

All the

ways

to

Emily O'Beirne
here



CHAPTER 1

Willa

“The sooner you answer the question, the better it will be for you, Brookes.”

“I know.” Willa smiles. Long green blades snake over her fingers, grass so springtime soft she could sink into it, pull it over her like a cool green blanket. None of that yellow stubble from camp.

They are a logjam of limbs, light and dark, jumbled under the apricot tree. It’s so good to be home, back in the radius of the handful of people life has doled out to Willa. Everyone’s on the map again, placed within reach: Nan’s down the side, wrangling her grapevine into submission. Willa’s brother, Jack, is over the road, killing digital baddies with Tyler. Her sister, Riley, is inside, supposedly cleaning her side of their room. And Kelly and Maida have her surrounded on the slip of a lawn. Even though it’s interrogation time, it’s blissful to lie here again in the slick of protective coating that is her nosy, beautiful best friends.

The grass tickles her cheek as a breeze cuts past, and she idly reminds herself to borrow the mower from Maida’s dad and mow before Nan tries to do it herself. It can wait for a minute, though. In fact, everything can wait just one more hour. Because right now she gets to dwell in the bittersweet feeling that is a Sunday afternoon at home—Monday morning looming, but not quite there yet. At Camp Nowhere, all the days felt the same, the hours regimented by mealtimes and shower times and cabin curfews.

Willa hasn’t quite left it all behind yet. It’s like free-floating between two worlds. All her reference points are still about camp. She keeps thinking that at any minute a bell’s going to sound, directing her to the next thing, or one of the Gandry girls is going to crack a joke about the food or the mystery fungus in the shower blocks. She keeps wanting to answer Kelly and Maida’s chatter with “that’s like when Amira...” or

“remember when Ling...”, but then she remembers that Kelly and Maida won't know who or what she's talking about, that she never talks about the people she goes to school with.

“Hey.” An elbow digs at her arm. “Answer the question, Brookes.”

“What was it again?” she asks, playing dumb.

“What school does this girl go to?”

“Brunswick Hill.”

Kelly wrinkles her nose. “Private.”

“I go to private too, remember?”

“Yeah, but that's because you're a poor genius scholarship kid.”

“We're not exactly poor.”

“Oh, yeah, that's right. That's me. Well, you *are* a genius.”

“Is she smart?” Maida asks, twirling a dandelion between her fingers.

“Very.”

“Of course she's smart,” Kelly says. “Do you think Willa would date a bimbo? What would they even talk about?”

“She talks to *us*.”

“She has to. We make her.” Kelly turns to Willa. “Hey, she's not like that Freya chick, is she? I didn't like her.”

“You didn't even meet her,” Maida reminds her.

“Whatever. I didn't need to.” Kelly holds a fray of black hair over her face, inspecting for split ends. “She was evil to Will.”

“Finn's nothing like Freya,” Willa says, smiling.

“Oh, wow, would you look at the smile,” Kelly says.

But the smile's not for Finn. Not this time. Willa's smiling at these two. Because she loves them so. And she's missed them. They're the people who pull her back when she strays too far into herself, who force her to keep one foot in the land of teenager.

“Listen, you can't go around being all lovesick and gross all the time now,” Kelly tells her.

Maida leans over Willa. “You know she only says stuff like that because she's happy for you, right?”

“I know.”

Maida still does that—explains Kelly’s behaviour. As if after all these years, Willa still won’t know how to read her, won’t get that this is how Kelly faces the world she was dealt, by being brash and loud and big like a bird swelling its feathers to look more ominous to predators. Willa totally gets it. In fact, she gets Kelly’s automatic defence more than she gets Maida, with her sweet, slow, go-with-the-flow attitude. Kelly just dresses her fears as anger, that’s all, while Maida doesn’t seem to have any.

“So what’s she like, then?” Maida breaks a piece of banana cake into hunks and passes it out.

Willa frowns. How do you translate a person into the slipperiness of words? Even someone who is as what-you-see-is-what-you-get as Finn? “I don’t know. She’s really smart and thoughtful. And kind.”

“Okay, now she sounds boring. *Kind?*” Kelly pulls a face.

“What’s wrong with kind?” Maida asks.

Willa pops a bit of cake in her mouth. There’s an instant starburst pang, tangy and sweet. Cream cheese icing. The best kind. “Don’t worry, she can be feisty too. She’s definitely got opinions.”

“Okay, now I like her more,” Kelly says.

Maida shakes her head and swipes crumbs from her tights. “Imagine if we judged this hard on the guys you hook up with. Finn sounds nice. And Will could use some sweetness.”

