

Good at getting noticed, bad at getting kissed

Taylor Blake IS A LEGEND



'Fresh
and
touching'
JACQUELINE
WILSON

LAURA JANE WILLIAMS

BLOOMSBURY

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*For the Year 9 in everyone and everyone in Year 9,
and Ella, for the inspo*

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If my life was a TV show, the cast of characters would be very, very small. In my life there's literally only:

- Mum, who thinks she's 'cool' and 'with it' and has a TikTok account that she updates *four* (!!!!) times a day. Cringe.
- Grandma and Grandad, who Mum is always shouting at for saying things that are a bad influence on me, when they're actually funnier than she is (I haven't told *her* that).
- Star and Lucy, my best friends who are also a couple and always together, so even though they are INDIVIDUALS WHO HAPPEN TO BE PARTNERED, they really only count as one person because they're joined

at the hip. It's cute and everything, but I'm a bit jealous because I've never even kissed anyone, let alone had a boyfriend or a girlfriend or A PARTNER.

However! All that is about to change! Because now I'm in Year 9 I get to be a host for the French exchange programme and I know – I can feel it in my BONES! – that good things are coming my way. Not to be dramatic but it's totally written in the stars. I have waited *years* for this. Years! But you're not allowed to take part until Year 9. WELL! Here I am, a Year 9 student all signed up for her very first French partner!!!!

Although Mum reckons I'm putting too much pressure on it.

'Darling,' she says, which is her new term of endearment for me. She called me *bunny* or *tater tot* or *bug-a-boo* for ages, but once I got into Year 9 I had to sit her down and explain that I am growing up now – if not already fully grown. As such, I found it infanticiding to be called anything that could be deemed a 'baby name'. ('Bunny,' she'd replied, '*infanticide* is when you kill a baby. I think you mean *infantilising*.' I didn't appreciate being corrected when I was trying to make a point; it felt a bit like whatever the mother version of mansplaining is. *Mum-splaining*. I said, 'Whatever way you slice it, Erica, please don't,' because calling her by her first name instead of Mum makes her purse her lips and try not

to get cross, which is a way of me almost always winning the argument, tried and tested, because she often just sighs and gives up! Credit where credit is due though – she did pack the baby names in. I’m *darling* or *cutie* now. I can live with that.)

Anyway.

Star and Lucy say I have a habit of going off topic.

Where was I?

Oh yes, the French exchange. Mum says I’m putting too much pressure on it.

‘Darling, this will be the first experience of many. It might be brilliant, or it might not be, but however it goes, your first French exchange won’t be your last. And more than that, I hope you’ll backpack through Bali, and go to India – god, the backwaters of Kerala? That’s where I knew I wanted to become a writer, you know. Travelling the world, making mistakes, having grand adventures ... I know I talk about France like it’s the best thing since sliced bread, but you don’t have to be a Francophile just because I am ...’

Mum is always doing this. She starts her stories about me but we always end up talking about her somehow!

‘Yes, yes,’ I say impatiently. ‘Living in Paris was the best three years of your life even though it’s nothing compared to living in Crickleton now, and being my mum. I love you for that! But Mum – *Erica* – I need you to promise me that you’ll

be super cool and we can get loads of nice food in and, you know, let's just not be super weird when my French exchange partner is here. Don't try and relive your Parisian youth, OK? And don't be too English, either. Let's be *chic* and *sophisticated* and if you could just ... let us get on with it?' I see her face fall a bit. I don't mean to be unkind. She loves using her French any chance she gets, and she's the one who bought me *How to Be Parisian When You're Not from Paris*. She read it when she was my age, so even though it's a bit old-fashioned it's still THE BIBLE!! I could quote that book off by heart if I wanted to. For example, the introduction:

How to Be Parisian When You're Not from Paris
Darling, you do not have to be of Paris to be Parisian, for being Parisian is an attitude. It is a state of mind. It is a way of being. The Parisian woman is nonchalant, has low-key style but high-maintenance skincare, and is proud but self-deprecating. She falls in love deeply and madly, and spins every event of her life into a story. She is wild and untameable, loyal but direct; she values herself and how she spends her time. The Parisian woman is the main character of her own world ...

Isn't that just so wildly chic?! Mum always has stories about her time in Paris, and I've seen her photos. We finally went

for my eleventh birthday and ever since then I've been OBSESSED. The food was amazing, all the buildings and the cobbled streets were amazing, the Eiffel Tower was amazing. It was a dream! We came home and Crickleton seemed so boring in comparison; it's just so small and full of old people. So, I watch endless movies and read every book there is on France and the French and dream about the day I will return! When I got *How to Be Parisian When You're Not from Paris* for my last birthday, it cemented my love of the place even more. I've waited years to make my first proper French friend, and on the exchange it is finally happening! Ooh la la!

... And it's cool Mum is excited for me, but also, this isn't her exchange, it's mine. I just want her to understand! 'No offence or anything,' I add quickly, seeing the look on her face now I've tried to set some boundaries.

'None taken,' says Mum, very much obviously taking offence. But do you know what? I take offence first, because she's always telling me to own my voice, to not let anyone tell me what to think or do, to be a strong independent woman like she hopes she is. And yet she does an awful lot of telling me what to think and do and feel herself! She can't get cross when I disagree with her. That's a dictatorship.

'Any word on who we're getting, anyway?' she asks, opening and closing cupboards to check what she needs to add to the grocery order on her app.

‘Not yet,’ I reply. ‘We all need to get our printouts from Madame Jones next week. Can I get the top of my ear pierced before then? Jessica Sanders got hers done at the cheap jewellery place at the shopping centre but they used a gun and it got infected and then she had to take it out to let it heal again, so I think I should go to the tattoo studio in town and have it done with a needle? But it’s a hundred pounds. I really think I should have a top ear piercing before the exchange. All the French girls have them and I can just put a plaster over it for PE.’

