

**SweetFreak says:**

*Can't wait til you're dead, Princess. Can't wait til I kill you.*

**FALL**

# 1

Friendship matters.

Right?

Being loyal. Being honest. Being there. It's what really counts.

That's what I thought, anyway. That's why I was prepared to sneak out of my room that night to meet Amelia. My bestie who was in a state. Again.

Well, maybe I liked the fun of getting something past Mum too. She thought I was already fast asleep up here. Which, clearly, I was never going to be. It wasn't even ten thirty, for goodness sake. But that's my mum for you . . . she doesn't really get me at all. Nobody does, apart from Amelia.

Which brings me back to my late evening creep across the landing . . .

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I close my laptop and check Amelia's message one last time.

*ry need c u, pls com now, usual plce* followed by a row of praying hands interspersed with sad face emojis

She must really be upset. With a sigh I turn off my phone – just in case I get any alerts – and leave my bedroom. I take wide strides, careful to avoid the place where the floor creaks. The TV's on downstairs, but otherwise the house is silent. My little brother, Jamie, has an eight-thirty bedtime, which means that Mum makes us all keep it down after that. I'm more worried about Poppy – that's my older sister – catching me sneaking out of the house. She'd love to get me in trouble. She's in a massive mood with me at the moment because her stupid boyfriend George broke up with her and she blames me. It's so unfair. All I did was send Amelia a video of Poppy making out with a guy on the beach when we were on holiday. I was just having a bit of fun with the video. I certainly didn't mean to stir things up with Poppy's boyfriend. It was a private message and I made it clear the whole thing wasn't really Poppy's fault. I even put angel wings on Poppy's back and devil horns on the Spanish boy's head, just to show that *she* was the victim – seduced by a six pack with big brown smiling eyes.

The trouble was Poppy's boyfriend George is my best friend Amelia's brother. He's also – clearly – suspicious and nosy, because he deliberately went and snuck a look at Amelia's phone. He saw the video and then he dumped Poppy.

It really wasn't my fault. Or poor Amelia's. I mean I feel bad that Poppy's all broken hearted over George, but if he's so untrusting that he thinks it's OK to snoop about on someone else's phone, then I reckon Poppy's better off without him.

I just wish she saw it like that.

George broke up with her the day after we got back from holiday. That was three weeks ago and my sister is still furious with me.

I stand outside her door, holding my breath, braced for Poppy to wrench her door open and start shouting. But all I can hear are sobs.

Is she crying? Guilt flushes through me. I'd give anything to make her feel better. Though if I'm honest I don't think it was true love with Poppy and George. I mean, I get she's upset about him finishing with her, but they'd been together nearly a year and if Poppy was as loved up over him as all that, surely she wouldn't have let that Spanish boy eat her face off?

I hurry into the bathroom at the end of the corridor. The window is hitched up a tiny bit, like it always is unless the air outside is literally freezing. I ease it fully open and scramble outside, hooking my feet around the drainpipe then letting myself carefully down on to the shed roof that's a metre or so below. Beneath me our cat, Rumble, is trotting across the patio, a dead bird in his mouth. Poor Mum'll go mad when he takes it into the kitchen. She gets really upset about Rumble's murderous tendencies and, like my sister, she can't stand the sight of blood. Still, Rumble's latest prey is a lucky break for me . . . if Mum's preoccupied, she'll be less likely to check I'm in bed.

It's been a warm day, considering it's almost the end of September, but the night air is cool. I zip up my new jacket – a black satin bomber with flowery embroidery on the back – and inch across the shed, over the fence and on to the top of next door's kitchen extension. They had it put in last year. Mum was all nicey-nicey when they apologised for the noise and disruption, though she complained about it all the time in private. She'd have complained a lot more if she'd realised the flat roof gives me a perfect run over to the wall that borders the street at the end of our road. I'm there in seconds, easing myself down to the pavement. I race across the road and around the corner on to King Street.

In a couple of minutes I'm clambering over the railings into the park and heading for the kids' play area. Mum used to bring me and Poppy here when we were little. More recently I've brought Jamie, though now he prefers the nearby wood. The row of swings

clinks in the breeze. Across the park I can just make out the edge of Bow Wood: dark and gloomy beyond the street lamps. Amelia isn't here yet. I lean against the spider-web climber with a sigh, wondering what's held her up.

