

A STORY WRITTEN BY
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A close-up photograph of a blue backpack. On the side of the backpack, there is a circular patch with a rainbow design. To the left of the rainbow patch, there is a small, light-colored map of Australia. The background is blurred, showing a person with blonde hair.

SHUNNED

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Preface

This story comes from a deeply personal place. Like many others, I was a victim of bullying throughout my childhood — a time filled with fear, isolation, and pain. I understand, all too well, how terrible it feels to be singled out and shunned, to feel invisible and powerless.

Shunned is my way of giving voice to those experiences — to shine a light on the quiet, painful battles so many face behind closed doors. While this story may not follow the exact path of my own journey, I want every reader who has ever felt alone in their struggles to know this: it does get better.

Healing isn't always simple, and the scars may linger, but with support, courage, and time, the darkness can give way to hope, friendship, and belonging. You are not alone. There are people who see you, who care, and who will stand beside you.

Thank you for opening this story. May it remind you that even in the hardest moments, there is a way forward.

Dedicated to

Everyone who was ever bullied.

Everyone who ever bullied.

Everyone who saw it happen and stayed silent.

May we all do better, and heal.

Chapter One

Ten folded the edges of her well-worn sketchbook carefully before slipping it into the box. It wasn't just a book — it was the map of every quiet afternoon she'd spent tracing the hills and trees around her old home, turning the Lake District's rolling green into ink and shadow.

A dog barked somewhere down the street, and Ten glanced out the window. She'd miss the familiar paths she used to wander after school, headphones tucked in, lost in her own world of music and thoughts. Mum always joked that Ten's hiking boots had seen more countryside than most tourists ever would.

She pulled out a battered paperback from the pile on her bed, a story she'd been reading for weeks but never

quite finished. It had been her escape during the tough months after Mum and Dad split—quiet nights, curled up with a book, where nothing else mattered.

Mum's voice called from the kitchen. "Packing up the entire Lake District in that box, are we?"

Ten smirked despite herself. "Trying not to leave any hills behind."

Mum's footsteps approached, and Ten tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "I know moving is hard. But new places can surprise you."

Ten nodded, though the knot in her chest hadn't eased. She was shy by nature, quiet and careful — but beneath that, a stubborn determination she didn't always show. She would make this new place hers, one step at a time.

The kitchen smelled faintly of Mum's cooking—roast potatoes crisped just right, and the faintest hint of rosemary. The worn wooden table was scratched from years of meals, homework, and whispered late-night talks.

Ten pushed peas around her plate, her appetite nowhere to be found. She watched Mum across the table, who

kept pretending to scroll on her phone but probably checked the packing list for the tenth time.

“Remember when you insisted on making toast for breakfast every morning because it made you look ‘grown-up’?” Mum said, a smile playing on her lips.

Ten rolled her eyes, a grin tugging at her mouth. “That was a very serious phase, Mum. I might have been practising for adulthood.”

Mum raised an eyebrow. “Judging by your current laundry skills, I’d say the practice is ongoing.”

“Harsh.”

They shared a quiet laugh, the kind that comes from years of knowing exactly how to tease each other without causing real offence.

Mum took a bite, then sighed softly. “I’m going to miss this kitchen, you know. All the burnt toast mornings and your endless cups of tea.”

“Don’t forget the mysterious disappearances of the biscuits,” Ten added, smiling at the memory.

Mum chuckled, then grew a little quieter. “Tomorrow’s going to be different.”

“Yeah,” Ten replied, “but not all bad. I’ll probably miss the hills more than anything.”

Mum reached across the table and gave Ten’s hand a squeeze. “We’ll find new paths, together. Even if some of those paths include terrible school cafeterias and dodgy Wi-Fi.”

Ten squeezed back, the knot in her chest loosening just a little. “As long as there’s tea, I think I can survive anything.”

Ten pushed her plate aside and glanced out the window one last time. The hills stood dark against the evening sky, unchanged and waiting.

“Mum?” she said softly.

“Yes?”

“I’m scared.”

Mum reached over and brushed her thumb on Ten’s cheek. “I know. But we’ll face it together. New place, new school, new everything. One step at a time.”

Ten nodded, feeling the knot in her chest loosen just enough to breathe. Tomorrow was coming, whether she liked it or not.

And maybe, just maybe, it wouldn't be so bad after all.

Chapter Two

Ten woke up tangled in unfamiliar bedsheets, too warm, her mouth dry, and her brain refusing to commit to consciousness.

For a blissful few seconds, she had no idea where she was. The light coming through the curtain was too soft, the ceiling too flat, the silence too still. She might have been at a sleepover. Someone else's house. Maybe Maya's. No — not Maya's. Maya had posters on her ceiling and a very vocal cat.

Ten shifted slightly and registered bare skin against cotton. Oh.

Not a sleepover, then. She never slept naked at sleepovers. Only at home.

Only... this wasn't home.

Her eyes fluttered open properly now, and the realisation hit with the slow, heavy thud of reality reloading: the new house. Ambleside. Yesterday's cardboard boxes. The strange smell of someone else's carpet.

She let out a soft sigh and stared up at the ceiling, which offered no comfort or answers, just plain white awkwardness.

So this is it.

No birdsong she recognised. No humming of next door's ancient boiler. Just the faint clink of something downstairs — Mum, probably. Or ghosts. Who could say, really.

Ten didn't move yet. She felt oddly like an exhibit. A still life titled: *Teen Girl in Mild Denial (circa 2025)*.

The duvet was lumpy. The air was colder than she liked. Her new room still smelled faintly of paint and dust, with a subtle undercurrent of IKEA packaging.

Somewhere inside her, a quiet voice whispered, *This is your life now.*

She frowned at the ceiling. "Bit dramatic," she muttered.

The duvet gave a stubborn rustle as she peeled it back and swung her legs over the side. The floor was warm under her feet — not just from the late morning sun bleeding through the curtains, but from the stuffy hush that comes with an upstairs bedroom in summer.

It was going to be one of those deceptively hot September days, the kind where the air felt heavy before you'd even had breakfast.

Ten padded over to the window and pushed it open. The latch stuck a little, and the metal was warm under her fingers. Outside, she could hear distant birdsong — not the kind she was used to, but busy and cheerful all the same — and the faint hum of a lawnmower somewhere on the hill.

The curtains were still creased from being taken out of the packet. New house, new curtains. The old ones had stayed behind. Too short for this window, apparently.

The room wasn't big, but it was hers. Sloped ceiling, slanting sunlight, floorboards that creaked even when no one was standing on them.

The bed sat awkwardly against one wall, the headboard slightly crooked — Mum had blamed “wonky Cumbrian floorboards” with a breezy shrug and a cup of tea. A stack of books leaned drunkenly on the

windowsill, half unpacked. Ten had meant to do it properly yesterday but lost motivation after three titles.

Her sketchpad was already out, propped against her desk like a reluctant promise. One pencil lay beside it, chewed at the end — a habit she kept trying to kick, but deadlines and anxiety usually won.

On the little chest of drawers was a photo of her and Maisie — the girl next door from back home. They were sitting cross-legged on a trampoline, both sunburnt and grinning, arms draped around each other like siblings. Ten smiled at it now, then quickly looked away before the ache in her chest had a chance to settle in.

Next to the photo stood a small porcelain cat with a chipped ear, white with blue flowers painted across its back. It had belonged to Grandma. Ten had been given it when she was eight and had named it Susan for no reason she could now remember.

Ten gave Susan a nod as she passed, as if to say: *We made it.*

There were still boxes stacked under the desk and a pile of clothes folded (ish) on the floor, waiting for drawers that hadn't been assigned yet. But it was enough. It was becoming hers, slowly.

She stood in the middle of the room, arms hanging loosely by her sides, letting the stillness wrap around her for just a second longer.

It's not home yet, she thought, but it's trying.

Ten turned back to the window, arms folded loosely as she leaned a little into the frame. Outside, the rooftops of Ambleside dipped and climbed with the land, slate and chimney pots angled like someone had sketched them in a hurry. She could just about see the edge of the neighbour's garden — trimmed lawn, a sad-looking swing, a washing line strung with socks.

It took her a second to register that the house opposite had a clear view straight into her window.

She blinked, then glanced down at herself.

“Oh, bloody brilliant,” she muttered, diving for the dressing gown slung across the end of the bed like a collapsed ghost.

It was one of those old fleece ones, pale blue and shamefully soft, with sleeves a bit too long and pockets full of tissues and hair ties. She wrapped it tight, belted it in the middle, and gave the curtains a firm yank closed — the kind that said: *No one saw anything. Probably. Definitely not.*

From downstairs came the distant clatter of a pan and the unmistakable sound of someone swearing softly after burning their hand.

“Mum,” Ten murmured with a small, tired smile.

She padded out onto the landing, the floorboard by the top step creaking like it was auditioning for a haunted house, and made her way down, the warmth from the kitchen growing with every step.

The kitchen smelled like toast and mild panic.

Mum was leaning over the toaster with a tea towel, fanning the smoke detector with the determination of someone who’d promised *just one calm morning*. The toast itself was wedged sideways in the slot, half-charred and slightly heroic in its attempt to self-destruct.

Ten stepped through the doorway and leaned on the frame.

“You win again, toaster.”

Mum didn't look up. "It *jammed*. I had one job this morning and it jammed."

"You had one job yesterday too, and we had oven chips for breakfast."

"I like oven chips," Mum muttered, not looking up from her battle with the toaster. "They never judge you. Unlike your daughter."

Ten smirked and wandered in, sliding onto one of the chairs at the little round table by the window. The table was old, slightly wobbly, and already cluttered with half-unpacked kitchen bits and a notebook full of Mum's truly awful shorthand.

"I made tea," Mum said, finally managing to eject the offending toast with a pair of wooden tongs and a dramatic sigh.

Ten reached for the mug and gave it a cautious sniff. "This smells... too healthy. Did you try to sneak oat milk in again?"

"It's better for your skin," Mum said, sitting down opposite her with a matching mug and an expression of saintly innocence.

"You said that about wheatgrass and I ended up with hives."

“That was *unrelated*,” Mum said, waving a hand. “Anyway, you look lovely. Glowing. Possibly radioactive. Very chic.”

Ten rolled her eyes and took a sip. It was oat milk. She made a face but didn’t complain.

Mum flipped open her notebook and peered at her phone, thumb tapping something in a message. “They’ve let me keep my column,” she said casually, like it wasn’t a small miracle. “I’ll still be writing for the paper back in Kendal, just remote. Fewer commute rants, but I’ll survive.”

Ten raised her eyebrows. “You mean we moved house and you *still* have to email angry questions to the council?”

“Darling, it’s the only reason I get up in the morning.”

“I thought it was the burnt toast.”

“That too.”

They shared a quiet grin over the tea mugs, the morning light catching in Mum’s mess of curly hair and making her look ten years younger. She looked tired, though. The kind of tired that comes from too many lists and not enough sleep, but she was smiling.

Mum reached across the table, brushed her thumb gently against Ten's knuckles.

"Still surviving?"

Ten nodded. "Mostly. There was a sighting of a boyband poster in the next window, so I may have traumatised someone's teenage son this morning."

Mum beamed. "That's my girl."

Chapter Three

The alarm buzzed like an unwelcome marching band, persistent and entirely lacking in sympathy. Ten lay still for a moment, weighing the merits of getting up against the merits of staying buried under her duvet.

“Come on, sunshine,” Mum called from downstairs, voice light but firm enough to carry up one flight of stairs. “Big day. New school, new friends, fresh opportunities to mildly embarrass yourself.”

Ten pulled the duvet over her head. The outside world could wait. Or better yet, not exist at all.

A sharp rap on the door made her flinch. “Ten! You’re not still practising your Oscar for Best Drama Queen, are you? Because you’re a shoo-in.”

Groaning, Ten threw off the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. The floor felt way too cold.

She blinked against the morning light filtering through the curtains and willed herself to care.

Downstairs, Mum was already bustling—flinging open windows, chopping fruit with a flourish, and humming a tune that was either encouragement or a cry for help. Ten wasn't sure which.

She shuffled into the bathroom, the mirror reflecting back a girl who looked about as ready for the day as a cat facing a bath.

“Hey,” Mum’s voice echoed from the kitchen. “Remember, it’s just one day. And if all else fails, there’s always the option of feigning amnesia.”

Ten managed a small smirk. “I’ll add it to my list of survival tactics.”

Ten rolled her eyes but felt the corners of her mouth twitch. Maybe, just maybe, she could survive this.

They settled onto the porch swing, the morning sun warm on their faces. The gentle creak of the swing

matched the soft chirping of birds nearby, while the scent of damp earth and freshly bloomed lavender drifted in the cool morning air. Mum cradled a steaming mug of tea, fingers wrapped around it like a lifeline. Ten's hands twitched at the edge of her blazer, picking at a loose thread as if it held the day's tension.

For a moment, Ten let her eyes wander over the neat garden, the droplets of dew clinging to petals catching the light like tiny jewels. It was peaceful here — almost a shame to leave it all behind. She wondered if the streets of Ambleside smelled of flowers too, or if the air there was just cold and strange.

“Look,” Mum said softly, rocking the swing gently. “It's okay to be scared. I'm scared too, in my own way.”

Ten blinked, surprised by the sudden warmth in her chest. Mum, scared? Somehow that made her feel less alone.

“Moving's never easy.” She could almost hear the echoes of her old house, the memories packed away in boxes now.

“New school, new everything,” Mum continued. “But you're not alone. And when school's done for the day,

how about we do something just for us? Maybe a bit of shopping, find a café with the best cakes in town?"

Ten let out a breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding. A small smile tugged at her lips.

"Promise you won't make me try any weird local delicacies?"

Mum laughed, the sound light and real. "No promises. But I'll be right there with you, trying to hide my own grimaces."

The swing creaked again as it rocked back and forth, the birdsong wrapping around them like a soft blanket. For a moment, the new house felt a little less strange.

Chapter Four

Ten stood outside Ambleside High, the sprawling redbrick building catching the early morning sun. A crowd of students milled about, their chatter a low buzz beneath the crisp September air. It wasn't huge — smaller than her old school, definitely. That should have been a comfort. But instead, she felt like a spotlight had found her and was blinking in Morse code: *New girl. New girl. New girl.*

She pulled her blazer tighter, fingers fiddling with the sleeve's cuff as if it could somehow shield her from the invisible eyes. The grass underfoot was still damp with morning dew, and a few birds trilled somewhere in the branches overhead. She told herself to breathe. One foot in front of the other, like Mum said. But it was hard when every glance felt like a question.

New faces were a rare thing here — whispers fluttered like butterflies whenever someone unfamiliar appeared.

Ten tried to imagine what they might be thinking. *Who's the new girl? Does she have any friends? Is she weird?*

Probably the last one, if the size of her hands trembling was anything to go by.

Taking a deep breath, Ten started walking towards the main entrance, scanning for anyone who might point her in the right direction. She approached a group of students chatting by the lockers. "Excuse me," she said, voice a little too high.

They glanced over, then turned back, their smiles not quite reaching their eyes. One girl shrugged and said, "Assembly's upstairs. Left at the end of the hall." Then they went back to whispering.

Ten forced a smile that felt more like a grimace and hurried on, the walls suddenly too close and the chatter too loud.

The hallways smelled faintly of polished wood and cheap disinfectant, a strange combination that somehow made her stomach twist.

A group of girls brushed past her, giggling. At the centre was a girl with a long, sleek ponytail and a sweep of carefully applied makeup. Her sharp eyes

locked on Ten for a heartbeat—cold and hard, like she was staring at a dead mackerel left to stink in the sun.

One of the girls beside her smirked and nodded towards the leader. “Look, Lottie. The new girl. Bit of a weirdo, aren’t you?” She said as she looked Ten dead in the eyes.

Lottie said nothing, just gave Ten one last chilling glance before slipping away with her entourage, like a queen flanked by her courtiers.

Just then, a gentle voice interrupted her spiraling thoughts. “You look a little lost.”

Ten looked up into the lady’s eyes—polite, practiced, and just warm enough to be reassuring, like a cup of lukewarm tea left forgotten on the side.

“Ms Grant,” the teacher introduced herself, offering a hand. “Assembly’s just down this corridor and up the stairs on the left. Come on, I’ll walk you there.”

Ten finally exhaled, the tightness in her chest easing just a little as she fell into step.

As they moved through the hallway, Ten glanced back once at the place where Lottie had vanished. Somehow, she knew this was only the beginning.

Ten edged her way to the far side of the hall, skirting the edges of the gathered Year 10s like a shadow trying not to be seen. She counted herself lucky to find a patch of empty floor near the back — well out of whispering distance from Lottie and her clique.

Same year. That was the kicker. Lottie's dominance wasn't just in her snide comments or sharp looks. They were classmates, part of the same crowd by default. Ten was the odd one out, the square peg jammed into the wrong hole.

She folded her arms, trying to shrink even smaller as murmurs and laughter bounced around the room. The walls were lined with banners and trophies, reminders of a school proud of its traditions.

Then the door creaked open.

Heads lifted, eyes flickering briefly to the newcomer. But the girl made a careful effort to avoid any glance, her gaze fixed on the floor, her shoulders tense as if carrying a secret weight. She moved quietly, slipping in almost unnoticed, like a ghost weaving through the noise.

Ten's curiosity pricked. Who was she?

The girl eased in at the far end of the hall, avoiding every glance like she had a strict quota of social energy she dared not waste. Ten had to half-turn, twisting her neck almost awkwardly, just to catch a better look.

She looked as unruly as the school rules would allow: her tie loosened and slightly askew, shirt untucked at the back, one sock pulled up neatly while the other sagged below her shoe. Not careless — deliberate. A quiet riot wrapped in uniform fabric.

The girl didn't approach anyone, didn't speak to a single soul. She planted herself firmly at the very back, eyes scanning briefly before settling on a spot where the chatter wouldn't reach her ears. A ghost among the living.

Ten felt a strange pull — curiosity mixed with a flicker of recognition she didn't quite understand yet.

A hush spread slowly through the hall as a woman stepped onto the low stage at the front — tall, well-groomed, and flanked by two teachers who stood like polite furniture. The murmurs died one by one as the microphone crackled.

“Good morning, everyone. Welcome back.”

The voice was smooth, almost theatrical — the kind

people used when they liked the sound of their own speeches. “I’m Mrs Wells, your headteacher. For those of you who are new—” and here she made a sweeping glance across the crowd, her gaze never quite landing on Ten “—we are proud to be a school that values discipline, academic excellence, and mutual respect.”

Ten shifted on her feet.

“Last year saw record exam results,” Mrs Wells continued. “Particularly among our Year Nines— now Year Tens — and among pupils who showed exceptional dedication to the school values. I’d like to take a moment to thank those who led by example... such as Charlotte Wells, for her outstanding contribution to the School Council and her ongoing peer mentorship work.”

There was a polite smattering of applause. Ten didn’t clap. Her eyes flicked towards Lottie, who smiled faintly — a restrained sort of triumph, like she’d expected it. One of the girls beside her elbowed her gently, grinning.

Ten’s stomach twisted.

So that was *Charlotte*. Lottie. Of course. The daughter of the headteacher, publicly applauded, leader of the pack.

The girl at the back — if she even noticed — didn't react. She stood as still as ever, hands tucked into her sleeves, staring at the floor like she'd heard it all before.

Chapter Five

The Year Ten assembly was in a smaller hall, tucked behind the main building. Ten followed a loose trickle of students, pretending she knew exactly where she was going. Her blazer clung awkwardly to the back of her neck — still warm from the morning sun, or maybe just nerves. *Great. I probably smell like panic and yesterday's deodorant.*

She hesitated at the threshold. Inside, rows of plastic chairs had been set out, mostly filled already. Some students chatted easily, others slouched with end-of-summer boredom. And near the middle, of course, was *them*.

Lottie and her entourage sat like royalty — front and centre, perfectly arranged. Ten caught the flick of a glance in her direction, and the lean-in of whispering. A smile flickered across one girl's lips, not friendly. Ten looked away.

