FEATURING
Holly Bourne
Maggie Harcourt
Will Hill
Linni Ingemundsen
Matt Killeen
L.A. Weatherly
S.M. Wilson

INTRODUCING
Faridah Àbíké-Ìyímídé
William Hussey
Namina Forna
The Places I’ve Cried in Public
One in a hundred thousand
The Pieces of Ourselves
Devil Darling Spy
The Infinity Files
Ace of Spades
Hideous Beauty
The Gilded Ones
Steel Tide
Seven Deadly Spells
Usborne YA have some incredible new books to fall in love with in 2020. But first don’t miss the new novel by the queen of UK YA, Holly Bourne, coming this October – a heart-shatteringly powerful story of what love is and what love isn’t, and of finding the strength to move on...

@holly_bourneYA
@hollybourneya
It’s half two in the morning and I’m back here where it started.

Yes, of course it’s cold. It’s half two in the morning, mid February, and I’m not dressed properly. I just bunged my coat on over my pyjamas and ran here in my slippers. I’m sat on this bench, shivering violently under the useless faux fur of my coat and I’m not sure why.

You see, I was in bed, doing my usual not-sleeping and trying-to-figure-out-what-the-hell-happened and thinking-it’s-all-my-fault and huddling-into-a-ball-and-disintegrating, and then, tonight – half an hour ago, to be precise – it became clear.

I needed to come here.

My breath escapes in short puffs of crystallized fog that float down to the dormant railway tracks. It’s so quiet in this alleyway. It feels like the whole world is asleep. Apart from me and my broken heart.

I’ve used up so many tears on you already and it’s not helping me get over this any better. So I’m sat here in the freezing cold, my jaw shaking, and
I’m trying to connect the dots.

This bench may not look like much. It’s got a plank missing, a grey mossy finish from years of weather, and it’s plastered in offensive graffiti. But this nondescript bench is significant, because this bench is where I first cried.

Not my first ever cry, but the first cry I can link back to you. To the story of us. Though you and I were more of a scribble than a story.

If I can untangle the messy line of biro, if I can trace back the scribble, it might finally make sense.

Here’s the starting point. I’m sat right on it.

I pull my coat tighter around myself. I close my eyes, and I remember.

“Don’t worry,” Mum said, watching me not eat my cornflakes. “Everyone will be new.”

She gave me that smile. The one that begged me not to make her feel guilty about it all.

“Everyone will know at least someone, whereas I know literally no one.”

“You will, by the end of the day.”
I didn’t finish my cereal, so I had to fish the orange pulp out with my fingers before I could pour the leftover milk down the sink. “I hope so,” I said, before going back to the bedroom that didn’t feel remotely like mine yet. I’d not finished unpacking, which didn’t help. Boxes of my life were still piled around the space, waiting for me to admit this was my life now and open them. I’d only removed my clothes, record player and vinyl, and, most importantly, my guitar.

I didn’t have time to play it but I picked it up anyway, shrugging the strap over my shoulder and perching on the end of my bed. I strummed a chord, feeling instantly calmer. I sang softly.

“Come on, Amelie, or we’ll be late,” Mum called down the hallway. I still couldn’t get used to us not having stairs.

I unwrapped my guitar from around myself and reluctantly put it down. “I’m coming.”

I piled into the front seat of our hot car and it was like climbing into an uncomfortable hug. My legs smudged sweat onto the leather. Summer was
reluctantly holding on, apparently missing the memo that it was now September. We pulled out of the communal car park and I turned the radio up.

Mum turned it down again. “Are you sure you’re going to be okay walking home? Call me if you get lost.”

“Mum, there are these things called phones. They have maps on them now and everything.”

“Well, you can still call.”

We drove along streets I didn’t know, rounded corners I didn’t know, drove past students I didn’t know, who were on the way to the same college as me that I didn’t know. They walked in clumps, while I shrank into my seat. We got stuck in traffic as cars struggled to find parking spaces. Exhaust smoke fugged its way through the car’s air conditioning, making it smell of pollution.

“I may have to spit you out here,” Mum said. “Are you going to be okay?”

I nodded, even though it wasn’t the truth. It wasn’t her fault any of this was happening. It wasn’t Dad’s either, not really. Having no one to blame for being ripped out of my old life almost made it worse.
“Hang on.” She indicated and yanked the car into a space. I opened the door, readying myself for the big unknown, when Mum reached over and put her hand on my shoulder. “Are you really going to be okay?” she asked for the third time, in her posh accent that wasn’t an accent since we’d moved down here. “I’m sorry, Amelie. I know you didn’t want this.”

I smiled for her and nodded for her. “I’ll be fine.”

She left me on the pavement in a cloud of fumes, and I watched her weave away through the thrumming cars. I wasn’t entirely sure where to go so I followed the scatterings of people my age, all walking in the same direction. My skin prickled as my shyness rash erupted across my chest. Great, just what I needed on my first day in a brand new college in a brand new part of the country – to be Blotchy Shy Girl. I fell into step behind two other girls and, despite the heat, did up my denim jacket to hide the worst of my red chest.

My skin got itchier as I imagined the potential hell awaiting me that day.

Having to nervously stand around, begging people to come and talk to me with my eyes.
Not knowing where I was going or what I was doing, and feeling insecure about how crap I was at basic human functioning.

As a result of my shyness, probably attracting some kind of weirdo who I don’t like, because they’re the only one who talks to me, and then spending the rest of my life being their friend out of duty.

Freaking about where to sit at lunch time and ending up in the corner, alone, watching everyone else be the friendly, extroverted person I wish I could be.

Having to introduce myself and stumbling over my words and my voice going all croaky and my rash getting rashier and everyone thinking I’m a weirdo.

The girls in front chatted excitedly, wisps of their conversation floating over their shoulders.

“Did you see Laura on results day? She’s gone full-on goth. Do you think her new boyfriend knows she loves Taylor Swift? Should we tell him?” They giggled and my stomach twisted. I forgot how mean girls could be. Back in Sheffield, I had my own little bubble of nice people who I loved and trusted. It
had taken sixteen years to find friends who got me and I them. I couldn’t believe I had to start again. The girls turned left and I copied, finding myself face-to-face with my new college, freshly painted for the new year. Streams of students trickled in through various entrances and everyone seemed to know at least someone. They launched themselves into hello hugs, asking one another how their summers had been. They were all laughing and chatting too loudly and excitedly – showing off on this fresh start of a new day. This was a small town. The most they could hope for was to “rebrand” slightly over the summer. Whereas I was entirely new. There was not one known face within this compound I stomped into, in my too-hot tan cowboy boots. And maybe that could be liberating – this chance to start over – except I didn’t want to start over. I wanted to be back in Sheffield with Jessa and Alfie.

Alfie…

I almost cried then, in broad daylight, before my first day had even started. Tears prickled the backs of my eyelids and sadness welled up in my intestines. And, because he knew me, because he
THE PLACES I’VE CRIED IN PUBLIC

knew me and loved me so well and so hard, Alfie
sensed it.

   My phone buzzed, right on time.

   Alfie: I’m thinking of you today. Just be you
   – blotchy shyness rash and all. You WILL
   make friends.
   Remember, only two years x x

   I stood to one side. A smile twitched across my
face, though it was a bittersweet one.

   Amelie: HOW DID YOU KNOW THAT THE
RASH HAD COME OUT? X

   A sharp bell rang out and I checked the time on
my phone – 8.55 a.m. I had only five minutes to try
and find room D24 and meet my new form group. I
rummaged in my satchel for my map of campus. I
shooked the paper as I managed to locate the
refectory right in front of me, and, apparently
D24 was in the media block to the right of it.

   There, I thought. That wasn’t so bad. You are
coping.
My phone buzzed again.

Alfie: I miss that rash. You’ll be amazing today.

I found myself closing my eyes. Standing there with the sun warm on my eyelids, the last dregs of late arrivers striding past me, I could picture every contour of Alfie’s face. The mole just next to his left eye, every tuft of his misbehaving hair. Instinctively, I typed out a reply.

Amelie: I love you

I stared at my screen, watching the cursor flash next to the “u”. Another surge of emotions ran through me and I deleted what I’d written. I watched the screen erase the truth, one letter of it vanishing at a time. The bell rang again. I was now late for my first day of whatever the hell my life was now.

Amelie: I miss you
I sent that one.
It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the whole truth.

I shake my head. Here, now, on this cold bench at almost three o’clock in the morning. My breath comes out as more of a pant. My body’s so freezing I can’t imagine ever being warm again. That warm day, not so very long ago, couldn’t feel further from this cold witching-hour of everyone-else-is-asleep o’clock.

What would’ve happened if I’d sent that first message?

That is one of the Big Ifs I’ve been turning over. What if I had told Alfie I loved him? What if I hadn’t deleted that truth? What if I’d gone with my gut instinct, the primal part of me that typed out the words I love you – even though we had that stupid agreement? If I’d sent that first message, would it have stopped what came afterwards?

I will never know.
one in a hundred thousand

LINNI INGEMUNDSEN

AUGUST 2020
A quirky teen story about a boy with a rare genetic disorder. Told in an unforgettable voice, this is perfect for fans of John Green, Wonder and The Perks of Being a Wallflower.

“Moving and exceptional”
The Sunday Times on The Unpredictability of Being Human by Linni Ingemundsen
I failed another test. It must have been the third one in four weeks. I didn’t fail because of my condition. It didn’t happen because I’m dumb.

Failing on purpose is actually not as easy as it sounds. You need to make sure you miss over ninety-five per cent of the test without making it obvious. So you can’t put down any ridiculous answers or anything. If you can’t think of something that sounds close, but definitely isn’t right, it’s better to just leave it blank or put down a question mark. Okay, it actually is pretty easy.

I’m not sure if the fact that I have been doing this on purpose makes it better or worse. There was a plan behind it. Not a very good one I suppose, but there was a plan.

Apart from my recent underachieving at school, I’m pretty much just like everyone else. At the same time I’m not. I like gaming, hanging out with my friends and reading comics. And I like taking pictures, but I don’t know if I’m good at it. I only have about a hundred and fifty followers on Instagram. But maybe that just means I’m not very popular.
I have two brothers. Jakob is seventeen, two years older than me. He drives a moped and has loads of friends. And girls love him. My younger brother, Adrian, is fourteen. He is stronger than me and faster than me. And, just like everyone else on the planet, he is also taller than me.

My dad died when I was six years old. He was a fisherman. He had broad shoulders and big arms. One day he went out to sea. And he didn’t come back. My brothers both look a lot like him. I don’t.

I have narrow shoulders and skinny arms and a tiny waist.

My right arm is longer than my left arm.

I am fifteen years old and 153 centimetres tall. The average height for an adult male in Norway is 179.7 centimetres. I’m not anywhere near average.

I figure the school will eventually contact my mom and tell her what is going on. I haven’t been in trouble before. It’s not like I am a star student or anything, but I always get by. For the past few days I have expected her to say something but so far nothing has happened. Every day she just comes home from work and everything is normal.

Earlier this afternoon, I had gone into the
kitchen to get a glass of water just as Mom walked in carrying a grocery bag in each hand. I tried to read her facial expression, but I couldn’t tell if she looked mad or not.

“Oh hey,” she said when she noticed me. There was nothing unusual about her voice either.

I sat down at the table and watched her put away the groceries. She placed two packets of chicken fillets on the counter, which I guess meant we’d be having them for dinner. With a hundred per cent certainty I knew the chicken would be organic, because we can’t eat chicken unless it is organic. That would just be insane.

