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HIDEOUS Beauty

WILLIAM HUSSEY

USBORNE

In memory of Marilyn Hussey.
I think you'd have really liked this one, Mum x

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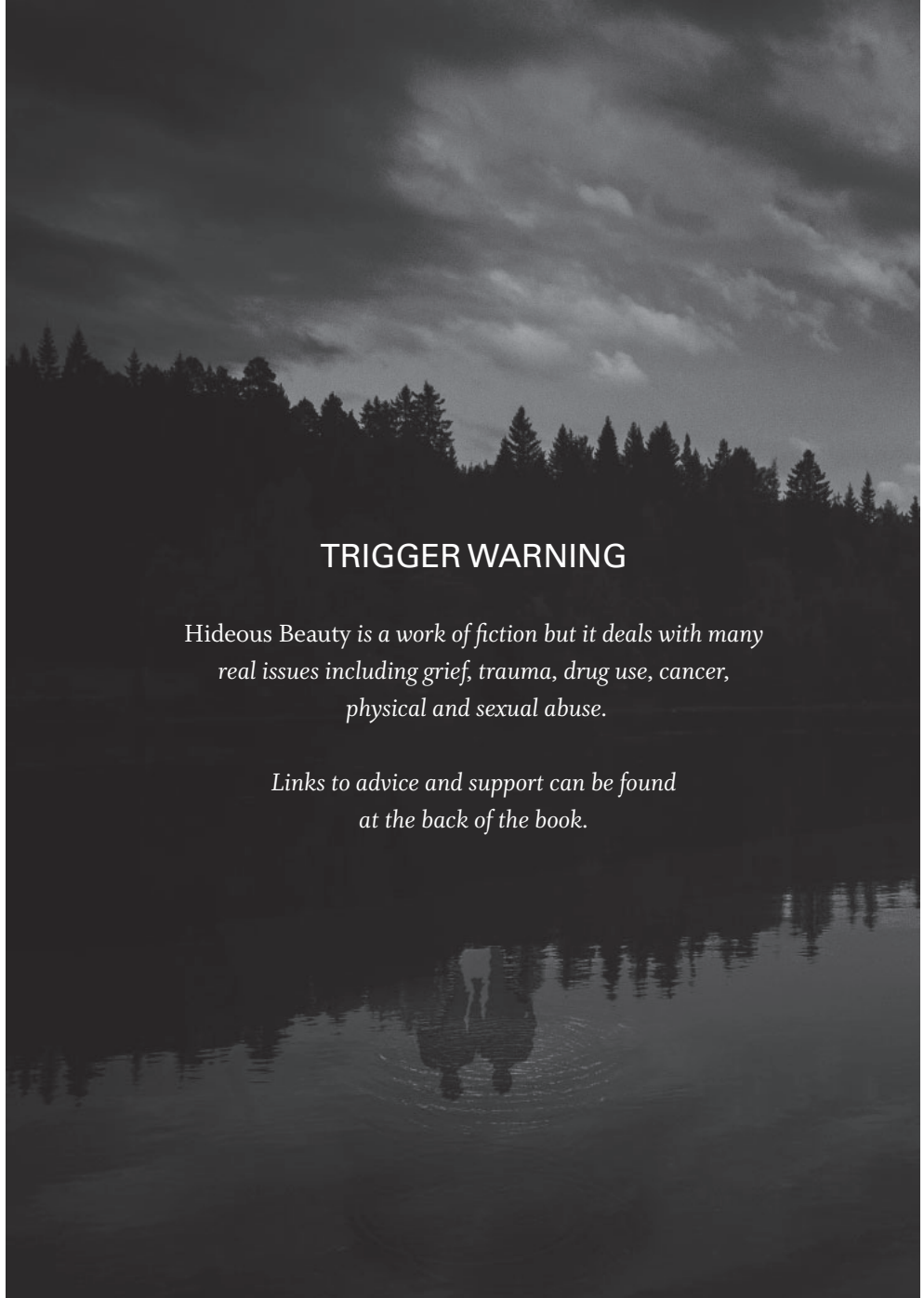
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TRIGGER WARNING

Hideous Beauty *is a work of fiction but it deals with many real issues including grief, trauma, drug use, cancer, physical and sexual abuse.*

Links to advice and support can be found at the back of the book.

