

st-blinking thing,
Chris,' and put my
at sort of parallel
r talks to me like
ry on working my
o tape. Seriously,
ms on here, and

another four or five that are solid too. In fact, I wouldn't skip *any* of them, which is good, because it takes ages to fast-forward through a song on this thing! Anyway, you know what? I think Vortex have found their first new fan in quite some time – I'll have to tell Greg when I see him next.

As the bus glides in and out of villages, fields and woodland, I let my eyes drift over the passing landscape, almost sliding out of focus, barely registering what's going past.

use,

*Tree, car, house, tree, pylon, sign, car, house, hill, tree,
owl . . . OWL? What?*

I spin my head round and, sure enough, rising up from a branch on the edge of this small wood is a huge silvery owl – massive wings slicing through the air as she soars up into the sky where she’s almost immediately lost from view.

I don’t know how I could tell you that I know, but even just in that snap-second, even from that distance, I just *know* without the slightest doubt that it was the same owl.

This warm soft glow spreads through me, melting all the bitter shards that I hadn’t even realised were there, and I lean back against my seat, smiling as the music plays on.

She was real – I *know* she was real.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

HERE WE ARE, THEN . . . BACK
in school on Monday morning.

Usually I’d be kind of down at the whole idea, especially with the whole row with Cameron and the haircut disaster, but I’ve got my trusty hat pulled down low, and I don’t know why I just feel all right today. Dad was in a decent mood when I got in. He’s still waiting to hear about that job interview, but he reckons it’s basically a formality, which means he thinks it’s in the bag. And if the Chris Tucker-shaped thorn in my side is going to

be less pointy, then that's a good thing too, right? Plus, we've got Art just before lunch, so I only have a couple of other lessons to get through first.

When I walk into the art room, Mr Prince is standing up by the board, trying to get the projector to work. With loads of teachers, everyone would just sit and watch, kind of enjoying the show, but with Mr Prince there's, like, five kids trying to help him get it all working – *everyone* likes Mr Prince.

There's a sudden flash of light and an image fills the screen. Mr Prince cheers, grinning as he looks around the room. Everyone's smiling – it's like everyone just *wants* Mr Prince's lessons to go well, so they do. It's weird what can make or break an atmosphere.

'I have some exciting news today,' says Mr Prince. 'There's a national wildlife art competition coming up, and there's an eleven to fifteen section. It can be any medium you like – photograph, drawing, painting, sculpture, textiles, digital art, whatever – it just needs to celebrate nature and wildlife.'

'Cool,' mutter a few kids, but there's not a great deal of excitement in the room.

'The winner and ten runners-up will get their work shown at a gallery in London *and* have an all-expenses-paid trip to go to the exhibition . . .' continues Mr Prince.

There's *definitely* more interest now. An all-expenses-paid trip to London? That's pretty sweet! I mean, apart from going to my mum's I've not been more than ten miles from my home in, well . . . *years*.

'Not to mention a two-hundred-and-fifty-pound cash prize for the winner and vouchers for art supplies for each runner-up.' Mr Prince nods slowly. 'Not a bad prize, I'm sure you'll agree?'

That's done it. Suddenly the room is on fire, with lots of people chattering excitedly to each other. I feel a giddy swirling in my stomach. Winning £250? Just *imagine!*

'Okay, okay!' says Mr Prince, laughing as he holds his hands in the air. 'You have to *win it* before you can spend it! But I'm mentioning this because I know some of you in here would have a *very* real chance.'

He catches my eye here. It's subtle, so that no one else would notice, but I *know* that he's talking to me. 'Some of you have got some excellent wildlife work, and I would *strongly* recommend that you enter. I'll leave all the details up on the screen so you can log on and fill in all the required forms. For everyone else who would like to enter, but doesn't have any wildlife work, I'm going to make this lesson and the next one available for the competition, so you should have enough time to come up with a piece that you're happy with.'

While everyone's getting their materials out and chatting about what they're planning to do, Mr Prince comes over to me. 'How about it, Will?' he asks. 'You'll be entering, won't you?'

'Definitely,' I say. 'I just need to get hold of a camera; my phone's dead.'

Mr Prince nods. 'I can help, if you like? We can use one of the digital cameras here, so you get a *really* crisp image. Give you as good a chance as possible. We can do it next lesson, if you like. Does that sound good?'

'*Definitely!*' I say again, nodding. 'Thanks, sir.'

See, that's what's so great about Mr Prince. It's like he just *gets* it. He gets me and everything that's going on. When he helps out, it's just easy, you know, natural, like he's just doing me a favour so I don't feel like a charity case.