I take advantage of the silence to run through the lines from my first scene in *The Sound of Music*. I was given the main part, Maria, after the auditions last week. Which, if I'm honest, is the most exciting thing that's happened to me all year. Not that I can let on how I feel, of course, it would be seriously uncool to show any of my friends that I'm over the moon to be involved with a school musical. Plus they'd all think I was full of myself if I started gushing about having the lead. It's not like I think I'm massively talented. That is, I guess I've always been able to sing and I don't have any trouble learning lines. Whatever, I spent most of year seven doing song and dance routines in front of my bedroom mirror, imagining I was a global star. Which is kind of embarrassing to admit to now. Anyway, we've only had one rehearsal for *The Sound of Music* so far – the whole cast doing group songs and it was fun. Amelia isn't in the show. She says the idea of standing up in front of everyone and performing terrifies her, though she might get involved with the set designs.

Where is she?

I suddenly remember that I switched off my phone when I crept out of the house. I turn it back on and, straight away, it pings with an alert. Is that her? I check the screen, half expecting it to be a text from Mum, furious that I'm not at home and all set to ground me for a month. She caught me sneaking out a few months ago and I promised I wouldn't ever do it again. But it's a message from Amelia.

**Carey, where r u?** <insert row of kitten sad crying emojis>

I roll my eyes. Amelia's message clearly said we should meet at the 'usual place' which, all summer, has been the park.

Irritated, I message back.

**im at swings, u?** <insert row of surprised kitten emojis>

**we sed rec** <insert cross face emoji>

<insert cross face emoji> **we sed swings**

Nothing back from Amelia. I stand up, tugging my jacket around my chest. Is she seriously annoyed? I'm sure I'm right about the meeting place. But maybe Amelia's too upset to think straight. She's been getting these mean private messages on NatterSnap from someone calling themselves SweetFreak all week.

If you're under ten or over sixteen you probably haven't heard of NatterSnap. It's an awesome app that lets you animate and manipulate images then share them. There are lots of apps like it, but NatterSnap is probably the most popular right now. And definitely the most realistic. Unlike, say, with SnapChat, the posts don't disappear unless you delete them. For instance, the last SweetFreak message Amelia got showed a huge (real) pig with her face perfectly superimposed on it rootling around in mud, then falling on to a house which collapsed under the weight, sending neon letters sparking into the air that said: *Amelia woz here*. Which is crazy. Because she's not even remotely overweight. The opposite, in fact, though she always says she thinks she's fat.

I told Amelia to ignore the message. When she hesitated I took her phone and deleted it myself. People can be really mean on social media but you can't let nasty stuff like that get to you. I know that sounds brutal, but it's the only way to cope. I wish Amelia wouldn't let it get to her.

Another message beeps, bringing me back to the park and the chilly night air:

**Please hurry, I rly need 2 c u**

My irritation vanishes. Poor Amelia, she must be feeling terrible. It's all very well me saying she should just ignore SweetFreak's mean messages but it's horrible not knowing who they come from. Like, it's got to be someone who knows her, right? But who would hate Amelia so much that they'd go to all that trouble?

I send a message back to her: **On my way** x <insert smiley face and big heart emoji>

Hoping that will have made Amelia smile, I set off across the park. I speed past the edge of the wood, shivering as I glance into the shadows of the trees, then on, down a couple of deserted backstreets. As I turn the corner by the Duck and Dragon pub I pass a pair of teenagers: a boy about my age and a girl with pink hair who looks about eighteen. The girl is wearing DMs with rainbow laces while the boy has mismatching trainers – one grey Adidas, the other yellow Nike with a green swoosh.

I scurry on, wondering whether that's some sort of random style choice or because he can't afford new trainers.

Another couple of streets and I'm almost at the rec. It's closer to Amelia's house, just as the park is closer to mine. Though in my opinion the park wins hands down as a place to meet. Technically the rec itself is an old club building that was used a million years ago when Mum was a teenager, for something called the Cornmouth Youth Club.

Needless to say nobody goes there any more, I think old people play bingo in it or something. There's a bus shelter outside – also unused, the last bus came through there about the same time Mum was going to the youth club.

When Amelia and I say to meet at the rec, it's this bus shelter we mean.