I wasn’t sure if the reason Mom didn’t say anything was because she hadn’t heard anything from the school yet, or if she was just torturing me. I couldn’t take the suspense any longer, I had to know.

So I said, “How was your day?”

She looked up and paused for a minute. “It was fine.” Then she looked at me like I had announced that I was dropping out of school to join the circus or something. “Why do you ask?”

I shrugged. “Do I need a reason?”
She lowered her shoulders and smiled. “No, of course not. It was very nice of you to ask. How was your day?”

“Fine.”

“Did something happen?”

“Nope.” I got up from my chair. “I’ve got homework.”

“Okay,” she said. “Dinner will be ready in about an hour.”

I went upstairs to my room and started on my homework. I could hear music playing from the next room, which meant that Adrian was home. Not that this was a surprise to me or anything, because most of the time he wouldn’t be out somewhere without me knowing where he was. I know this is going to sound really, really lame but my younger brother is actually my best friend.

There were no sounds coming from Jakob’s room, which made sense as it was Tuesday and he would be at handball practice.

For Norwegian class, I had to read a poem by Rolf Jacobsen and answer questions about it. It was something about machines eating trees and how this was some sort of hell for wise pelicans. It didn’t
make much sense to me.

There were five questions connected to the poem and I didn’t really have to do much faking when answering them poorly.

I finished my work, and then Mom called us down for dinner. I closed my workbook and ran downstairs two steps at a time. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I heard Adrian opening the door to his room.

In my mind, we had a race and I won. If he had been aware of the race he would have beaten me, so it was better that he didn’t know.

I walked into the kitchen and took a seat at the table, opposite Mom. Adrian came in and sat down next to me. No matter if we are all home or not, we always sit in the same places.

Then we ate our organic chicken with steamed vegetables and brown rice. No one was really talking, because everyone was busy on their phones.

Shortly after, we could hear someone opening and closing the front door, which was soon followed by a loud thud. It was Jakob, dumping his gym bag on the floor. Next we could hear the sound of his
shoes hitting the wall as he kicked them off. My mom hates it when he does that, but she didn’t say anything as he walked into the kitchen. She just said “Hi”, hardly looking up from her phone.

Jakob’s cheeks were red and he smelled like the wind.

“Hey,” he said and sat down next to mom, opposite Adrian. He helped himself to the food but skipped the rice. Carbs are apparently very bad for you if you want to make it as a handball player.

Me, I eat all the carbs I can get. My mom put away her phone and asked Jakob how his practice went. For a while we talked about how many goals he had scored, and then we talked about how Adrian finally managed to do this bike trick he has been working on. No one talked about me failing my maths test, because apparently my school is really slow at picking up on these things. You would think they’d pay extra attention to someone like me, right?

This is what Google has to say about Silver-Russell syndrome:

Silver-Russell syndrome (SRS) is one of many growth disorders. It is characterized by a slow growth,
starting even before the baby is born. Many children with SRS have low muscle tone and may start to sit up and walk later than average. Some may also have delayed speech development. Signs and symptoms may include: low birth weight, a head that appears large in relation to body size, poor appetite, characteristic facial features including a prominent forehead or a small, triangular-shaped face; and arms and legs of different lengths.

What Google doesn’t tell you is what it feels like to be the shortest boy in your class. Or how it feels to know that this isn’t going to change. Or that by the time you start your third year of high school you will be shorter than most of the girls in your class.

Approximately one in a hundred thousand people has Silver-Russell syndrome.

My name is Sander Dalen.

I am one in a hundred thousand.
A gorgeous contemporary YA romance between two history geeks investigating a lost WWI love affair, told in the wry, relatable and effortlessly real voice of a girl living with bipolar II. Perfect for fans of Jennifer Niven…with a twist of *Downton Abbey*.

“Maggie Harcourt is the UK’s answer to Rainbow Rowell”
Lucy Powrie

@maggieharcourt
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I have picked the worst possible moment to be standing on the pavement outside the village shop: the exact moment the bus to the sixth-form college goes past on its last morning run of the term.

If only I hadn’t agreed to pick up my brother’s parcel from the post office counter before work.

If only Mr Parkins and his stupid package to Australia hadn’t been ahead of me in the queue.

If only I hadn’t told my friend Mira that I’d meet her and we could walk back up to the hotel to start our housekeeping shifts together.

If.

Only.

But here I am, and here’s the bus, and as it stops to let Mr Parkins cross the road with agonizing slowness, every single face behind the bus windows turns, one by one, to look at me – and I am fixed to the spot as firmly and definitively as if someone had driven iron spikes through my shoes.

Everything stops: time, my heart, the movement of the Earth through space. Everything. I am trapped in this moment, pinned like a butterfly on a board.
Me on one side of the window; the people I used to
go to school with, the people I used to know, to be one of – the people I used to be friends with – staring at me from the other.

And then Mr Parkins has made it to the other side of the street and, just like that, the world is moving again and the bus is gone. I step off the pavement to watch it disappear from view between the hedges and the green overhanging branches of trees.

There goes the life I could have had.

Almost did have.

A strange, horrible screeching sound fills my head, drowning everything else out – and at first I wonder if it’s just in my head or whether it’s me and I’m doing it out loud…and then I realize that Mrs Rolfe from the Old Vicarage has stopped in the middle of the pavement and is staring at me, and the screech stops and there’s a new noise. One that sounds a bit like…like a car horn.

A car horn coming from behind me.

I’m in the middle of the road, aren’t I? That screech was brakes.

Slowly, I turn around.

It’s an old car – one of those vintage things that
looks like a squashed frog. It doesn’t help that it’s
dark green, either. The effect is…deeply amphibian.

More blasts on the horn, sharp and angry, then
long. One-two-three-foooooouuuurrrr.

Is everybody looking? Has anyone else seen?
Are there faces at the windows along the street,
peering out to see what all the noise is in this tiny
little nothing village at this time of the morning?

No big deal – just Flora Sutherland, standing in
the middle of the road.

I make myself take a step sideways, back to the
safety of the pavement, and hope that’s enough. I
wish the car would go, that the ground will swallow
me, that nobody – nobody – has noticed or shaken
their heads and thought, Well, what do you expect
from someone like her? None of it is enough, and the
driver’s door swings open with a creak.

“What the hell are you doing? I almost hit you!”

Red hair, sunglasses above a dark T-shirt, and a
face bleached pale with shock.

“Are you crazy? Hello? HELLO?!”

The word “crazy” hits me harder than the car
could ever have done. I flinch – then panic in case
he saw, but he whisks straight past me and drops
into a crouch in front of the car.

He’s checking it for scratches. Buffing at the paint with the palm of his hand.

He doesn’t care whether he nearly hit me. He cares whether I dinged his paint job.

I take a deep breath, hugging Charlie’s parcel tighter to my chest like a shield.

*Is this a balanced reaction?*

Satisfied I haven’t damaged his paintwork, he turns back to me and sees me watching him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, just standing there in the road? Have you got some kind of death wish?” He pulls the sunglasses off his face and waves them around him like he’s conducting the orchestra at an outrage concert. “If I hadn’t looked up right then…” he starts – then stops himself.

“Maybe,” I say quietly, “you should look where you’re going.” I almost add, “instead of calling other people crazy” but decide it’s better if I don’t.

“Maybe,” he snaps back, “you shouldn’t stand in traffic.” He’s younger than someone with that kind of car should be. My age, maybe a couple of years older. Eighteen? Nineteen? His eyes are a washed-out shade somewhere between blue and green, and
he squints against the bright sunshine.

“Yes. Traffic. There’s so much of it,” I mutter, turning my face away again and letting his gaze slide off me.

I hear him open his mouth to speak, but there’s no other sound.

*Just go. Get in your car and go. Leave me alone.*

He still hasn’t moved. Why won’t he go?

“Look, seriously, are you okay?” He says it gently now; there’s real concern in his voice. “Do you need me to call some—”

“I’m fine,” I snap. “You can go now. Really.”

The edges of the parcel dig into my ribs.

“Wow. Okay.” He leans away, his eyes as wide as if I’ve slapped him. “Whatever. I’m just trying to do the right thing here…”

“Then can you just leave? Please?” My throat squeezes tightly around the words, not wanting to let them out. I can barely hear them over the pounding in my ears – I can’t tell if it’s my heart or my brain that’s thumping, but something is. Maybe it’s both of them.

“Okay, okay.” He shakes his head, stepping back. “Sorry. Fine. I mean… Jesus. I was just trying to
find this hotel…”

His lips keep moving, but it doesn’t matter; I can’t hear a word.

He’s a guest.

The hotel can only be Hopwood Home. There are no other hotels for miles around. There’s nothing else for miles around, not out here.

Oh god, he’s a guest he’s a guest he’s a guest.

Get it together, Flora.

He reaches into the car, pulling a sheet of paper from the dashboard. The sheet of paper he must have been looking at when he nearly hit me. He holds it out. “I don’t suppose you know where it is, do you?”

“I work there.” It falls out of my mouth before I can stop it. I end up half-swallowing the last part of “there” and feel stupid. He, however, brightens.

“Oh, amazing. I’m so lost. Totally, totally lost.” Running a hand back through his hair, he looks around – as though to say that the only reason he’d be anywhere near a village like Hopwood-in-the-Hollows is to pass through it on the way to somewhere else. With that kind of car, and dressed the way he is – carefully, neatly, probably expensively – it seems about right.
And if he’s staying at the Hopwood, and I’ve been stupid enough to let slip that I work there, the last thing I need is him complaining about the super-unhelpful staff member standing in the road on his way to check in.

_Get it together, Flora. The sooner he gets directions, the sooner he’ll be gone._

“You’re going the wrong way.”

“I am?” He squints along the road, the same way the bus went, then turns around to look behind him. “But…”

“You need to turn around then go back through the village, past the pub and take a right. Go past the farm with the ice-cream sign shaped like a cow, then keep going until the road gets narrow and forks off to the left. Take the left fork, and there’ll be a metal gate with a gatehouse and an intercom. That’s the hotel.”

There’s a long silence, then: “So that was a left at the farm?”

“Do you have a pen?”

He hands me the paper, and reaches back into the car to pull out a biro with a chewed end. I slide the parcel under one arm, and sketch out a quick
map. It’s not good, and I realize it was a mistake to try and make the cow-shaped sign actually cow-shaped so I label it “cow” but at least it should get him to the Hopwood. And away from me.

I pass the paper back and he takes it, nodding. “Thanks,” he says – and hesitates. “You’re sure you’re okay?”

Am I sure I’m okay?

Ask me that a year ago.

“Fine. Thanks.” I slide the parcel back around to my chest and look back down at the floor. “Please just go?”

The almost-smile on his face disappears behind a frown. “No problem. Thanks for…whatever.”

I wince as he slams his door, starting the engine with a loud roar…and just like that, he’s driving away.

And there – coming up the street and just in time – is Mira, rounding the corner from her house with her bag over her shoulder, sunglasses pulled down over her eyes and her housekeeping uniform looking like she slept in it. Hearing the car, she raises her head and smiles when she sees me, stuffing the letter and envelope she’s carrying into her pocket.
“What’s that?” She nods at the package in my arms.

“Charlie’s anniversary present for Felix. He asked me to pick it up for him.”

On every level it’s possible to wish it, I wish I’d said I couldn’t.

Mira makes a thoughtful noise as – tyres screeching – the green car goes past the other way, vanishing around the corner behind the village primary school with its row of sunflowers along the front wall.

“What happened to your uniform?” I ask, but Mira just shakes her head.

