

LAURA SIEVEKING

All Your Wishes

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All Your Wishes



LAURA
SIEVEKING

A Scholastic Australia book

For Dan xx

Prologue

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‘I mean, don’t you think it’ll be nice to get away from all
. . . all of this?’ Mum said, waving her hand in the air.

I looked down at the little fluffy white dog at the
table next to us. His eyes gazed up at me and I offered
a light smile. But then he was distracted by his owner
giving him a corner of her poached chicken breast
from her salad.

I sipped my lemon, lime and bitters and swallowed.
Mum’s eyes were fixed on me as she drank her almond
macchiato.

I nodded. ‘It will be nice to hang out with other
teens, I guess,’ I said slowly. ‘Normal teens,’ I added.

Mum smiled at me as she swallowed. ‘And it’s only
six months. Think of it like an exchange.’

New house. New school. New friends. New family.

I flicked my long brown ponytail over my shoulder, keeping a few strands in my fingers so I could twirl them as I thought.

I met Mum's eyes, but her gaze shifted as she craned her neck to see something behind me.

'Oh no,' she mumbled. 'Paps. Twelve o'clock.'

I began to turn.

'No, don't look!' she hissed. 'Hat on. Glasses on. Now. We're leaving.'

I pulled my cap onto my head, tucking my long hair into it, and shifted the brim down over my eyes. I then slid on my sunglasses and pulled up the collar on my shirt all the way.

'Ana! Ana!' the photographers started yelling as they ran towards my mother.

'What's your next role?'

'Did you hear the Oscar nominations?'

'Do you feel you were overlooked?'

'What are your next plans?'

'What is your relationship with Joseph now?'

Mum hooked her arms into mine and dragged me

towards the car, which was waiting for us at the kerb.

'Eyes down,' she whispered.

I knew exactly what to do. I cast my gaze down at the pavement and let my mother guide me along the path. I closed my eyes and listened to the incessant snapping and clicking of cameras.

Our driver took me by the arm and guided me into the back of the vehicle. I put my hands over my face, as my parents always told me to do, and waited for the car to start moving.

The photographers banged on the windows, concentrating on the other side of the car where my mum sat. She rolled her eyes and I could tell she was using all of her powers of self-control not to make a rude sign at them.

The car started to roll forwards and the driver had to blast the horn to get some of the photographers out of the way of the car.

The horn. The banging. The clicking. The yelling.

I turned towards Mum. 'About your idea?' I said.

She looked up at me with hopeful eyes.

'I'm in.'

Chapter 1

Two months later . . .

I looked up at the glowing EXIT sign and walked through the automatic doors, pulling my suitcase behind me. The throngs of travellers bustled around, rudely shoving or dodging past me.

I grinned. It was nice not being noticed.

There were definitely no signs of the paparazzi, and when I made eye contact with several strangers, not one of them looked at me with any kind of recognition.

‘There she is!’

My heart leaped into my throat. Had I been recognised somehow?

But then I saw who it was.

Aunt Katherine was waving enthusiastically at me, and her two mortified teens held a big sign that said,

‘Welcome, Piper!’ in big black blocky text.

I ran over to her and she pulled me into a tight, restrictive hug.

‘You’ve grown so much!’ she gasped, squeezing my shoulders. ‘It’s so lovely to see you, Piper,’ she said, pulling me into another embrace.

‘Thanks, Aunt Katherine,’ I managed to squeeze out of my lungs through her embrace.

She wasn’t actually my aunty, by the way. Aunt Katherine was my mum’s best friend from high school. They’d kept in contact over the years, and we often visited Aunt Katherine and her family whenever we were close by. We’d holidayed with them, and they’d come and stayed at our place several times. Although with COVID travel restrictions, and, well, the busyness of life, it had somehow turned into years since I’d seen them all.

‘You remember Chloe and Cooper?’ Aunt Katherine said, gesturing to her twins.

‘Of course,’ I said, offering Chloe a hug.

Chloe was like a cousin to me—we hadn’t seen each other in a while, but we’d spent a lot of our childhood

together. We'd still message and email each other with updates and photos, so it wasn't weird to see her. She still had that same bright smile and shining eyes I remembered.

But then my gaze shifted to her twin brother, Cooper. He had the same sparkly eyes, but instead of a bright smile, he wore a self-conscious grin. Cooper and I hadn't kept in contact, so I was surprised to see how much he'd grown. He'd always been smaller than Chloe, but I guess he'd had his high school growth spurt, because he was now taller than all of us, including Aunty Katherine. He was lanky and looked uncomfortable, as if his new, taller body was an ill-fitting suit he had been forced to wear. He had fluffy hair that looked like it hadn't been brushed today, and he stood awkwardly, unsure about whether or not he should hug me like his sister did.

I extended my hand for a handshake right as he extended his fist for a fist-bump. I ended up taking his fist into my hand and awkwardly shaking it as he mumbled an apology, embarrassed.

Chloe laughed but then quickly stopped when

Aunty Katherine gave her a meaningful look.

'Cooper, be a gentleman and take Piper's bag,' Aunty Katherine whispered, nudging him.

'Oh yeah, sorry,' Cooper mumbled, his cheeks flushing pink.

'Thanks, Cooper,' I said, passing him my wheely bag. I had a backpack and a small handbag that I'd taken on the plane, so it was nice that Cooper was helping.

As we started to walk away, a man stopped us. My heart leaped into my throat and my mind began racing.

Paparazzi?

Eager fan?

Stalker?!

'Excuse me, do you know where the car-hire desk is?' he asked Aunty Katherine.

'Yes, just over there on the far side,' she replied, gesturing with a smile towards the other end of the airport arrivals area.

'Thank you.' He smiled and walked on.

I released a long breath.

'Are you okay?' Chloe asked, tilting her head.

‘Oh yes, totally. Just . . . getting my bearings,’ I said quickly, not wanting to seem paranoid. ‘It’s been so long since my last visit!’

Chloe linked arms with me and I felt more comfortable than I had in years. She was just like, well, family.

We walked through the airport and into the multi-storey carpark where Auntie Katherine had parked the car. We approached the simple navy-blue van and the orange lights lit up as she pressed the ‘unlock’ button.

As I climbed in, I took in the smell of the car. It smelled so . . . normal. Not like a leather-clad limo or a brand-new sports car. There were crumbs on the seat, which I dusted off lightly as I sat down and secured my seatbelt.

As we pulled out into the busy road, my breath caught in my throat as I came face to face with *my mother*. Well, not *actually* my mother. But a huge billboard with her face beaming down at me. She wore a tight black jumpsuit and dark sunglasses. Her hair was slicked back and she wore a serious, piercing expression on her face. She was starring in a new spy movie,

which I’d already seen in an advanced screening.

‘She looks amazing,’ Auntie Katherine mused, lifting her eyebrows towards the billboard. ‘How is Mum doing, Piper?’

‘She’s pretty good,’ I said. ‘I think this new movie role she’s about to shoot will be great for her.’

‘A period drama?’ Auntie Katherine said. ‘I never thought I’d see the day! She’s always been the drop-dead gorgeous spy or secret agent or space-mission commander. Can’t believe she’s doing a classic!’

I laughed. Auntie Katherine was right. Mum never did historical movies like the one she was about to do.

‘When I spoke to her on the phone, she said she needed a change,’ Auntie Katherine added.

‘Yeah,’ I said slowly. ‘She’s kind of . . . starting fresh.’

The car went silent as the indicator clicked rhythmically. I glanced at Chloe, who opened her mouth as if to say something but then shut it quickly.

The lights turned green and the car kicked back into gear. Cooper, who was sitting in the front seat, flicked on the radio, which cut through the silence like a knife.

I was grateful for it.

‘So, how do you feel about starting school with us?’
Chloe chirped.

‘It’s been a *really* long time since I was in a traditional school,’ I said. ‘But I’m looking forward to it. It’ll be nice to just be around normal teens and live a normal life for a bit. Thanks for keeping everything about me a secret,’ I added.

My mum and I had had long conversations with Aunty Katherine, Uncle Leon, Cooper and Chloe about how I would be able to go to a regular school without the risk of being harassed. We’d all agreed that keeping my identity a secret would be the best way. Nobody needed to know that I was the daughter of Ana Haberfield and Joseph Maynard. Or *Anseph*, as the media used to call them in a somewhat cute mash-up of their names.

The reason this was possible was because Mum and Dad had always kept me away from the cameras. Nobody in the wider public knew what I looked like. I remembered when I was little, they always had me in broad-brimmed hats or animal face masks. These days, it was always big sunnies and caps, and sometimes even

wigs. Plus, for extra protection during my stay with the Yangs, I was using my grandma’s maiden name, Pritchard. So, it was less likely anyone would connect me to either of them.

‘It shouldn’t be too hard anyway,’ I added. ‘I don’t look anything like my mum.’

‘I think you look more like your mother than you think,’ Aunty Katherine said, winking at me in the rear-view mirror. ‘I remember her from school days—she was just like you.’

I saw my face in her mirror and frowned. I didn’t think I looked anything like my mum. Mum was glamorous. People always said the entire room stopped when she entered it. She was tall with a wide smile and sparkling eyes. I struggled to believe she ever looked like me in high school. Not that I thought I was ugly. I was just . . . I dunno. Not noticeable. I had mouse-brown hair that frizzed up in the rain. I wasn’t tall or short. I was just . . . me, I guess.

After driving through the city, the townhouses soon gave way to houses with big front yards and sprawling verandahs. Green parks with swings and sandpits

seemed to pop up at every other corner. We turned down a quiet street and passed a bunch of cute little cottages with bicycles on the front porch. Then, we turned into number ten, stopping in the carport.

I climbed out of the car, and Cooper ran around the back to get my luggage from the boot. I breathed in the scent of jasmine and took in the sounds of the birds. Everything seemed so peaceful. I felt like I was on the set of a quaint small-town movie.

We went inside through the red front door, and into the narrow hallway. Ahead was a flight of stairs, and I could see through on the ground floor to a kitchen and lounge area.

‘Our room is on the second floor,’ Chloe said, gesturing for me to follow her.

We climbed the stairs and turned left on the landing. I could see a bathroom across the hallway. We entered Chloe’s room and I smiled. It was small but homely. There were two beds set up, and on the opposite side of the room was a lovely bay window with light streaming in.

‘We took my desk out so we could fit in another bed,’

Chloe explained. She walked over to her built-in wardrobe. ‘I’ve cleared half my wardrobe so you can have all this side,’ she said, gesturing to the hanging space, ‘and these drawers. I know it’s probably tiny compared to what you’re used to, but . . .’

‘No, it’s amazing,’ I said. ‘It’s so nice of you to clear out half your bedroom so I can share it for six whole months.’

‘It’s nothing,’ Chloe said, waving her hand lightly in the air. ‘Cooper and I shared a room in our old house. And then, when we moved here, Mum said we refused to sleep in separate rooms even though there were enough for us to have our own. So, we spent another two years in the same room before I finally decided that a girl needs her space and privacy,’ she said, smiling. ‘That, plus Cooper was officially starting to get teenage body odour and it was *gross*.’

I laughed out loud. ‘He sure has grown since I last saw you two.’

‘Yeah, and boy does he like to remind me,’ Chloe says. ‘He calls me his PLP—his “public leaning post”—and he uses my head as an armrest.’

I laughed again, remembering Cooper's antics from when we were little. He was always able to make us laugh at things.

Chloe gathered up her thick, long dark hair and secured it on top of her head in a messy bun.

'So, what are you, like, into these days?' I asked, sitting down on my bed.

Chloe jumped onto her bed and kicked off her shoes, crossing her legs underneath her. 'Oh, you know, just the usual stuff.'

'Like, sport or what?' I prompted. Chloe and I had always kept in touch, messaging on our phones, but we didn't talk a lot about day-to-day things.

'More music,' she said. 'Cooper and I are in the school choir, and we both got selected for the vocal ensemble.'

'What's that?' I asked, excited. I too loved music, and spent a lot of time playing piano and singing. And music had always helped me when I was feeling lonely, especially.

'It's a smaller group of singers who do lots of concerts and stuff like that. My two best friends are in it as

well. It's audition-only though and pretty hard to get into. Well, if you're a girl.'

'How come?' I pressed, eager to know.

'More girls like to sing than the guys. Or maybe just more girls are happy to admit they like singing. In fact, they always struggle to fill enough spaces with male singers. It's hard to find guys who have broken voices deep enough for what we need who aren't totally embarrassed of being in a choir,' she said, shrugging.

'But Cooper does it?' I asked.

'Cooper has the nicest singing voice, and Mum said it'd be wasting his gift not to use it. He was hesitant because he said the cools would give him a hard time, but Mum said if he joined the ensemble then he could have an extra hour of gaming time every weekend. That was enough of a bribe and he took it on pretty quickly after that.'

'So, who are these "cools" and did they actually give him a hard time?' I asked. I'd never been in a high school. Plus, I never really got to hang out with a group of friends my age who could tell me about their schools. I was often on set with my parents without any

other kids in the cast or crew. I would homeschool with my tutor in the trailer and spend the rest of my time around adults. So, all I had to go on was American sitcoms.

‘Oh, you know, just the usual group of sporty, beautiful people who don’t feel the need to be nice to anyone. But actually, no, I don’t think they’ve ever teased him about music. Probably because they don’t tend to notice anyone outside of their own little bubble,’ Chloe said.

In other words, high school was very much still like it was in the movies.

‘Anyhow, I’m starving. You want some morning tea?’ Chloe asked, standing up off her bed.

‘Yes, please,’ I said, holding my tummy. ‘That flight lasted forever and the only things that weren’t outright gross were the weirdest looking muffins you’ve ever seen. I chose not to risk my life eating one.’

Chloe laughed and grabbed my arm. ‘Let’s go.’

I followed her out of the room and down the stairs. And realised, I was smiling the whole time.

Chapter 2

Later that night, at dinner, we gathered around the table for a meal of roast chicken and vegetables. The moment Uncle Leon brought the steaming chicken out to the table with its warm, spiced scents, I was instantly transported back to staying with Chloe and Cooper when I was little.

It was before Mum and Dad were super famous. They had their careers doing television and supporting roles in a couple of blockbuster movies. It was an easier time in life—my parents weren’t constantly on the road shooting movie after movie, and they were not well-known enough to draw much paparazzi. If one was shooting, the other would stay home with me. We’d have regular dinners, lunches and hang-outs with

Chloe and Cooper, who became like siblings to me since I was an only child.

Uncle Leon (also not my *actual* uncle) was the best cook and loved experimenting with all kinds of cool recipes. But my favourites were always his classics, from roast chicken to Chinese flavours from his childhood.

Now, my life was a mixture of movie-trailer lunches, high-end restaurants and dinner at home cooked by our housekeeper. It wasn't often I'd sit at the table with Mum and have dinner with her. Or Dad for that matter. And obviously, never with *both* of them since . . .

'Piper, would you like gravy?' Uncle Leon asked.

'Yes, please.' I glanced over at Cooper, who was serving up some peas and carrots. 'Since when do you eat peas?' I asked.

He grinned at me. 'Since I became a *mature* teenager,' he replied, eyeing his mum.

'Since I told him he had to eat them or he'd lose gaming privileges,' Aunty Katherine corrected.

'I remember when you were little, you'd squish them under your plate, and then when the plates were stacked and collected, nobody noticed them there,'

I teased, raising an eyebrow at him.

'Cooper!' Aunty Katherine gasped, mortified by the revelation.

'You traitor!' Cooper laughed, playfully nudging me.

'I always wondered why there were so many peas in the scraps bin,' Uncle Leon mused.

'How are you feeling about school tomorrow, Piper?' Aunty Katherine asked.

I felt a flutter of nerves and excitement in my stomach. 'Pretty good, actually. I'm excited to just be around average teens—you know—having a locker, getting a lunch order, passing notes in class and playing tricks on the teachers . . .'

Chloe laughed. 'Oh, Piper, you are too cute! High school isn't quite like the Hollywood movies.'

I felt my face flush and I knew it would be bright pink. It always happened when I was embarrassed. Chloe reached out and squeezed my arm kindly.

'I guess that's all I have to go on,' I said. 'I haven't been in a proper school since I was eleven. And I reckon it's probably a little different in high school. You two will have to teach me.'

‘It’s not rocket science,’ Cooper said. ‘Turn up, go to class, go home. Copy, paste.’

‘Cooper,’ Aunt Katherine said. ‘Is that really all you think of school?’

Cooper shrugged.

‘It is a bit more than that,’ Chloe said, taking a sip of her water. ‘But Cooper and I will help you. You know, show you where to go so you don’t get lost. Give you the low-down on all the groups of who to talk to and who to avoid.’

‘Like that Talia girl you’ve told me about?’ I said. Chloe had told me all about a girl named Talia who was the Queen Bee of the school. But she was really mean to Chloe in Year 7, and I remembered the name because she often messaged me about it.

The table suddenly went completely silent. Chloe took a long sip of water. Uncle Leon busied himself adding more potatoes to his plate, even though he already had some on there. Aunt Katherine looked at Cooper, whose face had turned a shade of pink.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘Oh nothing,’ Chloe replied, waving her hand in

the air. ‘Yes, she’s one to avoid, for sure. But there are plenty of lovely people to be friends with. Like us, right, Cooper?’

‘I’m finished,’ Cooper said quickly. ‘May I be excused?’

‘Sure. Take your plate to the kitchen and go take a shower,’ Uncle Leon said.

Cooper offered me a half-smile, then stood up and walked to the kitchen.

‘Is he okay? Did I say something wrong?’ I whispered to Chloe.

‘No, not at all. He just hates Talia. But so do I, so who cares? We all just avoid her.’

I turned to watch Cooper as he scraped the leftovers on his plate into the bin. There was the unmistakable colour of green on the bottom of his plate where he’d squished his peas. He caught my eye and gave me a little smile.

Chapter 3

I am walking down the hallway. It's dark. It's been a long day.

I just want to go home.

The lights above me flicker.

The door is shut. The star on it winks at me.

I twist the doorknob and it swings open.

The bright lights around the mirror momentarily blind me.

And then . . .

My heart leaps into my throat. Tears sting my eyes.

'Piper!' he says in shock. 'Piper, this isn't—'

I can't hear him anymore. Because I'm running.

I don't know where.

Just . . . away . . .



'Piper?'

I was jolted awake by the sound of Chloe's voice.

'Sorry, did I scare you?' she said.

I leaned over and grabbed the glass from the bedside table and took a long sip. 'No, it's fine. I just—I'm not used to sharing a room.'

'Ready for your first day of school?' Chloe asked. Her eyes shone as she grinned at me. That was when I noticed she was already fully dressed. She was wearing a navy-blue skirt with a white blouse. Her dark hair was slicked back in two meticulous braids, which hung over each shoulder.

'Am I late?' I said suddenly, sitting upright.

'No, you're not! I'm just an early bird,' she quickly reassured me.

'You mean a freakish bird,' Cooper's voice said in the doorway.

Unlike Chloe, Cooper was *not* dressed for school. He stood there in his pyjama shorts and t-shirt, his hair in a tussled mess on top of his head. He still looked half asleep and more like the cute little boy I knew as a child.

Chloe threw her pillow at him. 'Get out!' she yelled, but I could tell she was only messing with him.

'Shower is free if you want one, and then your uniform is hanging just there,' Chloe said as she pointed to my uniform, which hung on the back of the door. 'I'll go downstairs and start making breakfast. How's pancakes?'

'Sounds amazing,' I answered.

Chloe skipped out of the room.

I wandered over to the coathanger that held my uniform. I ran my fingers down the buttons on the white shirt and the skirt underneath. I slipped it off the hanger and held it up in front of me. I'd showered the night before, so I decided just to get dressed. As I pulled the skirt up, I frowned slightly. It was a little long.

I stood in front of the full-length mirror and took in my reflection. I felt like an 'extra' from one of Mum's movies who was playing the part of a schoolgirl. It didn't feel real. And I was suddenly feeling nervous.

I grabbed my brush and stroked it through my long brown hair. My hair frizzed up in response and wouldn't sit down flat like I wanted it to. With a sigh, I

bundled it all up into a high ponytail to keep it out of my face.

'Pancakes!' Chloe called from downstairs.

I walked into the kitchen, where she was placing a plate stacked with pancakes in the centre of the table.

'Oh, wait,' she said as she saw me.

Chloe walked over to me and pulled my skirt up so it sat higher on my hips. She then rolled the top of it over at the band, which immediately shortened it another inch.

'There,' she said. 'You can't turn up to school with your skirt hanging down over your knees. That's a social crime,' she added with a wry smile.

Cooper came into the kitchen and stopped in the doorway as he saw me.

'What?' I asked self-consciously, reaching for my hair.

'Oh no, nothing is wrong,' Cooper said, flustered. 'It's just a bit strange seeing you in my school's uniform. But you look . . .'

I raised my eyebrows at him.

'It suits you,' Cooper finished quietly as he bundled himself over to the table.

‘Well, look at you three,’ Aunty Katherine said as she entered the kitchen in a flurry.

‘Pancake?’ Chloe offered.

‘Sorry, darling, not today. I have to get to work. But Dad said he’d give you all a ride this morning. Can you be ready in ten minutes?’ she said, grabbing the takeaway coffee thermos that Uncle Leon had prepared for her earlier.

‘How come Dad only gives us a ride when Piper is here?’ Cooper complained. ‘I ask for a ride every day!’

‘Because it’s Piper’s first day,’ Uncle Leon answered as he strode into the room. ‘Bye, darling,’ he said, giving Aunty Katherine a quick kiss.

‘Ew,’ Chloe mumbled.

‘It’s cute,’ I whispered to her. I remembered back to the time when my dad would say goodbye to my mum like that. Slowly, it went from a kiss, to a pat on the shoulder, to a cursory nod . . . then to nothing.

‘Not cute. Gross,’ Cooper added.

‘Good luck today, Piper!’ Aunty Katherine sang as she headed to the front door.

‘Thanks!’ I called back.

‘Right, you three,’ Uncle Leon said. ‘Finish your pancakes and go brush your teeth and get your stuff. The limo leaves in five.’

Cooper rolled his eyes at his dad’s joke. I stifled a laugh and Cooper shook his head at me but couldn’t completely suppress a grin.



‘Just stop on the corner, there,’ Cooper said to his dad.

‘Embarrassed for me to drop you out the front of the school?’ Uncle Leon said with a cheeky grin.

‘In short, yes,’ Chloe retorted.

Uncle Leon stopped the car and we all got out. I straightened my skirt and tossed my bag over my shoulder.

‘Have a good one!’ Uncle Leon called out of the window.

‘He’s so embarrassing,’ Chloe mumbled.

I giggled and waved to Uncle Leon as he drove the car away.

We headed around the corner and followed the streams of high school students heading towards the

school gate. Some students were smaller than us and some looked much older—almost like adults! But a lot looked our age.

We walked through the big metal gates and up the steps into an open courtyard. Classrooms lined the circumference of the courtyard with various room names and numbers on the doors. I could already tell I was going to get lost.

‘That’s the Year 8 and 9 lawn,’ Chloe said, pointing to a large grassy area on the other side of the courtyard. ‘We sit there at lunch.’

‘But see that part over there with the bench?’ Cooper said. ‘We *don’t* sit on that.’

‘Why not?’ I asked.

‘That’s the Lush Bench,’ Chloe said.

‘What on earth is a Lush Bench?’ I said. It didn’t look very special or . . . luscious.

‘That’s what the cools named it,’ Cooper said, rolling his eyes. ‘They reckon you can only sit there if you’re part of their group.’

‘But why “lush”?’ I asked, confused.

Chloe shrugged. ‘That’s just what they call it. It

doesn’t matter anyway—just avoid it unless you want to be ridiculed by them.’

At that moment, two girls wandered over to the bench. They both had shiny long hair cascading down their backs, one blonde and the other dark-haired. They sat down and the blonde girl laughed loudly—too loudly—and various people in the courtyard turned her way. The other girl playfully slapped her knee and squealed, ‘No WAY!’

Another two guys approached them, one casually throwing a basketball up into the air and catching it again before sitting down.

‘Come on, Piper. I’ll show you where your locker is,’ Chloe said, gently pulling my arm.

As I turned to leave, another figure caught my eye. It was a guy, walking over to the bench. He had sandy-blond hair and green eyes. He glanced up in my direction and then did a double-take, probably realising that I was new to the school. His lip turned up into a half-smile and a tiny dimple appeared on his cheek.

I froze. I didn’t know if I should smile back, wave or just ignore him completely.

Before I could decide, his attention left me as the blonde girl leaped up from the bench and pulled him into a hug. He patted her back awkwardly, and when she pulled herself off him, she was flashing a white, toothy smile.