She's there as I approach, bending over her phone, her long straight blonde hair falling over her eyes. She never ties it back, whereas I'm always shoving my curls into hairbands.

'Hey!' I call out.

Amelia looks up. Her big blue eyes glisten in the lamplight. She looks really unhappy.

I run up. 'I thought the "usual place" was the park,' I say, panting for breath.

'It *was* in the summer,' Amelia sniffs. 'But now we're back at school we meet *here*.' She says it with a tinge of petulance, as if this is something I should have automatically known. A flicker of irritation passes through me, then a tear trickles down Amelia's face and I remember why I'm here.

'What's happened?' I ask. 'Is it SweetFreak? Have they sent another message?'

Amelia shakes her head. 'It's Taylor. He *still* hasn't called me. In fact . . .' Amelia says, choking back sobs. 'In fact he's just unfriended me on *everything*.'

'Oh.' I sigh inwardly. Is that really what's upset her so much? I don't get it. I mean, she and Taylor only went on a few dates together. Nothing serious – just like my sister and George – and yet Amelia's totally obsessing about him. I hate seeing her like this.

'I was wondering about the messages I've been getting from . . . from SweetFreak.' Amelia's lips tremble. 'Do you think Taylor might have sent them?'

I wrinkle my nose. It seems unlikely that Taylor, who as far as I can see has basically lost all interest in Amelia, would start sending her nasty messages out of the blue. But I'm pretty certain Amelia would probably rather he paid her any attention than none at all. Anyway, she's miserable enough about the guy ignoring her without me going on about it too.

'I don't know,' I say, trying to work out what to say that won't upset her any further. 'It doesn't seem like his style.'

I'm not sure if this is true, of course. I've met Taylor several times, but I don't know him properly.

Amelia is still sniffing, clearly trying not to cry again. I feel so bad for her.

'Are you OK?' I ask.

'Not really.' Another tear wobbles down Amelia's cheek.

I give her a hug and we sit down on the rusty old bus shelter seat.

Amelia's fingers stray to her silver necklace and the little heart-shaped pendant that hangs from it. 'I still can't get my head around it. Taylor seemed so *happy*.' She sighs. 'The last time I saw him he took me to the Haunted Hut outside the industrial estate. He'd got hold of a key to it somehow, a weird one with a skull painted on the end, and it was really spooky. I was all freaked and Taylor was really nice and we made out and it was so romantic and he gave me this necklace and then . . .'

' . . . and then the very next day he just stopped calling.' I sigh. Amelia has already told me this story several times. 'I know, but, see, you can't think like that. It's boys. There's no way of understanding them. They're crazy.'

'He mentioned he'd met a girl hoping to be a model.' Amelia's face crumples again. 'So of course he wouldn't still want to go out with me after that. I'm so fat and ugly.'

'No you're not.'

'I am. You've never had a boyfriend so you don't understand.'

'Of course I—'

'No. It's obvious. He was just putting up with me until someone better came along.'

I press my lips together to stop myself pointing out that I'm certain Amelia's reading way too much into it. Anyway, Taylor is clearly an idiot if he doesn't want to be with her so why is she getting so upset?

What is it with her and Poppy that they're so hung up on stupid relationships?

Why can't they get excited about something else? Like, I'm not saying I'm so super-sorted or anything, but I've got the lead in the school show, I'm on track with my grades and while I wouldn't say I was the most popular person in my year, I don't have any beef with anyone. I'm certainly not hung up on a guy I only dated a few times, like Amelia is. Or heartbroken because I messed up like my sister.

I sit back, letting her go over the last meeting between her and Taylor yet again: how he was all handsome with his dark wavy hair and leather jacket and how maybe if she'd kissed better or worn a sexier dress he might have stayed interested. I'm itching to



tell her to get over him, that he's a loser. Good-looking certainly and, by all accounts, popular. But a loser nevertheless.

'He's crazy if he doesn't want you,' I settle for saying.

Amelia gives little cough. 'I was actually wondering if I could . . . that is, I know Jamie is friends with Taylor's little brother, so maybe you could organise for them to get together and I could come with you?'

