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"Not bad, Sarah."

Mrs Perry inclines her head as I sing the closing bars of the Bach, then lifts her hands from the piano keys and turns to face me. "A little wobbly in parts, especially around the adagio."

She pauses, waiting for my response.

"I'm sorry." I shift the weight on my feet. "I'm a bit tired today."

"Right." Mrs Perry gives me one of her searching looks. "I can see that, Sarah. And this is a challenging piece. Well within your capabilities, yes, but if you're going to be ready, you'll have to work much harder on it."

I nod, picking up my score from the music stand and putting it back in my bag. "I promise I'll practise more this week."

She smiles as she stands. "Remember those breathing exercises I showed you. And your posture, Sarah. You still need to focus on your posture." Mrs Perry places one hand on her belly and lifts her chin; instantly her whole body seems taller.

"Okay." I bite the inside of my lip, trying not to show that I'm upset. Or how exhausted I really am.

It doesn't work. Mrs Perry walks over, taking both my hands in hers, and looks me full in the face. I get a faint tinge of perfume, something light and floral.

"Sarah, I hope you don't feel I'm being too hard on you."

"I don't, I—"

"You're so talented, and I know you can do this. But even with a voice as lovely as yours, you need to be well prepared. In a top-level audition like this, they're looking for excellent technique as well as raw talent."

She squeezes my hands gently, then takes a step back to get me in full view.

"Are you eating properly?"

I clear my throat. "Yes."

"Seriously, Sarah, every week there seems to be less of you." She frowns. "You're not on a diet, are you?"

"No," I say quickly, withdrawing my hands from hers and grabbing my bag. "Really. I…" I can't think how to explain. That after everything that's happened, food is somehow the last thing on my mind.

Mrs Perry gives me another questioning look. "So how are things at home?"

"Fine," I lie, taking a deep breath and forcing myself to appear brighter. "Better, I mean. Mum's doing better, I think."

Mrs Perry sighs. Puts her hand on my arm. "I'm concerned, Sarah, that's all. Worried this is getting too

much for you…so soon after…"

She doesn't say it. Thank god.

"I'm okay," I say, more firmly than I intend. "I just want to get on…you know, keep going."

I can't bear the sympathy in her eyes any longer, so pull the money out of my purse and leave it on top of the piano.

"I'll see you next week," I say and dash out of the room, almost tripping over the cat in the hallway.

I know there's nothing in the fridge at home, so I call in at the corner shop on the way back. Pick up four packs of sliced bread, three tins of baked beans, a few apples and some mild Cheddar. And more butter. The one thing Mum will always eat is buttered toast – she must be just about made of the stuff by now.

But she might have a cheese sandwich. Maybe an apple if I cut one up.

I'm queuing at the till when I spot a girl with long blonde hair over by the fruit and veg, laughing into her mobile phone. Abigail Turner.

"Oh god," I mutter under my breath. I haven't seen her since summer term ended three weeks ago – and I don't want to see her now.

But it's too late. She's already spotted me.

"Hey, Sarah!" Abigail raises her hand and smiles. She says something into her phone, then pops it into her bag and heads in my direction.

"Hi! It's *so* good to bump into you." Her voice too bright for it possibly to be true. "How are you?"

"Hi, Abby. I'm fine, thanks. And you?"

"Oh, you know. Great. *Fabuloouuus*," she drawls, stretching out the word like elastic. "I'm going up to Edinburgh with Jonas next week, then we're off to Ibiza. You know, do all the clubs and beaches and stuff." She beams at me and does a funny little shiver. "I'm *so* excited!"

I can tell she's nervous. One of those people who smothers embarrassment by being extra bubbly. I try not to hold it against her.

"Wow! That's an awful lot of bread." She nods at the loaves crammed into the basket.

I muster a smile, trying to think of a polite exit. I'm sure Abigail is finding this as awkward as I am, and I need to get home and check Mum hasn't actually fallen into a coma or something.

"Just stocking up the freezer." I keep the smile fixed on my face in a way I'm hoping she'll start to find off-putting.

"Right." Abigail tucks a loose strand of hair back behind her ear with a nervous giggle. She's clearly struggling to think what else to say, and I almost feel sorry for her. She's making an effort, I remind myself; she could simply have pretended not to notice me and run away.

After all, Abigail wouldn't be the first. Since my brother died six weeks ago – barely a month after his twenty-first birthday – everyone at college seems to divide into two camps: those who go out of their way to avoid me,

and those who go out of their way to show me how much they care.

Abigail falls in the latter. Six months ago she and I would hardly have exchanged a word if we'd bumped into each other like this. It's not as if we're actually friends or anything. Not like me and Lizzie.

But ever since it happened, since Max died, she's one of those people who seizes every opportunity to be nice.

I guess I should be grateful. Instead, it makes me want to scream.

"Hey," Abigail says suddenly, "I'm having a party when I get back. You know, to celebrate getting our exam results. Tanya and Zoë are coming – they're mates of yours, aren't they?"

I nod, though in truth I've barely seen them for weeks. I've hardly seen anyone except Lizzie since it all happened. I haven't exactly been feeling sociable.

"I'll try to make it." I shuffle forwards as the person in front of me pays and moves away. "Better go." I give Abigail what I hope is an appreciative look. "Have a nice summer."

"And you!" she says, beaming, as I turn to face the cashier.

It's hot, even for August. I'm sweating by the time I get to Foxton Road, and my arms feel like they might fall off. I stop for a minute, put down the shopping. Shake some life into my fingers, then slip off my rucksack and open

it up, stuffing the apples and cheese and one of the loaves inside. I struggle to zip it up again and heave the bag back onto my shoulders.

As I straighten, I see this guy heading towards me, walking quickly, one hand thrust into the pocket of his jeans, the other punching on his mobile with his thumb.

We're both near the point where the pavement narrows between the postbox and one of those tall silvery trees, the kind with peeling bark and a fat, knobbly base. There's barely enough room for two people, let alone one hampered with shopping bags, so I pause to allow him past. He doesn't notice me waiting. He's too busy reading something on his phone.

He looks sort of familiar, though I'm pretty sure we've never met. I shudder. Oh god, please don't let it be one of my brother's friends – it's more than I can bear right now.

I edge between the two cars parked beside me, intending to cross to the other side of the road. It's a tight squeeze, and as I heave one of the bags over the front of the nearest car, the corner of the plastic catches on the wing mirror. A tin of beans spills out, bouncing off the bonnet and onto the ground, rolling under the bumper.

Damn. I bend down to retrieve it, hoping I haven't damaged the paintwork. When I get up, the man is only a metre or two away.

His gaze fixes on mine. For a second he stares at me blankly, nothing registering in his features. I'm still not sure I recognize him, though his face is hardly the kind

you'd forget. Lean and angular, with the lightest grey eyes, gazing at me with an intensity that's almost startling.

But if anyone is startled, it's him. His blank expression tightens into shock. He stops dead, and I take in the black hair, the leather jacket and dark-dyed jeans. And the twitch in his left eye; a rapid, blinking motion like a kind of tic. He doesn't move, just looks at me as if I'm the last person in the world he ever expected to see.

The last person in the world he ever *wanted* to see.

I feel my cheeks flush. What on earth is this guy playing at? Why is he gawping at me like that?

I open my mouth to speak, but he beats me to it.

"Shit," he says under his breath, then suddenly he's gone. Turns on his heels and starts walking back the way he came, only quicker, as if he can't get away fast enough. I'm so stunned that I just stand there, watching, until he darts into Cambourne Avenue and disappears out of my sight.