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1

Juliet

There should be a disclaimer at the beginning of teen movies:

CONTENT WARNING:

REAL LIFE IS NOTHING LIKE THIS. WE ACCEPT NO LIABILITY WHATSOEVER FOR THE UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS THAT WILL ARISE FROM WATCHING THIS FILM. VIEWER DISCRETION IS ADVISED.

Seems fair. People *should* be warned that the whole ‘guy meets girl, they hate each other (or pretend to), they get forced together, and – BAM – they fall in love’ thing is total bullshit.

And yeah, I know it’s fiction. That none of this stuff is *real*. But I still get sucked in. Every. Single. Time. I even get *butterflies* when they stare at each other the way I stare at my hot-water bottle and painkillers after a day of too much standing up.

And you know which movies are the worst? The ones set at Christmas. Teenagers with above-average good looks, festive jumpers and mistletoe, Tiffany boxes and fake snow, wrapped up with perfect smug smiles.

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Don't even get me started on Disney movies. Targeting five-year-olds with their happy-ever-afters? It's sickening.

Here's a spoiler. Real life doesn't work like that. Real life is a first kiss with *way* too much saliva, with someone you barely know, behind the sports hall at breaktime. Your best friend is keeping lookout and whispering that you're taking too long, when you're only trying to figure out a polite way of stopping the slushy horror show. Real life is your other best friend doing *way* more than kissing, with someone else, at the same time, a few metres away.

Real life is the doctor handing you disgusting grey crutches and telling you that you'll need to use a walking aid for the foreseeable future.

Real life is staring at yourself in the mirror and trying not to despise your new reflection.

In real life, all your problems aren't solved over the course of ninety minutes. There is no witty voice-over, no strategically placed plot points, and *definitely* no over-emotional soundtrack telling you exactly how to feel.

Because real life is *nothing* like a stupid movie.

Michael was already outside. I could hear music blasting from his car. I threw off my crutches, letting them slide down the stairs, almost taking out Jeffrey, our Chihuahua-Chewbacca cross.

Mum was in the hall beside the front door, watching me come down: one step, two feet.

'Maybe we should keep the other pair downstairs, so Jeffrey doesn't have to fear for his life every morning?' Jeffrey hid

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behind Mum's legs as she joked, gauging my mood with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

'Yeah. Would probably be easier.'

Why don't we just get it over with and put some in every room?

'How are you feeling this morning?' Mum asked.

I didn't look up. I didn't need to. I could practically see the crease of concern in her forehead deepen.

'Fine, Mum. Completely, one hundred per cent fine.' Fake smile.

'Jules.'

'Mum.' I met her gaze and smiled, properly this time. And when I did that, the forehead crease disappeared for a second.

'It's the first day of your final year, love. It's going to be great. And nobody's going to notice the crutches.'

'Yeah, I know.' *Of course* everyone was going to notice the crutches. That wasn't the issue. The issue was what they were going to say about it.

She leaned over and kissed my head.

'Ready to take on the world, kid?' Dad came out of the kitchen holding a coffee.

'Something like that.' I looked down at my new trainers. Black Nike Air Force 1s. Not exactly Birch High regulation uniform. As if I needed another reason to stick out. But shoving my feet into leather school shoes hurt too much nowadays.

Dad kissed my head too. 'Promise me a game later? I've got a new move up my sleeve.'

'Sure.'

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Mum opened the door. *And there endeth the leaving ceremony.*
Thank God for that.

‘Hey, Mrs C, Mr C!’ Michael walked into the hall and headed straight towards the kitchen. He appeared two minutes later, his mouth full of one of Mum’s home-made back-to-school blueberry muffins and another one in his hand.

‘Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,’ he intoned, bursting into overdramatic life. *Way* too much energy for this time in the morning.

He took my school bag from me, and we walked down the driveway. ‘Your hair is on point today.’ He kissed his fingers, then nodded at my crutches. ‘And I *love* the new accessories.’

‘I’ll cut you.’

‘What? I’m serious. They totally give you something extra. And are those new kicks? Watch that Princess Peach doesn’t try and rob them off your feet.’

He nodded towards Tara, sitting in the back of his car. Michael picked her up at the crossroads every morning. He offered to pick her up from her house, but she always said she liked a little walk in the morning, something to do with the air making her skin glow. She was smiling at her phone as we approached.

‘Bye, Jules,’ Mum called.

God. Why have they followed us outside?

‘All will be well, my friend. I promise.’

Easy to say if you’re Michael. I’d never met anyone so comfortable in their own skin. Then suddenly his smile disappeared and he looked serious. It amazed me how

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expressive Michael's face was, like it was impossible to hide the thoughts in his head. 'Actually, though, how are you? The new look can't be easy.'

'Seriously, I'm *fine*. We don't need to talk about it. Wait – is that a top knot?' Michael's dark hair had been pulled back off his face into this tiny bun on top of his head.

'Yeah, it is. Do you like it? My dad was watching Italian football last night, and what can I say? Something he watched finally appealed to me. Don't you think it makes me look like an Italian stallion?' His movie-star smile almost blinded me.

It was impossible not to smile back at Michael.

He squeezed my bag into the back seat with Tara and helped me into the passenger seat of the car. His parents had bought him a new black Audi over the summer.

Some of us got crutches, some of us got an Audi . . .

'Is that a muffin, Michael? I'm starving – did you bring me one?' Tara asked.

'No, sorry. You should've come in instead of sitting on your phone.' He shrugged.

'Ugh, whatever. Oh wow, you're actually bringing them to school?' Tara eyed my crutches like they were carrying some infectious disease. Michael slid them into the back seat beside her, next to my bag. 'Ouch, Michael! Watch where you're sticking those things.'

'Yeah. Remember what I said? Dr Patel –'

But she wasn't listening. She was on Insta. 'Oh my God, Hana got a *lob*. What do you think?' She pushed her phone through the space between me and Michael, and there was

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Hana, head cocked, lips parted, peace sign in the camera and her black hair cut into a long bob with a blunt fringe. Gorgeous. It was pretty much the reason Tara decided to be friends with her in Year Ten. ‘Hot people have hot friends,’ she’d said.