My mouth gapes. 'You seriously want to go to his house on the pretext of my kid brother having a playdate?' I hesitate. 'Oh, you must feel really awful.' That's what I say, but what I'm actually thinking is that it's a bit selfish of Amelia to be asking. No way am I using Jamie as some sort of chess piece to manoeuvre her in through the front door. My seven-year-old brother annoys me half the time, with his mischievous grin and his constant pestering, but I love him to death. And I refuse to use him just because Amelia's desperate to get back with a stupid boy who isn't worth her time or her tears.

I meet Amelia's soft, trembling gaze, my irritation mounting. She's my best friend and I love her, but she really can be a bit of a princess. Lately, I feel like all we ever do is talk about her. Not that I'd say that to her face.

I'm just trying to work out how to reject her Jamie plan without losing my temper, when Amelia herself gives a groan.

'Don't worry. I'm sorry, it was a stupid idea. Anyway, there's no knowing if Taylor would even be in, though I suppose once I'm in his house I could always try and sneak into his room . . .' She glances at me, then, seeing the look on my face, corrects herself. 'Sorry, it's fine. I'm fine.' She checks her phone. 'It's late. I'd better get home. Thanks for coming out.'

Is that it? I've risked being grounded for a month, just so Amelia can go on about Taylor?

I take a deep breath, struggling with my irritation. I can't let her see. It's not fair on her. And anyway, we're best friends. Amelia's awesome. She's always been there for me, like the time we went on a school trip to the London Dungeon and I got sick and Amelia stayed with me for two whole hours while everyone else was running about having fun. She's a great friend. And I need to be a good friend to her now. What is it Mum's always saying? Something about everyone being entitled to their own reality and that it's important to try and respect other people's points of view, even if you disagree with them.

Right now, for Amelia, her reality is that she's devastated *and* she's had to put up with those mean NatterSnap messages all week, so I say nothing, just hug her goodbye then run home through the empty streets.

A quarter of an hour later I'm hauling myself over our neighbour's wall and up on to their kitchen extension. I scramble across it, then hop over the fence to our back garden shed and up to the bathroom which is, thankfully, unoccupied.

As I let myself in and pad across the landing I can hear Mum downstairs, on the phone to one of her friends. She's moaning about the dead bird Rumpole dragged in. Suddenly feeling tired, I creep to my room, avoiding the creak in the same way that I did on the way out. There's no sound from Poppy. I slip out of my clothes and get into bed. I check my phone, yawning now. Nothing from Amelia, which hopefully means she's feeling better. I put the phone down on the little desk beside my bed. Its blue light illuminates my open laptop.

I stare at the laptop, frowning. I was sure I closed it before I went out. But I can't have done and neither can anybody else in the house. Jamie's been fast asleep for hours. And if Mum had come in here and discovered I wasn't in bed, there'd be hell to play. As for Poppy, the mood she's in right now, she'd definitely have grassed me up if *she'd* realised I'd gone out.

I'm asleep within seconds, forgetting all about my laptop. It's not until the end of the following day that I realise what has happened.

And my entire world comes crashing down.

'Carey!' Mum's voice in my ear startles me awake.

I open my eyes to see her looming over me. She's in her work suit and half made up, one eye complete with eyeliner and a smudge of pale grey eyeshadow, the other bare.

'Will you please get up?' She gives my shoulder an irritated shake.

I grunt and turn over, pulling the duvet over my face. Mum has already opened the curtains and bright sunlight glares in.

'Please, Carey. And I need you to walk Jamie to school. I've got an early meeting.'

'Why can't Poppy do it?' I grumble.

'She's not well,' Mum says. 'Tummy bug.'

'Yeah, right.'

'I have to go.' I'm still under the duvet but I can hear Mum's footsteps padding across the room. 'Come on, Carey, you'll need to leave in twenty minutes if you're going to drop Jamie at breakfast club, and make sure you have something to eat.'

'That's loads of time,' I mutter. But Mum has already gone.

I lie still for a few minutes, then shove the duvet off me and get up with a groan. I throw on my uniform, then spend five minutes working product through my hair. Unlike anyone else in my family I've got wildly curly hair and it has to be tamed every morning. I'm just finishing when Jamie bursts in and leaps on to my bed, jumping up and down and waving a plastic sword.

Did I mention Jamie's obsessed with a video game called *Warriors of the Doom Wood*? There's a cartoon as well, even a boring movie which Mum and I took him to over the summer.

