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Glimpse

Written by

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The Highwayman

PART ONE

I

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding –
    Riding – riding –
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.

II

He'd a French cocked-hat on his forehead, a bunch of lace at his chin,
A coat of the claret velvet, and breeches of brown doe-skin;
They fitted with never a wrinkle: his boots were up to the thigh!
And he rode with a jewelled twinkle,
    His pistol butts a-twinkle,
His rapier hilt a-twinkle, under the jewelled sky.

III

Over the cobbles he clattered and clashed in the dark inn-yard,
And he tapped with his whip on the shutters, but all was locked and barred;
He whistled a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Bess, the landlord's daughter,
Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.

IV

And dark in the dark old inn-yard a stable-wicket creaked
Where Tim the ostler listened; his face was white and peaked;
His eyes were hollows of madness, his hair like mouldy hay,
But he loved the landlord's daughter,
The landlord's red-lipped daughter,
Dumb as a dog he listened, and he heard the robber say –

V

'One kiss, my bonny sweetheart, I'm after a prize to-night,
But I shall be back with the yellow gold before the morning light;
Yet, if they press me sharply, and harry me through the day,
Then look for me by moonlight,
Watch for me by moonlight,
I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way.'

VI

He rose upright in the stirrups; he scarce could reach her hand,
But she loosened her hair i' the casement! His face burnt like a brand

As the black cascade of perfume came tumbling over his breast;
And he kissed its waves in the moonlight,
(Oh, sweet, black waves in the moonlight!)
Then he tugged at his rein in the moonlight, and galloped away to the West.

PART TWO

I

He did not come in the dawning; he did not come at noon;
And out o' the tawny sunset, before the rise o' the moon,
When the road was a gypsy's ribbon, looping the purple moor,
A red-coat troop came marching –
Marching – marching –
King George's men came marching, up to the old inn-door.

II

They said no word to the landlord, they drank his ale instead,
But they gagged his daughter and bound her to the foot of her narrow bed;
Two of them knelt at her casement, with muskets at their side!
There was death at every window;
And hell at one dark window;
For Bess could see, through her casement, the road that he would ride.

III

They had tied her up to attention, with many a sniggering jest;
They had bound a musket beside her, with the barrel beneath her breast!

'Now, keep good watch!' and they kissed her.
She heard the dead man say –
Look for me by moonlight;
Watch for me by moonlight;
I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way!

IV

She twisted her hands behind her; but all the knots held good!
She writhed her hands till her fingers were wet with sweat or blood!
They stretched and strained in the darkness, and the hours crawled by like years,
Till, now, on the stroke of midnight,
Cold, on the stroke of midnight,
The tip of one finger touched it! The trigger at least was hers!

V

The tip of one finger touched it; she strove no more for the rest!
Up, she stood up to attention, with the barrel beneath her breast,
She would not risk their hearing; she would not strive again;
For the road lay bare in the moonlight;
Blank and bare in the moonlight;
And the blood of her veins in the moonlight throbbed to her love's refrain.

VI

Tlot-tlot; tlot-tlot! Had they heard it? The horse-hoofs ringing clear;
Tlot-tlot, tlot-tlot, in the distance? Were they deaf that they did not hear?
Down the ribbon of moonlight, over the brow of the hill,

The highwayman came riding,
    Riding, riding!
The red-coats looked to their priming! She stood up, straight and still!

VII

Tlot-tlot, in the frosty silence! *Tlot-tlot*, in the echoing night!
Nearer he came and nearer! Her face was like a light!
Her eyes grew wide for a moment; she drew one last deep breath,
Then her finger moved in the moonlight,
    Her musket shattered the moonlight,
Shattered her breast in the moonlight and warned him – with her death.

VIII

He turned; he spurred to the West; he did not know who stood
Bowed, with her head o'er the musket, drenched with her own red blood!
Not till the dawn he heard it, his face grew grey to hear
How Bess, the landlord's daughter,
    The landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Had watched for her love in the moonlight, and died in the darkness there.

IX

Back, he spurred like a madman, shrieking a curse to the sky,
With the white road smoking behind him and his rapier brandished high!
Blood-red were his spurs i' the golden noon; wine-red was his velvet coat,

When they shot him down on the highway,
    Down like a dog on the highway,
And he lay in his blood on the highway, with the bunch of lace at his throat.