She used to say that about me.

‘She looks amazing,’ I said.

Michael sighed. ‘Yeah, looks fine.’

‘Well, *your* hair looks ridiculous, Michael,’ Tara said. ‘Love your shoes, though, Jules – are they new?’

‘Yeah, Dad bought me them yesterday.’

‘Ugh, lucky bitch,’ she said as Michael started the car.

‘Just get yourself a disease.’ I smiled.

‘Do you think I could pull off crutches?’

To be fair, she probably could.

‘Oh, you know that *thing* we were talking about last night, Jules? Hey, Michael, turn down the music, will you?’

I noticed Michael grip the steering wheel more tightly before reaching for the volume control.

Tara and I had spent an hour on WhatsApp last night. She’d decided she wanted to go for it. To lose her virginity this year, and we were basically going through all the guys at school, trying to find the perfect candidate. We hadn’t found one.

‘Yeah?’ I said.

‘Well, there’s this party next Friday. You know, Daniel from St Anne’s?’

No.

‘Yeah?’

‘Well, I figured that might be the perfect opportunity –’

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‘Am I missing something?’ Michael asked, looking at me.

I shrugged and looked at Tara. I wished she’d just tell him. I hated the weird tension.

‘It’s kind of a “best friend only” thing.’ She smiled at the back of Michael’s head, and I tried to soften his side-eye by pulling a stupid face.

Michael had never liked Tara. Well, that’s not true. We all used to hang out in this big group: Tara, me, Michael, Hana, Luke and Charlie.

Michael and I had met on our first day. We sat beside each other in English, and he passed me a note saying, ‘Please, sir, can I be your friend?’ I laughed, then we both got told off, and he’s been making me laugh ever since.

Michael and Tara actually used to get on, for a few years at least. Until she told him that her second favourite ex-One Direction band member was Louis and not Zayn (first was Harry, obviously). He said that made him suspicious of her as a person. Michael took his stanning of One Direction really seriously and never trusted her after that. That’s what he said anyway when I asked why he didn’t like her. There are loads of other reasons now, but that triggered it. *Apparently*. He just never went into details.

‘Oh, Jules, I forgot to tell you – I totally went up a cup size this summer.’ Tara grabbed her boobs. My neck hurt from turning round.

‘Riveting,’ said Michael, rolling his eyes so hard I was surprised we didn’t run the red light.

I thought about my barely-there chest, hidden underneath my school jumper.

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As if she'd read my mind, Tara piped up: 'You know, Jules, you really need to get smaller jumpers – that one looks like a sack. You'd look really hot in a tight jumper.'

But I liked my big clothes. The baggier they were, the better I was doing at hiding how skinny I was. I pulled my sleeves over my fingers. Michael called my style 'hobo chic'.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I don't think Mum would buy me them just for that.'

I noticed Michael raise an eyebrow, and he was right not to believe me; there wasn't much Mum wouldn't buy me. Mum was never done buying me stuff, mostly clothes. She'd got to the point now that she'd make excuses for it, saying things like, 'Oh, I was in town and saw this!' or whatever. And it wasn't like I didn't appreciate it; I just knew why she was doing it – so the new clothes were kind of tainted by the fact that their existence had been triggered by my disability.

'Boo. Your mum is such a bore,' Tara said, rolling her eyes, and Michael turned up the music again.

Luke was waiting for us (well, for Tara) when we got to school. He'd not-so-subtly fancied her for ages, but until last year had barely talked to her. I don't know what happened over the summer after Year Twelve, but he came back to school with new confidence. He started showing up everywhere. Every breaktime, every lunchtime, trying to get her attention. I think the first time Tara actually spoke to him was the day he came to school with two tickets to see Taylor Swift and asked her if she wanted to go. She said yes, then took Hana instead.

'Hey, gorgeous,' said Luke, directed at Tara.

She ignored him.

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I tried to get out of the car too quickly and my ankle twisted as I stepped out. When I tried to steady myself with the door, it swung open further and I landed on my side, my right knee hitting the ground.

‘Jesus,’ said Michael, jumping out of the driver’s seat.

‘Help Jules!’ Tara snapped at Luke. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d clicked her fingers too.

‘I’m fine. I don’t need help – I’m fine,’ I spluttered.

But Luke was already there, at Tara’s request.

Pain.

I’d learned to do this thing where I’d bite my tongue as hard as I could instead of screaming. But it didn’t get rid of the shame. My face was burning, and I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing to God I was back at home in front of my laptop.

I felt Luke’s hands under my arms. I kept my eyes closed, as if he wouldn’t see the humiliation all over my red face. For a minute I enjoyed the feeling of his hands on me, and for a second I pretended I was in one of those teen movies. And that Luke was some hot guy touching me because he couldn’t keep his hands off me, not because he was helping the disabled friend of the girl he was obsessed with off the floor.

‘You OK?’ he asked. But by the time I’d made some witty joke and balanced myself on the crutches that Michael handed me, he was already five steps ahead, carrying Tara’s school bag.



2

Ronan

Chess is about control. From the very first move, the player has the opportunity to gain control of the centre, strengthening their position from the outset. Some people say the opening is the most important move. But it doesn't end there. To maintain control, you have to plan your moves as you go, so you always know (to some degree of accuracy), what's coming next. So I made sure I always knew my next move, and sometimes even my second, third and fourth.

Of course by doing that, you're assuming your opponent will go for the most obvious moves. And if it's someone you've played before, it's *usually* safe to assume that they'll follow a pattern. The same pattern that they've always followed.

But if your opponent becomes unpredictable, or loses control, you may as well not have planned anything. An unpredictable opponent is dangerous. They can screw with your head. Leave you wondering whether or not there was something you could have done to change the way the game played out, convincing you that the whole outcome was something you could have avoided altogether. But like everything, chess makes more sense with hindsight.

