

— THE BLOOD TEXTS —

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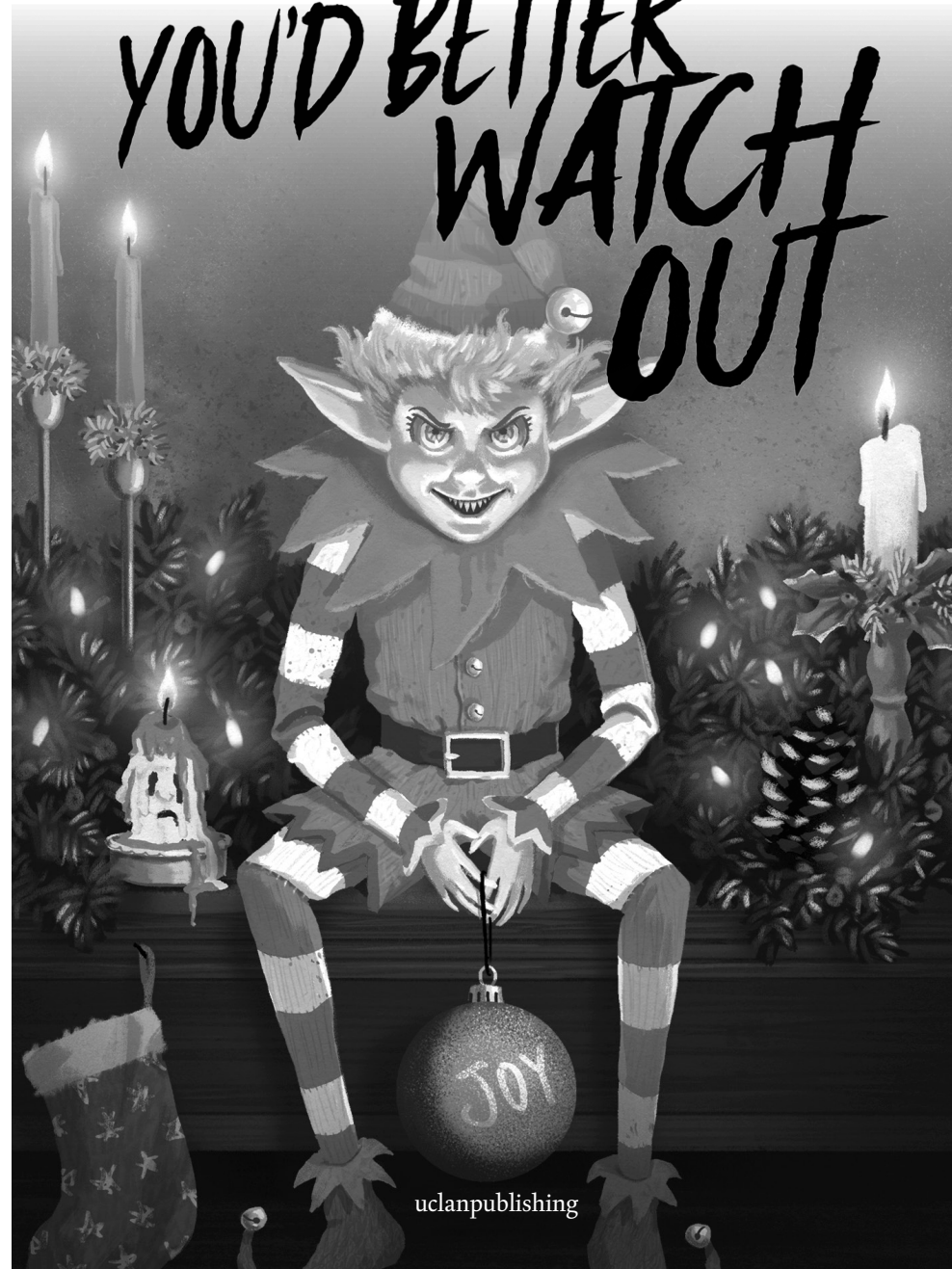
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Set in 10/16pt Kingfisher by Amy Cooper.

