

ZERO

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To Baz. For being ace.

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Chapter One

Rain battered the windscreen of the car. The sun had been up since before five but it hadn't managed to break through the clouds yet. 'You don't have to come in with me if you don't want to,' I said, running the back of my fingernail through the patch of steam where our breath had fogged the car windows.

I already knew what the answer would be but my stomach still sank when my mum pulled the handbrake with rather more force than necessary before she answered me. 'Yes, I do.'

'It's only over there.' I pointed across the road to the staff car park and the reception block, fluorescent-lit against the grey sky. 'I can go by myself.'

Mum pulled the key out of the ignition and turned to face me. The worst of it was she didn't even look angry, just sad. 'That's not what the terms of your bail say.'

I bit my top lip and stared determinedly out of the window. The clouds seemed to have got darker in the last few minutes. Behind me, Chec started kicking the back of my chair. 'Hello? Two door car? I can't get out unless you do.'

We clambered out and stood on the pavement outside the parade of shops while Mum fiddled with the locks on her ancient 2CV. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Chec eying me up and down. After a minute or so of her staring I'd had enough. 'What?'

She raised her eyebrows and gave me a slightly hurt look. 'Just having a look at what you're wearing,' she said patiently. I said nothing. I knew better than to ask what was wrong with what I was wearing.

'What?' She widened her eyes innocently. 'I'm just saying, maybe we should have got together this morning and done your hair. You know, for confidence. Or put together an outfit for you.' I looked down at the jeans, vest and flannel shirt I was wearing, confused. This *was* an outfit.

Chec started to hover, bouncing slightly on her toes as she peered at me. Unable to hold herself back any longer, she clamped her ring binder between her knees and reached for my hair. I scowled and batted her away with more force than was strictly necessary. Usually I was happy to go along with her when she wanted a hair and makeup dress-up doll, but today I totally wasn't in the mood.

Her arms fell to her side and glowered at me from under her eyebrows. With a sigh I relented, turning my head towards her obediently, reminding myself that she was only trying to help. Chec smiled and started raking her frosted-pink nails through my hair, combing it out

and weaving it into a neat fishtail plait. She leaned back against the car to admire her work whilst Mum swore quietly and tried to thump her car key into the lock.

A few shops along, the door to the newsagents opened with a metallic buzz and a tall boy sauntered out, uncapping a bottle of thick pink milkshake. He stopped and took a long slug from it, what little light there was catching his golden hair. Lost in his own world, he started to wander down the street in our direction, reading the label on his milkshake bottle and taking another appreciative swig.

I fake-coughed loudly and Mal's eyes snapped up, a grin lifting the side of his mouth. He ambled over to Chec and leant in to kiss her cheek. She giggled and tried to squirm away from him. 'Get off! Don't kiss me when you've been drinking that revolting stuff.' He laughed and grabbed her shoulders, trying to nuzzle her neck, making her shriek louder.

I fought the urge to stick my fingers in my mouth and make sick noises and shuffled a bit away from them.

Giving up and draping an arm round Chec's shoulder, Mal drained the last of his sticky drink and chucked the bottle into a bin. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and thumped his chest with his fist, belching. 'Hey, Ro. How's it-' His eyes snapped fully open when he looked at me and he choked slightly. 'Wow. Ro. That's...some eyeliner you've got going on there. It looks cool, though,' he said hastily, but he glanced blatantly between me and Chec, doing that thing that people often do, that thing where they stare at us, thinking: *Wow. I can't believe they're even related.*

Ignoring Chec's silencing elbow to the ribs, he pointed to his chest. 'Biology A level. I do know a bit about protective colouration. Is this because of what Cassie said on Facebook? Because you *know* no one will believe her. Don't you?' He looked at me in what I'm sure he meant to be an earnest, reassuring way.

I felt the colour drain out of my cheeks. One of the first things Mum had done when we got home from the police station was take away my laptop and phone. 'What did she say?'

Mal's mouth opened and closed for a few seconds like a startled fish. 'Mal, you're such a dick!' Chec wrenched away from him and started swatting at him with her folder.

'What did she say?' I looked at Chec and Mal, who both had trouble meeting my eye.

Chec linked her arm through mine, blasting Mal with laser eyes. 'She's just being Cassie, doing her attention-seeking thing. She's like that girl in *Mean Girls*-'

'Rachel McAdams,' Mal supplied.

'Shut up, Mal. She's like Rachel McAdams in *Mean Girls*, when she goes round telling everyone that the other girl's a lesbian just to be spiteful.'

‘She called me a lesbian on Facebook?’ I asked, thoroughly confused.

‘No, she called you a thief.’

Great.

As soon as we were through the school gate, Mum said, ‘Mal, you don’t have to come into reception with us.’ Mal, who’d known my mum long enough to recognise an order when it was being given, sidled off, giving me a sympathetic wave and a ‘text me’ hand signal to Chec.

The beige and blue reception area was quiet, with just the whir of the photocopier in the background. The secretary looked up when we walked in, did a double take and started to look uncomfortable.

Mum ignored her pained look. ‘*Hel-lo,*’ she said in her best telephone voice while I hovered nervously next to her. ‘I’m Kate Harper; I need to sign Roanne in today.’ She looked at the secretary expectantly.

The secretary’s mouth worked, but no sound came out and she started to pluck nervously at her fuzzy cardigan. ‘Mr Mitchum asked to see you, actually,’ she managed to get out eventually, not really seeming to know whether to address me or my mum. The headteacher wanted to see me? This didn’t bode amazingly well.

Mum pulled an impatient face. ‘Is it going to take very long? I’ve got a lesson starting in twenty minutes.’

‘Um... Why don’t I get him to come out and see you?’ The secretary scurried off into the office area in a cloud of flowery perfume.

Mum shrugged at me. ‘I’m going to go and move the car off the yellow lines. Don’t go anywhere.’ I saluted her and sank down onto the bright blue hessian couch. The school office smelt of photocopiers and instant coffee. I fiddled with my fringe, wishing I had my phone with me.