X

And still of a winter's night, they say, when the wind is in the trees,
When the moon is a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
When the road is a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
A highwayman comes riding –
    Riding – riding –
A highwayman comes riding, up to the old inn-door.

XI

Over the cobbles he clatters and clangs in the dark inn-yard;
He taps with his whip on the shutters, but all is locked and barred;
He whistles a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
    Bess, the landlord's daughter,
Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.

Alfred Noyes, 1906

Chapter One

GOALS (HOW TO BECOME NORMAL)
NO NIGHTMARES
NO GLIMPSES
STOP WORRYING DAD
GET FRIENDS

I scrutinized Miss Mahoney's face as she read. Her eyebrows had been raised for a few minutes now. I ran through each of the four points in my head. She must have read them ten times. I wished I knew what she was thinking.

She lay the paper face down on the desk and spread her hands over it as though it might fly up and hit her in the face.

'Liz,' she began.

My stomach tensed. She didn't like it. I'd learnt early on in our year of meetings that her 'I'm being serious now' voice was not a good sign.

'This list . . .'

She fixed her gaze on a point somewhere over my left shoulder instead of meeting my eye. She really didn't like it.

'This list . . . Now, it goes without saying that I am happy

for you. Delighted for you. I wouldn't normally advise students to move schools at this point in their studies, but I know being at Jameson Secondary has not been easy. I can understand why you're itching to get away.' She finally turned her gaze to me and I made an effort to stop fidgeting in my chair. 'However, this whole obsession with being normal . . .'

I folded my arms around me.

'"Normal" is meaningless, Liz. You are only as normal as you feel inside.'

I sighed. 'That's the point,' I said, picking my satchel off the floor and resting it on my knee.

'I'm pleased you've written down some goals like I asked you to, but I was thinking of something more achievable. More . . .' She waved her hands as if trying to pull the right words to her.

'These are achievable, miss. Well, the first three anyway.'

The corners of her mouth drooped. 'How?'

'I'll be gone from this school. I'll be living in a different house.'

'And the nightmares will stop, just like that? Your "Glimpses"—' she made quotation marks in the air with her fingers '—will stop?'

'Yes.' My heart was pounding, the way it always did when someone tried to talk to me about my Glimpses. I glanced pointedly towards the door.

Miss Mahoney sighed and leaned back in her chair. She looked at me for a long moment. I wrapped the lace hem of my dress around my finger and tried to keep my face calm.

'I know you don't want to hear this again,' she said, 'but I need to remind you that you can't expect to run from your

problems, as if they're separate from you. I'm concerned that you're setting yourself up for disappointment—'

I stood up, cutting her short with the squeak of my chair on the tiles. I pressed my satchel to my chest like a shield. 'Well, you can stop worrying about me now, miss.' I pursed my lips together and stared at an ink stain on her desk, not wanting to see the sympathy I knew would be in her eyes.

She held my 'Normality List' out to me. 'I just don't want you to have unrealistic expectations.'

I took the paper and pushed it into the outside pocket of my bag. 'I'm going to be fine.'

'I hope so, Liz.'

The lunch bell rang, punctuating the end of her sentence. The corridor outside her office exploded with the noise of classroom doors banging open, the pound and squeak of feet racing to join the lunch queue, 'No running!' yelled by a teacher.

My stomach clenched. But then I remembered – this was my last lunchtime here; my very last – and my tension eased. I reached for the door handle. 'Bye, then. And thanks.'

Miss Mahoney's raised voice followed me as I stepped into the flow of bodies in the corridor. 'Bye, Liz. I'm only an email away if you need me.'

I gave her a last smile as the door swung shut behind me. I won't be emailing, I thought. Four hours from now, the nightmare of my school life here would be over. Five weeks from now I'd be leaving this town for good. Things could only get better.

I looked down, held my satchel to my chest like a battering ram, and headed through the corridors. The crowd thinned as I moved away from the dining hall. By the time

I'd reached my locker, I was as alone as I ever was at Jameson Secondary.

Finally breathing easy, I put my satchel on the floor, opened my locker, and pulled out my lunchbox.

'What have you got for me today, freakazoid?'

An ink-stained hand plucked the box from my fingers. I slammed my locker door shut to reveal Derek, busy examining the contents of my lunchbox through its transparent lid. His friends – his usual gang, three boys and two girls – grinned over at me from behind him. One of the girls, Danielle, waved; a sarcastic wiggle of her fingertips.