NOW: Thursday 2nd April

1

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

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

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

"C'mon." He rocks my shoulder. "Don't be a drama queen. It might be fun."

"Dude, I have had more than enough 'fun' for one day."

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey, I'm not judging. As far as immense pube things go, it's a keeper."

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

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

"And your gaydar is never wrong, I suppose?"

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

"Flouncy?" I shake my head. "That's coming from *you*?"

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

It flips.

"Dylan, I mean it. Your mum and dad? That was pretty awesome. I don't think you even realize how awesome. You told your parents who you were and you got to leave

the house with all your teeth. It's one up on my coming-out story, anyway."

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

"You know," I say, "I'm always here if you—"

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

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

Except, I'm happy to say, in my case.

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

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

Well.

"Suh-*oooooo*," he prods, "can-we-can-we-can-we-can-we?"

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

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

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

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

"Looking fox-*haaaay*, Miss H!" El kind of dances around

her as we pass, and she giggles. Actually giggles. Jeeze. "You've done something with your hair. *Fssssst!* Hot as."

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

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

The bass hits us as we push through the swing doors. The usual stale funk of the gym is complemented tonight by some painfully perky pop. Ellis probably knows the name of the band, the members' ages and star signs, their favourite junk food and any scandalous rumours doing the rounds. I, meanwhile, have the musical tastes of a great-grandfather and anything post-80s Madonna might as well be ancient Sumerian as far as I'm concerned. Despite knowing this, and that I have all the co-ordination of a freshly ejected baby giraffe, El grabs the collar of my black T-shirt – always black, saves the headache of fashion

– and drags me through the crowd.

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

"Stop it," he laughs, swatting my breath away, "tickles."

"I'll do more than tickle in a minute!"

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

"Promise?"

And screw Ellis freaking Bell and his freaking gorgeous grin.

My stomach flips again.

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

Deep breath.

Here goes.

It's time to see what Ferrivale High makes of the new (improved?) Dylan McKee.

2

"You are, aren't you?" I whisper into his neck. "You are trying to kill me."

"Relax," he whispers back. "And know that, if you try to run, I *will* trip you."

The whole thing's happening so fast that I sort of forget to be petrified. Here we are at school, and I'm out, and El hasn't given me a moment to be scared. I suddenly realize this has been his plan all along. It's the last day before the Easter holidays. If he hadn't insisted on coming to the dance, storming us inside before I could catch my breath, I'd have had the whole break to worry myself stupid. This way, at least we'll get it over with. And so, yeah, I've got to hand it to my boyfriend: he is sort of a genius.

We dance on. Strobe lights from the disco heliograph across El's trademark pearls, picking them out in greens and blues and yellows. I don't think I've ever seen him without

them. Those pearls are El's insistent, glorious flourish; his little wave to the world that says he is who he is, like it or not. They are also freaking cool! I love his pearls. I love his long graceful neck and the dark pixelation of stubble around his jaw and his sharp cheekbones and his sleek black curls and his strong hands in the small of my back and…

Him. I love him.

I love you, Ellis.

I love him so much that my fear vanishes. They know, all of them. Even if they didn't get to see the video on Instagram before the mods took it down this morning, it will have been downloaded and shared a hundred times by now. When the internet has got hold of your left nipple, a little of your right butt cheek, and your face screwed up in what is either full-on ecstasy or chronic constipation, it will never let you go.

But we dance, and I watch the faces that know go by, and I just don't care.

"Kill me now," I say, and don't mean it at all.

"Why would I kill you?" he murmurs. "I've only just found you."

The rhythm changes, the tempo ramps up, and he pushes us very gently apart. He's still dancing, but whatever I've been doing – it can't by any definition known to the human race be called "dancing" – stops. I just sort of stand there, swaying.

"What do you mean?" I mouth back. I can hear him perfectly but feel I have to mime because I'm now so lost against the music. "You found me ages ago. Last November. The bonfire. A Diet Pepsi and the school band and Alistair Pardue flat on his arse. Remember?"

"I'll always remember. But I really found you tonight, Frecks."