Her heart kicked up a little. *Anywhere but near them.*

She let her gaze sweep the room, searching for an escape route — and spotted someone, alone, near the back.

A girl slumped low in her chair, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle. Her uniform clung to the rules in only the vaguest possible sense — top button undone, tie loosened and skewed like it had been knotted in the dark. Hair scraped back into a lopsided twist, but clearly on purpose. Not messy, just... defiant.

Ten didn't know why, exactly, but she walked towards her.

She paused beside the seat. "Mind if I...?"

The girl didn't look up. Just gave a shrug — the universal signal for *do what you like*. No invitation, no smile. Ten stood there a beat longer than she should've, and then her courage wobbled. She slid into a chair three seats over.

Not next to her. But not near anyone else, either.

The room slowly quieted as a teacher stepped to the front. Ten barely heard the first few words. She kept sneaking glances sideways, half-hoping the girl would

say something. But she just stared ahead, arms folded like a gate.

Ten sat a little straighter and faced the front. *Well, at least I tried.*

But the pull was still there — that strange gravity. Like she'd spotted another lost planet just drifting near hers. *Probably just because the girl looked as alone as Ten felt. But maybe not just that.*

The last bell had rung, but the building still clung to heat and noise. Students drifted towards the exits in slow-moving clumps, some louder than others, the air thick with the buzz of a first day survived.

Ten moved with the flow, her rucksack bumping lightly against her hip, eyes scanning half-hopefully for a certain messy ponytail she hadn't seen since lunch. But no sign of her.

She was just about to push through the double doors when a sudden sharp sound made her pause — a bark of laughter that didn't sound fun.

Around the corner, near the lockers, Lottie Wells and her entourage had gathered like they owned the place. The knot of girls were half-circling another student, smaller, arms crossed over her stomach.

Ten slowed. Not stopped — not really. Just... not moving.

One of Lottie's girls reached forward with a theatrical flourish and tugged up the hem of the victim's skirt. A squeal, hands flailing, cheeks flaming. "Seriously? These?" the girl mocked, loud enough to echo. "Do your mum still pick your knickers for you, or is this just a tragic cry for help?"

The other girls howled, high and vicious. The girl at the centre stood frozen, too shocked or ashamed to move.

Ten's throat tightened. Her hands curled around the strap of her bag.

From the end of the corridor, a figure in a staff lanyard appeared — a teacher, though Ten didn't know the name. The woman glanced down the hallway... and then turned, disappearing through another door as if she hadn't seen anything at all.

Right, Ten thought bitterly. *Of course*.

Lottie said something else — too low for Ten to hear — and the girl pushed past, head down, fleeing. Lottie smirked and rolled her eyes theatrically, as if *she* 'd been inconvenienced.

Ten ducked her head and took the longer route around. Not running. Just... not asking for trouble.

The main doors let out a groan as she pushed through them and stepped into the late afternoon. Sun still bright, but the warmth had gone flat. The walk down the school steps felt longer than it had this morning.

She scanned the dispersing crowd again, eyes trailing past every flash of a school tie, every swinging bag.

But the girl was nowhere to be seen.

Ten adjusted her bag and started the slow walk home. The edge of her blazer collar scratched against her neck, and for the first time that day, she noticed the silence.

Chapter Six

The house was quiet when Ten stepped inside, her blazer already half-off by the time she closed the door behind her.

The hallway smelled unfamiliar— a mix of old floorboards and washing powder that hadn't quite settled into the house yet. But when Mum hugged her, Ten caught the faint scent of her deodorant, and for a moment, that small familiarity eased the tight knot in her chest.

She toed off her shoes and dropped her bag where it fell, not bothering to straighten it up. Upstairs, the bathroom door creaked open on its old hinges like it too had survived a long day.

Ten slipped into the bathroom, leaving the door slightly ajar as usual. She undressed quickly and stepped under

the warm shower, water spilling over her shoulders and washing away the grime of the day.

She scrubbed at her skin like she could wash the day off — the sweat, the nerves, the way her shirt had stuck to her spine all afternoon.

She let her forehead rest against the tiles. Closed her eyes.

Lottie Wells, she thought bitterly. The way that group had laughed — not loudly, not in the way teachers notice, but in that needle-thin way that left bruises.

And that poor girl in the corridor at the end of the day. Ten hadn't even done anything — hadn't said a word. She'd just... watched.

Her stomach twisted. She rinsed the shampoo from her hair and turned the water a little hotter. Steam curled around her like a soft shield.

And then there was the girl in the back.

Ten had gone back to the seating plan during break. The first time, she'd only checked to find her own spot and make sure Lottie wasn't anywhere near. But this time, she'd scanned for the messy ponytail. She counted the seats from the window and matched it to the drawing pinned up on the noticeboard.

Harper.

Her name was Harper.

She didn't know what she'd been hoping for.

Something about her — the way she slouched in her chair like it wasn't built for her, the loose tie, the unbothered knot of hair — it had pulled at something Ten couldn't name.

But it was probably just because Harper clearly was an outsider. Just like Ten.

Ten reached for the towel and began drying her hair, the warmth of the fabric comforting against her skin. She lifted it over her face for a moment, breathing in the soft cotton before lowering it.

The bathroom door creaked open softly.

“Hey, love. Just checking you're okay in here,” Mum said gently, stepping inside with a mug of tea.

Ten blinked, surprised but not uncomfortable. “Yeah, I'm fine.”

Mum perched on the edge of the bathtub, her eyes kind but curious. “How was it? School, I mean.”

Ten shrugged, pulling the towel around her shoulders. “It was... a lot. Different.”

Mum nodded knowingly. “Anything you want to tell me?”

Ten hesitated, then gave a small, wry smile. “There’s a girl... kind of an outsider. I found her name on the seating plan.”

“Oh?” Mum raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “That sounds promising.”

“Maybe,” Ten murmured. “Or maybe it’s just because she looks like she doesn’t quite belong. Like me.”

Mum smiled softly and brushed a damp strand of hair from Ten’s face. “We’ll figure it out together, yeah?”

Ten nodded, the flicker of comfort growing inside her. “Yeah.”

Chapter Seven

The café smelled like cinnamon and burnt coffee beans. Mum insisted the beans weren't burnt, just "robustly roasted", but Ten wasn't convinced. Still, she liked it here. There was something calming about the hum of background chatter and the occasional clatter of cups that made it easier to pretend the day hadn't happened.

Ten stirred her cappuccino slowly, watching the froth collapse in on itself.

"You'll be bouncing off the walls by midnight," Mum said, sipping her own tea with exaggerated smugness. "Should've gone for Earl Grey. Civilised. Classy. Doesn't come with a milk moustache."

Ten licked the froth off her upper lip. "You literally drink out of a 'World's Okayest Mum' mug every morning. I don't think you get to lecture me on class."

Mum's smile twitched. "That mug was a gift, thank you very much."

"From me."

"Exactly. A treasured heirloom."

They lapsed into a comfortable quiet, Ten letting the warmth of the mug seep into her fingers. The shopping bag at her feet pressed gently against her ankle, a silent reminder.

Mum didn't mention it. Didn't ask questions. She just reached down, took a long sip of tea, and glanced out the window as if the whole business of buying grown-up underwear for a girl who still preferred cartoons to romance novels had been entirely ordinary.

Ten cleared her throat. "Thanks, by the way."

Mum looked over. "For the coffee?"

"For... today."

There was a pause, soft and careful. Mum nodded once, then added lightly, "Anytime. You've got a whole year's worth of tiny disasters ahead. Happy to sponsor your coping mechanisms."

Ten snorted. "Not disasters. Just... turbulence."

“Oh, very airline chic. Shall I be the seatbelt?”

Ten smiled at that, faint but real. She looked out the window too, at the people passing by, at the world that didn't know who she was or why she suddenly felt like she needed armour under her clothes.

She didn't want to think about the girl in the hallway. Not right now. Just her coffee, the quiet hum of safety, and Mum's terrible jokes.

Dinner had been something beige and comforting — maybe pasta, or chips — but Ten hadn't really noticed. Her stomach had only remembered it existed once the adrenaline of the day had worn off. She'd eaten slowly, one elbow on the table, listening to Mum recount some ridiculous article she was editing about a haunted barn conversion in Penrith.

Now, the two of them were curled up on the sofa, Ten in her oversized T-shirt, socks mismatched, legs tangled beneath a blanket that smelled faintly of fabric softener and long-forgotten popcorn. Frozen was playing on the

telly, and Ten wasn't even pretending to be too grown-up for it. Not tonight.

She sat tucked against Mum's side, head resting on her shoulder. Mum had already sung along—badly—to “Let It Go,” complete with theatrical gestures that had earned a dramatic groan from Ten and a half-hearted pillow swat.

“I swear,” Ten mumbled, “one day you're going to get arrested for singing in public.”

Mum nudged her with her elbow. “Jealousy is a cruel mistress, darling.”

Ten smiled, not really laughing, but warm through. That soft kind of warm that settled in your chest and made your eyes heavy. She stared at the screen but wasn't really watching. Elsa was running up a mountain, barefoot and defiant, snowflakes flying. Ten's thoughts drifted to the crumpled paper bag upstairs — her new underwear, folded neatly and hidden away, as if keeping them out of sight might stop them from meaning anything.

Mum hadn't asked why. She'd just picked out a few options, held them up like it was nothing, made a joke about underwire being the devil's own invention, and

bought the lot with a knowing look Ten hadn't quite been ready to return.

Ten sighed quietly.

"You all right, love?" Mum asked, without moving.

Ten nodded. "Just tired."

Mum stroked a hand over her hair, fingers gentle. "Big day."

Ten hummed.

On screen, Anna was trying to make friends with a snowman. Ten closed her eyes for a moment and just listened to the sound of it — the music, the wind howling through cartoon fjords, the rise and fall of her mum's breathing beside her.

In here, nothing could get her. Not Lottie Wells. Not whispering girls. Not even the ache of wanting to understand someone like Harper Midvale.

For now, she was safe. And she didn't have to explain any of it.

Chapter Eight

By Friday, Ten had learned to recognise the sound of her name when it wasn't actually spoken.

A pause in a whisper. A muffled laugh from across the corridor. The way a group of girls turned slightly, almost imperceptibly, like sunflowers tracking something other than light.

It had started on Tuesday.

Before that, Lottie and her gang had seemed to busy themselves with other targets — easy ones, maybe, or simply girls who'd learned to play the game by staying quiet. Ten had spent most of Monday drifting just outside their orbit, grateful to be invisible.

But that didn't last.

On Tuesday morning, someone had rearranged the contents of her P.E. bag. Her clean socks were wet, stuffed inside the bottle pocket of her rucksack. Her gym top was crumpled and slightly sticky, as if someone had poured juice on it and let it dry.

No one said anything. Not the teacher, not the girls standing just a little too far away to be accused.

By Wednesday, it was her seat in English. Gum on the bottom. A tiny slip of paper that read *Little Miss Homeschooled* taped to the back of her chair.

And on Thursday, the whispers had started.

She'd caught just enough to know they weren't about the other girls anymore. The girls had a new subject, and apparently, it was her.

But Harper had looked at her yesterday.

Not long. Just a glance across the classroom before tutor. And then — incredibly — she'd lifted her arm, nudged her bag aside, and motioned slightly toward the chair next to her.

Ten had stared like an idiot. She hadn't even realised she was moving until she'd sat down.

There'd been a moment — the tiniest glance from Harper, a flicker of something like a smile — before she looked away again.

They hadn't spoken. But Harper hadn't moved. And no one had made Ten leave.

It had been... enough.

But now it was Friday. And she could almost see the finish line, the weekend on the horizon.

Ten sat on the low wall outside the Year Ten building, blazer unbuttoned, schoolbag at her feet, and her knees drawn up like armour. The sky was that watery grey that couldn't quite decide between drizzle or just looking miserable. The kind of morning that felt like it might apologise to you, then trip you in the corridor anyway.

Her eyes scanned the yard automatically, searching for one face — and flinching when she found another. Lottie was already here, lounging by the doors with her pack around her like perfume: cloying, inescapable. She

laughed too loudly, too easily, flipping her ponytail over one shoulder as if the entire world existed solely to adore or fear her.

And it did, mostly.

Lottie had turned her full attention on Ten by Wednesday, and by Thursday, she'd turned her cruelty into a game. Quick jabs in the corridor, murmurs just loud enough to carry. Comments about Ten's hair. Her voice. Her clothes. Always phrased so she couldn't quite prove it. Always followed by the perfect little smirk.

Ten had learned to keep her head down, her mouth shut. Keep walking. Pretend it didn't stick. Pretend she wasn't already scraping it off like chewing gum from her brain.

But today—today something shifted.

“Hey.”

The voice came from her left — quiet, but steady. Like it had already decided it belonged and didn't need to prove it.

Ten turned.

Harper stood a few feet away, half her hair falling out of its knot, a biro tucked behind her ear. Her blazer hung off one shoulder like it had given up trying. She glanced at Ten, then at the ground, then back again.

“You can sit by me again,” she said, like it wasn’t a big deal. Like she wasn’t throwing a life ring into a sea Ten hadn’t even realised she was drowning in.

Ten blinked. “Yeah. Thanks.”

And just like that, the day felt... survivable.

By the time they settled into third period, it had almost started to feel normal — her seat next to Harper, the quiet shuffle of books and pencil cases, the low murmur of the classroom finding its rhythm. Neither of them said much. They didn’t need to.

The classroom was heavy with the thrum of concentration. Mr Levin was explaining something about algebra that had gone far enough over Ten’s head to be circling the stratosphere. She squinted at the board, pen poised uselessly over her notebook.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed Harper hunched over her own book, expression unreadable as always. The rest of the class seemed half-asleep, the air already warm with the scent of pencil shavings and someone’s too-strong deodorant.

Then it happened.

Levin turned, tripped over his own satchel strap, and caught himself on the desk with an awkward flail that sent a pen flying across the room. It landed with a clatter, skidding right past Ten's foot.

A beat of silence. Then someone coughed in a way that was absolutely not a cough.

Ten's lips twitched.

She glanced sideways.

Harper's head was still tilted down, but her mouth had curved into a reluctant smile.

Ten smiled too.

Harper looked up — just briefly — and their eyes met. For a second, the moment stretched, and neither of them looked away. Just two crooked little smiles, hesitant but real.

Then Harper dipped her gaze again, as if the weight of it was too much to hold.

But the smile lingered.

And so did Ten's.

The corridor curved just before the stairwell, quiet in that in-between lull between classes. Ten kept her pace steady, eyes down, trying to will herself invisible.

But it wasn't enough.

“Oi, look at this.”

The voice was sharp, smug. One of Lottie's girls — the one with the long black braid and the permanent sneer — had peeled away from the wall like she'd been waiting for a cue. She reached out, flicking the edge of Ten's rucksack with two fingers like it was something dirty.

A moment later: “What are you, nine? Gay?”

She didn't even wait for an answer. Her eyes were on the others now.

The rainbow sticker — small, frayed at the corner — caught the light as it shifted. Ten hadn't thought about it since sticking it on weeks ago. It was just... hers. Quietly hers. Now it was something else. Now it was a target.

Laughter bubbled up behind the braid girl's words — not loud, not cruel in itself, but sharp enough to slice through the thin layer of courage Ten had left. She didn't know if they were laughing at her or just following the rhythm of the group. Maybe they didn't know either.

Lottie stood a few feet back, arms crossed, her face cool and unreadable — queen of nothing and everything. She didn't speak. She didn't need to. A flick of her gaze, the hint of a smirk curling at one corner of her mouth — a clear approval of the other girl's actions.

Ten felt it like a crack of thunder beneath the surface.

The rest of them hovered nearby — close enough to hear, close enough to laugh. None of them said a word. But they stayed. And that was enough.

Their silence wasn't neutral. It was fuel. A group like that didn't need all voices raised — just enough of them lowered.

Ten felt the heat rise to her face, shame prickling at her ears. She gripped the strap of her bag tighter and started walking, even though her knees wanted to buckle.

Don't cry. Just don't cry.

She walked slowly, with dignity but her heart was pounding in her chest and she had an urge to turn around to make sure the girls weren't following her, hoping for escape — but then she saw someone almost hiding against the wall.

Harper.

She stood half-hidden beside the lockers, shoulders rigid, her arms folded across her chest. Her eyes met Ten's for a second — unreadable, distant, but alert.

Ten's breath caught. For a heartbeat, something like hope stirred.

But Harper didn't move. Didn't speak.

She didn't walk away either. Just stood there — still, uncertain — like she was deciding something and didn't have time to decide.

Maybe she hadn't heard the start of it. Maybe stepping in would've made it worse. Maybe she just couldn't.

Or maybe she could, and didn't.

Ten didn't know. That made it worse somehow.

The sting of humiliation mixed with something colder — disappointment that felt too much like betrayal. She

hadn't even known she'd been hoping for Harper until that hope went unanswered.

Still, she walked on. Not faster. Not slower. Just forward, like her legs belonged to someone braver.

Chapter Nine

Ten was halfway into her knickers when she realised she'd picked the wrong ones.

The new ones — the ones she'd chosen without explaining why. Black with lace edges and a lack of details like bows and prints. Grown-up. Or trying to be.

She hesitated, then tugged them off and reached into the drawer for a different pair.

Cotton. Soft. Blue with a tiny faded owl on the hip and an elastic so tired it that didn't dig in unless she really annoyed it.

Better.

Downstairs, Mum was already in the kitchen, barefoot and sleepy-eyed, her hair scooped into a loose bun that looked like it had taken two seconds and no mirror. Ten

padded in, rubbing at one eye, and dropped into a chair at the table.

"You're up early for a Saturday," Mum said, setting down a steaming mug of tea. "That's suspicious."

Ten shrugged. "Wasn't really sleeping."

Mum gave her a long look, but didn't push. Just slid a plate of toast her way and sat opposite with her tea, wrapping both hands around the mug like she needed it to keep her upright.

Ten raised an eyebrow. "Not burnt to a crisp this morning. Progress."

Mum narrowed her eyes but didn't argue. "That's gratitude, that is."

"So," she continued eventually, with that gentle kind of brightness she always used when she knew something was fragile. "First week done. Survived?"

Ten gnawed at the corner of her toast, crumbs spilling as she answered. "Mostly."

"Mostly is still a pass in my book."

A pause. Then:

"Want to tell me about it?"

She didn't answer straight away when Mum asked about school. She broke off another bit of crust instead, pressing it flat under her thumb. She wanted to say something clever. Or funny. Or at least not pathetic. But all that came out was, "I don't think they like me."

Mum's expression softened. "Who?"

"The girls at school. The ones in my form. And others too. I don't know. It's like... I'm not the right kind of new girl."

Mum reached across the table and touched Ten's hand. "Oh, sweetheart."

Ten pulled her hand back gently. Not unkindly. Just... not ready.

"I'm not saying it's awful," she said quickly. "It's just weird. Like there are rules I haven't been told."

"Sometimes there are," Mum said quietly. "Sometimes they're unfair and stupid and designed to keep people out."

Ten nodded, eyes still on her toast.

"But you'll find your people," Mum said. "Even if it takes time. The weird ones. The kind ones. The ones who know how to see you."

"I don't need a whole group," Ten said. "Just one person who gets it."

"That's usually how it starts," Mum said. She smiled. "You've always been good at finding the quiet ones."

Ten smiled faintly back, grateful — but also a little ashamed of how much she wanted to believe that.

"So," Mum went on, pushing back her chair, "what's the plan today? I've got an article due by four, so I'll be locked to my laptop. But if you're going out, I can transfer you some money."

Ten shook her head. "I'm just going to walk. Maybe sketch somewhere. The café from Monday was nice."

Mum studied her. "You'll be all right?"

"Yeah. I think so."

She didn't say it, but she wanted the world to feel big again.

Big enough for something to shift.

Ten slung her rucksack over one shoulder, the straps digging lightly into her skin. The morning air was crisp, the kind that made her cheeks feel like they might tingle all day. She liked the quiet of the streets this early on a Saturday — not too many people, not too much noise.

