

BLOOMSBURY

GWYNETH REE'S

LIBBY

in the

Middle



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Chapter One

‘Well, I don’t see any dead bodies lying around, Dad,’ I joked as we drove away from our old house for the final time.

Dad acted like he hadn’t heard. Either he was too stressed to bother even trying to get my joke or he honestly didn’t remember saying, ‘Over my dead body!’ when the idea of moving to live near Aunt Thecla had first come up. Aunt Thecla is Dad’s totally interfering older sister. She’s always lived in the same village where the two of them grew up, and she and Dad have never got on. Dad has always said he couldn’t wait to get away from that village, though Mum says she’s sure he exaggerates when he tells us stories about how awful it was to grow up there.

After a lot of persuasion Mum had finally talked him round, and for the last couple of weeks he had tried to be

positive about it, at least in front of my sisters and me. We all knew that having Aunt Thecla living on our doorstep wasn't going to be easy. She's such a busybody, always sticking her nose in and dishing out her opinions on everything and everybody. Mum says our aunt's own life can't be that fulfilling if she has to take such a huge interest in other people's, but Dad says that's no excuse. Plus he says she's rich enough to take up loads of hobbies and go on lots of exciting holidays whenever she gets bored.

'She's bribing us to get what she wants,' Dad had warned Mum when Aunt Thecla had first made her unbelievable offer.

'So what if she is?' Mum said. 'She's clearly doing this because she's lonely after losing Hughie, but in any case she's doing us a huge favour. I mean, I know she's loaded, but three sets of private school fees is no mean offering.' (Hughie was our aunt's dog, and she was devastated when he escaped from her garden recently and got run over.)

'I'm telling you, Nina,' Dad persisted, 'you don't know my family like I do. She might not be like my father and make us repay her in blood and spit, but she'll have her own agenda, you can be sure about that! This is all about her being in charge of us.'

'Oh, Paul! If this is about what happened when you were a boy, then quite frankly I think it's time you forgave her.'

'I *have* forgiven her!'

'*Consciously* maybe.'

'I thought you were a dentist, not a psychiatrist,' Dad snapped.

'Forgiven Aunt Thecla for *what?*' I'd interrupted, but that just made them both cross with *me* for listening in. I have to admit that I do listen in to other people's discussions quite a bit. Mum says that I'm far and away the most curious one in our family, and I guess that's true.

I'd forgotten all about that conversation while we prepared to leave. I was far too busy saying my last good-byes to various friends and to our old house and neighbourhood. I found myself feeling unexpectedly sentimental about things I'd hardly noticed on a daily basis – the blue garden gate I'd help Dad paint one summer, the park at the bottom of our road where I'd learnt to ride a bike, the big oak tree I always passed on the way to school, and our corner shop, which was the first shop I'd been allowed to walk to all on my own back when I was seven. Then there was Luke, our friendly window-cleaner, and Jovanka, our cleaning lady, who

cried and gave us sweets on the day she said goodbye. I'd already said goodbye to most people I knew from school when we'd all broken up for the summer holiday.

It had been weird how suddenly lots of people at school who I'd never thought particularly liked me came up to give me hugs on the last day. I suppose I've always been one of the quiet ones at school, and since my best friend, Sarah, moved away I'd always felt a little bit of an outsider there. It was strange to receive all this positive attention from people who I thought barely noticed me, and to suddenly feel like a part of my school just as I was leaving. Even though I'd only been there for a year (I was just finishing Year Seven), a lot of teachers said they'd miss me and made a point of wishing me well. I had a feeling some of them felt sorry for me being uprooted, especially as I'm not exactly the sort of person to burst confidently into a new school and effortlessly make new friends.

At home I was doing my best to keep clear of the frequent tantrums of my almost-sixteen-year-old sister, Bella. This move was not what she wanted either, because it meant leaving behind her boyfriend, Sam. Sam has just turned seventeen (too old for Bella, according to Dad), and a few months earlier he'd dropped out of school. The

fact that he'd immediately started an apprenticeship at his uncle's garage had stopped Dad being too scathing about that, but in any case my parents weren't exactly heartbroken to be taking Bella away from him.

Now that we were all crammed together in our car, I could sense my whole family was really close to meltdown. As usual, I was stuck in the middle between Bella and our six-year-old sister, Grace. Bella and Grace look like sisters, whereas I always think I look like the odd one out. They both have dainty features, pale complexions with rosy cheeks, and glossy dark-brown straight hair and large brown eyes. I've got grey-blue eyes, loads of freckles and thick curly reddish-brown hair that comes down to my shoulders. And there's absolutely nothing dainty about me.