The tempo slows again and he pulls me in, tighter than before. El's a good head taller than me and I love it, how our bodies just kind of fit together, like they were made that way. And right then I think: *Screw every single evil knuckle-scraping bigot who screams "God hates fags!" If there is a God, then he made us to fit, El and me.*

His chin grazes softly against my cheek and the crest of freckles that earned me one of my El-brand nicknames. Frecks, the Unteachable Twonk, the Prof, and McKee D – the last because of my notorious (in El's eyes) love of all junk food.

"I found you tonight when you became you," he goes on. "When you told them."

He's right. I breathe. *I am me*. Totally me in a way I never thought possible before. And I don't care any more that I can't dance and that there are people lounging against the monkey bars whispering behind their hands and laughing at us, and that a single barked "QUEERS!" erupts when the song dies down. In fact the word's a prompt and I do

something I would never have thought possible twenty-four hours ago.

I stretch up onto my tiptoes, throw my arms around his neck, and kiss Ellis.

Right there, in the gym of Ferrivale High, in front of our classmates and teachers, I snog the ever-loving face off my boyfriend. I'm still so new to kissing that I forget to close my eyes for the first few seconds, and I see El's lips hitch up at the corners. But then he gets lost in it too. He stops smiling and I shut my eyes and he cups the back of my head and I kiss him until my toes hurt. And yeah, I can still hear the giggles, but they're background music to the background music. They're tiny. Minuscule. Hate at the atomic level. They don't matter. And anyway, I also hear a voice call out: "Woooohoooooo! Go for it, McKeeeeee! Kiss that sexy centre-forward!"

A few whoops and a round of applause greet this encouragement, and then a hand falls on my shoulder.

"That'll do, gentlemen."

Mr Robarts, head teacher, looking ultra-stern. I blink up at him and he has this crappy *I'm certainly not approving of this kind of behaviour* face on. It's crappy because a second later it completely falls away and he hasn't a hope of suppressing a small smile. He pats us both on the back.

"Okay, lads, dance away, but try to keep it vaguely PG, will you? I would still like to have my job on Monday

morning, and if some of the virgins get jealous, I'll be getting calls from the parents."

"Thanks, sir," I murmur, and even El knows not to pull me back into a snog when we've been treated this fairly. Instead he twirls me on the spot and we settle into some kind of ballroom pose, my head on his chest.

I still can't believe this is happening. Just yesterday I'd have thought it impossible. Us out and proud and dancing in front of the whole school. My heart gives this single deep grateful throb. Thank you, mysterious pervy porno poster, you did me a favour after all.

It suddenly occurs to me that El hasn't spoken for all of five minutes. This is worrying. It's like a politician forgetting to lie or Michael Bay making a movie that doesn't suck balls.

"What's the matter?" I ask.

"Nothing," he grumbles, and flicks his face away from me. "It's just…"

"Ellis?"

"All right." He looks back and gives this huge theatrical sigh. "I'd just like to know who taught you how to kiss like that."

I grin. "You really want to know?"

"Yes, I want to know."

"You might not like it."

"I'm man enough to deal."

"If you're absolutely sure…?"

"Frecks."

"Okay." I let him hang for a moment. "It was your aunt, Julia. We've been having this secret affair since the very beginning. The truth is, I'm coming out tonight as a straight guy who's really into aunts."

"The dirty old cow," he says, deadpan. "I'll be having words when I get home."

He gives me another spin and I take in the gym properly for the first time. And I have to admit, the dance committee girls (who are also the debate team girls, the history club girls, the community outreach girls, the freaking LGBTQ safe-space girls, even though the closest any of them has come to queer is when Katie slipped on a bit of quiche in the lunch hall and her head ended up in Gemma Argyle's lap) have outdone themselves. The walls are covered with sugary pink banners, while giant papier-mâché Easter eggs dangle from the ceiling like huge piñata turds.

And then I see their crowning glory and stop dead.

"Oh fuck, they haven't," I murmur.

"What is it?" El asks.

And as I stare at the display of unimaginable awfulness on the far side of the room, I feel this hot needle of guilt twist in my gut. Oh sure, it hasn't been the easiest of days, what with the manic chirruping of my phone at 7 a.m. this morning:

Dude, have you seen Instagram? Maybe take a look. Nice ass, BTW

Dylan, my man! Didn't know you had it in you – but now I see that's just where you like it!!!