Her feet led her without much thought, past rows of shuttered shops and the delicious smell of fresh bread wafting from a bakery. The café from Monday wasn't far now, but something caught her eye — a patch of green nestled between the brick buildings, dotted with splashes of colour from flowerbeds.

Ten slipped through the rusty gate into the park and paused, letting the calm wrap around her like a soft blanket. The city noise faded behind her, muffled by the tall trees whose bare branches stretched skyward, thin and fragile against the pale morning light.

She followed the winding path slowly, her footsteps soft on the gravel. Here and there, clusters of wildflowers caught her eye—delicate blues and yellows peeking from between the tangled grass. The air smelled faintly of damp earth and something green and fresh she couldn't name.

Her rucksack bounced gently against her side as she walked, the familiar weight comforting. Ten had been looking for something to draw—a shape, a colour, a

quiet detail she could hold onto. But her gaze kept drifting away from the world in front of her.

She thought about school, the faces she didn't quite understand, the silence that seemed to follow her like a shadow. The whispered names, the cold looks, the feeling of being watched but never seen.

She pushed the thoughts away, focusing instead on the slow stretch of time ahead. It was Saturday. She had the whole weekend to breathe, to not worry about who liked her or who didn't.

She let herself notice the small things—the way a breeze made the leaves shiver, the soft croak of frogs in the pond nearby, the distant laughter of children playing somewhere beyond the trees.

The path curved gently to the left and opened out to a small clearing with a wooden bench beside the water's edge. Sunlight spilled across the slats, warming the rough wood.

And there, hunched over a sketchbook, was Harper.

Ten spotted Harper before she heard her—the way she leaned back against the low stone wall by the pond, her hair hanging loose and tumbling past her shoulders, catching the soft morning light. The park was quiet and a gentle breeze stirred the leaves, sending dappled sunlight dancing on the water’s surface. The air smelled faintly of damp earth and fresh grass, punctuated by distant birdsong and the occasional rustle of squirrels in the underbrush.

Harper’s ripped, baggy jeans pooled around a pair of old Chucks, once white but now scribbled over with doodles and scrawled designs in ink and pencil—like she wore her own story right on her shoes. It was a stark contrast to Ten’s neater appearance: loose runner’s shorts and a soft, slightly oversized sweatshirt with *YALE* printed across the chest, the fabric faded and comforting.

But Ten barely registered it. Harper was Harper.

She stepped closer, feeling the familiar weight of nervous hope settle in her chest. Harper’s eyes flicked up, sharp and cautious, scanning Ten’s face as if questioning whether it was safe to let down her guard. Then, after a beat, Harper gave a small, almost shy nod.

“Hey,” Ten said quietly, easing onto the bench a respectful distance away. Her voice was calm, steady—there was no need to hide here.

“Hey,” Harper replied, her voice low and careful.

For a while, silence stretched between them, filled only by the subtle sounds of the park—the gentle lap of water against the pond’s edge, the rustling leaves overhead, the distant hum of the town waking up.

Ten’s eyes wandered to Harper’s sketchbook, propped open on her lap, edges worn. “What’re you drawing?” she asked softly.

Harper’s fingers twitched around the edge of the book. “Just... stuff,” she said, almost dismissively.

Ten smiled gently. “Can I see?”

Harper hesitated, then shifted the sketchbook so Ten could glimpse the pages—rough sketches of branches, shadows, the curve of the pond’s edge. Nothing polished, but full of quiet life.

“You’re really good,” Ten said, honest and kind.

Harper’s lips twitched into a fleeting smile, almost embarrassed. “Thanks. I’m not sure what I’m doing half the time.”

“Neither am I,” Ten admitted. “But it’s nice, trying.”

They shared a small laugh—soft and uncertain.

Ten fiddled with the hem of her sweatshirt. “I didn’t expect to see you here,” she said. “Not outside school.”

Harper shrugged, her eyes tracing a line across the pond. “Sometimes it’s easier to be myself when there’s no one watching.”

“I get that,” Ten said quietly.

Another pause, then Harper glanced sideways. “You coming to the café later?”

“Yeah,” Ten replied, “if you want.”

Harper’s eyes met hers, hesitant but something warmer flickering there. “Yeah. I want.”

They sat a little closer, the quiet space between them shrinking, safe for now.

The pond rippled softly as a breeze skimmed across its surface, carrying with it the faint scent of damp earth and wildflowers. The world outside the park’s edges seemed distant, muted. For the first time that week, Ten felt a fragile thread of calm knot gently inside her chest.

Harper shifted on the bench, the rough denim of her jeans creaking slightly. Her fingers still toyed with the edge of her sketchbook, betraying the usual hard edges she wore like armor.

“So,” Ten ventured carefully, “what do you usually do on weekends? I ... I guess I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Harper’s gaze flicked upward, sharp but thoughtful. “Sometimes I just need to get away. Away from the noise, the looks.” She paused. “This place feels quiet enough.”

Ten nodded. “Yeah. It’s funny how something as simple as a park can feel like a sanctuary.”

Harper’s eyes met hers, steady now, the brief flicker of vulnerability almost hidden beneath her usual reserve. “You don’t have to pretend here,” she said softly.

Ten smiled, a little shyly. “Neither do you.”

For a moment, the silence stretched between them—comfortable, honest.

Ten glanced down at her own bag, running a hand over the smooth strap. “I brought my sketchbook, but I’m not really sure what to draw today.”

Harper shifted, pulling her own sketchbook closer, as if to offer a quiet challenge. “Try the pond,” she suggested. “There’s something about the way the light moves on the water.”

Ten’s smile widened. “Okay, I’ll give it a shot.”

Harper watched her for a moment, then, more to herself than to Ten, murmured, “You’re not like the others, you know.”

Ten’s heart skipped. “I hope not.”

Harper shrugged, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “You’re quieter. More... real.”

Ten felt warmth bloom in her chest. “Maybe that’s because I don’t want to waste time pretending.”

“Good,” Harper said, almost fiercely. “Because I don’t do fake.”

Ten’s smile deepened, a spark of connection igniting. “Neither do I.”

The morning sun climbed higher to its zenith, casting long shadows across the grass, as two unlikely friends settled into the stillness—each quietly grateful for the other’s presence.

The midday sun filtered through the canopy of leaves above, dappling the ground in shifting patches of gold and green. Ten sat cross-legged on the grass, her sketchbook balanced on her knee, pencil moving slowly across the page as she tried to capture the shimmering pond. Harper was nearby, hunched over her own book, lines and shadows taking shape beneath her fingers.

The silence between them was easy, filled with the quiet scratch of pencil on paper and the soft rustle of leaves.

Then, faint voices drifted through the trees — careless, loud, and growing closer.

Harper's gaze snapped up, sharp and wary.

"Shortcut," she muttered, barely above a whisper. "They always take this path."

Ten looked up just in time to see a group of girls cutting through the park, their chatter light but edged with the usual sharpness. They were laughing, pushing and jostling each other, the kind of noise that scraped against the peaceful afternoon like nails on a chalkboard.

Harper's eyes narrowed. "That's the Pretty Pack," she said quietly, almost grimly. "Lottie's lot."

Ten's heart thudded, but the girls didn't seem to notice them at all.

"They don't see us," Ten whispered.

"Doesn't mean they won't," Harper said. "Keep your head down."

Chapter Ten

The voices faded as the group took the shortcut and disappeared behind the trees. Harper let out a soft breath, her fingers still trembling slightly from where she'd gripped her sketchbook.

Ten shifted her bag higher on her shoulder. "Shall we head to Willow & Brew? I could do with something cold."

Harper nodded, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Yeah. I know the safest way." She looked in the direction the group of girls went.

They walked side by side along the sun-dappled path, the warm afternoon light slipping through leaves and scattering golden patches on the cracked pavement. The air was soft, filled with the scent of fresh grass and warm earth under the afternoon sun. Somewhere

nearby, a sparrow sang, bright and clear, threading through the quiet.

Ten found herself stealing glances at Harper. Her hair was tangled and wild, falling loose around her face like she didn't care to tame it, and her worn and ripped jeans as well as her scribbled-on chucks gave her a raw, effortless edge. There was something about her—something calm yet fierce—that made Ten's chest tighten just a little. But she kept it to herself, turning her gaze away when Harper wasn't looking.

The café appeared ahead, its pale blue-green door framed by curling ivy that caught the light like tiny jewels. Inside, sun streamed through tall windows, making the dust motes swirl lazily above the worn wooden tables. The soft murmur of conversations, the clinking of cups, and the faint hiss of the espresso machine wrapped around them like a quiet comfort.

They settled at a small table near the back, where the sunlight pooled in warm patches. Ten slid off her backpack and finally exhaled, the tension in her shoulders easing.

Harper ordered two iced teas, her voice low and steady, and Ten watched the way her fingers curled around the menu, steady and sure, even if the rest of her seemed guarded.

As Harper passed her the glass, condensation cool against Ten's fingertips, she caught herself wondering how someone so guarded could feel so alive—like a secret wildness kept just beneath the surface.

They sat side by side, the quiet between them gentle but electric, a fragile moment carved out of a messy world.

Ten traced the rim of her glass with a fingertip, the ice clinking softly inside. The sun spilling its golden light across the table, making Harper's loose hair catch it like threads of copper. Ten's eyes flicked up but she quickly looked away, unsure if she wanted Harper to notice.

"So," Ten said quietly, "you come here often?" She swore at herself for not being able to come up with something better.

Harper shrugged, her gaze fixed somewhere beyond the window. "Sometimes. It's quieter than school." Her voice was low, almost guarded.

Ten nodded. "Yeah. I like it here too. Feels... normal."

There was a pause, filled only by the gentle clatter of cups and distant murmurs from other tables. Ten felt the weight of the silence, but it didn't feel uncomfortable—more like a shared understanding.

Harper finally glanced at her, eyes unreadable. “What do you draw?”

“Whatever catches my eye,” Ten said with a small smile. “Sometimes landscape, sometimes people. It’s nothing fancy.”

Harper tilted her head, a flicker of interest crossing her face. “Mind if I see?”

Ten hesitated a moment, then pulled her sketchbook from her bag, flipping it open. Harper leaned in slightly, enough for Ten to catch the scent of her shampoo while she scanned the loose, tentative lines. “Not bad.”

“Thanks,” Ten said softly, a little pride sneaking in.

Harper’s lips twitched, almost a smile. “You’re better than you think.”

Ten looked up, catching that brief softness before Harper looked away again. The moment passed, but something shifted—small, but real.

The last of the ice had melted in their drinks. The sun had shifted, casting longer shadows across the table, and the quiet clatter of cutlery from behind the counter had taken on a slower, more winding rhythm.

Harper glanced at her watch — a battered digital one with a pink strap that didn't match anything else she wore. "I should probably go soon," she said, not quite meeting Ten's eyes.

Ten nodded, trying not to let her disappointment show. "Somewhere important?"

Harper shrugged, sliding her drink aside. "Just something I said I'd do." She started pulling on her bag. "I like to keep promises."

Ten watched her, then smiled faintly. "I'm glad you stayed this long."

Harper looked up then, something unreadable flickering behind her eyes. "Me too."

For a second, neither of them moved. The café around them carried on — a spoon clinking against ceramic, a laugh from the far table — but their little corner felt still.

As Harper stood, Ten rose too. Her chest felt lighter than it had in days — since before Monday, even. Like someone had loosened a knot she didn't know was there.

"I'll see you around?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

Harper's mouth curved into a lopsided smile.
"Probably."

And with that, she pushed the door open and slipped into the sunlight. Ten watched her go, a soft breeze drifting in from the street.

She sat back down, alone again — but not lonely.

Not anymore.

Chapter Eleven

The front door gave its usual creaky sigh as Ten stepped inside, letting the cooler air of the hallway wrap around her. She dropped her keys into the dish by the door and shrugged off her bag, her fingers brushing the softened fabric of her sketchbook inside.

“Mum?” she called, toeing off her shoes.

“In the kitchen!” came the reply — cheerful and not frazzled, which was already a good sign.

Ten padded through, catching the scent of something warm and vaguely lemony. Mum was at the counter with her sleeves rolled up, pouring hot water over two teabags like it was the most luxurious thing she’d done all week.

“Hey you,” Mum said, glancing over her shoulder. “Good timing. I just hit send on the article, and I haven’t even screamed into a cushion once today.”

“Proud of you,” Ten said, and meant it. She slid into one of the kitchen chairs, the creak of wood under her legs somehow grounding.

Mum handed her a mug and sat opposite. “Did you find somewhere nice to draw?”

Ten nodded, cupping the tea between her hands. “The park was lovely. Quiet. I didn’t do much drawing in the end, but...” She trailed off, hesitating.

“But?” Mum prompted gently.

“I ran into someone. From school. Harper.”

Mum blinked. “The girl you sit next to?”

“That’s the one.” Ten let the warmth of the mug settle into her palms. “We talked. She sketches too! So we hung out and sketched a bit. Then went for a drink.”

Mum’s eyebrows lifted, just a little. “That’s... that’s lovely, sweetheart.”

Ten gave a small nod, a smile tugging at her mouth. “Yeah. It was.”

Mum took a slow sip of her tea, then leaned back in her chair. “So,” she said, eyeing Ten over the rim of her mug, “is Harper nice?”

Ten shrugged, but it wasn’t the closed kind. More like she was still trying to figure out the answer. “She’s... quiet. Not in a scared way. Just sort of... like she’s used to being on her own. But she’s funny. In this really dry, blink-and-you-miss-it kind of way.”

Mum smiled. “Sounds like your kind of person.”

“Yeah.” Ten looked down at her tea. “Maybe.”

The kitchen settled into a comfortable hush, the kind only weekend evenings seemed to carry. Outside, the light had turned honey-gold, slanting through the back window and catching in the dust motes.

Mum tilted her head slightly. “Did you sketch her?”

Ten gave a soft snort. “What? No. That’d be weird.”

“Not if she didn’t notice.”

“She’d notice.”

Mum raised both eyebrows in mock-defeat. “Fair enough. Did you draw anything at all?”

Ten hesitated, then got up and fetched her sketchbook from the hallway. She flipped to a page, sliding it across the table with a kind of shy pride.

Mum leaned in. “Oh, Ten... that’s beautiful.”

It was a loose sketch of the pond. Nothing fancy, nothing polished — just the curve of the water’s edge, some trees in the background, the silhouette of a figure on the bench with knees drawn up, head tipped to one side.

“She didn’t notice that one,” Ten said, and both of them smiled.

“You know,” Mum said after a moment, “when I was your age, I met someone too. Just one person, really. I don’t remember most of the others, but I remember her. Because I could be weird with her. I didn’t have to explain everything.”

Ten looked up. “Did it help?”

Mum nodded. “It saved me, I think.”

Something quiet and tender flickered in Ten’s chest. She didn’t say anything — didn’t have to.

A beat later, Mum stood and stretched. “Right. I’m declaring this a dinner-free evening. Toasties and crisps, or I’ll order pizza.”

Ten grinned. “You mean I get to eat carbs and not talk about vitamins? Be still my heart.”

Mum laughed, already reaching for the phone. “Enjoy it while it lasts.”

Later, with the pizza box cooling on the counter and two mugs of hot chocolate steaming between them, Mum crouched beside a half-unpacked box near the bookcase.

“I’m sure I shoved it in here somewhere,” she murmured, pushing aside a folded jumper and an unopened pack of batteries.

Ten, curled up at the kitchen table, blinked at her. “What *exactly* are you looking for?”

“The fox puzzle,” Mum said, victorious, pulling out a faded cardboard box with a torn corner. “You know. Snow. Trees. Missing pieces. Bit tragic.”

“You brought *that*?” Ten asked, mock horror creeping into her voice.

“It’s tradition,” Mum said firmly, dropping it on the table. “This place needs a few.”

Ten rolled her eyes but slid her chair closer.

They tipped the pieces onto the table — edges mingled with middles, some turned upside down, others clearly from another puzzle entirely.

“This is even worse than I remembered,” Ten muttered, poking at a bit of what might have once been a snowflake.

“Character-building,” Mum said serenely, already fitting two sky pieces together. “Besides, your brain’s had a long week. It deserves something impossible but satisfying.”

Ten didn’t argue. She sifted through the jumble, fingers finding the corner pieces first.

The house was quiet in that newly-moved-in way — only half-familiar, still settling around them. The fridge

hummed like it was thinking too hard. The wind played at the windows. And the two of them sat, shoulder to shoulder at the kitchen table, the only light a warm overhead glow that softened everything.

Mum reached for her mug. “Harper seems like someone you might trust.”

Ten paused. “You’ve never even met her.”

“I don’t need to. You came home lighter. That’s enough for me.”

Ten didn’t answer straight away. She focused instead on pressing two pieces together — wrong shape, wrong shade.

“She’s been through stuff,” she said eventually, quietly.

Mum nodded, the way she always did when she knew not to ask more.

“You don’t have to carry that for her,” she said gently. “Just be kind.”

“I want to be,” Ten said, so softly it was almost to herself.

And that was enough.

They worked in quiet rhythm after that, the world outside dimming into blue. Somewhere between the fox's hind legs and the corner of a tree trunk, Ten realised she felt... steadier. Not quite settled. But closer. Like this house — like this town, this *day* — might one day be home.

Chapter Twelve

Monday came too quickly.

The school gates loomed just as grey as they had a week ago, the crowd no less chaotic. Ten stepped off the bus with her bag hugged close, dodging a boy on a scooter and a group of girls who spilled off the pavement like they owned it. She kept her head down and moved fast, weaving through the current of blazers and bags and voices raised too loud.

It was exactly a week since the first assembly. Since she'd walked through these doors with fresh uniform creases and the impossible hope that someone — anyone — might smile first.

That hope had thinned out a bit now. Not gone completely, but quieter. Like the kind of hope you kept in your pocket, folded small enough to hide.

She pressed through the corridor, trying not to make eye contact with anyone lingering near the lockers. Lottie's Lot had a habit of sprawling across the central hallway like a roadblock — not always saying anything, but always watching. Measuring.

Ten had learned quickly that silence could be just as sharp as words.

She adjusted her grip on her bag and slipped around the edge of the crowd. The rainbow sticker gone now. Harper had called them something — *the Pretty Pack*, half-mocking, half-weary. It fit. Glossy ponytails. The latest trainers. Blazers worn with just enough casualness to show they didn't need the rules. And that way they looked through you — like you were background noise unless you gave them a reason to bite.

She spotted two of them up ahead, one of them definitely Emily — the one who'd mocked her sticker. Ten's breath caught, but she kept moving, head ducked slightly, like that might make her invisible.

It didn't.

Emily glanced over but didn't say anything. Just nudged the girl beside her and tilted her chin, a whisper sparking a brief smirk between them. Not loud enough

to catch, but Ten felt it anyway — the kind of attention that settled on your back and followed you down the corridor.

She didn't run. She didn't cry. She just walked. One foot in front of the other, until the stairwell offered a turn, a breath, a moment to be small and unseen.

One week down. One hundred more to go.

Ten turned the corner by the stairwell and nearly walked straight into someone.

"Sorry—" she started, already stepping back, but then she saw who it was.

Harper.

Hair a bit neater than Saturday, shoved behind her ears instead of loose. School blazer slung over one shoulder like she hadn't bothered with it until the last minute. Regulation shoes, plain and scuffed, nothing like the ones she wore in the park.

She looked up, and for a second their eyes met.

"Hi," Ten said, soft. Not really a whisper, but shaped like one.

Harper's expression didn't change much — not in any obvious way — but something in her jaw loosened. She gave a little nod, almost a smile, and said, "Hey."

Then she glanced past Ten, towards the stream of students still moving up the corridor, and stepped sideways to let someone through.

Ten wanted to say more. Ask if she'd finished her sketch. Or thank her — just for being there on Saturday. But Harper was already shifting back into the quiet, not-quite-there version of herself. Walls up. Edges tucked in. Like school required a different version, one with fewer soft bits showing.