The bell pierced through the air, giving me a fright. Chloe pulled my arm and gestured for me to follow her. I looked away from the Lush Bench and followed her out of the courtyard and into the hallway.



‘Class, before we start our next unit on Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, I wanted to introduce you to our new student,’ Ms Huxley said.

My face started to feel hot and I suppressed the urge to groan in protest. I’d had this all morning—every teacher felt the need to ‘introduce’ me, even though I had heaps of the same kids in each class who’d already met me.

‘Piper, please stand,’ Ms Huxley said as she gestured for me to join her up the front of the class.

‘So, Piper, what brings you to our school?’ she asked.

‘My parents are away for . . . for work,’ I said carefully. ‘So, I’m living with Chloe and Cooper Yang for six months.’

‘Are you American?’ the blonde girl from the Lush Bench said, not even bothering to raise her hand. I hadn’t had a class with her yet.

‘Raise your hand, please, Talia,’ Ms Huxley said.

Aha. Talia. The one Chloe had warned me about.

Talia rolled her eyes and lifted her hand in the air.

‘Are you American?’

‘Yeah, I live in Los Angeles,’ I said slowly, being careful not to give away too much.

‘What do your parents do?’ Talia shot back.

‘Oh, um, well, they’re divorced. My dad is away on . . . business. And my mum works in . . . the media,’ I said.

‘Like, a journalist?’ Talia retorted.

‘Something like that,’ I mumbled.

‘Have you studied Shakespeare before?’ Ms Huxley probed.

‘Yeah, I did *Romeo and Juliet* last year at . . .’ I hesitated. What was I going to say? With my tutor in my

mother's Hollywood trailer on the set of one of the biggest movies of the year?

'At where, dear?' Ms Huxley said, breaking my train of thought.

'At my old school,' I finished quickly.

'And what do you like to do in your spare time?' she asked.

My mind raced again. *Sit in my mum's trailer? Run lines with her? Go to the Oscars . . .*

'Uh, I do a bit of dance,' I said.

'Lovely! Talia here is a very good dancer. I'm sure she'll take you over to the dance studio after this class to see what they have on offer for you to join,' Ms Huxley said, nodding at Talia.

'Of course!' Talia chirped, tossing her blonde ponytail over her shoulder.

'Excellent. Well, we all hope you feel welcome and enjoy this semester with us here at Wattlegrove High,' Ms Huxley said, pointing back to my seat.

I moved away from the front of the class as quickly as I could and slid back into my seat, my cheeks burning. In that moment, I caught Cooper's eye and

he gave me a quick, sympathetic smile.

The lesson dragged on, but I barely took note of anything the teacher said. I was too busy replaying what I'd just told the class. I must have looked so ridiculous, standing there unable to answer the simplest questions about my own life.

I winced. This wasn't something I was used to, and I really hoped to never do that again.

At the end of the lesson, the bell rang and it was time for recess.

As I stood up, I saw that Talia was gathering her books, ready to leave the class. I remembered that the teacher had asked her to show me to the dance studio, so I followed her closely out of the door and into the corridor.

Once we were outside, she turned and looked me straight in the eyes. 'Yes?'

'Oh, I just . . . I thought you were showing me the dance studio,' I mumbled.

'Ah, no,' she said flatly.

'But you said to the teacher that—'

'Of course I told the teacher I would. But I'm not.

Any questions about that?’ she mocked, her eyes glinting dismissively.

Well, this is awks.

‘Bothering the new girl?’ a male voice said from right behind us.

I turned and saw it was the guy from the Lush Bench—the one with the sparkling green eyes who had looked at me. Something in my stomach twisted and I turned to go.

‘What’s your name, new girl?’ he called after me.

I turned back to face him. Talia had linked her arm into his and was looking at me with an intense side-eye.

‘Piper,’ I said.

‘Well, hey, Piper. Welcome,’ he said smoothly.

Talia rolled her eyes. ‘Can we go now, Cruz?’ She pulled on his arm like a toddler pulling a parent away from their adult conversation.

‘See you round, Piper,’ Cruz said.

I stood silently, confused at my own feelings. I’d seen plenty of cute guys my age on movie sets. In fact, when Jude McClean played my mother’s teenage son last year, I spent almost every day around the cutest guy

in Hollywood. The truth was, he was pretty boring in real life, despite all the teenage girls thinking he was the hottest thing in the world. But here I was, in the middle of an everyday high school, speechless in front of a normal, not-famous guy.

‘Coming to sit with us?’ Chloe’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

‘Oh yeah, totally,’ I said, making an effort to shake off my awkwardness.

She looked from me to where I was staring in the wake of Cruz’s footsteps.

‘Did you just meet Talia and Cruz?’ she asked as we walked to our lockers to get our food.

‘Yeah. I mean, Talia is in my English class, but I only met that guy just then. Cruz, did you say his name is?’ I said, trying to sound casual.

Chloe laughed, seeing straight through my act. ‘Yes, Cruz,’ she said. ‘And don’t even go there, girl.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked in mock offence.

‘Cruz and Talia are like, the only fourteen-year-olds at the school who are dating,’ she said.

‘Dating?’

‘Yeah, like, boyfriend and girlfriend. Mum says fourteen is too young to date, and to be honest, I kind of agree. But they’ve been a “thing” since primary school,’ Chloe said. ‘Well, according to Talia anyway.’

‘Cruz doesn’t know he’s dating her?’ I said, confused.

‘Of course he knows. But I don’t even reckon he *likes* her that much. She’s so annoying. But she tells everyone they’re an item, so he just goes along with it. But I don’t care. They belong together,’ Chloe said flatly.

‘How so?’ I said as we reached our lockers. I unlocked mine and pulled out the lunch bag that Uncle Leon had made for me that morning.

‘They’re both just, I dunno, self-absorbed,’ Chloe said with a shrug.

‘Cruz seemed nicer than Talia,’ I said.

‘Maybe. But she’s so fake—he probably is too. I wouldn’t trust a word either of them said.’

I thought back to Talia saying she’d show me the dance studio then ditching me the second we got into the hallway. I wondered if Cruz was like that as well.

Chloe led me over to the lawn where a small circle

of other teens was gathered. They were busy opening their lunch bags and starting on their recess. Cooper was already sitting there and waved when I approached.

‘Guys, this is Piper,’ Chloe said. ‘Remember I told you she’s staying with us while her parents are away on . . . on business?’

‘Hi, Piper,’ the group chorused.

‘Piper, this is Harry, Lucy, Nia and Jishaan,’ Chloe said, pointing to each friend.

They all waved and smiled at me. I sat down next to Cooper.

‘So, is there anything at the school you want to try out?’ Nia asked eagerly. ‘We could show you if there’s anything in particular. There’s debating, art club, choir, dance . . .’

‘I’d like to try the choir,’ I said.

Cooper looked up at me with surprise. ‘I didn’t know you could sing,’ he said.

I blushed. ‘Well, I don’t know how *well* I can sing, but I’ve always wanted to be in a choir. I’ve never had the chance.’

‘Your school didn’t even have a choir?’ Lucy asked.

‘Ah, no, it didn’t,’ I said quickly.

‘You’re in luck, then, because Wattlegrove High is one of the best schools for singing in the whole state. All of us are in the choir, and Chloe and Cooper made it into the vocal ensemble,’ Lucy explained, smiling. ‘But that group is by audition only. It’s the group that gets to go to all the special eisteddfods, and they totally always win.’

Chloe flicked her dark hair over her shoulder. ‘What can I say? We are just *talented*, I suppose,’ she joked.

‘You might be. Cooper only got in because they had no boys!’ Jishaan teased.

Cooper threw a mandarin peel at him.

‘You didn’t want to do the ensemble?’ I asked Jishaan.

‘Nah,’ he said, waving his hand in the air. ‘One choir is enough for me. And it clashes with robotics class anyway, which both Harry and I are involved in.’

‘So, anyone can join the big choir?’ I asked.

‘Yep. In fact, there’s a rehearsal at lunchtime today,’ Harry said, gesturing at the group. ‘You should totally come. We’ll all be there.’

‘And we can introduce you to the choir teacher,’ Cooper added.

‘Sounds great,’ I said.

I sat back, stretching out my legs in front of me, soaking up the morning sun. As I watched the group talking, laughing and mocking each other, I smiled to myself. It was nice to feel so . . . so ordinary.

Chapter 4

‘Ms Banks, this is Piper,’ Chloe said as we walked into the hall where the choir was rehearsing.

‘Hi, Piper,’ Ms Banks said. ‘Welcome to choir!’

She had a kind smile and deep-brown eyes. She seemed genuinely excited that I was joining the choir, which made me think that it wasn’t the most common thing for new students to just rock up at any point in the year.

Harry, Lucy, Nia and Jishaan fist-bumped some of the other choir members, who ranged in age from Year 7 all the way up to Year 12. Despite the choir having students from all years, it still wasn’t big. And Cooper wasn’t kidding when he said there weren’t many boys. In fact, other than Harry, Jishaan and Cooper, there

were only three other guys there amongst the twenty or so girls.

‘Have you been in a choir before?’ Ms Banks asked.

I wasn’t quite sure how to answer this. I’d been singing all my life and was part of a small ensemble of kids who sang on the soundtrack to a Disney movie my mum was involved in. But there was no way I could say that!

‘Um, yeah, a bit. Just a small school choir,’ I said hurriedly.

Ms Banks tilted her head curiously. ‘Do you know what kind of singer you are? Like, soprano, alto . . .?’ she asked.

‘I think a mezzo-soprano,’ I said, using the term one of the music directors on set had used to describe me once. He’d said it was a middle-range voice—not as high as a soprano, but not down low either.

Ms Banks smiled approvingly. ‘Go sit in that section over there with Nia,’ she said, pointing to a group in the middle of the choir.

‘Everyone, are you ready to warm up your voices?’ she asked loudly, gaining everyone’s attention.

Everyone nodded, and we began with some basic vocal exercises and scales.

After we were all warmed up, we began singing through some of the songs that the choir had been practising throughout the year. Apparently there was a performance coming up, so they were working hard to make it sound good.

We were singing a mash-up of songs from movie musicals. At first I struggled with some of the changes from song to song, but after a while I felt like I was keeping up. It felt amazing as the other voices enveloped me, enclosing me in a world of intoxicating sound.

I listened to the sound and realised that the guys in the choir were having to do a lot of work to provide the bass notes. One of the Year 7 boys and Harry's voices weren't broken yet, so that left Jishaan, Cooper and a Year 10 and Year 11 boy to carry the bass notes, which were deep and low.

I could hear Cooper's deep, soothing voice as we sang and I looked at him with surprise. I hadn't heard him sing since we were younger and belting out silly songs on the swing set. His voice had really matured.

He gave me a small smile back.

By the end of the session, I felt invigorated.

'Do you think you'll come again?' Lucy asked as we were finishing up.

I nodded. 'For sure. That was really fun.'

Chloe began singing the high melody as we helped pack up the chairs. I joined in with the mezzo-soprano harmony. Ms Banks stopped next to us and paused. Then tipped her head thoughtfully.

'Piper, you have a pretty voice and a really good ear for harmonies,' she said.

I felt my face go red. 'Oh, thanks.'

'Would you like to come along to try our vocal ensemble?' she said.

I nervously looked at Lucy and Nia—I was keenly aware they hadn't been invited to the group, and I wasn't sure how they'd respond to me being at the school for one day and being asked in.

But Nia and Lucy smiled and nodded their encouragement.

'Yeah, maybe,' I said.

'I think you'd love it. Why don't you come along to

the next rehearsal? We do have a competition coming up, if you're interested.'

I nodded my appreciation for her faith in me.

As we walked out, the guys caught up to us.

'What was that about?' Cooper asked, walking alongside me.

'You mean Ms Banks?'

'Yeah—she looked serious when talking to you,' he said.

'She's keen for me to try the vocal ensemble,' I said quietly. I didn't want to sound arrogant.

'Piper Pritchard,' he said, stopping. 'Invited into the top group on day one. Anyone would think you have *celebrity* in your genes.'

'Shh!' I hissed at him, nudging him playfully.

He held his hands up in mock surrender. 'I know, I know. Top secret.' He drew his fingers along his mouth, pretending to zip it up.

As we walked up the path, back towards the lockers, we passed the Lush Bench.

'Oh look,' one of the guys said, standing up. 'If it isn't the Nerd Herd coming back from sing-song time.'

Another guy guffawed and high-fived him.

'La-la-la-LAAAA!' another guy shrieked in a mock operatic voice.

'Last I checked, pop stars are some of the coolest people around,' Jishaan retorted. 'And they are all *singers*, you know. Ever heard of Olivia Rodrigo? Justin Bieber?'

'You, Jishaan,' Talia said, standing up on the bench, 'are no Justin Bieber. More like Justin FREAKER.'

It wasn't a strong pun. But still, the others shrieked with laughter. Then Cruz leaped up and grabbed Talia off the bench, lifting her into the air. She squealed and pretended to struggle, but it was obvious she wasn't actually fighting him at all.

'Come on, ignore them,' Lucy said.

'Hey, Cooper,' one of the other guys yelled. 'Got any new girlfriends lately? I dunno, maybe like one with *orange* hair?!' Everyone cackled at the quip, but I had no idea what they meant.

Cooper turned crimson and walked off even faster.

I turned back to watch Cruz spinning around with Talia in his arms. Something shifted in my stomach,

but I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was. Was I annoyed? Jealous?!

'What was that about Cooper and a girlfriend?' I whispered to Chloe as we walked away.

'Oh, nothing. They're just being random and weird,' she said quickly. 'Let's get to our lockers before we're late to the next class.'

She trotted off ahead and gently pulled Cooper's arm, but he wrenched it away angrily, leaving Chloe loitering in his wake. It was unlike him to be so moody and I frowned in confusion. It seemed like a silly quip from the cool guys. So, why was Cooper so offended?



That night, at dinner, I told Auntie Katherine and Uncle Leon all about my day. It felt so strange to be sitting around a dining table, eating a meal with a family and everyone talking about their days.

Cooper had cooled down since the lunchtime incident at the Lush Bench, and he seemed to be in a good mood again.

'Invited to the vocal ensemble already?' Auntie

Katherine gushed. 'That's amazing, Piper!'

'Looks like you've inherited some star power,' Uncle Leon added.

I winced internally at the comment but smiled at him. I didn't like being compared to my mega-famous parents. And I also had no aspirations of following in their footsteps. As much as I enjoyed singing, *nothing* inside me wanted to have a Hollywood life when I was older. I wanted to live in a little cottage by the beach with three cavalier King Charles spaniel dogs and be a singer-songwriter. No red carpets. No paparazzi. No headlines.

'Oh, I found a place for you to go with your friends on Saturday,' Auntie Katherine said suddenly.

'Saturday?' I asked, confused.

'Oh, haven't the twins told you? It's their birthday!' Uncle Leon said.

'Yes, of course, I knew that!' I said. I'd always sent Chloe messages on her birthday. She'd mentioned to me ages ago that we'd do something for their birthday just after I'd arrived. I'd forgotten all about it in the chaos of starting a new school.

'We asked Mum to book a fancy café-restaurant for us,' Chloe said.

'No parents,' Cooper added.

'Does that mean I don't have to pay?' Uncle Leon joked cheekily.

'Ha-ha,' Chloe said sarcastically. 'But yes, you do.'

'Where'd you book?' Cooper asked.

'The lovely café-restaurant at the harbour. We can go in on the train and drop you there. And then you can have a walk on the foreshore and we'll pick you up after a couple of hours. How does that sound?' Aunty Katherine said.

'Sounds good to me!' Chloe said. 'Now, what am I going to wear?!'

'Who's invited?' I asked nervously. I was feeling a little overwhelmed about how many new people I'd met already.

'Just the group from school—Harry, Nia, Lucy, Jishaan, you and us,' Cooper said.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I liked all of those people.

'What are you going to wear?' Chloe asked, as if it were the most important detail.

I thought for a moment. 'I don't know. But do you know what I *won't* be wearing?'

The others looked at me quizzically.

'Big sunglasses and a cap pulled down over my eyes so that nobody knows who I am!' I said.

Chloe broke into a smile. 'Ah, a life of complete mediocrity,' she mused. 'What bliss.'

I knew she was making a joke, but as I smiled, I realised she was absolutely correct.

Chapter 5

On Saturday, as we approached the entrance to the waterside café-restaurant, I felt little bubbles of nervousness in my tummy. I was always on edge when out in public, as I'd experienced one too many disastrous episodes of paparazzi or over-enthusiastic fans bombarding us once they recognised my parents.

I was dressed in a simple white maxi skirt and a pale-blue singlet. My hair was down, my curls cascading down my back. Chloe had lent me a little bit of makeup. I was never really into makeup and neither was she, but since it was a special occasion, we'd put on a little bit of bronzer, some clear mascara and some shiny lip gloss that smelled like cherry lollipops.

Jishaan, Harry and Cooper looked extra smart in

their shirts and tailored shorts. Harry had even gelled his hair. Cooper approached the front desk.

'We have a booking for seven under Katherine?' he said.

I tilted my head to the side. He looked so . . . grown up. He wasn't the little boy I used to chase around the garden. He looked like, well, a teenager. And with his hair smoothed down, falling gently over his forehead at the front, it made me think . . . He turned in my direction and offered me a little smile. I felt my chest momentarily tighten and I wasn't sure why.

'Ready?' Chloe said, breaking my thoughts.

I realised the others were already striding ahead, following the waiter.

The waiter led us outside to a balcony. Our table was behind a small half-wall, which made it almost feel like a private area. The balcony overlooked the harbour and the sunlight danced on the water.

'So, what'd you get for your birthdays?' Nia asked Cooper and Chloe.

'The best present we got was actually a shared one,' Chloe said.

‘Does that annoy you?’ Harry asked. ‘Sharing presents?’

‘Maybe, but not in this case,’ Cooper said. ‘We got an electric piano!’

‘Oh cool!’ Lucy gushed. I’d learned this week that Lucy played piano.

‘It’s so cool. It has proper weighted keys like a real piano, but you can hook it up to the computer and compose all this stuff on it,’ Cooper gushed.

‘We can record, and it has all these different sounds and instruments,’ Chloe added.

‘That’s pretty epic,’ Jishaan agreed.

‘I also got some clothes from that new store, Baileyville,’ Chloe said.

‘Their stuff is *so* nice,’ Nia said.

Cooper rolled his eyes. ‘I did *not* get clothes. Thankfully.’

The other guys laughed.

‘Menus?’ the waiter said as he came back over and handed out some fancy menus in leather-bound folders. ‘I’ll give you some time to decide.’

I checked the menu. It all looked really yummy.

‘What’s a beef *carpaccio*?’ Harry said.

‘It’s actually raw beef,’ I answered.

‘Ew!’ he gasped.

‘No, it’s really yum. It’s cut super fine and thin,’ I explained.

Harry did not look convinced.

‘And what’s a *jus*?’ Lucy asked, pronouncing it exactly how it was spelled.

I smothered a giggle. ‘It’s pronounced *zh-oo*,’ I said, ‘and it’s a very light sauce, a bit like a broth.’

‘How do you know so much about fancy food?’ Jishaan asked.

Cooper and Chloe exchanged glances. My eyes went wide. ‘Oh, part of my dad’s business—he’s always at fancy lunches with clients and sometimes I get to go along too.’

Jishaan shrugged, content with the answer. Chloe gave me a wry smile.

‘Do they have fries?’ Harry asked, anxiously scanning the menu.

‘Harry, we are being *fancy*,’ Nia scolded. ‘We don’t eat fries.’

The waiter came back and we selected our dishes. The others chose pastas, chicken, steak and I went for the risotto.

‘Any sides?’ the waiter asked.

I could see Harry’s eyes light up, ready to ask for fries with his steak, but Nia quickly interjected. ‘Broccolini, please.’

Harry scrunched up his nose, but Nia shot him a look and mouthed, *Fancy!*

We sipped on our soft drinks and gazed out at the beautiful harbour.

‘When I’m older, I’m totally going to have a yacht,’ Jishaan mused.

‘You and what money?’ Harry teased.

‘I’m going to work for Google. Be a tech giant. You just wait and see,’ Jishaan said.

‘Then I’ll live in that house over there on the waterfront,’ Lucy said.

I looked and saw the beautiful white two-storey house with a shining tile balcony and a glimpse of a gigantic chandelier inside. I also saw a woman with cascading dark hair standing on the balcony with large

dark glasses, holding a coffee in her hand, gazing out at the water.

‘Just a casual, I dunno, ten million dollars maybe?’ Cooper said, smirking.

‘What about you, Piper? Which one would you live in?’ Nia asked.

I looked at the large houses, looming over the water’s edge, and the shining boats gliding along the water.

I shrugged. ‘Not for me. I just want a little beachside cottage. Dogs. A music studio to compose songs.’

‘You wouldn’t take a life like this?’ Lucy said, gesturing to the opulence all around us.

‘Nope,’ I said flatly. The others looked at me like I had rocks in my head.

‘Your meals,’ a voice announced from behind as the waiter and some other staff brought out our plates.

‘Oh, this is divine,’ Lucy said as she took a bit of her chicken dish.

‘This steak is melt-in-the-mouth!’ Harry declared.

Nia leaned over and dished up some broccolini. She nodded at the rest of us.

‘We don’t want to look like *kids*,’ she pointed out.

We each leaned in and took a long green strip of vegetable. Harry lifted it to his mouth and nibbled the end, then scrunched up his nose. Lucy smothered a giggle. Even Nia winced as she swallowed.

Cooper bit his lip to hide a smile. Chloe ate with a reflective face, as if she was enjoying it. It was obvious she wasn't.

After a couple of seconds, Nia signalled to the waiter.

'Hi, yes, I was wondering if you served French fries?' she asked.

'Yes, of course,' the waiter said, winking.

We all burst out laughing, pushing the broccolini to the edges of our plates.

After we'd devoured our lunch, the waiter came over with the menus so we could take a look at the desserts.

'What's a *parfait*?' Harry asked.

'Frozen dessert,' I replied quickly.

As we looked over the options in silence, the conversation from a table behind the wall that separated us wafted towards us.

'I'm glad Ana Haberfield wasn't nominated for an Oscar,' a woman's voice said. 'She is so *annoying*. I can't

watch any movies with her in them. She's so fake!'

'I can't stand her either,' another female voice said.

I froze. Cooper's eyes widened and Chloe gently squeezed my knee under the table. I gave her a shrug like I didn't care. But I did. They were talking about my mother.

'Not surprised Joseph left her,' a male voice said.

'Traded up, in my opinion,' another man said, laughing like a braying donkey.

A lump formed in my throat. I swallowed hard, but it was as if I had a pebble there, lodged.

'Do you want to go?' Chloe whispered quietly so the others didn't hear.

I shook my head vehemently. I didn't want to spoil their birthday lunch.

The voices continued. 'Joseph is a snake,' a woman said. 'They have a daughter, you know.'

'That's it,' Cooper said, standing up.

Jishaan, Lucy, Nia and Harry looked up at him, puzzled. They probably hadn't even registered the conversation at the other table as they looked through the enticing desserts.

‘Cooper, no, it’s okay,’ I said, holding my hand up.

‘What’s wrong?’ Lucy asked, suddenly noticing the tension.

‘It’s ah—nothing. I just . . .’ Cooper looked out over the harbour and then something caught his eye. ‘I just had a better idea,’ he said, a smile creeping onto his face.

‘Yeah?’ Harry asked.

He pointed across the harbour and the others turned to look. A smile crossed all of their faces. ‘Well, that’s not very grown up or *fancy*,’ Nia noted.

‘I don’t care—we’re not adults. You’re only a kid once, right?’ Cooper retorted.

‘Let’s do it!’ Chloe said, standing up.

The others copied and stood up and closed their menus, placing them down on the table.

‘I’ll sort out the bill with Mum’s cash,’ Chloe said, smiling cheekily.

Jishaan, Lucy, Harry and Nia followed Chloe towards the front of the café. Cooper hung back and gently pulled on my arm. ‘Are you okay?’ he whispered.

My skin prickled under his touch. ‘I’m okay. It’s

nothing new. I’ve lived with this my whole life.’

He nodded and gently put his hand on my back, guiding me ahead of him.

As we passed the table of adults who had been talking about my family, Cooper stopped.

‘Excuse me,’ he said.

‘Cooper, you don’t have to—’ I began, but he held his hand up to me.

‘You are supposed to be grown adults,’ he said to the table of people.

‘Excuse me?’ the woman said.

‘All we could hear was you tearing into a family you know nothing about. I hope your kids aren’t learning from your example. Do better,’ he spat.

The adults were so taken aback that they sat in complete silence.

Cooper took my arm and gently guided me out of the café, into the sunshine. And all of a sudden, the lump that was lodged in my throat dissipated. It felt nice to have someone back me.