Dear Dyls, I'm so sorry for what you're going through. Just know, Gemma and Suze and me don't care at ALL that you're gay now xxx

Etc. etc…

I almost broke my laptop in the rush to check out what all these well-meaning friends were talking about. I sort of guessed, of course, but even as I clicked the blurry freeze-frame and the video started to play, I was whispering in my head: *Please no, please no, please no, please no.* And then, as if to mock me, my own voice came through the speakers, tinny and mortifying: "*Please, yes. Yes, El, yes!*"

So yeah, it's been a hideous and then strangely glorious day. It excuses nothing.

"Mike," I breathe. "Oh my God, Mike."

I pull back from El and weave my way through the spectators who've assembled to watch our first public dance. I'm not much good in crowds, but right now it's easy to ignore the eyes that follow me across the gym. A few of El's footie mates give me a brotherly pat as I pass. Moving

deeper, this seems to become some kind of meme, so that by the time I reach the huge blown-up picture of my best friend, my shoulder is actually aching.

Mike Berrington's big dopey handsome face grins down at me from the wall. There's the scar I gave him in nursery school when I accidentally elbowed him into the duck pond – a backward letter S that, inflated, looks like a brand across his chin. I feel El's hand slip into mine.

"What's the matter?"

I turn to him, hot tears scalding my eyes.

"Jesus, Ellis, I forgot. It's his fourth bloody session and I forgot." I see El's brow clear as he understands. "It's chemo day."

And I'm officially the worst best friend ever.

3

"Do you like it?" says Gemma Argyle, practically falling into us. She throws out her hand towards the big blown-up picture of Mike.

"What the hell is it supposed to be?" I mutter.

She looks at me as if I've just murdered her grandmother. Or worse, asked if I could borrow her Louis Vuitton ballpoint in English.

"The committee decided that this year's ball will be in honour of our brave, inspiring classmate Michael Berrington. All of tonight's ticket money will go towards buying Mike something really special, once he's finished his treatment."

"Right," El says, "lovely of you. But what the hell have you done to him?"

He gestures at the golden light that appears to be radiating out of Mike's head.

"It's the Easter Dance," Gemma explains.

"So he's…" El frowns. "Jesus?"

El has always liked Mike. He rates him highly because, as El puts it, "Mikey's smart, funny, nice to look at, and completely non-threatening to my love life." It's true. On a good day Mike could give Ansel Elgort a run for his money, but I've never once fancied him. It would be like lusting after my own brother.

"It's the season of renewal and new life and resurrection and miracles," Gemma says pertly. She ignores my groan. "And poor Mike needs all the help he can get."

Fuuuhhh-uk you! I want to say it, but don't. I think, deep down, part of all this is genuine and Gemma really does mean well. Anyway, she's not the villain in all this. I am.

I'm heading for the door when El catches up with me. I hold up my hand, palm out. "Give me a sec, okay?"

He nods, all understanding. "Tell the lazy sod I'll pop round tomorrow and we'll watch the match, if he's up for it."

I almost smile. Mike and Ellis and football. Ghosts of last autumn and the school bonfire and El's football petition and the first time I ever planted eyes on this beautiful boy run through my head. I give him a weird double-handed wave and push through the swing doors and out into the car park. It's cool and quiet outside. The tarmac shines blue-black in the moonlight. Kids are huddled in shadows,

smoking, snogging, doing other things. I rest my back against El's car and bring up my contacts.

While the call connects, I glance up at the school roof: the scene of last night's surprise picnic, organized by my amazing boyfriend – and where we were secretly filmed mid-canoodle ("canoodle"? Jesus, Dylan!). I'm starting to wonder for the thousandth time who could have done such a thing when Mike picks up.

"Hey, porn star," he sighs.

He sounds tired. God, he sounds so bloody tired. I suddenly feel cold and almost as frightened as when he first told me his news.

"Please no," I groan. "Don't tell me you watched it!"

Mike chuckles like an old man. "Honestly? No. You guys are *so* not my type."

"Aw, c'mon. If you had to choose between me and Gemma Argyle?"

"If that was the choice?" he muses. "I guess in those *very* specific circumstances, you might just get lucky."

"I'm honoured," I laugh. "Bitch."

"Bumboy."