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When I walked out of St Anne's that day, it had felt like a good idea. More than that. It had felt like the only option. When you have a lunch hall full of people staring at you, waiting for answers that you don't want to give, it makes a hell of a lot more sense just to get out of the situation before you say something you'll regret.

In chess they call it retreating.

Ciaran taught me how to play chess. He was really good at it too. But it helped that he had brains to burn and a photographic memory. Thing is, I was never jealous or anything. People acted like I should have been, like sibling rivalry was just a given. They'd talk in hushed voices when Ciaran got another prize for coming top of the county, or country, in whatever exam it was. But they didn't have to – I thought it was awesome. *He* was awesome. And it wasn't like I was stupid or anything. But it's weird, because it's him who seems like the stupid one now.

Even though things fell apart long before, it's the phone call that sticks in my head. It still makes me feel sick. It wasn't so much the words she used, but the realization that I was in this alone.

She was sitting at the kitchen table, with one hand playing with her newly dyed blonde hair. She was wearing full-on make-up too. And it's not something I'd usually notice because she always wore make-up, but there wasn't even a smudge. Her nails were red. The perfection disturbing. Like the opening to my own personal horror movie.

Is that Principal Heath? I didn't know how Mum did it, making her voice normal when everything

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'I just wanted to talk about Ronan Cole . . . yes . . . he won't be back this term . . . we've had some . . . issues with his brother . . . Yes, Ciaran. I sent a letter, I'm not sure if you got it? . . . Good.'

Issues? That's what she was calling it?

In the silence Mum held out her hand and examined her nails, like she was talking to one of her friends. I didn't know what she was saying then. I couldn't hear anything now; my heartbeat was thudding in my ears. All I heard through the haze was 'a shame', 'disappointing', 'sorry'.

'Disappointing? Sorry?' I had to shout the words, force them out because they were catching in my throat. Her expression didn't even change. Her face was still; there was nothing there.

'Ronan, please. I'm on the phone.'

'Is that what you think? That he's a disappointment?'

She scraped her chair back and walked right past me, closing the living-room door, leaving me in the hall with my stomach twisted in my throat.

That was six months ago.

Six months of ignoring my friends, of not playing chess, six months of trying to remember everything about the Ciaran I grew up with, while at the same time trying not to think about him at all. Six months of sleeping no more than three hours a night because my stupid brain wouldn't shut off.

And now I was starting a new school. Birch High. At least nobody knew me there, and nobody knew Ciaran. I just hoped that it'd be better than St Anne's, where everyone thought who slept with who was the most important thing in the world.

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I stared at myself in the mirror. The uniform looked so weird after a summer of hoodies and jeans, although the navy woollen blazer was better than the ridiculous purple of St Anne's. You don't stand out as much in navy.

A year. It was all I had to do, get through this year then I could get away from this town, this life, this everything.

I pushed an earbud in and went downstairs. Mum was dressed for work and making breakfast. Her high heels clicked on the kitchen tiles, and she gave me a red-lipped smile as she put pancakes down on the table like it was some kind of sitcom. I almost expected canned laughter.

But nothing was funny any more.

'Ronan, eat something. I've made pancakes – you and Ciaran used to love pancakes,' she said. 'Do you remember that time Ciaran made them and stuck one to the ceiling when he tried to flip it?' She laughed at the memory, like it had happened only the other day.

I didn't answer, just walked past her, opened the fridge and took out a can of Coke.

'Ronan, please. You look thin – you need to eat something before school,' she pleaded. I was almost out of the door when she added, 'I'm passing the school on my way to work if you want a lift?'

Mum was an estate agent. She showed people round perfect houses, selling perfect lives, day after day. I wondered how people could believe the stuff that came out of her mouth when she talked about a place being a 'perfect family home' or that 'you'll be so happy here'. Maybe they didn't really believe

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it, deep down. Maybe they just liked pretending their lives could be better than they already were.

I acted like I hadn't heard her when she offered me a lift. Just walked out of the front door, slamming it behind me. I was five minutes down the road when I remembered. 'Shit,' I muttered. I don't know how I'd forgotten it. I'd carried it about with me for months, in my pocket, in my bag, even in my sock. I didn't want to go back in and see Mum again, but I had no choice.

I turned back, went into the house, then ran upstairs two steps at a time, and picked up the pawn I'd left on my desk. Black and carved, still pristine after so many games. I slid the chess piece deep inside my blazer pocket. With it, I felt lighter. Mum was standing at the bottom of the stairs when I came down, looking at me like she was going to say something. I turned up my music, with my earbuds in, and kept my eyes locked on the door until I got outside.

Birch High was about two miles away from my house, a walk through Belfast suburbia: four-bedroomed, loft-converted, double-garaged perfect lives. I crushed the can I'd just finished and dropped it over someone's little picket fence, where it sat, out of place, on just-cut grass.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

AUNT SARAH: Good luck today, Ronan. Let me know how it goes x

Aunt Sarah had been sending me messages all summer. None of which I'd replied to. She'd turn up at the house sometimes,

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though, and then I couldn't avoid her. But I did make sure that she never got me alone. I knew that if she did I might slip. And if I slipped, so would everything.

Slowing down as I reached the big iron gates of the school, I could hear the calls from the schoolyard over my music and watched a football fly towards a group of screaming girls. Just like St Anne's. Full of morons. I thought I'd at least make it through the schoolyard without anyone talking to me, but as soon as someone yelled that I was new, they swarmed around me like flies on shit. Someone slapped me on the back and asked who I was, someone else asked if I was any good at football and a voice from too far away called me a dick. Nice. I mumbled responses, hoping they'd get the hint. I noticed a couple of girls staring at me, doing that thing where they look up just long enough for you to notice before turning to each other and laughing. They were pretty hot. But the brown-haired one (total Queen Bee vibes) was looking around like she was only interested in who was looking at her. We had one of those in St Anne's too: Casey Molloy. I didn't have time for people who thought they were better than everyone else. And even though her friend had a bright pink backpack with badges and shit all over it, she looked way less try-hard. She caught my attention. Black hair, nice smile.