'Give that back!' I lunged for the lunchbox, tripping over my satchel and sending it spinning towards Danielle. Danielle squealed and jumped sideways, like my bag was something disgusting, then picked it up and threw it to Leah. Leah echoed Danielle's squeal and let my bag whack to the floor. My books spilled around Derek's feet.

'Stop it!' My voice was small, like my lungs had shrivelled. I balled my fists at my sides.

Derek shook my lunchbox, making peanut butter smear across the plastic. 'What is this?' His tone was bright, like we were having a friendly conversation. 'Diarrhoea sandwiches? Your dad send you to school with diarrhoea sandwiches, did he, loony?'

I wanted to tell him to shut up. I wanted to tell him we weren't twelve any more; that I didn't care what he said, because after today I'd never see him again. But all that came out when I opened my mouth was another weak, 'Give it back.'

Derek held the box towards me, a smile on his round face. 'Go on, then. Take it.'

I hesitated, then reached for it. With a flick of his wrist,

Derek flung my lunchbox past me as if it were a Frisbee. It banged against a wall further down the corridor. There was a rustle, splat and crunch as the contents fell out.

'Oops. Slipped. No shit sandwiches for you today.'

I folded my arms across my chest. My heart pounded against my ribcage. Four more hours, and I'd never have to go through this again, I told myself. One more missed lunch didn't matter.

'You've got what you wanted.' My voice was almost a whisper. 'Please leave me alone.'

'Leave you alone?' Derek's eyebrows shot up, his new eyebrow ring – which had already earned him multiple detentions – glinting in the light. He lowered his voice to a whisper and leaned close enough for me to smell his cheap aftershave. 'But I thought you were never alone.'

I stiffened. Though I knew he was winding me up, the hairs rose on my arms, making my skin tighten. Without warning, the sensation on my skin intensified into full-blown pins and needles. No. Please not now. Not in front of him . . . But it was now. The tingling spread across my skin like flames.

I gasped and stumbled backwards, bashing my heels against the bottom of the lockers. Unable to stop myself, I scanned the corridor, my eyes wide. No, no, no . . .

'Oh my God, she's scaring me!' Danielle shrieked gleefully, grabbing Derek's arm.

'And the freak show begins,' Derek said. 'Luke, get your phone out. I want a video of this. I'm going to miss Loony over the summer.'

I pressed my back against the locker doors. I didn't know which way it was going to come from, but I had to be ready to run.

I saw it. Behind Leah's head. A pair of disembodied hands.

I knew those hands. Of all the Glimpses I'd seen at Jameson Secondary – the booted feet that had run towards me, the eyes that had glared at me, the mouths that had snarled at me, the torsos that had floated behind me – I knew those hands the best. I knew every coarse, black hair sprouting from the pale skin. Knew the exact red of the shiny, stretched nubs where thumbs should be.

They were the hands that had attacked me in year seven, making me scream – the first time Derek noticed me.

They were the hands that had earned me the title Loony Lizzie, when they'd attacked me in a Science lesson in year eight.

And now they were ruining my last day at Jameson Secondary.

I watched, transfixed, barely daring to breathe, as the eight pale fingers tangled in Leah's shoulder-length hair. I couldn't tell whether they were trying to caress her bottle-blonde locks or pull them.

Leah, of course, had no clue. She grinned at me, and made circles next to her ear with her index finger. 'Looooony,' she sing-songed.

One of the hands freed itself from Leah's hair and copied her gesture, circling her other ear. Then, in sickening slow motion, it pointed its long index finger at me.

I shrieked and ducked as the hands flew straight for me, fingers spread. They slashed across my cheek with a sensation light and creepy as moth-wings, then disappeared down the corridor behind me. The tingling on my skin cut off, like my body was a conductor and someone had pulled the plug.

The hysterical laughter of Derek's gang filled my ears.

'Jeez, don't pee yourselves,' Derek told his friends, though

he could barely get the words out, he was laughing so much. 'Good show, Loonz.'

He turned away from me, which was the cue for the others to leave. They kicked the contents of my bag – my school books, my pencil case, my purse – halfway down the corridor with them, before they finally got bored.

'Watch out for men in white coats over the summer,' Derek called over his shoulder, before they rounded the corner. 'Though even a straitjacket would be an improvement. At least then your grandma could get her dresses back.'