New nicknames, nothing nasty in them, coined around Christmas when I told him. He was the first to know, except for El, of course. He came out to me so I came out to him, quid pro quo: *I have leukaemia*; *I'm gay*. We hugged each other fierce under twinkly fairy lights.

"I tried calling. Sent you a couple of messages," he says.

"Yeah, I turned off my phone after the millionth *I'd get that mole on your butt checked out* text. Anyway, none of that matters. How are you doing, Mike?"

"We'll get to my woes in a minute, Dylan." He lets out a big breath. "So I guess you've had one fucked-up day. Do you know who posted it?"

"Not a clue. But El's determined to find out."

"I can't even imagine why anyone would do something like that," Mike mutters. "But I'm with El all the way. We *will* find out who it was, Dylan, I promise."

I smile despite myself. The two most important people in my life are El and Mike. They make me feel safe and wanted, and that's no small thing.

"I called your house," Mike goes on. "Your mum told me you'd gone to the dance. Dude, seriously? The actual Ferrivale High Easter Dance? You know I love El, but sometimes I think he's a bad influence on you, undoing all my years of hard work. Remember what we used to call that thing?"

"The Dipshits Ball," I laugh. "Yeah, and it's every bit as dipshitty as we imagined. There are these great big shiny turds hanging from the ceiling, and the gym's so pink it's like they sealed all the doors and gunned down a herd of flamingos. Seriously, Mike, did you know they've stuck a giant picture of you on the wall?"

He groans. "Yeah, one of the three witches sent me a screenshot, complete with hearts and crying emojis."

"Mate, they've photoshopped the crap out of you. It looks like someone's set fire to your farts and you're basking in the afterglow."

"It looks like I'm dead," he chuckles.

He meant it as a joke, but all I can do is stare at my hand, and yeah, I know it's ridiculous, but I swear I can see our two little hands held tight together. Mike and Dylan, walking buddies, trotting along in our supervised line from junior school to the council swimming pool. Mike and Dylan, karaoke buds, hand-in-hand at Tamsin Carlisle's fourteenth birthday party, belting out "I Got You Babe" and holding up our phones like lighters. Mike and Dylan, last Christmas, holding hands, coming out in our different ways.

"So do your family know?" Mike breaks into my thoughts. "How'd they take it?"

"Good." I nod though he can't see me. "Yeah. They were okay with it."

"Really?"

He lets it hang. Thing is, I sometimes forget Mike has known my folks for almost as long as I have.

"Uh huh."

"That's great then…" he says. "If you're sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be sure?"

"Dylan. It's me."

"Okay," I sigh. "So I guess Chris could've been a bit more vocal. I basically got a headlock and my skull knuckled, but as it's a miracle he ever learned to speak in the first place, I suppose that wasn't a bad reaction. And Mum and Dad? Pretty much how you'd expect."

"And they're cool with El?"

"How are you, Mike?" I blurt out.

"I'm fine, Dylan. Really, I am."

"And your chemo? You still at the hospital?"

"Oh, the wondrous world of chemo? Yeah, today was actually all kinds of mad. In the end they had to… Ah crap. Hold on." I can hear Mike's mum – not her words, but I'd know that distant mumble anywhere. Carol's like the Godzilla of mums – scary, but in a kind of awesome and iconic way, and if you're one of her scaly lizard babies she'll protect you with her life. Luckily, I've been counted as an honorary Berrington ever since I kissed Mike when he fell over and started bawling at his fourth birthday party. I actually can't wait to tell Carol my news, even though I'm pretty sure she's already guessed. Mike comes back on the line. "Sorry, buddy. So yeah, grim day. I'll tell you all about it later. Might make you smile or maybe burst a vessel. My dad nearly took someone's head off. But look, Dylan, I really have to go. Come over tomorrow, yeah? I haven't said a word to Mum or Dad, but I know they'll bake you a freaking cake or sign us all up for Pride or something."

"It's a date."

"Night, Bumboy."

"Night, Bitch."

He hangs up. He sounds okay. Really. Just a bit tired.

I head back into the dance.

And for a moment I just watch Ellis. My heart's still full of Mike, of all the fears we've never expressed since he told me his diagnosis, and it helps a little to watch El. Watch him and know that, whatever happens next with my oldest friend, this person will help us through it, just by being there.