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PROLOGUE

THE BLOOD TEXTS

2004 . . .

“You’re scared.”

“I’m not scared!”

“You’re the one who wanted to do this!”

“I’m just saying, the coach is gonna go. We’ve got to get back!”

“Whatevs, run away then,” Mason scoffed, his black Korn hoodie up over his ears, his legs straddling the metal track in what he would *never* admit was his *One Tree Hill* pose. From the path below, his friend sighed and turned away up the dripping, decayed exit ramp. As the New Animal rollercoaster rumbled far above them, joined by the muffled screams of its passengers, Mason couldn’t help but call after him.

“Go on then, biatch!” he shouted. “Run back to teacher! But *I* won the challenge! *I’m* keeping the magazine! It’s MY trophy!”

The magazine was tucked down the back of Mason’s baggy jeans, and it was why they were here in the first place. *The Blood Texts* – the most gruesome and gory of his older sister’s horror magazine collection. When he’d discovered a feature

among *The Blood Texts*' creased pages about Smithson's Theme Park, just one week before their school was visiting it, he and his friend's next graffiti challenge had been clear: they would tag the *OLD ANIMAL ROLLERCOASTER, HOME OF REBECCA'S HEADLESS GHOST!*

"Rebecca didn't keep her arms and legs inside the ride. Rebecca wanted to wave to the camera. But once the 'coaster sped up, she started slipping out too far, and when the loop-the-loop went through the tunnel, her head clipped a boat on the old River Rapids. Her boyfriend had to sit the rest of the ride next to her headless corpse. After her family sued, Smithson's shut the Old Animal ride and built the New Animal over top of it. But *The Blood Texts* says they never tore the loop down. It's still down there, and Rebecca's ghost an' all . . . searching for a head to replace hers."

His friend had grinned then, and they'd gone toe-to-toe with sick jokes about the tragedy. It was what they did – like *Jackass*, like *Dirty Sanchez* – like grinning the blood out between your teeth after stacking a rail grind. Like sneaking past warning signs down an unmarked tunnel to graffiti the last bones of a deadly rollercoaster that Smithson's Park *didn't* mention in their ads.

MA\$ON

He was getting better, he decided, as again the New Animal rumbled and screamed above. The dollar sign used to just look like he'd screwed up the 'S', but now it looked legit, like the \$ in the rapper Ma\$e. He leant closer to study it, when the battery light began to fade orange.

"Dumb torch," he growled. The batteries were the big Eveready ones he'd tea-leafed from his sister's new hi-fi; how were they failing already? Mason – *BANG* – smacked the torch with the – *BANG* – palm of his hand, trying to get some juice from the batteries, but the orange bulb still – *BANG* – wouldn't *BANG*—

Splash . . .

It came from below, quiet, but unmistakable.

"Tyler?"

There was no answer. Mason shone his torch down, lighting up twisted metal, bolts and rails, to the brown, stagnant water of the closed river rapids beneath. Seeing nothing, he turned to point the beam behind him. The grey fake river wound further down the gloomy tunnel, surrounded by knackered SM_LE _OR TH_ C_MERA! signs, tattered rope queues and decayed plastic animal models. Then, with a sudden thought, he looked up to where the last surviving tracks of the Old Animal twisted and climbed, before stopping dead against a concrete slab that Smithson's had built to hide this infamous deadly loop-the-loop.

Huh . . .? The screams. The rollercoaster screams, from the New Animal.

Why have they stopped?

Splash . . .

At the second splash, Mason whirled the torch back down again, a cold stab of fear in his gut.

There was nothing.

And then . . .