The peals of Danielle's and Leah's laughter echoed down the corridor towards me.

I hissed every swear word I knew, standing up for myself too late, as always. I looked down at my vintage purple dress – a seventies charity shop find I'd been proud of, until this moment – and tugged angrily at its lace cuffs. I was glad I hadn't told anyone but the teachers I was leaving. I could only imagine the torture Derek would have inflicted if he'd known this was his last chance.

Shaking with adrenaline, I gathered the contents of my bag and the bits of my lunch that were still edible from the floor. I kept an eye out, but the Glimpse-hands had gone, their damage done.

I thought of the creepy way those fingers had tangled in Leah's hair, and shuddered. Miss Mahoney was wrong. I might be the only one who saw Glimpses, but there was no way those horrors came out of my own head. I was messed up, but not that messed up.

No. The Glimpses were real, just like Derek was real; and that was why I was going to be able to leave them behind, just like I was going to leave Derek behind. By the time I got to

my next school, my nightmares and the Glimpses and Derek and his stupid cronies would be gone, and no one there would know a thing about me.

Six weeks from now, I was going to seem perfectly normal, for the first time in seven years.

Chapter Two

This isn't happening. Concentrate, and the pins and needles will go away. Concentrate, and there won't be anything there.

I edge towards my bedroom door. With each step the tingling gets worse. Dread churns in my stomach. It's like I'm ten years old again. This should have ended.

Nausea rolls through me and I clamp a hand over my mouth. My fingers burn where they press my teeth into my lips. It's in my room. My new room.

Wait.

Like a compass needle, my focus flips. I freeze, my skin on fire where I'm touching the door handle. It's moved. It's . . .

Behind me.

My back bristles, not with pins and needles, more painful – more like daggers and blades.

Fighting every instinct, I turn. I don't want to see, I don't want to see, I don't want . . .

I see it.

The Glimpse.

★

I slid out of bed and picked the crumpled ball of paper off the floor. I'd almost got it in the bin, not bad for a half-asleep throw.

Smoothing it with one hand, I looked again at the offensive words: '1. No nightmares'.

Okay, so my resolutions hadn't got off to a good start. No big deal. No need to give up so quickly.

I padded across the floorboards to the boxes piled in the corner – I really had to unpack today – rooted for some sticky tack, and fastened the crinkled list to my wardrobe door. White tack, white paper, white wardrobe. Everything in my new room was white. The door, the bed covers, the furniture, the shutters at the window. Even the exposed beams that criss-crossed the walls and ceiling, that were dark brown in the rest of the inn, were painted white here. That's why I'd chosen this room. It was a blank canvas.

Bang bang bang bang bang.

'Liz? Liz! Are you okay in there?'

Bang bang bang bang bang.

'Dad, what's wrong?'

'I heard you shrieking.' His voice was muffled by the thick door, but the worry in it was obvious.

I winced. 'I'm fine.'

I really had to work on 'No nightmares'. It would help a ton with 'Stop worrying Dad'.

'Are you almost ready for school?'

I frowned. School was still hours away. I was up early; my alarm hadn't even gone off yet. My gaze slid to the bedside table, finding the digital display of my alarm clock. The very blank display of my alarm clock. I hadn't plugged it in.

I inhaled sharply. 'Dad, what time is it?' I didn't bother to sound calm this time.

'I'm coming in.' Dad pushed my door open. He stared at me from the threshold, his eyes wide beneath his glasses, his pyjamas rumpled, his hair wild from sleep. 'Liz, you're still in your nightie.'

'What time is it, Dad?'

'Seven forty-five.'

Twenty minutes until my bus. Twenty minutes until my first bus journey, on my first day at the new school.

I yelped, and dived for the pile of clothes I'd laid out yesterday.

'I'll make you breakfast,' Dad said, and speed-stumbled away.

I pulled on my brand-new jeans and shirt and ran down the worn carpet to the nearest bathroom, pulling my unbrushed hair into a ponytail on the way. There was no time to tiptoe through the corridors like I had yesterday, no time to think about the abandoned rooms I passed.

The dank air of the small bathroom filled my mouth. I scrubbed it away with a thirty-second toothbrushing, then ran back to my room for my bag and half fell down the unfamiliarly steep stairs.

Dad stood at the bottom of the staircase, a plate of toast in his hand.