More people are on the dance floor now. I can't help grinning as some of the football team start dancing with each other, mimicking my and El's moves. There's no sting in it. They're laughing and pretending to make out, and it feels like a kind of tribute. In a weird way, I'm sort of proud. It's something like progress, right? A little step for Ferrivale High. Maybe next year there'll be more out kids dancing together and there'll be no parody in it at all.

I switch from the boys whispering fake sweet nothings to each other to El. He's working the room in his usual easy way. It always amazes me how he can flit between these groups and be accepted by almost all of them. Now he's laughing and joking with Gemma and the committee witches. Now he's huddled up with the rugby lads, cackling over some sports reference I'd never get. Now he's with the library kids, probably talking the latest queer fiction and

wondering whether Jane Austen was just a teeny bit bi. Then he's high-fiving this grinning parade of teachers – Dementor Harper, sweat-rings Robarts, little Miss Buchanan with her adorable moustache, Mr Morris, our history teacher, only skipping art teacher Mr Denman, just back from sick leave, who stood up too late. Sure he gets a couple of weird looks here and there, but he deals as El always deals – he makes them all silently ashamed with the hugeness of his heart.

I rock back against the monkey bars and think: *What now?* Everything in the past four months has been about me and El and making sure no one knows. Not gonna lie, it's been exhausting. But none of that effort is needed any more. I guess we can just *be*. We've got final exams coming up, then, if we get the grades (please God!) we'll be heading to Bristol in September. We decided way back we'd ditch halls and get a little student flat together. A cosy crib for two. Maybe we'll adopt a feral cat or try not to kill a goldfish for a month or two, and we'll be ultra-sociable with uni clubs and stuff, but it'll be our first real chance to exist properly together, as a couple. I get excited just thinking about it. But first there's summer, and all the possibilities of summer: El dragging me to gigs and galleries; me dragging him to comic book conventions and my favourite medieval castles and battlefields. Late nights, late mornings, breakfast in bed, reading, sketching, touching.

Me and El.

"Let's get out of here."

Another of El's whiplash moments. I'd been watching Mitchell Harrison and Joe Cotterill slow-waltzing to "Uptown Funk", laughing my head off, when suddenly he's there, right in front of me. And he's different. Ellis without at least a trace of a smile is always disconcerting. It's like you can finally see that darkness he trailed with him from Birmingham all those long months ago.

"What's the matter?" I say, catching at his sleeve.

"It's nothing. Just, let's go, okay?"

He looks over his shoulder, but I'm not sure where his eyes are focused: the committee girls; the footie lads; the library geeks; the teachers. All I know is that when he looks back at me, those perfect pink lips are trembling.

"Please can we go?" he repeats.

An unnamed fear, strange and yet horribly familiar, grips my heart. I've seen Ellis like this before – back in those dark days over Christmas when he inexplicably vanished on me. I won't go through the pain and fear of that miserable week again. I won't. We have to talk.

4

We're in the car, not moving. El sits silently in the driver's seat, his fingers plucking and twisting at his pearls. He looks…I don't know. The best I can come up with is lost. His eyes are huge and blank and it feels as if he isn't seeing me at all.

When I reach out to touch him he flinches, like I've scorched him with a cigarette. He looks down at my hand and swivels sideways in his seat, arching his back until his shoulders are almost touching the ceiling, as if being anywhere near me disgusts him in some way.

"El, Jesus, what the hell's going on?"

There's a weird sort of pleading in my voice, and I don't like it. It scares me that I've done something, today of all days, that has made him hate me. What the hell that could be, I've no idea. My mind flips back over the past thirty minutes or so. It can't be me heading off to talk with Mike,

he can't be jealous of that. El has always understood the me-and-Mike thing. So has someone said something to him? Something awful about me? I'm now tearing through my entire school career, hunting for some deep dark secret that I've never confided to El. But that's impossible. The only secret I've ever had that's been a source of inner shame was exposed this morning, and, Jesus, it was El himself who taught me there was no shame in that at all.

Okay, so maybe it isn't a secret. Maybe it's a lie. Have I been kidding myself? All those pats on the back and the football team fake-smooching on the dance floor – maybe there *was* an edge to it after all, and I was just so caught up in the giddiness of this awful, wonderful day that I misinterpreted it. Has some nasty whisper been invented?