Soft ripples raced across the grey water, before a ride boat bobbed gently down the river below. Mason's mouth felt suddenly dry. The boat was filthy, worn and circular with seats around the edge and a wheel in the middle. The insides were strewn with something black and matted, and as he climbed down to the bottom rail, Mason saw what it was and fought back the urge to scream.

Hair. Long, human hair. And blood.

Mason pulled out the magazine tucked behind his waistband and stared at the picture on the open page.

"It's true," he croaked out loud. "*The Blood Texts*. It's true."

It was the last thought his head got to have.

The Blood Texts. It's true.

— Chapter One —

If anything, it's Olivia's fault.

Miss Faith's too. She's always had it in for me – while perfect Olivia always got the encouraging smile. Miss Faith *knew* I'd be screwed for her sad-act Christmas Special Test. Like putting Christmas in the name makes it all jolly. *It's a test, you silly cow!*

It's Miss Faith's fault, because if she hadn't of given me *that* look, then I wouldn't of felt that piece of coal in my gut. That anger.

I wouldn't of even *thought* to cheat.

And actually, it's Declan's fault too. Firstly, because he was talking so much about how his mum would get us into the cinema to see that new horror, *Slay Bells 3: Silent Night, Unholy Night*, that I didn't even know what this test was meant to be about.

Secondly, because when I nudged the fricking numbnuts during the test and nodded in Olivia's direction (who didn't have the decency to at least *try* and hide her answers), he got this big dopey grin on his face, and of course Miss Faith

spotted it straight off. He didn't just top up his answers like I was doing either. That fool got himself a ten out of ten, *then copied Olivia's name onto his damn sheet before crossing it out!*

But what happened next was definitely Olivia's fault.

See, after Miss Faith saw Declan's test and rared on him ("*YOU ARE ONLY CHEATING YOURSELF!*"), she then made a big show of looking over *my* shoulder at *my* test, while the whole class stared, all judgey. Then, gutted because she didn't have any proof that I'd copied, she floated back to her desk with her posh-hippy hair and her kooky, crappy, *inspirational-English-teacher* clothes, and said, "The Ghost of Christmas Future was sitting by Evangeline Clark too, I see."

And there it was again. That anger. That little piece of coal in my stomach, burning hot.

Because I didn't really get her weak joke but I *knew* what Miss Faith was saying. She was calling me *thick*. And as the blood rushed to my cheeks, as my face burned hot from embarrassment and anger and . . . *hurt*, I saw perfect little Olivia turn forwards again, but not before catching a small smile on her perfect little teacher's-pet face.

Class ended, and I was still angry.

We all filed out of the classrooms, a slurry of teenagers in drab white and grey uniforms squeaking down halls decorated with the world's most depressing pound-shop tinsel, and all I had was Olivia's smirking face in my head, and that coal

burning up my guts. It kept burning too, all through Kelsey's tragic attempts to flirt with Declan. All through Geography, every time Olivia shot a pale, nail-bitten hand up to answer yet another question. All through sneaking through the gap in the fence to the Derelicts for a breaktime vape when the coast was clear, and all through dossing about in French. By lunchtime, I was stood in the food queue, listening to tinny old Christmas songs coming through the tannoy and brimming with rage.

NNNNNope. I'm not having this.

"Turkey stew or Christmas Veg Surprise, duck?" the lunch supervisor asked, but I couldn't care less. My focus was on Olivia, saying her delicate *pleases* and *thank yous* at the other end of the line. *She* should learn how it felt to be the loser. *She* should learn how it felt to be turned into a joke.

"You getting something, or what?" Declan muttered. "Ange?"

I ignored him. Olivia left the queue with a full tray, and I followed. With every step I strode closer, letting the rage boil my blood, my eyes boring holes into the back of her skull, until I was right behind and grabbing my phone out my pocket.

"Ange, what are you—" Declan called, but it was too late. As Olivia turned, I kicked out at her feet, sharply hooking my leg around hers.

She fell. Hard.

