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your
BACK

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Watch
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BACK

SUE
WALLMAN

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*For my friend Fiona –
thanks for being there in good times and bad*

PROLOGUE

At last, after all the questioning is over and I confirm I understand the strict bail conditions, I'm told I can go home with Dad.

“You'll be sent a letter with a date for your first court appearance,” says Detective Constable Cameron Walters. He's the younger, athletic-looking officer, with intense eyes and a buzz cut.

“This is all a nightmare,” Dad says quietly as we wait outside the police station for a taxi. His white top has somehow become grimy in the last few hours, and I swear his hair looks greyer than it did this morning. I stand apart from him, numb and nauseous.

Five minutes go by or maybe ten. My phone's been

taken for evidence so I can't check, and I'm incapable of judging anything accurately right now.

Eventually, when we're both sitting in the back of the taxi and the driver has established that we don't mind him playing his music, Dad murmurs, "We should talk this over, Kara."

I look at him. "We already did, with the solicitor."

"I meant properly," he says, his eyes meeting mine.

My left wrist hurts where the handcuff was. I rub it, watching it turn red. "Not now," I say. My head is thick with tiredness and stress, my body aching.

He drops back against the seat and his eyes are full of tears.

"I'm sorry," I say softly.

Dad touches my arm gently and I realize my face is wet. I didn't even know I was crying.

"Me too," he says.

"I feel sick," I say, and I spend the rest of the journey home clutching a plastic bag from the driver, who's now worried about his upholstery. He keeps glancing back at me as I deep-breathe next to the open car window.

Dad pays the taxi driver as I stumble up the path. Mum opens the front door before I reach it.

"Oh, Kara," she says. She holds out her arms but her pale, horrified face scares me. She's taking in the custody clothes I'm wearing, the thin grey jogging bottoms and sweatshirt. The black plimsolls with no laces. She looks behind me to Dad. I see the unbearably sad and

questioning look she gives him. Dillon, my eight-year-old brother, comes out of the kitchen, eyeing me cautiously as if I'm a stranger.

I run upstairs to my room. All I want to do is go to sleep and wake up to my life before any of this happened. Mum follows me but by the time she's in my room, I'm bundled up in my duvet, facing the wall.

"I'll bring up some food later," she says. There's a wobble to her voice, as if she's holding back a sob. "We can talk then."

I fall asleep quickly but I wake with a panicked jolt. It's dark outside and I'm sweating in my grey top and bottoms. I push back the duvet with my feet and switch on my bedside light. As I get my breathing under control, I look round my room, reminding myself of everything I love in it. Suddenly, everything I took for granted seems incredibly precious. Not just these objects – my family.

Grievous bodily harm. That's the charge. If I'm found guilty, then what? I'm too young for jail at sixteen. A secure unit of some description.

My stomach lurches. I reach instinctively for the stone on my bedside table. Grey with white stripes, smooth, and as heavy as glass. It's soothing to hold but it also makes my chest ache.

The paper that was underneath the stone falls to the carpet. It's one of the forms for the screenwriting course I'm booked on to in the summer holidays. They want a sample of my writing. *The first scene of a screenplay,*

a monologue or a more personal piece, whatever you believe showcases your potential.

Ah, my potential.

I rip the paper into tiny pieces. I was so excited about that course. Even though it states on the form they pride themselves in being “an inclusive organization”, I can’t imagine that extends to someone serving time for assault.

All the same ... I look at the pieces of paper. Maybe I *will* write something, after all. Maybe I’ll tell them how I got here. Show them my wasted potential.

I fetch my laptop from my desk and return to bed, rearranging my pillow so I can sit upright. I open a Word document and start to type.

CHAPTER 1

I'm heading into English, first period. A Thursday. We're sliding towards the end of Year Eleven and all too soon we'll be tipped into the whirlpool of exams to sink or swim.

"Ms McNally's off sick," someone says. "We're getting a cover."

"Better not be that shouty woman who wears her glasses on a chain," says Gracie, as we make our way into the classroom and sit wherever we want, rather than adhering to Ms McNally's seating plan. "Always wanting *complete silence*. Who does she think she is? She should have retired years ago. I hate her."