'Move over, Libby,' Bella snapped as we left our street behind. A few years ago she wouldn't have cared if we were squashed together with our thighs touching, or even if I'd been perched on her lap, but now she acts like any physical contact between us has to be avoided at all costs. She calls it an invasion of her personal space.

'I can't! I've got Grace's seat digging into me on this side!' I protested.

'You can move your leg away from mine!'

‘Girls, will you please stop squabbling,’ Mum said crossly.

‘We’re not!’ Bella retorted. ‘We’re having a *discussion* about who’s taking up the most room. Which is definitely Libby!’

I didn’t stand up for myself. I knew if I tried to challenge her she’d start spouting hard facts about the size of my bum in relation to hers. Although she’s three years older than me she’s really slight in build, like Mum and Grace. I’m the only one who takes after Dad’s side of the family in that I’m ‘a good healthy size’, as Aunt Thecla would put it. Aunt Thecla isn’t fat but she’s definitely pretty solid, and you’d probably take me for her daughter rather than Mum’s if we were all standing together.

Aunt Thecla had been visiting us once or twice a year for as far back as I can remember, and she always made a big thing of scrutinising our appearance, commenting on all the ways my sisters and I had changed. Not only was she like most adults who’d say, ‘Look how much you’ve grown!’ she wouldn’t actually leave it at that. She always stared at us for so long it made us really uncomfortable, and then insisted on pointing out her various observations like, ‘Libby’s shoulders are so broad now – just like Mother’s ...’ and ‘Bella has exceptionally big toes – she

gets those from her grandfather' and 'You've got your grandfather's legs, Libby – but hopefully there's more they can do these days for varicose veins ...'.

Needless to say she annoyed us all no end.

'I hate this stupid car, Dad!' Bella complained loudly. 'I don't know why we can't get one like Sam's mum's, with those pop-up seats in the back.'

'Pop-up seats in the crumple zone, you mean!' Dad said. 'I've seen her car. Those seats are a deathtrap.'

'What's a deathtrap, Daddy?' Grace asked with a frown. 'Is it dangerous?'

Bella sent her a withering look. 'Well, what do *you* think?'

'It's nothing for you to worry about, darling,' Mum said swiftly, 'though I must say I can't see why she even needs such a big car when it's just the two of them.'

'Sam's uncle was getting rid of it,' I told her.

Bella, who continued to glare daggers at the back of Dad's head, snapped, 'I don't think Sam's mum would make him sit there if it was a *deathtrap*, Dad!'

'Don't know about that,' Dad said. 'If Sam was my son I might take the risk.'

'PAU-AUL! You shouldn't joke about things like that.' Mum was glaring at him too now.

'Who says I'm joking?' Dad growled. The trouble is, Dad still blames Sam for most of Bella's problems at school, which if you ask me is a bit unfair.

'You know, believe it or not, Sam actually *liked* you when he first met you, Dad,' Bella said coldly.

'It's true,' I joined in. 'He told Bella you're not nearly as awful as *she's* always making out!'

I wasn't surprised by the jab in the ribs I got from Bella. Her sense of humour has been non-existent lately. So has Dad's, but at least he let out a snort that sounded vaguely like a laugh.

Bella put in her earphones and turned away to stare out of the window. It seems like she never stops scowling these days. I thought about what Mum had said when I'd complained to her about Bella being so mean and bad-tempered over the last few months. Mum said it wasn't uncommon for someone who was being bullied at school to take it out on their nearest and dearest. She said that now the bullying had stopped we just had to give Bella some time to revert to her normal self. Not that I was sure any more what Bella's normal self actually *is* ...

'Let's play a game!' Grace said, giving my arm a tug. She didn't ask Bella, who would probably have ignored her in any case. Years ago, when Grace was a baby, Bella

and I had played loads of car games together on long journeys. Nowadays she prefers to retreat inside her own head whenever we're all in the car.

'OK then,' I agreed, even though I wouldn't have minded retreating too. But I knew that if I did I'd really disappoint Grace.

We played different games on and off for the next couple of hours while Bella listened to her music with her eyes closed. I could tell she wasn't asleep because she was nodding her head slightly in time with the beat. I tried to keep as much as possible to Grace's side of the car. At least she still likes cuddling up to me.

We were playing yet another round of 'Can you spot?' when Grace suddenly let out a whimper. I looked at her face and I knew at once what was wrong.

'Grace feels sick!' I shouted, which immediately set off Operation Sick Bowl.

'Can you get it for her, Libby? It's that empty ice-cream tub ... under Daddy's seat.'