Ten nodded once and kept moving. Not hurt. Not really.

Just reminded that school was a place where kindness had to wear armour.

Ten watched Harper drift ahead, swallowed by the tide of students making their way towards form rooms and lockers and the endless blur of Monday lessons.

She adjusted her bag on her shoulder, still feeling the echo of that small smile, and stepped into the current herself.

The corridors buzzed around her, full of rustling coats and low chatter and the metallic click of lockers. Just noise. Just school.

But somewhere in the noise, a shape was starting to form. A glimmer of something like belonging — still blurry at the edges, still far off — but real enough to chase.

Chapter Thirteen

The sun had slipped behind a pale drift of clouds, softening the light across the cracked tarmac of the schoolyard. The usual breaktime noise — laughter, shouting, that one boy always bouncing a ball against a wall — drifted past Ten like background static.

She stood at the edge of the yard near the bike sheds, her rucksack at her feet, sketchpad tucked under her arm. Harper leaned beside her, quiet as usual, chewing the end of a pen and not quite meeting her eye. It wasn't like Saturday. But it wasn't nothing, either.

Ten was still holding onto the gentleness of the weekend — the park, the café, the easy silences. She didn't want to let it go. She was starting to think maybe things could actually be... different.

That's when she heard the giggle.

Sharp. Mean. Aimed.

She didn't have to turn to know it wasn't for anyone else.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Harper shift. Not tense, not flinch — but change. Her shoulders tucked slightly inward. Her gaze lowered.

A group of girls had stopped a few metres away. Emily at the front, all glossy lips and calculated messiness. Lottie wasn't there, but the look on Emily's face said she'd been sent. Or was at least performing for imagined approval.

“Well, well,” Emily drawled, folding her arms. “Didn't know this was the new hangout for the misfit lovebirds.”

A ripple of laughter from behind her. Not loud. Just enough.

Ten froze.

Harper didn't move.

Ten tried to smile, like maybe it wasn't serious. Like maybe they could ignore it.

Emily took a step closer.

“Didn’t take you long, huh? First week and already picking your girlfriend.” She looked at Harper with mock pity. “Although... not sure if violent psycho really counts as a catch.”

More laughter. One of the other girls — the taller one with the oversized earrings — smirked and nodded at Ten’s bag.

“She removed the gay sticker. Not even a proud fag. Just a fag.”

That got a bigger laugh.

Ten’s mouth went dry.

It wasn’t the words. It was the way they said them. Like being proud was a joke. Like being gay was something shameful you tried to hide and they still saw anyway.

She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Emily leaned in slightly, her voice syrupy. “Bet you’re real proud now, yeah? Snagged yourself the school’s very own mental case.”

Harper straightened. Not all the way, just enough that Ten felt it.

Emily kept going. “Isn’t this the part where you shove someone, Harper? Go on, make it a full set — gay and violent. You’re basically an after-school special.”

Ten’s heart was thudding. Her fingers curled around the edge of her sketchpad.

Still, Harper said nothing.

Not a word. Not a movement. Just... distance.

The worst part wasn’t the insults.

It was the waiting.

The long, dragging pause where Ten thought maybe Harper would say something. Step forward. Tell them to stop.

She didn’t.

And then, just like that, Emily and the rest peeled away, already bored of the game. They walked off laughing, tossing hair, bumping shoulders, and acting like nothing had happened at all.

Silence settled like ash.

Ten stared at the ground. Her sketchpad. Anything but Harper.

Her voice, when it came, barely made it out.

“You didn’t say anything.”

Harper shifted beside her. “Wouldn’t have mattered.”

Ten nodded slowly.

It wasn’t agreement.

Just something to do with her head.

She didn’t know whether she wanted to cry or scream or vanish. She only knew that something had cracked a little. Something about safety. About being seen.

Harper glanced at her, then away. “Are you okay?”

“No,” Ten said. “But I will be.”

She picked up her bag, and this time, didn’t wait for Harper to follow.

Chapter Fourteen

Ten sat cross-legged on a low brick wall beside the tennis courts, her backpack resting between her feet. The sky had clouded over since break, the light turned silvery, like everything had been smudged with chalk. Laughter floated across the field from some younger year group doing laps, but none of it seemed near enough to matter.

She pulled her phone from her pocket and opened the message thread with Mum.

Something happened at school.
It was stupid.

They were awful. I didn't know
what to say.

Am I weird for freezing?

She stared at it for a long time. Her thumb hovered. Then she sighed and backspaced until the screen was empty again.

The cursor blinked. Like it was waiting.

She locked the phone and dropped it back in her lap.

A quiet sound — not footsteps exactly, more like presence — stirred the edge of her awareness. She turned just as Harper stepped around the corner of the building, her blazer half off one shoulder and her hair a mess.

Ten blinked.

“Hey,” she said, softly.

Harper nodded. “Hey.”

She didn’t sit straight away. Just hovered like she wasn’t sure if she was meant to be there. Then, as if deciding to risk it, she slid down onto the wall beside Ten, one foot still on the ground. Close but not touching.

They sat like that for a moment, not talking. The air between them tentative. Muffled. Still a bit bruised.

Then Harper cleared her throat.

“So,” she said. “That was... something.”

Ten gave a hollow laugh. “You could say that.”

She picked at a thread on the hem of her sleeve. “They really hate me.”

“They don’t even know you.”

“That doesn’t seem to matter.”

Harper didn’t answer right away. Then:

“Lottie doesn’t need reasons. She just needs someone to aim at. And Emily—she’s the sort that gets a kick out of hitting whatever she’s told.”

Ten nodded.

A pause. Then she glanced over. “You okay?”

Harper tilted her head, surprised. “You’re the one they went after.”

“You too. That... that thing they said—about you—”

Harper looked down, her fringe falling forward.

“Yeah.”

She didn’t elaborate. Just scrubbed a hand over her face and let it fall.

Ten didn’t push. She just sat beside her, holding the silence open like a space Harper could step into if she wanted.

After a long pause, Harper said, “I don’t like when people look at me like that. Like I’m some dangerous thing.”

“You’re not.”

Harper gave a faint, crooked smile. “Not to you.”

They sat there a while longer, the afternoon loosening around them.

Somewhere behind the hedge, a pigeon fluttered noisily from a tree. The wind picked up, cool against their sleeves.

Eventually, Harper pulled her knees up and rested her chin on them.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “For not saying anything. When it happened.”

“You were there.” Ten nudged a stone with the toe of her shoe. “That meant more than you think.”

Chapter Fifteen

The narrow corridor was the kind of place most teachers avoided—a dim, slightly worn shortcut that students took to slip between classes unnoticed. Faded lockers lined the walls, their chipped paint and scratched surfaces telling stories of years gone by. Flickering fluorescent lights buzzed faintly overhead, casting long, uneven shadows that pooled in the corners. It was quiet here, almost forgotten—a perfect place to move unseen, until today.

Ten and Harper walked with purpose, only stopping in their tracks when they saw it. They turned to face the wall, standing shoulder to shoulder as they took in the abomination. Voices carried from around the corner.

Ms Dawes led the way, and behind her, Lottie followed, moving with a confidence that was almost casual—but

there was something in the way she held herself, a subtle smirk playing at the edge of her lips.

Ahead of them, Ten and Harper standing in the hallway, the wall bore a fresh scar on its pale paint.

Bright, crude letters sprawled across it, mocking and harsh:

IS IT GAY IN HERE OR IS IT JUST US?

Beneath, two roughly drawn vulvas, jagged lines turning the shapes ugly and hateful rather than playful.

Harper's eyes flicked up sharply, jaw tightening as if the insult had landed directly on her skin. Ten's breath caught, her heart suddenly heavy, like she'd swallowed a stone.

Ms Dawes took in the vandalism, not entirely sure how to react.

Lottie's gaze didn't waver from the graffiti. "Oh wow," she said, mocking surprise and shock, her voice dripping with fake innocence. "What a way to impose your sick beliefs on innocent students."

Her eyes flicked coldly to Ten and Harper. “I bet that girl we just saw running past us was in on it too. Pretty sure she had a spray can in her hand, actually.”

Ten’s heart thundered in her chest. She could hardly believe her own ears.

Harper clenched her fingers tightly around her bag strap, voice low—almost a growl, but controlled. “We didn’t do this.”

Lottie lifted her chin, daring them to say more.

Ms Dawes’ eyes shifted between the graffiti and the girls. “You understand the seriousness of this, don’t you? Defacing school property is not a minor offence.”

“But we weren’t—” Ten began, voice shaky.

Ms Dawes held up a hand, cutting her off. “That will be for the headteacher to decide.”

Lottie smiled then—a small, cruel curve that didn’t reach her eyes. “It’s disturbing to think some students might feel so... angry, so entitled. It’s not fair to the rest of us.”

Heat rushed to Ten’s cheeks—half embarrassment, half growing fury. The whole scene felt like a nightmare—trapped in glass, visible but powerless.

Harper's eyes darted to Lottie, a flicker of hatred hidden beneath her calm exterior.

Ms Dawes glanced back at the wall. "I'm afraid this will need to be dealt with before our meeting, Lottie."

Lottie gave a small nod, stepping back as if she bore no responsibility. "Of course, Ms Dawes. I certainly appreciate the dire seriousness of this situation. I can always wait."

"We'll be taking this very seriously," Ms Dawes said, voice tight. "There will be detention for those responsible, possibly further disciplinary action."

Ten looked at Harper, who kept her gaze fixed on the graffiti, as if willing it to disappear.

The corridor suddenly felt colder. The paint on the wall mocked them—fresh and cruel.

Ten's voice cracked. "We didn't do this. You have to believe me."

Ms Dawes sighed—tired, disappointed. "We have to investigate, but suspicion falls on you two for now. And for now, you will have to report for detention at the end of the day."

Lottie turned on her heel, her footsteps echoing down the hall, light and untroubled. She glanced back once at Ten and Harper, lips curving into that merciless smile.

The teacher watched the girls with a sorrowful gaze—but the decision was made.

Harper finally spoke, voice low and steady. “We’ll deal with it.”

But Ten felt the ground shift beneath her feet. The fight was only beginning—and the world suddenly felt much colder.

Ms Dawes stepped back from the wall with a tight breath, as if the words scrawled across it had settled into her bones. She straightened, gathering herself.

“You’ll return to class now,” she said, voice clipped. “Both of you. And at the end of the day, you are to report for detention in Building C, Room 12. Immediately after final bell.”

Ten opened her mouth, but nothing came out. There was no space left for defence—only the clench in her stomach and the echo of Lottie’s footsteps still ringing in her ears.

Harper gave a curt nod. Not agreement, exactly—just resignation.

Ms Dawes turned without waiting for more, motioning for the girls to follow. Her shoes clicked sharply against the worn tiles as she led them back through the corridor.

Ten trailed beside Harper, her thoughts a tangle of disbelief and quiet rage. The wall behind them still loomed in her mind, loud and ugly.

They didn't speak.

There was nothing left to say—not yet.

Only the walk back to class, eyes ahead, hearts burning.

Chapter Sixteen

The door to the storage room creaked open, releasing a stale breath of dust and forgotten memories. Sunlight filtered weakly through the grimy window, lighting up the scattered debris: old textbooks, broken chairs, and battered boxes that looked untouched for years.

Ms Dawes gave a sharp nod. “You’ll be here for detention—cleaning, sorting. No phones, no talking.” Her voice was flat, detached.

As the door clicked shut behind her, Ten glanced around the cramped, neglected space. The air felt thick with silence, as if the room itself was holding its breath.

Harper sighed, pulling her sleeves down over her wrists.

A voice from inside the room broke the silence. “They don’t even check if we actually do anything in here,” it muttered.

Ten froze for a moment. Then realised it was another student in detention.

From the shadowed corner, the voice came again—a boy, probably a bit younger, leaning lazily against a wall. “Been stuck here a few times. Trust me, the teachers don’t care. They just want to get rid of you.”

Ten raised her eyebrows. “So no one checks?”

The boy shrugged. “Not really. You just sit and look busy. Sometimes I read. Sometimes I nap.”

Harper exchanged a glance with Ten, the faintest flicker of relief passing between them.

Ten started pulling at a battered box near the back, the lid creaking as she opened it. Inside were papers, folders, and loose sheets yellowed with age.

“Look at this,” Ten said, pulling out a stack of therapy referral forms—some stamped *Confidential - Do not distribute* in faded red ink.

Harper's eyes narrowed as she sifted through the papers. "These should've gone to the counsellor... but someone never bothered."

Ten's fingers traced the top form, her heart sinking with every line she read.

Then, beneath the forms, Harper pulled out a file labeled *At Risk Students*.

She flipped it open, revealing rows of names typed in neat columns.

"Poppy Ellis," Harper whispered, recognising the name immediately.

Harper's jaw tightened. "She left a couple of years ago, vanished without a word after an incident."

Her gaze flicked to another name just below—her own. She quickly folded the piece of paper and discreetly hid it in a pocket.

Harper's eyes darted away quickly, voice low and guarded. "There's more in here. Names... things the school doesn't want anyone to see."

Ten swallowed, feeling the cold weight of the paperwork settle over them.

“Why hide this?” she asked softly.

Harper closed the folder without looking at Ten. “Because it’s not about helping people. It’s about control.”

Ten watched her friend carefully. Harper wasn’t ready to talk—not yet.

The room felt colder now, the silence pressing in.

Outside, footsteps echoed faintly, a reminder that the world beyond this dusty storage room was still turning—and still watching.

Harper said nothing as Ten’s heart hammered, the weight of the lists and forms settling over them like a silent warning.

The dusty room felt heavy, the stale air pressing in around them. Time slowed, stretching out in the dim light as they sat side by side on the cold floor, backs against the chipped wall. The boy leaned against the far

corner, absorbed in his own quiet world, leaving the space between Ten and Harper silent but charged.

Neither looked at the other. Harper's eyes stared down at her folded hands, fingers twitching nervously. Ten's gaze flickered around the cluttered room, catching on the peeling paint, the scattered papers—but mostly, she listened, waiting.

Harper's voice was low, cautious, as if the words themselves might break something fragile. "That list... it's not just names. It's history. People who've been marked. Targeted."

Ten's heart clenched. She'd seen enough of that already. "Why?" she asked quietly.

Harper took a slow breath, eyes still fixed on her hands. "Two years ago... Poppy Ellis—she was in my P.E. class. Gym. We all were. Lottie and Emily were there too." Her voice hardened just slightly. "They... they did something awful."

Ten's stomach tightened. She sensed what was coming but forced herself to stay calm.

"They peed all over Poppy's knickers and skirt." Harper's voice dropped almost to a whisper, but the image was brutal enough. "While Poppy was in the

gym. Emily and Lottie... they excused themselves to the locker room just before the end of class.”

Ten’s mind recoiled at the thought. The cruel humiliation felt like a punch to the gut.

“After class, Poppy had no choice but to wear those clothes.” Harper’s gaze flicked briefly to Ten, voice thick with bitterness. “When she came out, the whole lot of them were waiting. Lottie and her gang made sure everyone saw. They called attention to it, laughing and pointing—telling everyone Poppy had pissed herself.”

Ten swallowed hard, her throat tight. The word sounded harsher in Harper’s mouth, raw with anger.

Harper’s eyes darkened. “Everyone believed it. And I knew better.”

Ten’s chest ached. She could feel the old wounds, the weight of cruelty—not just the act itself, but the way it destroyed Poppy. The way it had done something to Harper.

Harper’s voice trembled slightly as she spoke again, quieter this time. “I’d been targeted too—alongside Poppy. I put the pieces together. Saw Lottie and Emily in that locker room. Heard the whispers.”

Ten's thoughts spun—she wanted to reach out, to offer comfort, but the distance between them felt real.

“I confronted Lottie,” Harper admitted, voice low but steady. “I told her to stop. But she just laughed in my face.”

Ten pictured Lottie's smug, cruel smile, the way she loved to hurt.

Harper's eyes darkened. “She started calling me names—telling everyone I was a bed-wetter, and that was why I was protecting Poppy.” Her voice twisted with bitterness. “Said my mum was in prison. Which wasn't true. But no one bothered to check. It stuck.”

Ten's heart twisted painfully. The sting of those lies made the truth even heavier.

“Lottie didn't care if it was true or not. She just wanted to break me.”

Harper's hands clenched tighter. “And when I pushed her... well, Lottie even had video of it. Edited, of course—cut out everything before the push.”

Ten swallowed hard.

“Later, someone sent me the full clip when it started circulating around school. I watched it again and

again—saw how they twisted everything, how they made me look like the bad guy.”

Ten felt a flicker of relief, almost shameful in its strength. Yes, Harper had been violent—but for a good reason. A reason anyone would understand if they really saw it.

It made Ten want to reach out, to say it was okay. That she believed her.

The silence between them stretched, filled not with tension, but something quieter. Mutual exhaustion. Understanding.

Ten glanced sideways, fingers nervously picking at the seam of her skirt. “You, um... wanna come over for dinner?” she asked, voice almost casual. “Mum’s making something warm, I think. You don’t have to stay long.”

Harper looked at her, not quite startled—but as if the offer had come from further away than it had. A beat passed. Then another.

“I’m not... great with parents,” she said carefully.

“Mum’s not really a proper parent,” Ten replied with a half-smile. “She swears in front of the telly and thinks dessert counts as a main course if it’s got fruit in it.”

That drew the barest huff of a laugh from Harper—barely there, but real.

She hesitated again. “Alright. Just for a bit.”

Ten nodded, and they stood slowly, brushing dust off their clothes. The storage room behind them felt like a closed door, heavy with secrets. But walking side by side now, even in silence, felt a little less lonely.

Chapter Seventeen

The bus had rattled away behind them, leaving the street quiet in its wake. Late afternoon light spilled across the pavement, long and slanted, stretching shadows from the hedgerows and low fences that lined the sleepy cul-de-sac.

Ten kept her hands in her blazer pockets, trying not to look as nervous as she felt. “So... just a heads up,” she said, glancing sideways at Harper. “Mum’s a bit odd. In a nice way. She once used a colander as a fruit bowl because the actual fruit bowl was ‘emotionally tired’.”

Harper snorted softly. “Right.”

“And she names our plants. Like, aggressively. There’s a cactus in the kitchen called Sharon, and you’re not allowed to move her or she ‘gets anxious’.”

That coaxed a real smile from Harper. It flickered, hesitant—but it stayed.

Ten's voice dropped slightly. "She's really excited to meet you, by the way. Don't feel like you have to be... you know, anything. Just be you. Or not-you. Whatever's more comfortable."

"I'm never really sure what 'me' I'm supposed to be," Harper muttered.

Ten gave her a gentle nudge with her elbow. "Then start with the one who doesn't run off halfway through dinner."

They both smiled, and the sound of their steps crunching on the gravelled driveway filled the pause that followed.

Ten unlocked the door, bracing herself.

Inside, the warmth hit them first—something bubbling on the hob, the hum of a radio playing softly in the kitchen, and the faint smell of cinnamon and tomato. A jacket was slung over the bannister. Socks dangled from the radiator like surrendered flags. Home.

"Mum?" Ten called, stepping out of her shoes.

From the kitchen: “In here! And I’m stirring! Whatever it is, it’s burning with love!”

Ten rolled her eyes and looked at Harper, who stood just inside the doorway like a shadow.

“You alright?” Ten asked under her breath.

Harper gave the smallest nod, though her eyes were already scanning the room, like she expected it to be some kind of trap — Lottie and Emily popping out of the shadows, ready to point fingers at her for believing someone might actually be nice to her.

Ten led the way into the kitchen.

Mum stood at the stove, hair pinned up with a pencil, wearing a jumper that had a suspicious soup stain near the elbow. She turned around the moment they entered, eyes lighting up when she saw the girl behind Ten.

“Oh,” she breathed, “you must be Harper.”

Harper shifted slightly, not quite stepping forward but not hiding either.