'You eat it,' I said. 'Sorry, no time. Bye, Dad.'

I pushed open the inn's heavy front door and headed into the dull morning. I shivered. I should have brought a jacket. I'd have given anything for one of my comfortable, thick dresses and a pair of tights right then, but I was taking no chances: nobody would call me 'granny girl' again.

Just school, just school, just school.

I crunched across the gravel towards the road, skirting

around the gnarled tree that filled the driveway. I slowed only to slip a compact mirror from my jeans pocket. For a second, the reflection of the Highwayman Inn loomed in the glass, framed by dark clouds that promised rain. The inn looked like an abandoned building from a horror movie.

My face was scarier though. My unwashed curls sucked to my scalp, then exploded out of my ponytail like broken tarantula legs. My eyes were puffy and rimmed with shadows, and my cheeks were pale.

So much for first-day-at-school attractive. Six weeks of summer holiday hair-and-make-up prep wasted because I forgot to plug in my alarm. I looked like a corpse with issues.

At least my outfit – skinny jeans and a fitted white shirt – would pass for 'normal'. I'd chosen it straight from the pages of a magazine, accessories and all, for being just the right blend of fashionable and forgettable. The only things that were 'Liz' about my outfit were my old leather satchel and my gold heart-shaped locket. I tugged the necklace straight under my shirt collar, and rounded the corner out of the inn's driveway.

I could feel them watching as I started down the road towards the bus stop. I scanned the queue as I got closer, passing a row of chocolate-box cottages. I ignored the kids in uniform – they wouldn't be going to my new sixth form, they were no threat. It was the faces of the students in jeans and dresses and logo-ed T-shirts that I scrutinized. A few of them stared at me right back, but seemed nonplussed. I silently congratulated my new clothes – score one for New Liz.

At the edge of the group, a goth couple were latched in an unending kiss. I moved to the other side of the crowd. I held back from speaking to anyone.

Less than a minute after my arrival, the double-decker

pulled up to the kerb. I hadn't taken the bus to school in years, not since Derek had moved to my part of town.

My nerves jittered as I joined the back of the sloppily formed queue. When I got to the front, I flashed my pass at the driver in the nonchalant way I'd seen the other girls do, and took the stairs to the upper deck, where I found an empty pair of seats at the back. Today was all about number four on my list – 'Get friends' – but I wouldn't introduce myself to anyone yet. Not till I'd worked out who they were and how nosey they were likely to be.

'Down the corridor, up the stairs, turn left, and 12G's the third door on your right.' The receptionist circled a room on a map of the school and handed it to me along with a timetable. 'Smile, love. We're all friendly here.'

I shoved my way through the scrum of first-year students and their parents at the reception desk. The school map sprawled across the paper. Noyes College was the only sixth form for miles, and served all the local villages. It must have been at least twice as big as my last sixth form. I couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not. More potential friends, but also more potential enemies.

Right now, it was bad. I twisted the map and frowned.

'Need a hand?'

I recognized the girl instantly as one of the goths from the bus. She was dressed all in black, with New Rock boots, which looked too heavy for her slight frame, and a tutu-like skirt with stiff net layers. Her chin-length bob was black, with a slash of red dye through the fringe. Black eyeshadow ringed her eyes – which were rapidly changing from friendly to 'maybe I shouldn't have asked' the longer I stared at her.

Smile, Liz. I beamed so suddenly that the girl's eyebrows shot up. 'Yes! Thanks. I'm trying to find 12G?'

She smiled, and jerked her chin to the right. 'Easy. I'll show you. I'm Susie, by the way.'

'Liz.'

Susie set off through the teeming corridors, and I followed. For a moment, everything felt incredibly surreal; familiar and alien at the same time. Automatically, my head lowered and my gaze dropped to the floor, but I caught myself in time and pulled both higher. As far as anyone here knew, I was as normal as they were, I reminded myself.

'Did you just move here, or something?' Susie looked back over her shoulder at me as we climbed a flight of stairs.

'Yes, on Saturday.' I picked up my pace to catch up with her.

A boy coming down the stairs the other way nearly barrelled into me. He stopped short with a tsk of annoyance. 'Sorry,' I blustered.

Susie reached back and caught my satchel strap, tugging me to the side. 'Keep to the left. School rule.' She pushed through some double doors at the top of the stairs. We entered a corridor of classrooms. Groups of students chatted by the lockers. Susie wound between them.