“No asking questions, thank you,” she mutters – and when I open my mouth to do exactly that, she growls something in Polish at me. My Polish is non-existent, but this being Mira I’m willing to bet that what she said is very, very rude.

See? Everything’s normal. Everything’s fine.

Except she’s eyeing me suspiciously. “You’re not right.”

“I’m perfectly right, thanks.”

“Also a terrible liar. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Honestly.”
“No. Really.” She peers at me over her sunglasses. “You had one of your mad head things?”

“Can we not call them that?” I drop my bag from my shoulder and squeeze the parcel into it, forcing the zip of my backpack shut over the top.

“But that’s what you called them!”

Which is true, because how else was I meant to explain the stuff that goes on in my head to my best friend? Charlie knows all the proper words for it, and what they all mean, because he’s my big brother. I know all the proper words for it and what they all feel like because…well, it’s my head. But how do you explain the inside of your mind to somebody else – particularly when it doesn’t work quite the way it’s meant to? Besides, nothing seemed to do the job of describing the anxiety, or the swings between crazy energy and slow, heavy despair better than “a mad head thing”. Trying to describe what my brain is doing at any given point to someone who isn’t inside it is kind of like…trying to explain the point of an octopus to an apple.

“You’re okay, yes?”


“I’m okay.”
A teenage spy. A killer disease. 
And the monster who would use it.

A pulse-pounding historical thriller set across war-torn Africa, pitting one girl against the horrors of the Nazi regime, from the author of the Costa Award shortlisted Orphan Monster Spy.

“Orphan Monster Spy’s Sarah sits alongside Lyra and True Grit’s Mattie Ross as one of the best spiky, clever, daring, unyielding protagonists I’ve ever read.”
Martin Stewart, author of The Sacrifice Box

🐦 @by_Matt_Killeen
The siren seemed muffled. It was absorbed by the seemingly endless hills of mud, or it fled into the big grey sky and was gone. Either way it didn’t seem particularly auspicious. It couldn’t even startle the few disinterested seagulls that continued to squat on the grey metal tube, as if it really was just a drainpipe left lying on the side of a hill. They failed to notice the cables and wires that straggled into the mire along its length, or the branches and offshoots of pipework welded into the main cylinder at regular intervals.

However, the grey tube and muddy slope did have a more interested audience elsewhere. The cables trailed away to form an intricate path of black rubber lines, down into the valley and back up the facing slope. At their end, five hundred meters away, was a concrete blockhouse sunk into the hilltop. Through a small slit running horizontally across its length, a dozen eyes watched and waited.

The darkness inside managed to be both stuffy and damp. The boards covering the floor were ill-
fitting and filthy, with muddy footprints, the walls bare and unadorned. A rusty radio hid in a corner, emitting a quiet metallic hiss.

“Zehn,” a voice crackled through the speaker.

The men straightened up and crowded towards the light. Their uniforms varied in colour and design but shared a predominance of gold and silver braid, medals and epaulettes, and a thick sense of entitlement.

“Neun…Acht…Sieben . . .”

Even the least theatrical jackets had a great number of hoops, lines and decorations. One man stood apart, in a dark suit, expensive coat and hat.

“Sechs…Fünf . . .”

The man stared over someone’s garishly braided shoulder-board at the opposite hill, his bright blue eyes piercing and unreadable.

“…Vier…Drei…Zwei . . .”

There was a shuffle of anticipation.

“…Eins…Null!”

A swiftly rising whine built into separate hissing screams. Then sparks escaped from each of the pipe’s tributaries in an almost simultaneous cascade, creating one roaring sound from a chorus
of individual howls. Fire exploded from the pipe’s summit with an unmistakable *thunk*, moments before the opening belched a cloud of thick black smoke.

The squarking of the scattering seagulls filled the sudden silence. There were a few tuts and disappointed noises from the assembled officers. Certainly the event seemed deeply anticlimactic.

“Did it work?” complained a portly *Luftwaffe* officer.


A nervous soldier sitting next to the radio coughed.

“One moment.” There was some excited chatter through the speaker. He adjusted his headphones. “Approximately seventy, seven-oh, kilometres, General.”

The general swung around and, with a triumphant smile, opened his arms to the waiting officers.

“Seventy kilometres, gentlemen. Seventy…and this is just a quarter-sized scale model. As you can
now appreciate, a full-sized example would have a range of some two hundred and forty kilometres, deliver a shell weighing some half a ton… and fire every twenty seconds…”

“…if it’s reliable enough,” whined the Luftwaffe officer.

“The finished cannon will fire every twenty seconds and unlike the Paris Gun, the K5 or any other traditional artillery piece, this gun barrel will not degrade and will not be damaged by repeated fire…”

“If it can be fired repeatedly…”

“On-kel!”

The distant scream tore through the room and stopped the argument dead.

A Schutzstaffel officer leaned towards the viewing window and started. “What on earth?”

Across the muddy valley a small figure in a red coat could be seen running from the cannon towards the blockhouse. She skidded and slid, almost toppling over in the deep sludge, but she remained upright and began to climb the hill.

“On-kel!”

She was pursued by two soldiers, themselves
incapable of staying on their feet, twice falling into the sludge in their haste. The child’s beret fell off as she clambered up the slope, long braids of golden hair swinging as she moved.

“Gottverdammt…” swore the man in the dark suit loudly. “Herr Generalmajor, that is… She… Take me out there immediately.”

He turned for the door and began shooing the officers out of the way. They tried to move, but the room was crowded, so they bumped into one another in the gloom. Those furthest away were confused, and everyone began asking questions. By the time the door was opened and the man reached the top of the steps to the open air, trailing the Generalmajor, the girl had summited the brow of the hill.

She was maybe twelve years old, small and slight. Mud was plastered up her legs and the hem of her coat was thick with sludge. Her eyes were red with tears, and her face was contorted in hysterical panic. Glistening snot ran from her nose.

“Onkel…” she howled, spotting the man and charging the final few metres towards him. She leaped onto him, forcing him to stagger back a few steps, almost crashing into the collection of officers
who had gathered behind him. He managed to catch her weight in his arms and hugged her close.

“Ursula! I told you to wait in the car.”

“You were gone so long I didn’t think you were coming back,” she wailed, hyperventilating and hiccupping in her rush to spill the words out. “So I went looking for you and there was a big bang and then these soldiers started yelling at me and—”

“Apologize to the general at once!” he growled. “Herr Haller…” The general coughed. “Now, Ursula…”

“What was your daughter—” the general tried again.

“My niece, Heer Generalmajor…” Then he snapped at the girl: “Ursula!”

“Sorry, Heer Generalmajor,” the girl wailed and, with a shriek, began to sob again.

“We must leave…Gentlemen.” The man nodded to the crowd of uniforms behind the general and began to stride away over the hill top.

“Herr Haller…”

“A most exciting test, Heer Generalmajor. I look forward to the contract,” the man called over his shoulder and the crying of the little girl.
The general found himself staring at the retreating figure, as did the guards and officers. After a moment the spell broke, and everyone shambled back to the bunker, murmuring as if nothing had happened at all.

The man closed the car door and started the engine. The Mercedes grunted in the cold air and came to life. The little girl in the passenger seat stopped crying and tossed stray hairs away from her face. After a long, wet snort, she snapped her fingers at the man. He handed her a folded handkerchief that she shook loose before blowing her nose noisily.

“I’m getting too old for this Quatsch,” she spat.

The man smiled. “Did you get it?”

“Of course,” she murmured, pulling what looked like a large grey firework from her coat.

“Then you aren’t too old.”

She made a face and then held the device up to the daylight that limped through the windshield. “I don’t understand the fuss. This is just an oversized firecracker.”

“Rocket propelled shells. Bad news for London,” he said, and then glanced down at something else
that Sarah was holding. “What’s that?”

It was a piece of porcelain, like part of a large cereal bowl.

“They were everywhere,” Sarah said, holding it up to the light. “Hundreds of pieces. Is it important?”

“Maybe… You measured the barrel?”

“Hm-hm.” She teased phlegm from her hair. “And I’d have rewired it, too, if that Schwachkopf hadn’t stumbled into me.”

“Language.”

“Yes, right.” She laughed.

“Seriously. You better not talk like that at the next party, Sarah Goldstein of Elsengrund. What will the cream of Berlin high society think?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t be there. I’ll be bringing Ursula Haller, the sweet little National Socialist darling instead.”
Following in the stardust trails of Princess Leia and Jodie Whittaker’s Doctor Who, the author of *The Extinction Trials* introduces a brand-new standout female hero who holds the key to peace across the universe in this slick sci-fi adventure.

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Will Hill on *The Extinction Trials*

@susanwilsonbook
Ash leaned forward, even though she knew it made no difference. The expanse in front of her was still the same. Darkness so wide it almost sucked her in. Little tiny glimmers of light could be picked out around her – stars from millions of light years away. Behind her lay her home planet Astoria. But she wasn’t interested in that right now.

This was it. The moment she’d waited for. Sixteen years. Preparation. Study. Sixteen hundred candidates, whittled down to six hundred, then to sixty. And now there was just one place. One place in the Star Corporation Academy. It was hers. She wasn’t going to put a foot, hand or strand of hair wrong. Not when it meant so much to her.

A tress of her blue hair floated in front of her eyes. She grabbed it and stuffed it back inside her pilot’s helmet, keeping her other hand on the throttle. The thick harness holding her in her seat was pinching at her shoulders and the top of her thighs. Tonight, her skin would be rubbed raw.

She waited, slowing her breathing and trying to
exercise the thing she struggled with most – patience.

The sun at the centre of their universe was off to her left. At the edges of her peripheral vision the three other planets in the solar system were moving slowly in their orbits. Her face scrunched into a perpetual scowl. Astoria had been at war with Corinez for as long as she’d been alive. Even the sight of the harsh icy planet made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. It was easy to let the feelings overwhelm her. She’d lost family. She’d lost friends. All to a war that seemed never-ending.

The green of Hakora and sandy colour of Vallus shimmered in the distance. Astoria currently had an uneasy alliance with both of these planets, all three sending candidates to compete for places at the Star Corporation Academy. But that alliance could change as quickly as the flash of a nearby comet.

She pushed the thought from her mind. She didn’t have room for it right now. All her attention had to be on the here and now. Two more hurdles, then she could finally start to plan for the future.
Today was the final pilot test, tomorrow would be the final practical test. She planned to ace both.

She gazed at the view screen, waiting… All of the other spacecrafts in this test were controlled centrally from the Star Corporation Academy. The ammunition was real, but the lives weren’t. The only ships that were actually manned during the test were the ones the cadets were piloting.

A dot appeared to her immediate right, almost unnoticeable. But the tiny flicker brought her back to the present with a harsh crash. Ash was ready, spinning her fighter craft around, her fingers poised above the red trigger buttons.

The black craft seemed to burst from nowhere directly in front of her – wormholes were like that, something could appear in literally the blink of an eye. She opened fire, not hesitating for a second. It could have been the wrong move. This could be a civilian aircraft. But she’d seen this often enough. Statistics told her the first craft to jump into the final pilot test was most likely to be an enemy crew. She’d reviewed every previous test, for every previous candidate – there wasn’t much else to do in her dusty village on Astoria.
White streaked across the darkness, ending in an explosion of muted yellow. There was no sound. Sound didn’t carry across space but in her head Ash heard a kind of pop.

She spun the craft around, her heart thudding in her chest. Her hand slid a little on the control lever, sweat coating the inside of her palm. She cursed and rubbed her hand on the leg of her dark flight suit. Last thing she wanted was her hand to slip at a crucial moment.