Mum didn’t hesitate—she just smiled, open and warm. “It’s so lovely to meet you. I’ve heard... almost nothing, actually, which is a crime. I’m flying blind here.”

Ten groaned. “Mum.”

“What?” Mum grinned and wiped her hands on a tea towel. “Can I offer you something warm? Food? Tea? Emotional safety?”

Harper blinked, caught between smiling and bolting.

Ten just whispered, “She’s always like this.”

And Harper, to Ten’s quiet relief, nodded slowly and murmured, “Okay... I think I like her.”

Ten tugged open the cutlery drawer, the soft clink of metal echoing in the kitchen. It was warm in here, thick with the smell of Mum’s tomato sauce and something lightly spiced—probably cinnamon, knowing her. Outside, the garden caught the golden end of the afternoon, but inside, the air felt tighter, like it hadn’t quite settled yet.

Harper sat at the kitchen table, elbow resting on the wood, idly spinning a cork coaster between her fingers. Not tense, exactly—but not relaxed either.

Ten balanced a stack of plates on her arm. “So,” she said, like it wasn’t a big thing, like she hadn’t been turning it over in her head all afternoon, “we got detention.”

Mum glanced over from the stove but didn't interrupt. She was stirring something thick and red, the spoon clacking against the pan.

Ten busied herself with lining up cutlery beside the plates. "Some idiot sprayed graffiti in one of the corridors. It was gross. Proper vile. And of course, Lottie and Ms Dawes just happened to come walking through right after."

Harper gave a dry huff, still watching the coaster spin. "Like they were *meant* to find it."

Ten nodded. "Lottie said we'd done it. Even mentioned someone else who supposedly 'ran off with a spray can' or something. Total performance."

Mum turned down the heat under the pot and folded her arms. "Yes. The school rang me."

Ten looked up. "They did?"

Mum raised an eyebrow. "Said you were being held back for detention. Gave me the whole 'defacing property' spiel."

Ten's eyes flicked to Harper, who didn't flinch. She stopped spinning the coaster, let her hands drop to her lap.

“They’ve done that before,” Harper said, not quite to anyone. “Call home, hope it puts pressure on whoever they’re blaming.”

“You think your parents will be alright about it?” Ten asked, voice cautious.

Harper shrugged. “Dad’ll know it wasn’t me. There’s been other times—stuff I apparently ‘did’ that never held up. He doesn’t exactly trust the school anymore.” The mention — or rather, the absence — of Harper’s mum made Ten slightly curious, but she didn’t ask.

Mum’s gaze sharpened at that, but she didn’t press. Instead, she turned back to the hob and gave the sauce one last stir. “Well, I’m glad you’re both here. Dinner’s nearly ready. You want to light the candles, Ten?”

“Yeah.” Ten grabbed the matchbox from the windowsill. “She’s trying to make it fancy,” she whispered to Harper with a tiny smile. “She does this when she’s trying not to interrogate.”

Harper gave a small, breathy sound that might have been a little laugh. She looked toward the door and then back at the table. “It’s nice.”

Ten lit the candles one by one, their flames trembling to life. The kitchen settled, not into silence exactly, but into something softer.

Harper still hadn't quite relaxed—but she wasn't spinning the coaster anymore.

The three of them sat around the table, steam rising from the pasta bowls like little ghosts. The flickering glow from the candlelights made everything feel softer, like the sharp corners of the day had dulled a little.

Harper stared at her food for a moment before picking up her fork. "This smells amazing," she said quietly.

"Thanks, love," Mum said, beaming. "It's one of Ten's favourites. She says it's the cinnamon, but I think it's just an excuse to make a mess with cheese."

Ten gave her a look. "You're the one who puts half the block on. I'm just a witness."

Mum chuckled. "See? She gets dramatic when there's company."

Harper smiled faintly. "It's good. You don't get this sort of thing at mine."

There was a pause—small, but noticeable. Mum didn't jump on it. She just topped up Harper's glass with water and said, "Well, next time you fancy seconds, you know where the doorbell is."

Harper glanced between them, a cautious glint in her eyes like she was still waiting for the other shoe to drop. “It’s just me and my dad. He’s not exactly—”

“—the candlelit dinner type?” Mum offered, gently.

Harper gave a dry little laugh. “Yeah. That.”

Mum’s eyes lingered on Harper a beat longer than usual—soft, searching. She didn’t say anything obvious, but Ten knew that look. She’d seen it before, the one that said *I’m putting two and two together and keeping the answer to myself*.

Ten stared hard at her pasta. She could feel the blush creeping up her neck, which was ridiculous because nothing had happened and nothing had been said. Nothing *had* to be said. But still. There was nothing like that. Harper was just a friend. Her only friend.

“So,” Mum said lightly, as if she hadn’t noticed, “what’s your least favourite subject, Harper? I find it’s always best to bond over mutual academic trauma.”

Harper blinked, then gave a cautious smirk. “Maths. Hands down.”

“Oh, solidarity,” Mum said, dramatically clutching her chest. “I thought it was a kind of curse word in my school days.”

Ten sat back in her chair, slowly breathing out. She watched Harper lean in slightly, her guard still half-up but not ironclad anymore. Her voice was still quiet, but she was talking. Mum was listening. The world hadn't fallen apart.

For the first time all day, Ten let herself smile—really smile.

Ten stood at the sink, her hands submerged in warm sudsy water. The familiar sound of clinking plates and the occasional squeak of a drying cloth gave the kitchen a quiet hum of life. Behind her, Harper methodically dried each dish with the sort of precision she usually reserved for avoiding eye contact in corridors.

Mum breezed in with a tub of leftovers. “Harper, love, would you mind popping this in the fridge? Bottom shelf, if there's space. No promises.”

Harper raised an eyebrow, then crossed the kitchen and opened the fridge door. A puff of something cold and slightly vinegary drifted out.

Ten didn't turn around, just grinned at the tiles above the sink. "You're entering the Great Unknown now. If you're not back in five minutes, we'll assume it got you."

Harper made a soft noise that might've been a laugh. "There's something in here with eyes."

Mum chuckled. "Don't wake it—it gets grumpy."

Harper reached for the shelf and shoved aside a suspicious-looking jar. "You two have a very weird thing going on."

Mum, on her way out of the kitchen again, looked over her shoulder. "You mean the *mutual fridge trauma survival pact*? Totally normal."

Harper smiled slightly, then shut the fridge and turned, leaning on the counter. "She's funny."

Ten shrugged, flicking water from her fingers. "Yeah. That's where I get it from."

Harper studied the cartoon sheep on the tea towel for a second. "I thought she'd be... different."

Ten stilled, then glanced at her. "Different how?"

Harper shrugged. "I don't know. Strict? Weird about, you know, me."

Ten frowned. "Why would she be weird?"

Harper shrugged again, not looking up. "Some people are. When you're the kind of girl who gets called into the headteacher's office more than twice a term."

Ten watched her for a beat. "She's not like that."

"I noticed," Harper said softly.

There was a quiet moment. The clatter of cutlery was gone now, replaced by the soft hum of the kettle coming to life.

"She didn't ask questions," Harper said. "Not really. Just... let it be normal."

Ten dried her hands. "She's good at normal. Especially when things aren't."

Harper gave the smallest nod. "It's... kind of nice."

Mum poked her head back in. "Hot chocolate, tea, or both? We've got the silly mini marshmallows if anyone's feeling juvenile."

Harper glanced at Ten. "Are the marshmallows pink?"

“They are,” Mum said cheerfully.

“Then I’m in,” Harper replied, almost smiling.

Mum grinned and disappeared again.

As she left, Ten caught a glimpse of something in her expression—just a flicker. Not a question, not quite approval, but something softer. Something like hope.

Harper leaned over and plucked a clean mug from the drying rack, placing it beside the kettle without being asked.

Ten watched her—this guarded, sharp-edged girl moving carefully through someone else’s home. And something in her chest loosened, just a little.

Chapter Eighteen

The morning air was sharp and still as Ten approached the school gates, the low murmur of arriving students drifting around her like mist. She shifted her bag higher on her shoulder, trying to steady the flutter in her chest. Two peaceful days had passed since dinner with Mum and Harper, and part of her had hoped—naively, maybe—that the world would keep spinning in that warm direction.

Then she saw it.

A knot of students just ahead, gathered near the gate. Not watching, not intervening. Just drifting, skirting around, eyes averted as if the scene before them didn't exist.

Ten's stomach dropped. At the centre stood Harper, her shoulders squared and still, facing Lottie and her entourage.

Lottie stepped in close, fingers curled around the strap of Harper's backpack, yanking it so Harper stumbled slightly. She didn't fall, but the motion was jerky, humiliating. Emily stood beside Lottie, arms folded, voice pitched just loud enough to carry.

"Can't lash out, can you?" she said sweetly. "That's what violent psychos do. And you don't want another mark on your file, do you?"

Harper said nothing. Her jaw was set, eyes fixed just past them, like she could disappear into that silence.

Ten froze. Her instinct was to run forward—to wedge herself between them, to pull Harper out—but her legs wouldn't move. She stood helpless, the breath caught in her throat, the edge of the crowd brushing her like cold wind.

A teacher—Mr Bryant—passed by, his eyes flicking to the scene and then away, without breaking stride. Ten felt something inside her twist. He saw. He *knew*. And he walked on.

Emily leaned closer to Harper now, lips near her ear. "You don't belong here, freak. You never did. People only pretend to like you 'cause they're scared of you."

Harper's hands were clenched at her sides. Her chin trembled—not much, but enough. The irony was ridiculous. Nobody pretended to like her. Her eyes burned, unshed tears catching the morning light. Fury, shame, something that lived deeper than either.

Ten's heart hammered. She fumbled in her bag for her phone, fingers shaking slightly as she unlocked it and hit record. She didn't know what she would do with it yet. But she had to do *something*.

The minutes passed slowly until Lottie finally stepped back with a theatrical sigh, like the fun had gone out of it. "Come on," she said to the others, pushing Harper away, but already losing interest. "She's not going to snap. Coward."

They moved off as suddenly as they'd begun, laughing as they melted into the crowd.

Harper remained where she was, shoulders tense, eyes still fixed ahead, not yet noticing Ten.

And Ten just stood there, phone heavy in her hand, throat aching. She finally understood what Harper had

tried to say. How easy it was to freeze. How hard it was to help when the cost felt so high.

And how much it *cost* to say nothing.

Harper's back was stiff as she stood by the wall, fists still clenched at her sides, her breathing tight and fast. Her hair had come loose in the scuffle, strands falling across her flushed face. She didn't look up when Ten approached, but something in her posture—too still, too focused—said she knew.

Ten stopped a pace or two away, uncertain whether to reach out. The urge to say *something* pressed hard against her chest.

"I saw—" she began.

Harper spun, eyes flashing. "Yeah? And what were you going to do? Get yourself dragged into it too?" Her voice was sharp, brittle, thick with fury she hadn't had a chance to spend.

Ten flinched but didn't step back. "I filmed it."

That stilled Harper. Her mouth opened slightly, like she hadn't expected that. But the moment passed, and her expression hardened.

“Great. Evidence of me standing there doing nothing.” She rubbed at her eyes quickly with the heel of her hand, like she could wipe the sting away before it took hold. “Should’ve filmed the bit where I cracked and flattened her, right? That would’ve been more satisfying.”

Ten stayed quiet. Not scared. Not flinching. Just there.

Harper looked away, jaw working. Her voice dropped. “Don’t... don’t look at me like that.”

“I’m not,” Ten said gently. “I just wanted to check you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” Harper snapped, but it was too quick, too brittle to believe. She turned away, staring down the school steps. “Don’t make this a thing.”

Ten didn’t move.

After a long silence, Harper muttered, “Thanks for not walking away.”

Ten nodded. There was no need for words.

They stood in silence for a while, the wind tugging at the frayed edges of the morning. Students filtered past them, some glancing over, most pretending not to see.

The school bell rang in the distance, muffled by the cold air.

Ten kicked at a loose stone. “You don’t have to go in.”

Harper gave a short laugh, mirthless. “Yeah, because *that* would make today better. ‘Oh sorry, Miss, I skipped class because your star pupil shoved me around again.’” Her arms were folded tightly now, guarding more than just her ribs.

“You could come back to mine,” Ten offered quietly.

“No. I think I’d rather be alone.” She paused. “Might go home anyway. I don’t know.”

Ten nodded. “Okay.”

Harper glanced at her, eyes tired. “Thanks,” she muttered, and turned, heading back down the road she’d come from.

Chapter Nineteen

Mum was on the sofa with a book when Ten let herself in, closing the front door softly behind her. She didn't say anything at first — just stood in the hallway, bag heavy on her shoulder.

Mum looked up immediately. “Tea?” She didn't wait for confirmation but Ten could hear her pour, of course she had a mug ready in there.

By the time she'd taken her shoes off and joined her in the living room, Mum was already setting down two mismatched mugs. Ten curled up in the corner of the sofa, holding the warm cup between her palms.

“It was Harper,” she said quietly.

Mum blinked. “What was?”

“Today. At school. She—” Ten swallowed, the words sticking. “They cornered her. Just outside the gates. Pushed her around. Said things.”

Mum’s eyes narrowed slightly. She didn’t speak, just let Ten keep going.

“I didn’t do anything,” Ten said. “I mean... I filmed it. But I just stood there. I wanted to stop them but I couldn’t move. My legs wouldn’t—I just froze.”

“That’s not nothing, sweetheart,” Mum said gently. “You were scared.”

“I was,” Ten whispered. “I’ve never felt that before. That... helpless. And she just stood there. Let them say what they wanted. Let them shove her. She didn’t fight back.”

Mum nodded slowly, setting her tea down. “Because she knew it would cost her more than it would cost them.”

Ten fumbled for her phone and pulled up the video, her hands still a little shaky. She handed it over. “I recorded

it. I thought... I don't know. I just had to do something."

Mum watched in silence. At first, her face was unreadable as the screen flickered with the muted clip, and then she pressed her lips together. When it ended, she held the phone a moment longer before handing it back.

"I'm so angry," Ten said. "They get away with everything. Everyone just pretends they don't see it."

"I know," Mum murmured.

Ten wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "I hate them."

"No, love. You hate what they did." She reached over and tucked a bit of hair behind Ten's ear. "There's a difference."

Ten leaned into the warmth of that touch, her breath unsteady. "It's not just Harper. I think they've done this to others too. And no one ever does anything."

Mum's voice was quiet. "Then maybe it's time someone did."

Ten met her eyes — really met them — and nodded slowly.

Mum poured herself another cup of tea, letting the silence stretch for a moment. Then she looked at Ten, gentle but steady.

“You did the right thing filming it,” she said. “Evidence matters. Especially in a place like that, where power protects itself.”

Ten looked down at her mug. “It doesn’t feel like enough.”

“It isn’t — not on its own. But it’s a start.” She leaned forward a little, elbows resting on her knees. “Listen. You said this isn’t just about Harper. That this has happened before. I believe you.”

Ten’s eyes stung again. Just hearing someone say that — no hesitation, no doubt — made her feel lighter and heavier all at once.

“You’re up against something that’s been allowed to grow,” Mum continued. “A pattern. An unspoken rule. That kind of culture doesn’t shift overnight.”

“But it can shift?” Ten asked, hopeful and wary all at once.

Mum gave a small smile. “Yes. But you’ll need more than this video. You’ll need to gather whatever else you can. Notes, messages, photos, more footage. If there are

other students who've seen things — or been through it — their stories matter too.”

Ten nodded slowly. “We found this file. In detention. It was labelled *At Risk Students* — but it's not what it sounds like. Harper said it's not about helping anyone. It's about control. Silencing the ones who make the school look bad.”

Mum's expression darkened. “If that's true, it could be important. But be careful. If someone's gone to the trouble of creating something like that, they'll want to keep it hidden.”

Ten's voice dropped. “I think it had Harper's name. And another girl's. Poppy Ellis.”

Mum just nodded, listening carefully.

“She left the school a couple of years ago,” Ten said. “After something awful. Harper knew her.” Ten continued to share what Harper had told her about the girls peeing on Poppy's clothes, how Harper had pushed the girls in return.

Mum sat back and she didn't flinch at all when she heard Harper had pushed. “She was damn right to push them.” She calmed herself with a deep breath and continued, “There's a thread here. And if you pull it, you might find the whole thing starts to come loose.”

She looked at her daughter seriously. “But Ten — you can’t do this alone. If you’re ready to push this, I’ll help you. Properly.”

Ten’s throat tightened. “You’d really... get involved?”

“I already am,” Mum said gently. “You’re not just my daughter, you’re a good one. If the people in charge won’t protect you — or Harper — then I will.”

Ten reached for her mum’s hand across the sofa, fingers curling into hers.

“So,” Mum said, a firmer tone creeping in. “Step one: gather what you can. Keep it quiet. Ask around carefully — there may be others who want this to end as much as you do. But no risky confrontations, not yet. We do this smart.”

Ten gave a small nod. Her pulse still felt like a drumbeat under her skin, but now it had direction. She had direction.

“Do you think we can fix it?” she asked.

Mum squeezed her hand. “I think we can try. And that’s where change starts.”

Chapter Twenty

Ten sat at her desk, the classroom buzzing softly as the final lesson dragged to its close. Her fingers traced the edge of her notebook, but her mind wasn't on the work. Instead, she replayed the morning's incident—Emily holding that orange juice bottle, taking a deliberate sip, then smirking, "This tastes like gay."

She remembered the way Lottie had laughed, how she'd taken the bottle from Emily and slid it over, emptying its contents silently into Ten's backpack.

The sting of it settled heavy in her chest, a mix of anger and helplessness twisting inside her. *Why does it always have to be like this?* she thought, swallowing the lump forming in her throat.

The teacher's voice droned on, but Ten barely heard it. She glanced around, wary, feeling eyes she couldn't see — waiting, watching.

Then the bell rang sharply, slicing through the classroom chatter. Ten stood slowly, determination setting in. She spotted Harper by the door and took a steadying breath.

Ten stepped out into the crowded corridor determined to catch Harper before she left. She weaved through the swarm of students pouring out of classrooms. Her eyes found Harper near the exit, moving with quiet purpose. Taking a deep breath, Ten closed the distance.

“Harper,” she called softly, careful not to draw attention.

Harper turned, her expression guarded but relieved to see Ten.

“I need to tell you something,” Ten said, lowering her voice. “About the plan Mum and I have been working on. It's better if we talk somewhere private, away from all this.”

Harper glanced around, her eyes sharp and alert. “Yeah, we can talk at my place. It's safer.”

They moved cautiously, scanning the crowd as they walked side by side, their shoulders almost touching for a moment of quiet solidarity.

“Feels like we’re always watching our backs,” Ten murmured.

Harper gave a faint, knowing smile. “We have to be.”

Reaching the bus stop, the noise faded a little, and Harper exhaled softly. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

The bus ride was quiet, the usual hum of chatter and engines fading into the background as Ten and Harper sat side by side, each lost in their own thoughts. When the bus finally stopped, Harper led the way through a neat, quiet street lined with tall trees.

They paused in front of a large, imposing house — clearly well cared for, with trimmed hedges and polished windows catching the late afternoon sun.

“This is it,” Harper said softly, her voice a little distant.

Ten swallowed, suddenly aware of the contrast. The house was huge compared to her and mum's cosy, cluttered little home — everything here felt sharp and controlled, the opposite of the warmth and mess she was used to.

“Wow,” Ten breathed, almost surprised by her own words. “It's... really nice.”

Harper shrugged, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “Yeah, my dad's a bit of a control freak. Keeps everything spotless.”

Ten shifted, feeling the roles subtly reversed — here, Harper was the one with the solid ground beneath her, while she usually held the safety net for them both.

Harper glanced at her. “Come on. Let's not stand out here all day.”

Ten nodded, steeling herself as they moved toward the front door.

The door swung open before Harper could grab the knob, and a man stood there, framed by the tidy hallway behind him. Harper's dad was taller than Ten had imagined, with neat, graying hair and a steady, serious gaze. He offered a small, polite nod.