'It's not here!'

'It must be!'

'Wait ... Nina, I think I might have put an ice-cream tub with the recycling when I cleaned out the car.'

'PAU-AUL!'

Bella had removed her earphones by this time. 'Libby gave her a book to read, Mum. That's probably what's done it.'

'LIBBY! You know she gets sick if she reads in the car!'

'She only had to look at the pictures! We're trying to spot a squirrel, aren't we, Grace?'

Grace mumbled something incomprehensible from behind the hand she'd clamped over her mouth.

Meanwhile, Mum was removing the lid from Dad's deluxe travel mug and peering inside saying, 'Sorry, Paul, but I'm not giving her my handbag ...'



Chapter Two

Dad had lowered his window to give Grace some fresh air, and by the time we reached the service station Bella's hair, much to my delight, was sticking out in all directions. (Mine probably was too but I didn't care.)

As we climbed out of the car Grace said she felt better.

'Better as in you're *not* going to hurl now?' Bella said sarcastically as she took out her hairbrush.

Grace looked puzzled. 'What's *hurl*?'

'It's just a cooler way to say being sick,' I explained.

Bella let out a dismissive snort. 'What do *you* know about being cool, Libby? *You're* certainly not!'

That comment got to me. I mean, I know I'm not cool, but I don't need *her* to tell me that.

At least I didn't have everyone at school texting horrible stuff about me, I felt like retaliating. But I couldn't say it – not knowing just how bad those texts had been.

Bella's problems at school had started six months earlier, though we hadn't known about it at the time. She'd had a big row with Sam's previous girlfriend, Andrea. That part was probably as much Bella's fault as Andrea's. But then Andrea started sending round nasty texts to all her mates, and also to Bella, accusing her of all sorts of things, including being unfaithful to Sam. The accusations and gossip became more and more vicious. Bella showed me some of the texts, but I knew there were also ones she deleted straight away because she said they were too disgusting to show anyone.

I didn't know what was happening when it all started. Bella didn't tell anyone at first, and at school the Year Sevens and Year Tens stayed pretty separate. But at home she was being really loud and mouthy, much more impatient than she'd ever been before, picking arguments with all of us, but especially with me. At the same time she started wanting to stay in all the time when she wasn't with Sam, and she never wanted me to go up and speak to anyone I knew from school if we were ever out and about together.

She was spending loads of time with Sam, who knew a bit about what was happening. He'd been sworn to secrecy by Bella, who threatened never to confide in

him ever again if he told anyone. So he didn't tell, but instead he went round to Andrea's house to confront her about it and ended up getting punched by her older brother.

The cyberbullying (because I know now that's what it was) went on for a couple of months, until Mum saw a text one day and asked her about it. That was when Bella finally told our parents everything.

Mum and Dad were horrified and wanted to go to the school immediately, but they couldn't get an appointment to see the head teacher for several days. Apparently, when they did see him he wasn't that helpful, saying that the girls needed to sort it out themselves. Mum and Dad were furious with the school's attitude, and that's when they made up their minds to move Bella. But Dad was also furious with Sam for knowing about the texts and not telling him. He said that if Sam couldn't make the right decisions where Bella was concerned then he didn't want him seeing her any more. And when Bella told Dad defiantly that she was going to see Sam regardless, Dad grounded her for a fortnight.

Despite Bella being grounded, she and Sam were still texting all the time and facetimeing each other loads. And as soon as she was free to go out again she carried on

seeing Sam, though she was careful to do it behind Dad's back this time.

'Not seeing him just *hurts* too much,' she told me one evening, hugging her middle tightly as she spoke. 'But then I don't suppose you get that, do you?'

'Yes I do,' I said, enjoying the feeling of being confided in for once. 'It's like when Sarah left. I still really miss her.' Sarah had been my best friend since we'd started school together when we were five, but she moved away last year. We stayed in touch via email, but she quickly made another best friend at her new school. Not that I blamed her. I just wished that I'd been as quick to find someone else. Though now it didn't matter, I guess. I wondered if I would make a new best friend now that I was moving away too. Mum says it's better to have lots of different friends rather than one best one, because then if you fall out or they move away it doesn't matter so much. I'm sure she's right. In fact, I know from experience that she's right. So what is it that still makes me want to replace Sarah?

'It's not the same at all,' Bella had scoffed. 'But then you're such a baby. I should've known you wouldn't understand!'

If she hadn't had tears in her eyes as she spoke I might have argued back. Instead it struck me that she probably

had a point. Yes, Sarah had been really important to me, but my family would always come first. Whereas if Bella had to choose between Sam and us at that moment ... well, let's just say I wasn't so confident who would win.