I whispered, ‘Thank you,’ to Cooper, and he nodded in acknowledgement.

Chapter 6

The seven of us stood at the entry.

‘Ready?’ Cooper asked.

‘Ready,’ we all chorused.

We entered the harbourside amusement park, complete with go-karting, a roller-coaster, Ferris wheel and various other rides.

‘You okay with not being *fancy*, Nia?’ Cooper teased.

‘Ooh, snow cones!’ Nia squealed. ‘I’m definitely okay with this.’

We laughed and headed to the ticket booth to buy our passes. We had about an hour before Aunt Katherine was coming to escort us all home.

‘Where first?’ Harry asked.

‘Birthday twins’ choice!’ Lucy said.

‘Go-karts!’ Cooper said.

‘Ferris wheel,’ Chloe said at the same time.

They laughed. ‘Okay, go-karts first, *then* Ferris wheel,’ Chloe conceded.

We ran over to the go-kart pavilion and went to the desk to get our jumpsuits and helmets. Then we joined the queue, which was quite long.

‘Should we double up so we all get in the same session?’ Jishaan said.

‘Uneven number,’ Harry noted. ‘But I’m okay to go alone. I feel the need for speed!’

We made it to the front and the attendant opened the gate. Chloe and Nia raced for one car, and Jishaan and Lucy to another. Harry picked the bright-red car and jumped in. I turned to Cooper, slightly awkwardly.

‘You want to go on your own or with me?’ he said.

‘We can go together,’ I said. My voice sounded soft and strangely shaky.

‘Who’s driving?’ he quipped.

‘Well, not to brag, but I have driven a Ferrari in our driveway once before,’ I said.

‘I can’t argue with that! Get in there, Formula One,’

he said with a wry smile, and I couldn't help laughing with him.

We jumped into a green car and pulled the seatbelts across our chests. Our car was further back than Nia and Chloe, who had somehow secured pole position.

The lights went from red to yellow to green.

'Go!' Cooper cheered.

I hit the accelerator and we took off. Within the first ten seconds, Chloe had driven her car off course and was stuck against the padded barrier.

'See ya, sis!' Cooper yelled over his shoulder, waving his finger in the air.

I squinted my eyes in concentration, dodging another car and smoothly gliding past Jishaan and Lucy.

'You drive like a pro!' Cooper said, leaning over to me.

Heat flushed my cheeks.

We had twelve laps to do and after ten only Harry was ahead of us. I pulled up right beside him, hoping to overtake. But then we approached Nia and Chloe, who had stalled again on the track. I had to brake suddenly as Harry yelled, 'Later, losers!' over his shoulder.

'Ugh, bad luck,' Cooper said.

'Oh no he doesn't!' I said, adrenaline surging through my body.

I manoeuvred away from Chloe and Nia, who were still on about lap five, and hit the accelerator.

'Wahooo!' Cooper shrieked, holding his helmet.

I navigated around another car and saw Harry up ahead. We were gaining on him.

'Final lap! Final lap!' an employee called, waving a chequered flag.

'I'm coming for you, Harry!' I yelled.

Harry glanced over his shoulder and was clearly shocked to see how quickly I'd caught up to him. I drove right up alongside him. He swerved to try to force me to slow, but I wasn't slowing for anyone.

With my eyes on the finish line, I hit the accelerator to full throttle and zoomed ahead. We crossed the line first with Harry cursing in our wake.

We slowed down and Cooper whipped off his helmet, turning around and waving a 'number one' index finger at Harry. Cooper sat back down and I took my own helmet off, breathing hard in excitement. He

pulled me into a hug and gently squeezed me. I felt a sharp intake of breath and we broke apart, suddenly feeling awkward. Our faces were still close together, and I noticed he was also breathing a little hard, as we sat in complete silence. There would have been only ten centimetres between us. My eyes dropped to his lips, then back up to his eyes, which bore into mine . . .

‘Can’t believe you beat me!’ Harry yelled, pulling up next to us.

We pulled apart rapidly.

‘What can I say? I must be a pro,’ I teased.

The others slowly caught up, except for Nia and Chloe, who officially gave up and got out of their cars and walked over to us.

‘I am seriously never learning to drive,’ Chloe said. ‘Sorry, Cooper, you’re going to have to be my taxi forever.’

Cooper laughed, his eyes flicking to me then quickly looking away.

‘Ferris wheel or dessert?’ Chloe said.

‘Dessert!’ everyone yelled at the same time.

We returned our helmets and karting suits and left

the pavilion, heading over to the food stalls. Nia got her snow cone and the rest of us bought ice cream. We wandered over to the picnic tables lined up along the harbour front.

‘That was so fun,’ Nia said. ‘Maybe we don’t need to be fancy *all* the time.’ She laughed.

We sat underneath the Ferris wheel, finishing our dessert before going to line up for a turn. As we walked over to join the queue, I heard a familiar voice.

‘Come on, Cruz, our turn!’

Talia. The others saw her too and rolled their eyes.

‘Just our luck,’ Jishaan huffed.

‘They’re probably on a date,’ Lucy said. ‘Let’s just ignore them. Hopefully, they don’t see us.’

Talia and Cruz climbed into their Ferris-wheel pod, Cruz with his back to us. But Talia was facing us and she immediately caught my eye. She very subtly raised an eyebrow at me, then she looked away as if she hadn’t seen me.

They rose into the air in their pod, slowly climbing to the peak of the wheel. I knew the views at the top of the wheel were some of the best in the city—looking

out over the harbour and beyond. As they got to the top, the wheel paused for a short while, as it did with every pod in order to let people take photos of the view.

Cruz and Talia stood up from their seat and peered through the bars of the pod, looking across the harbour with their backs to us. Talia looked over her shoulder, down to me in the line below. Then she turned and pulled Cruz towards her, giving him a kiss on the lips.

I looked away—it was awkward to see, and I felt like I was being included in a private moment. But as she pulled away, she glanced down at me again, as if the whole thing had been a show just for me. Which was just plain weird.

I suddenly thought back to the moment in the go-kart with Cooper. I didn't know what I felt—I'd always seen him like a brother sort of. Did he see me like a sister? Did I want anything to change?

I glanced at Cooper, who also saw Talia and Cruz. He caught my eye and his cheeks flushed red, as if he was having exactly the same thoughts I was.

But what was he concluding?

Chloe also saw Talia and Cruz, and she scrunched

up her nose. 'You know what? Ferris wheels are actually totally boring. Who's for the roller-coaster?'

'Yeah!' Harry exclaimed.

'Let's do it,' Lucy said.

We all agreed and jumped under the rope, out of the Ferris-wheel line. As we did, I saw Talia sitting cuddled up to Cruz, staring in my direction, smirking.

Smirk all you like, Talia, I thought. So not interested in whatever you think you're winning here.

Chapter 7

*I burst outside, shielding my eyes from the light. Tears flow.
Angry, jagged tears.*

'Piper, come back!' his voice yells.

'Get away from me!' I scream back.

*She's following behind him. Anger and hatred seep from every
pore on my body.*

'It's not what you think,' he yells.

*A crowd is gathering. I don't even care. I barely even notice.
Everything around me has gone fuzzy.*

'I know what's going on! I'm not a baby!' I shriek.

Cameras start clicking and flashing.

*He holds up his hands, trying to silence me. But there's a
rage inside of me that's like a tsunami. No wall will hold the
torrent back.*

*'Let's go back inside and . . . and talk!' he pleads, glancing
around at the cameras.*

But I don't want to talk. I shake my head.

And scream.



I rubbed my eyes as the morning sun streamed through the window. I half sat up and propped myself on my elbow.

'Oh, you're awake, then, are you?' Chloe said mockingly.

'Why, what have you been doing?' I asked.

She raised an eyebrow at me. 'Only been for a run, made eggs on toast, made my bed, had a shower and am now ready to go out.'

I scoffed. 'I'm not a morning person, okay?' I said, putting my pillow over my face.

Next thing I knew, Chloe had jumped on my bed and was fighting to pull the blanket off me, while simultaneously tickling me.

'Where are you going?' I asked once she'd finally relented.

‘We need to go to the shopping centre for a few things and I need new sports shoes. Do you want us to wait for you so you can come too, or are you okay to chill here for a bit? We won’t be long,’ she answered.

‘You go, I’m nowhere near ready,’ I said, flopping back down onto my pillow.

‘Fair enough. Bring you back some sushi?’

‘Yes, please. Salmon if they’ve got it,’ I replied.

‘Sure thing. See you soon, lazy bones!’ she joked as she got off my bed and headed out of the bedroom door.

I sat my pillow up against the bedhead and leaned back on it. I loved Sundays. My parents were often home on Sundays, not shooting movies or doing press interviews. If they weren’t away interstate or overseas, we’d often make Sundays our day to relax. It usually started with freshly squeezed orange juice and coffee for my parents. Dad would cook pancakes or scrambled eggs, and we’d sit on the deck at the back of the house, which overlooked the woodlands behind our property. It was so peaceful and calm. I mean, this was all before my parents split, of course. The memory of

their divorce cut into my head like a bolt of lightning. I scrunched up my nose and threw off the blanket, keen to forget all about that part of my life.

I walked downstairs to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water. Then I popped two pieces of bread into the toaster, boiled the kettle and made myself a cup of tea, splashing in the perfect amount of milk and half a teaspoon of sugar.

The toast popped, and I buttered it and added honey, making sure to clean up the crumbs and put the knife in the dishwasher. Aunty Katherine had been so kind in taking me in—Mum kept reminding me to be a ‘good guest’.

Once I’d finished eating, I put my plate into the dishwasher then headed into the living room to sit for a bit with my cup of tea. I saw the electric piano the twins had received for their birthday. Chloe had said I was welcome to use it at any time—she knew I played piano and that I liked making music. Aunty Katherine said as long as I was in the house, it was my piano too, which was super sweet since it was brand new. Chloe had left the cover open (which Uncle Leon kept telling

her not to do), so I walked over and gently ran my fingers over the keys.

I sang a couple of notes that had been playing over and over in my head in a circular tune of my own making. Sitting down on the piano stool, I gently placed my fingers on the keys and began playing the notes.

'Da-da-da,' I sang along.

Then some words popped into my head that matched the tune.

'It's like I'm seeing you for the first time, first time . . .'

I sang.

Suddenly, the image of Cooper sitting in the go-kart entered my mind. He'd been my friend for so long, but now . . .

'It's like I'm seeing you for the first time, first time . . .'

I sang.

But then a new image came into my mind. The image of Talia and Cruz, arm in arm at the amusement park. And his face as he turned to look at me that first time at school. His sandy-blond hair and those piercing green eyes.

' . . . the first time.'

My voice petered off and I stopped playing. I wasn't sure which notes came next.

'That sounds pretty,' a voice said from behind me.

'AAAAAH!' I screamed, falling backwards off the stool.

'Piper! Are you okay?' Cooper said, running over to me.

Thankfully, the floor was carpeted, and it was only my pride that was bruised.

'Cooper, you scared me!' I said, putting my hand over my heart.

He helped me up and I sat back on the piano seat.

'I thought you'd all gone to the shopping centre?' I said.

Cooper shook his head. 'I was asleep! I'm not a morning person.'

'Chloe said "we are going" and I thought she meant all of you. I thought you were a serial killer breaking into the house!' I said.

Cooper grinned. 'I don't think that's a huge risk in this boring area of suburbia,' he pointed out. 'What song were you just playing?'

My cheeks flushed, knowing that I'd just been thinking about him. Or Cruz. Or someone.

'It's just one I made up,' I said quickly.

'You really are talented at song writing,' he said.

I played the notes again but didn't add the words, in case he knew I was singing about him. If it was about him—I didn't even know myself.

'Can I join?' he asked, gesturing to the piano seat.

I nodded and shimmied up the seat, making room for him next to me. I played the notes again, and as I played, Cooper added some bass notes, filling out the sound. It made it sound really whole.

'Do you have words?' he asked.

'Not really,' I said. 'Just a few I cobbled together about . . . about my dog back home.'

My dog?! Kill me, please!

'How does it go?' he asked.

'It's like I'm seeing you for the first time, first time,' I sang.

He looked at me quizzically.

'It's about when I got her as a puppy,' I said quickly.

He nodded and looked down at his hands.

I sang the line again and he added a harmony,

joining in the words. It made it sound so much better than I could have expected.

'Maybe something like this for the next bit?' he asked, playing another part of a tune.

'Oh yeah, that works,' I said, copying his melody.

'And everything is changing,' he sang, the words matching the melody perfectly.

My eyes met his.

'That's about your world changing because you now have a dog,' he said matter-of-factly.

'Exactly,' I added quickly. *Don't make this weird, Piper!*

We played through the next part with me singing the tune and Cooper adding harmonies underneath. I finished the last line and played the last lower note as he played his last upper note. Our fingers hit the same key at the same time. They hovered there, together, on that key for a few seconds before he drew his hand away.

'Great song,' he whispered. 'It's . . .' he looked directly at me, 'really beautiful.'

I jumped when Cooper's phone started ringing on the coffee table. He bounded up and answered it.

‘Oh hi, Chloe. Uh, yeah, I’ll have chicken sushi, please,’ he said into the phone. ‘Okay, thanks, bye.’

He ended the call and looked towards me. ‘I’d better go jump in the shower,’ he said. ‘I feel a bit awkward hanging around in my pyjamas.’

I laughed a little as he turned and left the room, feeling all kinds of awkward myself. And confused.

Giving myself a little shake, I faced the piano again and lightly played the new song I’d created with Cooper. He was right, it was beautiful.

I just wished I knew whom I was singing about.

Chapter 8

The vocal ensemble rehearsal was after school, so once the bell sounded for the end of the day, I followed Chloe and Cooper back to the music room to see Ms Banks. As the choir conductor, Ms Banks also ran the vocal ensemble. When we got there, I felt my stomach drop. Most of the other students were in Year 10, 11 and 12! I felt like a total baby being there.

But Cooper lightly touched my elbow and pulled me through the doorway, into the room.

‘Oh, Piper, you came!’ Ms Banks gushed as she walked over to us.

‘I thought I may as well give it a try,’ I said.

‘You have one of the strongest singing voices I’ve heard in a while,’ she said.

My cheeks heated up as a couple of the older students overheard her and looked me up and down.

‘Everyone, this is Piper,’ Ms Banks announced. ‘She’s new to the school but has a lovely voice and is trialling the vocal ensemble.’

The other students either said ‘hi’ or waved or simply nodded at me.

‘Let’s get started!’ Ms Banks called.

We shuffled into our positions, according to the types of voices we had.

‘As you all know, we have the District Eisteddfod in six weeks’ time. That’s not long to get this new piece sounding heavenly.’

There was a murmur amongst the students.

‘Shouldn’t we do a piece we already know, then?’ one of the older guys asked.

‘Where’s the challenge in that?’ Ms Banks said with a twinkle in her eye. ‘Take one of these sheets and have a look at your parts.’

She handed out the sheet music and I saw at the top of the page the title: ‘Bridge Over Troubled Water’. I knew the song—it was one of my dad’s favourites.

‘This is a song that was popular in the 1970s,’ Ms Banks said.

‘That’s like, one hundred years ago!’ a girl cried.

‘Not quite, Mia. But yes, it’s an older song that your parents or even grandparents may have loved. But it’s also an incredible song to sing in parts. But it’s quite complex. We are going to need to work hard,’ Ms Banks said.

To begin, she played the song on the smartboard. It was beautiful. It had so much yearning and passion. And by the end, everyone was nodding along. It was about being there for each other, supporting each other during the hard times and looking out for one another. It was everything that friendship should be about. And it made me feel good.

‘We are going to do this in four-part harmonies,’ Ms Banks said.

‘What’s this bit at the beginning?’ one of the older guys asked.

‘Oh yes, that’s for our soloist,’ Ms Banks explained. ‘I want someone to start off the song, singing the first verse by themselves. It’ll really start the tone as lonely

and solitary. Then we'll add the choir and it will suddenly feel full and like we're all supporting that person.'

'Can I put up my hand for the solo?' the girl named Mia asked.

'Actually,' Ms Banks said, 'I'm thinking a male soloist this time.'

Mia sulked.

'But I need the right person. Someone with a voice high enough for these notes up here,' she said, pointing to the sheet, 'but also deep enough for the rich tones down low. So, maybe one of our younger boys, perhaps.'

I turned towards Cooper and he shook his head violently from side to side. I guessed that was a 'no' from him!

'Anyway, we're not worrying about the soloist right now,' Ms Banks said. 'We need to get started on learning all our parts. It's quite intricate.'

We began by practising in our parts, then we had a go at putting the beginning of the song together. Some of the notes went wonky and people came in at the wrong time. But when we finally got it together, it

sounded amazing. The notes, which were all working in complete harmony, seemed to reverberate off the walls around us.

By the end of the session, I was buzzing. The music had made me feel so alive, and singing it with a talented group like this one completely transported me out of that school classroom and into a heavenly space of beauty. I'd never had much of a chance to sing in groups like this one.

We finished up and gathered our belongings.

'Dad said he'd actually be nice and pick us up today,' Cooper said. 'He'll meet us out front.'

I nodded as I gathered my bags together.

'How'd you like the ensemble, Piper?' Ms Banks asked from behind me.

'Oh, it's wonderful,' I said.

'So, you'd like to stay?'

'Yes, definitely. If you'll have me,' I answered.

'I'd love to have you! I can hear you have a very strong ear and learn harmonies quickly,' she said.

The other ensemble members filed out of the room.

'Oh, Cooper?' Ms Banks said, calling him back.

Cooper walked over to where Ms Banks and I were standing.

‘I’d like you to consider being our soloist for this performance,’ Ms Banks said.

His entire face turned beet red. ‘Ah, nah, I don’t think so, Miss,’ he said. ‘I’m not really an up-the-front guy. More of a background dude.’

‘But your voice would be perfect. You have the range,’ she protested. ‘Will you at least think about it?’

‘Come on, Coops, just consider it?’ I added, nudging him.

He looked at me in the eyes and a half-smile fluttered across his lips. ‘Maybe. But probably not,’ he added quickly.

‘I’ll take that for now,’ Ms Banks said, smiling. ‘Piper, you can convince him, okay?’

I laughed lightly and nodded my promise.

Chloe, Cooper and I sat on the bench just outside the school, waiting for Uncle Leon to turn up.

‘Why won’t you do the solo?’ I asked Cooper again.

‘Cooper? A solo?’ Chloe cried. ‘I *wish* he would! But he hates being the centre of attention, don’t you?’

‘That’s because I never *can* be the centre of attention when *you’re* around!’ he said, pushing her playfully to the side.

‘But I’ve heard you sing—you’re great,’ I prodded.

‘I just don’t love it when people are staring at me,’ he said, shrugging.

I realised I wasn’t going to win him over just yet, but I made a mental note to gently keep on encouraging him in the coming weeks. But I did wonder why he was so afraid of the limelight. He was smart and a wonderful singer and pretty nice looking . . .

‘Hey, Cooper!’ a guy’s voice yelled.

We looked up and there was a small group of guys that I remembered from the Lush Bench. They were the ones who were bagging us out for being in the choir.

The guy who called out reached into his bag. ‘I’ve got something you’d like,’ he said.

He pulled an orange out of his bag and tossed it at Cooper. Cooper stood up and angrily threw it back at the boy, who dodged it, cackling and walking away.

‘What was *that* about?’ I asked, annoyed. Why did those guys keep on harassing Cooper?

‘Nothing. It’s *nothing*, okay?!’ Cooper said in a voice harsher than I’d heard him use since we were little kids fighting over the last scoop of ice cream.

‘Cooper—I just—’

‘Forget it!’ he said, walking away.

‘Where are you going?’ Chloe called out.

‘I’m walking home. Dad is taking forever and I’m sick of waiting. I want to walk,’ he said over his shoulder as he stormed off.

‘What on earth is going on with him?’ I asked Chloe. ‘What happened with Cooper and Talia and that whole group?’

‘It’s just . . . it’s a stupid thing from ages ago. He wouldn’t want me telling you,’ Chloe said hurriedly.

‘Please tell me,’ I pried.

‘It was ages ago . . .’ Chloe repeated, waving her hand dismissively.

At that moment, Uncle Leon rolled up in his car. Frustrated, I opened the door and hopped in.

‘Where’s Coops?’ he asked lightly.

‘Got sick of waiting and walked home,’ Chloe said.

‘Oh right, okay,’ Uncle Leon said. ‘I bet we catch up

to him though. Should I stop and pick him up or drive right by so we can beat him home?’ he said cheekily.

‘I don’t even think he wants to be picked up,’ Chloe said flatly. ‘He’s in a mood.’

‘What about?’ Uncle Leon asked.

‘Oh, nothing. Just teenage stuff,’ Chloe said.

Uncle Leon frowned slightly and looked at me. I nodded in agreement. ‘So moody,’ I added.

He nodded and restarted the car, pulling out onto the road to drive us home. But my mind was racing. Cooper was clearly really triggered by Talia and her friends. And they definitely targeted him. I wondered what had happened between them all.

And I wanted to find out.

Chapter 9

I must have been five or six at the time. I remembered it was a warm summer day, and Mum and Dad had taken me down to the lake. We hired one of those paddle boats where you cycled the pedals with your feet to make it move. Mum and Dad each sat in a seat with the pedals and I sat in the middle. While they pumped their legs, I basked in the sunlight, enjoying the ride.

Mum's curly hair was bundled up on the top of her head. She wore a simple white shirt and capri pants with big sunglasses over her eyes. As they pedalled, Dad stared at her while she spoke with the corner of his mouth turned up in a half-smile.

He said something funny and she laughed her glorious laugh, playfully smacking his arm and laughing

until tears rolled down her cheeks. I didn't remember what they were laughing about.

When we got to the other side of the lake, we jumped out of the paddle boat and Dad took me to get an ice cream. He chose mint chocolate chip and I had strawberry. We got a scoop of vanilla for Mum in a small cup. She never liked the cones.

We took them back to her where she sat on the riverbank. She'd kicked off her sandals and rolled up her pants so her knees were exposed to the sun. She was delighted that we bought her an ice cream too, as she hadn't asked for one.

Dad drew a noughts-and-crosses board in the dirt with a stick. We used pebbles and leaves as the noughts and the crosses. I won every time.

Mum's phone rang and she was about to silence it, but then tilted her head at the number on the screen.

'Hello, this is Ana Haberfield,' she said, standing up and wandering over to a quiet spot a few metres away.

I glanced at her and watched. Her face lit up and she looked at my dad. He frowned and mouthed, *Who is it?*

She waved her hand to silently tell him to be patient. But her expression was of pure joy.

Once she hung up the phone, she bounded over to us like one of the bunnies at Nan's farm.

'Joe, you'll never believe it,' she gushed.

'What? What?!'

'What is it, Mummy?' I asked.

'Mummy is going to be a movie star!' she squealed.

'Space movie?' Dad asked.

'The lead role,' Mum squeaked. 'This is your captain speaking!'

He leaped out of the seat and picked up Mum and spun her around. She squealed and held her sunglasses on her face. He put her back down on the ground and gave her a long kiss.

I giggled.

'Mummy, you are already a movie star,' I said as she sat down.

'You're right, Piper, but I've only ever had smaller parts. This time, I'm going to be the star of the movie!' she said, pulling me into a hug.

'This is big, Ana,' Dad breathed. 'Did they talk cash?'

'Only preliminary numbers, but yes,' she said, winking.

'How much?' he asked.

'I'm not talking money in front of Piper.' She giggled, pretending to cover my ears. 'But let's just say, I think we can make an offer on that house on Riddles Lane. *And* the crash pad in LA.'

'Yes!' Dad yelled, fist pumping the air.

'Will you go away to film it?' I asked. I remembered Mum went away to film another movie, even though she wasn't the main lead. She was gone a month.

Mum exchanged glances with Dad.

'She will, but I'll be with you, Button! We'd never *both* go away.' Dad pulled me into his arms and gave me a tight squeeze.

'But you might get a starring role too,' I protested. Dad had also been in a stack of movies in smaller parts, and I knew it was his dream to have a starring role as well. He just said his time hadn't come yet. But what if it did come? At the same time as Mum's?

'It's all about Mum for now,' he said, looking into Mum's eyes.

Mum leaned over me as I remained in Dad's arms and lightly stroked his cheek. 'This is the beginning for us.'

The beginning of what? I wondered.

'Excuse me?' a voice said from behind us. We looked, and a woman and her husband were standing close to us. 'Did you play the forensic pathologist in *Evidence Lost*?' the woman asked.

'Why, yes I did! It's not often people recognise me from that—I was only in a few episodes.' Mum laughed.