I looked at my timetable for the first time. Apart from maths, they'd put me in the middle-of-the-road sets so I could catch up. I was going to be bored to tears.

It made me think of Ciaran and the time I played f6. Which I didn't think was a bad move. I had a plan. But Ciaran clearly thought differently.

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'You've just weakened your king position, Ro. You're better than that. It achieves nothing in terms of central control or piece development. It also takes up a square that you might want for a knight. Think. Make your moves count. Push yourself, it's the only way you'll improve.'

He laughed then, but not in a bad way. I knew he just wanted me to get better. But he took no prisoners. I'd only just learned the set-up of the board: eight horizontal rows called ranks, eight vertical columns called files. Ranks were numbered, files were lettered. The moves were coordinates, and coordinates made sense to me. Ciaran used to make sense to me too.

And there he was, in my head again, filling up space.

I stood in the hall and felt for the pawn in my pocket.

Still there. Still weak.



3

Juliet

Being Tara's friend meant that it was hard to stay under the radar. Everyone wanted to talk to Tara, to be seen with Tara, to go out with Tara. I wondered if she ever got bored of it.

It didn't used to be like this.

At primary school, Tara and I did everything together – 'BFFs for life' with little half-heart necklaces to prove it. We were inseparable. We'd spend every weekend at either my house or at Tara's, camping out in her bedroom or in my living room under tents that Mum would make for us. Sometimes Tara's little sister, Annie, would join us and we'd all watch Disney movies together, before I hated them. Mum would paint our nails and buy us takeaway pizzas.

I remembered thinking that Tara and Annie felt like my sisters.

When Tara's dad left, they moved house and after that Tara always asked if we could just go to my house instead because it was bigger. I haven't even seen her new house. After a while I stopped asking to go there and she just spent more and more time at mine.

I never felt less-than, back in primary school.

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Then came the diagnosis.

Sometimes when I tell people I have arthritis, they laugh. In fact, some people even tell me I don't have it, that I'm too young and arthritis is for old people. I totally get it. When I was twelve and Dr Patel told me I had it, I laughed too.

Then I cried. A lot.

And changed my name.

Michael was the only person who was still *allowed* to call me Juliet. And only because he refused to call me anything else. I think he would stop if I asked him to, but I remember telling him how much I used to love my name, and I think it's just his way of keeping it alive. Either that or he was too busy thinking about Harry Styles to listen to anything I had to say. 'Juliet' was fine when I was a kid. In fact, I *loved* it when I was a kid because Mum would tell me the story of how she named me. She was watching some olden-days version of *Romeo and Juliet* when she was pregnant and apparently I kicked when Juliet said, 'What's in a name?' Mum was a sucker for love stories. But when you're at school and can barely walk, the last thing you want is any kind of name that makes you stand out. 'Jules' slipped under the radar. 'Jules' just made more sense.

Tara had disappeared with Luke to find Hana and Charlie. Michael waited for me.

He must have heard my slow exhale as I stared at the school because he nudged me. 'Let's do this.'

'Or we could, you know, go home or something? Maggie's? I hear they do excellent breakfast shakes,' I said.

'Don't try and tempt me with my milkshake weakness. Anyway, you'd never cut class, you're too scared. And besides,

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I have my new hairstyle to flaunt, so you're all out of luck, J. Boo hoo.' Mock sad.

'These could double up as weapons, you know!' I poked him with a crutch.

'Yeah.' Michael considered my threat for a second. 'You'd never cut it in prison. Sorry, you're stuck with me.' He looked at his phone. 'Hey, found this gorgeous picture of you online.'

Michael and I had this game. We'd find the most ridiculous pictures and send them to each other, editing over them with 'that's you'.

I looked at the screen and burst out laughing. There was a picture of the bird lady from *Mary Poppins* sitting on some stone steps covered in pigeons.

'You're such a dick.'

'What? I thought you could get some style tips. Look how happy she is being hobo-chic like you.'

'Actually, on second thought,' I said looking at the picture again, 'I think she's pretty hot.' I shrugged.

He shuddered. 'You disturb me.'

The bell had already rung, and the halls had emptied as we walked to registration. Now that Michael was staring at his phone, there was nothing to distract me from the fact I was about to crutch-walk into a class full of people who thought wearing a *coat* to school was social suicide.

I hated being late. Even before, without the crutches, I hated their eyes on me, my eyes in their heads, like I could see what they were thinking.

Why is she walking like that?

What's wrong with her knees?

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Can't she move any faster?

And now it was worse. The *tap-tap* of plastic on lino was all I could hear, filling my head.

'J, we have to go.'

'What?'

'Haven't you been listening to anything I've said? To the party, that one Tara was talking about. This is our year.'

'Ugh, really? I don't know. I was thinking of sitting this one out.'

The last time I went to a house party I had a couple of drinks and kissed Caleb Harrison, who then tried to do more than kiss me in a room full of people, as if access to my mouth was an open invitation to everywhere else! At least he had the decency to look ashamed when I asked what the hell he thought he was doing. Then I got drunk to try and forget what happened and didn't sit down all night. When I woke up the next day it was like someone had tightened all my joints with a spanner. It took hot-water bottles and massages to get me out of bed. And I had to take Monday off school.

'Yeah, that's not an option. Sorry. And Caleb will be there, waiting with his tongue for your mouth. And his handsy little fingers.'

'Another reason to sit this one out.'

'Poor boy. He loves you. Not sure why.' Michael smirked at me.

'He loves everybody. I saw him kissing Emily in the music room last week. She looked weirdly into it.' I screwed up my face at the unwelcome memory of his tongue in my mouth.

'It was probably a rebound kiss to mend his broken heart.'