“Hey, dad,” Harper said softly. “This is Ten.”

He glanced at Ten, then back to Harper, his expression thoughtful but distant. “Nice to meet you, Ten.”

Ten smiled nervously, unsure what to say. The moment was brief — no warm welcomes or easy chatter, just a quiet acknowledgment.

Harper slipped past him, leading Ten down the hall toward her room. Inside, the space was neat and efficient, every surface clear of clutter. A bed was pushed against one wall, a desk with schoolbooks stacked precisely, and on the floor near the window, a single plush toy rested, looking a little out of place.

Harper dropped her school bag beside the door and moved further into the room without a word. Ten followed quietly, feeling like an outsider in this spotless space. Harper slipped off her blazer and white shirt with practiced ease. Ten caught a glimpse of a worn, white bra beneath — nothing fancy, just something comfortable and familiar. Then Harper pulled on an oversized sweatshirt that looked like it had seen better days, the fabric soft and faded.

The skirt came off last. On the bed lay the ripped jeans that seemed to carry all of Harper’s edge and defiance. Ten couldn’t help but notice how those tough, lived-in clothes didn’t quite belong in the pristine room. It was

as if Harper herself was a wild thread woven into neat fabric.

As Harper bent down to tug on the jeans, Ten's eyes flicked downward. There, just visible for a moment, were Harper's knickers — soft cotton, covered in childish prints. They were so different from the plain, grown-up underwear Ten now chose—always careful to blend in, to avoid any unwanted attention at school. The contrast made Ten's throat tighten a little. Harper looked both strong and vulnerable.

Harper caught Ten's curious glance and gave a small, embarrassed shrug. "They're the only ones I had clean."

Ten smiled gently, the moment feeling unexpectedly tender.

Her eyes drifted back to the small plushie lying by the window, its soft fur catching the afternoon light. "That's the cutest thing," she said softly, nodding toward it.

Harper's hand shot out before Ten could say more, scooping up the plushie and tucking it behind a stack of books on her desk. Her cheeks flushed just a little. "It's nothing," she muttered, avoiding Ten's gaze.

Ten smiled gently. "No, it's not nothing. It's... kind of perfect, actually."

Harper shrugged, the edge of a smile twitching at her lips, but her eyes stayed cautious.

Ten settled onto the edge of Harper's bed, careful not to crowd her. "So, Mum thinks we need to get as much evidence as we can—videos from other students, stuff from that detention room. Anything that shows what's really going on."

Harper's fingers fiddled nervously with the hem of her sweatshirt. "Even if it's risky?"

Ten nodded, her voice steady. "Yeah. But we won't rush it. We'll be careful. Mum's going to help us figure out how to do this without getting caught or blamed."

Harper looked up, a flicker of something like relief in her eyes. "And she's really on our side?"

"Completely," Ten said softly. "She wants to help you—and me. We're not alone in this."

Harper narrowed her eyes, folding her arms. "Alright, but how's your mum going to just fix this? It's been going on for years. Why now?"

Ten shrugged, trying to sound confident. "Because she's not afraid, for one. And she really cares. Plus, she's a journalist — knows how to dig for the truth, how to handle stuff like this without blowing it."

Harper let that sink in, then frowned again. “Okay, but how do you think we’ll get the videos? People are scared to even talk.”

Ten smiled a little. “We already have two clips showing what Lottie’s done. And we’ll be discreet, talking to others who’ve seen things but don’t want to get involved publicly.”

“And the paperwork from the detention room?” Harper’s tone was skeptical.

Ten grinned. “Getting detention isn’t exactly hard. I’ve got a plan.”

Harper looked at her with a half-smile, a flicker of hope breaking through the usual guardedness.

Harper moved around the kitchen with practiced ease, chopping vegetables and stirring the pot on the stove. The kitchen was spotless, every utensil and dish gleaming and arranged just so — a far cry from the cozy, cluttered chaos of Ten’s own home.

Ten opened a cupboard and paused, staring at rows of plates stacked perfectly by size. She blinked, then reached for a set, but stopped herself, unsure which to take.

Harper glanced over her shoulder, a faint smirk tugging at her lips. “The middle ones. Also we have fixed seats at the table. You can’t just pick and choose.”

Ten laughed nervously, setting the plates down carefully. “Right. Rules. Got it.”

Harper pointed toward the dining room. “You’re at the far end, by the window. That’s the best spot.”

Ten hesitated, then smiled. “Thanks. I’ll try not to break anything.”

Ten picked up the glasses next, noting how they were arranged in perfect rows, like little soldiers waiting for inspection. She carried them out to the dining room, her fingers slightly clammy.

The place felt too neat. Not just clean — deliberate. Every chair aligned, every surface gleaming, the smell of polish still faint in the air. It was the kind of house where you weren’t sure if you were allowed to laugh too loudly.

She set the glasses down carefully, aligning them with the plates.

Harper's voice floated in from the kitchen. "Cutlery's in the drawer beside the fridge. Left side."

Ten nodded to herself and opened it. Of course. All the forks in one row, spoons in another, not a single teaspoon out of place. She picked up three knives and hesitated, suddenly unsure whether she should be helping at all.

Back home, Mum would have just shouted, "Grab whatever's clean, love!" and they'd eat with mismatched cutlery, sometimes off their laps. But here... here she was afraid of choosing the wrong fork and ruining everything.

The table was set now, neat and quiet, like it was waiting for something to happen. Ten stood awkwardly to the side, unsure if she should sit or help more. From the kitchen came the soft clatter of pans and the low hum of Harper humming under her breath — not quite a tune, more of a rhythm to keep her hands busy.

Then footsteps in the hallway.

Harper's dad entered the room, his presence almost startling in the silence. He was tall, slightly stooped, dressed in a collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up,

and a faraway look in his eyes like he'd been somewhere else entirely and only just returned. He gave Ten a polite smile — warm enough, but distracted, like he was still mid-thought.

“You must be Ten,” he said, obviously having forgotten she introduced herself to him when they got there. His voice gentle but slightly clipped, like a man not used to company. “Nice to meet you. I’ve heard...” He glanced toward the kitchen, then back at Ten. “Some things.”

Ten smiled, trying not to show how nervous she was. “Nice to meet you too, Mr...?”

“Richard. Just Richard’s fine.”

He pulled out the chair at the head of the table — the one Harper had told her to leave — and sat down without further comment. His gaze wandered briefly to the window, then to the table settings, and back to the middle distance.

Ten sat across from him at the other end of the table, hands folded neatly in her lap, wishing she could shrink into the chair.

“Harper said you’re at the same school?” he asked eventually, tone more out of obligation than curiosity.

“Yeah,” Ten said quickly. “Same year.”

There was a beat of silence.

“Mm.”

From the kitchen, Harper’s voice called out, “Dinner’s ready,” and Ten sighed inwardly with relief. Richard turned toward the sound, sharing the feeling almost silently. “Smells good.”

Ten glanced at him again as Harper emerged with the dish — a fragrant risotto, creamy and steaming in a wide white bowl. Harper carried it with care, like she was used to being the one who made sure things went right.

Richard gave her a small smile, a surprisingly warm one. “Thanks, kiddo.”

Harper didn’t reply, just placed the dish down and began serving as if it were all routine.

Ten felt like she’d walked into a family photo — polished, composed, and silent in all the wrong ways.

Chapter Twenty-One

Later that night, Ten curled up on the couch, the soft glow of the lamp casting warm shadows around the room. Mum sat beside her, a steaming mug in hand as always, eyes bright but patient.

“So,” Mum said gently, “how was the visit? How’s Harper’s dad?”

Ten hesitated, tracing the rim of her own mug. “Different. Quiet, mostly. He’s kind, I think... but not like you. No jokes, no teasing. Just... serious.”

Mum nodded, a small smile playing on her lips. “Some parents are like that. But sounds like he’s carrying something heavy.”

“Yeah. It felt like... I was walking on eggshells the whole time. Their house is so neat and perfect. Made me nervous I’d mess something up.”

“You’re just not used to that kind of order, love. It’s okay to feel out of place.”

Ten glanced up. “Harper’s room was like that too. So tidy. But then I saw her clothes — all ripped jeans and old sweatshirts.” She hesitated, not mentioning the underwear, and continued, “She’s... not who you’d expect, I guess.”

“Perhaps those clothes are Harper’s way of keeping a distance from the perfect,” Mum said softly.

Ten sighed, the weight of the day settling over her. “I told Harper about the plan. Mum, we’re going to try and gather proof, expose what’s really happening at school. But it feels huge. Like we’re tiny against all that.”

Mum reached over, squeezing Ten’s hand. “We’ll be the tiniest but loudest then. And I’m with you every step. We’ll figure it out.”

Ten took a slow sip from her mug, gathering her thoughts. “After we finished eating, just before I left, Harper told me something.” She paused, eyes searching Mum’s face. “She said she knows at least a couple of girls who have videos—of the bullying, I mean. And they might be willing to share them.”

Mum's expression shifted, a flicker of hope in her eyes. "That could be exactly what we need."

Ten nodded, a small spark of determination stirring inside her. "It feels like we're finally getting somewhere." She yawned and stretched her arms up.

The house was quiet now, the soft hum of night settling around Ten like a gentle cloak. Mum moved through the dim light of the hallway, humming softly to herself as she brushed her hair. The sound was steady, grounding — like a lullaby that didn't need words.

Ten stood by the bathroom door, watching her. Part of her wanted to reach out, to curl up close and feel that calm wash over her. Another part was still tangled in the chaos of the day — the weight of what she and Harper were facing, the sting of the school's secrets, the shadows lurking in every glance and whisper.

She thought about Harper's guarded eyes, the way she held herself tight like a fortress. And then about herself — the mix of wanting to be strong, to fight back, and

the quiet, aching need to just be held, understood without having to explain.

Her mind flickered between the two — the girl who was already so aware, already thinking in complicated, careful ways, and the little girl inside who still wished for a simpler world.

Mum's voice broke through, soft and warm. "Come on, Ten. Let's get you ready for bed."

Ten nodded, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She stepped forward, allowing herself to be led without words, letting the quiet love in the room fill the spaces where her own doubts crowded, as Mum pulled her jumper over her head.

She brushed her teeth, the mint sharp and clean, a small comfort. Mum's presence was steady beside her, like the world was still safe somewhere — even if the school felt like anything but.

As Mum folded back the covers on Ten's bed, the older girl felt that tug again — the pull between knowing so much and still needing to rest, to let herself be just a girl for a little while longer.

She climbed in, letting the cool sheets settle around her. Mum's hand brushed her hair softly, and she leaned in and kissed her goodnight.

And for the first time that day, Ten let herself breathe, as Mum closed the door behind her.

The room was dark, the soft glow from the streetlight slipping past the curtains like a whispered secret. Ten lay still beneath the covers, her eyes closed but her mind wide awake.

Harper's face drifted through her thoughts — sharp, guarded, and yet somehow fragile beneath it all. The way she pushed through each day like a storm held just on the edge of breaking.

Ten wondered about the moments they'd shared today. The quiet in the kitchen, Harper's quick but embarrassed smile when she caught Ten noticing the plushie toy. The way her voice softened just a little when she talked about the videos, about the plan to fight back.

There was something more there, a flicker she couldn't quite name. Not love, not yet. But something shy and new, a gentle stirring she felt deep in her chest whenever Harper was near.

It wasn't just the pain and the fight — it was the way Harper's presence made the world seem a little less harsh, a little more possible.

Ten turned onto her side, hugging a pillow close. Maybe tomorrow she'd be braver, say more, reach out more.

For now, she let herself hold onto that quiet hope, the tender possibility of something more than just friendship.

And as sleep finally took her, that thought was the last thing on her mind — a soft promise that maybe, just maybe, this was the beginning of something beautiful.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The corridors buzzed with the usual noise — lockers slamming, chatter bouncing off the walls. But beneath it all, Ten could feel the sharp edge of something darker watching them.

She walked side by side with Harper, their steps quick but careful, eyes scanning faces. They had a list — a few girls who might have captured bits of what had happened, fragments of evidence hidden in videos or whispered stories.

At the first name, they paused by a cluster of lockers. Ten's heart thudded as a girl with bright, nervous eyes leaned in, her phone clutched like a lifeline.

"I might have something," she whispered, airdropping a movie clip, her glance darting down the hall.

Harper nodded, biting her lip. “Thanks,” she said softly, slipping the phone into her pocket.

They moved on, each exchange quick, careful. Every moment they spent together felt like a risk — and Ten couldn’t shake the feeling that eyes were tracking their every move.

In the distance, shadows shifted near the entrance to the main hall.

Lottie and Emily stood there, chatting with their usual smirks, but their eyes flicked toward Ten and Harper more than once.

Had they noticed? Were they onto the whispered meetings, the secret gathering of proof?

The thought sent a cold prick down Ten’s spine.

She squeezed Harper’s arm briefly. “We need to be careful,” she murmured.

Harper’s gaze was steady, but Ten could see the tension in her jaw.

They had come this far. Now, it was time to hold on tighter — for each other, and for the truth waiting to be uncovered.

As Ten and Harper lingered near the lockers, a shadow fell over them. Lottie and Emily approached, their smirks sharp and cold.

“Look who it is,” Lottie hissed. “The proud little lesbian and the school’s favourite violent psychopath.”

Emily snickered, eyes flicking between them. “Still think you’re untouchable, huh?”

Ten’s heart hammered, but she held her ground. The words stung, but she could hear the weariness beneath them — same insults, over and over.

Lottie stepped closer, her voice low and dangerous. “But you’re getting too bold, Ten. Watch yourself, or next time it won’t be just words.” Her eyes flicked to Harper’s face, as if hoping for a reaction then back to Ten.

Ten met Lottie’s gaze, feeling the weight of the threat, but refusing to back down.

Harper’s fingers twitched, but she stayed silent, eyes burning with that quiet fury.

Lottie’s smile twisted cruelly. “Don’t say we didn’t warn you.”

With that, Lottie and Emily turned and strode away, leaving a tense silence behind.

Ten exhaled slowly, glancing at Harper. “We have to be smarter.”

Harper nodded, the fire in her eyes flickering but still there.

The corridors felt a little quieter once they’d put some distance between themselves and Lottie and Emily. Ten and Harper moved side by side, the buzz of passing students fading into a dull hum around them.

“That wasn’t fun,” Ten said, glancing at Harper. “But it felt different this time, you know? Like we’re not just stuck. We’re fighting back.”

Harper nodded, a small, tight smile flickering. “Yeah. And those videos...” She shifted her bag, eyes brightening a little. “I actually know a couple of girls who might share theirs. It’s something.”

Ten’s chest lifted with relief. “We’re getting somewhere.”

Harper looked over, the hint of warmth in her eyes catching Ten off guard. “Thanks for sticking with me. I don’t do this easy.”

“You don’t have to,” Ten replied softly. “We’ll do this together.”

The classroom doors loomed ahead, and Ten took a deep breath. There was still a long road ahead, but for the first time in a while, it felt like they weren’t walking it alone.

As they reached the classroom, Harper glanced sideways at Ten, curiosity flickering beneath her guarded expression.

“So... how exactly are we supposed to get into the detention room?” she asked quietly.

Ten grinned, a flicker of mischief lighting her eyes.

“Ah, that’s the secret,” she said, lowering her voice as if sharing a treasure map. “Wait and see.”

Harper raised an eyebrow, but didn’t press. Instead, a slow smile tugged at her lips—the first real one in days.

“Alright then. I’m trusting you.”

Ten felt a warm rush of something—hope, maybe even a little excitement. It was a small thing, but it meant everything.

Together, they stepped inside, ready to keep pushing forward.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The classroom buzzed softly with the hum of conversation, but Ten and Harper sat close, voices hushed as Harper pulled her phone from her pocket.

“I found someone who has clips,” Harper whispered, eyes scanning the screen. Her fingers trembled slightly as she hit play.

The video was grainy, taken from a hidden angle somewhere near the corridor. The footage showed Lottie and her gang surrounding a smaller girl, their laughter sharp and cruel.

Then the teacher appeared—calm, arms folded, watching. Not intervening. Not even frowning. Just... smiling.

Harper’s jaw tightened. “See that? She’s encouraging them. Doesn’t even try to stop it.”

Ten swallowed hard, heart pounding in her chest. The kind of pounding that prickled her skin and made her breath hitch. “This is... it. Proof.”

Harper nodded, but her voice was heavy, weighted with dread. “Yeah. But if the school finds out we have this...”

Ten met her gaze, steady despite the knot tightening inside her. “We’ll be ready.”

Harper locked her phone and slipped it into her pocket, eyes flicking nervously around the room. Every glance suddenly felt loaded, as if the hum of classmates carried invisible eyes, waiting, watching.

“I don’t want to talk about this here,” she muttered, voice low, edged with fear and resolve both. “Too risky.”

Ten nodded slowly, understanding the gravity behind those words. “Yeah. We’ll keep it quiet.”

Harper glanced at her, sharp but tired. “So... what’s the plan? You said something about the detention room earlier.”

Ten let a small, confident smile curve her lips. There was a spark in her eyes now—fierce and certain. “Let’s break the dress code. Proper.”

Harper hesitated, then nodded, the tension easing just a little. “Alright. I’m in.”

They shared a look, a quiet pact sealed without words.

The plan was simple—swap one sock each. Just enough to break the uniform rules, nothing serious, but enough to guarantee detention.

Ten’s fingers trembled as she peeled off her white sock, cool air brushing her skin. The black sock Harper held out felt softer, heavier, a bold contrast against her pale foot. The sheer thought of breaking rules on purpose—something she’d never dared before—sent a thrill surging through her veins.

Harper mirrored her movements, tugging off one black sock and sliding on Ten’s white one. Their eyes locked, a quiet spark passing between them—this tiny act of rebellion was theirs alone, a secret weapon against the system that tried to silence them.

The door swung open and Mr Levin stepped in, his eyes sweeping the room—then stopping dead at their feet. Ten’s heart slammed against her ribs, fierce and fast. Her face stayed calm, but inside she was a whirlwind of nerves and daring.

She stepped forward, crossing her legs just enough to make the mismatched socks impossible to miss.

Mr Levin's eyes narrowed sharply. "Your uniform is not up to standard."

Ten met his gaze head-on, steady and unflinching. "We swapped socks. That's why."

Harper's voice was low but firm, steady as a stone. "We're done playing by your rules."

A long pause stretched out. The teacher's mouth tightened, his expression unreadable. Then, with a curt nod, he said, "Detention. Both of you."

As they followed him down the corridor, Ten's heart still raced—not from fear, but from something sharper and brighter. Pride. Defiance. Connection.

She'd never felt this way before.

It was a small victory, but it was theirs.

The steady clack of their shoes echoed off the linoleum corridor walls, a sharp contrast to the low murmur of distant voices from classrooms and lockers. The stale, sterile scent of the school lingered in the air—an odd mix of cleaning products and old paper that always made Ten feel a little on edge.

Her heart pounded, a rapid drumbeat in her chest that felt both thrilling and terrifying. Each step beside

Harper felt heavier, the weight of what they'd just done settling over her like a second skin. Mr Levin's figure loomed ahead, focused and unyielding, leading them toward the detention room without a word.

Ten's eyes flicked to Harper's side. Harper's jaw was tight, her shoulders squared in quiet defiance, but when their gazes met, something softened. Without thinking, Harper's hand reached out, fingers brushing lightly against Ten's before sliding gently into hers.

The contact was electric—warm and grounding all at once. It wasn't just a simple touch; it was a small rebellion against a world that tried to keep them small, invisible, and silent. Ten's breath caught, a flicker of something unspoken passing between them—comfort, courage, maybe even something more.

She squeezed Harper's hand back, steadying herself against the sudden surge of emotion. The corridor seemed to narrow around them, the noise fading until it was just the rhythm of their footsteps and the steady thump of Ten's heart.