“Sweetness?” Kelly pulls another face. “I just threw up in my mouth a little.”

This makes Willa laugh. Because Maida sounds like some honeyed meemaw from the deep South. Only she’s a million miles from it. Maida’s a classic inner-city Melbourne mongrel, Kelly always says proudly, just like her and Willa. Aussie, Greek, and Filipino are all tossed into the mix that made her, and somehow all these ingredients have conspired to make this doe-eyed, dreamy pixie with a haircut to match.

“Anyway,” Kelly says from inside a sigh. “I know I’m being judge-y, but she could be Willa’s first proper girlfriend, so I have to make sure she’s picked a winner. We’ve waited long enough.”

This is the good, the bad, and the ugly of telling them about Finn. Well, telling Kelly, anyway.

“So,” Kelly nudges her and grins, “most important, will *I* like her?”

Before Willa can give that question the sarcasm it deserves, a loud, wailing “Wil-la!” rides high in the air.

Riley’s on the back step, hands on hips, the ridiculously long hair she refuses to cut floating around her elbows. She’s wide-eyed and brimful with all the melodrama that Willa’s quickly learning that an eleven-year-old with a new, prepubescent sense of self-importance can muster.

“What’s wrong, Riles?”

“I can’t find one of my library books. They’re due tomorrow. I’ve looked everywhere.”

“Well, have you finished cleaning your side of the room?”

“...sort of.” She gives Willa a sheepish smile.

“Then the only surprise is that you’re surprised you can’t find it. It’ll be somewhere in that mess.”

Riley clicks her tongue loudly but doesn’t move. As usual, she’s waiting for Willa to solve the problems she can’t be bothered solving.

Maybe Willa doesn’t love this part about coming home. “Look, I’ll help you look for it later. But only if you haven’t found it *after* you clean up.”

Riley’s mouth moves towards a pout but second-guesses itself at the last moment. Instead she goes for that new, helpless look she’s been trying on.

“Just do it, Riles,” Willa says, fighting a smile. Is it possible her sister has learned even more guile in Willa’s absence? “Then you’ll be able to watch TV after dinner.”

The pout makes its victorious return. “You’re lucky I missed you!” She spins and flounces into the house. “Your phone’s ringing!”

Finn. It has to be. Willa leaps up and jogs into the shadowed kitchen. But by the time she snatches up her phone from the kitchen table, it’s stopped. It *was* her. Damn. Just the fact Finn’s thinking of her right now makes her blood swim harder under her skin.

The sun hits her right square in the eyes as she steps back outside, her bare feet slapping the concrete. There’s a thump and curse from down the side of the house. Nan’s standing in the narrow space between weatherboard and fence, glaring up at the gnarl of vine, her hands jammed on her hips. Riley all over again.

Willa edges down the path, fern fronds skimming her legs. “What’s wrong?”
“Support beam’s cracked, and the wire’s jammed in it.”

“Oh.” Willa peers into the tangle of stem and bright new leaf. “Want me to climb up and see if I can pull it out?”

“No. It’s going to need some pliers and a ladder, I think.” Nan rubs her upper lip, where beads of sweat have gathered. She’s been trying to downplay whatever illness dogged her while Willa was gone, but Willa can see traces of it in the ashy torpor of her skin. It’s been setting off flickers of worry since she got home.

“Should I ask Kelly to get her brother to come take a look?”

Nan nods, but Will can tell she’s only half listening as she scrutinises the tangled mess above her. “Or maybe I could just climb the fence to get to it.”

“Don’t do that,” Willa says hurriedly. Nan will do anything if her precious jungle is at stake. “I’ll ask Dave. He can mow the lawn too.”

“That boy will take forever about getting himself here.”

“Not if I get Kelly onto him.” Willa swipes some cobwebs from Nan’s back as she follows her down the path. “And not if you pay him.”

“Of course I’ll pay him. I always do.” Nan stops every few steps, inspecting her ferns, turning over fronds and picking off dead bits, master of all the green she surveys. “This garden. More work than raising children.”

Willa smiles. She always says that. “Want help with dinner?”

“It’s ready to go. You can switch the potatoes and lamb on in about twenty minutes while I finish repotting the baskets out the front, if you like. Throw on some of that fresh rosemary from the garden, and tell the girls they’re welcome.”

“Thanks.” But for the first time ever, Willa isn’t excited that the girls might stay for Sunday dinner. Only because she’ll have to wait even longer to call Finn. But she also knows that if she doesn’t ask them, Kelly will be making her own meal, and who knows what hippie fare Maida will have to endure.

They haven’t moved. Kelly’s thick legs are kicked up against the tree, while Maida’s petite ones are crossed primly on the grass.