I hoped Mum would come back before Mr Mitchum arrived. Chec and I had only been going to this school for a year and the only time I’d spoken to him so far, he’d spent the whole conversation calling me Joanne.

Chec sat down next to me on the too-squashy sofa and tucked her leg under her. I gave her a watery smile and she responded with a sorrowful look, her delicate eyebrows pinching together in an upside-down V.

She knotted her fingers together in her lap and then reached over to take my hand, twining her fingers with mine. ‘Don’t worry about what Cassie said. No one listens to her.’ I smiled at her lie. Cassie was the queen bee of the sixth form: everyone listened to her.

‘Nothing ever goes on in this crappy village, and everyone heard what happened on Saturday, so people are going to stare today, but if you just ignore them it’ll all die down by lunchtime.’

Which would be a great plan, if I was Chec. She drifted through life casually sticking two fingers up to anyone and anything sent to upset her. ‘I want to go home. I don’t think it was a good idea for me to come in today.’

Chec frowned at me. ‘But if you hide at home, everyone’s going to think you’re guilty.’

‘I think the fact that I was arrested is going to make people think I’m guilty.’

‘But you didn’t DO it!’ she hooted in outrage.

Her faith in me went a little way towards easing the hard, bilious knot in my chest because, god knew, unconditional love had been a little thin on the ground at home this weekend.

If I hadn’t been aware before, my parents made it clear on the car journey home that they liked being called by the police to say that their daughter had been arrested on suspicion of shoplifting only slightly more than they liked terrorism or malaria. My phone, laptop and iPad had been spirited away as soon as I’d walked through the front door and it had been strongly hinted that I should keep to my room as much as possible.

‘Everyone thinks I did it,’ I said, remembering the look on the police officers’ faces while I was being interviewed.

Chec didn’t contradict me. ‘I should have been there with you.’

‘Don’t be stupid. It’s lucky you weren’t there; we’d probably both have been arrested.’

‘But at least you wouldn’t have gone through all that alone.’ I opened my mouth to disagree, but then shut it again. The time between the store detective stopping me and my parents arriving to pick me up had pretty much been the scariest few hours of my life. ‘You asked me to come into town with you, and I said no. I’m a bad sister,’ she said glumly.

A group of Year Nines burst in through the front doors, taking the short cut instead of going round the back to the pupils’ entrance. Their giggles were cut short when they saw me and were replaced by a short period of stunned silence followed by thrilled whispers. Excellent. I closed my eyes, wishing with all my being for the power of invisibility. To just switch myself off and let the world drift on without me.

The door opened again and I got ready to hide again, but it was just Mum. She came and sat with us, nodding gravely at Chec, like they were hanging round the hospital bed of a mutual friend. The first bell rang, summoning everyone to registration. ‘You should probably go to your class.’ For a second, I thought she was talking to me, but no. Chec started to look mutinous, but she knew our mother too well to bother arguing.

‘See you in English,’ she said sadly, shouldering her bag and giving me a limp thumbs-up. She trudged slowly past the dusty trophy cabinet, as if giving my mum time to change her mind, and then out into the main corridor.

Over at the reception desk the phone buzzed. ‘Mr Mitchum is ready to see you now,’ the unfortunate secretary said, and we duly filed in.

‘They can’t do this, you know,’ she ranted to me on the way home. I found it hard to pay much notice; my mind was chanting ‘kicked out of school, kicked out of school, kicked out of school’ in time to the vibrations of the rumble strips on the way back to our village.

‘They have a legal obligation to educate you. They can’t just- IDIOT!’ She swerved violently and slammed the heel of one hand down on the horn while making an angry telephone gesture with the other to the man in the white van who had a phone clamped between his chin and his shoulder. I sank a bit lower in my seat. My mum’s two pet peeves were people talking on the phone whilst driving, and litterbugs. I’ve found out through cruel experience that it’s a lot harder to hide when she’s running down the street waving a crisp packet at someone’s retreating back, bellowing, ‘I think you’ve DROPPED something!’

‘They can’t do this,’ she repeated. I felt too weary to point out that it was too late; they already had. ‘We can take it to the board of governors. They can’t take away your right to an education.’

I saw a tiny glimmer of hope. ‘Being as I’m not allowed in school, can I have my laptop back? So I don’t fall behind with my work.’ I wondered whether to ask for my phone too, but decided not to chance it just yet.

‘Hmm? Oh. Yes, I suppose so.’

We came in through the side gate and I let myself in through the back door while Mum went off to my dad’s studio at the end of the garden.

My stomach growled as I slung my bag onto the kitchen counter. I glanced at the microwave. Ten o’clock. I’d had bacon and eggs for breakfast just two hours ago and I was starving already.

I wondered if anyone would miss the cold roast chicken sitting under cling film in the fridge, but deciding I’d pushed my luck far enough I grabbed the peanut butter jar and a spoon and ran up to my room. My stomach squirmed and roared again while I waited for our crappy rural broadband speed to finally give me access to the internet, so I dug my spoon into the peanut butter jar and voila! A peanut butter lollipop.

The internet screen pinged up and a few clicks later Cassie's profile picture smirked out at me.

Lock up your valuables - turns out one of the Homeschool Freaks is a jewel thief. Hands up who saw that one coming? It's always the quiet ones....

Homeschool Freaks. Good one, Cassie.

A hundred and thirty seven likes. Huh.

Chec and I had been home schooled since we were five. I hadn't minded it - I didn't have anything to compare it to - but Chec had always lobbied our parents hard to be mainstream schooled. When we started our A Levels, she'd finally got her wish and was now one of the more popular girls in our year, but looking at Facebook it seemed that the home schooling stigma had been harder to shake off than she'd thought.

I read and re-read Cassie's post. Okay, so it wasn't as bad as it could have been, but her words still felt like a punch to the gut. Working on the assumption that people who kick the queen bee's hive get stung, I'd never crossed swords with Cassie and it pissed me off that she'd done this.