From what Ash had seen in previous rounds, there were four other competitors she had to worry about. It was normal for the top candidates to be tested alongside each other so they were probably nearby right now. But each craft was identical – a single-seat pilot craft with a standard weapons array – so there was no way of identifying who was manning which. She gave a little shiver of excitement – the thought of outperforming Trik, Arona, Ezra and Castille appealed to her competitive edge. She wanted to come out on top. She wanted to be truly the best candidate for the pilot job.

But her competitors all wanted the same. Each of them equally committed. Each of them equally
ruthless. For any of them, getting into the Star Corporation Academy would be life-changing. A chance at opportunity. A chance to get off the planets they all claimed to love so dearly, but saw no future on. Failure would mean going back to the mines for Castille, the military factory for Trik, the fishing boats of Hakora for Ezra, and the desert dunes of Astoria for Arona. Ash didn’t even want to contemplate her own dusty village.

Her gaze flicked left, then right, scanning the darkness for another tiny distortion. There it was. Up to the far right of her vision.

She yanked the stick towards her, throwing the nose of her fighter upwards as she let out a stream of fire. This time the enemy craft had barely started to materialize from its jump before it disintegrated into a million splinters. For a split second, she saw a flash of red against the pale hull – the sign of one of the fighters from Corinez. Her mouth instantly dried as shards of metal shot around her, a few spearing the hull of her fighter.

There was a ping. Two orange lights. She glanced at the screen in front of her. Potential hull breach. And fuel leakage. The two biggest crises for
a fighter pilot. Loss of fuel could leave her floating in space for the rest of her natural life. A hull breach could cause the rest of the outer structure to fracture, or could lead to oxygen leaking. Both of which were deadly. If things got to that point she was sure they would pull her out in time – no pilot had ever died during a Star Corporation assessment, but the test here was for her to find a way out of this.

She had to concentrate. The Star Corporation Academy apparently drafted an “every case scenario” for each of the candidate’s potential moves in the test. They were watching her now. Waiting to see how she would react to the hull damage.

She noticed another starfighter looping around. It seemed senseless. There was nothing to see.

Then she spotted something. Her fingers sped across her controls, trying to zoom in on the tiny blot beyond that fighter. She frowned. A cargo vessel. Generally slow-moving, usually carrying either freight or passengers – occasionally both. Unless this was part of the test, under no circumstances should it be in this part of the solar system.
The other fighter hadn’t moved. She had no idea what it was doing. It just seemed suspended in space, hanging there, watching the struggling cargo vessel.

Expect the unexpected. The thought permeated her brain. One of the instructors had mentioned it on their first day, his mouth quirking into a smile. She’d practised hundreds of scenarios. But none of them had this element.

Two thin streams were currently coming from her craft – one of oxygen, the other of fuel. But the streams coming from the cargo vessel were much thicker than her own – it was obviously in serious trouble. It was a bigger craft, potentially carrying passengers, as well as crew. It shouldn’t be here. Not in this zone. They must want to see her reactions to this unexpected element.

A tiny part of her stomach squirmed. But what if this wasn’t part of the test? What if this was totally random, and completely out of everyone’s control?

No.

It couldn’t be. Not here. Not now.

She pushed forward with the throttle. The hairs on her body prickled as she flew towards the bigger
ship. There was an enormous rent in the side of its metal hull. Cargo vessels had minimal shields. Right now, it must be diverting all its power to those shields to try and keep the ship together.

There were the little prickles again. Part of her brain was telling her this was all deliberate – a test to play with her mind and her ability to think straight. But something else, that thing deep inside her gut, was putting her on full alert.

She shot past the fighter that still hadn’t moved. She had no idea who was manning that craft. Maybe they were just as bewildered as she was, and trying to pretend not to be. More lights started to ping on her boards. She had to make repairs. She had to pay attention to her own vessel or she would soon need to be rescued herself.

But she couldn’t. Another light appeared on the control panel. Her eyes picked up the colour – orange. She wasn’t going to die quite yet. She only had to really worry when the lights were red – but of course, then she might have no time left.

She hit the comms button. Her eyes saw the name on the battered hull. “Cargo Vessel Attila. What is your condition?”
Her ears were flooded with static and she flinched. She flicked to another channel and tried again. “Cargo Vessel Attila, this is Pilot Yang. Give me your status.”

Still nothing.

She looked behind her. The clear bubble around her allowed her to see the fighter now sitting on her tail.

“Fighter, identify yourself and your purpose.”

Something resembling a snort came over the com. The voice that replied was almost mocking. “Guess it’s time to go home, Ash. You’re leaking like an old pipe in the Carpesian desert.”

Ezra. It would be him. Trik would likely have ignored her. Castille would have probably spoken first. She wouldn’t even have appeared on Arona’s radar – the girl was too focused for her own good. But Ezra? He did annoying for a living.

“Are you going to help or not?”

“Not,” came the short reply.

“There might be people on that cargo vessel,” she hissed.

“There are people on my fighter. Me,” he replied. She flicked her switch again and heard
something else above the crackle coming from the Attila. Something that made panic swell in her chest. “Mayday. Mayday. Shields are failing. Request assistance…”

The rest of the dialogue was lost in a hiss. She was sure she’d heard voices in the background. She responded immediately. “Cargo vessel Attila, what assistance do you require?”

She was trying not to freak – thinking about the capacity of that vessel. Her fighter was tiny. What would she do if they requested emergency transport?

She spoke before they had time to answer. “I can tether you. Tow you back to the nearest space port.”

“Negative. There’s no time.”

She struggled to turn again and see behind her, desperately trying to figure how much space there actually was in a single-seat fighter. Could she possibly cram any people in here? Her stomach plummeted as a thought filled her mind. What if there were children on the cargo vessel? Could she squash some kids in behind her?

Her alarms were still sounding. One of the
orange lights flicked to red. Too many things were happening at once.

Anger bubbled inside. She’d run a thousand practice scenarios. In every single one she’d been methodical, logical. She’d weighed up complicated situations in less than a few seconds and acted without hesitation.

But none of them had been real.

And that was the difference. This felt real.

She could practically hear the heartbeat of the captain of the cargo vessel through the com. He was a living, breathing person. Practice sessions involved theory – not reality. None of the other vessels in the final test should be manned by actual people. The only people in space should be the cadets.

“Systems failing…” came the crackle. “No… time…”

“How many people do you have on board? Do you have transport technology? I’m a single-seat fighter. I’m not sure how many I can hold.”

She couldn’t remember any scenario where extra people had been transported aboard a single-seat fighter. Fear was starting to grip her. Her heart
was thudding inside her chest.

The com crackled. Most of the words were lost.

“…transporting now…”

The air shifted in front of her, just above her eyes.

Her recognition was instant – what was materializing in front of her was far too small to be a person. A second later a brown package appeared in the air before her face.

“Wh…at?”

The dark space outside lit up as the cargo vessel exploded into a million fragments.
How can you play the game when the cards are stacked against you?

Get Out meets Gossip Girl…
Ace of Spades is an explosive and addictive new high-school thriller.

“I wrote Ace Of Spades in an attempt to articulate how painful and debilitating institutionalized racism is.”
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First-day-back assemblies are the most pointless practice ever.

And that’s not saying much, since Niveus Private Academy is a school that runs on pointlessness.

We’re seated in Lion Hall – named after one of those donors who gives money to private schools that don’t need it – waiting for the principal to arrive and deliver his speech in the usual order:

Welcome back for another year – glad you didn’t die this summer

Here are your Senior Prefects and Head Prefect

School values

Fin.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for structure. Ask any of my friends – correction – friend. I’m pretty sure that, even though I’ve been here for four years, no one else knows I exist. Just Jack, who sometimes acts like there’s something seriously wrong with me. Still, I call him a friend, because we’ve been friends forever and the thought of being alone is much, much worse.
But back to structures. Jack’d tell you all the rituals I go through before playing the piano. There’s a difference between that and these assemblies, though. For one, without the rituals I don’t play as well, but without this speech, life at Niveus would still be an endless drudge of gossip, money and lies.

The microphone screeches loudly, forcing my head up. Twenty minutes of my life about to be wasted in an assembly that could have been an email.

I lean back against my chair as a tall pale guy with dull black eyes, oily black hair slicked back with what I’m sure was an entire jar of hair gel, and a long dark coat that almost sweeps the floor stands at the podium, staring down at us all like we’re vermin and he’s a cat.

“My name is Mr Ward, but you must all address me as Headmaster Ward,” the cat says, voice liquid and slithery. I squint my eyes at him. What the hell happened to Headmaster Collins?

The room is filled with confused whispers and unimpressed faces.

“As I’m sure some of you are aware, Headmaster
Collins resigned just before summer break, and so I’m here to lead you all through this year at Niveus Private Academy,” the cat finishes, his lips turned inwards.

“So, the rumours were true,” someone whispers nearby.

“Seems like it… I hear rehab is super classy these days though…”

I hadn’t even heard anything was wrong with Headmaster Collins, he seemed fine before summer. Sometimes I feel like I’m so lost in my own world, I don’t notice the things that seem so obvious to everyone else.

“And so,” Headmaster Ward’s voice booms over everyone else’s, “we keep within the Niveus tradition, starting today’s assembly with the Senior Prefect and Head Prefect announcements.”

He swivels expectantly as one stiffly-suited teacher rushes forward, handing him a cream-coloured envelope. Silently, Headmaster Ward opens it, the paper’s crinkle amplified to a blaring shriek through the speakers. He pulls out a piece of card and places the envelope on the podium in front of him. I start to zone out.
“Our four Senior Prefects are…” He pauses, pupils flicking back and forth like black flies trapped in a jar. “Miss Cecelia Wright, Mr Maxwell Jacobson, Miss Ruby Ainsworth and Mr Devon Richards.”

At first, I think he’s made a mistake. My name never gets called out at formal assemblies. Mostly because these assemblies are usually dedicated to the people the student body know and care about, and if Niveus was a movie, I’d probably be a nameless background character. Jack elbows me, pulling me from my shocked state, and I push myself out of the chair. The creaking of wooden seats fills the hall as faces turn to glare at my attempt to shuffle through the rows. I mumble a “sorry” after stepping on some guy’s designer shoes – probably worth more than my ma’s rent – before making my way to the front where the Senior teachers are lined up, my sneakers squeaking against the almost-black wood beneath them. My heart pounds and the light applause in the hall comes to an awkward stop.

I recognize the other three standing up there, though I’ve never spoken to them. Max, Ruby and
Cecilia are these tall, pale, blonde clones of each other, and next to them, my short frame and dark skin sticks out like a sore thumb. They are main characters.

I stand next to Headmaster Ward, who is even scarier up close. For one, he’s unnaturally tall and his legs literally end at the top of my chest. His pupils move, staring at me despite his head facing the front.

I look away from him. Pretending that the BFG hasn’t got a scary emo brother called Ward.

“I’ve already heard great things about our Head Prefect this year,” Ward’s voice drags, making what I’m sure was meant to be a positive, somewhat lively sentence as lifeless as a eulogy.

“And so, there should be no surprise that the Head Prefect is none other than Chiamaka Adebayo.”

Loud cheers fill the dark oak-walled room as Chiamaka walks forward. I notice her army of clones seated at the front clapping in scarifying unison, all as pretty and doll-like as their leader. Her head is held high as she accepts her badge with pride, smug expression on her face as she joins us. I
almost roll my eyes, but she’s the most popular girl at school, and I don’t have a death wish.