Willa flops down between them and turns to Kelly. “Can you send your brother over tomorrow? Nan’s got a job for him. She’ll pay.”

“Then I’m sure he’ll find a minute in his busy schedule of doing sweet FA to help.”

"Nan says you two can stay for tea if you like. Lamb."

"A Nan roast?" Kelly click her tongue. "Damn. Can't. Got to go to work."

"And my mum's making *nut* roast." Maida pulls a face.

"What the hell is that?" Kelly asks.

"You do not want to know. But apparently it's an event we must all be in attendance for."

"Lucky you," Willa says. Canned laughter from some tween sitcom spills out of the house. She sighs and adds another thing to the growing list of things to do tonight. Because Riley clearly isn't going to clean until Willa helps her. And Willa still needs to pack her schoolbag, iron her uniform, hang out her camp washing, and check that all her camp homework is complete.

Kelly yanks at a strand of her hair. "By the way, after careful consideration, Maida and I have decided that we'll permit you to date this girl. As long as we get to meet her, *stat.*"

CHAPTER 2

Finn

“She goes to Gandry Park.” Finn opens the glove box and rummages through manuals, receipts, and odd car bits. Bingo. She pulls out a tin of mints. “On scholarship.”

“Uh-huh.” Her mum, Anita, is doing a woeful job of pretending to listen as she weaves the car through the tight Sunday afternoon traffic. Usually, if Finn dropped the news that she’s dating someone, there’d an Inquisition-level list of carefully-crafted, not-too-nosey-but-not-too-uninterested questions. Not “uh-huh”. And then there’s the fact that her mother—award-winning educator extraordinaire—didn’t jump all over the Gandry scholarship info. That’s a dead giveaway that Finn’s words are just gliding right past.

So Finn gives up. Flinching at the hot peppermint slide in her throat, she watches the slow-moving scenery as they attempt to depart the inner-north. High Street inches by in a chaotic montage of apartments under construction, old ladies pushing trolleys, and hipsters leading trends and dogs and children from café to café.

Anita brakes suddenly and mutters something under her breath. Finn glances uneasily at her. Her mother’s usually a chilled driver, the type to say “go team” instead of “hurry up” when cars are slow to take off at a newly green light. Not today.

Anita’s sunglasses are monsters, dominating her small face. Even with their protection, she still manages to look tired and deflated. It was the first thing Finn noticed when her bus pulled into the school carpark on Friday—how small her mother looked as she stood by her car, clutching her keys. And Anita’s never small. In size, yes, but in personality, she’s always been a lioness.

The first thing she said as she folded Finn into a strangle of a hug was “I’m sorry.”

And because Finn was so shocked by the sight of her mum looking that way, she just said, “It’s okay.” Even though it’s not. Even though coming back to a dad-less house has made everything so strange.

Finally, they pull clear of the traffic and head for an exit that will take them to the beige boringness of the eastern suburbs. Visiting her grandmother has always been a hell mission. And not just because she lives forty-five minutes out of the city.

“So, why do we have to even visit Grandma Esther if you and Dad...” Finn doesn't know how to describe whatever it is that her mum and dad currently are. Or are not. “She's not your mum.”

“Because no one else will.” Anita leans forward as she speeds up to merge with the cars streaking past on the highway. “And because we are good people.”

“We are stupid people.”

Anita clicks her tongue and does that head-tilt thing she always does when she wants to agree but knows she isn't supposed to.

“And why doesn't Anna have to come?”

“Your sister's working.”

“That's it,” Finn says. “I'm getting a weekend job.”

“No, you're not.” Now she's listening.

“Why not?”

“We've been through this enough times, Finn. You're busy enough as it is. If you want to be a student representative and go to painting classes and do all the other things you want to do on top of your studies, that's fine. But there's not enough time to work too. I'd rather give you pocket money.”

“You know, most parents would want their kids to get a job.”

“Most parents want their kid to get a job because they can't provide pocket money or because they want them to learn a lesson in responsibility. We can manage pocket money, and we were also lucky enough to be born with a freak child who has the responsibility part down already.”

Finn doesn't know whether to smile because her mum is being her mum again or to pout because she never wins this argument.

“You can get a job in the summer holidays. You can have three jobs then if you want.” Anita pats her leg. “Besides, you have to admit, finding employment just to avoid a monthly encounter with your grandmother might be a little overreaching.”

“But smart.” Finn watches house roofs streak past, half hidden behind the cement slabs shielding them from the freeway. “She's going to say...stuff.”