By the start of July, Mum and Dad were having problems trying to find a new school for Bella. It didn't help that she was sitting GCSEs next year and her predicted grades weren't very good. That's when Aunt Thecla stepped in and suggested we move to live near her and let her pay the fees for all three of us to go to the independent school she had attended herself. It was called St Clara's and Aunt Thecla knew the headmistress there. Apparently they had places for all three of us for the coming school year.

'Over my dead body!' was Dad's first response. 'There's no way on earth I'm going back to live in that village.'

'Paul, let's just go and have a look,' Mum had said in her most persuasive voice. When Dad still refused to budge she'd said, 'Think about it, Paul. It's girls only. That means no boys to distract Bella. Or Libby and Grace when the time comes.'

That had sparked Dad's interest a bit. Then Mum added, 'We'd also be putting some distance between Bella and Sam.'

The following day Dad had called us all together. 'Your mother and I have been thinking ... we're going to look at St Clara's, and if we like it we'll move. But we're going to rent out our house here and rent a place in the village close to the school. A year will be long enough to get Bella through her GCSEs. Then if we decide not to stay we can just move back.'

I was about to protest that Bella wasn't the only one in our family, and that just because I didn't have any problems at school *yet* it didn't mean I wouldn't have if I had to keep moving around. But Mum gave me a look that promised she had no intention of moving back even if she wasn't about to contradict Dad at this point. So I let it rest.

Everything happened super-fast after that. We went to visit St Clara's, where we met with the headmistress, Mrs McLusky, and we were all offered places to start after the summer holiday. Mum managed to get herself some part-time work at the dental practice in the village, and Dad has his own business as a web designer working mainly from home, so that was fine.

I have to say that I'd half expected Bella to stage a sit-in at the last minute and totally refuse to leave our house. But after meeting Sam for lunch the day before

we left she'd seemed surprisingly calm about things. Which just goes to show that Sam is actually a pretty good influence on her, rather than a disruptive one as Mum and Dad seem to think.



Chapter Three

Unfortunately, now that we were leaving, Mum and Dad would never get to see that side of Sam – the side that’s really kind and protective.

I thought back to when I’d first seen it myself. It was soon after our elderly cat Trixie died. I’d made a little wooden cross to mark the spot where Dad had buried her at the far end of our garden. As I sat by her grave one afternoon telling her how much I missed her I heard someone approaching and assumed it was Mum or Bella.

‘Hi, Libby,’ said an unexpected male voice, and I felt myself squirm as I realised Sam must have heard me talking to our dead cat.

‘Oh ...’ I stood up abruptly. ‘Hi ...’

Bella had only been going out with him for a few weeks and it was the third or fourth time he’d been

round to our house. It was before he'd dropped out of his A levels so the only concrete thing Dad had against him at that point was that he'd been suspended from school for a week at the end of Year Eleven for calling our headmaster 'useless and spineless'. (Dad said that even though it was true, it showed gross stupidity and immaturity to actually call the man that to his face.) There was also the fact that Sam was in the sixth form, whereas Bella was only in Year Ten. Dad has always had a big problem with that, even though the actual age difference is only fourteen months.

'Hi,' he said. 'Bella said to come and give you this out here so your mum doesn't see.' As he spoke he handed me a framed photograph of Trixie. She was lying in her favourite spot in the sun on top of Bella's bed. I immediately felt tears in my eyes. It was exactly how I wanted to remember her.

'I gave a copy to Bella too,' Sam said. 'I took it the last time I came round.' He looked a bit self-conscious as he added, 'Listen, you can't tell your parents I actually took those photos or they'll know I was in Bella's room, OK?'

I nodded. I really wished I *could* tell Mum and Dad about the photos so they would see for themselves how

kind Sam could be. I knew I couldn't though. Bella had been at home on her own that day and Sam wasn't meant to have been here at all, let alone in Bella's bedroom. I knew that Dad would go ballistic if he found out.

'It's lovely, Sam. Thank you,' I murmured. I have to say I was pretty touched that he'd thought of me as well as Bella.

'That's OK. I know how bad it is to lose a pet you've grown up with.'

'Has it happened to you?' I asked softly.

He nodded. 'I had a cat called Mabel. I got her when she was a kitten. Last year my mum gave her away without even asking me, just because she kept scratching the new carpet.'

'Oh, Sam ... that's terrible.' And that's when I decided I liked him.