'I told you!' the woman said to her husband. 'You owe me an ice cream—I was right!'

'It's our favourite show,' the man explained.

'I suggest you get her autograph now,' Dad interjected, 'because she's going to be a much bigger star in the near future!'

Mum playfully hit Dad and frowned at him. 'I'm not meant to announce it, Joe!'

'Ooh, is it a movie?' the woman asked.

'Maybe,' Mum said cryptically, winking at the couple.

'Well, then, we'd better get an autograph so we can

show it off to everyone when you are properly famous,' the man said, opening his wallet and pulling out a piece of paper. 'Honey, do you have a pen?' he asked the woman.

The woman rummaged in her bag and pulled out a pen, and the man handed the piece of paper to Mum. She wrote something down, and signed her name across the bottom and handed it back to him.

'Awesome, thanks. How about a photo, then?' the woman said. 'We can say we knew you *before* you were super famous.'

'Sure!' Mum laughed. 'Gosh, this is fun! I could get used to this!'

The man handed his phone to Dad to take a photo. Mum stood in between the couple and smiled.

'Jump in the photo, Piper!' Dad said, putting me down on the floor.

But before I could move, Mum held up her hand. 'No! I mean it, Joseph. Not Piper.' I knew she was serious because she was using Dad's full name.

I moved back and Dad took the photo before the couple thanked us and walked away.

‘Piper could have been in a photo—they’re not the paparazzi,’ Dad said, ruffling my hair.

‘No photos of Piper. Anywhere. If this gets big—and who knows what’s going to happen—then it’s our job to protect her. No photos, no media. She remains anonymous,’ Mum said. ‘Always.’

Dad tilted his head to the side, as if trying to read Mum’s face. She had a serious expression that she hadn’t worn all day. Dad nodded lightly.

Mum reached up to her head where her sunglasses were perched and pulled them off. She leaned over and popped them on my face. They were huge and covered from my forehead down to the top of my mouth.

‘Mummy!’ I laughed. ‘They’re too big!’

She tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

‘That’s perfect,’ she whispered.

I walked over to the water’s edge and peered down at my reflection in the lake. I giggled at how I looked.

With the giant sunglasses covering my face, I didn’t even recognise myself.

Chapter 10

‘Hi, baby!’ Mum cooed through my phone screen.

‘Hi, Mum, how’s it going?’ I said.

‘Oh, you know, long days. Never any rest for me,’ she said.

‘What’s with your hair?’ I asked. Mum’s usually curly hair was in tight ringlets and she wore an old-fashioned comb, pulling her hair back.

‘Oh, you haven’t seen half of it.’ She laughed. She reached down beside her and picked up a clump of material. She shook it open and then placed it on her head.

‘A bonnet?!’ I said, laughing hysterically. ‘I never thought I’d ever see you playing a part that required you to wear a bonnet!’

‘Well, this is my big change of direction,’ she said. ‘Who knows? The Academy might respect me a little more once I’ve done this classic. But anyway, enough about me. How are *you*?’

‘Fine, fine,’ I said, trying to sound reassuring.

‘What’s school like?’ she said, taking off the bonnet and throwing it on the table behind her.

‘I guess it’s kind of like the movies,’ I said. ‘But more boring.’

She laughed.

‘Nobody knows who you are, right?’ she said with a solemn look.

‘No, of course not,’ I said. ‘Chloe and Cooper haven’t told anyone and I am certainly not volunteering the information.’

She nodded approvingly. ‘Any cute guys?’ she said with a cheeky grin.

‘Mum, that’s so cringe,’ I said, wincing.

‘Oh come on, Piper! You’re fourteen, and I know you’ve started noticing boys.’

An image of Cruz and his deep-green eyes and floppy hair leaped into my mind. But it was quickly

replaced by an image of Cooper at the go-karts, taking off his helmet and pulling me into a hug.

‘Maybe,’ I said carefully.

‘Who is it?!’ Mum said, leaning into her phone camera. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement.

‘No, it’s no-one,’ I insisted. ‘I mean, sure, there are cute guys, but nobody specific.’

‘Oh come on, Piper, you have to give me more than that. What colour hair? What does he like to do?’ she baited.

I knew she wouldn’t stop until I told her *something*. I couldn’t describe Cooper, for obvious reasons.

‘Blondy-brown,’ I finally said. ‘And footy.’

‘A footy boy? Wow, I didn’t think that’d be your type!’ She laughed.

I heard something clatter in the hallway behind me, giving me a startle. When I turned, I saw Cooper grab his dropped phone off the floor and clumsily put it back into his pocket. His face was flushed red with embarrassment. Oh no. Had he heard me?

‘Sorry, Piper—I wasn’t listening, I promise!’ He stumbled over his words, looking very uncomfortable.

‘I was just walking past and dropped my phone. Didn’t mean to scare you. Hi, Auntie Ana!’

‘Hi, Coops! You taking care of my girl?’ Mum yelled through the phone.

‘Of course. I mean, Chloe and I are, yes. Not just me,’ he said, his words tumbling out of his mouth.

Cooper waved and left the room in a hurry, his footsteps fading as he went into the kitchen.

‘Wow, he’s grown,’ Mum whispered.

‘Yeah, he’s . . . really sweet,’ I said.

‘Such a young man now!’ Mum said. ‘I haven’t seen him in years, clearly.’

I was desperate to change the subject. My mind was racing as I replayed the scene that had just happened. Surely, he’d heard me talk about Cruz. That was so embarrassing.

‘There’s something else I need to mention,’ Mum said slowly.

Uh-oh. Here we go.

‘What is it?’ I asked, knowing full well what she was about to say.

‘Your dad texted me and said you aren’t responding

to his messages again,’ she said quietly.

I sighed. ‘I’ve just been busy, Mum. It’s not easy starting a new school and all that.’

‘I know, I know. But you can’t just block him out, Piper,’ she argued.

‘I’m not!’

‘You know I’m not particularly fond of the man either, but he’s your *father*,’ she said.

‘I know, Mum! And I told you, I’ve just been busy, okay? I’ll get back to him. Just . . . just leave it.’

Mum’s sympathetic look was like a stab in my heart. ‘Look, I need to go. Homework and all that,’ I said.

‘I miss you,’ Mum said.

‘I miss you too.’

We ended the video call and I placed my phone facedown on the desk. My excitement about talking to Mum had completely dissipated with the mention of my dad. *Dad*. The word sat like a splinter in my heart.

I shook my head and pulled on my sneakers. Then I ran downstairs.

‘Auntie Katherine, I’m going for a jog. That okay?’ I asked.

‘Of course, sweetie. Don’t go far though,’ she said.

‘I’ll just go up to the oval and back.’ Chloe had given me a short tour of the neighbourhood on the weekend, and the oval wasn’t far away.

‘Dinner will be ready in about half an hour,’ Uncle Leon said.

‘Okay!’ I headed to the front door and stepped out into the crisp late-afternoon air.

I launched into a light jog, my shoes slapping the pavement in a rhythmic beat. The sky was beginning to turn pink and the sun was dipping low on the horizon. I passed house after house, little slices of suburban happiness. Neighbours walked their dogs and mouthed silent ‘hellos’ as I passed each one. Kids rode bikes and tweens did their paper rounds. It was so different to Hollywood, and hiding from the snaps of the paparazzi, who hid like pythons in the shrubs, waiting, waiting for their prey so they could strike and bind and squeeze until there was no breath left in them.

I came over the crest of the hill and saw the oval up ahead. The light shriek of a referee’s whistle. The grunt of a tackle. The cheer of a group. I ran right up to

the sidelines so I could take a drink from the drinking fountain.

I recognised some of the guys on the turf. Lots of the cool guys from the Lush Bench. They’d run at each other like feuding bucks, lock horns, and twist and writhe. Then a sleek, swift pass to the player on the outside who ran like Hermes with wings on his feet. He dived over the line and slid through the moist grass, sliding along like a swan on the water. He stood up and turned, flicking his blond-brown hair from his eyes.

Cruz.

His mates ran over to him, slapping him on the back in congratulations.

I’d never really been into football, but seeing it now, there was a beauty about it. The rugged tackles contrasted with the flight of the athletes running up the sideline, eyes on the try-line. Unflinching. Unwavering.

Cruz caught my eye and I felt flustered. I lifted my hand to my hair, pushing the wayward strands out of my face. I turned and took another drink from the fountain, trying to look busy. When I looked up, he was back on the other side of the field, talking to his coach.

The coach clapped his hands together and blew a short, sharp shriek of his whistle.

‘That’s enough, boys,’ he said. ‘You can go now. Remember, 9 am for the game this weekend.’

The guys jogged off the pitch, the smell of sweat and dirt hitting me in the face.

Cruz came off last and I turned to walk away.

‘Piper, right?’ he said.

‘Yeah . . . Cruz?’ I said, pretending that I struggled to remember his name.

He smiled, a dimple creasing on his cheek. Something in my stomach dropped.

‘So, you hang out with those twins, right?’ he said.

‘Yeah, I’m staying with them while I’m here. I’m only around for the rest of this year while my parents are away on business,’ I explained.

‘Is Cooper, like, your boyfriend?’ he asked.

My cheeks became hot. ‘What? No!’ I suddenly felt like I’d betrayed Cooper. I didn’t know why. He wasn’t my boyfriend. ‘I’ve known him since I was little. He’s like a brother to me,’ I said slowly.

It wasn’t completely untrue. I *had* thought of Cooper

like a brother when we were little. But then I remembered seeing him at the airport. His fringe flopping over his face. His awkward smile. The way he gave me that cute little half-smile when I saw him shovelling his peas into the bin . . .

‘So, no,’ I said again.

‘I’ll take that as a “no”?’ Cruz said, laughing at how many times I had said *no* to his question.

My cheeks felt hot again.

‘You’re a runner?’ he asked.

‘Oh, not really,’ I said. ‘I mean, I like to run, you know, to clear my head. That kind of thing.’

‘You should compete in the cross-country carnival in a couple of weeks,’ he said.

‘I’m not fast,’ I said quickly. ‘I just run for fun. I wouldn’t want to compete.’

‘It’s not like that,’ he said. ‘It’s a really fun carnival. It’s not all super serious. And the best bit is, you get to miss half the day of school,’ he finished with a cheeky grin.

‘Oh yeah? Maybe.’

‘You know Talia?’ he said.

‘Your girlfriend?’ I answered, then suddenly felt awkward for saying it.

‘Yeah, my girlfriend. I think you have some classes together? Anyhow, she goes in it. Lots of girls do.’

‘I’ll think about it, then,’ I said.

He smiled again, flashing his perfectly straight white teeth. So many guys our age still had braces, so he had either had them and got them off early or he was born with enviable dental talent.

‘Cruz, you coming, bruh?’ one of the other guys called.

‘Better go. Nice to see you again, Piper,’ he said.

I waved lightly as he started to walk away to the change rooms.

My mind was a tangle as I walked back to Chloe and Cooper’s house. Seeing Cruz and talking to him made me feel light-headed. There was something about the way he spoke—the way he looked right into my eyes. It was like he was only focusing on me and I was the only person on the planet. I thought back to the moment when Cooper took off his go-kart helmet and we hugged. The way his lips gently parted as we stared

at each other. Was I reading into these situations? With *both* guys? Why did I feel like I was somehow betraying Cooper by talking to Cruz? And why did I feel like there were sparks between Cruz and me? He had a girlfriend!

Clearly, I was overthinking both situations. Cooper was like family and Cruz was taken. End of story. I picked up my pace until I was jogging again. And in that moment, I decided to put both guys far out of my mind.

Chapter 11

‘Class, I want you to find a partner and start your character investigations for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,’ Ms Huxley said.

Nia nudged me. ‘Want to go together?’

I nodded, happy that I wasn’t a leftover that no-one would pair with. Chloe wasn’t in my class and I was worried Nia would want to go with someone else. And Cooper already had someone to work with sitting next to him.

‘I will give you each a character and you can go through the play and your notes to create your investigation profiles,’ Ms Huxley said.

‘Can we use the internet?’ someone asked.

‘Yes, but remember, you need to use reputable

sources only and absolutely no AI is allowed!’

Nia and I turned our chairs towards each other, and Nia pulled up a fresh document on her laptop.

‘Nia and Piper, I’d like you to do Puck,’ Ms Huxley said. ‘He’s a central character to the play, but I think you are both bright girls and can manage it.’

‘Thanks, Ms,’ Nia said as Ms Huxley walked off to another group to assign their character.

‘Bottom?!’ I heard Talia shriek from the other side of the room. The dark-haired girl she was paired with was laughing loudly. She was another from the Lush Bench. ‘We’re doing a character whose name is BUM?!’

‘That’s Bottom,’ Ms Huxley corrected. ‘And, yes.’

‘She’s so annoying,’ Nia scoffed.

I smirked. I’d seen plenty of divas in my time. There was one on the set of Dad’s last movie who insisted that staff peel her grapes for her because she didn’t like the texture of the skin. One day, the caterers hadn’t peeled her grapes and she lost her mind.

Thankfully, Mum was never like that. Well, not to my knowledge anyway.

Nia typed the title PUCK up at the very top of the

document, then we got to work looking through our notes and pulling out relevant parts from the play that related to his character. He was a cheeky kind of elf-like character. Always up to mischief. As we typed it onto the document, Cruz's cheeky smile flashed into my mind. His dimple imprinting on his cheek and his green eyes sparkling.

I couldn't ask Chloe anything about Cruz because she'd already accused me of having a crush on him and told me not to 'go there'. I wondered how much Nia knew.

'Puck's a bit like a naughty cool guy,' I said casually. 'Like, he'd be on the Lush Bench for sure.'

Nia laughed. 'You're totally right. Playing pranks on the teachers.'

'So, are all the guys from the Lush Bench, like, total airheads?' I asked.

Nia narrowed her eyes at me. 'I mean, I don't know them that well. Most of them are arrogant and think it's funny to shame people in front of everyone, so yeah, not my type.'

'Cruz and Talia seem pretty popular,' I said, trying

to steer the conversation towards Cruz. 'She is totally annoying, like you said, but I dunno, he seems a bit nicer. Maybe more down to earth? Like he's deeper than all that lush-bench rubbish?'

Nia scrunched up her nose. 'Oh no you don't,' she said.

'What?'

'You're seriously not crushing on Cruz, are you?'

'Absolutely not!' I protested. But blood rushed to my face, colouring my cheeks.

'Well, the answer is, I don't know if he's "nice" and "deep", but my suspicion is he's not. He's been dating Talia on and off since Year 6. How deep can he possibly be?' Nia said, glancing over at Talia.

'Yeah, you're right. I just . . . he was nice to me, so I thought maybe he was different. But I'm sure he's just another one of those superficial guys,' I said, waving my hand dismissively.

I glanced over at Talia, who was scrolling on her laptop. She'd stop and point at the screen, beckoning her friend to read something. Then they'd both either laugh or look shocked or whisper, *OMG, can you believe it?!*

It certainly didn't look like she was researching the character of Bottom from Shakespeare.

I looked back down to my hard copy of the play and started flicking through the scenes again.

'Talía! Madison! I can see your screen!' Ms Huxley scolded from the back of the classroom. 'Get off the celebrity gossip website and start working. I'll be checking your progress.'

Talia rolled her eyes very subtly, carefully making sure the teacher couldn't see, and said, 'Yes, Ms Huxley,' in a chirpy voice.

But then she looked at her screen again, pointing to something with her mouth wide open. This was followed by another *OMG* from her friend.

Talia saw me looking at her and stared right at me. I quickly looked away.

The bell rang at the end of class, and Nia and I gathered our belongings and headed towards the door. As we exited the classroom, I saw Cruz waiting for Talia in the corridor, as he always did after our English class. Usually they'd meander up the hallway together, but today, Talia raced out of the classroom, grabbed

his arm and dragged him up the corridor at pace.

'Whoa! Slow down!' Cruz protested, but he trotted after her like a puppy dog.

'She's in a hurry,' Nia said.

'Probably needs to show him her new lip gloss. That's *urgent*,' Cooper said, joining us.

We laughed.

'What's next?' Nia said, looking at the timetable in her diary. 'I'm off to art. Where are you guys going?'

'Music,' Cooper and I said at the same time. We were in the same music class.

'See you at lunch!' Nia said and walked off in the opposite direction.

Cooper and I wandered up the hallway, in no particular rush to get to our next class.

'Ugh,' Cooper huffed. 'I can't be bothered.'

'I thought you loved music, Cooper Yang,' I teased, surprised by his comment.

'I love music, but not *mainstream* music class,' he said. 'This is the class everyone in the year is forced to do. So, most of the people in the class are tone deaf or can't even clap on a beat. We do the most boring stuff.'

It's not like vocal ensemble, where people are actually musical.'

I nodded. I'd only been to one music class, and Cooper was right. Last lesson we'd tried to sing 'Row Row Row Your Boat' in two-part rounds and it sounded worse than the alley cats wailing in the night in the city, back home.

'Fair,' I said.

We entered the music classroom and our teacher, Mr Norman, stood up the front, telling everyone to hurry. He had wispy white hair that reminded me of a character out of *Lord of the Rings*. He wore a shirt with a bowtie, which was a bit funny because no other teacher wore a tie, let alone a *bowtie*. The bowtie was red and was covered in little black music notes.

'Cooper, you're a strong lad,' he said, clapping Cooper on the back.

'Is he?!' one of the footy guys mumbled, making the rest of the class laugh.

Cooper reddened.

'Can you help me get the percussion box off the shelf?' Mr Norman asked him.

I slid into a double desk at the back of the classroom, assuming Cooper would join me once he'd helped Mr Norman. Cooper reached up into the cupboard and pulled down a box.

'Good lad,' Mr Norman said. 'Can you please hand out the instruments? And, everyone, don't play your instrument until I say so.'

Cooper handed out castanets, clapsticks, triangles and bells. Of course the second everyone received an instrument, they began to bash, clash and smash them all at once. The din was eyewatering.

'Mind if I sit here?' a cool voice whispered next to me. I turned and Cruz was sliding into the seat beside me. 'Sneaked in before old Normo could see I'm late,' he whispered, smiling at me.

Cooper arrived at my desk and saw Cruz had taken what he'd assumed to be his seat. I shook my head lightly and shrugged—I hadn't invited Cruz to sit there. Cooper shrugged with a smile as if to say *it's fine*. But he swallowed hard as if it wasn't quite fine. He handed me a maraca and gave Cruz a mallet without saying a word. Then he walked away and I wanted to

call him back, but I didn't want to be rude and tell Cruz to move. Plus, it was Cruz. And something in me was drawn to him like a magnet. I didn't want him to leave, even though I felt bad about Cooper.

'Everybody, quiet!' Mr Norman yelled over the clanging and banging. 'We are going to practise rhythm. You need to sound your instruments to the rhythm of "Hot Cross Buns",' he said.

Some students sniggered.

'Like this: Hot. Cross. Buns,' he said, tapping his clapsticks together on each syllable. 'Hot. Cross. Buns. One-a-pen-ny, two-a-pen-ny. Hot. Cross. Buns. Now all together!'

Everybody picked up their instruments and tried to sound them to the beat. It sounded like somebody falling down three flights of stairs with a box full of pots and pans. Students were cracking up and Mr Norman had his hands over his ears. I was pretty sure people were getting it wrong on purpose.

'Stop! Stop!' he hollered. 'Let's start with this small section of the room,' he said, pointing to a cluster on the far left. 'Everyone else, instruments down!'

'Wow, that sounded worse than a collapsing scrum,' Cruz whispered, grinning.

I had no idea what a 'scrum' was, so I just nodded and pretended to find it funny.

He put down his cowbell and mallet. 'So, I was thinking about the other day,' he said.

'Yeah?'

'Yeah, like after footy practice. You said you might want to do cross-country?' he said.

'No, *you* said I should do cross-country,' I said, smiling cheekily.

'Ha, not wrong. But I was thinking, if you want to, you know, we could do some running training together? I find it's easier to run with a . . . a friend,' he said.

My mind certainly felt like it was running. At a million miles an hour. *Is he asking me on a date? No! He has a girlfriend!*

'Piper?'

I realised I'd frozen with an entire monologue running through my head. I must have looked ridiculous staring into nothingness and not answering him.

'Um, yeah, that'd be good,' I said hurriedly.

‘Right, now this side of the room!’ Mr Norman sang out, pointing to us.

I picked up my single maraca. Cruz picked up his cowbell and mallet.

‘Together!’ Mr Norman sang.

Hot.

Cross.

Buns.

Shake.

Shake.

Shake.

The noise in the classroom reverberated in my ears as students stabbed and banged at the rhythm with their instruments.

‘Better!’ Mr Norman yelled approvingly. ‘Now, I have a new task for you all. Find a partner and together you need to do a one-minute performance. You can choose two percussion instruments or an instrument you already play. Or one of you can even sing! The voice is a powerful instrument!’

I saw Cooper spin around from the front.

‘Team up with me?’ Cruz whispered in my ear.

The sound of his voice so close gave me goosebumps. The hair on my neck prickled.

I looked into his eyes as he flicked his fringe out of his face.

‘Sure,’ I said before I knew what I was even doing. My eyes darted back to Cooper, who looked from Cruz to me. He slowly turned back to the front. I opened my mouth to call to him, but it was too late. And anyway, what would I say?

‘You will perform your piece not just for our class but for the whole year group in week seven,’ Mr Norman told us.

‘I can play “Riptide” on the ukulele,’ Cruz said proudly, sitting up straight in his seat.

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Yeah, we learned it in music last year. I’m pretty good, if I do say so myself,’ he said, smirking.

‘And why did you want to team up with me?’ I asked, eyebrows raised.

‘I know you’re in the choir. And I know you got into that vocal thingy with all the properly good singers,’ he said. ‘I figured you’d make me look good.’

I laughed and shook my head. 'I knew it! You're just using me for my skills,' I joked.

'Maybe *you* are using me for my mad ukulele skills?' he shot back.

'We'll see who has the mad skills,' I said. 'But how awks doing it in front of the entire year? We'll need to practise.'

'Come to my place after school. We can practise then,' he said coolly.

My heart thundered in my chest. 'Oh, I can't today. But I can on Thursday, if that suits you?'

'Yeah, that's great. I don't have footy training, so that works. Meet me after school and we can walk to my place together.'

The bell sounded and I startled. Cruz stood up and said in a smooth voice, 'It's a date.'

As I sat in my seat, watching him walk out of the room, I felt like my entire body had turned to liquid. I wasn't even sure I'd be able to stand. My hands trembled and my head felt light.

But then I saw Cooper walking towards the door.

'Cooper!' I yelled after him. 'Wait up!'

He turned to look at me and gave a little wave. *Sorry, gotta be somewhere*, he mouthed. Then he turned and jogged out of the room.

And I was left in my seat, barely able to move or think or speak.

What on earth just happened?

Chapter 12

The next morning, Chloe, Cooper and I walked along the path slowly, breathing in the crisp air.

Cooper seemed to have forgotten about me ditching him in music class, and things were pretty much back to normal after I explained that Cruz sat next to me uninvited. Cooper had waved his hand dismissively at me, saying it didn't matter. But I saw Chloe look at him out of the side of her eyes and then she shook her head at him. I wondered if they had that twin-telepathy thing going on. Like when twins felt each other's pain and all that. I asked Chloe about it later and she said she was sure Cooper was fine. I wasn't so sure.

'Coming to choir at lunch?' Cooper asked me.

'I guess so,' I said, shrugging.

'Not enjoying it?' Chloe asked.

'No, it's not that at all,' I said. 'I didn't mean to sound negative. I meant of course I am because our whole group goes, so what would I do if I didn't go?'

We walked in through the school gates and up into the locker room. I opened the padlock with the combination code and the door swung open. My sports gear tumbled out of the locker, along with some of my books.

'Why've you got so much in there?' Chloe said, giggling.

'I do *not* have my head around this school timetable yet,' I said. 'Like, why do we have a Week A and a Week B? Why can't each week be the same? I always bring the wrong thing on the wrong day!'

'You'll get used to it,' Chloe said with a smile. 'It took me about a whole term of high school to know what I was doing. You're doing a great job considering you haven't even been in a high school before now.'

'Shh!' I hissed, reminding her that nobody else knew that I'd been schooled on the movie lot of my parents' latest blockbuster.

The bell pierced through the air and Chloe grabbed her books for the first few lessons.

‘I’ll see you at recess,’ she said.

I was still tidying up the tsunami that had erupted out of my locker. The truth was, I wasn’t just muddled about starting a new school. My whole mind was a jumbled mess ever since Cruz had sat next to me in music class and had invited me over to his house to practise our performance piece. That was tomorrow, and my mind had been completely unfocused in anticipation. I couldn’t concentrate in class and I kept doing really weird things like putting the milk in the pantry and my phone in the fridge.