My brain vomits up a trove of poisonous gems:

You know McKee's a secret slut, don't you, Ellis? Sucked off half the footie lads before you rolled into town.

I heard he's been two-timing you with [insert name here] *and they're gonna break it to you soon.*

Ellis, man, wake up. He isn't even gay. He just tried it out for a laugh. You know, like a phase?

Funny how the brain works. I know deep down that

it's all complete bullshit, but each of these imaginary conversations seems more plausible than the last. I even start thinking up ways to counter them:

Holy Christ, Ellis, a slut? Was there anyone on the planet who could've out-virgined me back when we met?

Two-timing? Like I'd be able to fit in a secret affair between homework, history club, uni applications and snogging your face off every break period?

Not gay? Seriously? Not *gay? The only thing about me that* isn't *gay is my dance moves.*

But all I can say is: "Ellis. Please, talk to me."

My heart is like a bird smashing itself against the cage of my ribs. But I decide I have to be brave. I reach for him again.

His reaction terrifies me. He pushes out the flat of his hand to meet mine, and I think, *This is it. There's no going back from this. I don't know what's happened, don't know what's been said, but if he thrusts me away physically my heart will break and I'll go right back to being the Dylan of six months ago. Screw that, it'll be worse, because once you're out there's no going back, and now I'll be out alone. Not just alone either. I was alone for seventeen years, but at least then I didn't know what the alternative could feel like. I didn't have this…this fullness in my life* – it's a crappy description, but it's the best I can do – *so what will be left of me, when he goes?*

Empty people don't know they're empty. It's a kind of blissful ignorance, I guess. We can try to imagine something different – romantic movies, mushy love songs, other kids holding hands and smiling in that totally alien way – we can make believe we understand all of that. But we don't. Not really. Not until it happens to us.

Suddenly the pressure of his fingers pushes my hand up to meet his, palm to palm. We stay like that for seconds that roll like oceans. Then he looks at me, finally, from under those endless lashes, and the pain in those tea-dark eyes is unbearable. Pain but no anger, no disgust. I rotate my wrist and feed my fingers between his.

"El, you scared me. You *are* scaring me."

"I'm sorry."

His voice is normal, or at least really well controlled. That's what no one gets about El: they think he's this impetuous, outrageous guy who says and does whatever he likes, and I guess that's partly true. But we're all contradictions, right? My boyfriend has been through stuff that would break the spirit of any so-called hero I've ever idolized in a comic book, but you'd never know it. Not unless you know *him*. Really know him. That's why I'm not fooled by his voice.

"So…" He twists back around to sit square in the driver's seat again. "How was Mike? Did you give him my message? He should really just shave his head completely. It would be like Professor X meets Jack Wills."

Even after all this time, I can't help but be impressed. I have no idea how he does this Control Alt Delete thing with his emotions. But I'm not having it. Not tonight.

"El, just stop."

"Stop what?"

"Deflecting."

"Hon, if you can't take me complimenting your best mate then that's your issue, not mine."

"Jesus!" I throw my head back against the rest. "Will you cut the comedy routine for just one minute? Mike's fine, okay? And I know you genuinely care, and you'd have asked anyway, but it's still kind of disrespectful, you know?"

He blinks, again like I've scorched him. "Dylan, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"I know you didn't, but it isn't right, using Mike to wheedle your way out of this. But okay, let's get it out of the way and then we can get back to whatever the hell is up with you." I close my eyes. "So Mike's having his chemo, and he's tired, and he's being brave and funny and caring, and he's worried about us. And Carol's gonna bake us a cake and march with us in Pride, and *fuck!*"

I burst into tears. Real, full-on waterworks with heaving

and snot and hiccups, the complete melodrama. Unlike El, I *do* cry. It's completely freaking ridiculous. Pixar movies, Oscar speeches, adverts with meerkats – I'm in almost constant danger of serious dehydration. But this feels different.

"Honey." His long fingers comb through my curls. He cups the back of my neck, pulls me in, and I get the strong, sweet scent of him under his deodorant.

"Just tell me what happened," I say. "This time, *tell* me."

"It's nothing."

"El…"

He fixes me with his eyes. "All right then. It's something. But I don't want you mixed up in it. And anyway, it's over."