“Yes, she will. About everybody and everything. And we shall listen politely, make chitchat, eat afternoon tea, and leave in thirty to forty minutes. And then we reward ourselves with pasta and a movie. And the good news is that your cousin got suspended from school, so I’m sure the spotlight will be on your Aunt Laura’s failings instead of our own.”

“Yes!” Finn wriggles in her seat. “Major diversion. What’d he do?”

“Some prank with his soccer team. Damaged an equipment shed.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Mark.”

“And hon,” Anita says, “of course, it’s completely up to you, but you should be prepared that if you do mention Willa to Esther, she’ll—”

“Oh, don’t you worry.” Finn shakes the tin to see if there are any mints left. “The less that old homophobe knows about my unsavoury love life, the better.”

This time her mother laughs. Her first real laugh since Finn got home.

CHAPTER 3

Willa

Willa strides up the footpath, stitching her way through the crowds of blue-and-white check headed for the school gates. There are the excitable juniors, the bored intermediates, and those remote senior girls, all moving en masse towards the hulking red-brick building.

It's strange to be back among them. Willa's cotton school dress hangs weirdly after weeks of jeans and T-shirts at camp. And then there's the depressing tug of her laden backpack on her shoulders. It will be even heavier on the way home.

She puts her head down and strides, tired already. Even with all her preparation last night, the morning was chaos. Riley was freaking out because she still couldn't find her library book. It took another twenty minutes of hunting and questioning before they finally deduced it was in her book bag. At school. Then Jack spilt his cereal on the floor, and the washing machine stalled mid spin while Nan was out in the yard. All before 8am.

Three more weeks until the holidays, she repeats in her head like a mantra.

The first person she sees inside the school gates is Eva, standing in a wash of sunlight, staring at her phone. Just as Willa's deciding whether to stop or not, Eva spots her and smiles. She pushes her sunglasses up. "Hey there."

Eva looks impeccable, as always. Her light-brown hair is wrapped into a loose but neat bun, and her brows smoothed to perfect arches over blue eyes. Even though Willa is always Gandry-mandated neat and tidy, she never feels as put together as Eva. Or any of these girls. She thinks she looks tidy when she leaves the house, but as soon as she gets among the picture perfection of these girls, she'll notice the wrinkle in her shirt sleeve or the small spot on her blazer. No one else would notice, but Willa does.

"So, how was your weekend?" Eva falls into step with her. "Oh, and by the way, this is me making sure you don't go all aloof on us again." Willa gives her a look, but Eva just gives her an insouciant smile. "It's weird to be back, isn't it?"

“It’s weird being back in uniform,” Willa says, yanking at her blazer. “So, was it nice to see your family?”

“Well, well. Look at you with the chitchat,” Eva teases.

“Very funny.” But it is kind of nice walking into school with the closest thing she’s had to a friend since coming here. On the bus ride home from camp, she learned more about Eva than she’s ever known. That she lives in an apartment not far from the school. That both her parents and her brother travel all the time—the parents for work and the brother for fun. Apparently, her older brother loves trouble like Eva loves success, and she’s constantly acting as buffer between him and their parents. Willa even told Eva something about her family. Not everything, though. Not yet.

The noise thickens as they enter the building, and girls desperately jam in last night’s stories before the imposed silence of form assembly. The air cloyes with the smell of mass-applied girl product.

“Only fifteen more school days until the end of term,” Eva mutters.

“Now, that’s not the Gandry girl attitude,” Willa jokes, jumping as an arm drops suddenly onto her shoulders and hauls her in close.

“Morning, ladies!” Amira inserts herself between them, carrying her own personal cloud of sugary perfume and self-confidence. “Civilisation is a wonderful thing, isn’t it? Nothing like a stint in the country to make you appreciate clean sheets and choose-your-own-meal-adventures. You suddenly begin to appreciate the little things.”

“Like self-direction,” Eva draws.

“So true. I gotta run.” Amira presses a kiss onto Eva’s cheek, drops a slap on Willa’s backside, and marches off into the crowds. “See you in Japanese!” she yells over her shoulder.

Eva grins at Willa’s expression. “Yeah, so now you’ve let her in, you’re going to have to learn to live with her complete lack of boundaries.”

“I let her in?”

“She can slip through any friendship crack. Catch you later.” Eva turns for the west buildings.

Before Willa can head through the doors to the north quad, she hears her name. She spins around, nearly bumping into some Year 8s. The vice principal is standing by her door, beckoning.

Ms Cassavetes' hair has already begun its daily escape, falling in lank strands around her head. And, as ever, her effort at corporate attire is stymied by wrinkles, what looks like dog hair, and a shaggy cardigan she keeps in her cold office but sometimes forgets to remove before leaving. Basically, she's a mess—especially compared to the parade of impeccable girl grooming that's currently marching past her door.