It’d got so bad that even Aunty Katherine had asked if I was stressed about all the changes. So embarrassing.

‘Ugh!’ I heard a shriek behind me. Talia was standing in front of her locker looking frustrated.

‘You okay?’ I asked.

‘I forgot my sports gear and I have sport today. I’m already on demerits for forgetting last time, and if I don’t turn up in sports gear today, I’ll get an afternoon detention,’ she whined.

‘You can use mine if you like,’ I said, shrugging. ‘I thought I had sport today, but I don’t.’

‘Are you serious?’ she said, turning towards me.

‘Sure—I promise it’s clean. It should fit you—I think it’s like a sack on everyone, right?’ I said, pulling out my sports bag and passing it to her.

‘Piper, that’s so nice,’ she said, looking genuinely taken aback.

‘It’s fine, I don’t need it,’ I said.

She took my sports bag and put it in her locker for later.

‘Come on, we’re late for English,’ she said.

I remembered that we had the same English class. Instead of trotting off ahead, Talia walked beside me.

‘You know, that was really nice of you,’ Talia said quietly. ‘Cruz said you were nice.’

My heart thundered in my chest. Cruz had been talking about me?

‘Oh?’ I managed to squeak.

‘He said you’re helping him with a music thing, or something like that,’ she said, flicking her long ponytail over her shoulder.

‘It’s for class,’ I mumbled. ‘I didn’t ask to go with him—we just happened to be next to each other.’

Talia laughed lightly. ‘I don’t *mind*, Piper,’ she said. ‘Cruz doesn’t belong to me. And I don’t belong to him. In fact, I haven’t told many people this yet, but we’re not even dating anymore.’

‘Really?’

I looked sideways, trying to examine her expression. There was no trace of heartbreak on her face. It was as if she was telling me about the weather.

‘To be honest, it’s been a long time coming,’ she said. ‘I think we’ve just been a “thing” for so long that we didn’t even question it anymore, you know?’

‘Not really,’ I admitted. ‘I’m not really the dating type.’

‘Well, everyone was always shipping us together since primary school. So, we’d always end up as the “it” couple—you know, a total vibe. People thought they knew us and that we were the best couple. But we never really stopped to work out if we were even a good match,’ she said flatly.

‘I understand that bit,’ I said slowly. ‘The bit about people thinking they know you and what you’re like,

even when they don’t have a clue.’

Talia stopped and tilted her head to the side, as if analysing me. ‘You’re really easy to talk to, Piper.’

‘Ah, thanks,’ I said.

‘Maybe we should, I dunno, hang out some time. It’d be nice to hang out with someone who doesn’t think they know everything about me already.’

‘Cool,’ I said as we reached the classroom.

We walked inside, and Talia went over to her friend and I slid into my seat beside Nia.

‘Hanging out with Talia?’ Nia said, confused.

‘I just let her borrow some sports gear is all,’ I said.

As I sat there, my mind buzzed away, a hive of confusion. Talia had been so *nice*. Nothing like the Talia who was mean to me on the first day. And then I thought of Cruz. His sparkling eyes and cute smile. He and Talia had seemed so in love at the amusement park. But now they were over? And she talked about it like it wasn’t even a big deal. Maybe they hadn’t even liked each other that much. Talia’s words echoed in my mind—the idea of people thinking they knew you. I, of all people, knew what that was like. That happened

Chapter 13

to my parents on a daily basis. I'd be standing in the check-out queue and see Mum splashed on the front page of a magazine with the headline 'Drama Ana—Impossible to Work With', or Dad with the headline 'Joseph's Hollywood Rival', and then there'd be a non-sense article about an apparent feud between him and some other celebrity that he'd never even met. It was all made up, but the whole world believed it. I guessed that was why my parents kept me far away from cameras and media—they didn't want the world thinking it knew me and splashing my life all over the tabloids.

Was high school that different? Sure, Talia wasn't a movie star, but she was a celebrity within the school walls. Maybe she really *did* want a true new friend.

I glanced over at her and she gave me a tiny wave.

But Chloe and Cooper really disliked Talia. And they'd known her a lot longer than I had. Could she really just be misunderstood?

I tried to focus on my work, but my mind kept wandering off. I realised one way that high school was exactly like the movies.

It was confusing as anything.

I'd had to stay back to ask my science teacher about an assignment after class, which meant by the time I walked back to my locker, lunchtime had well and truly started. The hallway with my locker was pretty much empty, and I could hear the whoops and chatter from the grassy areas outside the hallway. I opened my locker and pulled out the lunch bag that Uncle Leon had packed for me that morning. It was so sweet how he made the twins', and now my, lunches every day. He called the kitchen 'Dad's Deli' in the morning, and he'd make anything, from wraps to noodles, salads and sandwiches. Chloe always complained when it was a sandwich and Cooper always complained when it was a salad. I told them to get over themselves and

be thankful that they were having lunch hand-made by their parents. Uncle Leon loved that. I couldn't remember the last time Mum or Dad had made me a sandwich.

I slammed my locker shut and was about to go outside to the lawn to find my friends when I heard a familiar voice behind me.

'Piper!' Talia said. 'I've got your sport gear here,' she said, holding up a bundle of clothing. 'I'll take it home and wash it if you like.'

I shook my head. 'No, it's fine, I can wash it. I don't need it for another couple of days.'

'Are you sure? Probably stinks like sweat—I really hate sport.'

'Honestly, it's fine,' I said, reaching out to take the bundle.

The clothes smelled nothing like sweat or sport, but more like a sample counter at Sephora. But I didn't say that.

I opened my locker and shoved the gear into my bag then shut it again.

'Do you want to come sit with me for lunch?' Talia

asked in a small, quiet voice.

'Oh, I was going to meet up with my friends,' I said, trying to hide my surprise.

'There's nothing wrong with diversifying your friendship circles,' Talia said with a laugh. 'It doesn't mean you're abandoning them, you know.'

I shrugged. I remembered Mum saying to me before I came to Chloe and Cooper's house that I didn't have to feel obliged to sit with them at school just because we were living together. Not that I felt obliged. They'd been so lovely and welcoming. And so had Nia, Harry, Lucy and Jishaan. I'd really started to care for these friends, even though I hadn't known them that long.

'Piper?' Talia said, breaking my internal dilemma. 'Just come. Your friends won't mind,' she said, linking arms with me and dragging me up the hallway.

Talia prattled on as we walked out of the hallway and into the sunshine.

'Piper,' she said after a while. 'Are you okay? You're not saying much.'

'I guess—I dunno—I'm just wondering why you're being so nice all of a sudden. You weren't exactly

welcoming on the first day. Remember when you offered to show me the dance studio then totally snubbed me straight after class?’

Talia’s cheeks went red. ‘I’m . . . I’m embarrassed I did that, Piper. Then I felt even worse when you were kind and gave me your sports gear. You didn’t have to do that. And we seemed to hit it off when chatting on the way to English. I felt like you understood me and weren’t trying to impress me just because I’m, you know, apparently “cool”.’

‘Maybe I just don’t think you’re *that* cool,’ I said playfully, giving her a nudge.

Talia laughed. ‘Let’s start fresh, then. Come meet my friends and you’ll see our group isn’t as bad as some people think it is.’

I immediately thought back to Chloe saying how much Cooper hated Talia. What had happened between them to make him loathe her so much?

We walked across the grass and approached what Chloe and Cooper had called the ‘Lush Bench’. Close up, it still didn’t look any lusher than any other bench in the school. Sitting on the benches was a collection of

teens who all exuded confidence.

‘Um, Talia, I thought you said there was no room at the Lush Bench for anyone new,’ the dark-haired girl from my English class said.

I found it interesting that she referred to it as the Lush Bench too, and it made me think maybe this group actually liked everyone calling it that. It was suddenly less quirky a nickname when I thought about it.

‘Madison, don’t be rude,’ Talia said. ‘Everyone, this is Piper. She’s new to the school and she’s been an absolute legend to me. So, I thought I’d introduce her to the gang.’

I waved shyly. Then immediately felt stupid for waving. What was I, three years old? I whipped my hand down by my side.

‘Piper, this is Madison, Briony, Luna, Toby and that’s Milo.’

The others nodded or said hi. I recognised Milo as the one who threw the orange at Cooper the other day. I also had a couple of classes with him, and he seemed like the type to always be cracking jokes or getting in

trouble. I didn't really want to get to know the guy who had tormented one of my best friends.

'Shove, Milo,' Talia said, gently pushing him so he stood up off the bench. 'Ladies first.'

'I don't see any *ladies* around here. Just bossy girls,' Milo muttered, nonetheless moving over to the ground and sitting down.

'What have we got here?' a smooth voice said from behind.

I turned and saw Cruz sauntering over. He gave me a little smile and my stomach flipped.

'You joining us, Piper?' he said.

'Yeah, Talia said I could, if that's okay,' I said nervously.

'Of course. I was talking about you the other day to these guys,' he said, nodding towards the group. My heart leaped in my chest at the idea of Cruz talking about me. 'I said, "That new girl is cool. We should hang with her."'

'And you've definitely traded up from that other group you were sitting with,' Milo yelled too loudly, high-fiving Toby.

'Hey, they're my friends,' I said, feeling suddenly emboldened. 'They may not be "lush", but they've been so nice to me. They're actually awesome people.'

The group went silent. I'd even surprised myself at how I'd snapped at Milo. It was one thing to crack jokes, but it was completely different to bag out my friends.

Cruz slapped Milo over the back of the head. 'Ignore him. He's a jerk sometimes.'

'Maybe I should go,' I said, beginning to stand.

'No, no, stay!' Talia said. 'Ignore Milo. He's always running his mouth off. We're happy you're here.'

I relaxed back into my seat.

I opened my lunch bag and pulled out my wrap. I sat and observed as Talia's group chattered away. I was trying to see if there was any tension at all between Talia and Cruz since they'd broken up. But there was nothing. He laughed at her jokes and she answered his questions. It was like they were friends and nothing had ever been between them—good or bad. To be honest, I was impressed. I'd seen adults behave far more immaturely around break-ups . . .

'So, Piper, what do your parents actually do

that they're away and you're having to live with the Yangs?' Madison asked.

'My parents are split up,' I said, 'so when they're both away for work it's a bit tricky. My dad runs a business—exports or something boring that I have no idea about.' I was surprised at how easily lying was coming to me these days.

'And your mum?' Briony asked.

'She's in fashion,' I said.

'In English class, you said she's a journalist,' Madison said, frowning.

'Yeah, fashion journalism. She's like, at all the big fashion shows and reports on them and stuff,' I said quickly. I twirled a strand of hair around my index finger, which was something I always did when I was nervous.

Madison nodded, seemingly accepting my correction without suspicion. I exhaled.

'Hey, Piper, do you want to come to my epic party this Saturday night?' Toby said.

'Oh yeah, it's going to be awesome,' Cruz added. 'You have to come!'

'I'm not sure,' I said. 'I don't know what Chloe and Cooper's family have planned. But yeah, maybe. Can I get back to you?'

'Yeah, totally. It's going to be amazing. My sister had her eighteenth party last weekend and we hired all this gear for a full week, so we've got speakers and a sound system and lights, and we even still have leftover food and drinks. I've invited like fifty people!'

'Half of which you don't even know,' Madison jibed.

'I do so! Some from my footy team and stuff,' Toby said.

'Rent-a-crowd,' Milo said, and Toby punched him in the arm.

'Sounds cool. I'll let you know, if that's okay?' I said. I wondered for a moment if I should ask if Chloe and Cooper could come. But then I remembered how much Cooper disliked Talia and how Milo threw fruit at him. They probably wouldn't want to go anyway.

The bell for the end of lunchtime sounded, and I zipped up my lunch bag and stood up.

'It was nice having you hang out,' Talia whispered. 'Come again?'

I shrugged. 'Yeah, maybe.'

Cruz sidled up beside me and walked with me back towards the lockers.

'You still good to come over tomorrow afternoon to work on the music thing?' he asked.

'Yeah, of course,' I said, then regretted sounding so eager.

I looked up and saw Chloe and Cooper standing in front of me with Nia, Lucy, Harry and Jishaan. Cooper looked from Cruz to me and then back to Cruz. He inhaled sharply then turned and walked towards his locker. I winced. Why was I feeling guilty about hanging out with other people? It wasn't like I belonged to Chloe and Cooper, so it wasn't fair if they were mad at me about it.

'Piper, where were you?' Chloe asked.

'See you tomorrow afternoon,' Cruz whispered then walked off.

'I looked out for you guys on the lawn, but you weren't there,' I said. It wasn't a complete lie—I had looked to our spot on the lawn on my way to the Lush Bench and was surprised to see the group wasn't there.

'Um, choir?' Nia said.

Oh no!

'Ugh! I completely forgot!' I said, smacking my forehead. 'I'm sorry.'

'No, I'm sorry,' Chloe said. 'I should have waited for you. It's all new to you,' she said kindly.

'I won't forget next time.'

We walked back towards the locker room in silence until Chloe broke through, saying, 'So, what's happening with Cruz?'

'Oh, nothing. I think Talia felt sorry for me being a loner and asked me to eat with them. And I'm doing my music project with Cruz,' I said dismissively.

'Talia? Talia's never felt sorry for anyone in her entire life. Except maybe herself,' Chloe said.

'She's actually not that bad when you get to know her,' I said.

'Piper, I've known her since kindergarten. I think I have a better idea than you about what she's like.'

Chloe's comment stung, but I didn't want to get into a fight. She walked off ahead to get her books for the next class. But her words echoed in my ears.

Chapter 14

'I don't care if the cameras are here!' I scream.

He comes towards me with his arms open, but I violently shove his arms downwards.

'Don't come near me. Don't touch me!' I yell.

Click, click, click. Flash, flash, flash.

'How can you do this to us? To Mum? To me?!' I shriek.

My voice sounds scratchy and high and not like my own.

'Piper, honey,' she says. 'We didn't want to hurt anyone.'

'You have no right to talk to me!' I holler. 'You pretended to be my friend!'

'Piper, I'm ordering you to go inside, now,' he says in a stern voice. Obviously changing tact. A new character. A new act.

'I don't have to listen to you. You're a conman. A liar,' I scream.

I turn and begin to run. Behind me, I hear an uproar of shouting from the paparazzi.

'Joseph, what was that girl talking about? Was that your daughter?'

'Mindy, what is that girl accusing you of?'

'Joseph, where's Ana?'

'Is this the end of "Anseph"?''

But I'm too far away to hear any more. So, I just hold back my tears and run.



By the time Thursday came, I was completely preoccupied by the fact that I was going over to Cruz's house in the afternoon to work on our music class performance. In the morning, I'd tried several different hairstyles while I scrutinised myself in the bathroom mirror.

Sleek, straightened ponytail—effortless and cool.

Messy bun—casual and fun.

Long and curly—mature and mysterious.

'Ugh,' I muttered to myself, pulling the elastic out of my hair.

'What's taking you so long?' Chloe asked as she

came into the bathroom. 'I've been waiting forever to brush my teeth.'

'Oh, nothing. I'm just having a bad hair day,' I said, trying to bundle my hair up onto the top of my head in another messy bun.

'This wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that you're going to Cruz's place after school?' she said, giving me a raised eyebrow.

'No!' I said. 'In fact, I totally forgot I was even going, so thanks for reminding me.'

'Liar,' Chloe said, playfully jabbing me in the side.

'Ugh, you girls are *still* in here?' Cooper said from the doorway.

'Don't look at me—it's Piper. Doing her hair for the fiftieth time for her hot date this afternoon,' Chloe said in a dramatic voice.

'It's not a date,' I said, getting slightly annoyed.

I looked in the mirror and my eyes met Cooper's in the reflection. He looked startled.

'You're going on a date?' he asked, sounding odd.

'No! I'm going to Cruz's to do our music performance practice, okay?' I said.

'You don't have to get my permission,' Cooper said and his voice had a sharp edge to it that I hadn't heard before. He was clearly annoyed. 'And why does it smell like Mum and Grandma are hanging out in here?' Cooper snapped, waving his hand in front of his face.

My face burned. I wanted to smell nice, like Talia did, but I didn't own fragrances and perfumes. I'd asked Aunty Katherine if she had a bit of body spray—nothing too grown up. She'd given me a spray can of a flowery body mist, but maybe I had applied a little too much. And if Cooper thought I smelled like a grandma, then I certainly hadn't achieved the effect I'd gone for.

I turned on the tap and started to wash my forearms where I'd sprayed the fragrance.

Cooper saw my face and that I was washing my arms, and it looked like he felt bad. I thought he was even going to apologise, but he closed his mouth and turned and walked away.

'He's been so moody lately,' Chloe said.

I finally gave up on trying to do something interesting with my hair and settled on a standard ponytail.

When Chloe and I went downstairs, Uncle Leon

said that Cooper had already headed off to school for something early. I scrunched up my nose—Cooper didn't have anything on before school, so I had a feeling he was making up a lie to avoid walking to school with me.

I sighed.

For the rest of the day, I was a distracted mess. All I could think about was hanging out with Cruz. I couldn't work out if I was excited or nervous or both. Mum had always said to me that actors learned to channel nerves—to redefine them as excitement. She always said excitement and nervousness had similar bodily reactions—butterflies in the tummy, jittering energy, quick breathing, fast heart rate. She used to say that as an actress, she would tell herself it was excitement in order to get rid of her nervous doubts.

But that didn't seem to be working for me at this point. I had *plenty* of nervous doubts. Like, what if he didn't like me? What if we had nothing to talk about? What if I said something stupid?

I'd been quiet all lunchtime as I sat with Chloe, Cooper and our friendship group in the lawn area.

There was no way I was going back to the Lush Bench—I was nervous enough about seeing Cruz later. Plus, I did feel bad about missing choir to hang with Cruz and Talia, especially knowing that Cooper loathed them so much. It felt almost like a betrayal.

At the end of lunch, when we were walking back to our lockers, Chloe had pulled me aside. She'd noticed I was quiet and looked at me with a serious face.

'Piper, I know you say you aren't worrying about hanging out with Cruz, but you've been quiet all day,' Chloe said.

I shrugged. 'I don't even know why. It's not like I need to impress him.'

'Just remember, Piper, he's *just* a boy. Just another kid in our year. Sure, a good-looking one, but he's just another fourteen-year-old dude who fails exams and drops the footy and stinks after sports class.'

I giggled. Chloe was right. Why was I getting myself in a knot over Cruz? He really was just another human.

'And, you know, be careful,' Chloe said, grabbing my hand.

'Careful? Why? He's not dangerous.' I laughed.

‘I just mean Cruz and that whole group aren’t known for being the nicest people on the planet. Don’t let him, you know, hurt your heart,’ she said softly.

I looked into Chloe’s eyes, which were deep with concern. I thought of how Talia had changed and been so nice. And about how Cruz had looked at me.

‘I promise I’ll be careful,’ I said, pulling her into a warm hug.

‘See you at home after,’ she said as she went to get her books for the last two lessons of the day.

As I gathered my own books, I realised I was feeling a lot better after my chat with Chloe. But I also couldn’t stop thinking about her comment. *Don’t let him hurt your heart.* There was no way I was going to let a guy hurt my heart. But I couldn’t get one questions out of my mind: would he try to?



Cruz was waiting for me at the front gate of the school at the end of the day.

‘Piper!’ he called, flashing a wide grin at me.

Heat flowed to my cheeks as I trotted over to him.

‘I don’t live far—just a couple of blocks,’ he said, gesturing down the street.

‘That’s fine,’ I said lightly.

We headed down the road with the afternoon sun gently warming our backs. The scent of freesias drifted lightly on the breeze. We mostly walked in silence, my mind racing to try to come up with something to talk about. But other than the odd remark about the weather, I couldn’t think of anything to say.

‘My house is just down there,’ Cruz said, pointing down the next street.

I felt relieved that the awkward walk was nearly finished and hoped we’d have more to talk about once we got to his place.

Cruz’s house was a sweet white weatherboard with a little picket fence and gate. The front path was lined with flowers and there was a gorgeous little porch swing out the front. Cruz turned the handle to the front door and walked inside.

‘I’m home!’ he called.

The house was small but nicely kept, with buffed wooden floorboards and crisp white walls.

‘In the kitchen!’ a voice called.

We dumped our bags in the entryway and headed down the narrow, long corridor.

We entered the bright kitchen, which had a lovely country vibe with cute pendant lights hanging over the white stone benchtop.

Behind the bench was a woman, who I assumed to be Cruz’s mum. She looked just like him. Long wavy blonde hair and sparkling green eyes. When she saw me, she smiled brightly, showing her dimple in her cheek, just like Cruz’s.

‘Cruz, is this the friend from school you mentioned?’ she said.

‘Mum, this is Piper. She’s new to our school,’ Cruz said.

‘Hi, Piper, lovely to meet you,’ Cruz’s mum said.

‘Where’s Talia?’ a voice chirped from behind us.

I turned and there were three younger kids sitting at the dining table eating fruit and muffins. I glanced at Cruz awkwardly at the mention of Talia.

‘Piper is here to do our music assignment with me,’ Cruz said, as if that explained why Talia wasn’t there.

‘Piper, these are my siblings. Lulu and James are twins and are ten years old. And that’s Lottie. She’s six.’

‘Almost seven,’ Lottie corrected.

The little trio of blondies waved at me sweetly, then resumed their busy task of eating.

‘Would you like a muffin and some fruit?’ Cruz’s mum asked.

‘We should probably get started on our music thingy,’ Cruz said. ‘Can we take them to go? Mr Yang is collecting Piper in an hour.’

‘Sure thing. Take a plate and feel free to get started,’ Cruz’s mum said, handing us a plate each.

I took a blueberry muffin and a piece of watermelon and followed Cruz out of the kitchen.

‘I like Talia better,’ I heard Lottie whisper as I left the room.

We went into a carpeted room with a big TV, a gaming unit and toys in little baskets.

‘This is our rec room,’ Cruz said. ‘My little siblings still think of it as their playroom, but I’m trying to claim it as my man cave. Everyone needs a space for gaming, right?’

I wasn't quite sure how to answer that. I wasn't into gaming and could never really understand what the big fuss was all about.

Cruz went over to the tall cupboard on the opposite wall and opened it. There were shelves stacked to the ceiling height, filled with board games, stationery, toys and other bits and pieces.

'It's gotta be here somewhere,' he mumbled. 'Aha!'

Cruz pulled out a little ukulele. 'I'm proud to say, I was in the ukulele group in primary school and even got a solo at the end-of-year concert.'

I giggled. 'Well, show me your mad skills,' I said.

Cruz started to play the opening chords to a pop song called 'Riptide'. He stumbled through the first few bars, stopping at his mistakes and trying again. It didn't sound great.

'You know, I play piano,' I said. 'If we want to do another song, I can probably learn it in time.'

'Are you saying I suck?' he said, giving me his cheeky grin.

'Not at all!' I lied. 'Just keeping the options open.'

'I really wanna do this song. I think it'll make me

look like a cool guitarist, you know?'

I laughed lightly and nodded. I supposed 'Riptide' was fine.

Cruz began to sing along to his clunky strumming. His voice was mostly in key, but he clearly didn't have much of a range as his voice squeaked when he tried to reach the higher notes.

'Join in when you can!' he called to me.

I sang along with him, awkwardly stop-starting as he tried to get the chords right. I even tried to add a harmony to one part, but the minute I started singing a different tune, Cruz couldn't hold the melody anymore, so I decided it would be better if we just sang the same thing.

After what felt like a clunky ride up a rocky path, we finally finished the song.

'What do you think?' he said.

'I think we have a lot of work to do,' I said, raising an eyebrow. 'Maybe we should break it down into sections and work on it bit by bit.' This was one way to help him learn the parts better.

Cruz nodded. 'I really want to do well in this

performance,' he said, looking down at his fingers as he tried to play the introduction to the song again.

'Why? I didn't know you were that into music.'

'That's just it,' Cruz said. 'Everyone thinks I'm this dumb footy jock and that I can't do anything except kick a ball and run fast. Sometimes I want to, you know, surprise people a bit.'

I tilted my head to the side. Cruz was still looking down at his fingers on the ukulele, poking his tongue out in concentration. It was kind of adorable. He stumbled on the same chord over and over.

'You know,' I said, reaching out my hands and gently pressing them down on his fingers to stop him from playing, 'sometimes you just need to slow down first. Get it right then try it faster.'

He looked up at me as our fingers touched. His green eyes locked on me.

'Like this?' he said, starting up again, but at a much slower pace.

'That's it. Now play that chord progression a few times. Once you've got it, string it together.'

Cruz played the chords slowly. Once he'd mastered

them, he added some more of the song, bringing it up to speed.