People murmur their agreement as they slump into seats,

and I nod, although I hate Gracie with her judgy overconfidence and generic straightened blonde hair. I hate her more than the supply teacher, who's called Ms Percival.

Out of the corner of my eye I see my ex-best-friend Eden take a seat next to her boyfriend, Will. Of course she does. They're spot-welded together these days, every inch the clichéd couple: pretty, clever girl with her rugby-playing hunk. Eden, with her flawless complexion and rose-gold shining hair twisted into a casual knot at the back. Will, with his height, muscles and alpha maleness. *Puh-lease.*

I'm not bitter, I tell myself.

Gracie, one of Eden's new, popular, bitchy friends, sits in front of them, her chair already turned round to chat. I grab a table on the opposite side of the room, by the window. Thankfully, a few people are absent so there's no one sitting next to me. I gaze out at the playing field and the half-hearted April rain.

It's hard to get used to my cast-off status. It's always been me and Eden, ever since the day we met. We were eight. Her parents had bought a gorgeous house near us, and she'd started at St Matthew's Primary School. I was asked to buddy up with the new girl. She was smiley and softly spoken; I made her laugh. We clicked immediately and became best friends, the kind of best friends who don't need anyone else.

We were like that for years. Just us. Me and Eden, against the world.

Things changed in January. We'd hung out all through the Christmas holidays as usual, watching films and doing the nerdy things we both loved, like online puzzles and extra assignments the teachers had set us. The same as always. We were looking forward to the new term because that's what we were both like back then. We had big plans – we were going to smash our exams, then breeze into the sixth form, then on to uni... Eden was hoping to go to Cambridge. I wasn't sure where I was aiming for yet but it would be somewhere that had a cool English Lit course, and ideally a module on screenwriting. My dad, who has been making plans for me ever since I was born, thought – still thinks – English is “a waste of a degree” but he is very much mistaken and, anyway, I don't care.

The morning before we returned to school for the spring term, Eden and I sat on the high stools in the window of Café Suzette as we liked to do on the last day of the holidays, scooping cream off our hot chocolates with rolled-up biscuits we used to pretend were cigars. We could see some people from school walking past the window. One of them was Will. I remember he was walking along in a muscle-tight top, side-eyeing a group of girls to see if they'd noticed him.

“Attention-seeker,” I'd muttered.

Eden had nodded.

We weren't in the popular group at school. That was fine with us – at least, I thought it was. Eden could've been in it if she'd wanted, I guess. People liked her more

than they liked me. She didn't accidentally say what she thought, like I did, and she understood how to get people on side. She was pretty, while I was average-looking, with my rounder, more expressive face and dull brown hair which I frequently dyed different colours. Still do. Eden didn't like rocking the boat, whereas I didn't mind giving it a good shake.

My sixteenth birthday rolled round on 16th January (I'd waited sixteen years for this synchronicity and it felt like a moment) and Eden gave me sixteen carefully chosen and wrapped presents, ranging from a famous book about screenwriting to unusual flavours of KitKats from Japan. Then, a couple of days later, when we were walking to school, she told me Will had asked her out and she'd said yes.

I stopped walking and stared at her.

"Will?" I asked. "As in, Will Fairshaw? Will in our year?"

"Yeah," she said, as if it was no big deal. "I really like him."

I was stunned, not just because, well, *Will*, but because Eden had always talked things like that through with me. Before she briefly went out with Karl Morrison she'd shown me all his messages and we'd agreed that he was funny, fit and smart. Karl was American and temporarily at our school for the few months his parents were working in the UK. He and Eden had been super into each other, but she'd made sure not to leave me out. Now I wonder if

that was because she knew he'd be going back to the States and she needed me there for her afterwards.

Karl had been fine. I got why she liked him. But Will wasn't a good match for Eden. Not. At. All. I started to tell her the many reasons why.

“He walks with his arms apart from his body like he's trying to air his armpits. How many times have we laughed about that? And oh my god, he's so up himself.”

Eden looked at me for a moment, then walked on. I hurried after her.