While I wasn't unpopular, I had never been what you'd call popular, either. Not like Chec was, where everyone knew your name where you went at the weekends and what you were wearing. I knew Chec would bang the drum for my innocence, but to everyone else I would just be That Girl, the one who nicked some jewellery from a shop and got caught.

Except I hadn't done it. I hadn't bloody done it, and everyone thought I had.

I looked at Cassie's simpering face again, resisting the urge to stick my fist through the screen. I considered changing my status to 'Roanne Harper hopes Cassie O'Donnell catches chlamydia' and decided against it.

All internet business concluded, I put the laptop to one side and flopped backwards onto my bed, bringing a cushion up over my face. I lay there for a while, enjoying the rare silence, before deciding no. No more wallowing. The To Be Read on my bedside table was teetering out of control, but after reading the same paragraph about a billion times I gave up and sloped off into the garden.

'Hey, Pumpkin,' my dad greeted me as I pushed open the door to his studio. He didn't look up from the wide canvas he was working on, but this was normal.

I went over and curled up on the knackered sofa. He started clearing away his paints, wiping his brushes on a cloth and waiting for me to start with whatever I wanted to say.

My dad created two types of paintings: the big, bland pieces he churned out that made money, and the smaller, clever pieces he actually enjoyed painting, that didn't. The canvas he

was working on was a huge abstract thing in soothing blues, probably meant to encourage people to invest more of their cash with whatever corporate headquarters it was bound for.

He started poking at the canvas with a small knife, smoothing something over. 'Did Mum tell you what happened?' I ventured.

He put the knife down on his table and nodded. 'Don't worry too much. It'll all get sorted out.'

I poked at a bit of paint on the wooden arm of the chair with my thumbnail. 'She's writing to the governors.'

'Yes, she told me that.' He frowned. 'I think she also mentioned the local authority and the papers.' He caught my horrified expression. 'It won't get that far, I'm sure.'

Do you think I did it? I wanted to ask him. Are you looking at your eldest daughter (by ten minutes) and thinking, *I raised a thief.*

I picked at a bit of dried paint on the arm of the sofa and sighed. Dad raised an eyebrow at me. 'Don't tell me you're bored already?'

I shrugged noncommittally, not wanting to ask him what was really on my mind. He glanced at the canvas he'd been working on. My dad kept regular hours, for an artist. He headed off to his studio at eight in the morning and never came back to the house until late afternoon. I'd asked him once whether he didn't need to wait for inspiration to strike. He'd laughed and told me that most of the time he was a glorified printing press. 'Fancy a run?'

Although I avoided unnecessary physical activity wherever possible, over the years my parents had bullied and cajoled me into taking various types of exercise. Team sports - or indeed any activity where you have to try and anticipate what other people are going to do - baffled me, so they'd encouraged me in middle-distance running, purely on the basis that I didn't have the short, wiry physique to make me a naturally fast sprinter and my boredom threshold was too low for long-distance.

The deal I had going with my parents was that as long as I did a 5k run every other day or so, they wouldn't complain about me spending the rest of my spare time curled up on my bed reading. My dad ran middle-distance too, and now that I was tall enough to keep up with him, we often ran together. I recognised his offer as the olive branch/acknowledgement of my innocence he'd meant it as.

I managed a smile. 'Only if you want to be thrashed.'

He looked at me, mock-annoyed. 'That's fighting talk where I come from, young lady.'

Outside, we stretched holding onto the swing set. 'Normal run or post-apocalypse?'

I was in the mood to be cheered up. 'Post-apocalypse, please.'

‘Okay,’ he said as he stretched out his hamstring. ‘It’s the year 2153, and humanity has been all but wiped out by a zombie plague-’

‘We did zombie plague last week.’ I pulled my arm across my chest.

He sighed, shifting to the other leg. ‘Fine, then. It’s the year 2153, and humanity has been all but wiped out by environmental disasters. The straggling remains of our species live in a series of vast underground caverns run by a totalitarian, militaristic government. You have discovered that the crazy dictator running your cavern - for some inexplicable reason, given the low population levels and limited resources - is planning to declare war on the next cavern over-’

‘How have I discovered this?’

‘Because you are a horrible, precocious, nosy child and often go poking around where you’re not wanted. Anyway, the evil overlord is planning on bringing about World War Three, and you’ve just managed to trick your way past the guards and out of your home cavern. Miss Harper, your mission, should you choose to accept it, involves finding the next pod over and warning them before the crazy dictator - that’s me - catches you, or the hazardous environment kills you. You can go in any direction you like and I’m giving you a one minute head start, after which I’m releasing the dogs. Go!’

Yelping with laughter, I sprinted off towards the woods at the end of our field.

Chapter Two

The next morning, for want of anything better to do, like get an education, I went for a walk round the village. It took all of three minutes, so I stopped off at the village shop to get a can of Coke and a magazine.

Trying not to look too much like a feckless youth, I perched on the back of the bench outside the shop and flipped idly through the magazine, reflecting on the unfairness of my situation. Not so much that I'd been kicked out of school - although that was pretty much Made of Suck - but more the fact that if I *was* to find myself at a loose end for the foreseeable future, it had to be in somewhere as deathly dull as Great Ormington.

When Chec and I were babies, my parents packed their bags one day and decided to travel the world. Just like that. My dad's an artist and we just flitted from one place to the next as the mood took us. By the time I was five, I'd been to thirty-eight countries, sometimes more than once. And then, in a fit of insanity that I've never really understood, they decided to move back to England to the tiniest, boringest village they could find and set up camp there for, like, the rest of their lives.

A fine layer of cold drizzle blew against my cheek. The calendar said June but it felt like a great big cosmic lie. Pulling my hoodie up, I jumped off the bench, chucked my empty Coke can in the bin, and made my way back home. The sofa and a few episodes of *Dog the Bounty Hunter* were beckoning.