Willa's always figured that Ms Cassavetes made some deal with the career devil, one that sacrificed grooming skills for maximum efficiency in all other areas. Because while she slays at her job, and parents and students both like and respect her, she always looks like she woke from a twenty-year coma and had five minutes to get ready before returning to work.

“Good morning.” Ms Cassavetes folds her arms and leans against the doorjamb. “I heard you girls did very well on camp. Good job.”

Willa smiles uneasily. She's already had to come to terms with the fact that teachers make her unreasonably nervous. It's her lot in life. “Thank you.”

“I was going to get a hold of you after assembly, but you're here now. It's late notice, I know, but could you please attend a middle-school curriculum meeting this afternoon? Just for an hour? The council has suddenly decided that there needs to be a student representative on the committee. It seems like a job for one of the academic leaders, but Stella from the seniors is busy this afternoon. Could you make it this once?”

Willa recalibrates her afternoon, biting back at the stress that's already flickering at her periphery: Curriculum meeting instead of study. Pick up Riley from Lefah's house. Then get dinner started while Nan goes to her community gardens meeting. The missed homework can happen after dinner while she helps Jack with his. She can probably get it all done if she spends lunch in the library today too. Then there's the fact she'd never say no anyway. “Sure, I can do it.”

Ms Cassavetes smiles and pushes herself off the jamb. “Great. Thank you. Can you also ask one of the girls to chat at assembly on Wednesday about the camp? It would be good for the younger girls to hear about the experience. Especially those Year 9s. They can focus on trying to get selected for next year.”

Willa nods, mentally signing Amira up for it. “Sure.”

“Good girl. Have a great day.” And she's back in her office with the door closed.

CHAPTER 4

Finn

She finds Dan where she can always find him on Tuesdays: in the front garden, under the weird scrubby tree that drops needles into their hair and food. Still, no one else is ever sitting there, so it's become their Tuesday lunch place.

Mondays he has drumming lessons. Wednesdays she has all-captain meeting. Thursdays she has lunch with the other intermediate student representatives to talk shop. Then he has multimedia club on Fridays, while she has extra art. But Tuesdays are inviolably theirs. Finn loves their little forty-three minutes of banter and smartassery. It gives her strength to get through the rest of the week. School gets so fast and so hard sometimes, but on Tuesdays with Dan, there's only the comfort of having completely understood nearly every single thing another person has said since the day you met them. It's been like that since they sat together in Ms Hedge's horrifyingly dull history class in Year 8 and shared a textbook and commentary on the teacher's unhinged outfit. And they've never looked back.

He rubs his palms on his grey school pants as she sits down. Then he immediately swipes his hand through his sandy hair. She knows exactly why he's being a fidgety weirdo too. His new girlfriend is sneaking off from her school today to eat lunch with them.

"You're nervous," she sings.

"Of course I am." He rubs his legs again. "My girls eating lunch together? Terrifying."

"Your girls? You make us sound like a harem." She picks up her roll and inspects it.

"What are you expecting to see in that sandwich? Have you actually ever eaten anything but a cheese roll for lunch? Ever?"

Finn shrugs. "I change cheeses. Sometimes it's cheddar. Sometimes it's Swiss." She's never been an adventurous eater. "Anyway, some of us are too busy with our more

pressing life commitments to bring handcrafted meals every day.” She eyes his bento-style lunchbox, jammed with a rainbow array of healthy edibles. “Your mum really needs to go back to work. She’s clearly bored stupid.”

“Bored *and* a post-chemo health nut. It’s all raw and grains at my house.” He picks up a piece of purple cabbage. “This, apparently, is food. I’d always thought it was merely decorative. Can I come to your house for some carbs soon?”

“So what you’re really saying is that you’re jealous of my cheese roll?”

“I’m not saying anything at all.”

“Yeah, right.”

In a blur of energy and wispy, dyed-blond hair, Rosie arrives. Finn can tell Dan’s really into her, because he stutters a little as he introduces them. “Y-you remember Finn, right?”

Rosie rests her hand on Dan’s shoulder and gives Finn a sunny smile. “Of course. Hi. How was your camp?”

“It was great.” Finn eyes Rosie’s jeans and loose, long hair—the perks of going to state school.

“Finn met a lady there,” Dan says.

“Awesome.” Rosie drops cross-legged onto the ground and turns to Dan, “Hey, remember the community group thing I was telling you about? The one Andy was asking you about making YouTube videos for?”

“Yeah.”