I shift awkwardly, feeling even more out of place now. If Max, Ruby and Cecilia are all main characters, Chiamaka is the protagonist. It makes sense seeing them up here. But me? I feel like any moment now, guys with cameras are gonna run out and tell me I’m being pranked. That makes more sense than any of this.

I know things like Senior Prefects are a popularity contest. Teachers vote on their favourites each year and it’s always the same kind of person. Someone popular, and I am not popular. Maybe my music teacher put in a good word for me? He’s the only teacher I speak to. I don’t know.

“Give another round of applause to our Prefect Council this year,” Mr Ward says, triggering louder claps from the sea of pale in front of us. I feel a few eyes on me, and I avoid them, trying to find an interest in the black wood beneath my feet, rather than the fact that there are rows and rows of people watching me.

I hate the feeling of being watched.

“Now for the school values.”
We all turn to face the giant projector behind, like we always do, ready to watch the school values scroll down the screen like credits at the end of a movie, while the national anthem plays in the background. The predictability of the ceremony is laughable.

The screen is enormous and black and covers the majority of the large, double-glazed window behind. Niveus is a school mostly made up of dark wood and glass, like they’re tempting the outside world to peer in. The outside is old and haunted-looking and the inside is new and modern, reeking of excessive wealth.

There’s a loud click and a large picture appears, filling the previously-blank screen. A rectangular playing card with “A”s in each corner and a huge spade symbol at the centre.

That’s new.

I turn to find Jack in the audience, wanting to give him our “what the hell?” look, but he’s staring at the screen, as if the whole thing doesn’t faze him. Everyone else in the audience looks just as unbothered by this as Jack. It’s weird.

“Ah, there seems to be some kind of technical
malfuction...” Mrs Blackburn, my old French teacher, announces from the back. A few more clicks, and all goes back to normal. The national anthem blares from the speakers and we sing along with our palms placed on our chests as we watch the school values fly past: Generosity, Grace, Determination, Integrity, Idealism, Nobility, Excellence, Respectfulness and Eloquence.

Nine values most people at this school lack. Myself included.

“Now for a speech from our Head Prefect, Chiamaka.” The student body goes crazy at the mention of her name, clapping loudly and cheering like she’s a god, which by Niveus standards, she basically is.

“Thank you, Headmaster Ward,” Chiamaka says as she steps up to the podium. “Firstly, I would like to thank the teachers for selecting me as Senior Head Prefect – it’s something I never imagined would happen.” Chiamaka’s been Head Prefect three years in a row now: there’s nothing remotely shocking about her selection. She looks back at the teachers with her hand still placed over her heart from when we sang the national anthem, feigning
surprise like she does every year.

My eyes really, really want to roll at her.

“I promise you all that I will work hard to ensure the funding we get this year goes towards the appropriate departments, especially since the ever-generous donation made to the music department last year was so…ill-used. I want to ensure we all receive the best possible education. Thank you.”

This time, I roll my eyes without a care, and I’m pretty sure the girl in the front row with the red bows in her hair looks at me with disdain for doing so.

The prefects all stay behind to get our badges, while everyone else marches out of assembly to their first period classes. I watch them all with their shiny new fitted uniforms, purses made from alligator skin and faces from plastic. I look down at my battered sneakers and blazer with loose threads and I feel a sting inside.

There are many things I hate about Niveus: like how no one (besides Jack) is from my side of town, and how everyone lives in huge houses with white picket fences and a cook who makes them breakfast. Drivers who take them to school and credit cards
with no limit tucked away in their designer backpacks. Sometimes, being around all of that makes me feel like my insides are collapsing, cracking and breaking. I know no good comes from comparing what I have to what they do, but seeing all that money and privilege and having none hurts. I try to convince myself that I don’t care.

Sometimes it works.

The badges are all different colours, and mine is red and shiny, with my name “Devon” engraved under Senior Prefect. I’ve never been a prefect before, and I was okay with that. I excel at blending in, being unknown, never being invited to parties and whatnot. But now that I’m here, and something like this is actually happening to me, I can’t help but feel this is a sign that this year is gonna go well (or at least better than the last three). A sign that maybe I’m gonna get into college – make my ma proud…
Love Simon meets 13 Reasons Why;
a heartbreaking LGBTQ+ love story fused with a
turning mystery

“HIDEOUS BEAUTY is my (greedy!) attempt to
write something that contains everything I love in
a book – a pulse-pounding thriller, a baffling
mystery, and a melt-your-heart LGBTQ romance,
all tied up with a tragedy that, I hope, addresses
the prejudices and intolerance young gay people
face today.”
William Hussey

@WHusseyAuthor
El makes the suggestion and I bury my face in my hands.

“Are you seriously trying to kill me? Honestly, I’d like to know, just so I can decide who gets my stuff after I’m dead. To you, Ellis Bell, I leave my complete comics collection, plus this sweet middle finger, which I’m flipping you as we speak. I also hereby return all the drawings you’ve ever given me. You’ll find the really filthy one taped under my desk drawer.”

I pull my hands away and give El a sidelong smirk. He smirks back. And I know I’ve already lost the argument, because his smirks are in a different league and complemented by these huge brown eyes that compel you to surrender.

“C’mon.” He rocks my shoulder. “Don’t be a drama queen. It might be fun.”

“Dude, I have had more than enough ‘fun’ for one day.”

And that might be just about the greatest understatement in human history.

El sighs and turns his belching, beat-up old
Nissan Micra out of my drive and onto Denvers Row. I watch his long dextrous fingers grip and slide and tube the steering wheel, and my stomach flips. Just a little.

“El,” I say warningly, “this is the way to school.”

“So anyway, I thought your parents took it pretty well,” he says, deflecting like a pro. “Your mum laughed and clapped her hands like you’d just farted pixie dust out of your arse and your dad actually gave you a hug. Sort of. Honestly, was that a hug or was he burping you? I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything so awkward. Oh, and by the way, I saw that brother of yours checking me out again. I’m not sure what creeps me out more, Chris lusting after me or that immense pube thing your mum keeps on the dining room table.”

“First” – I raise a finger – “that is one of my mum’s decorative sculptures. She made it at her art class last week, and she’s very proud.”

“Hey, I’m not judging. As far as immense pube things go, it’s a keeper.”

“Second,” I say, forcing my lips into a straight line, “Chris is most definitely not into you. You embarrassed him fairly spectacularly at the
Berringtons’ barbecue, remember? And he has a girlfriend. Third girlfriend this year, in fact.”

El shrugs and takes another turn towards school. “It’s true,” he says quickly, cutting off my latest protest, “that ‘Chris’ is the least gay name your parents could’ve come up with for their firstborn. But three girlfriends in twelve months? That’s protesting way too much.”

“And your gaydar is never wrong, I suppose?”

“Not where McKees are concerned. By the way, while we’re talking names, with ‘Dylan Lemuel Jasper’ they were just asking for trouble. But I guess they’re so hip and tolerant and everything, they actually wanted their second son to be at least a little flouncy.”

“Flouncy?” I shake my head. “That’s coming from you?”

And just like that the mood changes. It’s the kind of jackknife switch around that might give anyone else whiplash, but after all these months of secret dating, I’m used to El’s rhythms. He loses the adorable grin for a second and one of those strong, gentle hands reaches across the space between us, his fingers interlacing with mine. He draws my
palm to his mouth and kisses it. I decide a millisecond beforehand that my stomach will not flip. Not this time. Not every time. Come on, it’s getting ridiculous.

It flips.

“Dylan, I mean it. Your mum and dad? That was pretty awesome. I don’t think you even realize how awesome. You told your parents who you were and you got to leave the house with all your teeth. It’s one up on my coming-out story, anyway.”

I blink hard and cup the line of Ellis’s jaw. He nestles his face into my palm. El very rarely cries, even when he has every reason.

“You know,” I say, “I’m always here if you—”

“I know. But I’ve told you most of it anyway, and I had the dental work done the same day I moved into this cheesy little burg. And, honestly, McKee D, a lot of rancid water has gone under that particular bridge; I don’t really fancy wading back into it again.”

He smiles. A strained grin so big that it reveals his pearly whites all the way to the back molars, like he’s a living advertisement for the Ferrivale dental surgery. His teeth are perfect. Of course
they are. He’s Ellis Maximillian Bell. By the way, Maximillian? That’s one of the few things about my boyfriend I haven’t been able to figure out. From what I know of his parents, it seems unlikely they took *that* much trouble over his middle name. In fact, having to come up with a first name was probably a chore for which they never forgave him. My theory is El took Maximillian for himself, claimed it and owned it, and that it’s as recent as last December, when Mr Maxwell introduced us to the main characters of the French Revolution and El became fascinated by the rebel leader Maximilien Robespierre. For all of a fortnight. El’s passions are intense but fleeting.

Except, I’m happy to say, in my case.

*My boyfriend.* Weird how new that still sounds. I roll it around in my head for a bit. I like how it rolls, smooth and easy and natural. Okay, so he’s been my boyfriend for quite a while, but as of tonight, it’s official. My brother knows. My parents know. The world, or at least my tiny corner of it in Ferrivale, knows. And it’s thanks to some sweaty-palmed pervert at school who caught us unawares with his smartphone, then posted us all over
Instagram. Honestly, I guess I should thank our friendly neighbourhood pornographer. His shonky camerawork gave me that final push when nothing else could. I had to bite the bullet and come out to my family.

El never understood what my problem was with telling the folks, and I guess to an outsider – especially one with El’s family history – it must have looked unnecessarily cowardly. But you see, things aren’t always as people make them out to be, and that look my parents exchanged when I told them, the look El didn’t catch?

Well.

“Suh-oooooo,” he prods, “can-we-can-we-can-we-can-we?”

I claw my fingers down my face and moan. If I really put my foot down he’ll turn us around, I know he will, but here’s the thing: scared as I am – freaking petrified as I am – I’m also kind of curious. So I admit defeat and give him the nod.

“Huzzah!” We’ve stopped at a junction and El paddles the steering wheel with his palms. Then, digging into the pocket of his perfectly contoured charity shop jacket, he takes out a lipstick and
puckers. “Ellis will go to the ball!”

Less than a minute later we’re screeching into the school car park. El’s almost five months older than me and handles his Nissan with the air of a racing driver. He has even taken the “Unteachable Git” (yours truly) out for a few jittery lessons. In my defence, he’s not exactly the most conscientious teacher. I still have no clue how to parallel park or even change gear smoothly, but he’s done his utmost to pass on the über-important skills of handbrake turns and burning rubber. Among other things. I think back to our first driving lesson in the empty car park of the old MegaDeal supermarket at the edge of town, and a delicious heat prickles my cheeks. I learned a few things that night, none of them in the Highway Code.

El hurtles us through the gate and aces a ninety-degree handbrake turn before parking in front of Miss Harper, Grand High Dementor of the geography department. She gives him the kind of look that could suck the soul from a muggle at fifty paces. Then she sees who it is, and smiles like someone’s just offered her a hamper full of kittens. I’m not sure whether she’d choose
to pet them or eat them, but still.

“Looking fox-haaaay, Miss H!” El kind of dances around her as we pass, and she giggles. Actually giggles. Jeeze. “You’ve done something with your hair. Fsssst! Hot as.”

The fevered rat’s nest atop Miss Harper’s head has been a fixture ever since my arrival at Ferrivale High seven years ago. It probably predates even those long-ago days and has its roots way back in the dim and distant mists of her supervillain origin story.