And she didn't let go of the tray like a normal person would. She clung on to it, not even putting her arms out to

break her fall. Her food went flying – stew splattering up into her face – legs sprawling out so wide that the back of her trousers made a comedy *ripping* sound. All at once, the dining hall fell silent except for the dribbling tannoy music – “*I believe in Father Christmas! I believe in peace on Earth!*” – and everyone, on every table, stared down at Olivia Novak.

I pointed my phone at her. *Click*.

And right then, just as a perfectly focused shot of Olivia’s horrified, gravy-covered face sharpened on my screen, just as I tucked my phone back in my pocket and *just* before Miss Faith barged angrily through the crowd screaming, “*EVANGELINE CLARK!*”, that piece of coal vanished like it had never been there.

The hole it left behind, though? Well, that’s guilt. Because, let’s face it, it wasn’t Olivia’s fault at all.

— Chapter Two —

“It’ll be here . . . there . . . wherever you might cause trouble!” my dad said angrily, and slammed the box down so hard the kitchen table rattled and dust came off his blue work jumper. There was a long pause where me, my mum and my kid sister, Edie, all stared. And nobody answered, cos no one had the right words for “*have you gone nuts?*”.

The wooden box was old-looking with a glass window. Scratched across the bottom in spindly writing it said:

The Watching Elf.

The Watching Elf was the thing behind the glass, a wooden doll of a little elf about medium teddy-bear-sized, except this was no cuddly little friend. He was *horrible*; a flinty, violent-looking toy from the olden days. The kind of creature that belonged in yellowing books of bloodthirsty fairy tales, or the old washed out, box-shaped TV shows my grandparents like; shows with evil ventriloquist dummies and fauns in bad make-up that go around saying “rin-tin-tin”.

His eyebrows were neat, *too* neat, little triangles that were meant to look friendly and amused but . . . weren’t.

His skin was snowdrop-pale and his cheeks were pinched red, and still somehow his face looked like it hid something much older, a skin-thin mask ready to crack and mould at any minute. His lips were thin and red, and peeled back in a smirk that was meant to be funny yet stern, a jokey *You naughty kids, you!* grin. But, just like his raised eyebrows, that smirk was quivering with violence and hate. This was made even worse by the teeth behind it. On a baby face like this, as unnerving as it was, you'd expect them to be pearly white and cheerful, but the teeth in the elf's mouth were yellowed and sharpened to jagged points, so real that if I'd leant forwards and opened the little door of his box, I wouldn't be surprised to smell stale blood on his breath. It was all so *wrong* somehow . . . and it was made even worse by the elf's chirpy Christmas outfit – from his dinky boots with bells on the end and his stripy stockings, all the way to the fluffy green elf hat that sat on top of his ruffled hair.

I peered closer through the glass, my mouth suddenly dry, and his cruel, smiling eyes gazed steadily back – a murder's worth of malice in their pin-prick pupils.

"It's the Watching Elf," Dad pronounced solemnly. "So you had *better* be good!"

I wanted to laugh. Dad's Christmas *mad*. Spends weeks decorating the flat in every tacky car-boot-tinselly tat he can find – but this was ridiculous, even for him. No way was I laughing tonight though. Thanks to his building site being *right* behind the school, Miss Faith had called him in after

the whole ish with Olivia. By the time she'd finished sharing all her hateful propaganda about me, he'd come out her office with a mad, deranged look – a scary mix of desperation and rage in his eyes.

Desperately, I looked to Mum for support. She was fixing up Edie's costume for her Christmas Show and, to my relief, she didn't look too happy to have Satan's garden gnome in our flat either.

"We are *not* having that thing in here, Shay," she said.

"Let me look," Edie said, and I slid the box to her. As she stared at it, Mum turned on me.

"Do you see what your behaviour has done?" she said. "Your dad has *lost his mind*."

"I'm standing right here!" Dad said incredulously.