As I pushed open the front door, I caught a snatch of conversation coming from the Good Sitting Room. The Good Sitting Room was where we entertained guests that weren't also friends. It was where we'd held the reception after my granddad's funeral and it reminded me of wearing scratchy clothes and having to listen politely while extended family members told me how tall I was getting.

I hovered outside the door. There was a male voice. Not my dad's. I wondered who the visitor was that he warranted Good Sitting Room treatment.

'Roanne!' My mum caught sight of me through the open door as I sidled past. 'Come in here. There's someone to see you.'

A man in his twenties wearing a grey suit and a sporting the blandest haircut I'd ever seen in my life got up out of his seat and held out his hand for me to shake.

'Ro.' There was a warning to be polite in my mum's tone. 'This is Adam Miller; he's one of the solicitors from Bartlett and Young. He's come to talk to you about the-' She trailed

off and made a flappy hand gesture that was apparently supposed to mean ‘massive predicament you’re in’.

Sensing that today was probably not the finest day to be giving lip to my mum, I instead gave Boring Suit Man - Adam, whatever - the barest of nods and sat down on the sofa.

‘Where’s Mister Bartlett?’ I asked. As soon as my parents had sprung me from jail (and that sounds a lot cooler than it actually was), my dad had got on the phone to Nicholas Bartlett, an old friend of his who was a solicitor. He was nice. And he dressed better than this guy.

‘He’s unavailable today,’ Adam said smoothly. ‘So, ah, Roanne,’ he began. ‘The date for your court case has been set. The twentieth of August.’ Dry-mouthed, I nodded. ‘There have also been some developments,’ he went on. ‘The Crown Prosecution Service has released a photograph to us that indicates you were putting something in your pocket as you were walking past the jewellery concession.’ He slid a grainy photo out of an envelope and passed it over to me.

I felt my mum’s glare start to burn an icy hole in the side of my head.

‘That’s BOLLOCKS!’ I squeaked. The hand holding the photograph shook with indignation and my mum’s glare cranked up a notch from Ice Queen to Medusa at my language. I looked carefully at the photo. ‘Look. Look! I’m scratching my BUM!’ Mum looked as if she didn’t know which was worse - shoplifting, or talking about bum-scratching in front of the man who stood between me and a criminal record whilst sitting in the Good Sitting Room. ‘I mean, not scratching my *bum*. It’s my hip. Look. I’m scratching the bit of hip at the top of my jeans.’ I thrust the photograph back to him.

Adam Bad Suit looked again at the photograph and made a little down-turned smile, accompanying it with a small shrug, as if to say that while it *could* be construed as a bum-scratch, it was probably more likely that I was a nasty, sneaky thief.

I started to panic. This was starting to feel a lot like living inside a Kafka novel. ‘I didn’t take anything from that stupid bloody shop!’ I was aware that my eyes were bulging slightly from their sockets and tried to rein my indignation in a bit. I swallowed and said more calmly, ‘You have to believe me - I’m not a thief. I wouldn’t do something like that, it’s illegal.’ I turned to my mum. ‘Seriously, this is wrong. They’re wrong. I didn’t do it, I swear.’ She rubbed my hand between hers and nodded, not quite looking at me.

‘Whether I believe you or not isn’t relevant, Roanne,’ Adam said, not unkindly. ‘The CPS believe they can prove you stole that jewellery and they want to bring the case to the

magistrate's court. So you have a choice now. You can either plead guilty and you will be sentenced accordingly-'

'Er, *no*. Absolutely no freaking way!'

'-Or if you decide to plead not guilty, we will need to come up with a good reason why you should not be found guilty.'

'I assume you're looking for a reason other than "Because I didn't do it",' I said as acidly as I could whilst fighting back tears of frustration.

He nodded slowly. A kind of *Yeah, this is a total bummer, isn't it?* kind of nod. 'If you decide to plead guilty... The magistrate would have discretion over your sentence, but the maximum penalty would be a fine and up to six months imprisonment in a youth offenders' institute.'

I tried to swallow, but my throat had almost closed up. Prison. Beside me, my mum gasped and clamped her hands to her mouth.

This was bad. This was so bad. Well, I mean, duh, of course it was, but the consequences would go way beyond the time I would actually spend in prison. It would be on my record for ever. It would have to go on my university applications and every time I applied for a job. And anything that required a background check? Forget it. This would be hanging over my head for the rest of my life.

'There must be something we can do,' my mum said desperately. 'What about- What about if Roanne offers to work for the shop for free to make up for the things that were taken? Would the shop be willing to do that?'

'Again, I didn't *actually* steal anything,' I huffed.

Boring Hair Adam crunched his nose up in confusion at my mum's suggestion. 'The shop management believe Roanne stole nearly ten thousand pounds worth of jewellery from them.' Nine, actually, I thought to myself. 'They're unlikely to ever let Roanne through their front doors again; they certainly won't let her work there.'

'Well...' Mum glanced at me and then back to Adam. 'Her dad and I are in a...financial position that would enable us to pay this money back to the shop in exchange for them dropping the charges against her.'

My mouth almost fell open in surprise. Seriously? They would be willing to fritter away nine grand on *a crime I hadn't committed?*

And then it hit me. Stupid Roanne. They *did* think I did it.

'It's not really that simple, Mrs Harper.' Adam ran his hand over his chin ruefully. 'The shop has the jewellery that was found in Roanne's bag. Technically, they're not out of

pocket.’ He frowned, as if he was about give a lecture on quantum physics to a pair of chimps. ‘When teenagers shoplift, the most common items taken are low-value: make-up, clothing. The items found in Roanne’s bag were high-value. Taking them would have taken a lot of planning: information about staff schedules, stock lists, deliveries, that kind of thing.’

The box of gold chains I’d been accused of taking had only just been delivered to the shop. The necklaces themselves were packaged separately in tiny plastic bags inside a larger plastic box, ready to be put out on pads in the glass display cabinet. It was a small, portable item, ideal for stealing, and very few people would have known of its existence. The shop assistant who had left it lying on the shop counter was probably on her way to the job centre as we spoke. ‘They think there were other people involved, too, don’t they?’ I said.