We don’t have tickets but such formalities are for mere mortals. Approaching the doors to the gymnasium, El beams a gigawatt grin that sets Katie Linton, Suzie Ford and the rest of the Easter Dance organizing committee swooning. Even Gemma Argyle gives him an indulgent smile. I roll my eyes as they usher us through. Jesus, are they just not getting the subtle signals El sends out? The ones that murmur, oh so softly, GAAAAAAAAAYYYYY!

The bass hits us as we push through the swing doors. The usual stale funk of the gym is complemented tonight by some painfully perky
pop. Ellis probably knows the name of the band, the members’ ages and star signs, their favourite junk food and any scandalous rumours doing the rounds. I, meanwhile, have the musical tastes of a great-grandfather and anything post-80s Madonna might as well be ancient Sumerian as far as I’m concerned. Despite knowing this, and that interpreting this alien language through the medium of dance would mortify me to my core, El grabs the collar of my black T-shirt – always black, saves the headache of fashion – and drags me through the crowd.

“Ellis, what the hell?” I seethe into the back of his neck.

“Stop it,” he laughs, swatting my breath away, “tickles.”

“I’ll do more than tickle in a minute!”

He plunges us onto the sparsely populated dance floor, planting his hands on my hips, turning me to face him, drawing me close.

“Promise?”

And screw Ellis freaking Bell and his freaking gorgeous grin.

My stomach flips again.
Okay, Dylan, this is it. No going back. The closet door is firmly barred behind you, chained and bolted. No re-entry, no refunds. It’s gay all the way from here on out. I’m guessing that at least fifty per cent of my classmates have now seen me doing the naked fandango with a guy anyway, so I can’t pretend Catwoman does it for me any more, no matter how much she kicks ass. My heart feels light and fluttery, hardly there at all, but El’s hands are strong and sure on my hips. I don’t look around; I keep my eyes fixed on his.

Deep breath.

Here goes.

It’s time to see what Ferrivale High makes of the new (improved?) Dylan McKee.
THE GILDED ONES

NAMINA FORNA

JULY 2020
We all have a choice.
Are we girls, or are we demons?

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Today is the Ritual of Purity.

The nervous thought circles in my head as I hurry towards the barn, gathering my cloak to ward off the cold. It’s early morning, and the sun hasn’t yet begun its climb above the snow-dusted trees circling our small farmhouse. Shadows gather in the darkness, crowding the weak pool of light cast by my lamp. An ominous tingling builds under my skin. It’s almost as if there’s something there, at the edge of my vision…

It’s just nerves, I tell myself. I’ve felt the tingling many times before and never once seen anything strange.

Father’s already inside the barn when I arrive, spreading hay for the animals. He’s a frail figure in the darkness, his tall body sunken into itself. Just a year ago, he was hearty and robust, his blond hair untouched by grey. Then the red pox came, sickening he and Mother.

“You’re already awake,” he says softly, grey eyes flitting over me.

“I couldn’t sleep any longer,” I reply, grabbing a milk pail and heading towards Norla, our largest cow.
I’m supposed to be resting till dawn like all the other girls preparing for the Ritual, but someone has to cook and clean and see to the farm. I’m the woman of the house now.

The thought brings tears to my eyes and I blink them away.

Father bales more hay into the stalls. “Blessings to he that waketh to witness the glory of the Infinite Father,” he grunts, quoting from the Infinite Wisdoms. “So, are you prepared for today?”

I nod. “Yes, I am.”

Later this afternoon, Elder Durkas will test me and all the other sixteen-year-old girls during the Ritual of Purity. Once we’re proven pure, we’ll officially belong here in the village. I’ll finally be a woman – eligible to marry, have a family of my own.

The thought sends another wave of anxiety across my mind.

I glance at Father from the corner of my eye. His body is tense. He’s worried too. “I had a thought, Father,” I begin. “What if… what if…” I stop there, the question lingering heavily in the air.

Father gives me what he thinks is a reassuring
smile, but the edges of his mouth are tight. “What if what?” he asks. “You can tell me, Deka.”

“What if my blood doesn’t run pure?” I whisper, the horrible words rushing out of me. “What if I’m taken away by the priests – banished?”

“Is that what you’re worried about?”

I nod.

Even though it’s rare, everyone knows of someone’s sister or relative who was found to be impure. The last time it happened in Irfut was decades ago – to one of Father’s cousins. The villagers still whisper about the day she was dragged away by the priests, never to be seen again. Father’s family has been shadowed by it ever since.

That’s why they’re always acting so holy – always the first in temple, always quoting from the Infinite Wisdoms. When Father returned from his army post with Mother at his side, the entire family disowned him immediately. It was too risky, accepting a woman of unknown purity, and a foreigner, at that, into the family.

Then I came along – a child dark enough to be a full Southerner, but with Father’s grey eyes, cleft chin, and softly curled hair to say otherwise.
I’ve been in Irfut my entire life, born and raised, and I’m still treated like a stranger – still stared and pointed at, still excluded. I wouldn’t even be allowed in the temple if some of Father’s relatives had their way. My face may be the spitting image of his, but that’s not enough. I need to be proven for the village to accept me, for Father’s family to accept us. Once my blood runs pure, I’ll finally belong.

Father walks over, smiles reassuringly at me. “Do you know what being pure means, Deka?” he asks.

I reply with a passage from the Infinite Wisdoms. “Blessed are the meek and subservient, the humble and true daughters of man, for they are unsullied in the face of the Infinite Father.”

Every girl knows it by heart. We recite it whenever we enter a temple – a constant reminder that women were created to be helpmeets to men, subservient to their desires and commands.

“Are you humble and all the other things, Deka?” Father asks.

I nod. “I think so,” I say.

Uncertainty flickers in his eyes, but he smiles and kisses my forehead. “Then all will be well.”
He returns to his hay. I take my seat before Norla, that worry still niggling at me. After all, there are other ways I resemble Mother that Father does not know – ways that would make the villagers despise me even more if they ever found out.

I have to make sure I keep them secret. The villagers must never find out.

Never.

The temple’s courtyard is packed when we reach it late in the afternoon. Father takes his place beside me just as the drums sound. The Jatu, the Emperor’s elite guards, march solemnly towards the steps in preparation for Elder Durkas’ arrival, their red armour a gleaming counterpoint to the sea of light blue dresses, their gnarled war masks glowering in the dull afternoon light.

Since the doors haven’t yet opened, I concentrate on the temple, taking in its stark white walls, its red roof. Red is the colour of sanctity. It’s the colour pure girls will bleed when Elder Durkas tests them today.

Please let mine be red, please let mine be red, I repeat silently.
The temple doors creak open and the crowd hushes. Elder Durkas appears at the top of the temple’s stairs, the usual pinched, disapproving look on his face. As with most priests of Oyomo, his mission is to root out impurity and abomination. That’s why his body is so thin, and his eyes so intense. Religious fervour leaves little room for eating or anything else.

He extends his hands over the crowd. “The Infinite Father blesses you,” he intones.

“The Infinite Father blesses us all.” The crowd’s reply reverberates through the square.

Elder Durkas raises the ceremonial blade towards the sky. It’s carved from ivory and sharper than the most finely-honed sword. “And upon the Fourth day,” he recites in the deep, booming voice he likes to use for these occasions, “he created woman – a helpmeet to lift man to his sacred potential, his divine glory. Woman is the Infinite Father’s greatest gift to mankind. Comfort in…”

Elder Durkas’ words fade to a low droning as my skin begins to tingle, the blood rushing underneath again. It’s coupled by sudden awareness – the stillness of the wind, the crackle of melting icicles,
and, somewhere in the distance…the crunch of heavy footsteps on fallen leaves.

Something is coming… The thought flutters through my mind.

I force it away. Why is this happening now?

Father must have noticed my distracted expression because he sighs ruefully, eyes still squinted against the sun. “Ever has your mind been inclined to wander, Deka,” he whispers. “You’re so very much like your mother.”

I smile weakly, return my attention to the Temple steps. Elder Durkas has finished his recitation. The Ritual of Purity will now begin.

Agda, Elder Norlim’s daughter, is the first girl to walk into the Temple, and her face is pale with nervousness. Will Oyomo favour her, or judge that she has succumbed to impurity? The crowd leans forward, tense. The chattering, the whispered conversations – all fade to a hush.

Moments later, a startled cry erupts from inside the temple. Agda emerges soon after, her blue scarf clutched across her chest, where Elder Durkas cut her with the ceremonial blade. Once she stands at the top of the stairs, she pulls off the scarf, holds it
above her head to display the red blood saturated there. A relieved cheer swells through the crowd. She’s pure. Her parents rush to embrace her, and her father proudly hoists the scarf to show the red blood there.

As they walk back down the stairs, the next girl enters, and the Ritual of Purity begins again.

I train my eyes on the door. The sight of it – large, red and imposing – frays at my nerves. The tingling strengthens – a low hum now, fine hairs lifting, awareness rising.

Something is coming, the thought filters through my mind again.

It means nothing, I remind myself firmly. I’ve felt such things many times before and never once seen anything stra—

Terror slams through me so sudden and heavy, my knees buckle. I grasp Father’s hand to remain standing. He frowns at me.

“Deka, are you alright?”

I don’t reply. Fear has frozen my lips, and all I can do is watch in horror as a sinister tendril of mist snakes around Father’s feet. More of it is slithering into the square, chilling the air as it does.
Above us, the sun flees, chased away by the clouds now rolling across the sky.

Father frowns up at it. “The sun is gone.”

But I’m no longer looking at the sky. My eyes are on the edge of the village, where the winter-stripped trees crackle under the weight of snow and ice. The mist is coming from there, heavy with a sharp, cold smell and something else – a distant, high-pitched sound that jitters my nerves.

When the sound shatters into an ear-piercing shriek the entire crowd stills, petrified statues in the snow. One word whispers across the square.

“Deathshrieks…”

Just like that, the lull is broken.

“Deathshrieks!” the Jatu commander calls, unsheathing his sword. “Arm yourselves!”

The crowd scatters, the men racing towards the stables for their weapons, women herding their daughters and children back to their homes. The Jatu plough past the crowd, heading towards the forest, where colossal grey forms are appearing, inhuman shrieks heralding their approach.

The largest deathshriek is the first to step foot over the leafy border marking the edge of the
forest. A hulking beast of a creature, it’s raw-boned to the point of gauntness, its clawed hands dragging almost to its knees, spikes erupting all the way down its bony spine. It almost seems humanlike, black eyes blinking, slitted nostrils flaring as it surveys the village. When it turns to the village square where I’m still standing, terror-struck, and opens its mouth my breath shallows.

A shriek blasts through my skull, white-hot agony slicing into my body. My teeth grind together, my muscles lock in place. Beside me, Father collapses to the ground. More villagers are already writhing there, faces contorted into terrified grimaces of anguish.

Other than me, only the Jatu remain standing in the square, their helmets specially soundproofed against deathshriek screams. Even then, their eyes flash white behind their war masks, their hands tremble on their swords. The ones here are mostly recruits, newly initiated into the ranks of Jatu. They haven’t yet fought in the borders of the South, where the deathshrieks lay constant siege – haven’t ever even seen a deathshriek before, probably. It’ll be a miracle if any of them survive this.
It’ll be a miracle if any of us survive this.

“Don’t let them get past!” Elder Martel, the village head roars, but it’s already too late.

The deathshrieks are ploughing through the villagers. The more the village men scream, the more frenzied the deathshrieks become. Blood splatters the ground, startling crimson across the white of the snow, corpses tangle with dried leaves and viscera.