A few months later Dad did catch Bella and Sam alone in our house – though thankfully not in her bedroom. It happened one afternoon when Dad came home early from a meeting in town. It was Sam's half-day and Bella had skipped school so she could hang out with him at our place. Dad was totally furious, especially with Sam. He accused him of being irresponsible and disobedient, and a few other things on top, before shoving him out the

door. Later he went round to complain to Sam's mother, who turned out to be less than helpful. (Apparently she said, 'He's not a child. He's seventeen – the same age I was when I had him. You have a problem with him seeing your girl, then speak to *him* about it! And maybe you should speak to *her* at the same time!')

'Well, she's got a point,' Mum said when Dad reported back to her. 'He's *not* a child. Neither is Bella for that matter.'

'They're both still young enough to accept *some* parental guidance,' Dad snapped, 'though I can see that for Sam it's not exactly abundant!'

'Poor kid,' Mum murmured.

For a moment Dad looked like he might be thinking the same, but then his face hardened. 'We have to think about Bella and what's best for her,' he reminded Mum firmly. 'The sooner she stops seeing him the better.'

I almost spoke up and told them that in my opinion splitting them up wasn't actually in Bella's best interests at all. But as usual I kept quiet. I might be good at noticing things that other people don't, but unfortunately I'm not so good at having the confidence to actually share those things with people – especially when I don't think they'll agree with me.

* * *

‘So, girls? How are we feeling?’ Dad asked Bella and me. We were inside the service station waiting for Mum and Grace, who were taking ages in the Ladies. I could tell Dad really wanted to hear that we were feeling OK about moving to live in the country.

‘I’ve never felt so miserable,’ Bella told him flatly.

I waited for Dad to check if I felt the same way, but he didn’t. I don’t think it was because he didn’t care about my feelings. I just think he sometimes finds Bella’s feelings so much to handle that he hasn’t got room to ask me about mine as well.

He looked worried as he launched straight into trying to coax my sister out of her bad mood, the way he’d always done so easily when she was younger.

‘Sweetheart ... cheer up ... you know this is your chance for a fresh start. And you have to do your GCSEs somewhere. You liked the school when we looked around, didn’t you?’

‘It’s not the school that’s the problem,’ Bella said sharply. ‘It’s everything else. I mean, we don’t know anybody and we’ve absolutely no friends there.’

‘No enemies either,’ I pointed out.

‘Yet,’ she emphasised with feeling.

‘Come on, Bella ...’ Dad persisted. ‘We’ll all support each other, and I bet you’ll make friends in no time.’

‘And just *think*,’ Bella continued doggedly. ‘Instead of seeing Aunt Thecla twice a year, she’ll be living down the road from us. Can you imagine how it’ll be having her constantly commenting on Grace’s table manners and trying to estimate what size feet Libby will end up with and going on and on at me to eat more vegetables ...’

‘Oh Bella, I’m sure it won’t be that bad.’

‘Yes it will. And she’ll be coming to every sports day and school concert, telling everyone she’s our aunt and wanting to know the reason why if we don’t get starring roles. I mean how gruesome is that?’

Dad swallowed and I could tell he was remembering the same incident we all were – the time when Aunt Thecla came to watch my school Nativity play one Christmas and marched up to the teacher at the end, demanding – in her loud, posh voice – to know why I was a shepherd for the second year running. Dad banned her from coming to my school plays after that, even though she did apologise and explain that she found it hard to watch me being ‘overlooked’ (as she saw it) when Bella had been Mary in Reception, Angel Gabriel in Year One and the only king with a speaking part in Year Two. And

I remember that in among all the embarrassment I felt quite surprised and pleased that she would stand up for me like that.

‘At least she won’t have to stay with us for the whole week at Christmas any more,’ I pointed out to Bella. ‘Or even overnight.’

‘Thank God,’ Bella said with a snort.

‘For small mercies,’ I added with a grin, because that’s one of our aunt’s favourite sayings.

Dad sighed. ‘You know, despite how difficult your aunt can be at times, you girls are very important to her. Family is everything as far as she’s concerned – and we’re all she’s got. I want you to try and remember that.’

That was rich coming from him, I thought.

‘What about *our* family?’ Bella demanded. ‘Mum and you and the three of *us*. Isn’t that important too?’

‘Of course it is.’

‘Because in case you haven’t noticed, the only time you and Mum argue really badly is when Aunt Thecla comes to stay. I just hope moving here doesn’t put too much strain on your marriage, that’s all.’

Dad’s mouth fell open, like it had been doing a lot lately after Bella had spoken. And this time he found himself with absolutely nothing to say in response.

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi and Sydney

First published in Great Britain in August 2017 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

www.bloomsbury.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 5277 4

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk