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Opening extract from

Falling Fast

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I stared out of the minibus window. It was raining and the pavements were a glistening grey. The houses and sky above were a softer, paler grey.

Grey. Dull. Boring. Like me. Like my life.

Maybe today would change everything.

Maybe.

Emmi peered past me. 'I think we're nearly there,' she said. 'So, River®. . . you decided yet if you're gonna try for it?'

I swallowed. 'It' meant Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, We were on our way to auditions at St Cletus's – a local boys' secondary school that had invited Year 10s and 11s from our girls' school to try out for the female parts in the play.

Juliet was the main girl's part, of course. But that wasn't why I wanted it.

I looked out of the window again. The rain was falling harder now. I could hear it drumming on the minibus roof even over the excitable chatter inside. There

were about fifteen of us, mostly girls doing drama GCSE with Ms Yates or in her after-school drama group. For everyone else, I was sure, the auditions were just a laugh.

But not to me. I wanted to be Juliet in the play, because I wanted to be Juliet in real life.

I wanted to be in love. To be loved.

I was just sixteen and I'd never met a boy I really liked. I mean, I'd met a few I quite fancied and more than a few who were fun to chat to. But I'd never felt what you could possibly describe as love. I spent a lot of time imagining it though. Imagining what he would look like. Tall and square-jawed, I thought. With deep, soft brown eyes that would melt me with their gaze, and dark, wavy hair curling onto his neck. He wouldn't be able to take his eyes off me. We'd move towards each other like magnets. Then we would talk and talk, discovering all the things we had in common, sharing our hopes and fears and dreams. And then, finally, we would kiss. A slow, deep, romantic . . .'

'Hel-lo, River.' Emmi's amused voice broke through my thoughts. 'Are you going to audition for Juliet or not?'

I glanced at Emmi's heart-shaped, dimpled face. My best friend had a sharp prettiness – all sparkling dark eyes and dramatically-long, shiny hair. Unlike me, she was relaxed and confident. She was the obvious choice for Juliet.

But I knew she was the wrong one.

Whoever played Juliet had to at least be able to imagine what it would be like to really fall in love with someone else. I was pretty sure Emmi was no more able to do that than she was to stop flirting with every guy she met.

'Don't see why not,' I shrugged, trying to look unbothered about the whole audition process. 'I mean, if you're going for a speaking part, you might as well try for all of them. Not that I really care who I end up playing.'

Emmi grinned. 'Yeah, right, Riv.'

I shrugged again and went back to the window. My face burned. Trust Emmi to have seen right through me.

The minibus was pulling into a huge, mostly empty car park. Directly in front stood a large concrete school block. It looked deserted. I checked the time on my phone. Four p.m.

'Guess all the boys have gone home,' Emmi said. She sounded disappointed.

'Good.' I stood up and joined the queue to get off the minibus. 'The last thing we need is an audience.'

Emmi laughed. 'Isn't an audience exactly what we're here for?'

We got off the minibus and milled awkwardly in the car park. The rain had lightened to a soft drizzle. The absolute worst kind of weather for my hair, which gets

all frizzy at the first sign of moisture.

A tall, very thin man with a high forehead and slicked back dark hair came striding towards us. A boy in the St Cletus school uniform of black trousers, white shirt and black-and-green striped tie trotted awkwardly beside him.

Ms Yates smiled nervously. 'That's Mr Nichols, the head of drama,' she said.

'Hello there,' the man boomed. For such a thin person, his voice was surprisingly deep. 'I'm Mr Nichols. Welcome to St Cletus's.' He beamed round at us all, casting a particularly warm smile at Ms Yates. 'Now, let's get you in out of the rain.' He flung his arms out to indicate the boy beside him. 'If anyone needs the bathroom, James Molloy here will show you to the Ladies.'

Fifteen pairs of eyes swivelled to look at James Molloy.

He had sandy-coloured hair and a squishy, comfortable face. Underneath the flush of embarrassment creeping up his cheeks, I could see he looked nice. Nice, as in open and friendly.

