

## PROLOGUE

There's this song that keeps coming on the radio, but Holly can only ever catch bits of it. *Remember oh remember back when we were*, a girl's voice clear and urgent, the fast light beat lifting you up off your toes and speeding your heart to keep up, and then it's gone. She keeps trying to ask the others *What is it?* but she never catches enough to ask about. It's always slipping in through the cracks, when they're in the middle of talking about something important or when they have to run for the bus; by the time things go quiet again it's gone, there's just silence, or Rihanna or Nicki Minaj pounding silence away.

It comes out of a car, this time, a car with the top down to dragnet all the sunshine it can get, in the sudden explosion of summer that could be gone tomorrow. It comes over the hedge into the park playground, where they're holding melting ice creams away from their back-to-school shopping. Holly—on the swing, head tipped back to squint up at the sky, watching the sunlight pendulum across her eyelashes—straightens up to listen. “That song,” she says, “what’s—” but just then Julia drops a glob of ice cream in her hair and shoots up on the roundabout yelling “Fuck!,” and by the time she's got a tissue off Becca and borrowed Selena's water bottle to wet it and cleaned the sticky off her hair, bitching the whole time—to make Becca blush, mostly, says the wicked sideways glance at Holly—about how she looks like she gave a blow job to someone with bad aim, the car's gone.

Holly finishes her ice cream and hangs backwards by the swing chains, just keeping the ends of her hair from brushing the dirt, watching the others upside down and sideways. Julia has lain back on the roundabout and is turning it slowly with her feet; the roundabout squeaks, a lazy regular sound, soothing. Next to her Selena sprawls on her stomach, stirring idly through her shopping bag, letting Jules do the work. Becca is threaded through the climbing frame, dabbing at her ice cream with the tip of her

tongue, seeing how long she can make it last. Traffic noises and guys' shouts seep over the hedge, sweetened by sun and distance.

"Twelve days left," Becca says, and checks to see if the rest of them are happy about that. Julia raises her cone like a toast; Selena clinks it with a maths notebook.

The huge paper bag by the swing-set frame hangs in the corner of Holly's mind, a pleasure even when she's not thinking about it. You want to drop your face and both hands into it, get that pristine newness on your fingertips and deep into your nose: glossy ring binder with unbumped corners, matched graceful pencils with long points sharp enough to draw blood, geometry set with every tiny measuring line clean and unworn. And other stuff, this year: yellow towels, ribbon-wrapped and fluffy; a duvet cover, striped in wide yellow and white, slick in its plastic.

*Chip-chip-chip-churr*, says a loud little bird out of the heat. The air is white and burns things away from the edges in. Selena, glancing up, is only a slow toss of hair and an opening smile.

"Net bags!" Julia says suddenly, up to the sizzling sky.

"Hmmm?" Selena asks, into her fanned handful of paintbrushes.

"On the boarders' equipment list. 'Two net bags for in-house laundry service.' Like, where do you get them? And what do you do with them? I don't think I've ever even seen a net bag."

"They're to keep your stuff together in the wash," Becca says. Becca and Selena have been boarding since the start, back when they were all twelve. "So you don't end up with someone else's disgusting knickers."

"Mum got mine last week," Holly says, sitting up. "I can ask her where," and as the words come out she smells laundry at home rising warm from the dryer, her and Mum shaking out a sheet to fold between them, Vivaldi bouncing in the background. Out of nowhere for one hideous swooping moment the thought of boarding turns into a vacuum inside her, sucking till her chest's caving in on itself. She wants to scream for Mum and Dad, fling herself on them and beg to stay at home forever.

"Hol," Selena says gently, smiling up as the roundabout takes her past. "It's going to be great."

"Yeah," Holly says. Becca is watching her, clutching the bar of the climbing frame, instantly spiky with worry. "I know."

And it's gone. There's just a residue left, graining the air and gritting the inside of her chest: still time to change your mind, do it fast before it's too late, run run run all the way home and bury your head. *Chip-chip-churr*, says the loud little bird, mocking and invisible.

“I dibs a window bed,” Selena says.

“Uh-uh, you do not,” says Julia. “No fair dibsing now, when me and Hol don’t even know what the rooms are *like*. You have to wait till we get there.”

Selena laughs at her, as they turn slowly through hot blurred leaf-shadows. “You know what a window’s like. Dibs it or don’t.”

“I’ll decide when I get there. Deal with it.”

Becca is still watching Holly under pulled-down eyebrows, rabbit-gnawing absently on her cone. “I dibs the bed farthest from Julia,” Holly says. Third-years share four to a room: it’ll be the four of them, together. “She snores like a buffalo drowning.”

“Bite my big one, I totally do not. I sleep like a dainty fairy princess.”

“You do too, sometimes,” Becca says, turning red at her own daring. “Last time I stayed over at yours I could actually *feel* it, like vibrating the entire room,” and Julia gives her the finger and Selena laughs, and Holly grins at her and can’t wait for Sunday week again.

*Chip-chip-churr*, the bird says one more time, lazy now, blurred with doziness. And fades.