'Nice,' I said.

'How'd you do that?' he said, smiling at me proudly.

'Like I said, I play piano. That's how I learn a tricky song. Break it down, slow it down, then build it all back up again. My mum always said it's less overwhelming to break things down into smaller pieces. Like when she's learning a whole script,' I said but then stopped abruptly. I couldn't believe I'd just said the word 'script'.

I'd told everyone my mother was a fashion journalist.

'Script?' Cruz said, looking up with raised eyebrows.

My mind raced. I wanted to tell Cruz the truth, but Mum's serious warning echoed in my mind not to tell anyone about her or my family.

'I mean, not like *script*, more like a speech. My mum often presents at fashion awards and stuff—has to talk up the front, you know?' I said, words tumbling out of my mouth faster than I could control them.

Cruz looked deep into my eyes. 'Yeah, cool,' he said.

I exhaled. He didn't seem to suspect anything. I made a mental note to be more careful with my words.

Cruz strummed clunkily through the next few bars. I tried my best not to wince at his playing. There was one chord that was clearly wrong, but he kept playing it over and over.

‘I think . . . I think that chord might be a bit wrong,’ I said carefully.

He looked up with a frown and tossed his fringe out of his face. ‘Which one?’

‘The one that sounds a bit wonky,’ I said.

‘I can’t hear it,’ he said, shrugging.

‘May I?’ I held out my hands.

‘You play guitar too?’ he asked, handing over the ukulele.

‘No, not at all. I mean, my dad does and we used to play stuff together. Me on piano and him on guitar. But he also had a ukulele, which I would muck around on from time to time.’

I played the chords slowly until I got to the bit where Cruz was messing it up.

‘Ah, here. Should be A-minor, not A-major,’ I said, strumming the correct chord.

‘I don’t even know what you’re talking about!’ Cruz

laughed, clearly trying to hide his embarrassment, and I felt bad for him.

‘Here,’ I said, passing it back to him. I walked around behind him and leaned over, showing him how to shift his fingers to the correct chord.

‘Oh yeah, that sounds nicer,’ he said.

He turned his head to where I was leaning over him. Our cheeks were only inches apart.

‘You smell really nice,’ he whispered.

My cheeks flamed. Heat rushed to my head and I felt dizzy. I couldn’t even respond. He turned so that he was facing me more directly, then lowered the ukulele into his lap.

I stood in silence, unsure if I should lean down to him. I could feel his warm breath near my face.

Suddenly, involuntarily, I stepped backwards.

‘Try it all together now,’ I said, my voice flustered. I walked around in front of him and sat down in my chair. My mind was racing, and so was my heart.

Why did I just do that? What would have happened if I’d stayed there?

All I knew was that my body had told me to move.

It didn't feel quite right and I didn't feel ready for anything to happen. Like a kiss.

I sat and stared as Cruz began strumming again, my mind lost in a confusion of ideas and discordant sounds.

Chapter 15

'You okay?' Cruz said, looking up from his ukulele.

'Yeah, of course, why?'

'You just seem quiet.'

'I'm fine,' I said, trying to shake away the embarrassment from my face.

Cruz seemed completely nonplussed, but I couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking. Did he *want* to kiss me? Had I imagined it? And if he did, what did he think about me moving away? Did he think I was a little kid who didn't understand this kind of thing?

'Is your dad a musician?' Cruz asked.

'What?'

'Like, you said he played guitar with you, so I wondered if he's a musician.'

‘Oh right,’ I said. ‘Ah, no he’s just a-a businessman. I don’t even really know what he does. You know those parents—the ones where the kids don’t even know what they do all day? That’s him.’

Cruz nodded. ‘You don’t talk about him much.’

I shrugged. It wasn’t like I’d talked all that much to Cruz about anything. I didn’t know why he thought I would have been talking about my dad.

‘My dad’s . . . not in the picture,’ he said, looking down at his fingers and lightly strumming the ukulele once again.

‘Oh,’ was all I could say.

‘He left my mum five years ago. Lottie was only one. What a loser,’ he said bitterly.

I examined Cruz’s face, but it was difficult because he was looking down at the ukulele strings. But I could see the frown etched on his forehead.

‘Do you ever see him?’ I asked gently.

‘Nope.’

‘I guess he hurt your mum pretty bad—you probably don’t want to see him.’ An image of my own dad flashed into my mind.

‘It’s not that. I mean, yeah, you’re right. But it’s not that I *won’t* see him. He doesn’t want to see *me*. Or any of us.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. Left my mum. Turns out he has another family on the other side of the country. He’d been with this other lady for like, years, and they even had a kid together. Somewhere out there, I have a half-sibling. Can you believe it?’

I shook my head, shocked. That would be so weird.

‘One day, he just packed up, told my mum he loved this other woman and that they were going to “make a go of it”. Didn’t want anything to do with me or any of my siblings,’ Cruz said angrily.

‘That makes me feel kind of bad,’ I said slowly.

‘Why?’

‘My dad did the wrong thing, that’s for sure. But he’s desperate to see me and I won’t return his calls. But I can’t just forgive and forget either,’ I said. ‘Like, if I just call him up, is it like I’m saying everything he did is just suddenly okay?’

It felt weird that I was saying all this to Cruz. I’d

never said it out loud to anyone—not to Chloe and not even to Mum. But now that I'd opened the lid to this jar of emotions, I couldn't screw it back on.

'I was the one who found him out,' I said. The words tumbled out uncontrollably. 'I saw him kissing one of his . . . colleagues.' I'd almost said 'co-star' but quickly corrected myself. 'I'm the one who discovered them, then I'm the one who told the world.' Tears pricked my eyes.

'You mean you told your mum? I think "told the world" is a bit extreme, Piper. I mean, it's not like you broadcasted it on the news,' Cruz said, putting his hand on my knee.

If only he knew. I *had* told the world. I'd run outside to where the paparazzi were waiting, like foxes outside a rabbit's burrow. I ran out there and screamed at my dad and his co-star, Mindy, who was a famous actress. The paps loved it. They filmed it and clicked their cameras and I didn't even care. I just kept yelling. I'd yelled about him cheating on my mum and the footage went viral. It's the only time my face had ever been shown in the media. Up until that point, I'd

always been in disguises or sheltered from the flash of cameras. But not that time. It was a couple of years ago, so I looked younger then. But sometimes I would pull up the footage just to see it again. Tears streaming down my cheeks. My father imploring me to go inside. The cameras were mostly focused on him and Mindy, and I should have been grateful that I was only a footnote to the drama. But I wasn't grateful. I was angry. So angry. Angry at him. Angry at the media. Angry that my heartbreak was the world's entertainment. That the headlines of the end of Ana and Joseph, or 'Anseph', was actually the fracture of my family. My world.

A tear spilled from my eye and dripped down onto my cheek.

'Piper, I'm so sorry! I made you cry!' Cruz said, leaning forward and wiping the tear with his thumb, his fingers gently holding my cheek.

'No, no, it's not you. It's just the memory of it all. It was a tough time for Mum and me,' I said.

'I get it,' he soothed. 'I thought my world would never heal when Dad left. But you know what? It really has.

It's hard sometimes, but I've got Mum and my siblings, and it's my job to take care of them. So I do. And I love it, mostly.'

'That's a big responsibility for a fourteen-year-old,' I sniffed.

Cruz shrugged.

I pulled a tissue from my pocket and wiped my nose. I was horrified to think that I was ugly-crying in front of my crush.

'Jeez, Piper,' Cruz said, rubbing his forehead.

'You're something else.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, like, I was with Talia for two years and never talked about this stuff. I've known you for five minutes and I feel like I can tell you my whole world,' he said, smirking.

I winced at the thought of Talia. Of the two of them, cuddling in the Ferris wheel at the amusement park.

'That's probably why we broke up,' he said flatly. 'We were together for show, but there was no real, I dunno, depth?'

'I get it,' I said quietly.

Everything inside me wanted to open up to Cruz. To tell him my truth—that I was the daughter of Hollywood's most famous ex-couple. That my parents were movie stars and their split was worldwide, headline news. That my childhood had been anything but normal and I was living a life undercover. I wanted to strip away all the secrets and façades, to peel myself open like a snake shedding its skin, revealing the fresh, real skin underneath.

I opened my mouth to talk, but the words wouldn't form on my lips.

'What is it?' he said, sensing that I was trying to say something.

'I . . . I just wish you knew the real me,' I said, fumbling for the words.

'I feel like I'm getting to see the real you,' he whispered.

'No, I mean, I-I—'

'Piper!' a voice called from the kitchen. It was Cruz's mum. 'Chloe's dad is here to pick you up!'

'What is it?' Cruz said, trying to coax me to say what I was going to say.

But the moment had passed. I stood up, looking down at his sweet face, which suddenly made him look like a young boy, trying to find his way in a big, confusing world.

‘It’s nothing,’ I said. ‘I’ve told you more this afternoon than I’ve told anyone.’

‘Me too.’

I leaned down and lightly kissed Cruz on the cheek. He smiled at me, his green eyes sparkling.

‘See you at school,’ I whispered.

As I walked out of the door to meet Uncle Leon, my lips tingled where they had touched Cruz’s soft cheek. I raised my fingers to my lips and gently touched them, as if I could hold that piece of Cruz in my hand.

Chapter 16

I picked up the phone and scrolled through the contacts. I stared at the blazing screen. I lifted my finger to hit ‘call’ but then scrunched my hand up back into a fist. The contact name remained illuminated, beckoning me.

Dad.

I thought back to what Cruz had said. About how his dad left them and wanted nothing to do with them. My dad had been trying to talk to me for ages. Sometimes I took his calls—on my birthday or around Christmas. He’d wish me a happy day and I’d grunt back in monosyllables. Even Mum would urge me to tell him about my presents. My day. Anything.

But the image of Mindy and him in the dressing

room was permanently etched in my mind. It was like a scar on my brain, a fault line, reminding me of our broken family.

It's not that I won't see him. He doesn't want to see me.

Cruz's words pricked at my thoughts.

I hit the 'call' button. It rang. And again. And again. I was just about to hang up when the call connected and there was a ruffling sound.

'Hello? Hang on! Piper? Are you there?' Dad's voice sounded flustered.

'Ah, yeah,' I said.

'Hang on, honey . . .'

I waited in awkward silence.

'Okay, I'm here. Are you there?' he said.

'Yeah, I'm here,' I said quietly.

'How are you? It's been ages! Mum told me you're staying with the Yangs. How's Katherine and Leon? And the twins must be big now!'

He was speaking so fast—like a kid retelling a trip to Disneyland.

'The Yangs are good. It's nice to see Chloe and Cooper again,' I said slowly.

'I've missed you, sweetheart,' he said. I could hear his smile through the phone.

'So, I hear you're on a new movie,' I said.

'Yeah, we start shooting next week. That's why I'm in a mad panic—packing up the house to move to the set for the next six months. It's in New Zealand, Pi! Isn't that exciting? Remember how you always wanted to go to the place where they shot *Lord of the Rings*? Well, that's where I'm going. Remember, you wanted to find fairies?'

'I don't believe in fairies anymore, Dad,' I said.

'Of course, I know that. I just . . . I just thought of you when they told me where we'd be filming.'

'Is Mindy going?' I said dryly.

There was silence on the other end of the line.

'Yeah, she is,' Dad said quietly.

'Is she in the movie too?'

'No, she's just coming for . . . you know, moral support,' Dad said carefully.

I didn't know what to say.

'So, tell me about school and stuff,' Dad said quickly, trying to fill the silence.

‘It’s kind of weird being at a regular school,’ I said.
‘Nobody knows who I am, don’t worry,’ I added hastily.

‘I know. I trust you,’ Dad said.

‘And the group of friends I’m with are really nice. I’ve been hanging out with Chloe and Cooper’s group. And some other people as well,’ I said, suddenly remembering Talia and Cruz and the Lush Bench group. Were they my friends too?

‘That’s so great to hear, Pi. What else have you been doing?’

‘I’ve joined the choir with Cooper and Chloe. And a smaller vocal ensemble, but I’m unsure if I’ll stay in that. It’s a big commitment,’ I said.

‘You have such a great voice,’ Dad said. ‘But of course, make the decision that works for you.’

I paused. I knew it would be polite to ask him more about his life. But I didn’t want to hear it. I didn’t want to hear what he and Mindy were up to. About their glamorous holidays and shiny new house. So, I said nothing.

‘Yes, honey, it’s Piper!’ I heard Dad gush. A female voice mumbled something in the background that I

couldn’t quite hear. I assumed it was Mindy.

‘Pi, I’ve been trying to reach you for a while,’ Dad said carefully.

‘I know, I’m sorry. I’ve been kind of busy,’ I said.

‘There’s actually something I wanted to tell you.’

I swallowed hard.

‘I wanted to talk to you before the paparazzi got all over it—you know what they’re like.’ He laughed nervously. ‘You see, I wanted you to know that Mindy and I are getting married.’

Heat rushed to my head. I felt dizzy. And my throat felt dry.

‘Piper?’

‘Um, yeah, I’m h-here,’ I stammered.

‘I know this is big news, but we want you to be involved. Mindy wants to spend more time with you. Be part of your life,’ Dad said.

My head spun.

‘We’d love you to be part of the wedding—maybe even like a flower girl? Or something more grown up, I mean. Or just be there on the day if you prefer. You don’t have to have a role.’ Dad was speaking fast, like

I did when I was nervous. ‘Maybe you can come and stay with us on set in New Zealand?’

I tried to swallow, but my throat was too dry. ‘I go to school now. I can’t just leave whenever I want,’ I croaked.

‘Oh yes, of course. I mean, maybe in the school holidays?’

‘Dad, I have to go. Uncle Leon is calling for dinner,’ I lied.

‘Of course, sweetie. Well, anyway, it was *so* good to talk.’

Before Dad could finish his sentence, I ended the call. I threw my phone onto the bed as if it was carrying a disease. I put my hands over my face and sank down onto the carpet, burying my head in my knees.

Waves of conflicting thoughts and emotions crashed down on me. I felt like I was caught in a rip with no way out.

It wasn’t that I thought Mum and Dad would ever get back together—she had said she’d ‘moved on’. But something inside still resisted the thought of Dad and Mindy being together long term. She was meant to be

the co-star who kissed my dad then went away. They weren’t meant to stay together—to get married! She would become my stepmother! And what if they had a child together? A half-sibling to me. This wasn’t the plan. This wasn’t my future.

‘Piper?’

I looked up and saw Cooper standing in the doorway, his face creased with concern.

‘You okay?’ he asked.

I nodded, wiping my eyes.

‘You don’t look okay,’ he said, coming in and sitting down next to me. ‘But you also don’t have to talk to me about it.’

‘Thanks, Coops,’ I said, leaning my head on his shoulder. It felt nice to be resting on him. Not with the weird feelings like at the go-karting. This was more like . . . like family. ‘Do you remember when we were little? And we made up that magical kingdom?’ I said, looking up at him. ‘I can’t quite remember the name—’

‘Mystishary,’ he said.

‘Yes! The Kingdom of Mystishary.’ I laughed. ‘Where on earth did that name come from?’

‘You.’ Cooper chuckled. ‘You were always the one with the creative ideas.’

‘Chloe was a princess, but I didn’t want to be a princess,’ I said, trying to grasp the threads of a memory that were as wispy as a cloud.

‘You were a purple fox with a magic tail,’ Cooper teased.

‘Oh yeah . . . my name was Lavender.’

‘Lavendorp,’ Cooper corrected.

I burst out laughing. ‘Yes, Lavendorp! And you were a . . . lion.’

‘Yep. I had a long mane and I was called Kingsley.’

‘And do you remember when I tried to jump on your back?’ I said.

Cooper laughed again. ‘Yeah, you said that you should ride the lion, but I was smaller than you and you jumped on my back and almost broke my legs!’

We both laughed loudly, remembering poor little skinny Cooper, toddling around with me on his back, his legs as shaky as a newborn foal.

‘And Chloe was the magic princess who granted wishes. Do you remember your wish?’ I asked.

‘I remember yours,’ he said, tilting his head and looking me in the eyes. Cooper gently brushed away a strand of hair that was stuck in my dry tear. ‘You wished you could sing like a lark and all the forest animals would come to you.’

I nodded. That was right. I wanted to be a songbird.

‘And what was yours? I remember Chloe wanted hair that grew like Rapunzel’s,’ I said.

‘I wished we could be together forever, remember? The fox and the lion.’

My breath caught in my throat. I rested my head back on Cooper’s shoulder. He felt so safe. Like family. But also like something else. Something more complicated than that.

I sighed, closing my eyes. It was all so simple back when we were young. So much of me yearned to go back. Back to the Kingdom of Mystishary, where we would sing and live forever. Where friendships never got tricky and parents loved each other for eternity.

Chapter 17

Lucy kicked off her school shoes and rolled her socks down her ankle.

‘I don’t want to get a sock tan line,’ she said, then stretched her legs out in the midday sunshine and balanced her lunchbox on her lap.

‘So, Piper,’ Nia said, leaning in. ‘You didn’t report back about your hang-out with Cruz.’

‘It was a school music assignment,’ I corrected.

‘Then why were you taking so long to do your hair in the morning?’ Chloe asked, eyebrow raised.

I stifled a smile.

‘Come on, spill the tea,’ Lucy pried. ‘This is your only chance before the guys get here.’

‘There’s nothing to spill!’ I exclaimed. ‘We played

through our music assignment. His mum is nice and his siblings are cuties. That’s it.’

‘You know he and Talia broke up,’ Nia said.

‘He’s probably on the rebound,’ Lucy added.

‘I don’t care if he is,’ I said, waving my hand dismissively. ‘I don’t have a crush on him.’

I knew it was a lie and my pink cheeks betrayed me.

‘Well, I wouldn’t go there anyway,’ Chloe said matter-of-factly. ‘You know I’m not a fan of Cruz. He’s just another one of the many airheads from the Slush Bench.’

I chortled at her re-naming of the Lush Bench. ‘Okay, I may not have a crush on him, but I will say, he was a little . . . surprising.’

‘Do tell,’ Nia said, practically salivating over the information I was providing.

‘I dunno. He was deeper than I thought he’d be, you know? Like, nicer and more insightful,’ I said carefully. I didn’t want to give too much private information about him.

‘I highly doubt that,’ Chloe said sceptically.

‘No, seriously. When he’s on his own, it’s like he’s

not trying to impress any of those other guys or Talia or anyone. He just seemed . . . more down to earth,' I said.

Nia looked smitten. Lucy looked puzzled and Chloe looked unconvinced.

Jishaan, Cooper and Harry came sauntering over to where we were sitting, and I immediately drew my thumb and forefinger over my closed lips, indicating to the girls to zip up the conversation we were having.

'Interrupting a ladies' lunch?' Jishaan said.

'No, of course not,' Nia said, shuffling over to make room for the guys.

The three of them sat down and pulled out their own lunches.

'Piper, I heard you telling Ms Banks this morning that you're not doing vocal ensemble,' Jishaan said as he bit into his sandwich.

Cooper looked at me with eyebrows raised in surprise.

'Yeah, but I'm still doing choir,' I said. 'It's just all a bit much. I've only just joined the school—I'm feeling a little overwhelmed.'

'Why didn't you say?' Cooper asked quietly.

'I didn't think it was a big deal,' I said, shrugging.

The truth was, Cruz had asked if I wanted to do running training with him for cross-country after his footy practice the same afternoon we had vocal ensemble. I kept telling myself I wasn't quitting because of Cruz but because I wanted to train for running. Which was kind of true. I *did* want to do the cross-country carnival. And I didn't plan on telling any of the group that I was running with Cruz. Chloe and Cooper would be at vocal ensemble, so how were they to know I was running with Cruz? They'd just know I was running. I didn't have to say who with. I mean, it wasn't *really* a lie.

'Plus, don't you think it's nice not to always be doing school stuff?' I said, trying extra hard to build my case.

Cooper shrugged. 'I thought you liked singing.'

'I do, I just . . .'

'Maybe Piper's right,' Nia said, sitting up straight.

'I am?'

'Yeah, we need to loosen up. Do some more fun stuff. We're always doing school stuff,' Nia said.

'What should we be doing, then?' Harry asked.

‘Like when we went out to lunch the other day. That was so fun. We should hang out more, you know, doing *social* things,’ Nia said.

‘Yeah,’ Lucy joined in. ‘We’re teenagers—we’re not meant to spend all our time on school stuff. Like, this weekend. What are you all doing?’

Everyone shrugged.

‘See? We should hang,’ Nia said.

‘You can come to my place,’ Jishaan said. ‘We could watch a movie or something?’

We all nodded.

‘Sounds good,’ Chloe said.

‘I’m in,’ I agreed.

We all looked up when we heard a shriek come from across the lawn. Cruz was standing by the Lush Bench, holding something above his head. Talia was playfully hitting him, giggling and yelling, ‘Give it back!’

Talia swiped at Cruz, trying to grab whatever it was that he held above her. When she lunged at him, he picked her up around the waist and spun her in a circle. She squealed in mock terror.

‘They don’t *look* broken up,’ Harry said, scrunching

up his nose and looking perplexed.

‘They’re on good terms,’ I said. ‘They just decided they don’t like each other like *that*.’

Everyone stared at me.

‘I just . . . I mean, Talia told me. She said everyone always shipped them together, but they actually aren’t a good match. They both agreed, so they’re fine that it’s over,’ I said, my face flaming.

‘Since when were you besties with Talia?’ Jishaan demanded.

‘I’m not! She was nice to me, that’s all,’ I said.

‘Talia? Nice?’ Harry said.

‘Yeah. I helped her out and she has been nice ever since. It’s no big deal,’ I said, shrugging.

‘But what about Cooper?’ Jishaan asked, confused.

‘What about Cooper?’ I said, turning towards him. I still didn’t know what happened between Cooper and Talia, even though everyone else did.

His face had turned beet red and he grimaced at Jishaan.

‘Oh right, Piper’s new here. It’s nothing,’ Jishaan said quickly.

I huffed. Why wouldn't anyone give me any answers?

'What movie are we going to watch?' Chloe said, quickly changing the topic.

We argued about the latest releases, struggling to agree on a genre for our movie night until the bell rang.

We gathered up our rubbish and started to stand when a shadow loomed over me.

'Piper!' Talia said.

She had her arm linked through Madison's and they were walking back to the lockers.

'So, are you coming to Toby's epic party on Saturday?' she chirped.

Oh no.

I'd completely forgotten about it. And now I'd committed to hanging out with my other friends. I winced at the thought of giving up a party with Cruz. Then I felt immediately guilty for even having that thought.

'Ah, no, I have other plans,' I said, struggling to hide the painful expression bubbling up to the surface.

'Piper, you don't *have* to hang out with us,' Chloe said, sensing my frustration.

'I said I would, so I will,' I said flatly.

Harry frowned. 'We're not your obligation, Piper. If you want to go to the party, then just go. We're not a charity case.'

He sounded annoyed. My whole group was staring at me, and Talia and Madison were still hovering, waiting for me to make a decision.

'You know,' Talia said, 'Toby was just saying how a stack of people can't come because of a concert that is on. So, there's heaps of space at the party.'

'Really?' Madison asked.

'Yeah, he was *just* saying it. He'd love you all to come,' Talia said.

Chloe raised an eyebrow. 'You want us. At Toby's party?'

'Yeah, why not? The more the merrier,' she said, flicking her ponytail over her shoulder.

'We're in!' Nia yelled.

'Hang on,' Jishaan began.

'Great! See you all at Toby's.'

Talia and Madison stalked away.

'Nia!' Harry yelled. 'You can't just decide for everyone!'

‘But it’s a party, you guys! We *never* get invited to parties. And never with *that* group,’ Nia said. ‘This is exactly what I was talking about before! We need to start, you know, getting out there!’

‘Out where?’ Jishaan asked.

‘Look, it’ll be fun if we all go together,’ Lucy said, clearly agreeing with Nia.

‘But we hate that group,’ Cooper said, wincing.

‘We’ll just go for a bit. Eat some cake, and if we hate it, we can go back to Jishaan’s,’ Nia said.

‘It’s all or none for me,’ Chloe said. ‘Everyone goes or I don’t go.’

‘Please, guys?’ Lucy begged.

Cooper looked at me. I didn’t want to seem desperate to go, but inside, I did want to. ‘Up to you. I’m happy to go,’ I said, trying to sound nonchalant.

‘We’ll go for a bit, then see,’ Cooper said flatly. ‘But if we’re hating it, we all leave together, deal?’

‘Deal!’ Lucy and Nia shrieked.

Lucy and Nia ran off towards their lockers, already arguing about what they should wear.

‘Why was Talia so keen to have us all at Toby’s

party?’ Chloe said, helping me up off the grass.