“OK, he's good-looking,” I said, “but his entire life is rugby and football. I bet he's never had an original thought in that well-groomed head of his. And his friends? You hate them!” I paused and added desperately, “*We* hate them.”

Will and his football and rugby mates liked to hang out with Gracie and her friend Selina. Gracie was the worst, with her contempt for anyone who wasn't in her group. Selina had black straightened hair and long fancy nails, which she was adept at hiding from teachers. Her normal resting face was a sneer. She was big on TikTok because of her little dog, who she dressed in different outfits; sometimes they matched her nails. People thought it was cute. Personally, I was surprised she hadn't had a visit yet from someone from the RSPCA investigating animal cruelty.

“I thought Will fancied Selina?” I said. “We think that whole group is an embarrassment, remember?”

“*You* think they’re an embarrassment,” said Eden. “That doesn’t mean I can’t have a different opinion.”

The next day, Eden wasn’t on the corner where we usually met to walk into school together. I’d thought she must be sick. But there she was in our form room, sitting next to Will. At lunch, she sat with him and Gracie and Selina. She ignored me the entire day.

It wasn’t a slow, fizzling-out end to our friendship. One day Eden and I were best friends; the next day she wasn’t speaking to me. I’d been ghosted.

And it hurt.

For a while everyone waits expectantly for a supply teacher to arrive but, when they don’t, people kick back and relax rather than stir up anarchy, which would have been the case if we were younger. After all these years at Hurst End School, we’ve finally figured out that if we lie low when the supply teacher doesn’t show we might get away with a free period. Matt Hepworth, who used to do school trampoline club with me until he became too good for it, shuts the door with his shoulder as he opens a packet of crisps.

Everyone has their phones out. I pull my French exercise book from my bag because I have a test after lunch and I could do with the extra revision time. Out of the corner of my eye I see Eden laughing at something Will is showing her on his phone. It gives me no satisfaction that her grades are slipping. She was kept behind in chemistry

yesterday and I heard the beginning of the conversation with the teacher. *I don't know what's been going on with you recently, Eden, but I'm concerned...*

“Kara?”

I look up to see Alfie Reggerton. I freeze. Alfie is the worst, and recently, for some reason, I've caught his attention.

I don't need this. He sits on the empty chair beside me and I breathe out unsteadily. This isn't going to be a relaxing free period after all.

“Why've you disrespected me?” he asks in a low but nevertheless confrontational tone.

Oh god. This must be about the message he sent me a few days ago. Wanna hang? And the equally enticing follow-up message yesterday: Heyyyyy gurl. I ignored them, of course.

Alfie is skinny but still manages to take up a lot of room with his long limbs, untucked shirt and grey hoodie. Our uniform is a grey jumper and he always has a different excuse for not having it: he's lost it; it was stolen; his nan's just died and he's wearing the hoodie she bought him in her memory; his cat was sick on it. Alfie probably doesn't even have a cat. He always used to be sent to lost property to change into a jumper but not now it's almost the end of Year Eleven and the teachers have given up the fight.

Strangely, lots of people find Alfie attractive and people like Will think he's amusing. To me, he's a ferret with a

mean streak. He looks at me now with his arms folded and his head tilted back. I've seen him inflict random acts of violence on students of all years, resulting in suspension and managed moves, but he always circles back to Hurst End. Getting expelled is far harder than it used to be, according to my dad, who thinks he knows a lot about education. Ms McNally is the only English teacher who can control Alfie, so this class is stuck with him.

“Been busy,” I murmur.

“Nah, rude,” says Alfie. “I don't message everyone.”

The day before yesterday, Alfie waited by the school gates and tried to walk home with me, telling me that he was going in my direction. I'd hunched my shoulders and listened to him describe a fight that had happened at lunchtime behind the sixth-form block. He found it amusing that a Year Nine's front tooth had been knocked out and people had been searching for it.

I hadn't wanted him to know where I lived, so I'd swerved at the top of the road and said I had to go to Tesco Express for my mum.

And in assembly the other day, he'd flicked a rubber band at my head and when I whipped round to see who'd done it he'd winked at me.