Thinking about this makes me think of Cameron and I feel bad. I mean, yeah, he was a bit heavy-handed, and he *totally* got it wrong, trying to pretend that those shoes didn't fit him or whatever, but he was only trying to help. He was only trying to do me a favour. I decide to sort things out with him the next chance I get.

We all pile into the hall after lunch for assembly. The head's up on the stage and his army of deputies are all there in EXTRA-stern mode. There's obviously something serious going on.

'This assembly was *meant* to focus on general health and well-being,' begins the head, peering out from beneath wiry rutted brows, 'but unfortunately I have to

discuss another matter instead. It has become apparent that a pair of running shoes has been stolen. The locker they were kept in has been forced open, so not only has there been a theft but criminal damage has been caused.'

He glares around the room. 'I'm sure I do not need to remind most of you that such behaviour is completely unacceptable!' He slams his fist down on his desk here, and, do you know what, I think he *really* is angry, not just *pretend-teacher-angry*.

After a pause he carries on. 'The training shoes in question were, I believe, a particularly expensive pair. Not, of course, that this has any bearing on the matter, as regardless of monetary value theft of *any* sort is intolerable in our community!'

The head *always* speaks like this; that's why assemblies go on for so long.

'Needless to say,' continues the head, 'the culprit *will* be found, and it would be advisable for them to return the training shoes to the staffroom. If this was just an ill-considered prank and the shoes are returned by the

end of the day, then Cameron Romelle's parents have informed me they will take the matter no further and will not, on this occasion, contact the police.'

Well, *that* really gets my attention; it's *Cameron's* shoes that have been stolen! His brand-new, insanely rare, almost one-of-a-kind shoes. I shake my head slowly as the head's face darkens and he continues. 'The damage to the locker, however, is another matter *entirely* . . .'

After that I kind of zone out. Cameron must be losing it! I mean, those trainers cost an absolute fortune! And, yeah, his parents are pretty chill, but they are *not* going to be happy about this! I look around the hall but I can't see Cameron anywhere. Still, we've got Geography together next, so I'll catch up with him in there. It'll give me a chance to patch things up with him too.

As per every other lesson we've had since *The Big Bad Row*, Cameron's not sitting by me in Geography. I'm at the desk behind him. So it's kind of tricky to get his attention. I wait until the lesson's well underway and we're doing this group discussion thing. I lean forward

and tap Cameron on the back. He turns and looks at me, eyes red-rimmed and sore-looking.

'Mate,' I whisper, 'I just wanted to say that I'm really sorry to hear about—'

'*William Pinker!*' shouts Mr Fraser.

God, I *hate* it when people do that. You know? Use the long version of your first name *and* your surname. It's SO unnecessary. I mean, there's not even anyone else called Will in this class. Plus, I hate my surname, so yeah . . . there's that too.

'I thought I had instructed everyone to discuss this quietly in their table groups?' adds Mr Fraser.

'Yes, *sir*,' I say. 'Sorry, *sir*.'

Now, I swear that I didn't *mean* to make it sound bad, but I guess I was feeling irritated by the whole *William Pinker* thing, so I might have had a bit of a face on.

'I will *NOT* stand for that tone!' bellows Mr Fraser, eyes flaring dangerously. 'And why are you wearing that *ridiculous* hat? Take it off immediately.'

I sit there feeling sick.

Greg had done an *okayish* job patching up my hair but there was still a bald strip right up the side – it's still pretty bad. So taking the hat off wasn't high up on my list of Top Ten Things That I'd Love to Do Right Now. To be honest, it wasn't even in the top 100.

Freeze time and run away or maybe *Fall through a wormhole to literally anywhere else* were definitely strong contenders for the top spot, though.

'Sorry, sir,' I mutter. 'I can't do that . . .'

'You *can't* do that?' he explodes, coughing out a short sharp laugh. 'And would you care to explain to us WHY you are incapable of removing that hat?'

Everyone's looking at me now. I feel my cheeks flush as the sick feeling grows.

'Maybe it's been glued on?' adds Mr Fraser.

A few kids kind of laugh here. You know things are bad when the class sides with a teacher over you.

'It's not *that*, sir,' I say, using my best, most reasonable good-student voice. 'It's just that, you know, I sort of *can't*. Like . . . I'd rather not.' I nod slightly to myself.

Hopefully that'll do the trick.

'Well, Mr Pinker . . . ?' says Mr Fraser in an overly syrupy voice, 'I'm sure that you might *rather not*. Just as I'd *rather not* waste everyone's time, dealing with disruptive irritating students and yet *here we are!*' He almost shouts those last words. Then he looks me dead in the eye. 'Now . . . Take. The. Hat. Off!'