For a moment, they were just two people, defying the rules together, and nothing else mattered.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The door creaked open again, releasing that same stale breath of dust and forgotten secrets as last time. The lazy afternoon light seeped through the grimy window, scattering motes of dust that drifted like slow dancers in the stale air. The clutter of battered boxes, old textbooks, and broken furniture sat like silent witnesses to years of neglect.

This time, the room felt emptier—no other students lounging in shadows, no murmurs to fill the silence. Just Ten and Harper, the weight of the moment stretching between them.

Ten shifted her school bag, still faintly smelling of orange juice—a reminder of Emily and Lottie's petty spite days ago. She glanced at Harper, whose fingers nervously fiddled with the strap of her own bag. Then, without a word, Harper reached out, her hand brushing

against Ten's before firmly clasping it. The touch was a quiet defiance, a small island of warmth amid the cold dust and faded papers. Ten's heart thudded—not from fear, but something softer, more electric.

They settled near the far corner where the oldest boxes sat stacked unevenly, their labels faded almost beyond recognition. Ten pulled a battered folder free, the edges curled and stained, and flipped it open carefully.

Inside were the scattered forms: therapy referrals, some stamped *Confidential* in fading red obviously never sent off, others left unsigned or unfiled. Ten's eyes scanned the pages, each one a whisper of a promise broken. The school's neglect lay bare in the smudged handwriting and crossed-out notes.

Harper rifled through another box, pulling out a worn file marked *At Risk Students*. Her face tightened as she flicked through the typed names—students who'd been sidelined, silenced, or disappeared from view. The same cold weight settled over them, heavier in the quiet room.

Every creak of the floorboards outside set Ten's nerves alight. The thought of a teacher walking in—and catching them rifling through the school's secrets—made her stomach twist. They weren't just

risking detention anymore. If caught stealing these papers? Expulsion, or worse, would be certain.

Ten's fingers brushed against a thick manila folder wedged behind a collapsed pile of files. The spine was unmarked, but the weight of it made her heart beat faster. She pulled it free, carefully lifting the cover.

Inside: meeting minutes. Typed. Some with inked corrections, others bearing scrawled initials and the looping signature of the headteacher at the bottom of each page.

"Harper," Ten whispered, already flipping through. "You need to see this."

Harper crouched beside her, the glow from Ten's torch app flickering faintly over the pages. They both leaned in as Ten began to read aloud, her voice low and tight.

Staff Briefing – Pastoral Concerns

Date: [Redacted]

Subject: Locker Room Incident / Behaviour Review

"It was raised that pupils Lottie Wells and Emily Hamilton were observed entering the girls' locker room shortly before the end of P.E. under the pretext of using the toilet.

Shortly after, student Poppy Ellis exited

visibly distressed. Her clothes had been soiled with urine, seemingly poured over her belongings.

A confrontation occurred shortly after involving student Harper Midvale, who physically pushed Miss Wells.

While the action taken by Miss Midvale was addressed separately, the initial instigation remains unclear.

Mr Barton (P.E. staff) voiced concern that the behaviour of Miss Hamilton and Miss Dawes suggested premeditation."

Ten paused. Her breath caught.

Harper didn't speak—her eyes scanned ahead, lips parted slightly.

Then came the next paragraph, stamped in red:

Headteacher's Remarks – For Internal Note Only

"Mr Barton is reminded to refrain from making unsubstantiated claims against students, particularly those from families closely connected to the school.

The matter is to be considered closed. Staff are not to pursue this line of enquiry further."

Ten felt like her chest had turned to ice.

“They shut it down,” Harper murmured, barely audible. “They knew. They knew everything and still blamed me.”

Ten’s grip tightened around the folder. “And Poppy. They let it happen to her. Covered it up. Just like—” She swallowed. “Just like they were trying to do with us.”

Dust floated lazily through the shaft of pale light from the high window, as if the room itself were holding its breath.

Harper’s voice was sharp now, trembling at the edges. “We need this. This one. This proves it’s not just gossip—it was discussed. Recorded. They *knew*.”

Ten nodded, sliding the minutes into the front pocket of her rucksack, barely noticing the lingering citrusy scent of the spilled juice. “We’ve got it. Real evidence.”

A floorboard creaked somewhere beyond the door, and both girls froze. The silence that followed felt stretched, unnatural.

Harper’s hand found Ten’s wrist. Just a touch. Just enough.

Ten whispered, “We need to go. Quiet. Now.”

But in her chest, beneath the fear, something else had taken root—something harder, hotter.

They weren’t just surviving anymore.

They were fighting back.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ten's house smelled of toast and lavender fabric softener, a warm, familiar mix that seemed to settle in Harper's bones the moment they stepped through the door. She'd been there a few times now, but this was the first time it truly felt like a haven — somewhere the world couldn't quite reach them.

Ten kicked off her shoes by the radiator and dropped her schoolbag with a dramatic sigh. "We live to see another day."

Mum poked her head out from the kitchen, apron still on, tea towel draped over one shoulder. "You're back earlier than expected," she said, wiping her hands on the towel. "Should I be worried, or is this one of your silent-rebellion-under-the-radar sort of things?"

Ten grinned. "A bit of both, really."

Harper stood just behind her, hesitant for a second, until Mum waved her in with a smile. “You too, love. Shoes off, bags down. Come in before Ten starts rifling through the snacks and eats everything.”

“She’s lying,” Ten muttered, already reaching for the biscuit tin.

Mum rolled her eyes affectionately and turned back toward the kitchen. “Kettle’s on. I’ll bring a tray through. You lot go get sorted.”

The living room was already familiar to Harper—the soft, over-squashed sofa, the cluttered bookshelf stuffed with actual books and half-finished jigsaw puzzles, the weird crocheted cushion that looked like a frog in a hat. She followed Ten in and settled onto the carpet while Ten flopped dramatically onto the sofa.

Ten reached into her bag and pulled out the folder, placing it carefully on the coffee table as if it were something fragile and sacred.

Harper sat cross-legged. Ten focused hard on not looking at her knickers and instead fixed her eyes on the folder, like it might disappear.

“I still can’t believe we have it.”

“Me neither.” Harper leaned forward, fingertips brushing the cover. “It doesn’t just confirm what I said

about Poppy. It proves they knew. And worse — it proves they decided not to care.”

Her expression grew distant. “I want to say it feels good, but... it also doesn’t. Like—it’s satisfying, but horrible too.”

Ten watched her for a moment, then nudged her foot gently. “Yeah. It’s both. But we can do something with it now. That matters.”

Mum returned carrying a tray with mugs, a plate of buttered crumpets, and what looked suspiciously like the *good* biscuits. She set everything down between them, then pulled up the armchair.

“Right,” she said, already slipping into ‘project mode’. “Let’s go over everything you’ve got. Video clips, documents, statements, anything that backs up your case. We’ll sort, label, duplicate. Then we’ll make a plan.”

Ten offered her mum a crumpet in silent appreciation. Harper looked from one to the other, a smile just tugging at the corner of her mouth. The way they bounced off each other—dry remarks, knowing looks—it was a rhythm she hadn’t experienced in years. It was safe, but also sharp-edged in the best way, like a joke between people who trusted each other absolutely.

“So,” Mum said, setting down her mug. “Evidence. Show me the goods.”

Ten retrieved her laptop and powered it on, while Harper settled beside her on the couch, scrolling through saved videos on her phone. They sat shoulder to shoulder, bodies close but easy, leaning into each other’s space like it was natural.

“I’ve got all the videos uploaded to a private folder,” Harper murmured. “Different angles of the corridor bullying, the teacher looking right at it. Plus the one of Miss Dawes trying to corner Ten after she reported the rainbow sticker incident.”

Ten’s fingers flew across the keyboard. “Okay. I’ll start a shared drive. Then we can label everything properly—date, time, who’s in it. We should also pull transcripts for the audio. Just in case.”

Mum gave a low whistle. “This is starting to look like a proper dossier. Remind me not to cross you two.”

Harper chuckled under her breath. “It’s all Ten. She’s terrifying when she’s got a spreadsheet open.”

Ten beamed. “Finally. Someone sees me.”

They worked for over an hour like that—cataloguing, uploading, double-checking. Mum sat nearby,

proofreading things, typing corrections, occasionally sipping tea and pointing out typos with a teacher's quiet smugness.

Halfway through, Ten tossed a stray crumpet crumb at her. "You're enjoying this too much."

"I never get to grade blackmail folders," Mum replied with mock-seriousness. "This is far more fun than writing articles about whatever the town council now has planned."

Harper laughed aloud, the sound startlingly open. She didn't even try to hide it.

It was that sound, more than anything, that made Ten glance sideways, the warmth in her chest suddenly swelling. Harper looked lighter here. Brighter. And it wasn't just safety—it was belonging. She had started teasing back, smiling easily with Mum, defending her organisational skills. It made Ten's throat tighten in a strange, wonderful way.

"You okay?" she asked quietly.

Harper looked at her, a question in her eyes, then nodded. "Yeah. I am. I think... this helps."

Ten smiled. "Me too."

Mum clapped her hands softly once. “Alright, team. One more hour, and then we eat. I’ve got pasta bake in the oven, and no one’s allowed to talk about emotional trauma over dinner.”

Ten groaned. “You’re the one who brought up Pythagoras at lunch last week. Don’t act like you’re above inflicting pain.”

“Ah, but that was educational pain.”

“Worse!”

Harper was grinning again, folding her arms across her knees, clearly enjoying the chaos. Ten caught her eye and, for a second, the world narrowed to just that—them, the sofa, the flickering laptop screen, and the growing sense that maybe, just maybe, they could win this.

And even if they didn’t, they weren’t alone anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The pasta bake had been demolished in near silence—not from tension, but from that peculiar kind of tiredness that settles in after a big thing has finally begun to move. A thing you’ve carried for so long, suddenly shared. A quiet sort of relief.

Now the plates were in the sink, the lights were low, and the curtains drawn tight against the night. The living room glowed with a warm amber softness, the only light coming from the lamp by the window and the fading embers of the fake fire Mum always called “aggressively cosy.”

Ten and Harper were curled together at one end of the sofa, knees drawn up and bare legs tangled slightly under a fleece throw. Ten wore her pyjama shorts and an oversized top that used to belong to Mum—washed so many times it was more air than fabric. Harper had

borrowed one of Ten's old jumpers, which hung long over her thighs, sleeves half-covering her hands as she cradled a mug of peppermint tea.

Mum sat at the other end of the sofa with her own mug resting on a cushion. She'd changed into leggings and a loose cardigan, hair tied up but still somehow gently chaotic.

"I spoke to Dad," Harper said quietly, breaking the quiet. "He said it's fine if I stay. He didn't even ask why."

Ten turned her head slightly, resting her cheek against the top of Harper's arm. "Good. You can have the bed then."

Harper smirked. "Only if you don't snore."

Ten nudged her. "I do not snore."

Mum gave a soft snort from behind her mug. "You do. Like a hedgehog having a nightmare."

"Mum!"

"I say it with love," she said, deadpan, but her eyes were kind.

A brief hush settled again. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked softly. Somewhere in the kitchen, the fridge made a mechanical hum. Outside, wind teased the windowpane—but inside, it was still. Safe.

Then Mum leaned forward slightly, resting her elbows on her knees. “Alright, girls. Let’s talk next steps.”

Ten sat up properly, and Harper mirrored her after a second. They weren’t tangled now, but there was no space between them, either.

“You’ve got evidence,” Mum said, her voice calm and steady. “The video clips. The therapy forms. The teacher meeting minutes. You’ve got a timeline, you’ve got documentation, and you’ve got lived experience—your own testimony. That’s more than most whistleblowers start with.”

Harper looked down at her hands. “But... what do we do with it? Just hand it in to the school? They’ll bury it again.”

“No,” Mum said firmly. “We’re not giving this to the people who caused the harm. We give it to someone who can hold them accountable.”

She reached beside her and pulled a notepad from between two cushions—because of course she’d already started planning. “You have three options. One:

you take it to the local authority, ask for an investigation into safeguarding failures. That takes time, but it's official."

Ten nodded slowly. "Okay. What's two?"

"Two," Mum said, "is the press. Local, maybe national if it catches interest. With the right angle—student whistleblowers, failure of duty, a headteacher covering for her own daughter—someone will pick it up."

Harper winced slightly. "But then our names get out."

"Not if you don't want them to," Mum said gently. "There are ways to do it anonymously. It's more complicated, but doable."

Ten looked at Harper. "And three?"

Mum hesitated. "You do both. Submit the report to the local authority and leak it—quietly—to a journalist. That puts pressure on the system to respond, and it keeps it from vanishing into a drawer."

The girls were quiet for a while.

Ten's fingers played absently with the edge of the throw. "What would you do, if it were you?"

Mum smiled, but there was sadness in it. “I’d do both. And I’d make sure I wasn’t doing it alone.”

Harper let out a breath. “Okay. Okay, then. We’re doing this.”

Ten looked at her, eyes wide but steady. “Yeah. We are.”

Mum gave a small, proud nod. “Then we start writing the formal complaint. I’ll help you draft it. And we’ll make backups of everything—paper, digital, cloud, USB. If anyone tries to bury this, they’ll need a very large shovel.”

A beat passed.

Then Harper murmured, “Do you think Poppy would’ve done this if she’d had someone?”

Ten blinked, then shook her head. “No. I don’t think she even knew she *could*.”

Harper looked at her hands again. “I want to do it for her. Not just for us.”

“You are,” Ten said softly. “We are. We are doing it for all of us.”

Mum didn't say anything—just reached out and squeezed Harper's arm once. Harper didn't flinch. Didn't move away.

It was late. The world outside the house was still the same—unfair, unforgiving, full of risk. But in this room, at this hour, three people sat together on a battered old sofa, and for once, none of them had to hold anything alone.

The laptop was balanced on Mum's knees now, its glow the only light still burning. The notepad had been filled and flipped over, a pencil tucked behind Mum's ear like it belonged there permanently. The girls were still curled on the sofa, shoulders brushing as they leaned in to read over the text taking shape on screen.

Harper had offered up the phrasing for the first paragraph—careful, formal, all edge beneath the politeness. Ten had typed the next part, fingers faltering only once, when she reached the bit about the “systematic silencing of student voices.” Mum hadn't said anything—just nodded, once, like she approved of the steel behind the words.

They worked in quiet bursts. Discussing which points needed evidence attached. Cross-checking the names and dates from the minutes. Mum had asked questions where it mattered—nothing intrusive, just gentle things

like, *“Are you happy saying it this way?”* or *“Do you want to leave this next part for now?”*

Every now and then, Harper would tug the sleeves of her borrowed jumper down over her hands and Ten would reach over without thinking, brushing her knuckles lightly against Harper’s arm. No one commented on it. It was just part of the rhythm now.

Eventually, Mum hit save, then backed the file up in three different places. “There,” she said, letting out a long breath. “I’ll print two hard copies in the morning. One for the council. One for... safekeeping.”

Harper sat back, exhaling slowly. “It’s real now, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Ten said softly. “We’re actually doing it.”

Mum closed the laptop with a satisfying little click and stood, stretching. “And on that note—bedtime.”

Ten groaned. “But I’m wide awake.”

“You’ve been wide awake for three hours on the edge of a breakdown,” Mum said, ruffling her hair. “It counts. Off you go. Brush your teeth, face cream if you can be bothered, and yes—you can sleep in.”

Harper blinked. “We’re not going in tomorrow?”

“Nope,” Mum said, already scooping mugs into her hands. “You’re coming with me. First thing. We’re hand-delivering that complaint. If the school rings, I’ll tell them you’re sick with integrity.”

Ten grinned. “Terminal honesty. Highly contagious.”

Harper chuckled softly, the sound a little raspy with tiredness. “Quarantine us for truth.”

“That’s the spirit,” Mum said from the kitchen, her voice fading as the tap ran. “Go on, you two. Sleep while the world is still quiet.”

They stood slowly, a little reluctant to leave the warm cocoon of the sofa. Ten picked up the laptop bag while Harper folded the fleece throw neatly, even though she didn’t have to.

“Hey,” Ten said as they climbed the stairs. “Thanks for doing this. Not just for Poppy. For me too.”

Harper glanced over. “You’re not doing it alone.”

Ten nodded. “I know. And that changes everything.”

They disappeared into the soft hush of the hallway, feet bare against the carpet, the weight of what they’d done settling over them—but lighter now. No longer crushing.

Ten was already under the duvet when Harper came out of the bathroom, bare-legged and slightly flushed from the heat of the water. The hallway light spilled across the carpet for a moment before Harper flicked it off and padded over to the bed.

“Left you the good towel,” she said quietly, slipping into the other side of the double.

“You’re my favourite towel,” Ten mumbled into her pillow.

Harper snorted softly, tugging the duvet up to her chin. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Mm-hmm.”

For a while, there was only the sound of the house settling. The faint click of a pipe. A distant car. Harper lay on her back, staring at the ceiling. Ten was curled towards her, not touching, just close. The kind of close that said *you can, if you want to*.

“I keep thinking,” Harper whispered eventually, “what if we hadn’t met? What if you’d just... kept your head down, stayed quiet?”

“I tried,” Ten murmured. “Didn’t work.”

There was a pause. Then: “You changed things.”

“You did too.”

Harper turned her head slightly, watching her in the dark. “I was just angry.”

“And I was just scared.” Ten rolled onto her back, letting their shoulders touch. “But now we’re angry and scared and... doing something.”

Harper breathed out, the air warm between them. “That’s what terrifies them. When we find each other.”

“Yeah,” Ten said softly. “They were fine with us being miserable alone.”

The silence that followed wasn’t heavy—it was full. Full of everything they didn’t need to say out loud right now. The fear, the strength, the what-comes-next.

Harper shifted, just enough for her fingers to brush Ten’s under the duvet. A light touch. Testing.

Ten threaded theirs together without hesitation.

“You’re not sleeping in separate beds anymore, then?” Mum called faintly from down the hall, amused and too perceptive by half.

“Go to bed, Mum!” Ten groaned.

“Just checking you’re not planning to overthrow the monarchy in your sleep.”

“We’ll do it in the morning!” Ten called back, her face burning.

Harper was laughing silently beside her, face buried in the pillow. Ten gave her a nudge, and Harper only laughed harder.

The room settled again after that. Darkness. Quiet. A warm duvet and someone’s foot brushing against yours.

They didn’t speak again. Didn’t need to.

They fell asleep holding hands.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Morning came slowly, creeping in through the half-drawn curtains with the softness of a Sunday lie-in. But it wasn't Sunday. And they weren't just skipping school — they were doing something real.

Ten sat at the kitchen table in one of Mum's oversized jumpers, nursing a hot mug of tea. The sleeves flopped over her hands, and she didn't bother pushing them back. Harper was beside her, hair still damp from the shower, one foot tucked up under her as she spread jam onto toast like she'd always belonged there.

"You two ready?" Mum asked, slipping a folder into her handbag with the same calm efficiency she used for hospital paperwork, passports, broken hearts.

Ten nodded. "I think so."

Harper gave a quieter, slower nod, but her eyes were set. Determined.

The file had been printed last night — redacted where it needed to be, clearly labelled and backed up on both girls’ phones and Mum’s USB stick. It included the video of the teacher smiling during the bullying, the minutes obtained through the sock-switching manoeuvre, the full footage of the hallway confrontation, and the meeting records that linked the headteacher directly to the cover-up of the Poppy Ellis incident.

It was all there.

“I called ahead,” Mum said, as she pulled on her coat. “They’ll see us. I didn’t give too many details, just said it was safeguarding related, and that it was urgent.”

Ten’s stomach twisted. “Do you think they’ll believe us?”

“I think,” Mum said, pausing by the door, “they’ll have to. I also called Social Services.”

The car ride was quiet — not tense, just full. Harper sat in the back with Ten, knees touching. Occasionally their eyes would meet, just for a second, and something steady passed between them: *We’re doing this.*

The building wasn't grand — just a squat office in the next town, beige bricks and frosted windows — but Ten felt her heart climbing into her throat as they walked in. The receptionist greeted them politely, then passed them off to a woman named Ms Patel, who looked kind without trying to be. She led them down a corridor that smelled of printer toner and floor cleaner.