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After our drunken kiss, Caleb went through this weird phase of sending me a message saying ‘Good morning, sexy’ *every day*. What are you even supposed to say to that? Hi? I gave full responsibility to Michael who replied in memes until he stopped.

Michael pushed the classroom door open to join registration, and twenty-five pairs of eyes looked up at us. At me. Heat from my face bled down my neck and over my chest, making my hands sweat on the crutches.

‘Good morning, Juliet. Michael, please take a seat.’ Mr Dawson barely looked up. But I heard whispering.

I’d thought I was ready for this. I’d told myself I was going to ignore everyone; pretend I didn’t care. But the hushed voices stung like shampoo in my eye, a background itch before the slow, stinging burn took over.

Michael pulled out a seat for me and made as much noise as possible. I sat down and slid the crutches under my desk, massaging the insides of my elbows where they’d dug into the skin.

I eventually looked up again. And when I did, I realized that nobody was looking at me at all. Michael raised an eyebrow towards the door.

‘What is it?’ I whispered.

‘Oh my God, J, you have to see this.’

‘See what?’

‘My future husband.’

I shuffled round so I could see. Some guy walked in, earbuds in, shirt hanging out. Black-rimmed glasses, with dark hair that fell over his face. He had light eyes, blue or green,

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from what I could see, and the kind of cheekbones you only see on TV.

‘Earphones, Mr Cole.’ Mr Dawson sighed, pointing at his ears. ‘And for future reference, registration is at nine, not nine fifteen.’

The boy just shrugged and sat down on a spare chair at Luke’s table, took out a notebook and started drawing in it. His other hand stayed in his pocket. He didn’t look up once.

Great. Because that’s just what we needed in this school – someone else who looked like they’d stepped straight out of some American movie.

Someone else who thought they were better than everyone.

Fan-bloody-tastic.



4

Ronan

I sat down on the first free seat I could find, and reluctantly pulled out my earbud. The teacher was some guy in a too-big suit with a ridiculous moustache and it actually pained me to do what he said. But it was my first day. The less attention I could get away with the better.

I clicked my pen and started doodling in a notebook, drawing 3D shapes. Hexagons, octagons, dodecagons. And as much as I didn't care what people were saying, I couldn't help but listen in on the conversations around me. They weren't exactly whispering.

Some girl was asking the girl next to her if she thought she looked hotter from the right or the left. And she actually answered. In fact, she paused and gave *actual* thought to her question. Someone else was talking about how hot 'Tara' looked at 'the party' last week.

'You're new, right?' A guy moved up a seat to sit beside me. The one who'd just been talking about the party. He had a big dopey grin on his face, like something you'd see on a cartoon Labrador, eyes shining like he'd just been told a dirty secret. Just then I wished it was a real class, instead of the

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stupid waste-of-time half hour where the teachers read out a list of names and made announcements about things nobody cared about. Then people wouldn't be switching seats.

'Yeah,' I said, and went back to my doodling, hoping he'd take the please-fuck-off hint.

'Well, there are a few things you need to know if you want to survive here. First, Tara Williams is the hottest girl in the year, brunette with great tits, and next is probably Hana Mori – her parents are from Japan. She has that totally hot Asian thing going on. Kelly Raddison, if you're into redheads. Chloe Piwko is up there too; she definitely jumped a few rankings in the last year.' He mimed a pair of tits on his chest. 'I've been trying to get into Tara for years, but she pretends she's not interested. I mean, come on.' I looked up and he was just nodding his head like I should agree. He slapped my shoulder. 'But yeah, fair play if you get anywhere with her. You'd be a hero,' he said, laughing. He was way too close to my face, and I could smell his coffee breath.

I didn't know if I was supposed to laugh too. It wasn't funny and I had no idea who Tara or any of the others were.

He must have seen the hesitation on my face because he continued, 'Or wait, maybe you're not into girls. I mean, that would kind of suit me, to be honest. Michael Crawley, Corey Lee, Evan Armour, Leon Jackson are your resident gay guys. There are some bi guys too – Marc Myers. He was actually going out with Kelly last year then dumped her for some dude. Mental.' He took a break from his monologue and looked at me. 'I'm Luke, by the way,' he said and offered his hand. I put down my pen and shook it.

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‘Ronan,’ I said. ‘And yeah, I’m not exactly looking at the minute.’

He burst out laughing, like it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard.

Christ.

‘You may not be looking, but they’ll be looking for you. I already heard Hana talking about the “new hot guy” so good luck with that.’ And he laughed again, then handed me his phone. ‘Here, stick your number in this. I’ll keep you in the loop.’ I hesitated before I took it. But giving my number didn’t mean I had to respond if he got in touch. And not giving my number meant making an enemy on my first day.

I tapped it in and handed the phone back.

When I was fifteen, Ciaran gave me the book *Inside the Mind of a Grandmaster* by Sergei Fedorov and I read it from cover to cover. But it was Alexander Kotov who first came up with the idea of a ‘Candidate Move’. A Candidate Move is the strongest move you can possibly make after analysing all the options, which is the exact opposite of what I did six months ago. I wasn’t going to make that mistake again.

I looked around the classroom. Then my eyes settled on someone. A girl with crutches. She was cute. She saw me looking, then her eyes flickered away. I wondered if she’d heard the rumours. She had a nice face, huge eyes, brown-blond hair and cheeks that had just turned pink. Why the hell was I even thinking about her? Adding that kind of complication to my life was exactly the kind of thing I absolutely didn’t need right now.

‘That’s Jules. Used to be a nine before the crutches. Solid

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seven now,' Luke whispered when he saw me looking. 'The crutches are new, dunno what happened. Turned into Crutch Girl over the summer, I guess.' He laughed again. I didn't. 'There was this one time she even came into school in a wheelchair, like just for a couple of days and then never again. Not really sure what that was about. Attention maybe.'

What an asshole.