Now...
TAKE.
HAT.
THE.
OFF!

Everyone's looking at me now. I mean, what can I do? I can continue to refuse and get, like, a bunch of new negatives that absolutely WILL go back to Dad or I can take the hat off and have everyone rip it out of me.

My hands feel as sweaty as my mouth is dry. I look over at Mr Fraser, silently pleading with him not to do this.

'Mr Pinker!' he bellows. 'Take it OFF!'

'Fine!' I yell back. 'If it means SO much to you!' I yank the hat off and hurl it across the room. There's this sudden gasping sound and a moment's silence before the laughing starts.

'What is THAT!?'

'Sick haircut, mate!'

'Yeah, sick. Where'd you get it done? Just so I can *never* go there!'

All I can hear is everyone laughing – laughing at me.

A familiar heat flares up in me and everything's throbbing with this red violent pulsing. Mr Fraser's

yelling at the class, but it's not working – you can't fight fire with fire.

I stand up, almost flinging my seat backwards. It skids across the floor. I don't care. I've got to get out of here. *Now*. I need to get away. Away from *everything*. If there was a way I could just disappear, just stop existing, I'd do it. Without a second's thought.

'*Everyone!*' shouts Mr Fraser. '*Quiet!* Be quiet NOW! And, *Will . . .* come on, come back, sit down –' His tone's different now – like he's realising that this hasn't played out *quite* how he thought it would.

But it's too late. It's played out exactly how I knew it would. Everyone's laughing. They think I'm a joke – and I am. I *know* I am. But, I tell you what, it hurts all the same. I grab my bag and rush blindly for the door.

Cameron is looking at me – soft brown eyes wide and full of pity. I grit my teeth, pushing the feeling back, but it's that look that does it – the pity – *that's* what tips me over the edge.

Tears start falling. I run out of the room, vision blurred,

eyes streaming. I'm furious. Furious with Mr Fraser for starting this all off. Furious with Cameron for his pity. Furious with the class for laughing.

Furious with the whole world.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SO THAT WAS IT.

I just left. Straight out of the school gates and I kept on walking until I found

myself in the old graveyard. At least most people here are dead – they tend to be less hassle.

'Hey! Will!' a voice calls out.

I shake my head. *Seriously? Who's this?*

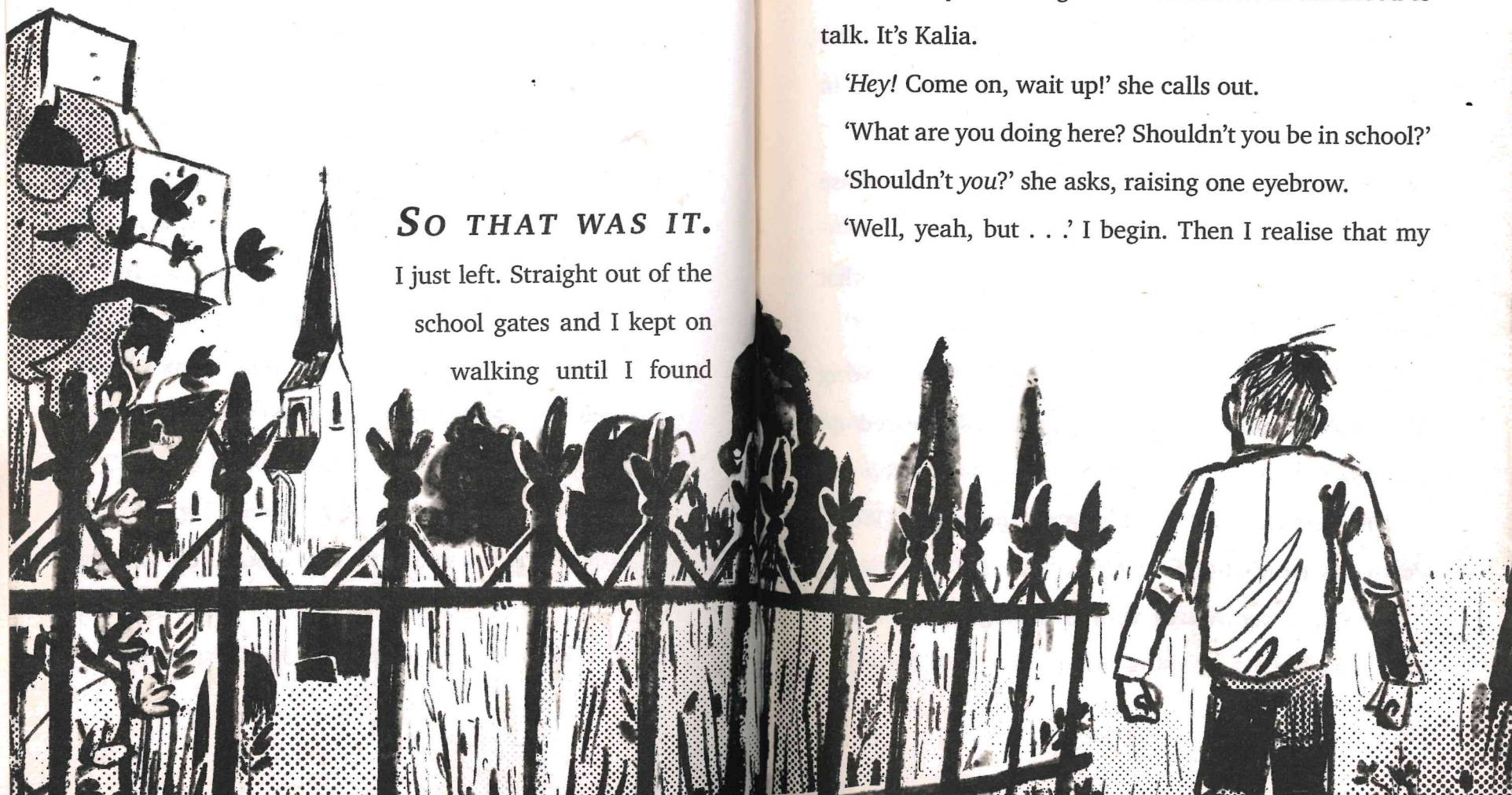
I shoot a look back, mouth clamped so tightly shut it feels like my teeth might shatter. I'm *not* in the mood to talk. It's Kalia.