Okay, I've avoided it long enough – basically because even thinking about that time makes me sick to my stomach – but I have to say something now.

"Has this got anything to do with what happened in December?"

El disappeared on me over the Christmas break. Disappeared completely. No phone calls, no texts, nothing. We'd only properly got together the week before, and without him I tortured myself trying to figure out what I'd done wrong. When he came back to me in the new year, I accepted all his feeble excuses because I was just so relieved to have him back in my life. But honestly, I never believed his reasons for vanishing.

I don't want to revisit that time – I can't think of anything worse – but the fear I've seen in him tonight? It all feels like a horrible echo of Christmas.

El shakes his head determinedly. "No, Dylan. It's nothing to do with what happened back then."

I don't want to push this but I have to. "You promised you'd never shut me out like that again. El, you *promised*."

"And I'm not shutting you out," he insists. "This thing, it's different."

"Well then…" My head's reeling. I take a breath. "Is it someone else?"

"*No*, Dylan." And when I try to look away he takes my chin and guides me back to him. "There is no one else. There won't *ever* be anyone else. You dope." He grins that crooked Ellis grin, brighter than Broadway neon, and the pain in his eyes becomes a memory. "Don't you know by now? Right, here goes…I can't believe I'm actually going to say this." He laughs and makes a grab for my ribs with tickling fingers. "You're the one, Dylan. You and your gorgeous freckles and your gingery hair and your moley bum and your geeky history stuff and your comic-book crap and your so-cute-it's-actually-annoying shyness and your eternal klutziness and your passion for Starburst sweets and *YOU*."

He releases me and I fall back into my seat, laughing, glowing.

El's laughing too, and then his predictable switch kicks in.

"It's you, Dylan," he says, his voice almost cracking. "And I know you think for some insane reason you don't deserve to be loved by me, but that makes you just about the most intelligent idiot I've ever met. I love you, Frecks. And it's fairy-tale bullshit, I know, but I've sort of loved you ever since the first time I saw you."

I sit there, stunned.

"You can't have," I say quietly. "All I was doing was standing gawping at you."

El shakes his head. "You couldn't see yourself. Your gawps are one of the best things about you. You know how everyone stared at me that first night at the bonfire? In I flounced, the new kid, all self-righteous and up for a row, and I got these looks of shock and laughter and instant hatred and weird admiration – the usual glorious rainbow. But you? You looked at me without any judgement or expectation at all. You just looked as if you'd like to say hello."

"And I did."

"And you did."

Shadows pass the steamed-up windows. Kids lurching, giving each other piggybacks, seventeen-year-olds playing tag.

"You saved me that night. You have no idea, but that's exactly what you did. The way it ended with my family.

The screams and swearing and unholy shit they threw at me after I told them. 'It's okay,' I said, 'I'm still me. I'm still Ellis. Still your son.' And then Dad knocked me to the floor and my mum stepped right over me and started packing my clothes. And I was just lying there, watching my little sister in her playpen. She didn't cry or anything. She just squatted down in her nappy and reached through the bars with her chubby little arms and she picked up my tooth off the carpet and she…" He takes a huge swallow. "She held it out for me. 'Ellis's,' she said. And then I was in the street and Dad was throwing tenners in my face and Mum was behind him shouting, 'Don't you ever come back!'" El looks at me, his expression so desolate it breaks my heart. "You know how you cope with that, Dylan? You either become more you than you've ever been before, or you curl up and die. But it's a hard act, you know? Straining all the time to be who you need to be. And then I came here and I got up that stupid petition—"

"It wasn't stupid," I tell him.

"And I see this cute comic-book geek," he continues, "his face glowing in the bonfire light. I ask him to sign my petition. And he does. And while he's signing, I can see he just wants to say hello. Because he really would like to know me… Ha! You scared the crap of me, you know?"

"Wait. *I* scared *you*?"

He laughs and presses his forefinger to my nose. "Yes,

Frecks. Because I thought, what if he gets to know me and I disappoint him?"

"You're an idiot," I laugh.

"I don't know." He turns and draws a perfect circle on the driver window. "I'm pretty good at disappointing people."

"You won't." I grab his shoulder, but he keeps his back turned. "It's us now. Just us. You and me, El, forever."

He sighs. "No such thing as forever, Frecks."