I managed to avoid him for the rest of the morning. In fact, I managed to avoid talking to anyone except the maths teacher when he asked me stupidly easy questions. It was like he was trying to catch me out. Nice try. I ignored the looks from other kids. I suppose I expected them, and I probably would have done the same, stared at some new St Anne's kid, not because I was a dick or anything, just interested, I guess. So, I didn't blame them. I just wasn't about to engage.

Lunchtime. The canteen was exactly like at St Anne's. Except here, I didn't fit in.

I didn't have to think about it before. I knew where I sat, with Alex and Sasha. After that fell apart, I sat with whoever was free. I liked that about St Anne's. No real cliques.

I kept my head down and stood in the queue, eventually grabbing some chips that they served with a depressing little side salad on a plastic plate. I wanted anything I could eat quickly to get out of there.

'Hey, man, over here.' I knew even before I turned round it was that guy Luke again. I was hoping he'd taken the hint earlier but clearly not. He was standing up, waving me over, and when I scanned the table, I saw the little group just staring at me. The two girls from earlier were there, the black-haired

one chatting to some guy beside her and Queen Bee staring right at me with a half-smile. I looked down at my tray.

Luke must have thought I hadn't heard him because he didn't stop calling me. Then everyone was looking again, and the memories of that last day at St Anne's flashed in my head. I couldn't leave, not again. I walked over.

The lunch hall had rows and rows of tables pushed together, so by the time I made it to where they were sitting, I realized there'd be no quick exit. I felt my heartbeat quicken. I ignored the kids who stared at me as I walked behind their chairs, whispering to their friends. On the joined-up table next to Luke's, I noticed that girl from registration, the one with crutches, sitting beside some huge dude, though only he was looking at me. I walked round them and sat down beside Luke. The room closed in.

Luke talked and talked. The other guy, who I learned was Charlie, only joined in once to tell me that there was no space left on the football team so if I wanted to play, I'd have to be a sub. Then there was Tara, Queen Bee. She was staring at me so intensely it made me squirm. The other one was Hana. Less stary, cute, but no less intimidating.

'Great,' was all I could say to whatever Luke had just said.

'So, I'm Tara, and this is Hana,' Tara said. 'You're Ronan, right? You used to go to St Anne's?'

'Yeah, that's right,' I said and stuffed some chips in my mouth.

She did have a great smile. One of those smiles that showed just the right number of teeth, dark brown eyes and hair to match. I chewed slowly and tried to ignore the heartbeat in

my ears, hoping by the time I'd finished eating they'd have moved on to someone else.

Then it was too much, the silence, the eyes. I got up.

'Sorry, I have to go.'

'What? Where you going?' Luke called. But I was already walking round chairs and trying not to drop my tray on the way out. Then my foot caught something, and the plate of salad fell everywhere, bits of lettuce, tomato and cucumber, all over the floor. No, not the floor, on to someone. I looked down and saw the crutches I'd just kicked over. Jules. She glanced at me once, then turned back to the table.

'Shit,' I said.

'Watch where you're going, man,' said the huge guy with a top knot, standing up and scooping her crutches off the floor.

That's when I looked at her. 'You have a . . .' I pointed at her head. There was a piece of lettuce in her hair.

The guy brushed it off for her, but she didn't move an inch, just stared down at the table.

'Sorry,' I said. Then I remembered the eyes, that everyone was still staring at me. I dumped my tray on the table and just kept walking until I got outside. I didn't stop until I got to the back of the sports hall where I could have a smoke.



5

Juliet

‘Shit, J. He’s even hotter up close,’ Michael said, nudging me. ‘Those cheekbones, those glasses. Be still my heart.’ I was still looking down at the salad sandwich Mum had made me, barely touched, waiting for the burning in my face to fade.

‘Yeah, I guess,’ I said, and shrugged. Hot, yeah, but he couldn’t get away fast enough when he kicked my crutches, like he was scared he was going to catch something. Maybe that’s what happens when you’re born like that, all cheekbones, blue eyes and floppy hair. You don’t *have* to care about anyone else. I looked up to see him climbing the stairs out of the lunch hall. Definitely hot though.

‘What do you think his deal is?’ I heard from down the table. It was Hana.

‘I don’t know, but the mysterious thing is so sexy,’ said Tara, staring after him too.

‘Sexy is right,’ said Michael, throwing a Malteser up in the air and catching it in his mouth.

‘I think I just found my new conquest,’ said Tara, loud enough for the whole table to hear. Michael snorted.

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‘Here we go,’ he whispered. ‘How does she even know he’s straight?’

‘I don’t think she cares,’ I whispered back.

‘Hey, Michael.’ I looked up to see Tara staring at us from down the table. ‘I’m going to go into town with Hana after school, so I don’t need a lift home.’

Michael shrugged. ‘OK, Your Highness,’ he whispered.

I didn’t need a lift either. Mum was picking me up early to go to physio.

The joy.

After his lunchtime exit, Ronan was back in my English class. He sat at the back by himself, earbuds in. If the teacher asked him a question, he’d just shrug and she’d move on. Part of me wanted to tell her that he was listening to music. Then he wouldn’t look so smug. I couldn’t believe Miss Black hadn’t noticed. She was pretty old, though, and probably didn’t know what earbuds were. Then my thoughts were interrupted.

‘Juliet, do you know the answer?’ I winced at Miss Black’s use of my full name and could feel my face start to burn. I’d been too busy looking at Ronan and hadn’t heard a word she’d said. ‘Honestly, it feels like I’m talking to myself sometimes. *Parting is such sweet sorrow*. Which of Shakespeare’s plays does it come from? It’s the play we’re going to be studying this term.’

Some Year Nine kid came into the classroom and handed Miss Black a note, giving me a few moments’ grace. She looked up. ‘Juliet, your mother is at reception. Do you have the answer before you go?’

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I could feel a thousand eyes on me, and I was convinced they could all hear my heart. Of course I knew what it was. I had watched the Leonardo DiCaprio movie a million times with Mum. But saying it would just mean somebody making a joke about my name.