'Hey! Come on, wait up!' she calls out.

'What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in school?'

'Shouldn't you?' she asks, raising one eyebrow.

'Well, yeah, but . . .' I begin. Then I realise that my



eyes must be totally bloodshot, I've probably got snot all down my face and my hair's . . . well, my hair's my hair. I fall silent, and stare at the ground.

'I saw you running out of school,' says Kalia, stepping towards me, her hand touching my arm. 'Looks like you're in a bit of a mess.'

'And you just came after me?' I ask, my brain not quite coping with this information. 'But *why*? Won't you get in trouble?'

'I guess,' she says, shrugging. 'As for *why*, it's because you look like you need a hand. *Right*?'

I mean, sure, I could say I'm fine. I could pretend that everything's okay. But it's not, *is it*? Nowhere near.

'Yeah,' I say, nodding slowly. Tears start flowing again but this time I let them. 'It's just all so messed up! *Everything!*'

Kalia gestures over to a bench against a wall. We sit down, saying nothing for a bit.

'Mr Prince showed us your owl picture,' Kalia says after a while.

'*What*?' I say. That wasn't what I'd been expecting her to say.

She nods. 'Yeah, he was chatting about some exhibition competition. Said your painting was an example of the standard we should be aiming for. The way I see it, there's no point *anyone* else entering if you've done that. *You know*?' She looks at me. 'That painting's amazing, Will.'

'Cheers . . .' I mutter, looking down.

She tilts her head towards me and looks at me from under her eyebrows. 'So it's not like *everything's* bad, is it?'

'Yeah, well, maybe,' I say, 'but everything *else* is.'

Kalia nods. 'I mean, sure . . . your hair could do with a *teeny* bit of attention.'

Caught by surprise, I almost laugh. 'You *think*?'

She narrows her eyes and pretends to inspect my hair. 'Yessss, I think you might have missed a bit here . . .' She holds up one of the longer, messier strands.

I laugh fully now. 'I was going to get it sorted after

school,' I say, shrugging. 'See, I'd been wearing this hat, and everything was fine until Mr Fraser got all *RESPECT MY AUTHORITY* and made me take it off. Then . . . well, to be honest, I don't really know what happened. It was a bit of a blur.'

'Well, that's Mr Fraser for you,' says Kalia. 'You should have *known* not to push anything with him! But, look, it's all done now, just forget about it.'

'But everyone was laughing at me!' I say. '*Everyone!*'

Kalia nods. 'Yeah, I've had that. I was in Year Six when we first moved here, and these lads down the road from me used to do this hula-dancing thing ALL THE TIME. You know my dad's from Hawaii, right?'

I shake my head.

'Well, he is,' says Kalia. 'He moved to London for work in his twenties, and for some reason stayed. Well, I guess that reason was my mum. All the same –' she gestures up at the mottled concrete sky and scrubby grass in the graveyard – 'would it have killed them to both move back to Hawaii once they'd met?'