‘I told you, she can be nice sometimes,’ I said.

‘I don’t buy it,’ Chloe said suspiciously.

‘Okay, I admit, she’s not always . . . wholesome. But I think in this case, Toby just wants the biggest party he can have to show off about it. I think we’re a bit of a rent-a-crowd,’ I said.

‘Sounds about right,’ Chloe said. ‘I thought there was a reason behind it.’

‘Who cares?’ I said. ‘Even if we are a rent-a-crowd, we still get a free party out of it, right?’

‘Maybe,’ Chloe said carefully.

As we walked back to the lockers, I saw Talia up ahead. She turned and lightly waved at me.

Saturday night was going to be interesting.

Chapter 18

Chloe pulled the hair straightener through my thick, long hair.

‘You have so much hair!’ she exclaimed as she separated another small section for ironing.

‘I know, it’s too much,’ I sighed.

‘No way, I’m jealous! My hair is so fine,’ Chloe said.

Chloe had pulled her own hair back into a long French braid. She was wearing a maxi skirt and a yellow singlet top with cute embroidery across the front. I was wearing a pair of jeans and a strapless royal-blue top. It was a good combination of casual and fancy.

We kept our makeup minimal—clear mascara and some tinted lip gloss, which was all I really wanted to wear anyway. I’d sat in trailers for hours with my mum

while she had movie makeup caked onto her face. It was enough to put me off makeup for life. Mum’s makeup artist said the best thing for young skin was simple moisturiser and sunscreen—she said she’d worked on far too many adult faces weathered by the sun or damaged by too much product.

‘There,’ Chloe said, finishing the last portion of my hair.

It looked long and sleek, and I parted it behind my head and pulled it down over my shoulders so it dropped down my chest. It looked so much longer when straightened, and I immediately wondered what Cruz would think of it. But then I pushed the thought out of my mind, embarrassed by caring about his opinion.

‘Whoa,’ Cooper said as he walked through the door, coughing, ‘there’s enough perfume in here to suffocate someone!’ He waved his hand in front of his face.

‘It’s just body spray,’ Chloe said, rolling her eyes.

‘And what happened to your lips?’ Cooper said, frowning. ‘They’re all sticky and shiny.’

‘It’s just gloss,’ Chloe said, exasperated. ‘Glad to see you dressed up,’ she added sarcastically.

Cooper was wearing jeans and a t-shirt. But I noticed he'd put a little bit of product in his hair, which was tussled in an intentional way.

'It's *just* Toby's house,' he said, rolling his eyes.

We went downstairs to where Auntie Katherine was waiting to take us to Toby's place.

'Oh, you three look so cute!' she exclaimed.

'Mum,' Cooper and Chloe said at the same time.

'Sorry, sorry, not *cute*. So . . . grown up!' she corrected.

'Can we just go and get this over with?' Cooper said.

'Leon, you're picking the kids up at 9 pm, okay?' Auntie Katherine said. 'I've already spoken to Toby's mum and she assured me the party is going to be fully supervised.'

'You seriously called Toby's mum?!' Chloe cried.

'Yes, in fact, I did. And I'm not sorry. I've known Toby since he was five, but that doesn't mean I don't check that everything is going to be above board,' Auntie Katherine said firmly. 'I also spoke to Jishaan's mum, and she said if you aren't having a good time, you are very welcome to walk back to her house since

she's only a block away. But you all have to go *together*.'

'You are being so OTT about this,' Cooper said with a slight smirk. 'It's not a rave.'

We said goodbye to Uncle Leon and headed out to the car with Auntie Katherine.

When we pulled up in front of Toby's house, Auntie Katherine slipped the gear into 'park' and unbuckled her seatbelt.

'Mum, you are not coming in with us,' Chloe said, horrified.

'I'm just going to give Leila a wave then I'll go,' she assured us.

Cooper, Chloe and I shared terrified glances. But there was no way Auntie Katherine would be convinced otherwise.

'Just, I dunno, walk in front or behind us—pretend you're not *with* us,' Cooper said.

'Nice to know my kids are that embarrassed of me!' Auntie Katherine said with a frown.

We bundled out of the car and walked up ahead. Toby's mum, Leila, was at the front door, and I heard Auntie Katherine greet her.

‘Katherine! It’s been so long! Can you believe our babies are practically halfway through high school?!’ Leila gushed.

Cooper, Chloe and I walked inside quickly, not wanting to hear any more of that conversation.

We walked through the entryway and towards the noise in the back of the house. There was a rumpus attached to the kitchen, which had double doors opening out onto the backyard. There was a large patch of grass with a trampoline on it, and beside it a pool, which was lit up like a glowing lake.

Outside, there was a trestle table set up with cups and soft drink, plus party food like party pies, popcorn, chips and sausage rolls. There was a DJ machine that was pumping out pop music through the speakers that were set up on the patio. I remembered Toby had said it was all hired for his sister’s eighteenth birthday.

We each grabbed a paper cup and poured ourselves a lemonade before going back into the rumpus, where we’d spied our other friends.

Jishaan, Harry, Lucy and Nia were sitting inside on a lounge. In the corner of the room was a piano, and

there was a snooker table in the middle. There were a few other people inside having a game of pool, but most were outdoors listening to the music. It was definitely quieter inside and I could see why our friends were hanging indoors.

‘I’m so glad you’re all here,’ Chloe said, nervously looking around.

‘Let’s go get something to eat—we can’t hide in here all night,’ Nia said.

We knew she was right, yet we were sharing nervous glances outside to where the other teenagers were hanging out.

Once outside, we wandered to the food table and each took something to eat.

‘See?’ Lucy said. ‘It’s fun going out and socialising, don’t you think?’

Harry smirked. ‘Okay, it’s better than I thought it would be,’ he conceded.

I glanced over to the DJ table, where I could see Talia and Madison with their other two friends, Briony and Luna, going through the playlist. They pointed to a song on the screen then dialled it up.

Taylor Swift's 'Shake it Off' blasted through the speakers, and the girls ran onto the paved patio area in front of the DJ desk and started dancing.

'Cruz! Milo! Guys, come over!' Talia shrieked.

The rest of their group came over and started dancing too, jumping up and down and screaming the lyrics of the chorus.

'Should we dance?' Nia asked. Even she sounded uncertain.

'No way,' Cooper said. 'I may sing, but I do *not* dance.'

Talia spotted me.

'Piper!' she squealed, running over to me and giving me a big hug. 'You made it! I'm so glad you and your friends came!'

Talia was wearing white linen pants and a cropped top that revealed her belly button. I noticed the glint of a belly-button ring and I wondered if it was fake or not. Either way, there was no way my parents would let me have a belly-button ring!

'You coming to dance?' Talia held my hand.

'I dunno,' I mumbled.

'Piper, you're a great dancer. You literally take dance classes,' Chloe said, pushing me lightly towards the dance floor.

'Come with?' I said to my other friends, but they all shook their heads resolutely.

'We're going to go inside and see if the pool table is free, but you dance. We'll catch you soon,' Cooper said, smiling.

Talia dragged me to the dance circle, where the Lush Bench friends were dancing.

'Piper!' Cruz said, turning towards me. My stomach dropped like I was at the top of a roller-coaster.

'You look gorgeous,' he said, pulling me into a hug.

The memory of my lips giving him a quick kiss on his soft cheek came flooding back and a surge of warmth flowed through my body.

'Hey,' I said, trying to sound casual. I turned to Toby. 'Thanks so much for having us over,' I said. 'And thanks for including my friends.'

Toby shot a look at Talia and Talia shook her head at him.

‘Yeah, no problem,’ he said.

The song reached the chorus and Milo decided to jump up on top of Toby’s shoulders. Toby bopped up and down with Milo high in the air, pointing his fingers to the sky and singing at the top of his lungs. That was until Toby’s mum came out and made him get down, saying there’d be no cracked heads on her watch.

‘I’m thirsty. Let’s get another drink. Madison, Piper, come with me?’ Talia said in a pleading voice.

I glanced up at Luna and Briony, who exchanged glances. I wasn’t quite sure if they were annoyed or not, but I said yes and walked out of the dance circle with Madison and Talia.

Talia stood in the middle, with her arms looped through mine and Madison’s. We got to the drinks table and poured some soft drink into a cup.

‘Let’s sit on the trampoline!’ Talia said, giggling.

We wandered over to the trampoline and unzipped the net. We held each other’s drinks as we climbed in and then sat cross-legged on the bouncy surface.

‘Whoa!’ Madison squealed, trying not to spill her drink as the trampoline wobbled up and down.

I reached out and steadied her so she didn’t tip sideways.

‘Thanks, Piper,’ she said, giggling. ‘Piper, you have officially done what very few people can do.’

‘What’s that?’ I said.

‘You have made it,’ Madison said with a smug smile.

‘Made what?’

‘Made it into our group!’ she gushed. ‘Do you know how many people want to be in our group? Like, everyone. But we rarely let new people in.’

I knew I should have felt grateful or happy or something like that. But instead, it was like I’d tasted something yummy but with a bitter aftertaste.

‘It’s not because we’re *mean*,’ Talia added quickly. ‘It’s just a lot of people don’t . . . click with us. So, it’s nice that you do.’

‘Yeah,’ I said quietly.

‘And it helps that *someone in particular* is clicking with you,’ Talia added with a sly smile. She nudged Madison, who giggled.

‘What do you mean?’ I said, butterflies flapping in my stomach.

‘Oh, don’t pretend. We’ve all seen how much you and Cruz are crushing on each other,’ Talia said.

‘We’re not crushing!’ I protested.

‘Piper, it’s *fine*,’ Talia said. ‘I told you, Cruz and I are friends, and we don’t want to be boyfriend and girlfriend. And anyway, I have a new crush.’

‘You do?’ Madison asked. ‘You didn’t tell me!’

‘I was saving it so I could tell you *both*,’ Talia said.

‘Who is it?’ I asked, leaning in.

‘It’s Toby,’ Talia said.

‘Toby?!’ Madison shrieked.

‘Shh!’ Talia said, playfully hitting Madison in the arm.

‘Since when? You’ve never liked Toby. You always said he and Milo are too immature,’ Madison said.

‘Well, I think he’s matured a lot over the last six months, so now I like him,’ Talia said matter-of-factly. ‘Which is perfect because it means Cruz is very available.’

My face flamed.

‘Besides,’ Talia added. ‘He told me that he likes you, Piper.’

My head whipped up. ‘Really?’

Talia nodded.

I took a long sip of my lemonade. So, I wasn’t imagining the connection between us at his house. My mind was awash with confusing thoughts. I definitely thought Cruz was cute, but was I actually ready for a boyfriend? Did I even *want* that?

‘Talia! Piper! Madison!’ Toby called from the dance floor. ‘Come inside! We’re doing cake!’

We stumbled off the bouncy trampoline, and Talia linked arms with me and Madison again as we crossed the lawn, back over to the rumpus, where people were filing inside to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to Toby and cut the cake.

The DJ music had been turned off, but I could still hear a tune wafting through the open doors to the rumpus.

We followed the crowd inside and I was surprised to see my friends there. Jishaan was sitting at the piano, and Nia, Lucy, Chloe, Cooper and Harry were all singing the song we were doing in choir from the musical *Les Misérables*. As Jishaan saw the crowd coming

through the doors, he yelled to them, 'Join in if you know it!'

Their harmonies were beautiful, but nobody in the room was appreciating it.

Toby's mum was standing in the doorway with a large rectangular cake that had fourteen candles on the top.

Jishaan immediately stopped playing the choir song and began playing the opening to 'Happy Birthday' with a long, flourishing scale up the piano keys. However, just as he was about to sing the first word, Toby burst forward.

'No! No, stop it!' he cried.

Everyone stood in silence. Jishaan stopped playing.

'Talía, I did *not* want these nerds here, but you insisted. You promised they wouldn't wreck my party, but here they are doing a chorus line!' Toby yelled.

Talia opened her mouth to speak but then closed it again.

'Just get them out!' Toby screamed. 'Go! You're turning my party into a nerd-fest!'

Jishaan stood up, his cheeks bright red. Nia, Lucy,

Chloe, Cooper and Harry looked horrified as they walked towards the doorway.

'Toby, they didn't mean—' Talia began.

'No, Talía. It's my party, not yours.'

'Come on, Piper,' Chloe called from the doorway. 'Let's go.'

I went to move forward, but someone grabbed my hand. I turned and saw Cruz holding me. He pulled me towards him and whispered, 'Please stay.'

My mind raced. Chloe's eyes were pleading with me. But Talía had said Cruz *liked* me. And he wanted me to stay.

'Piper, Mum said we have to stay together,' Cooper reminded me.

A few people snickered at Cooper mentioning his mum.

'It's okay—my dad can drop her home,' Talía said. 'My parents know your parents,' she said to Chloe and Cooper. 'Piper, we can just call the Yangs and let them know.'

'Piper,' Chloe said, frowning.

I looked back at Talía, who was nodding. Then I

looked at Cruz's sparkling green eyes and his hint of a smile. He mouthed the word *stay*.

'I'm staying,' I said flatly.

'Not cool, Piper,' Nia muttered as she walked out of the door.

As I glanced up at my friends leaving the party in disgrace, I caught Cooper's eye. He looked at me, not with anger but with something else. Disappointment? No. Betrayal.

I mouthed his name—*Cooper*—

But he held up his hand to silence me.

And left.

Chapter 19

Talia's dad dropped me back to Chloe and Cooper's house, and I thanked him and said goodbye. Talia gave me a big hug before I left the car and said I made the right decision staying at the party.

I wasn't so sure.

It's not that anything bad happened. We'd danced some more and then Milo threw Briony in the pool, and she was absolutely furious and had to borrow some of his sister's clothes. Toby's mum got mad and made Milo apologise. Cruz had asked me to stay, but we didn't really hang out all that much anyway. He played pool with Toby, and then we all sat on the grass and laughed at stories of some of the teachers at school. It was fun, but I was now doubting my decision

to stay instead of going to Jishaan's with my other friends.

'How was it?' Aunty Katherine called from the couch where she was watching TV with Uncle Leon.

'Fun, thanks,' I said. 'Thanks for letting me get a lift back with Talia.'

'Hey, Piper, please come here,' Aunty Katherine whispered, beckoning me over. 'Why did the twins leave the party? Did something happen? They just said it was boring, but . . . you know. Were they okay?'

'Yeah, they were fine. They just weren't having the best time,' I said.

It wasn't a lie, I guessed. I felt a pang of guilt about the whole situation, but I shook the thought away.

I went upstairs and could see that Chloe and Cooper were already home. When I peeked into my room, I could see Chloe was under her blanket, sleeping. I wondered if she was faking it just so she didn't have to talk to me, because it was only 9.30 pm and she usually stayed up later on a Saturday night.

I sighed and walked up the hallway to see if Cooper was asleep too.

I gently knocked on his door, which was ajar. It swung open and I peeked inside, but he wasn't there. I was about to leave when I saw his window was open and I knew exactly what he was doing.

I tiptoed inside and lifted the window open wider, then climbed out onto the roof.

'Need company?' I asked.

'Piper, you scared me,' Cooper said, putting his hand to his chest.

Ever since Cooper was little, he'd loved climbing out onto the roof to look at the stars. His parents would freak if they knew, but I knew it was a special place for him to sit and chill. To wind down if he was angry or sit alone if he was sad. I remembered the first time I'd seen him out there—it was after his best friend moved away and he was really down. We'd just sat out there together, making shapes with the stars in the sky until we heard our parents looking for us.

'How was the rest of the party?' he said, his eyebrow raised.

'It was okay. Not amazing. Milo threw Briony in the pool, so she's not speaking to him.'

‘Sounds about right,’ Cooper said, rolling his eyes.
‘That guy can be a real jerk.’

‘Is the whole group mad at me for staying?’ I asked.

Cooper was silent for a moment. ‘Maybe a bit. The girls said you should have come back with us out of solidarity. Toby was out of line.’

‘Yeah, he was. I’m sorry,’ I said quietly.

‘Piper, I’m not going to lie. I don’t know what you see in them,’ Cooper said.

‘They’re not all bad,’ I said carefully.

‘They’re superficial and mean,’ Cooper said, frustrated.

‘Talia has actually been really nice to me. It’s hard being the new kid and trying to fit in. She’s been very welcoming. And Cruz . . .’ my voice trailed off.

I felt Cooper bristle next to me at his name.

‘Cruz is deeper than he seems, once you get to know him,’ I said.

‘I’ve known the guy half my life. I’m not sure I agree,’ Cooper said flatly.

I stared up into the inky sky with the shining little diamonds.

‘Remember when we used to wish upon these stars?’
I said.

Cooper nodded.

‘What do you wish for now?’ I asked.

Cooper shrugged. ‘I don’t know. It’s like, when you’re little it’s all about having superpowers or getting a puppy. But now—things change. Sometimes I don’t know what I want. Like, where I want to be in the future. It’s like this endless horizon and I don’t know my destination.’

‘You know you aren’t supposed to have your life mapped out at fourteen,’ I said.

‘I know. What do you wish for?’ he said.

‘I used to wish my parents would get back together, but Dad and Mindy are getting married.’

‘How do you feel about that?’ he asked.

‘That’s just it—I don’t know! I thought I’d be angry—like I’d want him to get back together with Mum. But he seems happy with her. And Mum is happy with her life now. Even though it’s not what I would have wished for them, maybe it’s the right path now. I don’t know,’ I said, sighing.

I wanted to change the topic. I was sick of thinking about Dad and Mindy, which had been on my mind ever since my phone call with Dad.

‘Cooper,’ I said slowly.

He looked at me, his eyebrows raised.

‘Why do you hate Talia so much?’ I asked.

Cooper looked back up at the stars, then sighed. ‘It’s totally stupid and not even a thing,’ he said dismissively.

‘Then why won’t you tell me?’

‘It was ages ago—last year,’ he said, pushing the words out like they were jammed inside. ‘She pretended she had a crush on me. She left me little notes and spread rumours that she liked me—she did it for ages so that I’d really believe it.’

‘Then what happened?’

‘After school one day, she told me I could kiss her on the cheek. And I wanted to. She was the coolest girl in Year 7—why wouldn’t I want to be Talia’s boyfriend? But she said I had to close my eyes. So I did. And when I leaned in . . . it’s so stupid, Piper.’

‘Tell me.’

‘It’s the dumbest thing. She held up a rotten orange,

and when my lips touched the orange, Cruz jumped out with Milo and Toby and took a photo. Then they told the whole year that my first kiss was with an orange.’ Cooper winced. ‘You can laugh if you want.’

But I didn’t want to laugh. It was a silly prank, but I could tell it hurt Cooper.

‘I’ve never lived it down. That’s why they always make “orange” jokes and throw fruit at me, and say I like girls with *orange* hair and all that. It’s not that the prank was that bad, it’s that they keep going on about it,’ he said.

‘That’s just Milo. He’s totally immature,’ I said. ‘Talia and Cruz don’t tease you anymore, do they?’

‘They always nudge each other like they’re laughing at me—like I’m the butt of their joke,’ Cooper said. ‘I just ignore them, but it gets annoying.’

‘Maybe you’re just imagining that they’re doing that,’ I said.

Cooper sat up and leaned on his elbow. ‘I’m not imagining it, Piper. They’re not nice. But they’ve sucked you in with their fake personalities.’

‘Why would they even bother?’ I asked. I thought

about Talia linking arms with me and Cruz telling me all about his dad. They couldn't be faking it.

'I don't know—maybe they're luring in the new girl to set you up for a prank like they did to me. Who really knows?'

'They wouldn't. It's not like that,' I said. Cruz would never do that to me. Would he?

I suddenly felt even worse about staying at the party with the group who had tormented Cooper for the last year. I realised that I hadn't just left my friends to go off without me, I'd *chosen* the people who made Cooper's life difficult.

'Cooper, I really am sorry for choosing to stay with them at Toby's party. I should have gone with you,' I said.

Cooper inhaled and nodded. 'You didn't know the whole story,' he said.

I was grateful for his understanding and forgiveness.

'I'm getting tired. I need to get inside before my parents check on me and discover my secret hiding place,' Cooper said, crawling across the roof and back to his window.

I followed him back inside. As I crept through the open window, he reached out his hand so I could take it and helped me down. Once I hit the floor, he kept holding my hand for an extra second.

'Just be careful with them,' Cooper said, pulling my hand towards him and planting a gentle kiss on the back of it. 'I don't want them to hurt you like they did me.'

I looked into his dark-brown eyes full of memories and sadness and friendship and love.

I nodded and walked out of his room as he gently shut the door behind me.

Chapter 20

Over the next few days, I made amends with my group of friends. I apologised to Jishaan for staying at the party instead of leaving when Toby was so rude to him. Auntie Katherine noticed that there was tension between Chloe and me, and she insisted we go out to a café and sort it out. Turned out an iced vanilla decaf mochaccino could heal the deepest wounds, as by the end of the drink we were friends again. I'd tried to explain that I wasn't siding with Talia and Cruz, but Chloe pointed out that standing by while your friends were thrown under the bus wasn't the greatest display of loyalty. I apologised for that. I also told her that Cooper confided in me about what had happened with Talia last year, and she said she was glad I was

seeing their true colours. Even though Cooper and I had made up, he was still a little distant with me. I couldn't tell if it was because deep down he was still hurt by what I did or if he was worried I'd end up in the Lush group, or even with Cruz as his girlfriend. The very thought of being Cruz's girlfriend filled me with conflicting feelings of excitement and nervousness.

Whenever Talia walked to class with me or waved to me in the corridor with a genuine smile, I couldn't help but think about Madison's words about me being one of the few to crack into their group. And seeing Cruz in the hallway made my heart beat faster and my stomach twist in knots. We'd been secretly practising our 'Riptide' performance together and it was actually sounding okay when he didn't stuff up the chords. The performance in front of the whole year was this Friday, and I was secretly hoping that my friends might see a softer side to Cruz if he made himself vulnerable on stage in front of the whole year group.

I still attended choir with my friends and was loving singing in the big group, the harmonies washing over me like a warm breeze on a summer's day. Singing

with my friends made me feel like I truly belonged, and I even had a tinge of regret about quitting the vocal ensemble. There wasn't anywhere else where I felt more myself—not in class, not at home and definitely not on the Lush Bench. It was like music somehow bound us together.

Despite this, the pull of running with Cruz instead of going to vocal ensemble was too strong. It was like he was a magnet and nothing I could do would repel his attraction. But I still kept it a secret that we were training together so as not to hurt Chloe or Cooper's feelings.

On the Wednesday afternoon, I walked back to the Yangs' house by myself, as Chloe and Cooper were staying back for rehearsal. When I got there, Auntie Katherine and Uncle Leon were still at work, so I let myself in with my key and changed into my running gear. I slipped my sneakers on and pulled my hair up into a bun, then pulled loose a strand on either side of my face so my wavy hair would hang down. I looked in the mirror and tucked it behind my ear, but then changed my mind and pulled it out to hang free again.

I flashed a smile to check there was nothing in my teeth and sprayed a quick spritz of vanilla body spray, which Auntie Katherine let me buy from the supermarket. Then I headed out to meet Cruz.

He was waiting out the front when I left the house and I smiled brightly at him.

'You look sporty,' he said, giving me a cheeky grin.

'Where do you want to run?' I asked.

'I was thinking up around to the oval then back past school and down the hill back to the house. That's five kilometres, which is the length of the cross-country course, so it's good practice,' Cruz said.

'Well, go easy on me,' I said. 'I don't do as much sports training as you do.'

'I'm sure you'll be just fine,' he said, smiling.

We jogged at a slow pace to warm up, snaking up the pathway towards the oval. The afternoon air was warm, but there was a slight coolness to the breeze, which was refreshing when it blew. When we got to the bottom of the hill before the oval, Cruz stopped me.

'Let's do a hill sprint,' he said, a glint in his eye. 'Race you?'

‘You’re on!’ I called, but I took off before he could begin, which gave me a small head start.

As soon as I started running, Cruz launched into a run, pumping his legs as he caught up to me in no time.

He overtook me just as we reached the top of the hill at the edge of the oval. I reached out to grab his t-shirt so I could slow him down and overtake him.

‘Cheater!’ he hollered.

He ran up the embankment to the oval, dragging me along behind him, until we made it onto the grass.

He toppled to the ground as he crested the peak of the embankment and pulled me down next to him.

We laughed in a tangle, breathless from the sprint. I flopped onto my back next to him and he lay on his back, panting and looking up at the sky. Our arms were still intertwined.

‘I nearly beat you,’ I said between laughs.

‘By cheating!’ he said.

We caught our breaths, and then Cruz sat up and leaned on his elbow. ‘You’re amazing, Piper,’ he said, shaking his head.

I sat up too and looked deep into his eyes.