“They might have to shut it down.”

“Why?”

She snags a piece of carrot from his lunch and shrugs. “Funding issues. Or maybe conservative assholes disguised as funding issues. Who knows?”

“That’s crap.”

“Totally,” she says, munching. “We’re trying to come up with a plan to attract attention to it. Will you help if we need video?”

“Of course.”

“What’s the group?” Finn asks.

“It’s this queer-friendly space for under-eighteens. Down on Leight Street, near the old mattress factory. You know it?”

“No.”

“The building’s shitty, but the people are great. Andy’s practically lived there since he came out.”

“Who’s Andy?”

“Oh, sorry.” Rosie laughs. It’s an obnoxious snort of a thing for someone so delicate, which makes Finn like her even more. “My twin. So now we’re all trying to think of ways to get some attention to the cuts.”

“You should help out, Finn,” Dan says. “Sounds like your kind of gig.”

“Why? Just because I kiss girls?” She slaps his knee. “Next thing I know, you’re going to be asking me if I know every gay you meet.”

“No. Because you’re a crusader, like this one.” He tips his chin at Rosie.

“Nothing wrong with that,” Rosie says. “Not all of us want to spend our days ranting into cameras, waxing lyrical about sci-fi for fellow nerds.”

“One hundred and twenty thousand YouTube subscribers can’t be wrong.”

“They could be, if they all have teeny tiny little brains.”

“You got even more subscribers while I was gone,” Finn says, eyes wide.

He gives her his best faux-modest look. “What can I say? I know my stuff.”

Rosie turns to Finn. “You know, we’ve been together six weeks, and I’ve avoided watching a single sci-fi film.”

“You lucky, lucky thing.”

They smile at each other, and Finn knows that finally, *finally*, Dan has picked a winner.

The three of them banter for a bit, comparing school and life notes until Rosie checks her phone and jumps up.

“I’ve got to go. But, hey, if you do want to help, Finn, we could totally use extra brains on this. And it’s a really cool place. I can let you know about our next meeting?”

“Uh, sure.” How does Finn always manage to get herself roped into helping with things? What vibe does she give off that says *ask me*? “I’ll try to come down.”

“Cool, I’ll message you.” Rosie drops a quick kiss onto Dan. “And you’ll help if we need you too, right?”

“Of course.” He smiles up at her. “I told you I would.”

Finn gets the feeling he’d say yes to anything Rosie asked.

“Good.” Rosie kisses him again. “See you, guys.” And she’s off, bouncing across the lawn and through the front gate. Dan’s smile as he watches her stride down the street is a sickening thing.

“She’s great,” Finn tells him before he can ask.

“Isn’t she? She reminds me of you sometimes.” He freezes. “Oh, wait, that’s weird.”

“Yep. Weird.”

“I just mean because she’s got all this energy. You don’t look alike or anything.” He’s blushing. Actually blushing.

“Uh, I’m aware of that.” There’s no avoiding the fact that Rosie’s a babe in a way that Finn could never be.

She has to laugh, because Dan still looks creeped out. “It’s okay, don’t freak. We’re clearly pretty different. For example, she thinks you’re hot.”

He smirks but doesn’t say anything.

It’s not like this stuff hasn’t come up before. When they first met, Finn sometimes worried that Dan was into her in a way she wasn’t into him. She liked this skinny, nervous sweetheart with a biting sense of humour, but he didn’t give her the tingles. But if he did like her back then, he never said or did anything about it.

It’s annoying, when she tells people her best friend is a guy. They always ask her if she’s ever “gone there” with him, like it’s an inevitability that things will get complicated. But it never has. It’s been a point of vague awkwardness from time to time, like now, but Finn only knows that she loves him to death and has no desire to touch him. And she’s 99.999 per cent sure he’s always felt the same.

“Hey, so Rosie and I had the commitment talk this weekend,” he tells her, shutting his lunchbox. “I don’t know why she thought we needed to have it. I’m not looking anywhere else. *Ever.*”

“That’s sweet. And gross.” She hands him the rest of her roll. “Willa and I haven’t talked about anything like that.”

“Yeah, well, you have to give it some time before you talk about that stuff. Just let it happen for a bit, and see what’s what.”

She shoots him a look. “Hey, Wisdom Boy, don’t do that thing where you get all sage and advice-y because you’ve been in a relationship for, like, a minute. Before Rosie came along, it’d been a long time between drinks for you too.”

“Can’t you just let me have this one thing? You’re better at everything else.”

“I guess.” She elbows him. “By the way, that is so spectacularly not true.”

“Whatever. So, what’s she like? You barely told me anything the other night.”