'What's it like,' I ask, 'Hawaii?'

'Never been,' says Kalia, shrugging. 'I'd love to but we can't afford it. So, yeah . . . I'd ask these kids to stop, but they wouldn't. If anything, that just made it worse. Then they had something to aim for, you know?'

I nod. Like I said about Chris Tucker, some people can sniff out your weak point from miles away.

Kalia continues. 'So when people like those idiots do the hula dancing to mock me or wear grass skirts and put on stupid plastic flowers at fancy-dress parties, it's like that's all I am to them – *fancy dress*.' Her lips purse together and her eyes narrow.

'So how did you stop it in the end,' I ask, 'the hula dancing?'

I can imagine her squaring up to them, quietly confident, defying them to carry on.

'I cried,' she says.

'Oh . . .'

'And when I went home, still crying, Dad told me that they probably just didn't know any better, so I did a

presentation at my primary school about Dad's ancestral history and what it means to us as a family.' She nods. 'That pretty much did the trick.'

'Pretty much?'

'Well, there was this one kid who kept it up,' she says. 'Isaac Richards.'

'And what did you do about *him*?'

She looks at me and grins, revealing sharp white teeth. 'I waited until the end of the day when he was walking home on his own. I took his pencil case off him and slowly snapped every pencil right in front of him. Didn't say a word as I did it. Then I told him that if he carried on, it'd be his arm next.'

I laugh. 'I knew it!'

Kalia's laughing too. 'Well, you know, as a *rule* I don't really condone aggression.'

'Ha! Nice one.'

'No, seriously,' says Kalia. 'Look, there's a difference between aggression and making it clear that you're not going to be pushed around, right?'

'I guess . . .' I say, although *really*? How would *I* know?

'So, look, don't worry about today. You know school . . . there'll be some other drama for everyone to chat about in a day or two. You just need to feel good about YOU, okay?'

She's right about school; it's a constant merry-go-round of drama – nothing ever sticks for long.

'And as far as your hair goes,' continues Kalia, 'save your money. My brother's training to be a barber, and he's good – seriously. Come round to mine and he'll sort it out for nothing; he wants all the practice he can get. He'll be there now, if you like?'

'What about school?'

Kalia looks at her phone. 'There's only another twenty minutes left. By the time we got there, it'll be time to leave or 'just go to detention.' She shrugs. 'Look, we'll deal with the fallout tomorrow, *okay*?' She stands up and looks over at me, smiling. 'So you coming then?'

Slowly I stand up and nod. I mean, of course I do.

Wouldn't you?



CHAPTER NINETEEN

‘MATE! WHO’S RESPONSIBLE FOR this?’ asks Lani, Kalia’s brother. He’s older than her. Seventeen or so, I’d guess? He peers closely at my hair, but although he’s smiling, I can tell he’s not being harsh.

‘Kind of a joint effort,’ I say. ‘Me and my mum’s bloke. The clippers broke while I was doing it. He tried to tidy it up, but, yeah . . . it didn’t work out too well.’

‘I can see . . .’ says Lani. ‘Anyway, nothing that a fade can’t fix. I’ll have to take it pretty high, though. That okay with you?’

‘Anything that isn’t *this* is okay with me!’ I say, gesturing at the mess on my head.

‘Good lad!’ he says, tucking a tea towel round my collar to keep the hair out. Then he turns on the clippers. ‘Right, let’s get to work.’

Kalia sprawls back on an armchair, her legs dangling over the arm as she watches her brother cut my hair. Their living room’s not much bigger than ours, but it feels *totally* different. I can smell something cooking, a sweet, spicy scent. They’ve got pictures up on the wall, paintings, photos, drawings, clay models that Kalia and her brothers must have made when they were kids, and there are plants growing pretty much everywhere. It feels alive – like a home.

Lani and Kalia chat easily to each other as he works, gently teasing each other but affectionate, and I feel totally at ease, which is weird, considering that, really, I’ve only just met both of them.

It’s hard to explain. They just have a good *feeling* about them. You know? Calm. Every time I’ve seen her

in school, Kalia seems hard, sort of defensive, but right now, at home, her body language is totally relaxed.

I zone out a bit, the soft murmur of their voices and the clippers creating a soothing wash of sound that carries the time away without me even noticing.

'You can stay for dinner, if you like?' says Kalia.

'Who me?' I reply.

'Well, yeah . . .' she says. 'Lani kind of lives here already, being my brother and everything. Of *course* I mean you. Mum's left a stew in the slow cooker; there'll be plenty.'