You can't fall in love with nice.

Mr Nichols strode off towards the school building, indicating – with another exaggerated arm movement – that we should follow.

We all scuttled after him.

James Molloy had – surprise, surprise – gravitated almost immediately to Emmi's side.

'Hi,' he said hopefully, then blushed.

Emmi flashed him a big smile. 'Hi,' she purred. 'I'm Emmi.'

I giggled.

James Molloy gulped. He looked as if he was desperately trying to think of something to say.

We reached the large wooden door that Mr Nichols had just walked through. James held it open to let Emmi past, then dived after her, ahead of me.

'We're going to the sixth form common room,' he said. 'The auditions'll be in there.'

Emmi glanced over her shoulder and cocked an eyebrow at him. 'Will boys be watching?' she said in a silky voice.

She was really turning it on, but I could tell it was all for effect. Emmi liked to know that she could have any boy she wanted but I'd never seen her bothered about any of them. Any other girl would have been labelled a slag but Emmi somehow got away with it.

Poor James Molloy's face was now the colour of a tomato.

'Er... no,' he stammered. 'That is, not until the second round. Mr Nichols asked for people with main parts to stay after school to read with some of the girls when he's heard you all.'

'Ah...' Emmi said, knowingly.

God, that meant having to do bits of the play with boys later. I glanced at Emmi. How come she wasn't in

the slightest bit nervous about that?

'So the boys' parts are already cast?' Grace asked timidly.

Grace is my other really good friend. She's completely different from Emmi: shy and quiet®. . . and she's been going out with the same guy, for, like, forever.

James nodded, then led us along a series of chilly, rather rundown corridors, into a common room, complete with pool table, a row of lockers and a series of bright red sofas.

'Please take off your coats and make yourselves comfortable.' Mr Nichols' booming voice resonated round its bare walls

'Sixth form common room,' James announced unnecessarily, staring at a patch of skin a few centimetres to the left of Emmi's nose.

Emmi nodded vaguely and wandered across the room. I turned to James.

'What part are you playing?' I said.

'Mercutio.' He blushed. 'Romeo's best friend. Which is cool, because the guy playing Romeo *is* my best friend.'

His eyes drifted sideways to where Emmi was self-consciously twisting her long hair in her hand. I watched his gaze flickering over Emmi's tall, slim body. She always seemed to manage to have her skirt a few centimetres higher than everyone else. She also

wore her sweater tighter and her blouse unbuttoned further. When she walked she wiggled her bum and flashed off legs that went up to her armpits.

My heart sank. No way was I getting the part of Juliet instead of her. Not unless the guy playing Romeo was really short and Mr Nichols was practically blind.

I knew I should have been pleased for Emmi, but I wanted this so badly and I didn't stand a chance.

'Emmi's my best friend,' I said, confidingly.

James Molloy looked down at me. For a second I saw myself through his eyes: I was short. I was dumpy. I was – *God*, I was like him. Squishy and comfortable.

At that point two other girls skittered over in fits of giggles and asked James to show them where the toilets were.

They all disappeared and I went to find Emmi and Grace.

'I'm so nervous,' Grace squeaked.

'For God's sake, Grace,' Emmi drawled. 'All you're doing is reciting a short poem. The worst that can happen is you'll end up a townsperson of Verona.'

Grace looked a little deflated. I don't think Emmi means it, but sometimes she can sound a bit harsh. After all, Grace was mostly here to support me and Emmi. Sure, she was doing drama GCSE, but performing wasn't really her thing.

I smiled at her. 'You'll be fine,' I said. 'You look really pretty.'

Grace smiled gratefully back at me. 'You look lovely too, Riv. I wish I had a figure like yours.' She sighed, then twirled her finger round a lock of her soft, strawberry blonde waves. 'And your hair really works the way you've got it tied back like that. You're so lucky it's so thick.'

Yeah, right. She was just being polite. Did I mention I have horrible frizzy hair and as for my body☹. . . well, maybe I'd look okay if I could lose half a stone☹. . . but however hard I tried, the weight never came off.