He nodded. ‘When a minor is arrested for shoplifting, the police call their parents to come and pick them up. If the parents seem suitably outraged, the police often only issue a caution for a first offence. It’s one less job for them if the parents are happy to mete out punishment. That’s if the shop bothers to involve the authorities at all. The reason the department store and the CPS are so keen to charge you is because they think you’re part of a shoplifting ring. They’re trying to put pressure on you to give up the other members.’

Apparently I was doomed to keep repeating the same phrase until the day I died. ‘I didn’t steal the jewellery. There was no planning. There are no gang members. I didn’t steal anything!’

An awkward silence followed.

‘Mrs Harper, could I impose on you for a cup of tea?’ Adam asked politely. He watched my mum leave the room and craned his head back to see how far she’d gone. He turned back to me. ‘Roanne, there is another option available to you.’ I looked up at him fearfully, and nodded. Maybe the CPS was going to offer me a reduced charge if I agreed to plead guilty. ‘I’ve been authorised to offer you an alternative to going to court.’

Huh? ‘What do you mean?’

‘I represent some people who are...influential, and are in a position to make the case against you disappear if you were to offer them your assistance in a certain matter.’

My eyebrows rocketed up my forehead as I tried to process what he’d just said. Surely he didn’t mean- ‘You mean, disappear completely? As in, like, forever?’ He inclined his head slightly. ‘But how?’

He shrugged slightly as if this was of no concern. ‘Leave the how to them. Are you interested?’

Although a part of me wanted to steam in, shouting, ‘Yes! Yes! Anything!’ my calmer side prevailed. ‘It depends. Who are they? And what is it they want me to do?’ Not that it mattered. At that moment in time, I struggled to think of anything I *wouldn’t* do to get my life back to the way it had been before the weekend.

‘They prefer to remain anonymous for the time being. You can just think of them as: The People Who Can Make My Court Case Go Away. As for what they want you to do... A child has been kidnapped. They would like you to help them retrieve him.’

Stunned, like someone had hit me over the back of the head with an invisible spade, all I could do for a moment was stare. ‘What? I just... *What?* How? Why don’t they just go to the police?’

‘The police are unable to assist in this matter, so the people I represent have assembled a team of professionals to re-acquire the child. You would be a part of this team.’ His head was still tilted down but when he snuck a look at me there was something in his expression akin to a cat looking at a mouse hole.

All I could think of was the possibility that I might be able to make this totally fake charge go away. ‘But I’m not a professional. I’m an A-Level student from Suffolk, not some kind of kidnapped-child-rescuer or, like, an ex-marine ninja with loads of survival skills and guns and stuff. I don’t have any skills that they’d need.’

‘We can discuss that in more depth once you agree to join us,’ he said, ‘but let’s just say some of your extra-curricular activities will come in very useful.’

Too make up for the fact that we are, apparently, Homeschool Freaks, my parents had sent Chec and me on a whole bunch of classes over the years. Karate, self-defence, archery, outward-bound skills, orienteering...

Marksmanship.

I stared. ‘No way. You’re saying I have to shoot people?’

He shook his head. ‘Violence would only be necessary in self-defence and if everything goes to plan you won’t be in any danger.’ He rubbed his hand over his mouth and let out a rueful huff of a laugh. ‘I know you have no reason to believe me, but your safety really is of paramount importance.’

A tiny part of my brain, the practical, sensible part, was shouting *Run. Run for your life. This man’s a lunatic.* But the larger part of my brain, the part that was busy remembering what it was like not to be thought of as a criminal, shushed it. I swallowed. ‘Do I have to do anything illegal?’

‘No, not at all.’ He glanced to the door. ‘Your mother is going to be back soon and I would prefer it if she didn’t walk in on this conversation. Do you have any other questions?’

‘What if we don’t manage to get this kid back? Do the charges against me stay dropped?’

‘You will get him back, but yes in the event of failure the charges would stay dropped.’

I fiddled with my lip ring and thought as rapidly as I could. ‘Let me get this right. Rescue the kidnapped child. No more court case.’

He spread his hands wide. ‘Think of it as community service. Freeing up police time so that they can go after the real criminals.’ He smirked slightly, knowing he’d got me on board.

I didn’t even have to think twice. Prison or community service. Jail or freedom. I nodded shakily. ‘Fine. If you can make the charges against me go away, I’m in. As long as I don’t have to do anything illegal. Or hurt anyone. I don’t want to do that.’ The last thing I wanted was to end up in more trouble than I was already in.

Adam grinned in relief and his whole demeanour relaxed. ‘Great. Great. It’s likely you will be away for a few weeks, so-’

‘A few WEEKS?’ I hooted. ‘I can’t! I’ve got school!’

He raised an eyebrow at me. ‘I was given to understand that your schedule had recently been freed up in that respect.’

My mouth popped open in horror, but he had a point. ‘Well, what will I tell everyone? How am I going to explain not being here for weeks on end?’

He raised his eyes to the ceiling and steepled his hands under his chin. ‘Digging wells in Africa. Yes, that should work. Somewhere out of the way, with a poor communications network. Uganda, maybe. You can say it’s part of a youth rehabilitation scheme that the government are piloting. You’ll need to tell your family this evening; the induction centre you need to go to is in Exeter and you need to be there by tomorrow afternoon.’

I glared at him. ‘How will I know the court case has been stopped? You could be lying and when I get back I could have a charge of breaking the conditions of my bail added to the list.’

He shrugged. ‘The case has already been dropped.’

‘Already been dropped? How can it have already been dropped? I’ve only been talking to you for the last ten minutes.’

‘If you don’t believe me, feel free to contact the Crown Prosecution Service and check.’ He gestured towards the phone on the side of the table.

I turned to the phone and glanced back at him. 'No, it's okay, I trust you,' I said slowly and began to sit back down in my seat.