She stands up and walks round the chair I'm sat in, inspecting my hair. 'Told you he'd do a good job.'

'Yeah. I'm not one to brag,' says Lani, tilting my head to one side and then another, making a few last small adjustments, 'but that IS a whole load better.'

He pulls the tea towel out from round my neck and nods towards the hallway. 'Go and take a look.' I glance over at him and he grins. 'Third door along.'

'Come on!' says Kalia, laughing. She grabs my shoulders and steers me into their small bathroom. I can see her in

the mirror; she's smiling, her eyes bright as she gestures towards someone almost unrecognisable in the mirror.

'What do you think?'

'That's just . . .' I murmur, my eyes prickling. 'It's . . . it's *brilliant*. I look totally different.'

'Mm-hmm.' Kalia nods. '*Definitely* an improvement.'

'You like?' asks Lani, peering in round the door.

'I love it!' I say. 'I don't know what to say!'

'Well, "thank you" is customary,' says Kalia, but she's smiling.

'Yeah, *yeah* . . . of course!' I turn to face Lani. '*Thank you!* Seriously.'

'No worries,' he says, grinning as he turns to leave. 'Any time, Will. It's all good practice.'

I turn my head slowly from side to side, looking in the mirror. It's cropped tight to my head on the sides and then fades up into a number four and from there to about two inches long on the top. Lani must have put some wax or something on there, it's sort of angled up to one side a bit. Seriously, it looks *amazing*. If I wasn't me,

I'd one hundred per cent think I was cool.

I end up staying for dinner at Kalia's. Her mum and dad both got home at about five and by half past we're sat round the table eating this amazing stew with sticky rice. Kalia's other brother, Noa, comes in halfway through dinner with his girlfriend, but it's not a problem; they just cook up some more rice and add a few more vegetables to the stew. Nothing here *ever* seems to be a problem.

'So where do you live, Will?' asks Kalia's mum.

Ordinarily I find this question kind of tricky. See, everyone knows Cherry Orchards and what it's like there, but you know what? For some reason tonight I just don't care.

'That'll be Cherry Orchards,' I say once I've finished my mouthful.

'Right . . .' says Kalia's dad slowly.

Like I say, everyone round here knows that place.

'We've been there a little while now,' I continue, 'while my dad's getting better.'

'What's up with your dad?' asks Kalia.

'He had an accident at work,' I say. 'It's been pretty bad actually; he could barely walk for a while, so I have to help out quite a bit, you know?'

'Sounds rough,' she says.

I nod. I *actually* nod for some reason. What's the point in pretending it's not? 'Yeah,' I reply, 'it is. He just can't get a break. You know? Every job he goes for ends up going to someone else.'

Kalia's dad looks over at me. 'You know, when I first moved to London, I slept in a car for two months while I saved up for a rental deposit. And, while it was a bad time, it eventually brought me everything that was good in my life. If it hadn't been for *that* moment, I wouldn't have met your mum.'

'Come off it, Dad!' interrupts Kalia. 'You've told us this story *SO* many times! Look, not *everyone* needs to sleep in a car to make things better!' She turns to me. 'Sorry, Will, Dad just *loves* to get all mystical about the universe bringing what you need when you need it most.'

Her father laughs. 'All right, Kalia,' he says, holding his

hands up in mock defeat. 'Look, I'm not saying *that!* What I *am* saying is that it was a bad time, right? And that *now* things are different. Things are *good.*' He gestures round at the room, at his family, at me. 'You know, Will, life is *always* changing, and you never know what's round the corner.'

Usually if someone said something like that to me, my brain would be all like, *Yes, I know that life is always changing – I used to live in a nice house with both my parents and now I'm in a tiny freezing-cold flat with my dad who can't work because of his terrible leg injuries.* But for some reason, here in their flat, where everything feels light and comfortable, that's *not* how I'm feeling. Instead, I'm imagining what it must have been like for him back then – a young man, moving to a brand-new country where he thought everything was going to be amazing and then having to live in a car for two months.

'That can't have been much fun,' I say.

Kalia slaps her forehead in an exaggerated way. 'Don't *encourage* him!'

'It was winter too . . .' adds Kalia's dad. '*Very* cold. Certainly a *lot* colder than I was used to.'

'*See!*' exclaims Kalia. 'He just can't help himself! You know what's coming next, don't you? The bit where Mum sees him in there early one morning and brings him a blanket!'

'Well, *that's* what happened!' protests Kalia's dad but he's smiling; they're all smiling.

'Then she looks at him . . .' adds Noa.