'I saw you coming from the Highwayman Inn this morning.' Her voice held an open question.

I grimaced internally. I knew I couldn't keep my new home a secret – not the way I planned to keep some other facts a secret – but it was a definite flaw in my plan to seem normal. The Highwayman Inn was not a normal house. Derek would have loved that.

Susie stopped outside a door with a fresh, white '12G' painted on the wood. She looked at me expectantly.

I felt for the familiar shape of my locket. 'Um, yeah,' I said. 'The inn belonged to my granddad, but he died a few months ago and left it to us.'

Her face lit up with genuine glee. 'Oh my God, you live there? You own it?'

I nodded, and couldn't help beaming back at her in relief.

'That is so cool!' Susie exclaimed. 'We went on an English trip there in year seven. We were studying that highwayman poem, you know?'

I nodded – I knew. Derek would have loved that too; I had moved into an inn famous for inspiring an old poem about ghosts. Derek had always told everyone that I was crazy, that I thought I saw ghosts. I wasn't sure what my Glimpses were, but if they were ghosts (dear God, I hoped not) they definitely weren't romantic spirits like in that poem.

Doesn't matter any more, I reminded myself. I'd left the Glimpses behind.

I tuned back into Susie's gushing.

'You're going to get so much attention from the English teachers,' she was saying. 'You noticed the highwayman statue in the school car park, right?'

I nodded again.

'If you live at the inn, does that mean you've got your own bar? Does your bedroom have chandeliers?'

I nodded. Shook my head. 'There's a bar. But no chandeliers.'

'It's got to be haunted.' She bit her lip with glee.

I stopped smiling. 'No.' The word came out too hard, too serious, but Susie was already turning away, and I hoped she hadn't noticed.

'See you on the bus, yeah?' She disappeared into the crush.

'Thanks!' I called after her, a moment too late.

I tugged hard on my necklace, trying to regain my composure. Susie thought the inn was cool, she knew nothing about me; everything was fine.

Chapter Three

I peered into room 12G through the glass panel in the door. Compared to the first-day-back excitement in the corridors, it looked an oasis of calm. A man with a grey beard – 12G's form teacher, I guessed – pored over a pile of papers at his desk. The rest of the room was empty, chairs stacked neatly behind freshly polished tables. From the few maps and flags pinned to the walls, I guessed 12G was a Geography room.

Teachers were one of the few things about school that didn't bother me – a good thing considering the number of extra classes I'd had to attend over the years – so I tapped on the glass and went in.

The man looked up. Before either of us could speak, the bell rang. The classroom door crashed open behind me. Students burst through the door like sprinters crossing the start line of a race.

'You must be Elizabeth Rathamore,' the teacher called, over the stampeding of feet and the scraping of chairs. 'I'm Mr Scholars. I'll catch up with you at break. I've had some notes through from your old school, from a Miss Mahoney.'

I nodded, my heart sinking. Of course my old school would send my notes through. But I'd still hoped they'd forget.

I joined the rush to find a chair. Most had already been filled. This was a crucial moment – I knew from experience that being stuck in the wrong seat could spell a year's worth of misery, especially when it came to picking partners for group work. At Jameson Secondary I'd had no choice but to sit on my own; I refused to let that happen again.

I made a beeline for a large table at the back of the room that had free spaces. 'Can I sit here?'

The four boys and two girls who'd claimed the rest of the table glanced up at me. One of the girls nodded. I slipped into one of the two empty chairs. I hoped someone would take the empty seat next to me, but when they didn't, I put my bag on it, so it would look like I'd meant it to be that way.

'You moved into that inn, didn't you? I saw you on the bus.'

I looked up to see my nearest neighbour, a girl in a bright pink top, looking at me expectantly. Her words had grabbed the attention of the rest of my table, and suddenly, I had an audience.

I smiled my best my-house-may-be-freaky-but-I'm-not smile. 'That's me.'

'Quiet, 12G!' Mr Scholars roared. I closed my eyes in a brief moment of relief as the gazes at my table slid away from me. 'So Elizabeth – heiress of the Highwayman Inn, no less – come up to the front and introduce yourself.'

A jolt of adrenaline killed my relief.

'Don't worry, I'm not an English teacher. I won't quiz you on the poem.' Mr Scholars grinned beneath his moustache.