'*Hamlet?*' I said, before putting my things away and reaching for my crutches. When I turned to get my coat from the back of the chair, I noticed Ronan run his eyes over me, from head to toe. I could feel my face get hotter.

'No, Juliet,' Miss Black said. 'It was, of course . . . Eva?'

'*Romeo and Juliet.*' Eva emphasized the Juliet. Just in case I hadn't got the stupid-answer memo.

'Yes, well done.'

The rest of the class was pretending to listen again, so I took my chance and started to walk towards the door. And when I was closing it, I saw him, eyes on me again. I thought about how nice it was to have someone with that face look at me without laughing. Then I thought about my red cheeks, my wrong answer, the hair-lettuce, the *tap-tap* of my crutches and saw his look for what it really was. Pity. I wished the ground would just swallow me up completely.

Mum was waiting in reception.

'I can get myself to hospital, you know. I don't mind getting the bus,' I told her, not for the first time.

I hated that she had to take time off work for me. Not only did it make me look like a massive baby, but she had to make up the work during evenings and weekends.

'It's fine, Jules. I had a half day anyway.'

Yeah. Because you'd booked it off in advance for this appointment.

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‘Thanks.’

‘Don’t be silly. Jeffrey’s in the car – I was going to take him for a walk when you’re in with Sean. Unless you want me to come with you?’

‘No, it’s fine. I’ll be OK by myself,’ I said.

Jeffrey was in the front seat. We got him from the rescue centre the same year I was diagnosed. I think everybody needed a distraction. He’s some kind of weird little mongrel. His fur is insane. He barked and jumped up, trying to lick my face.

‘Are you ready for your own personal concert?’ Mum turned up her Celine Dion playlist.

Mum’s rendition of ‘My Heart Will Go On,’ always made me laugh. She is a terrible singer. Jeffrey sounded better when I trapped his tail in the door. Thank God the drive to the hospital wasn’t long.

‘I’ll just come to reception with you, then I’ll take Jeffrey for a walk, OK?’ Mum parked in our usual disabled spot, the huge white wheelchair in the space telling the world what I was. For a while I’d made her park in the ‘normal’ spots. But that was before. When my arthritis was controlled, and I wasn’t too sore to make a point.

Over the summer it had flared. I hoped it would go away in a couple of days, that the huge swellings on my knees and elbows would just disappear. But it didn’t. It got worse. Constant burning joints, falling asleep at dinner. It got so bad that Mum ended up doing everything for me again. Like she had at the beginning. When her life was ruined as much as mine. But I’d promised myself I wouldn’t let it happen again. So I agreed to

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start the new medication, one that I injected into my thigh once a week, despite my needle phobia. One I insisted on doing in my room so Mum and Dad wouldn't hear me scream. And I didn't complain about parking in the disabled space again. Because I was *fine*. I had to be fine.

'Fine.'

'Just take a seat. Sean will be with you soon,' the receptionist said. Mum stuffed some leaflets into her bag. I stared at my phone. Michael had sent me some memes and Tara had sent me some message about how hot the new guy was, or something.

'Tara's welcome to sleep over this weekend if you want. She hasn't been over in ages,' Mum said, looking over my shoulder at my phone screen. I locked it.

'Yeah, thanks. I'll ask.' I already knew what she'd say. And anyway, we weren't twelve any more.

'Juliet Clarke?' The receptionist called my name and I looked down the corridor to see Sean poking his head out and smiling.

'See you soon, Jules,' said Mum. 'Have fun.' I think it came out of her mouth before she realized. Or maybe she only realized when she saw my face twist. Which probably wasn't fair. I didn't mind physio when I was there. And Sean was great.

'Hello, my favourite patient. How are you today? Ready to start our training for the Belfast marathon?' He smiled and closed the door behind me.

'Ha, ha,' I said. 'Marathon runners are mental.'

'I agree completely,' said Sean.

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‘Haven’t you done like ten or something?’

‘Yep. Awful things. How are you, anyway?’

‘I’m fine.’ I gave him a thumbs up.

‘You’re not with your mum now, Jules. How are you really? Worse? Better? So bad you have to beg to listen to your mum’s Celine Dion music to numb the pain?’

‘Celine doesn’t even touch the edges.’

He sucked air in through his teeth. ‘That *is* bad. Where hurts?’

I almost laughed when he asked that. ‘My left wrist doesn’t hurt,’ I said.

He put his hand on his chin and studied me for a minute. ‘Bollocks,’ he said.

And that caught me off guard. I laughed. ‘It’s not very professional to swear, you know.’

‘Yeah, but I made you laugh. Would I be right in saying it’s something you don’t do much of any more?’

I couldn’t answer straight away.

‘See? I’m a physio and a therapist all in one,’ he continued.

‘Don’t quit the day job.’ I smiled. But he was right – I couldn’t really remember the last time I had laughed.



6

Ronan

The girl I dropped the salad on was in my English class. Jules. When she left halfway through, she caught me looking at her. It wasn't like I was drooling or anything but at the same time I'm not *not* going to stare when there's someone blatantly hot right in front of me. She was probably thinking about how much of a clumsy idiot I was. I shook the scene from my mind.

The rest of English dragged. I just about made it to the end of class before I had to get out of school completely.

I thought I'd kept a low-profile when I left, but I heard Luke shouting after me as I was walking out of the school gates. If it'd been someone else, I might have turned round, but I couldn't face any more of him. I shoved my hands into my pockets and turned up my music until it was screaming in my ears. I went the long way home, through Sycamore Close, just in case there were any teachers about.

The first thing I noticed when I turned the corner on to our street was our empty driveway. Relief followed. Mum wasn't home. The last thing I needed right now was to listen to her.

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Ciaran listened to Mum, to every word she said. To the constant talk about going to Cambridge, about winning the Silver Pawn Chess Invitational. The tournament that was happening here next month. That's what happens when you listen to her. Your life falls apart.

I closed my bedroom door, turned up my music on the Bluetooth speaker and opened my laptop. I scrolled through Reddit, not really reading anything. But something caught my attention and made me stop. An ad.