“That’s because your mum kept yelling questions the whole time. You should have just given the phone to her.”

“She missed you.”

“I know. I’ll come see her soon. Anyway, Willa’s awesome. She’s super serious and tough, but then she’s kind of a secret softy. It’s cute.”

“So when can I meet her?”

“First *I* have to see her.”

“When’s that?”

“We’re supposed to meet Friday.” A hum of impatience crashes through Finn. It’s only Tuesday. She lets out a little moan.

“What’s wrong?”

“Friday’s ages away.”

He stares at her. “Wow. This girl’s made you all weird and needy. Now I really want to see her.”

“One, shut up. Two, get in line.”

CHAPTER 5

Willa

Willa's in the library, using every minute of her free period to bury this maths chapter in her past. It will be one less thing to do tonight.

Behind her, a group of Year 8 girls back and forth between complaining about some group project they're supposed to be doing and discussing Melinda's chances of making up with Joel. Willa has no idea if Melinda is someone from TV or a girl who goes to Gandry, but either way the debate is intense.

She blocks them out and works steadily through the next forty minutes. With five minutes until the bell, she's only got one equation left to do. But right at the last hurdle, the temptation's too much. She slips her phone out of her pencil case and slides it under the cover of her maths text. It wouldn't exactly look good for an academic leader to be on her phone in study period, but she can't resist. She used to be able to leave her phone in her bag all day and not even think about it. Not any more.

But it's worth it because there's a message from Finn.

Confession...

Willa smiles. *Do share.*

The response is instant. *Waiting until Friday is really, really hard.*

Tell me about it.

Two more days...

I know.

Unless...

What?

What time do you get back from school?

My bus usually gets in just after 4.

There's a pause. *I have school council until four. What if I met you? Could you hang out for a minute? Or do you need to be home straight away?*

I have to pick up Jack from soccer at 4:30 in Prince Park

Oh.

Willa frowns. It's always like this. There's always something she's supposed to be doing. She's about to text *sorry* when there's another message.

What if I met your bus and walked you there? I live near the park, remember?

Willa can't help grinning. *Persistent, aren't you?*

Oh, sorry! I don't mean to be pushy. I can totally wait 'til Friday.

But Willa can't. *Don't be sorry. I was joking. Please meet me.*

Okay. I'll be the weird, stalkery one lurking at the bus stop.

A thrill jets through her as the bell rings. The girls behind her instantly start to complain they didn't get enough done. Surprise.

Willa didn't finish her work either. And it was totally worth it.

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She finishes the last sum on the way home, working a dicey balance of textbook, notebook, and calculator on her lap.

The bus lurches along the busy roads, returning her to the northern suburbs. By the time they get to her stop, there's only a handful of Gandry girls left, crowded out by a horde of nonnas and their shopping trolleys who got on at the markets halfway between school and home.

When her notebook slips off her lap at a sudden stop, an old man next to her picks it up and mutters approvingly at her studiousness. She thanks him politely and wonders what he'd think if he knew she's sprinting through her homework so she can meet a girl in the park. A girl she hasn't stopped thinking about whether she's going to get to kiss in the park.

The bus swerves into her stop. She hauls her bag onto her shoulder and peers through the window. Finn's leaned against a brick wall, hunched over her phone. Willa just stares for a moment, struggling to compute the exquisite knowledge that the girl in the striped school dress, her hair blowing forward in the wind, is waiting for her. Just for her. Because that girl couldn't wait another two days.

They meet in the middle of the footpath. Finn squints into the sun, smiling and clutching a small, white takeaway cup. "Hi."

"Hi." Willa smiles, thinking how Finn looks different. Maybe it's seeing her here with the heavy urban grey as backdrop, instead of the strident green of camp. Maybe it's the demure pinstripe of her school dress and her hair looking like it knows what a brush is. Maybe it's the hint of eye make-up. She's like the smoother, city version of Finn.

They eye each other for a moment, and then Finn, ever the brave one, folds her into a brief hug. It's awkwardly platonic. A hug that feels like a lie, because it's pretending they are something they are not.

Willa panics at the strangeness of it all. Like she suddenly can't find their *them*-ness. This is exactly what she's worried about each night, in those lights-out moments when

Finn inevitably invades her thoughts. What if they can't find what they had at camp? What if it can't be shifted and still hold its form, instead collapsing like a piece of clay moved before it's solidified?

"You know," Finn says, "I usually hate it when people state the obvious, but I'm going to say it anyway: it's really, really good to see you." And that candid smile pulls Willa back from the brink. Because there she is. And here they are.