"Well, what am I supposed to think with you bringing that thing home? Aren't these elf things meant to be *soft*? Edie'll have nightmares!"

"No, I won't. I think he looks sad," said Edie simply. "Like an Itku Henki, missing his family."

We all stared at her. Edie's my kid sister, and even though she likes thrash metal, and dresses like the undead, and Mum and Dad have to make her turn all the crosses on her bunk the right way up when Nanna visits, she's actually a really sweet ten-year-old girl, always seeing good in people and the madcap imaginary world she inhabits half the day. It was actually her old Halloween outfit Mum was making Christmassy right then, sewing snowmen up the hem of her witch's cloak ready for her theatre

club's big Christmas show. Tbh the snowmen looked pretty evil too.

"Anyway," Mum said. "I thought we weren't going to buy any more decorations this year?"

"I didn't buy it, I found it!" Dad exclaimed, eyeing Edie's snowmen with dismay. "We were clearing out a fireplace and it was just sitting there, like it was waiting for us."

"Urgh, it's from the *Derelicts*?" I said, and shoved it away. The *Derelicts* are these abandoned houses running alongside the school yard. They *used* to be the perfect place to skive, vape, make out, whatever you wanted . . . till my dad got a job helping to tear them down. He's been driving me mad – dropping me off at the school gates like a baby, and eating his sandwiches *right* near the gap in the fence.

"Tony said I should bring it back to watch over you," Dad said with a grin.

"You were talking about me at work?!" I nearly shouted it. "What about my privacy, Dad? That's so disrespectful, that is—"

"Don't start with that, Evangeline," Dad said shortly. "Not after today."

"I've been *punished* for today!" I shot back. "*Detention's* my punishment! Not this stupid toy. Like I'd even be *bothered* about an elf, like I still *believe* in—"

"HEY!" Mum and Dad snapped at once, both of them darting looks at Edie, and I groaned. Edie's their last baby, and me and my older brother Elijah open her eyes to reality

on pain of death. Luckily, she was too busy murmuring nice words to the frickin' elf to notice. Finally, she looked up to see us all staring at her.

"What?" she said. But Dad turned back to me.

"She called it bullying, that teacher," he said in a low voice. "What you did. She said you *bullied* that Olivia."

Mum stopped sewing and looked up. Edie looked shocked; looked upset in a way I *hated*. I stared at my feet and wished for the ground to swallow me up.

"Bullying," Mum repeated. Her eyes met mine, and . . . and that was the worst part, because I'd never seen a look like it in her face before. Not disappointment – more like fear, more like devastation, more like . . . she had finally resigned herself to something she'd been dreading all her life. Finally, she put out her hand and said, "Phone."

I didn't dare argue. She took it off me and, like always, glanced up to her *super-secret* hiding place above the extractor fan. Then, when I thought that was it, she paused.

"And forget about seeing your friends tomorrow," she continued.

"Mum—"

"You're grounded for two weeks."

"But Declan's mum's taking us to the cinema!"

"AND I'm going to call this Olivia's parents tonight and invite *her* round instead."

"Mum, no!"

"And if, understandably, she doesn't want to come over, then you're going to go round there and apologise."

“What? That’s stupid!” I protested. “Mum, she won’t want to come and I’ll look like an idiot and—”

“BULLYING!” Dad roared. And just as the Santa clock started to sing ‘Santa Claus Is Coming To Town’ for the billionth time that month, I shut up.

— Chapter Three —

“Hahahahaaaaaa! You’re telling me!” Mum shrieked down the phone.

“Mum . . .”

“Definitely no number then? Because I’ve . . . Hahaha, like a shopping mall Santa!”

“*Mum . . .*” I gritted my teeth, batting away a frond of our plastic Christmas tree that *always* hangs over my end of the sofa. Mum looked up at the tinkle of baubles and I held the remote up hopefully. *Unmute?* I mouthed silently.