CHESS LIFE – chat while you play.

Completely anonymous. Bringing chess to YOUR life.

Chess was my life. *Was*. Past tense. I kept scrolling. Not really looking at the screen at all. I missed it. The chess. Ciaran and I used to play for hours, holed up in his room listening to death metal. He'd always win, but he always said it just took practice and I'd easily be as good as him one day. Since he's gone, it hurts too much. I put everything away: chessboards, books, awards. I even hid Ciaran's playbook under his mattress. The leather-bound 'secret' notebook was where he wrote down all his moves and studied them as if his life depended on it. If it all disappeared, I wouldn't have to think about it.

But I slipped. I couldn't remember how Bobby Fischer had won the game against Donald Byrne in New York in 1956. Ciaran was obsessed with Bobby Fischer. The Grünfeld Defence. That's how he'd won. I meant to delete my search history, to get rid of all the evidence. I guess I forgot. But the

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algorithms didn't. Then the ads started again. The ones for expensive boards and chess retreats, and now, Chess Life.

I let the cursor hover over the little pawn icon for the Chess Life website. It was anonymous. It would be like playing a computer, wouldn't it?

My heartbeat was in my ears again.

'Free trial' for one month.

Wise the fuck up, Ronan. Don't be a pussy.

I clicked on it.

A month wasn't long. And I could unsubscribe at any time. I probably wouldn't even like it – it was hardly the same as playing a real person.

After I filled in my email address, a box popped up. Screen name? Well, it was anonymous so obviously I couldn't use my real name. I let myself focus on the music. 'Angel of Death' was playing. I typed it in. Taken? Seriously? I twisted round to look at the posters on my walls for inspiration and felt the pawn in my pocket, digging into my thigh. The pawn. A lonely pawn.

The screen burst to life. You could send people invitations, or you could be randomly assigned someone to play. There was a little chat box on the side so you could – what? Talk and laugh at them for their terrible moves?

All this chess shit was bringing him back into my head.

I closed my laptop. What a stupid idea.

I thought about going into his room. The room that Mum constantly tidied. Instead, I turned my music up, so high it hurt my ears.

It was better than listening to the screaming in my own head.

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7

Juliet

'Knock, knock,' Dad said, from outside my bedroom door. He'd just got home from work and always came up to say hello.

'Yeah?' I called.

'I got us some pizza from that place you love. Are you coming down?' He poked his head into my room.

'Yeah, I'll be down in a minute.'

'Heard you were skiving again?' Dad said.

'You know me,' I smiled. 'Mad for missing class.'

'Everything go OK?'

'Fine, Dad. Same old.'

'You're the bravest girl I know.'

'It was just physio.' I pulled myself off the bed and laughed at Jeffrey chasing his own tail, to mask the shooting pains in my legs.

There it was again. That word, *brave*. I never liked it. People threw it around like it meant something, like having joints that didn't do what they were supposed to do somehow made me brave. It didn't. I didn't *ask* for all this pain and I was just doing what anyone would do in my position, trying to pretend it didn't exist.

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‘After dinner, do you fancy a game of chess?’ he asked. ‘Oh, and there’s post for you. That magazine that you love, I think.’

‘Sure, to the chess,’ I said. ‘And great, thanks.’

The magazine was a subscription to *Teen Queen*, this fashion magazine that Mum thought she’d discovered. I don’t think she knew I read the whole thing online anyway.

More than that. I’d save the pictures of celebrities into this file on my laptop in a folder named ‘English Revision’. It was pathetic really. Mostly shots of famous women and teens in skirts, dresses, cut-off jeans, chosen so I could study their perfect knees and dream for ten minutes. I daydreamed about what it must be like to have knees like that. The whole joint outlined, the dents at the bottom of their tanned thighs where lean muscles protruded. I’d pore over the clothes I could never wear. Would it hurt to get on? Anything without buttons was hard to take off. Would it show my knees? Skirts and dresses were out. Was the material stiff? It would bunch up in my crutches. I got the same feeling when I looked at the pictures every night before bed, an aching in my chest and a lump in my throat that had nothing to do with arthritis. But it was like I was compelled to do it. A punishment for having this stupid broken body.

Mum was so excited when I opened my first subscription after my seventeenth birthday that I pretended I loved it and spent an hour once a month with her, looking at pictures of beautiful women with perfect joints and perfect lives, even though it hurt more this way. In the open. Mum acted like I looked just like them, the perfect people. I’d just nod along, smiling when she said how lovely the clothes would look on me, like I believed it too.

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In my head, it was one small payback to a mum whose life I'd already ruined a million times over. To a mum who'd put her dreams on hold because of me.

So when she treated me like I was twelve years old, I gritted my teeth and didn't say anything. When we looked at the magazine, I listened to the 'that would look amazing on you'. And I didn't complain when she came home from work with bags of new clothes for me, hanging them up in my wardrobe when I was at school and surprising me when I got home. My surprised face was almost as believable as my 'I'm fine' face.

I went downstairs, the smell of pizza making me realize how hungry I was. We hardly ever ate pizza.

'Your seat, *madam*,' said Dad, pulling out a chair and waving me to it. I rolled my eyes and smiled. Mum had set the huge bowl of salad she'd made beside my placemat. She didn't say anything, but over the last few years our diets had changed drastically. At first it was no meat, then no dairy, then no carbs. Now it was no sugar. I'd seen her watching programmes on how diet can affect inflammation and then she'd just pass it off as something she wanted to try herself. I just went with it.

'So, what did Sean say today then?' Dad asked.

'Just said to keep doing my exercises, keep the joints mobile, same old.'

But it wasn't the 'same old'. I was hoping he wouldn't, but Sean had noticed the muscle wastage. The way my thigh muscles had faded to nothing in the last few months. He told me how quickly you lose muscle mass and how it was so easy to do with my 'condition'. He told me I needed to really work on my quads, how more muscle would take pressure off the