‘Taylor,’ my mother says, not even taking her head out of the fridge, which I would get accused of being *rude* for if I did. My mother says eye contact is the first and most important bastion of respect, to which I said, well, not in China. Direct eye contact with someone of an older generation is a sign of disrespect there! To which *Mum* said, being deliberately obtuse is unbecoming. ‘I am not paying a hundred pounds for you to have your ear pierced, even if I do think you’d suit it.’

All I heard was that Mum thinks my ear would look good pierced at the top, which, if you think about it, leaves room in her *no* for something closer to a *yes*. Time to be a bit more polite then – I reckon I can wedge the door open on her ‘maybe’ by tomorrow morning, latest.

‘Oh,’ Mum says, squinting at her phone. ‘Grandma and

Grandad are FaceTiming. I'll bet they want to congratulate you on your first byline in the school paper!' She prods at her screen. 'Hi, Mum! Hi, Dad!'

'Hello, darling!' comes Grandad's voice. 'Is the world-famous journalist Taylor Blake there with you?'

'She is,' Mum says, pulling me into frame.

'Hi, Grandad,' I smile. 'Hi, Grandma.' They're holding a copy of the school paper, the *Register*, smiling like Cheshire cats.

'Your review is fantastic,' says Grandma proudly. '*Keeping Your Ion on the Prize with Science Week* by Taylor Blake. What a clever headline!'

Grandad chuckles. 'I'd say we don't know where you get it from, but we're pretty punny ourselves, so ...'

I roll my eyes good-naturedly. 'Must be in my DNA then,' I say, and they laugh.

Grandad clears his throat and keeps reading. '*Crickleton High has been celebrating Science Week. This year's theme was all about connections ...*'

Oh my gosh, this is so embarrassing.

'I wrote it, Grandad, I know what it says! Shush!' I laugh. 'You don't have to read it to me! It's only a hundred and fifty words, anyway. And about Science Week. I want to write about stuff that's important to me, not just reviews of school events. It's hardly a feminist manifesto, is it?'

Mum kisses the side of my head and says, 'We're just pleased for you, is all. And we all have to start somewhere.'

'Your first byline is no small feat,' Grandad says. 'Plenty of people *want* to have a dream, but not a lot of people actually *work* to make their dream happen. You're a doer, Tay. You go after what you want.'

I screw up my nose, still embarrassed. Who knew people being kind could be so uncomfortable? I sort of want them to keep going, because it's nice to be told you've done a cool thing, but at the same time my cheeks are burning and for some reason I want to cover my face with my hands.

'We're going to frame it,' says Grandma. 'Once you've signed it.'

'Ooooh,' Mum coos. 'I'll send a photo of it to Auntie Kate, too! She'll be so excited for you!'

Auntie Kate is Mum's best friend, and runs a yoga studio out in Bali. When I was seven, she went to a psychic, and the psychic told her I'd achieve 'big things'. She likes to be kept up to date with any of my wins, because she takes it as proof the psychic was right. I mean – if she is right, I'm not mad about it!

I shake my head at my family. 'You're all crazy,' I say, but everyone can tell what I mean is *thank you*.

'Oh, love, the time!' Mum says then, glancing at the kitchen clock. It's three o'clock. 'Aren't you late to meet the girls?'

‘Argh!’ I say. ‘You’re right. Sorry, guys, I’ve got to go!’

‘Bye, darling, well done again!’ Grandma says before we ring off.

Nooo! I hate being late for stuff! I feel like I miss out if I’m not on time. I put my hands on Mum’s shoulders and flash what I hope is a winning grin, even though I’m not entirely sure what a ‘winning grin’ is. An enthusiastic one?

‘Errrr,’ I start, because I have to ask, but I am aware I’m doing a lot of favour-asking today. ‘Have you put any money on my Starbucks card? They said I’m not allowed to just have a tap water and take up a table any more.’

Mum’s face softens. She has a way of looking at me sometimes, all soft crinkled eyes and Smirky McSmirk smile, and it makes me feel funny. Like she might laugh at me but is trying not to, when I don’t even know what I’ve done. Must be love, or something like it, I suppose. Either that, or she thinks I’m a fool.

‘A fiver,’ she says, her voice serious even though I can tell she’s not really mad. ‘And that’s all! I had a job in Year 9! I think it’s time to think about gainful employment for you.’

‘Yup,’ I say, going in for a kiss on the cheek. She likes it when I do that, and gets all huffy if I try to leave without it, like she’s being ignored. But I never ignore her! Not on purpose! Sometimes I’m just BUSY. ‘You worked for two pounds an hour in Great-Auntie Barbara’s pine furniture

shop when you were fourteen, cash in hand, which after the bus and your lunch left you with about fifty pence profit. I hear you! But think of how much less time I'd have for homework if I worked every Saturday! And at fifty p, you'd still have to give me money for Starbucks ...'

'HmMMMMM,' is all she muses, screwing up her nose like she doesn't want to unpack all that. 'Just go, you. Love you, Bug-a ... I mean, love you, darling. Tell Lucy and Star I say hi.'

'If we come back here after can they stay for tea?'

That Look again. Earnest. Crinkle-eyed. A bit like she might cry, or burst into hysterics, if only she could decide.

'You know I love a house full of girls. Of course,' she says, and as I pull on my coat and walk down the hill I think: she's all right, Mum. It could be worse. Lucy's mum is a biology teacher at our school. Imagine THAT.