It’s a massacre.

Terror knifing my heart, I turn to Father. He’s engaged in combat with a deathshriek, he and two other villagers pushing the creature back with swords and pitchforks. He doesn’t see the other deathshriek racing towards him, bloodlust in its eyes.

“NOOOO!” The desperate cry erupts from my chest before I can quiet it, so powerful it seems almost as if it’s layered by something else. Something deeper. “STOP, PLEASE! Leave my father alone! Please, just leave us alone!”

The deathshrieks whirl towards me, eyes deep black with rage. Time seems to suspend as their leader moves forward. Closer, then closer still
until—

“STOP!” I shout, my voice even more powerful than before.

The deathshriek abruptly stiffens, life dulling from its eyes. For a moment, it almost seems a husk — an empty vessel, rather than a living being. The other deathshrieks are the same — frozen statues in the late afternoon light.

Silence descends upon the village. My heart pounds in my ears. Louder. Louder. Then… Movement.

The lead deathshriek turns and staggers towards the forest, the others following behind it. The mist swiftly withdraws behind them, almost seeming to follow in their footsteps. In less than a minute, they’re gone.

I’m drunk with relief, floating, like I’m only barely connected to my skin. A hazy feeling is taking over now, making my entire body feel light as thistledown.

I glide towards Father, a glazed smile on my face. He’s still standing where he was, but he doesn’t seem to feel as relieved as I do. His face is pale, his body slick with sweat. He almost looks…
terrified.

“Father?” I ask, reaching for him.

To my surprise, he recoils. “Foul demon!” he shouts. “What have you done with my daughter?”

“Father?” I repeat. I take another step towards him, confused when he once more recoils.

“Don’t you dare call me that, beast!” he hisses.

The other men have gathered around him now. The women have begun to flock out of the houses, my friend Elfriede among them. There’s an expression on her face, one I’ve never seen there before. Fear.

“Your eyes, Deka, what’s happened to your eyes?” she whispers, horrified.

My eyes? I turn to Father, about to ask what the men are saying, but he nods grimly to something behind me. When I look, there’s Elder Martel’s son Ionas, a sword gleaming in his hand. I frown at him, confused.

“Ionas?” I ask.

He thrusts the sword into my stomach. The pain is so sharp, so exquisite, I barely notice the blood spilling into my hands.

It’s red… so very red at first, but then the colour
begins to change, to *glimmer*. Within moments, the red has turned to gold – the very same gold now racing across my skin.

Shadows cloud my vision as the blood in my veins slows to a trickle. The only thing that remains moving is that gold, pouring into my hands like a river.

“As I always suspected,” a faraway voice says. When I look up, Elder Durkas is looming over me. His expression is dark with satisfaction. “She’s impure,” he declares.

That’s the last thing I hear before I die.
Never underestimate the girls of this world…

The all-female crew of the Mors Navis return to continue their battle for survival and revenge on the high seas – *Pirates of the Caribbean* meets *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

“A gutsy tale of sisterhood, courage and unshakable trust. You don’t want to miss this book!”

Julie Murphy on *Seafire*

🐦 @nataliecparker
Caledonia dreamed of fire and of drowning. The sea was glassy and cold. It surrounded her in a way that was almost loving, pushing at her fingers and toes, swirling at the nape of her neck. The current nudged her gently back and forth as though she were a piece of kelp, relaxed, yet not quite adrift. Directly above, the surface blazed. Fire danced along the water as far as Caledonia could see. And somewhere beyond those flames a voice called her name.

She reached up, and her fingers met something soft and dry.

“I think she’s coming around.” A hand wrapped around her own. “I’ve got you.”

She blinked and was surprised to find she was not underwater but in a room. Her eyes refused to focus on the broad dark outline of the person holding her hand.

“Try to relax,” he said.

Her eyelids felt heavy. She let them fall closed, and the fiery ocean folded over her once more. Exhaustion urged her to stay there. Yet a quiet
voice inside her insisted she open her eyes again. She’d left something undone. She’d left people unprotected. She’d left before she meant to, and on the other side of those flames were people she loved.

Pisces.
Amina.
Redtooth.
Hime.
Donnally.

Now she was burning. The room was hot. So hot. Her skin was burning, and she could barely draw a full breath. She tried a second time, and for a second time felt her lungs constrict. So she tried harder and harder still, but it was as if she were trapped, by water and by fire.

“Oh, hell. Someone get Triple!” the boy holding her hand called.

“She’ll kill herself if she keeps this up.” This was a new voice. And not a kind one. “Good riddance.”

“You’re not helping, Pine.” A third voice. This time a girl. “Move over. I’m going to put her under.”

The cool glass of the sea returned. Caledonia drifted. Her lungs felt heavy and shallow, but she
didn’t mind. The sea had her. And she always trusted the sea.

When she woke next it was dark. The air smelled like damp cloth, and the only light came from a small pile of dying embers cradled in a ceramic bowl. It cast its ruddy glow over the wall nearest Caledonia’s feet. Fabric, not steel. Her eyes struggled to focus, and her mouth felt like it had been filled with tar. A soft pain throbbed in her back.

A breeze pressed against one wall of the tent. The fabric rippled, and just on the other side of that thin layer pine needles whispered. This is not the Mors Navis.

Her mind was suddenly very alert, her memories returning in a flash. Her crew had sailed into these cold northern waters for a chance to save her and Pisces’s brothers. They’d fought Electra and won; they’d found Ares. But not Donnally. And when Lir’s ship appeared on the horizon, she’d left the Mors Navis for the chance to take revenge on the boy who’d killed her family and stolen her brother.
She’d faced him on the deck of his own ship, and for a second time Lir had left her to die.

That explained the pain shooting from her lower back to her stomach, but not the tent in which she now found herself. Not the loose-fitting shirt and pants in which she was dressed.

She curled her fingers and toes, carefully testing each one. They burned and protested at first, then movement came more easily. Encouraged by their progress, she drew a breath of air that tasted like smoke and attempted to sit up. Pain – hot, lancing, angry – blossomed from a point in her back. It sliced through her like a spear through water, seeming to cleave her in two. A noise escaped her mouth, and suddenly the tent flap was pulled aside.

There was a disorienting swirl of dust and daylight, then the flap was closed, returning the room to smoky darkness. Only this time, there was someone else inside. Hands landed on her shoulders, holding her firmly against the bed.

“Lie back, would you?” The boy’s voice was gruff and distantly familiar.

Caledonia’s eyes settled on his arms, on the old
scar running across one bicep. In this light, everything was washed in a colourless shadow, but she knew what hue she’d find there – a dense, violent orange.

A moment ago, her body had been full of so much pain it threatened to overwhelm her. Now she was alert. Her heartbeat quickened, energy surged through her, and suddenly all that pain was a faded memory.

She twisted beneath the boy’s hands and leapt to her feet. He stumbled back with a look of keen irritation. He was bigger than she was, and his muscles left no doubt in Caledonia’s mind that he would best her with barely a thought. So she wouldn’t give him time to think.

While he climbed to his feet again, she was through the tent flap and running. She found herself in a ring of tents, beyond which tall trees stretched toward the sky. The air was fresh and cold, tinged with woodsmoke and pine. And everywhere she looked there were more of them.

Bullets.

Even if she couldn’t see their bandoliers, she could sense it in their walk, their gaze, their sudden
focus on her. There were dozens of them. She was in a camp of Bullets.

She quashed her instinct to head towards the horizon and instead turned towards the woods. The trees would be harder to navigate in her current state, but they would provide cover. The Bullet from inside the tent emerged with a scowl, his eyes finding her immediately. Now that they were in daylight, she could see that his skin was a pale, smoky brown, and stubble darkened the strong line of his jaw. He was not quite as large as she’d thought at first. Still, he was uninjured and unimpressed.

Caledonia broke for the woods, running as hard as her legs allowed. She spotted a narrow trail that slipped between the tall trees and avoided it. Her only hope was to become invisible as quickly as possible.

The woods were a combination of lofted evergreens, waist-high ferns, and tangled undergrowth. Her steps were uncertain and her balance worse. Behind her, the confident stride of her pursuer pounded steadily. She pushed to beat it, to be faster and lighter on her bare feet, but her
body was slower than her will. The trees blotted out all sense of direction, and the undergrowth obliterated the ground beneath. Where she was unsteady on this terrain, her pursuer was at home. With each step, the muscles in her back twisted harder, screamed louder, and warmth began to seep toward her waist.

She pushed faster, trusting that the ground that supported this endless sea of ferns might also support her. For a short while, her luck held, then her foot landed in a small rut and she rolled over a twisted ankle. Her pursuer was on her in a second.

She tumbled and he pounced, grabbing her around the shoulders. Caledonia slipped his grip and spun to face him, lashing out with her fist. She caught him squarely across the jaw. The hit took more from her than it did from him, and she landed firmly on her knees. Spent.

“That was never going to work.” The boy’s hands landed heavily on her shoulders, applying enough pressure to hold her in place. “I suggest you return to bed before I have to do it for you.”

Now that she’d stopped moving, pain surged through her back. Her head spun, her lungs
twisted, nausea left her mouth viciously hot, and her ankle throbbed with the fresh injury. It wasn’t going to be long before her legs gave out completely.

“I can carry you,” he said, sweeping his eyes along her body. “Though I’d prefer not to.”

“That makes two of us,” Caledonia sneered, still breathing hard as she climbed slowly to her feet. She had no option but to do as he said and he knew it.

The boy crossed his arms and waited for Caledonia to precede him back to camp. The trip seemed to take so much longer than her haphazard flight through the unfamiliar wood. Each step sent a fresh wave of pain singing through her bones, and exhaustion caused her to tremble constantly. She desperately wanted to stop and rest, but if she stopped, that Bullet would make good on his threat to carry her. She willed her legs to hold her up until they reached the tent again and the cot within.

The Bullet stopped just inside the open tent flap as Caledonia settled against the thin mattress. The move cost her in both pain and dignity. She cried out, shivering as the wound in her back wept fresh blood.
“Stupid ideas. Stupid rewards.” The Bullet’s voice was unconcerned and still surprisingly judgmental.

“It’s never a stupid idea to run from a Bullet.” The words came out rough, pressed through the sieve of her pain.

The Bullet grunted. “Don’t run again.”

It was a command, but he didn’t move forward to bind her, and for the first time she marked how strange it was that she hadn’t been bound to begin with. Either they thought she wasn’t capable of escape on her own or they were confident she wouldn’t want to. Though she’d certainly proved the first to be true, it was the latter that left her unnerved. Where was she?

“You’d be dead if it wasn’t for us,” the Bullet offered, still watching her with that mixture of indifference and judgement. “You’d be one more carcass for the birds to finish off. Maybe that’s what you’d prefer? Wouldn’t break my heart.” He was a dark outline in a bright doorway. It made him difficult to see clearly. Caledonia didn’t want to look at him anyway. She closed her eyes and turned her face away.
“That’s what I thought,” he said gruffly.

And then he left. For several long moments, it was just Caledonia and the stuffy dark air of the tent. She drew careful breaths, counting to four on each until her heartbeat began to slow. She couldn’t move again if her life depended on it. And it might; she wasn’t entirely sure. She focused instead on the things she did know. She was in danger. She was in the custody of Bullets far from her crew. And she was alive.

She let the pain remind her of all she’d done to get here and that this was not the end of Caledonia Styx. Where there was pain, there was promise.