No. Mum frowned and shook her head. Sitting back, exasperated, I heard Elijah clomping up the stairs in his football boots. A moment later he poked his head round the door of the living room, tall in his kit, bandana matted to his forehead with sweat.

“Safe, safe, people—” he began, then saw Mum on the phone and stopped. He looked at her, looked at my miserable face, and whispered, “You in trouble again?”

GO. I mouthed right back.

He grinned this grin that *proper* gets my back up.

“In Trouble, innit,” he whispered knowingly, and as I mouthed all kinda words back, pointing at him to go, he left. Course, Mum didn’t notice any of this, she was too busy making that weird laugh she saves for other mums.

“Hahaaaa! All right then – haaaa!”

“Waaaaah!” I mimicked.

“I’d better go, she’s giving me evils now. Yeah, huh, like I’m the one.”

“What?” I said, mouth dropping open with outrage.

But Mum was smiling and deliberately looking elsewhere.

“See you tomorrow, thanks anyway,” she said, and hung up.

“Can I at least put the sound back on now?” I said icily.

“Or did you want to gossip about me some more.”

“I want to gossip some more,” Mum said without looking up from her phone, and I let out a silent scream of rage to the ceiling. But at last she stopped scrolling and sighed.

“I don’t get it,” she said. “None of the other parents have contact details for Olivia.”

“She only started at the school this year,” I said, and added hopefully, “Probably we should leave it then.”

“Haven’t you got anything? Weren’t you two supposed to do a history project together – the family tree thing?”

I froze. How did she remember *that*? Olivia had been new to school at the beginning of Year Nine, and my history teacher Mr Taylor had decided for some terrible reason that *I* should partner with her on her first project – this loser ‘Special Project’ he’d got all teary eyed about – finding each other’s family histories.

Ugh. And Olivia had driven me mental, trying too hard and asking me deep and meaningful about my family history, right back to Ireland and Windrush and everything. I’d meant to research *her* family, but the one time I asked she’d been all weird and vague, doing that whole pretending-not-to-care bit that I *hate* the Cringes doing, and so I gave up. Instead, at the last minute, before we were supposed to upload the history, I’d made a load of things up – saying she was descended from serial killers and all this other stuff which she *sorta* laughed at, but which Mr Taylor had a right bitch fit about (Detention #451).

Seeing I wasn’t going to answer, Mum sighed again.

“Maybe if we search your phone.”

“What?! NO! Mum, no, I . . . you said you wouldn’t ever do that.”

“I never said any such thing.”

My mind flashed through screenshots I would *hate* for Mum to see – vape shots, snapchats and *hundreds* of messages throwing shade at Olivia.

. . . lmao when olivias chair made that fart sound and she went brigh lighter fell out my bag and olivia looked 🤒 shes cringe af cos miss perfect olivia says so shes such a bi . . .

“You – *no*, Mum. C’mon. I . . . There’s private stuff on there.”

Mum kept frowning, like my reaction made her want to check the phone even more.

Desperately, I thought of a way, any way, I could contact

Olivia without it. Then it occurred to me.

“GroupMe!” I blurted out. “You can call from GroupMe! Olivia added me as a friend, I think. Here, give me your phone.”

Mum’s face turned stoney. OK, I said that a bit too abruptly.

“Please?”

With a sceptical look, Mum handed over her phone. I opened the GroupMe app on her home screen . . . and was greeted by a skeleton with an evil laugh.

“Jeez, what rabbit hole did *you* fall down?”

Mum let out a bark of a laugh. I *do* like making her laugh.

“It’s Edie’s account. She uses it as much as you used to. Are you even still on GroupMe?”

I signed Edie out and logged in.

“Hmm, not really,” I shrugged, “but I still check it now and then.” I tapped the Friends History option, this *long* list of statements like *Kelsey asked you to be her friend / You asked Kelsey to be your friend* appeared. “It’s kinda pointless now, I guess. But you can call through it.” I kept scrolling but couldn’t see Olivia’s name.