'And he looks at her . . .' continues Kalia.

'And we both fell in *looooooooooooooove!*' joins in Kalia's mum, rubbing her husband's shoulder and grinning at him.

And it's all just so nice, so warm – I feel like somewhere along the line I must have fallen through the ice into a freezing river and it's only *now* that I'm finally sitting down by a fire. I can practically feel myself steaming.

Kalia's dad glances over towards me. 'Look, Will . . . I know that life can be hard. I understand, yes? So any time you want to come round here for dinner or anything, you feel free. *Okay?*'



I feel a huge sudden rush of gratitude, not just for that offer but for everything tonight. For letting me feel normal for a couple of hours. My eyes sting and I have to breathe slowly and bite my lip to keep everything under control, then I manage to nod and say, 'Thanks.'

And then, after we've all helped wash up and put away the dishes, that's it. I'm stood outside Kalia's flat and she's leaning against the doorway.

'See you tomorrow then?' she says.

'*Absolutely*,' I say.

My cheeks feel hot and my pulse throbs in my ears. That sounded, you know . . . a bit keen. I didn't mean it like *that* . . . But Kalia doesn't notice, or if she does notice, she doesn't make anything of it. She just grins as she waves and turns back in to her flat.

I press play on the Walkman, walk up the concrete steps and towards home, feeling the sharp chill of the evening air against my ears and the side of my head. And yeah, it's pretty cold, but even if I had it with me, there's no way I'd put that hat back on – not with my

hair looking *this* good.

The music throbs in my ears and I grin, walking in time to the music, enjoying the car lights as they glide past. Everything seems to be happening at exactly the right time with the music. A bus speeds up past me just as the song swells to the chorus and then a bunch of joggers sprint past, light beams from their head torches bouncing around in time to the beat.

I laugh to myself. I love it when everything's like that – when it all just feels *right*. I'd almost forgotten the feeling. You know, *actual* happiness? I feel light, almost floating, like there's no problem that can't be solved. And, I tell you what, tomorrow I am sorting things out with Cameron. No matter what. No excuses, no delays. I walk a bit quicker, a rush of excitement tingling through me, bursting to get out. I speed up even more, eventually breaking into a run, going as fast as I can. Grinning wildly as the cold air rushes towards me, I run until my breath's hot and raw in my throat, until my legs start to

ache and then I keep on running.

After a while I notice a shadow gliding along on the ground nearby. It's broad and fast, weaving a bit from side to side. I shoot a look upwards and *almost* catch a glimpse of something large and pale with flapping broad silvery wings, as it sweeps round the corner of a building, up in front of the moon and away into the open night sky.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE NEXT DAY, I WAKE UP FEELING,
well . . . you know, *good*. And maybe that's all it takes?
Just a bit of life – *real* life. A few nice moments with
people who might actually care one way or another what
happens to you – moments that actually *mean* something.

So, yeah . . . I'm walking towards school feeling all
pumped up and optimistic. It's weird, I even feel like I'm
walking differently, not shuffling like normal, but kind
of striding. My head's held up and I'm actually looking
around. Then I hear my name shouted out. I glance round.

Chris Tucker is stood on the corner of the road nearby.

'Looking sharp, mate!' he says.

I pause, waiting for the punchline, but there isn't
one. He just nods approvingly. 'D'you get it done at the
Turkish place?' he asks, inspecting my haircut. 'That's a
tight fade!'

'A friend did it,' I reply.

'If any of *my* friends tried to cut my hair, I'd end up
looking like I put my head in a blender!' he says with a
grin.

'To be fair, that's how it looked after I tried,' I say,
smiling.

I'm *smiling*? What the hell's going on?

Chris laughs. 'Right . . . Is that why you had that hat
on the other day, when you'd been at your mum's?'

I nod. This is weird. This is all SO weird.

'So what's it like round at your mum's?' asks Chris.
'Better than Cherry Orchards, I'll bet?'

He says *Cherry Orchards* as though he's some old-
fashioned TV presenter.

'Where *isn't*?' I say.

'Fair point . . .' He nods. 'So what are your folks like? Are they cool?'

'Cool?'

'Yeah, you know? Can you get away with stuff?' He grins. 'My mum's cool, see? My brother gave me these cans of cider at the weekend and she found them in my room, but didn't say *anything*! Not a peep – pretty sweet, right?'

'Pretty sweet,' I say, thinking that *actually* it sounded kind of messed up.

'So what's your dad like?' I ask.

Chris shrugs. 'Dunno, haven't seen him in years.'

'That's rough,' I say.