'Er☹. . . thanks, Grace.'

Emmi yawned. 'I don't know what you're getting anxious about,' she said to Grace. 'It'll be over soon, then you can phone Darren and tell him all about it.'

'Darren said he didn't like the idea of me being in a play at a boys' school,' Grace said.

Emmi rolled her eyes. 'Well, that's his problem, isn't it?'

I squeezed Grace's hand sympathetically, but the truth was I had no idea what Grace saw in Darren. He was geeky and spotty – while Grace was sweetly pretty, with her wide blue eyes and perfect skin. Plus, I was pretty sure he didn't have a passionate bone in his body. Mind you, looking at Grace's pale, anxious face, I wasn't sure she did either.

The thought depressed me. It seemed entirely possible Grace would go through her whole life never feeling an overwhelming, die-for-you love.

Lots of people probably didn't.

Not me, though. Please. Not me.

I closed my eyes and tried to remember the lines I'd picked for my audition.

The room fell silent. Mr Nichols cleared his throat.

'I think we'll start with a simple visualisation,' he said. 'Please everyone find a space to stand, then close your eyes and imagine a busy marketplace in old Verona. Observe the bustle, the townspeople in their long gowns, all going about their business. Take time to smell the freshly baked bread, to squeeze the soft fruits on the stalls, to feel the warm sun on your back. . .' He droned on.

I sighed. This was exactly the sort of rubbish Ms Yates was into. I let my mind drift back to my ideal guy.

A minute or two later and Mr Nichols made us visualise walking into the centre of the marketplace and sitting in a circle on the ground.

'Now if you'd all open your eyes and find a seat. . .we'll start the auditions by going round the room,' he said.

There was a scramble for seats. I found myself perched on the arm of a sofa, next to Emmi.

'Okay, let's get going,' Mr Nichols said, suddenly brisk and businesslike. 'Please give your name before you begin.' He looked over to the door. 'James, tell the boys we'll be up in about half an hour. And shut the

door on your way out.'

With a swift glance at Emmi's elegantly crossed legs, James backed out of the door. We all looked at Mr Nichols.

'A volunteer to start?' he said.

Everyone looked at their laps. Then I felt Emmi raise her hand beside me. 'I don't mind going first,' she said.

She sashayed over to the open space in the middle of the room. She faced Mr Nichols and smiled – a coy, shy smile. God, she hadn't even started and she was already acting.

Ms Yates nodded approvingly. She, like most of our teachers, loved Emmi because she was always prepared to speak out in class and because she was so polite – at least to the teachers' faces.

She did a speech from the play – the beginning of the scene where Juliet is on her balcony and Romeo sneaks over to talk to her. She was good☺. . . She moved around naturally, and put loads of expression into her voice. But for all that, she never really sounded like she meant anything she was saying. I watched Mr Nichols. He was concentrating intently on her, his eyes following her as she moved. At the end she looked up at him from under her eyelashes. He nodded and smiled at Ms Yates.

Great.

After that we went clockwise round the room. Grace was next. Unlike Emmi she didn't move into the mid-

dle of the room. Instead she stood where she was and recited her poem in a loud, clear voice.

She was actually quite good. A bit stiff maybe, but she put loads of expression into what she was saying and at least she remembered all the words. Asha Watkins forgot her poem, while Maisie Holtwood refused to even start. Two more girls just stood there, staring shyly at the carpet as they did a bit from the play.

On and on it went. After twenty minutes Mr Nichols was looking bored, his chin propped in his hands. A sly smile was sneaking across Emmi's lips. So far there was no one to touch her.

Thanks to the order we were sitting in, my audition was going to be last. I tried not to let the wait prey on my nerves.

A few more girls gave Okay-ish performances. Daisy Walker, a tall girl with high cheekbones and intense dark eyes, was good. She moved about a bit, using her hands expressively like Emmi had done.

I felt more and more nervous. The time dragged and dragged. Then suddenly it speeded up and Mr Nichols eyes were on mine – 'Yes?' he said.