'I'll be Sir Tamwin Star, you can be Lady Pretzel-loser.' Jamie wields the sword, his cheeks dimpling as he smiles.

'Pretzel-loser?' I grin. 'Are you sure you've got that right?'

'Whatever.' Jamie spins around on the bed, flourishing his sword again. 'Get away from her, you fiend!' he shrieks in a mock posh lord accent.

'Aaagh!' I shrink away, playing along in imaginary peril.

A thump on the wall that divides my room from Poppy's. 'Be quiet!' comes her muffled yell. 'I'm not well.'

I roll my eyes. She might fool Mum but as far as I'm concerned there's nothing wrong with my sister – not physically at least. Her so-called tummy upset is all about George dumping her. 'Come on, Jamie, let's go.'

With a roar my little brother jumps to the floor and races out the door. As I pick up my school bag my eye is caught again by the open laptop on my desk. I shut the lid, my mind flitting back to last night when I'd been certain that I'd closed it before I snuck out.

'Carey!' Jamie calls from downstairs. 'Come on!'

'All right! I'm coming!' I yell back and the laptop mystery flits from my mind as I hurry out of my room.

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I can tell something's wrong the moment I walk into my form room. I spot Amelia straight away. She's sitting on the table by the window, surrounded by girls. She's nodding as Rose, her shiny brown bob swinging as she speaks, says something in a low, serious voice. Rose is one of the most popular girls in our class. Not that I'm a big fan myself. Most people think she's lovely but to me she's one of those girls who make out they're your friend, but who you're never really sure of. She's in *The Sound of Music* with me, as Mother Superior. That's basically Maria's boss when she's a nun at the start of the story. I'm pretty sure Rose wanted to be Maria. She's been all gushy to my face about how good I am, but I sense she resents me getting the role. She clocks me as I hurry over and her back stiffens. All the girls she's with are speaking at once.

'Unbelievable.'

'Who the hell is SweetFreak anyway?'

'Gone too far.'

The only one not talking is Amelia. She meets my gaze, tears welling as she sees the concern on my face.

'Look.' She holds out her phone.

The girls turn, acknowledging me with nods and grimaces. I'm certain – though it sounds mean to say it – that they're only surrounding Amelia for the drama.

'It's really bad, Carey,' Rose says with a solemn sigh. 'Poor Amelia.'

I brace myself for another mean, mocking, manipulated NatterSnap image, like the three Amelia has already received this week. But this time the post on the screen is so shocking that my breath actually hitches in my throat. It's the same photo of Amelia

as in the pig-face video, but in this film her eyes have been manipulated to look wide and terrified and a long, serrated knife is being drawn slowly along her throat. As the skin is slashed through, blood pours out and thick black type appears against the red:

***SweetFreak says:***

*Can't wait til you're dead, Princess. Can't wait til I kill you.*

The whole effect, like all NatterSnap stuff, is made worse by being so sickeningly realistic.

I shiver and hand back the phone. 'This is from SweetFreak again?' I ask.

Amelia nods. Her face is pale, her red-rimmed eyes as unhappy as I've ever seen them.

'I can't believe she'd go this far,' I say. It sounds hollow. Insufficient to the nastiness of the post. Because we're all used to snide, mean messages but this one is in a different league altogether.

The other girls start talking all at once again. Amelia gives me a puzzled look, then her face crumples and she holds out her arms for me to hug her. Which I do, obviously. Truth is I'm shaken. I've never seen anything as vicious as this before. 'Have you told anyone?' I say, my mouth close to Amelia's ear. I mean one of Amelia's super-busy parents. She lives with her mum and stepdad and sees her dad every other week. The three of them make Mum's working life look like a part-time hobby.

'I've told Mrs Marchington,' Rose interjects bossily. 'She should be—'

'Girls, stand back, please. Let me through.' The brisk tones of our form teacher echo over our heads.

Mrs Marchington is not a teacher you mess with, so we scatter. I step away from Amelia, but not too far. I am her best friend, after all. Mrs Marchington sweeps across the room. Amelia holds out her phone and the teacher takes it. Her face betrays little emotion as she gazes at the screen, but there's a tightening around her lips and she blinks rapidly.

'Come with me, Amelia,' she orders.