A slow smile spread across his face until it became a grin with a slightly feral edge. It was like someone had turned up the lights; I felt dazzled and could feel my blood quickening again. 'Excellent.' He gave me a quick smile. 'Now, let's get down to business.'

As Adam started to explain with the aid of a sketched map the best way to get to the induction location, I wondered if my week could possibly get any freakier.

Turns out, it could.

Chapter Three

I spent the rest of the afternoon engaging in blatant acts of bumlickery, like cleaning the downstairs toilet and putting away the laundry before announcing my sudden change of summer plans.

Dinner was as subdued as it had been for the past two nights. Mum and Dad kept casting me looks that, whilst not exactly *angry*, weren't exactly friendly either. Even Chec, who by rights should have been quietly gleeful that the Bad Twin spotlight wasn't being shone on her, was silent.

Parental goodwill towards me and Chec often worked like a set of old-fashioned scales; for one of us to rise, the other had to fall. After I pierced my lip a few months back, the scales had been decidedly in Chec's favour until two weeks ago, when Dad had seen more than he'd bargained for when he was putting away some clean t-shirts in Chec's drawer. The ensuing furore - or Condomgate, as I liked to call it - had put Chec well and truly in the doghouse and propelled me back into their good graces. Now, it looked like I was back to being the Bad Twin again.

My announcement was initially met with astonished silence, which I figured was better than the outright 'You must be joking' I'd been expecting. Like Rottweilers, my parents were a confusing and unpredictable mix of over-protective and easygoing. Often they'd give the nod to things I thought would be refused outright but have conniption fits about things that hadn't even registered on my radar.

'They'll drop the charges completely?' My mum glanced at my dad, who raised his eyebrows and shrugged slightly. I pushed my tortellini around my plate with my fork and tried not to meet their gaze for fear I'd blurt everything out.

Dad wasn't to be put off, though. He ducked his head to meet my eye. 'Have they told you exactly what you're getting into with this, Ro?'

'Oh, yes,' I lied, eyes widened for added authenticity.

'And you're happy with this offer of...digging wells in Africa?' I nodded enthusiastically and my dad turned to my mum. A look passed between them that I couldn't make out and they seemed to come to a consensus. 'Alright. Mum and I will talk about it later and we'll tell you our decision tomorrow.'

I breathed freely again. 'We'll talk about it later' usually meant yes.

After dinner I sloped off to Chec's room. She was clicking morosely through Netflix and looked up as I came in, rolling over to give me half the bed.

For a moment she didn't look at me. Then, clicking on some random box set, she threw the remote onto her chest of drawers and turned onto her side, scowling reproachfully. 'You can't go to Africa. I won't let you. You can't abandon me to our bloody mother and this bloody boring village.'

'Hello? I got *arrested*, remember? If I don't do this, it's not going to be a choice between you and Africa; it's going to be jail. No choices at all. Just jail.'

She squinted at me in amazement. 'It's almost like I'm talking to a completely different person. I can't believe you're planning on digging wells in Uganda. It's totally Duke of Edinburgh. So...outdoorsy. You *hate* the outdoors.'

'Yeah, but if I do this, they'll drop the charges against me. It's like a community service thing. If my case went to court, I don't know what would happen.'

'You could get off!'

'Yeah, and I could be sent to juvie. This is a perfect opportunity.'

'A perfect opportunity...to catch malaria.'

I knew better than to argue with her, and besides, it suddenly struck me that Adam had never actually said *exactly* where this kid was being held. Shit. What if it *was* in Africa? What if malaria was actually an option?

Eventually Chec turned to me with her sad-puppy face and started fiddling with my sleeve. 'I can't believe we're not going to see each other for weeks and weeks. Who's going to look after you?'

'Maybe I'll start looking after myself for a change.' I took a deep breath and bit my lip before going on. 'I'm leaving tomorrow.'

Chec's mouth popped open, giving me a delightful view of chewed-up popcorn. 'But you can't! What about-' she shut her mouth with an audible click.

'What? What about school? I don't go there any more, remember? But it's a good thing,' I hastily went on. 'Getting booted out of school has turned out to be a blessing in disguise. It's freed me up to do this well-digging thing. And the sooner I go, the sooner I'll be back.'

I nudged her, trying to get her to see the bright side. She didn't smile, so I carried on nudging her until she reluctantly started nudging me back before throwing herself onto her back in surrender. 'God, I can't believe you're abandoning me for the summer. You're doing something really noble and cool and you're going to have *such* an amazing tan by the time you get back,' she said wistfully. 'And you'll get so *fit* with all that exercise.'

'So you're saying I'm going to come back looking all brown and muscly?'

'Like a female bodybuilder,' she assured me.

Everything seemed to be going exactly to plan. Which is why, when I came downstairs in the night for water, I was surprised to find my parents still discussing it.

Okay, *find* probably isn't quite the right word. As I was walking past the living room I heard one of them say my name, so obviously I pressed my ear to the crack in the door to better hear what they were saying.

I was so intent on my eavesdropping I didn't even hear Chec sneak up behind me. 'Watcha doi-' she began in her best foghorn voice. I clamped my hand over her mouth and gestured wildly towards the living room. Realisation dawned and she pressed her ear to the door.

Where've you been? I mouthed to her.

She jerked her head behind her, in the direction of Mal's house. It was one in the morning. I gave her a disapproving look and she shrugged innocently.

'At least we know the shoplifting thing was a fit-up job,' my mum was saying.

'You mean you didn't before?' I could almost *hear* my dad raising his eyebrows. Chec raised hers too.

'Well...' For all her bluster, my dad had a way of pinning my mother to the spot sometimes. 'Richard, she is a *teenager* for god's sake. They rebel. They act out. It's what they do. And no, I wouldn't have expected it of her but it's not out of the realms of possibility.'

My dad stayed silent for a minute. 'We still make a decision about this thing in Africa,' he finally said.

What? I mouthed. They hadn't even decided whether I could go yet?