Declan asked you to be his friend / You asked Declan to be his friend

You asked Bex to be your friend / Bex asked you to be her friend

Olivia asked to be your friend

Raj asked you to be his friend / You asked Raj to be your friend

“There she is!” Mum said, but too late. I missed it and kept scrolling.

Chris asked you to be his friend / You asked Chris to be your friend

Olivia asked to be your friend

Alanna asked you to be her friend / You asked Alanna to be your friend

Ike asked to be your friend / You asked Ike to be your friend

Olivia asked to be your friend

“She asked you to be her friend three times,” Mum said quietly.

“I know, right?” I said, and *stupidly* still thought I could make her laugh. “I mean, read the room, woman!”

Mum didn’t answer at first. Hearing myself speak at last, I looked up and saw that same look she’d had on her face when Dad mentioned bullying. It was that resignation, that sad despair. It was that dislike.

“When did you become such a . . .” she began, then looked quickly away.

“Such a what?” I said, but my smile was forced and there was a lump in my throat. Somehow, I knew what she’d been about to ask.

Mum cleared her throat.

“Let’s call her then,” she said, and reached over to tap on Olivia’s name. “Where’s the ‘Call’ button?”

“It’s . . .” I began, then swallowed again. Olivia’s profile barely registered. Where mine was packed with pictures and

memories, Olivia had *nothing* from school on hers; not this school nor her last school. It was like she didn't really exist. Beneath her name was a figure that made me feel like a turd.

Olivia is friends with 45 people / 6 people are friends
with Olivia.

Only six people out of forty-five friended her back.

"Evangeline?" Mum said, and I hit Face2Face. Immediately the screen went to a black call screen – a dial tone sounded, and I handed her the phone.

"You speak."

"What? No, this is—"

"You want me to do this, *you* speak!" I hissed, and before Mum could retort the call was picked up . . . although the screen stayed blank.

"Hello?" Mum asked, surprised. There was a pause – still Olivia's camera never switched on, and then her voice came through, unsure.

"Hello?"

"Oh, uh, hi, Olivia! It's . . . I'm Evangeline's mum."

There was a pause. I rolled my eyes.

"Oh, uh, hi, Mrs Clark," Olivia said, sounding weirdly cheerful, "What, er – what—"

"I just want to say on behalf of Evangeline, *and* myself, that she – we – are very sorry for her behaviour today. Very sorry."

There was a long pause. Mum's eyes bored into me, willing me to say sorry as well, but I couldn't speak. This was just *too* cringe. Finally, Olivia answered.

"OK . . . thank you, Mrs Clarke."

"With that in mind," Mum said, still glaring at me, "Evangeline wanted to invite you round tomorrow to apologise in person."

There was *another* long pause.

"Is she waiting for you to say 'Over'?" I snapped, but Mum pointed at me with an *angry* shush, and I shut up.

"I don't know if that'll work," Olivia said finally and I breathed a sigh of relief. "See, my mum—"

"Your mum!" replied Mum with relief. "Can I speak to her, maybe? I could collect you, and—"

"Actually, I will be able to make it," Olivia said quickly, and I swore to myself. "Tomorrow morning, yeah? Could you send me your address?"

"Great!" Mum said, and paused, a long pause. When it was clear Olivia wasn't going to say anything more, she added, "I'll see you tomorrow then! And again, I want to say how sorry I—"

"Thank you very much for the invitation, Mrs Clark," Olivia said politely. "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"Great!" Mum said for the millionth time. "I'll send you that address now."

The screen cut back to Olivia's sad profile again, and there was silence.

"She seems very nice," Mum said finally.

"Why don't you just adopt her then?" I snapped back, and stormed out, mad at both her and Olivia all over again. Furiously walking towards my room, I stopped short. That stupid elf box had moved to the hall table opposite the