Obediently, Amelia follows the teacher out of the room. The girls who were with Amelia when I arrived erupt into hushed, gossipy whispers again, most of which focus on the potential identity of SweetFreak. I would probably have joined in, but at that very moment, Heath Sixsmith strides in.

Heath is playing Captain von Trapp, the male lead in *The Sound of Music*. Lots of heads turn as he walks towards me – he is tall with dark blond hair and chiselled cheekbones and everyone thinks he is the best-looking boy in our year.

‘Hi, Carey,’ he says with a warm smile. He starts telling me about an extra rehearsal lined up for lunch break. I’m not really listening. Mostly I’m worrying about poor Amelia but, if I’m honest, I’m also enjoying the looks I’m getting from across the room. Rose is definitely jealous. Her dark eyes glint as she stares at us, then she catches me watching and flicks back her hair in self-consciously casual fashion. One of the girls in her group says something and Rose nods, suddenly looking very interested in what the girl is saying. Yeah, right. Normally Rose is only interested in the sound of her own voice. She has a little gang of girls who hang on her every word. They even copy her look – shaggy long bob, off-the-shoulder tops and big hoop earrings. Amelia and I call them the Rose Clones.

The memory of the many laughs we’ve had over this brings poor Amelia to the front of my mind again. I wonder how she’s getting on with Mrs Marchington.

‘I don’t mind how many rehearsals we have,’ Heath is saying.

‘Really?’ I ask, tuning back into the conversation.

‘Yeah, I want to be an actor when I leave school,’ Heath says earnestly.

‘Right.’ I shoot a glance sideways. Rose and the Rose Clones are still watching us. Heath doesn’t appear to have noticed. He’s gazing down at me with a big smile on his face, now telling me about his cousin who is already at drama school. Does he fancy me? He’s certainly in no hurry to leave, even though his own form room is on the other side of the school.

Though I’m not interested in him, the thought is kind of gratifying. Out of the corner of my eye I can see a couple of the Rose Clones throwing envious glances in my direction, though Rose herself is now staring at her phone. Heath carries on chatting to me about the play until Mrs Marchington strides back in and he scuttles off.

‘Seats, please,’ Mrs Marchington orders.

I put up my hand. Where’s Amelia? I need to find out if she’s all right.

‘What’s happened to Amelia, Miss?’ Rose asks without bothering to put her hand up.

‘Sit down,’ Mrs Marchington snaps, ignoring the question. She glances at me. ‘You too, Carey. Hurry up, everyone.’

I lower my hand and take my seat. Poor Amelia. Most likely she's been taken to talk to the head. Which she will hate. Maybe it's for the best. Whoever SweetFreak is, they've really got it in for her. Not that our headteacher can do much about what happens online. There's no proof that the person behind the messages is even at school with us. Still, maybe it will make Amelia feel better to know that it's being taken seriously.

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Amelia doesn't reappear all morning, not even for Art, which is her favourite class. She's known for her hand-drawn birthday cards – she's got a real talent for it and is doing a bigger version as part of her GCSE Art project. I know all the Art stuff is here, at school, and that Amelia has been working on it all hours, so if she's too upset to have taken it with her things must really be bad.

I call her at break, but it goes straight to voicemail so I send a NatterSnap message asking her to let me know how she is. I attach a gif of a kitten with huge blue eyes. Amelia loves kittens. I hope it cheers her up.

The lunchtime rehearsal for *The Sound of Music* helps take my mind off her.

'Isn't it mad I'm supposed to be the dad of the year sevens and eights playing the kids?' Heath says to me, grinning from ear to ear. 'I reckon I only got the part cos I'm tall.'

'Tall and talented,' I say with a smile.

Heath blushes and I look away, as if I'm a bit embarrassed too for having praised him. I'm trying to pitch myself as slightly more than friendly, but without giving too much encouragement. I've got no intention of taking things further with him, but there's no harm in spinning things out for a bit, especially if it makes Rose jealous. I can't wait to tell Amelia what's going on, but she doesn't call back all afternoon, so I send another text on my way home.

When I get in, Poppy is in her PJs, mirroring her laptop on to the TV in the living room. Jamie is still at after-school club. Mum will collect him on her way back from work. I grab a cereal bar from the stash in the kitchen cupboard and wander into the living room. When Poppy sees me she turns away.