Chris gestures dismissively. 'Don't bother me. He's a waste of space. Better off without him. See, he thought he was something *once*, but he's just some soft old loser now – you know what I mean?'

'Right . . .' I say. 'Yeah.' Although actually I've got no idea what he means at all.

'So you skipped out on school yesterday?' says Chris.

'Cool.'

It's my turn to shrug. 'It wasn't like that,' I say. 'I just needed to NOT be there. You know?'

'Tell me about it!' he says, grinning. 'I feel like that most days. Total waste of time, right?'

'Yeah . . .' I say again, not sure how else to respond.

'Anyway, I've got something to do,' says Chris suddenly as we're walking past the newsagent's, 'need to pick something up for a mate of mine. See you later, Will.'

'Yeah, later then, Chris,' I reply as I carry on walking, shaking my head slowly from side to side.

As it turns out, school was fine. Like, totally fine. *Better* than fine. Kalia's mum had phoned the office and explained *everything* to the head of Pastoral. So instead of a detention and a whole bunch of long conversations, I find myself having Mr Fraser sort of apologise for how things went down yesterday. I mean, it wasn't like an *apology* apology – that's not really his style, and he did make it totally clear that I was *never* to just up and leave

school again – but I do think he genuinely felt bad that his lesson had turned into a *Let's All Rip It Out of Will* session. So, yeah, he's kind of gone into my good books a bit. He's definitely out of my BAD books anyway.

Kalia was right too. Some kid in Year Eleven got suspended today for setting fire to a bin in the science labs and setting off all the sprinklers, meaning that his whole class *and* the teacher got soaked. So that filled up most of the chat around school, and nobody was all that interested in the whole Will's-hat thing.

Besides, now that I've got this new haircut, I've noticed that people look at me a bit differently, you know? They do this little double take to check that it's me. A couple of kids even said that it looked decent. So, yeah, nice one, Lani!

In fact, the only bad thing about today was that I didn't see Cameron *or* Kalia. Cameron was off sick or something, and Kalia I just didn't see because she's not in my year. I mean, over lunchtime I did try to hang out in some places that I thought she might be, but that felt a

bit weird and pushy so I stopped doing that and just got on with my day.

Still, hopefully my phone'll be working again once I open the rice box and I can get her details or something?

Anyway, that was my day. Pretty great, all in all, and I'm still in a good mood all the way home. Right up until I open the door. And as soon as I do that I know something's wrong.

It's weird. There's just this thick heavy atmosphere, you know? Like, I can actually *feel* it, like the air's made of tar.

'Hey, Dad,' I call out, 'you all right?'

I can see him. He's on the sofa but he doesn't say anything at first, doesn't even look in my direction. I feel this whooshing sensation as the room slides away from me and suddenly it's like all the joy's been sucked out of the world.

Something's happened. Something bad.

'Dad?' I rush through to the room. 'Are you okay?'

He looks round at me. His face blank, a mask. 'Didn't

get the job . . .' he says, his voice flat as he limply holds up a letter.

I knew it. I just *knew* it.

'That's all right,' I say, leaning over and putting my hand on his shoulder. 'Come on! There'll be other jobs, right?'

'Sure,' he mumbles, the word falling from his mouth like a stone. He doesn't say anything else.'

'Look, don't worry about it!' I say. 'That just wasn't the right job for you.'

'But *none* of them are!' he says. 'I don't know what to do, Will. I've tried *everything*, but nothing works.' He looks up at me with awful empty eyes. 'I'm tired.'

'Look, we'll work something out!' I say, the same upbeat, optimistic, totally fake voice that wouldn't convince a six-year-old. 'We always do, right?'

'Right,' he mutters, then slowly closes his eyes. 'Look . . . I'm going to bed, Will. I'm just tired – *really* tired.'

'Okay,' I reply, not mentioning that it's only five p.m., doing everything I can to ignore how wrong this all

feels. 'Well, see you in the morning then, Dad,' I add, as he heaves himself up and limps slowly towards the door. I watch him go, hoping that he'll turn and do that stupid goofy hopeful smile of his.

He doesn't.

So, yeah, I know that things are bad. I mean, *obviously*. But I didn't realise quite *how* bad it was until I get woken up in the middle of the night.

Cold air pinches at me and my breath swirls out, a cloud of mist illuminated by the glow of the street lights gleaming in through the thin curtains.

My heart jolts. An awful noise is coming from the room next to mine – a gulping, gasping, retching sound. *What is it?*

My pulse thuds through my chest, up into my throat and ears, pounding hard but not loud enough to drown out that dreadful sound. Then it stops, collapsing into broken sobs and I recognise what it is.

It's crying.

It's my dad, crying.