'She's too young,' my mum said quickly. My stomach turned ice-cold. Jesus, did she *want* me to go to prison, or something? 'The charges will get dropped, in any case,' she went on impatiently. 'Even if it did go to court, she'd...' Their voices got more muffled as they moved to a different part of the room.

'So, we'll say no, then? Wait and see what happens.' My mum. The traitor.

My dad started saying something about standing by me, but I couldn't make out his words properly, what with the sound of their betrayal ringing in my ears.

Wordlessly, Chec took hold of my sleeve and propelled me back upstairs. I sat down heavily on her bed, willing the tears back while she put her pyjamas on.

I was too *young*? Seriously? Too young to go to Africa, but not too young to go to prison, apparently.

‘What are you going to do?’ Chec had swept her hair up into a headband and was wiping make up remover across her eyes.

I looked up at her. She’d stopped with the lotion bottle still in her hand, her face pink and shiny without make up, waiting for my answer. I knew she would never pressure me, but I could see the hope in her face.

Being home schooled had been harder on Chec. By nature an extrovert, even the extra-curricular stuff we’d been pushed into hadn’t been enough to satisfy her. She’d longed to be mainstream schooled for as long as I could remember and in the last year she’d blossomed. Being carted off to jail would mean the end of everything, not just for me but for her too.

Plus, also: prison. I shuddered.

My parents were planning to tell me no, but- I swiped angrily at my eyes and a rogue thought drifted into my head. But what if they couldn’t? What if I wasn’t here to tell?

My breath came quicker as this idea took root. There was nothing to stop me from walking out the door right now. If I waited until mum and dad were in bed I could pack a bag, cycle into town, be on the first train into London in the morning...

‘I’m going to do it anyway.’ The words came out before I could stop them.

Chec gave a wide-mouthed shriek and I flapped at her to shut up before our parents heard. ‘No way! Seriously?’ She was squeaking.

I nodded. ‘I’ll get the first train into London.’ I chewed on my lip ring. ‘Can you hold them off for a bit in the morning?’ She nodded vigorously. ‘Okay, then.’

Something inside me squinched at the thought of deliberately disobeying my parents like this. God knew I was no goody-two-shoes. I’d defied them plenty over the years, but never over something like this. Never anything as big as being told I couldn’t go to Africa and then going anyway.

But then, I reasoned, *technically* I wasn’t disobeying them. They’d not *actually* told me I couldn’t go...

And another thing: they didn’t want me to go to *Africa*. And I wasn’t. I was going to Exeter.

I wondered what they’d say when I got back from my Exeter/Africa jaunt, and hurriedly pushed that thought to the back of my mind. I had to hope that having a non-criminal daughter would be considered better than having an obedient daughter in the long run.

Slowly tiptoeing, I made my way back to my room and started rummaging in my cupboards.

The sun had already risen when I got on the five-eleven train into London, and by ten I was getting off at Exeter St David's. I prayed that my parents weren't waiting to collar me as I got off the train. I'd done the maths: if they'd somehow found out that I was headed for Exeter instead of Heathrow and Chec hadn't been able to distract them, they might just about have been able to make it here before me, especially if my lunatic mother was driving.

The coast, however, was mercifully clear. I wandered out of the station and turned up a side lane, my hands clamped tightly to the strap of my bag to stop them shaking.

The road Adam had given me directions to consisted of one long building, a warehouse of some kind by the looks of it, set back slightly from the pavement behind a chain link fence. It looked fairly new, but bland and dull as if someone had been trying to disguise it as a brick wall.

After a few minutes of pacing and panicked swearing, I found the door - a plain stainless steel panel with a handle - and stood outside for a moment trying to compose myself. It wouldn't do to turn up to spy camp looking flushed and sweaty. I wiped my damp palms on my jeans. A few calming breaths later and I was ready to go.

I pondered again as to why Boring Suit Adam had been so keen to recruit me for this. It had crossed my mind that this all might just be some elaborate ruse to lure me into an abandoned building to become the victim of a serial killer. I still wasn't entirely sure that Adam wasn't a psycho, so I'd employed all the tact I could manage to raise this concern with him.

'How do I know this isn't all crap and you aren't just luring me away to rape and murder me?' I'd blurted.

He punched a number into his phone and handed it to me just as a female voice answered. 'You're through to the Crown Prosecution Service. Ask them what's happened to your court case.' I glared at him but did as he asked.

'I've got nothing listed under that name,' the woman on the end of the line told me in a bored-sounding voice.

'It was a shoplifting case. Could you check again for me?' I asked. I heard some tapping and shuffling of paper and the same bored voice told me that her computer definitely said no.

I hung up the phone and handed it back to Adam. 'The people I work for made your court case disappear. It's as if it never happened. With that sort of power, don't you think they could just snatch you off the street if they wanted you that badly, instead of going through this rigmarole?'

It sounded true. It made sense, logically. And yet I couldn't shift the feeling that although I was technically being told the truth, I wasn't being told the *whole* truth. Something vital was being held back, but I didn't even know what question to ask to find out what it could be.

Now that I was three hundred miles from home, I wondered about that a bit further. I'd phoned less than five minutes after I'd agreed to help him. How had he managed to get the case stopped and have the court notified in so short a space of time?

The steel door swung open silently when I pulled the handle. Inside, the warehouse was huge and empty. Light shone weakly through the high, grimy windows onto the concrete floor and I stood for a minute to let my eyes grow accustomed to the semi-darkness, taking in the dusty, unused smell.

I felt an awful lot like the girl in every horror movie ever made; the one who's always going upstairs to investigate when she should be running out the door. I could see the newspaper headlines. 'Girl, 16, found murdered in Exeter warehouse. Police have no leads. Distraught parents say, "We thought she was in Africa!"' My fingers closed round the sonic grenade rape alarm my parents always insisted on me carrying around.

As my sight adjusted I was able to make out the doorway to the office I'd been told to report to. I stood in front of it pondering the decision to either go through it or back out into the street - either choice would lead to my life taking a hugely different direction. In the end, though, there was no choice to make. I pushed the door open.