'What's your problem?' I demand, instantly irritated.

'You,' she snaps, turning the volume up.

I can't be bothered to argue with her. She seriously needs to get over herself. So I traipse up to my room. An hour and a half later Mum and Jamie bustle in and an hour after that I wander downstairs wondering what we're having for dinner. To my surprise Mum isn't in the kitchen. She's in the living room sitting next to Poppy on the sofa. Two police officers sit opposite. All of them have solemn faces, which turn in my direction as I walk in.

'Oh, Carey.' Mum stands up. She's trembling. 'I was just about to call you down.'

'What's happened?' I gasp. 'Is it Dad?'

Funny I should immediately think of him. Most of the time I forget about my stupid father. He walked out on us five years ago and apart from the occasional message we never hear from him.

'No, love.' Mum bites her lip. 'Come and sit down.'

I take a seat on the other side of her from Poppy, feeling uncomfortable. The older police officer peers at me intently. He has a saggy, creased face and is dressed in a suit that looks at least a size too big on the shoulders. After a moment's awkward silence, he clears his throat.

'I'm DS Carter and this . . .' He points to the woman beside him. She's much younger, with short, jet black hair and sharp little eyes. 'This is DC Kapoor. We'd like to talk to you about a death threat against Amelia Wilson that appeared this morning on the social media platform NatterSnap.'

'Talk to *me*?' I stare at him. Wow, Amelia's parents must have gone ape over the message. I'm certain Amelia would hate having to talk about it, especially to police officers.

'The first thing to say is that we have a community initiative with local schools that prioritises early intervention to ensure zero tolerance on this kind of bullying and intimidation.' DS Carter sounds like he's learned that off by heart.

Beside him DC Kapoor rolls her eyes. 'All of which means our precious time is periodically taken up with young people who've decided to take private arguments too far and who need to realise there are consequences for such actions.'

'OK. . .' I hesitate. 'I can see why you'd want to follow up that thing Amelia got sent.' The image of the knife slitting Amelia's face flashes into my head. I blink it away. 'But why do you want to talk to me? I don't know anything.'



There's a horrible pause. Mum makes a strange noise: a sort of strangled sob. Poppy puts her arm around her.

'I'm afraid there has to be a bit more to it than that,' DS Carter carries on. I frown. What does that mean?

'For goodness sake,' Poppy snaps. 'Even if you don't care about your best friend, how can you do this to Mum?'

'Do what?' Exasperation rises inside me. 'Why don't you just shut up, Poppy.'

'Why don't you—?'

'Let's just take a look at what we're talking about.' The unsmiling DC Kapoor hands Mum a tablet. It shows a screen grab of the SweetFreak death threat Amelia got this morning. Poppy and I peer over Mum's shoulders as she swipes the screen to video mode, then presses the play button. On screen Amelia's eyes widen in horror as the knife makes its slow, tearing way across her throat. Blood spurts out. I gag, bile rising into my mouth. It's just as horrific as it was the first time.

Mum turns away. 'Ugh,' she says. 'I can't bear to look at it.'

I glance up at the detective, fear rushing, like cold air, down my back. Do these police officers think *I* sent Amelia this death threat? 'I didn't have anything to do with this,' I say, my stomach tightening. 'Amelia's my best friend.'

'As the sergeant said, there's a bit more to it than that.' DC Kapoor narrows her mean eyes. 'We've traced the sender,' she says. 'We know who sent the message.'

The tension in the room reaches an unbearable level. I can feel my cheeks burning. Stupidly I feel guilty, even though I've done nothing to be guilty for.

Mum is wringing her hands.

'I . . . I don't understand,' I stammer.

Poppy pushes the tablet across Mum towards me. 'You did this,' she growls. 'That's what they're saying, stupid.'

'No.' My head spins. I want to articulate the million reasons why it's impossible that I could have created and sent such a horrible message, but my brain is a scrambled mess.

DC Kapoor hasn't taken her eyes off me. 'The message was sent from an IP address located in this house. From a specific computer.'

My jaw drops.

'Your laptop,' Mum adds, lips trembling. 'They're saying this horrible things came from your laptop.'

'Which never leaves your bedroom,' Poppy adds.

'In other words,' DS Kapoor says. 'It looks very strongly as if the death threat came from you, Carey.'