Cruz reached his hand forward and gently cupped it under my chin. He pulled my face towards him and gently pressed his lips onto mine.

His mouth was soft and I felt like I was going to melt into the grass. I closed my eyes as he kissed me gently, then as he pulled back, I opened my eyes to see his green ones staring back into mine.

‘Uh, wow,’ was all I managed to say.

It was the first time anyone had kissed me, and it was simultaneously everything I could have imagined but also nothing like what I pictured.

‘I’ve never met anyone like you, Piper,’ Cruz said quietly.

‘Is that a good thing?’ I asked with one eyebrow raised.

‘It’s amazing,’ he said. ‘It’s like you know me so well even though we haven’t been friends that long. And you’re smart, musical and so pretty,’ he said.

I blushed at the waterfall of compliments, unsure about what to do with them.

‘And I feel like we’re so . . . connected,’ he said. ‘Like we both have split parents and you understand about

my dad—I never tell anyone that stuff. I feel like I can trust you with anything. Do you feel the same?’

‘I do,’ I said carefully. I did feel like Cruz and I were connected. But I knew I was holding a massive secret that I hadn’t entrusted him with. The truth about me and my family. I wanted to tell him so badly, but my parents’ words kept ringing in my ears. Mum always said we couldn’t trust anyone but those closest to us—just family and people like the Yangs, who knew us and loved us before we were famous. And maybe she was right. But maybe she wasn’t? Maybe I *could* trust Cruz. ‘Cruz, I would like to share more about myself . . .’ I said slowly. ‘I just don’t know if I can.’

His hand covered mine. ‘You can trust me, Piper. If you want to.’

I bit my lip, trying to decide. Then he gently took hold of my chin and pulled me in for another kiss.

As we pulled apart, I decided I did want to tell him my secret about my family. I wanted him to know I trusted him. And that we could trust each other. But as we pulled apart, I saw two pairs of eyes staring at us in shock.

It was Chloe and Cooper.



I caught up to Chloe and Cooper at the bottom of the hill.

‘Chloe! Cooper! Wait!’ I yelled.

I’d left Cruz behind on the oval and chased after my friends.

‘Just forget it, Piper,’ Chloe said over her shoulder.

‘Can you two just stop?’ I cried.

Chloe and Cooper stopped and turned towards me. ‘Why are you being like this? I’m allowed to have other friends that aren’t you two!’

‘Is that what you think this is about?’ Chloe said, shaking her head.

Cooper’s face was twisted into a grimace.

‘Well, what is it about? Is it you, Cooper? Are you jealous?’ I spat.

Cooper scoffed. ‘Piper, you can be so . . . so arrogant!’ he yelled.

His insult felt like a slap to the face.

‘Then why are you mad?’ I yelled back.

‘Because you’re a liar! The one thing you said you hate in other people, especially your dad,’ Cooper said, frustration seeping out through his words.

‘How am I a liar?!’

‘You said you quit vocal ensemble because it was “too much”. The truth was, you were using the time to go out with Cruz. I don’t care if you have a boyfriend, Piper, but I care that you lie to us about it!’ Cooper said angrily.

Chloe nodded. ‘You’ve been a really bad friend, Piper,’ she added. ‘You’re so obsessed with Cruz and Talia that you stuck with them when Toby humiliated Jishaan and the rest of us at the party. You hung out with them and forgot to come to choir. And now you lie to us about quitting the vocal ensemble just so you can spend time with the one guy who was *horrible* to Cooper.’

‘That orange prank was a year ago!’ I snapped. ‘Maybe you just need to move on, Cooper.’

‘Move on?! How I’d *love* to move on! But I can’t because your friends Milo, Talia and Cruz like to bring it up every time they see me. They mock me and never

let me forget it!’ Cooper cried. His eyes looked teary and a lump formed in my throat.

‘There’s no law saying you have to hang out with us while you live here, Piper,’ Chloe said. ‘But I just thought you’d be a better judge of character.’

I stood still, unable to speak. My mind couldn’t reconcile Cruz—the boy I had just shared my first kiss with—as the one who was tormenting my friend. But when I saw the hurt in Cooper’s eyes, it was like we were kids again. I wanted to hug him and tell him it was okay, and that the fox and lion would always be together.

But they’d called me a liar. And a bad friend. Was I a bad friend? Was I a bad judge of character? Had I been making a horrible mistake?

I just didn’t know anymore. I felt like I was stuck in a rip at the beach and was tumbling about, not knowing which way was up. Talia, Cruz, Cooper, Chloe. Cruz’s gentle kiss. Cooper’s sweet voice singing along beside me at the piano. Talia’s warm hug. But also her smug smile.

I shook my head, trying to empty my head of every confusing thought.

Then I turned. And ran.

Chapter 21

The next few weeks dragged along. Things at home were awkward with Chloe and Cooper after our fight.

I ended up sitting with Cruz and Talia more and more at lunchtime, purely because I didn't want to have to face the twins every moment of my day. We were civil to each other at home to try to stop Aunty Katherine and Uncle Leon from worrying about us. I tried to distract myself with going for runs and video-calling Mum. I'd even called Dad once, which he was completely delighted about. But when Mindy tried to join the call, I finished it up pretty fast. I wasn't quite ready for her yet.

The day of the music performance rolled around, and Cruz and I stood backstage, waiting for our turn

to sing 'Riptide' in front of the whole year group. Cruz gently strummed the chords, stumbling on a few of them. I hoped it wasn't going to be a big embarrassment, especially for Cruz. He was putting himself out there in a way he didn't normally, so I wanted it to go well for him.

'You'll be great,' I said, squeezing his hand lightly.

'Yeah, I will be,' he said, smiling back, and my brow furrowed slightly at his response.

Another pair was on stage, playing a horrendous duet between a clarinet and a trumpet. It was probably meant to be the old song 'It's the Final Countdown', but it was hard to tell. I figured at least we'd be better than them.

'Who else is singing today?' Mr Norman said backstage as he fluttered around the upcoming performers.

'We are,' I said, putting my hand up.

'Take a lapel mic and pop it on, or we won't be able to hear you. Make sure it's turned off at the power pack,' he said, showing us the switch.

Cruz and I took a microphone and power pack each and clipped them to our school shirts. I checked the

switch was in the 'off' position. Cruz flicked his on and off like a child playing with a new toy.

Cooper was behind me and also took a microphone and power pack.

I smiled at him awkwardly. 'Good luck,' I said quietly.

He shrugged. It was still awkward and no amount of vanilla mochaccinos could fix this situation.

Cooper turned and bumped into Cruz. 'Sorry,' he mumbled.

'Move it, fruit-boy,' Cruz said, irritated.

Cooper looked up at me with his eyebrows raised.

I stared at Cruz, doubt filling my mind. Had Cooper and Chloe been right about him? Or had he really changed?

'Piper! Cruz! Good luck!' Talia's voice chirped. I turned and she pulled us both into a hug. 'I can't wait to see what you two do. You're just the cutest pair,' she said.

'Thanks, Talia,' I said.

'Cruz, can I have a quick word?' Talia said, pulling him aside and leading him offstage.

'Cooper,' I said, reaching out to him. 'I heard what Cruz said. I'm sorry for not seeing that he's still teasing you. I'll talk to him about it later. Tell him to stop.'

'Forget it, Piper,' Cooper said. 'He's never going to change.'

'Next performer!' Mr Norman called, gesturing for two bongo players to take the stage.

I sat down on a chair in the wings next to Cooper in silence. I peeked around the curtain and could see the rest of our year group looking bored in the seats. Chloe was with Nia and Lucy. I could also see Milo and Toby throwing little bits of scrunched up paper at people, trying to get it stuck in their hair without them noticing.

The bongo din finished and the crowd clapped lazily.

As we sat there, waiting, I began to hear voices. But they weren't coming from the wings of the stage. They were coming from the speakers.

I looked up, confused.

'Whose microphone is on?' Mr Norman said, irritated. 'Turn your mics off until you are on stage!'

The voices got louder. It sounded like Cruz. And a quieter voice, further away, like Talia.

‘I spoke to the entertainment reporter and she’s coming TODAY,’ Talia hissed. ‘She’ll be outside the school this afternoon, ready to expose Piper.’

Eyes turned to me in the wings of the stage. Cooper looked at me in horror.

What was going on?

‘When they expose her as Joseph and Ana’s daughter, Piper is going to be distraught,’ Talia continued.

I heard a shocked gasp from the audience, who could also hear the conversation spilling out of the speakers, into the auditorium. A murmur rippled through the hall, which I could hear from backstage.

‘Anseph?’

‘Ana Haberfield?!’

‘Joseph Maynard?!’

‘PIPER?!’

I felt faint. I wanted to find Cruz and tell him to shut off his mic. But I didn’t even know where they’d gone.

‘And when Piper is distraught that the paparazzi have found her, that’s when WE come to her comfort,’

Talia’s voice said, sounding smug and all-knowing.

‘I dunno, Tal, this is all getting a bit weird,’ Cruz’s voice said. It was louder as the microphone was on his shirt. ‘I feel kinda mean.’

‘Mean?! Cruz, this is our chance! If we are friends with Anseph’s daughter, then *we’ll* be famous too! I’ll be an influencer!’ Talia gushed.

‘I don’t like leading her on. It’s getting messy,’ Cruz said.

‘What? You’re not having real feelings are you? Because you know I’m still your actual girlfriend,’ Talia hissed. ‘Wait, why is that light on your battery pack? Turn that off, you loser!’

The sound was cut and I sat silently in the wings of the stage.

‘Piper,’ Cooper said quietly, putting his hand on my shoulder.

I looked at him, but I had no words. I was completely speechless. I peeked out to the audience, where the whole year group was whispering with shocked expressions.

Just breathe. In and out, I repeated to myself.

Cruz and Talia came bundling into the wings of the stage.

‘Sorry, Piper, I got caught up,’ Cruz said. He obviously had no idea his whole conversation was just blasted across the speakers of the entire school hall.

‘I’m not performing,’ I said flatly.

‘Why? Nervous?’ he said in a soothing tone. ‘You’ll be great.’

‘No,’ I said, staring vacantly ahead.

I felt dizzy. Voices echoed in my head. All I could hear was the snapping of the paparazzi on that day when I found out about my dad and Mindy. Betrayal. Cameras. Feeling exposed. I stood up and ran out of the wings and straight through the back doors of the hall.



Tears spilled down my cheeks as I ran through the school. Why had I come here? Why had I tried to be *normal*? It was all a mistake. I needed to go back to homeschooling on set with my parents. It was the only way to do things.

I sat down on the Lush Bench and tucked my knees up to my chest. Then I buried my head in my knees and cried big, thick tears. Tears for all the people in my life who turned out to be frauds. Tears for my dad. Tears for Cruz. And tears for the true friends that I’d hurt along the way.

‘Piper?’ a soft voice said.

I looked up and Cooper was standing in front of me.

‘Can I sit down?’ he asked gently.

I nodded, wiping my tears with the sleeve of my jumper.

‘What am I going to do now?’ I said, sniffing. ‘The whole year knows who I am. Talia has leaked it to the media, who will be here today, no doubt. I have no friends—’

‘Why do you say that?’ Cooper said, gently rubbing my back.

‘Chloe was right. I was a bad friend to the people who truly cared. People . . . like you. I hurt you by believing the people who bullied you. I was obsessed with them and they were using me. So, now I have nobody.’ Fresh tears spilled from my eyes.

'You don't have nobody. You have me. Remember my wish?' Cooper said.

I shook my head.

'The lion and the fox. Together forever,' he said.

I leaned into his chest and sobbed.

'What do you want?' Cooper said, his voice harsh.

I looked up and saw Cruz standing in front of me. Talia trailed behind him.

'Piper,' he said.

'Go away,' I hissed. 'You're a liar and a fraud.'

'No, you don't understand,' Cruz said, standing in front of me. 'What you heard—yeah, it was right. Talia had planned to expose you to the media, and we were going to use that to get connections to your parents and Hollywood. It was a rotten plan and I'm sorry,' Cruz said.

'How did you even find out who I was?' I asked.

'Talia and Madison saw a video of you from when you were younger. When you found out about your dad and that actress, Mindy. They recognised you. And then they did some more searching and saw a photo with your mum and Mrs Yang. So, it confirmed it. I'm

so sorry, Piper.' His cheeks had grown pink.

'I don't believe you,' I said.

'The plan was that I would pretend to have a crush on you to get you into our group. Talia knew you wouldn't come for just her, and she thought you had feelings for me. And I agreed to do it. I was a loser,' Cruz said. It actually looked like his eyes were welling up with tears too. 'But the thing is, it all went wrong,' he said.

'Yeah, you left your microphone on and now the whole year knows what a scumbag you are,' I said.

'No, that's not it. *I fell for you*, Piper,' Cruz said softly.

'You what?!' Talia shrieked, marching over. 'Don't you dare do this, Cruz. You're just trying to make me the bad guy here!'

'Shut up, Talia. I don't want to be your boyfriend. You're not nice. Piper is smart and kind and beautiful. She's a better friend and a better girlfriend than you'll ever be!' Cruz yelled.

Talia's face scrunched up, and she turned away and ran.

Cruz turned back to face me. 'Piper, all that stuff

about my dad and being able to talk to you? That was *real*,' he said.

I sniffed. I looked at Cooper, who was shaking his head angrily. I squeezed Cooper's hand then stood to face Cruz. Cooper shrugged and stood up to go. He didn't want to watch me forgiving Cruz. But that wasn't what I was doing at all.

'Cruz, you are a wimp. You care what everyone thinks and go along with whatever Talia or Toby or whoever in your "Lush" group says. You lie.' My voice grew in strength and volume. 'You are cruel to people and you only do things if they benefit you. You used me. And I don't care if you "fell for me" along the way. Our whole connection was based on your selfish lie. And I want nothing more to do with you,' I said.

I turned and saw Cooper beaming with pride.

'This is a true friend,' I said, gesturing towards Cooper. 'And his whole group. They cared for me when they didn't know who I really was. They were kind and generous to me, wanting nothing in return. That's a true friend,' I said.

Even though Cooper was smiling at me, I still felt

awful for the way I'd treated him and Chloe and the whole group. I'd ditched them like they were rubbish as soon as the Lush Bench group took an interest. But there was not even a hint of malice in Cooper's eyes. Just forgiveness. And love.

'Come on, Piper. Let's go back to the auditorium,' Cooper said, holding my hand.

And we left Cruz right where he was, standing by the Lush Bench. Alone.

Chapter 22

I sat down in the auditorium seats with Chloe, Nia and Lucy. Mr Norman said I didn't have to perform, considering the circumstances.

Mr Norman bustled onto the stage, looking flustered. 'Ah, now Cruz will be performing "Riptide". Alone,' he announced.

The audience sat in silence. You could have heard a bubble pop.

Cruz walked on stage, confusion across his face. Then he stood in the centre and started strumming his ukulele. He tripped over the first few chords and a few people in the audience snickered.

He sang out the words to the song, but he sounded squeaky and off-key without me there to guide the tune.

Some people put their hands over their ears. Others laughed. One shouted, 'Stick to footy, mate!' Everyone laughed.

At the end, Cruz's face was red with anger. He stormed off the stage, throwing his mic to the floor.

I didn't smile. I didn't laugh. I didn't point. I just sat. Staring.

'Next we have Cooper,' Mr Norman said. 'He's chosen to do a solo of an Ed Sheeran song—'

'Actually, I'm doing another song, if that's okay,' Cooper's voice said from the wings.

He walked onto the stage and sat down at the keyboard that had been set up, then flicked on his microphone.

'I-I don't normally sing by myself in public. But this song is special,' he said.

He started to play the introduction to a tune that I knew. At first I couldn't place it—like after waking up and trying to remember the remnants of a dream. But then he started to sing.

'It's like I'm seeing you for the first time, first time,' he sang.

It was my song. The one I'd written.

His voice sounded sweet and clear. A few people sat up straighter, listening harder.

‘And everything is changing, but we don’t change at all.

Yet here we are together, seeing you like never before . . .’

I stood up from my seat and glided up to the stage like a ghost. I climbed the stairs, expressionless. Cooper’s eyes met mine. Then he shuffled up the piano stool and I sat next to him. And joined in my song.

‘It’s like I’m seeing you for the first time, first time,

and you’re everything I’ve ever known.

But somehow you’re brand new to me.

Like a book I’ve read in the past,

but with an ending I could never see . . .’

I sang the harmony over the top as Cooper’s voice sailed out across the hall. Our voices collided and merged and melded and flowed—it was the perfect sound reverberating through the room, like two beating hearts, completely in sync.

Cooper played the final few notes. When he stopped, the room was utterly silent. Someone coughed lightly. But then, applause. At first it was light, but then it got louder. It grew in a crescendo as the others in our year

group whooped and cheered.

‘Bravo!’ Mr Norman cried.

I turned to face Cooper and his eyes met mine. They said so much. They said, *I forgive you*. They said, *I know you*. They said, *I still love you*.

I pulled him into a hug.

And the crowd kept cheering.



After the performances finished, I stood up awkwardly.

All the other teens in my year were staring at me and whispering behind their hands.

‘I can’t believe you are Joseph and Ana’s daughter,’ Nia said with wide eyes.

Lucy, Jishaan and Harry nodded.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,’ I said. ‘I didn’t want to lie, but I had to keep it a secret.’

‘It’s okay, we understand,’ Lucy said. ‘We know it was for your safety.’

‘But what do I do now?’ I said. ‘Talia said she leaked the info to the media and they are expected to be at the school at any moment. I don’t want to be

exposed. I don't want my face all over the papers and the paparazzi camped outside the school gates every day. That's exactly what I was trying to get away from!

Chloe looked at me quizzically. 'I mean, how are they going to *know*?' she said, as if thinking aloud.

'What do you mean?' I said, frowning.

'I have a plan,' Chloe said, smiling. 'Everyone who wants to help out Piper, come over here!' she yelled.

A few people wandered over, curious about what Chloe was saying. Then a few others. Then some more.

Suddenly, we were surrounded by a huge group from our year.

'Listen up,' Chloe said. 'Who wants to be part of a plan to give Talia what she deserves?'

A mumble of approval ripped through the crowd. I guessed Talia had been cruel to more people than just Cooper and me.

'So, here's what we need to do . . .'



We walked out of the auditorium in a large group, and walked en masse towards the front gates of the

school. We could already see Talia there, talking to a young woman and two men flanked on either side with cameras in their hands. It wasn't the paparazzi mob I was used to, but I knew that would change once the reporter got confirmation that this school was indeed hiding Anseph's daughter.

Chloe and Cooper walked at the front of the group, and I was buried in the middle in between Nia and Lucy. Guys and girls marched alongside me as we descended upon the reporter.

'There! That's their daughter! Piper,' Talia said, pointing in my direction.

Nia stepped forward from beside me. 'Yes, I am indeed Piper, the daughter of Ana Haberfield and Joseph Maynard!' she said, enthusiastically waving her hand in the air.

The reporter raised an eyebrow at Talia. Nia's skin was dark and she looked nothing like either Joseph or Ana.

'No, not her!' Talia protested. 'It's that other girl.'

Lucy stepped forward. 'No, I am Piper, daughter of Joseph Maynard and Ana Haberfield!'

The photographers began clicking their cameras in a frenzy.

‘No, you’re not!’ a girl named Mavis said, stepping forward. ‘I’m Piper!’

The cameramen turned and started taking photos of Mavis.

‘What is going on?’ the reporter asked, looking frustrated.

‘She’s that one with the long hair!’ Talia said.

‘No, I’m Piper!’ Harry said, stepping forward and doing a twirl.

‘Is this some kind of a prank?’ the reporter yelled at Talia.

‘It’s not, I promise!’ Talia pleaded.

‘Which one of you is actually the daughter of Ana Haberfield?’ the reporter demanded.

‘It’s me!’

‘No, it’s me!’

‘It’s her!’

‘No, it’s her!’

‘It’s him!’

‘It’s her!’

‘It’s me!’

The scene was chaotic as everyone either claimed to be me or pointed to someone else, claiming they were me. The noise was a frenzied din as the cameramen spun around, trying to work out who they should be taking a photo of.

‘They’re all lying,’ Talia squealed.

‘I know exactly what’s going on here. You’re a silly teenager who wants her five minutes of fame by dragging a reporter out here to prank. Which one of you is filming this to upload on socials, hey?’ the reporter shouted.

‘Nobody! This isn’t a prank!’ Talia screamed.

The chorus of ‘I’m Piper!’ kept ringing out as the reporter and her cameramen stormed off, away from the gates.

‘Don’t ever contact me again!’ she yelled behind her.

‘You . . . you bunch of LOSERS!’ Talia shrieked at our entire year group.

But we were all too busy shouting and laughing to hear her.

Chapter 23

Three weeks later

I carefully squeezed myself out of the window and onto the roof. I crawled along the tiles until I was sitting next to Cooper.

‘You were amazing tonight,’ I said. ‘I’ve never heard you sing so well.’

Cooper had decided to do the solo for the vocal ensemble, and Aunty Katherine, Uncle Leon and I had sat in the audience, cheering for him, and for Chloe, who was in the ensemble too. Ever since Cooper had sung in the auditorium at school, everyone had been telling him what an awesome voice he had. He’d grown so much in confidence over this time that he’d even volunteered to sing the solo.

I couldn’t have been prouder as I’d sat in the theatre,

watching my childhood friend sing like a pro on stage. And he’d looked really cute doing it, too.

Cruz had been mocked by everyone since he’d tried to perform ‘Riptide’ at school. People would sing it every time he walked past, which incensed him. After we scared the reporters away, I’d called Mum and told her the whole story about Talia. Within hours, Talia had some serious threats from Mum’s legal team about posting anything about me online. Talia must have been freaked out by that because she’d not once talked to me or even got near me since.

And I was friends with Nia, Lucy, Harry and Jishaan again after apologising to them for treating them so badly. I’d really felt like I’d learned some important lessons about friendship and forgiveness over the last couple of months.

I huddled up closer to Cooper as the cool night breeze whipped around my face.

‘Maybe next year you could join the vocal ensemble again?’ Cooper said. ‘That’s if you decide to stay on past the six months you’re meant to be here.’

‘I’m definitely considering it,’ I said. ‘But I’ll go and

spend some time with Dad and Mindy over the summer while I decide. I feel like I should get to know her a bit before the wedding.'

I looked up at the inky night sky, punctuated with sparkling diamonds above. I leaned my head onto Cooper's shoulder as I breathed in deeply. He smelled of home.

'Don't stay away too long though. I'd miss you too much,' Cooper said.

I looked up at him and gazed into his dark-brown eyes. Sitting next to me was the boy I'd known my whole life. He'd always cared about me. He'd always known me. But it really was like I was seeing him fresh this year, like I was meeting him for the first time.

'The fox and the lion shouldn't be apart for too long,' I conceded. 'It was your wish, remember.'

'What's your wish, Piper?' he said, inching in closer to me.

I leaned into him.

Cooper's lips met mine. They were so soft as he gently kissed me. He pulled back and traced his fingers down my cheek. 'I've seen this face a thousand times,

but it's like we're at a whole new beginning.'

I leaned in again and gently kissed his lips. I pulled him in tightly and hugged him.

'I have everything I could wish for right here,' I said.

And then I kissed him once more.

About the author

Ever since she learned to hold a pen, Laura Sieveking has loved creating stories. She remembers hiding in her room as a six-year-old, writing a series of books about an unlikely friendship between a princess and a bear.

As an adult, Laura has spent the vast majority of her career working in publishing as an editor. After several years, she decided to put down her red pen and open up her laptop to create books of her own.

Laura's books revolve around all the things she loved as a child—friendships, sport and a little bit of magic. She has written series for early independent readers and middle-grade fiction. And she's the author of the popular Ella at Eden series and Gymnastics Diaries series with Australian Olympic gymnast Georgia Godwin.

She lives in Sydney with her husband and two children, and her two fluffy dogs who look like teddy bears.

SCHOLASTIC



Piper is the daughter of two famous Hollywood actors and is sick of being followed by the paparazzi everywhere they go. So when she gets the opportunity to spend six months attending a regular high school, something she's never done before, she grabs it with both hands. Piper moves in with her childhood friends, twins Chloe and Cooper, and they all agree to keep Piper's true identity a secret.

SCHOLASTIC

Piper finds herself in a confusing new world. The cutest boy at school, Cruz, takes an interest in her, and the coolest girl suddenly wants to become friends. But why? Despite Chloe and Cooper's warnings, Piper is drawn to Cruz and his friends, who she's adamant are not as shallow as they may appear. But are Chloe and Cooper right about these people? Or does Piper see something more in them? And will her affections for Cruz threaten to tear Piper and her best friends apart?

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