“Why wouldn't you reply?” asks Alfie, pushing his chair back so he can appraise me from all angles. He's smiling, as if he's got me cornered, which I guess he has. I shrink away from him, my heart hammering, but I'm angry too.

“Lots of people send messages like that,” I say. Doesn’t Alfie know how many unwanted Heyyyyy DMs a girl gets?

“Lots?” repeats Alfie. “Is that right?” His head moves up and down slowly, and he looks ridiculous, a parody of someone sensible thinking over what he’s heard. But then he moves, scarily fast so he’s standing next to me, his face right up in mine. “So you think you’re better than me, is that it?”

“Leave me alone,” I say. I force myself to stand calmly. *I’ll move seats, I think. Or someone will intervene.* I glance behind me. I’m in a class of about thirty people here and they’re all looking at me. A few seem surprised. Everyone is fascinated. Alfie and I are making their morning much more interesting. Matt Hepworth carries on munching his crisps as he watches the entertainment.

Eden’s whispering something to Will. I wonder if she’s telling him to help me. Will is twice the size of Alfie and he could defuse this just by coming over. I take a step and, as I watch Will sighing and pushing back his chair, as if he’s about to get up, Alfie yanks my arm behind my back, twisting my wrist at the same time. I whimper. Telling him I need this arm to write my GCSEs with is only going to amuse him. The pain is excruciating and I’m about to cry. Or pass out.

“Please let go,” I hiss loudly through clenched teeth, tears forming.

Alfie’s eyes are bright with aggression. I’m scared. I’ve never been in a confrontation like this.

Suddenly I'm aware of a movement next to him. A blur of grey jumper and mid-brown hair. Someone quite small is attempting to pull Alfie off me.

Dazed, I realize it's Weird Romilly. A girl who exists on the sidelines. She never sticks her hand up in class or puts herself forward for anything. In fact, she's often not here at all. I don't think I've ever heard her speak. Yet here she is, defending me.

"She said 'let go'," says Romilly fiercely, gripping the back of Alfie's hoodie somewhere near the armpits.

Alfie is so surprised, and probably embarrassed to have Romilly clinging on to him, he releases me and I sit down on my seat. I take deep breaths while Alfie rearranges his hoodie, visibly annoyed that it's been stretched.

"Look what you've done, you utter freak."

Romilly shrugs. She's been called way, way worse.

Alfie swagger-walks away from us, shaking his head to keep face.

"Idiot," mutters Romilly. She slips past him and sits down next to me, swinging her scruffy tote bag on to her lap, hugging it to herself. I appreciate the solidarity as everyone goes back to their phones.

I look at her properly for the first time. She's never been more than "Weird Romilly" in my head. She has pale skin, slightly darker under her eyes, and long mid-brown hair, fuzzy at the bottom from the split ends. I, as a hairdresser's daughter, always notice the hair. She tucks a section of it behind her ear now and I see her earring, a silver skull.

“Thank you,” I say. “That was nice of you.” I mean it. I’m so grateful I could hug her.

She shrugs her thin shoulders, holding out her hands, and I see an array of silver rings on delicate fingers. “Couldn’t sit there and do nothing.”

“Like everyone else did,” I say. I wish Eden had stepped up. *Maybe she was about to*, I think.

Romilly rummages in her green bag, which is advertising a bookshop I’ve never heard of, and pulls out a tube of extra-strong mints. She proffers it to me.

I take one, the powdery texture dissolving on my tongue with a sharp taste.

“They have a kick, right?” she says as I pull a face. “Sugar’s good for a shock though.”

The door swings open and Ms Percival strides in. “Sorry I’m late, folks,” she says, her chained glasses bouncing on her chest. “My timetable was wrong.” She tuts, looking at everyone with their phones out. “You’re Year Eleven. Exams in sight. Why aren’t you using this time wisely?” She stands with her hands on her hips. “Exercise books out, everybody.”

“Thanks again, Romilly,” I say as I reach for my bag. “It’s great to still have the full use of my arm.”

She gives me a half-smile of acknowledgement, her expression serious, her eyes locked on mine. “No worries,” she says. “I’m always here for you.”