I blinked back at him. At least I knew now that he hadn't read Miss Mahoney's notes. He wouldn't be asking me to do this if he had.

I reached down to straighten a dress I wasn't wearing – I still wasn't used to jeans – and squirmed my way up to the front of the room.

I scanned the faces in front of me. No one looked particularly hostile. No one was laughing. No one was sneering at my clothes. Still, it was impossible not to feel a familiar panic.

'Hi.' I lifted a hand in an awkward wave. 'I'm Liz. Short for Elizabeth.' I gave Mr Scholars a pleading look. *Enough?*

'And what subjects are you taking?' he asked, oblivious to my discomfort.

'English, History, Art, General Studies.'

'An arts girl, eh? None of my classes. Who here does some of those subjects and would like to show Liz around?'

Long seconds passed with a distinct lack of hands being raised. The invisible gas ring under my chin started clicking. Any moment now and I'd burn up.

'Sarah, you take History don't you?' Mr Scholars said. He fixed his eyes on a girl in the front row, who started opening and closing her mouth like a fish.

'And James, you take Art?'

A hand shot up at the back of the room. It was the pink top girl from my table. 'I'll show her,' she called.

'Thank you, Katie,' Mr Scholars said.

The classroom door flew open and bounced against the wall with a bang, making me jump. Chair legs scraped against the floor as every student in the room turned round, startled. A frazzled-looking teacher marched into the room towards me and Mr Scholars. I took my chance to dart around her and back to the safety of my seat, glad not to be the centre of attention any more.

'Mr Scholars!' the woman screeched behind me. 'I cannot

do it. I'm sick of him already and the school year's barely started.'

I buried my head in my bag, pretending to retrieve a pen that had fallen from my pencil case, and took a calming breath.

The room fell silent.

'Miss Webb,' said Mr Scholars, trying – unsuccessfully – to be discreet. 'We promised his father we'd give him another chance. There's a procedure. Verbal warnings, then written warnings, then—'

'I don't care!' Miss Webb's voice went up another decibel.

Katie winced and stuck her fingers in her ears.

'I'm not suffering another year of this. He's completely destroyed my seating arrangements already, he causes chaos wherever I put him.'

There were sniggers now, quiet ones. Katie unstuck her fingers, leaned towards me and whispered, 'Miss Webb's one of the History teachers. I'll show you where the History block is later, if you like.'

I sought for my smile muscles and mouthed a grateful, 'Thanks.'

'I'm sending him to you,' Miss Webb continued behind me. 'You can deal with him this year, Mr Scholars. I've had enough!'

The door banged again as she flounced out of the room. Giggles spread around the class.

'Class 12G, settle down.' Mr Scholars sounded tired. 'Apparently, we're going to have two new students this year. Elizabeth Rathamore and Scott Crowley.'

There was a collective groan. Even I wasn't paranoid enough to think it was over me.

I vaguely registered the sound of the classroom door opening

again as Katie leaned back towards me, her eyes sparkling. 'Scott, right, he's—'

Thunk. My bag plummeted from the chair next to me and onto the floor.

'Scott Crowley!' Mr Scholars bellowed.

My eyes drew level with a fashionably sagging waistband, then moved up to take in a grin, the silver glint of an eyebrow ring, and white-blond hair. Scott – I assumed – was tipping the chair where my bag had been at a forty-five-degree angle. When I met his eyes his expression twisted in a double-take.

'Kicked out of class before the school year's even started. Disgraceful. Sit down this minute!'

Scott didn't flinch, just smirked down at me, his eyes not leaving mine. 'Oops, was that your bag?' he said, with mock innocence. 'You must be the new girl. Sorry about that.'

Mr Scholars marched over to our table and folded his arms. 'Show over yet, Scott?'

'Carry on, sir.' Scott sat down next to me in a cloud of aftershave. For a moment I was transported right back to my old school, to Derek hanging over me, laughing through a fugue of cheap-smelling chemicals.

Scott made a show of picking my bag off the floor and returning it to me, his leg bumping mine as he did so. I took the bag, my fingers numb. I hoped I was succeeding in keeping my face blank.

This boy wasn't Derek, I told myself. I wasn't the Liz I'd been six weeks ago. And everything was going to fine.

Thunder rolled outside the windows, making the whole class groan again. I kept my face neutral, and turned my eyes on the teacher, away from Scott.