They stroll the asphalt stretch that splits the cool, green centre of the park. Finn checks her watch. "So, by my calculations, we have about fourteen minutes before you have to go get Jack."

"And how many seconds?"

"Don't tease. A good stalker always knows these things."

They drop their schoolbags and settle onto a bench. Finn turns and gives her a bashful smile. "Sorry I was all weird and desperate and couldn't wait to see you."

Willa laughs and shakes her head.

"Why are you laughing?"

"You shouldn't be sorry. I wanted to see you too." Willa's face is instantly hot. Why does she have to be so self-conscious?

"Good." That's all Finn says as she plucks Willa's hand out of her lap and weaves their fingers together on the bench.

Willa stares at the sudden cacophony of colour between them: the clash of blue check and purple stripe, the chipped bottle-green of the bench, the silvery residue of worn graffiti, Finn's freshly mulberry nails and her plain ones.

She looks up to see Finn smiling at her like it's a question. Like she's asking if it's okay to hold her hand here. Probably because Willa's the private one. But all Willa knows is that Finn's holding her hand on a bench in the park and how incredible it feels. It will have to be okay.

A clutch of kids stalks by in Willa's old school uniform. A guy with a straggling effort at a goatee leads the pack, mouthing off about some argument with a teacher as he tosses his bag high in the air and catches it. A pair of girls trails them, school shoes in hands, cutting straight through the pond that surrounds the broken fountain. As they clamber out, wet footprints ghost their steps. One of them eyes Finn and Willa and mutters something to her friend. She turns and stares, then shrugs.

"I wonder if they're talking about the fact we're holding hands or the fact that we're in two different school uniforms," Finn muses.

"Probably the uniforms." Kids at Willa's old school hated the Brunswick Hill kids on principle. "An interschool relationship? It's very Montague and Capulet."

"So, how is it being back in Gandry's clutches?"

They talk quickly, making a feast of the minutes. They even talk about the things they've already talked about on the phone, because it's different when they're together. Better.

It still stuns Willa how easily talk comes to her when she's with Finn. She never feels tongue-tied or too earnest like she does with girls at school. She tells Finn about Riley's meltdown over some science project about plants last night, and how it just got worse as Willa struggled to explain it simply enough so her sister will get it. "I'll never be a good teacher."

Then Finn tells her how a group of kids at her school got in trouble for making a GIF of the principal shaking his finger at them and putting it at the top of the online school newsletter. "I thought it was genius," she says.

"No one would dare do anything like that at Gandry."

"Kids at mine dare and then get detention for weeks. Hey, so is your nan feeling better now?"

"Well, she's not sick anymore."

"That's good." Finn's thumb grazes the back of her hand. "Right?"

"Yeah." Willa doesn't tell her that the worry's not gone, that even though Nan's better, she doesn't seem completely right. Sometimes Willa catches her stopping and taking long breaths as she works or sitting in her chair when she'd usually be buzzing around her garden. But Willa doesn't want to talk about it because that makes it real. Instead, she focuses on the sooth of Finn's thumb sliding across her hand.

They sit and watch the world trudge past until Finn checks her watch and clicks her tongue. "That went too quickly. So, are we still going to hang out on Friday?" she asks as Willa heaves her bag onto her shoulders.

"Do you still want to?" Sometimes she's scared Finn's going to change her mind, going to realise this was all just a dumb camp thing.

"Of course. Should we take your brother and sister to the movies, still? Some Disney Pixar whatever?"

“Are you sure?”

“Why not?”

Willa smiles. “Wait until you meet them.”

“The Willa siblings don’t scare me.”

“They should. Hey, you don’t have to walk me all the way there,” she says as Finn turns for the soccer fields.

“Yes, I do. My place is on the other side of the fields, remember?”

“Of course.” *Damn*. Because what Willa really means is they should say goodbye here. Because here, she can do it properly and not in front of a whole lot of gawking boy children and a brother who knows nothing about Finn.

Finn starts walking, but Willa grabs her hand, pulls her back to her, and kisses her. A whisper of a kiss, really, because she’s too shy to dare anything more.

A slow smile spreads over Finn’s face. She plays with Willa’s blazer lapel, pulling her closer. “You look younger in uniform.”

“Well, you look girlier in yours. I mean, not to say you don’t look like a girl...” Willa blushes. “I just meant—”

“It’s okay. I know what you mean.” Finn takes hold of both her hands. “You kissed me first.”

“I kissed you first.” Willa leans in and does it again, like she means it this time. “And second.”

“Good.” Finn drags her back onto the path. “You’re nearly caught up.”

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ALL THE *WAYS* TO HERE

BY EMILY O'BEIRNE

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