The office was small and as well as the dusty smell of the disused building, there was an undercurrent of wood smoke and other flavours, although the office was as empty as the warehouse. The air shimmered slightly, but if there was a warm air vent nearby it wasn't doing a great job; the air was cold and clammy.

'Hello?' I called. No reply. Whoever was supposed to be meeting me wasn't here.

Anticipation hung in the air, the sense that hundreds of eyes were waiting for something to happen. I took a breath and stepped through the doorway into the office.

The flash of light lasted less than a second, just the time it took for me to take two steps forward, but something in the movement made it feel like I was falling and then something else was grabbing my ankles, tightening like an oversized elastic band, pulling me backwards. I tried to scream, but I couldn't seem to pull any air into my lungs. Just as I started to panic and flail, the world burst into colour again.

‘INCOMING!’ A voice boomed in my ear and a pair of hands that felt like steel wrapped in kid gloves picked me up from behind under my arms and whirled me around. ‘Neve! Get them off her legs!’

‘On it!’ another voice sing-songed and the pressure around my ankles released. There was an insectoid shriek and the skitter of too many feet across a hard surface.

The steel hands were still holding me and propelled me gently but firmly across the room. ‘Stay here; don’t move,’ the first voice - a boy’s - commanded, and I caught a flash of wide green eyes and crazily spiked black hair before he darted off.

Now that I had stopped moving the room I was in came into clearer focus. This wasn’t the warehouse office. The room I was in now was larger and had cobbled walls with wooden crates piled high in the corners.

What. The. Fuck?

I pressed myself against the wall and slid slowly down until my bum hit the floor staring wordlessly.

A tall girl wearing a blue fitted shirt and tight trousers with a mass of blonde hair piled up in a bun shot across the room, wielding a sword - a sword! - in pursuit of a beetle. A beetle the size of a Doberman.

The dark-haired boy, the one who had propped me against the wall, was busy trying to get a large cat down from the ceiling. Except it was a cat with tooth-filled mouths where its eyes should have been and a scorpion’s sting instead of a tail.

The cat-thing skittered around on the ceiling, hissing with all three of its mouths and dodging the boy as he swiped at it with its sword. Yes, he had a sword, too. Of course he did. Why wouldn’t he?

The boy and girl whirled around the room like dervishes chasing the freaky creatures, moving faster and more fluidly than the confined room would have suggested was possible.

The boy took a flying leap into the air, vaulting over a crate and almost skidding into a bronze-haired girl seated on a pile of sacks in the corner of the room. Her face reminded me of a china doll - all blue eyes and pouting lips. She wore a dark green tunic and trousers and sat with her hands neatly folded in her lap watching the chaos impassively. When she noticed me looking, the corners of her cupid’s-bow mouth turned down and she looked away.

‘Don’t worry about helping, Kallista. We’ve got this,’ the boy shouted. The girl - Kallista - glared at him.

The beetle-creature scrambled clumsily up the wall before shrinking back on itself and launching itself at the blonde girl. She was too quick for it, whirling her sword around her

head and catching the creature mid-air, slicing it neatly in two. The two halves fell to the floor and twitched for a couple of seconds before laying still. She poked the part that had been a head gingerly with the toe of her boot and nodded, seemingly satisfied that it was dead.

The boy crouched and jumped high, like he was packing springs in his boots, and skewered the cat-thing through the chest. He whirled it round and without needing to be asked the blonde girl cut its head off, which rolled away before coming to a stop against a pile of crates.

‘Get its sting as well,’ the boy shouted over his shoulder and with a twitch of her sword, the blonde girl duly nicked it off. It fell to the floor, spattering an iridescent blue ichor all around.

The room fell quiet. The boy and girl scanned the room, wiping their swords. All three of us were panting slightly, although admittedly the other two had far more reason to than I did.

The girl turned to the boy, tucking a lock of blonde hair back into her bun. ‘You owe me a tenner,’ she said. ‘I told you there’d be clingers.’

‘Yeah, yeah, whatever...’ They spoke with the well-modulated vowels of the slightly-posh, and their voices held the slightest West Country burr.

The girl span around slowly, looking for something. ‘Any ideas?’ she asked the boy, arching an eyebrow. He stared into space for a moment and walked slowly to where I was sitting.

He bent over in front of me and held his hand out to pull me up. It had a wide streak of glistening blue slime across the back. Frowning, he wiped it on the back of his trousers before offering it to me again and pulling me to my feet.

Straightening up, I took a proper look at him. He was wearing cut-off jeans and a Thundercats t-shirt with a pair of army boots, all spattered with dots of slime. His crazy hair, bottle-green eyes and wildly incongruous sword made him look like a real-life manga character. I stared openly, not caring how much of a creepy stalker I was coming across as, while a thousand images went off in my mind, each as insubstantial as a soap bubble, disappearing when I tried to take a closer look.

I know you, I thought to myself, trying to place where I’d seen him before. *You’re-Bugger*. I totally knew who he was. And not in a *you’re-a-famous-person* kind of way. More in a *we’ve-met-before* way. I knew him from-

I looked away and then back at him, hoping that this would jog my memory. It didn’t.

The boy stared back at me like he got this reaction all the time. The longer I looked at him, the more I *knew* I knew him. It felt like a mental stutter, like having a word on the tip of your tongue, making me want to stamp my foot and click my fingers.

We might still be standing there to this day, me with my face working in confusion and him with a look of polite patience, had the blonde girl not coughed loudly, in the way people do when they're making it perfectly clear that their throat isn't in any way uncomfortable, they're just tired of being ignored.

The boy shook his head slightly and remembered that he was supposed to be talking and broke into a wolfish grin. I wished I could say I was surprised when I saw his crooked eye teeth, but no. Because his smile, like everything else about him, was totally familiar to me. 'Nice to meet you at last, Roanne. I'm Oriel Saldana, and this is my twin sister, Neve.' The girl nodded and tipped the hilt of her sword at me before sheathing it in a holster across her back. 'We're the people who've hired you.'