Tomorrow, she would be stronger.
SEVEN DEADLY SPILLS

L. A. WEATHERLY

SEPTEMBER 2020
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🔗 LA_Weatherly
🔗 la_weatherly
My name is not Laura. I am not insane. My name is not Laura. I am not insane. My name is not Laura...

I mentally chant the words, my right hand scrubbing to the rhythm. My knees and shoulders ache. The toothbrush’s bristles are splayed, useless. The remaining tiles stretch away from me in a sea of black and white.

My name is not Laura.
I am not insane.
And I am getting OUT of here tonight.

I give a tile a last vicious scrub and sink back on my heels, taking in the communal bathroom’s floor. I never realized how large it was before this. I’m coated in sweat – my hair hangs in auburn strings. The work’s barely half finished, but for a change it doesn’t matter: it’s Friday, and it’ll be two o’clock soon.

I go over my plan again, picturing every detail. Tonight, I promise myself. A small bird flutters in my chest.

“What’re you smiling at? Ain’t you done yet?”
I startle. Georgia, one of the aides, stands in the doorway.

“I’m sorry, ma’am.” Every staff member here is “ma’am” or “sir”. By now it comes automatically. I don’t bother pointing out that I’ve been on scrubbing duty every day for a week and it’s never taken less than four hours, so no, of course I’m not finished yet.

She smirks. “Well, this is what you get with that attitude of yours, missy. Keep going ‘till you’re done.”

Alarm kicks me. “But—” The word escapes before I can stop it. I lick my lips and say, “Group’s in an hour.”

“So?”

“Dr Forrester said I should be there.” It’s all I can think of, but the wrong thing to say. Georgia eyes me suspiciously.

“Are you talking back to me?”

“No! No, ma’am. I just—”

“Some internet diploma doctor who shows up once a week ain’t in charge of you losers – we are. And I say the floor comes first.”

My thoughts are tumbling, screaming. Group’s
only on Fridays; I can’t wait another week! I have to reach my family.

If I can just be with them, everything will be okay.

My fingers grip the toothbrush so tightly that it hurts. I want to say something else but know it’ll just make things worse. Just yesterday, Georgia locked a girl in a closet for “looking at her funny”.

I give a curt nod, not trusting myself to speak – and then see that Crystal, another of the inmates, has appeared behind Georgia’s shoulder. She takes in the scene and concern flickers across her round, pretty face.

“Good.” Georgia checks the clock. “Well, hey, lookit that! Fifty-two whole minutes ‘till Group. Better get scrubbing if you want to make it, girl!”

She turns away, almost bumping into Crystal. “This bathroom’s closed,” she snaps, and strides off.

Crys looks after Georgia, biting her lip. She glances back at me and hesitates…then seems to decide something. Catching my gaze, she jabs a finger towards a cupboard under one of the sinks. She widens her eyes meaningfully and hurries off, her footsteps catching up to Georgia’s.
I swallow and stay motionless, waiting for the footsteps to fade. Then I stiffly get up, stumbling a little, my orange uniform damp at the knees. I go to the cupboard and open its water-stained wooden door.

There’s a jug of industrial cleaner inside. My brow furrows. Crys and I are friends – well, as much as any of us can be friends here, when they hardly let us talk to each other. What was she hinting at?

Hyper-conscious of the open bathroom door, I kneel and quickly explore the cupboard. Its back panel is loose. I push it aside and search the exposed concrete recess with straining fingers.

At first, I think there’s only grime and pipe work – then my blind grasp closes on cool metal. I pull out an object and gape at it.

A mophead.

My face splits into a wondering grin. No handle, just the sponge-and-metal mophead… but it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

I finish with twelve minutes to spare and race to go take a shower. No hot water, as usual, but in Texas
in August that’s not really a problem. Not that they’ve told us we’re in Texas. But a few of the other kids have been here before. Somewhere near the Texas-Oklahoma border, that’s everyone’s best guess.

They don’t burden you with insignificant details like that when you’re an inmate at New Day Academy. Our faulty little brains might explode.

I don’t have a spare orange jumpsuit, so I have to put my still-damp one back on again. I throw the clothes on and hastily scrape my long auburn hair into a ponytail. No mirror, only a wavering piece of metal, but I can still see how thin and pale I’ve gotten these past four months. My cheekbones are prominent, my brown eyes larger-looking than usual. It’s not a good look.

I wonder what my family will think when they see me.

A faint memory comes, one of my favourites: a birthday party when I was seven. Purple balloons hung from the ceiling. Mom wanted me to wear a frilly dress but I refused and wore a tiara and a superhero cape. Gran had sniffed, “What nonsense; who even gave her that?” And my two cousins
SEVEN DEADLY SPELLS

laughed and chased me around the living room, the three of us darting around dozens of other family members.

It felt so safe.

542 West 92nd Street, Manhattan, I think fervently. It’s both a prayer and a promise. Maybe I can’t remember their names, but I remember that address. It’s emblazoned on my brain.

I grip the sink, staring at my thin, haunted face. I’ve never been psychic. I’m not even sure I believe in it. But the sense of urgency has grown almost unbearable lately, a snake coiling in my stomach. My family is special in some way. I don’t recall the specifics, but we protect people. And from the moment the memories started, I knew there were dark forces who’d do whatever it took to stop us.

My family needs me…and more than that, I need them.

I shiver. My plan’s got to work out the way I hope today. It has to.

I find Crystal in the line waiting to go into Group and slide in beside her. “Thanks,” I mutter, leaning back against the painted concrete wall.
She flicks me a glance. “Did you put it back?”
I nod just as Georgia appears around the corner. Her gaze narrows at me. “I told you to finish the floor first, Laura!”

My name isn’t Laura. I bite it back and look at her left shoulder. Direct eye contact can irritate them, like aggressive dogs.

“I know, ma’am. I did finish,” I say.

Georgia goes huffing off towards the south block bathroom and I cross my arms, feigning unconcern. Will she come steamrolling back and tell me I didn’t do it right? Forcibly return me to toothbrush duty, with an extra week thrown in for good measure?

She doesn’t reappear by the time Dr Forrester opens the door and motions us all in. I let out a breath and Crys shoots me a look of understanding, her eyes dancing.

“I wouldn’t have wanted to bet on that,” she whispers.

“Don’t ever go to Vegas, you low-roller,” I mutter back.

“Nope. Only to have an Elvis wedding someday.” I hold back a grin, thinking that I’m going to
miss Crys. In the four months I’ve been here, she’s the only one I’ve grown even a little close to. We seem to be able to communicate with only a few words.

As we enter the conference room, I glance at Crys again and a sudden impulse grips me. I’ve been planning my escape alone, hoarding it close to my chest like a miser. But Crys is my age, barely seventeen, and her family has pretty much abandoned her here. If she doesn’t get out, she’s trapped until she’s eighteen.

She risked her secret to help me. I wouldn’t even have the chance tonight otherwise.

No. Don’t. Two can get caught more easily than one.

My pulse beats faster. I ignore my inner voice. Before I can change my mind, I touch Crys’s arm and whisper in a rush, “Do you want to get out of here?”

The room has plywood-panelled walls and folding chairs arranged in a circle. Crys frowns as we sit down.

“We can’t, he’s right there,” she mutters back.

He is Dr Forrester, standing at the desk getting
some papers in order. He’s more lenient than the aides, at least about stuff like talking. Everyone’s sitting more sprawled than usual – shuffling, whispering.

“Not this room. I mean New Day,” I murmur back, and Crys’s eyes widen in a flash of blue. Just then Dr Forrester clears his throat and heads for his seat.

I lean close to Crys and murmur, “If you want out, don’t play along in Group today.”

It’s all I have time for. Dr Forrester sits down and claps his hands. “Good afternoon, everyone! I trust you’re all well.” He’s about forty, white and balding, with a goatee that he probably imagines looks arty but actually looks like a rip-off from a cheap Satan costume.

People quieten and sit up a little. There are nineteen of us in Sunshine, girls and guys both. No one responds to him.

“You’re all well?” he prompts.

A few murmurs. Every face looks carefully blank. We may all prefer Group to everything else that goes on here, but that doesn’t mean anyone likes it.
Dr Forrester glances at his notes. “Shall we start with you, Crystal?”

She tenses. *Damn.* I wish he’d started with me, so that she’d know I’m not setting her up for whatever reason. People do that shit here, to get in good with the doctors and aides.

Crys’s hand in her lap is clenched. “Sure,” she says, her tone neutral.

“Excellent.” Dr Forrester shuffles his papers. “So, in our last session, you admitted that you were wrong to have had intercourse with your boyfriend – and in fact, given your life-long religious beliefs, that it was likely indicative of a personality disorder – and you also confessed that you’d disrespected your parents and were grateful for all the help you receive here. Would you like to expand on how you can continue to improve?” He taps his papers together and gives her a bright, expectant look.

Crys shoots me a glance and then exhales.

“No,” she says.

Dr Forrester blinks. “Pardon?”

Crys sits up straighter. “I did say that stuff, but I didn’t mean it.”

If there wasn’t so much at stake, I’d want to
laugh. Dr Forrester suddenly looks like one of those toys whose eyes bug out when you squeeze their tummies. “You – you deliberately lied?” he sputters. “About which part?”

“All of it. Except the intercourse part.”

He relaxes a fraction. “Ah, you mean that you regret—”

“No, I mean I had it,” Crys says. “And I don’t think it was wrong, no matter what my parents’ religion says. Tyler and I love each other, we were both of legal age, and we took precautions.”

Everyone’s agog, staring at Crys as if she’s started speaking in tongues. A few people stifle nervous giggles. Crys looks so composed, with only her clenched fist to show otherwise. Usually it’s only new inmates who challenge Dr Forrester; the rest of us tiredly play along.

Because the alternative is Solitary. And no one with half a brain wants to end up there.

Dr Forrester scribbles some notes, frowning. “I’m very sorry to hear this, Crystal,” he says, his tone clipped. “You’ve reverted to a quite disturbing degree. I think you need some time alone to contemplate this.”
SEVEN DEADLY SPELLS

He goes on to someone else then. I see Crys swallow, see the tears start in her eyes – and then with a sinking feeling, I recall that she has claustrophobia. An aide locked her in a broom closet as a punishment once and she started hyperventilating; she practically collapsed when the aide finally opened the door. Solitary is bad enough for most people, but for her…

*It’ll be okay, it’ll be worth it*, I try to signal to her. She won’t look at me.

Meanwhile, the guy, Jack, scrambles to admit every wrong thing that New Day thinks about him. “Yes, sir, I guess I sure *am* crazy to have smoked weed…”

Dr Forrester goes around the room, selecting people at random. The clock ticks away the minutes. I keep glancing at it, growing more and more worried that he won’t reach me before the time is up. Usually he gets to everyone, but not always. Stupidly, this hadn’t occurred to me when I urged Crys not to play along. Oh, god, have I sentenced her to Solitary for nothing?

And even apart from Crys…my muscles tighten. No. I *can’t* wait another week. My family needs me.
“Laura,” Dr Forrester says finally, and relief sweeps over me like a cool breeze.

He looks at his notes. “Well, you haven’t had a good week, have you?” He chuckles. “Cleaning duty for insubordination – oh dear.”

I shrug, waiting.

“However, Laura, last session you admitted that you were having delusions, probably of a psychotic nature, of having a large family – when in fact your family consists of only you and your single-parent mother, who’s effectively abandoned you. You admitted that you need help for your delusions, and that—”

My chin juts up as I meet his gaze.

“My name isn’t Laura,” I say levelly. “And I’m not insane.”
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