Mum did most of the talking. She laid out the folder on the table, explained how long the bullying had gone on, how the school had not only failed to protect but actively silenced. She didn't embellish. She didn't need to.

Ten watched Ms Patel's expression shift as she skimmed the documents. The page with the headteacher's threat. The list with Poppy and Harper's name. The video freeze-frame of the teacher watching cruelty with a smile.

Eventually, Ms Patel set down the file and looked at them all in turn.

"This is serious," she said. "I want you to know—you've done the right thing coming here. You've been incredibly brave."

Harper sat very still. Not tense, not relaxed. Just... holding herself together.

“What happens now?” Mum asked.

“We’ll take this forward. There’s a process. I can’t promise everything will move quickly, but this won’t be ignored.”

Ten nodded slowly. It didn’t feel like a victory — not yet. But it felt like the first step that actually *mattered*.

As they left the office, the sky had turned grey and cool, but not threatening. Ten walked beside Harper down the pavement, their fingers brushing occasionally. Neither of them spoke.

They didn’t need to.

They’d delivered the truth. Now the rest would come.

Mum led them down the high street, her coat flapping a little in the wind, until they ducked into a narrow-fronted café tucked between a charity shop and a chemist. Inside, the air was warm and sweet with cinnamon and coffee beans. A soft clatter of cups, quiet conversation, and the low hum of music wrapped around them like a blanket.

Harper lingered near the doorway, her fingers brushing the edge of her coat sleeves.

Mum glanced back. “Corner table’s free.”

Ten slid into the booth first, shrugging off her bag and kicking her feet under the table. Harper followed, sitting close beside her, not touching but near enough to feel the warmth. She looked out the window, watching people pass—ordinary people, doing ordinary things. No one staring. No one whispering.

Mum returned with three hot chocolates and a plate of shortbread biscuits. “I asked for extra cream on yours,” she said, setting one in front of Harper. “Figured you could do with it.”

Harper blinked, then smiled, shy and small. “Thanks.”

They sat like that for a while, just sipping, the clink of spoons and soft sips filling the space between words.

Ten’s hand found Harper’s under the table—tentative, not demanding, just there. Harper didn’t pull away.

For Harper, it was like finding a place that didn’t ask her to apologise. Her spine slowly uncurled from its usual hunch of guardedness. Her fingers stayed laced with Ten’s.

Ten gave her a nudge with her shoulder. “We did it.”

“Yeah,” Harper said, her voice quiet. “We really did.”

She looked across the table at Mum. “Do you think they’ll actually do something?”

Mum met her gaze directly. “They have to. We’ve got minutes, video, referral forms. It’s not hearsay. It’s a paper trail—and they ignored it.”

Harper nodded slowly, the words soaking in.

Outside, a man walked past with a shaggy dog wearing a raincoat. Inside, the steam from their mugs curled upwards, soft and lazy.

For once, Harper wasn’t waiting for something to go wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

They didn't expect the cars.

Ten spotted them first, just after they'd rounded the bend at the top of the hill, where the trees opened and the school came into view below. Three dark vehicles, two unmarked and one with a flashing blue light mounted discreetly behind the windscreen, had parked just outside the school gates. Uniformed staff stood nearby, stiff and uncertain, while a handful of figures in plain clothes moved with quiet purpose through the crowd.

Harper slowed her steps. "Are those—?"

"Police," Ten breathed. "And... someone from child services, maybe?"

They walked the rest of the way in silence, hearts hammering in time. Students clustered just inside the

gates, not entering. The usual morning chaos had paused. Conversations hushed as people turned to look at the newcomers. Word was already spreading—fast and wild, like fire in dry grass.

“Someone's getting arrested.”

“No, it's an inspection.”

“I heard the headteacher's been suspended—”

Harper kept close to Ten, her shoulder brushing hers.

“Do you think it's started?”

Ten didn't answer, not with words. She just reached for Harper's hand and held it tightly.

The gates were still open. No one stopped them from walking through. No one stopped anyone. The teachers—those who were visible—were clearly flustered. Ms Dawes was in deep conversation with a woman in a navy suit, her usual iron composure fraying around the edges. Mr Bryant stood near the reception doors, arms folded, but for once not barking orders. Just watching.

And there, at the far end of the courtyard, was the headteacher herself—pale, stiff, and being spoken to by a man holding a leather folio and what looked like a warrant badge clipped to his belt.

Harper let out a slow breath. “Oh my god. They’re here for her.”

All around them, students had given up pretending. No one was going to class. Backpacks were slung lazily to the side, phones were out, and everyone was watching. Some were whispering, others gawking openly.

Someone nearby muttered, “Finally,” with a kind of breathless satisfaction.

Ten turned, scanning the crowd. “Do you see Lottie?”

Harper shook her head. “Not yet. But people are watching *us*, too.”

It was true. Here and there, eyes flicked their way. Not with malice this time. Not even the sort of fearful avoidance that had haunted them for weeks. This was something else—curiosity, awe, maybe even a flicker of admiration.

A ripple passed through the gathered students as the headteacher raised her voice—just for a moment. Then she was interrupted. One of the officials held up a piece of paper. Another leaned in to say something, firm and final.

And then she was being escorted inside.

There were no cuffs. No dramatic takedown. Just the quiet efficiency of people who knew exactly what they were doing, and didn't care about saving face.

Harper turned to Ten. Her eyes were wide, not with fear, but with disbelief. "It's actually happening."

Ten swallowed the lump in her throat and gave the smallest nod. "We started this."

Around them, the school began to change. Not physically—but the air itself felt different. Like the place had exhaled something rotten, and for the first time in years, someone had noticed the stink.

A teacher finally raised her voice. "Students—please return to your form rooms!"

No one moved.

Harper glanced sideways. "What do we do?"

Ten grinned, not unkindly. "We watch."

After the headteacher was escorted through the main doors and out of sight, no bell rang.

No morning assembly. No teacher patrols. No booming voice barking over the tannoy.

Instead, the students lingered in the courtyard, unsure what to do. A few drifted toward the school building, uncertain. Eventually, someone — probably a senior teacher — must have told them to head to their form rooms and wait.

So they did. Sort of.

The hallways weren't quiet.

Clusters formed at every junction — doorways, lockers, stairwells. Conversations hummed in low tones, rising and falling like ocean swells. No one sat in neat rows or opened textbooks. Instead, the school seemed to float in a kind of suspended animation, like everyone was holding their breath and didn't quite know why.

Ten and Harper stuck together, slipping into their usual classroom without a word. There were already half a dozen others inside — heads bent over phones, heads snapping up when the door creaked open, as if they thought it might be someone important.

It never was.

There were no teachers.

“They’re all in some emergency meeting,” someone muttered. “I heard it’s about the safeguarding stuff.”

“I heard it’s because the headteacher’s been suspended.”

“Someone said she’s getting arrested. Like *properly*.”

Harper moved to the windowsill and perched, her knees drawn up slightly, her arms crossed. She was listening — not to the conversation in the room, but to the hallway just beyond, where more footsteps and hushed voices drifted through.

Ten joined her. She didn’t sit, just leaned beside the radiator and stared out across the grey, overcast school grounds.

Then a quiet gasp from behind. “Is this...?”

Ten turned. Someone — one of the Year Tens — held out their phone. “It’s on X. A journalist just posted a scan of some kind of internal document. Look—”

Harper was already moving to see. The student tilted the phone so they both could read.

The article was short, but the scan was real. Ten recognised the page immediately — the minutes from the teacher conference. Poppy’s name was redacted but it was the minutes all the same. And beneath that, the headteacher’s own words, black and damning.

Someone had leaked it.

Ten’s breath caught. “That’s Mum.”

Harper blinked at her. “Seriously?”

“She said she’d make sure the truth spread before the school could bury it.”

More phones came out. One by one, screens lit up around the room. Students scrolled, tapped, shared. Some reading aloud softly. Some staring in open-mouthed disbelief.

“This isn’t just one thing,” someone whispered. “This goes *deep*.”

“I think my name’s on that list,” said a girl Ten didn’t know well. Her voice shook. “I... I was told I was just ‘being emotional’ when I said I wasn’t safe in school.”

Harper turned, her expression softening. “Do you want to sit with us?”

The girl blinked, surprised, but nodded slowly. She crossed the room, curling up beside Harper on the windowsill, her phone clutched like a shield.

The whispers kept growing.

In some rooms, students laughed nervously. In others, someone cried softly. Everywhere, something was shifting — the silence of the last few years cracking open under the weight of long-buried truths.

For the first time, people were *talking*.

Ten watched it unfold with a strange mix of dread and quiet satisfaction. “It’s not over,” she said quietly, more to herself than anyone else. “But this is the beginning.”

Harper leaned her shoulder into hers, warm and grounding. “We did this.”

Their eyes met, and a warm smile passed between them—soft, certain.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

They watched from the windows first. Word had spread quickly — someone had spotted her, the headteacher, being led down the corridor, flanked by two officials in smart jackets and grim expressions. She looked smaller somehow. Paler.

And when she stepped through the front doors, there was a beat of disbelief. Then the realisation.

That's it. It's actually happening.

The courtyard filled in seconds.

The corridors had already been buzzing, but now they emptied completely. Teachers didn't stop them. No one barked orders or told them to return to form rooms. No one even tried.

From every block, students spilled out — from classrooms and stairwells and side doors. They converged wordlessly on the schoolyard, a strange hush rippling over the crowd like static. Ten could hear her own breathing as she moved with Harper at her side, half of their form group loosely surrounding them like a protective shoal.

The police car was parked just beyond the main gates, lights off but unmistakable. The headteacher walked stiffly toward it, hands at her sides, face unreadable. She didn't look at the students. Not once.

Someone behind Ten started filming.

Someone else murmured, "She's really going."

Harper's hand brushed Ten's — not to grab, just to remind her she was there. Ten didn't move away.

By the time the headteacher reached the car, nearly the entire school was outside. The air was cold, sharp, the grey clouds hanging heavy overhead — but no one complained. They just watched.

When the car pulled away, a long, low breath seemed to escape from the crowd, like the school itself had been holding it in all along.

Then movement, a shift near the edge of the group.

Lottie.

She stood with only two girls flanking her now — the others had peeled away in the last hour, edging into safer territory. Some had vanished entirely.

Emily stood beside her, arms crossed, expression tight. The usual smugness was missing.

Lottie spotted them. Her eyes locked on Ten and Harper as if she knew that they were the source of all of this, and for a moment, she looked like she might still try.

“You think this changes anything?” Lottie said, her voice low but sharp. “You’re still nobodies.”

Ten said nothing. She didn’t have to.

Harper, standing tall beside her, tilted her head just slightly. “You done?”

Lottie blinked, startled.

But it wasn’t Harper that stopped her.

It was Emily.

“Shut up,” she snapped, turning to face Lottie full on. “Just—shut up. You don’t get to talk anymore.”

The words hit like a slap. Lottie seemed stunned.

Emily turned and walked off, heels snapping against the concrete, not even glancing back. The two girls who'd stood with them exchanged glances, then followed, leaving Lottie alone in the yard.

She didn't say another word. She didn't have time.

Lottie stood frozen in the middle of the schoolyard, her mouth slightly open as Emily strode away without looking back. The sound of her footsteps echoed louder than they should've, swallowed by the sudden hush that had spread across the gathered students.

No one moved to comfort Lottie. No one laughed, or sneered, or even whispered. The tide had turned — and she knew it.

Ten watched the moment unfold with a strange, hollow ache in her chest. Not pity, not really. But something close. A recognition of what it felt like to be utterly alone, though Lottie had earned it a thousand times over.

Then a voice cut through the quiet.

“Charlotte Wells?”

Two figures stepped into the schoolyard from the main corridor — both wearing plain jackets, dark trousers. They looked too neat, too calm for teachers. One of

them, a woman with a ponytail and clipped speech, held up an ID wallet just long enough for those nearest to glimpse the crest.

“We need a word with you.”

Lottie turned sharply, her bravado twitching back to life. “I’m in the middle of something.”

The second officer, taller and older, stepped forward. “This won’t take long. We’re following up on a formal complaint regarding past incidents of assault, involving fellow students. You’re not under arrest — but we need you to accompany us off school grounds for questioning.”

Lottie blinked, scoffed — then looked around for backup.

There was none.

Even the few who’d stood behind her minutes ago had quietly stepped aside. One of them busied herself with her phone. The other pretended not to see.

“You can’t be serious,” Lottie said, her voice too high.

The officer didn’t argue. He simply stepped beside her and gestured toward the entrance.

“This way, please.”

And for the first time in as long as anyone could remember, Lottie moved without a single soul following her. Her posture was stiff, her face tight with disbelief and shame. But she didn’t protest again.

She walked.

A murmur ran through the crowd — not loud, not gleeful. Just a ripple of disbelief, of quiet reckoning.

And then, as the officers and Lottie disappeared through the school doors, the sun broke free from a cloud overhead. The moment shimmered in the silence that followed — heavy, fragile, and full of everything that came next.

Harper let out a slow breath.

Ten turned to her. “That was... unexpected.”

Harper nodded. “I’ll take it.”

They stood there a moment longer, letting the cold air wash over them. Around them, the students began to murmur again — softer now. The energy had changed. Less frantic. More watchful. Waiting to see what would happen next.

And in that quiet, Ten reached out and took Harper's hand.

This time, she held on.

Chapter Thirty

The staffroom was full, but not with its usual clatter of teacups and low chatter. The chairs were pulled into uneven rows, hastily arranged around the edge of the room, while a knot of senior staff stood awkwardly at the front. Someone had unplugged the kettle. No one touched the biscuits.

The room crackled with unease.

Ms Grant — the teacher who had guided Ten to the assembly on her first morning—stood stiffly near the window, arms crossed tight, her face drawn and pale. Beside her, a council official in a navy coat flipped briskly through a clipboard, barely glancing up as he called the next name.

“Mr Barton.”

The P.E. teacher stood slowly. His face was blank, but his hands trembled faintly at his sides. He said nothing as he walked forward, collected the folded letter of suspension, and was quietly escorted out by one of the officers.

No one spoke.

Not until the door clicked shut behind him.

Then came the first low murmur. A chair scraped against the floor.

A history teacher leaned forward, his voice low. “They’re really doing it.”

Ms Jenkins, the ICT teacher, twisted the strap of her handbag. “They’ve got video. Witness statements. Emails.”

Another name was called — Ms Thorne, the smiling form tutor whose grinning face had been captured in one of the now-viral videos, standing back while a girl was being jeered at in the corridor.

She didn’t protest. Just stood, lifted her handbag, and left the room with her head bowed.

A wave of breath swept the staffroom. Tension lifted for some, tightened for others.

“I always said it was getting out of hand,” muttered one of the science teachers, too loudly.

Someone turned and stared at him. “Did you ever say it out loud? To anyone that mattered?”

The man flushed and looked away.

Near the back, Ms Hargreaves — Ten’s English teacher — sat with her arms folded tight across her chest, her knuckles pale. She hadn’t spoken once.

“I still don’t understand how it got this far,” whispered another teacher.

The council official finally looked up. “Because no one stopped it.”

His voice was quiet, but it cut across the room like a blade.

“The council is taking over the school’s management, effective immediately,” he continued. “A temporary leadership team will be appointed by the end of the day. Until then, classes are suspended. Students are free to leave or receive counselling from Social Services in the form rooms.”

Murmurs again. Someone swore under their breath.

“What about Lottie?” someone asked. “And the other students named in the complaints?”

“They’re being removed from the school premises as we speak,” Mr Levin said grimly. “Pending investigation.”

No one argued.

A maths teacher cleared his throat. “Do we... know who’ll be interim head?”

“Not yet,” said the official. “We’re reviewing possible candidates. If you’ve been complicit or failed in safeguarding duties, you will not be considered.”

Ms Fellows spoke then, her voice dry and tired. “So that narrows it down.”

No one laughed.

Instead, the room was filled with the sound of shifting bags, tapping shoes, rustling papers. A staff room full of people waiting for judgement — some afraid, some relieved. Some angry, others ashamed.

And through the window, they could still see the students outside in the courtyard, no longer under their control. Watching. Waiting.

Chapter Thirty-One

The house smelled faintly of baking — cinnamon buns, maybe — though no one had actually baked anything. It was just the kind of warmth that clung to the walls in Ten's home. Familiar. Lived in. Safe.

Harper sat close beside Ten on the couch, their shoulders pressed together, fingers woven tightly between them. She hadn't let go since they'd come through the front door. Ten hadn't wanted her to.

Richard Midvale sat in the armchair opposite, still in his work shirt with the sleeves rolled awkwardly at the elbows. His bag rested on the table beside him. He'd left work early, Mum had said, the moment he heard. The story was already hitting local news sites. Names weren't published, but he'd known. Of course he had.

He hadn't said much at first. Just hugged Harper with a stunned sort of gentleness, murmuring, "*I should've known something wasn't right.*" Now he was sitting forward slightly, elbows on knees, the lines around his mouth deeper than usual. His gaze flicked, just once, to where their hands were joined. But he didn't say a word.

"So," Mum said, breaking the silence as she returned from the kitchen with a tray balanced expertly in her hands, "I didn't know if we were a biscuit or a slice-of-cake sort of household today, so I've gone with both. And tea, of course. I've got oat milk and normal."

She gave Richard a soft, grounding smile as she set everything down on the coffee table. "You look like you could use something stronger, but tea's what we've got for now."

He blinked, startled by her gentle humour. Then let out a breath. "Tea's perfect, thank you."

Harper shifted just slightly against Ten, her fingers twitching in Ten's grasp but not pulling away. There was tension in her — a kind of coiled restraint — but it wasn't fear. More like waiting. Testing the waters.

"So," Mum said, easing herself into the second armchair. "We're just taking today slowly. No rush to

decide anything. The council's handling the mess, and the school's effectively paused. You're both home. Safe. That's the bit I care about."

Richard gave a nod. "It's... a lot," he said at last. His voice was quiet. "The report online— It doesn't even touch the surface of what happened, does it?"

"No," Ten said softly.

Harper squeezed her hand once. "Not even close."

Richard leaned back, running a hand down his face. "I had no idea it was this deep. The way they treated you—" He stopped, glancing toward Harper. "You said things were bad, but I thought you meant... bullying. Name-calling. I didn't know it was structural. Organised."

"It was both," Harper said. Her voice was steadier than Ten expected. "But now it's out there."

"And I'm proud of you," he said, quickly. The words caught him by surprise as much as anyone else. "I am, Harper. I know I... I haven't always known how to say things. But I'm proud."

Harper looked down at their joined hands. A tiny breath left her — like some part of her had been waiting for that. Maybe longer than she'd realised.

Mum refilled the teacups, glancing between them with that steady, no-nonsense calm she carried like armour. “This is going to be a strange few days. Maybe longer. But you’re not in this alone.”

Ten felt her chest loosen, just a little. She didn’t realise how much weight she’d been carrying until now. Sitting here with Harper, their legs bare and tangled under a knit blanket, hands tight together, Mum to her right and Richard across from them — it didn’t feel like a war room anymore.

It felt like a family.

Not one that matched any picture on a greeting card. But one that worked.

That held.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The soft morning light slipped through the curtains, dust motes dancing lazily in the golden beams. It was still early, the quiet hum of a Sunday morning wrapping around Ten's room like a gentle embrace. The weeks since everything had shifted—the scandal, the upheaval, the uneasy calm that followed—had settled into something more bearable. Not perfect, not all fixed, but better.

Ten lay back against the pillows, warm beneath the duvet, Harper curled close beside her. Their hands were entwined, fingers tracing familiar patterns as if to remind themselves they were still here—together.

“We’ve come a long way,” Ten whispered, voice soft and steady. “Feels like forever since that chaos at school.”

Harper nodded, her eyes still heavy with sleep but bright with a quiet hope. “A few weeks now, hasn’t it? I keep thinking about that.”

They shared a smile, a little smile that held the weight of everything they’d been through—the fear, the defiance, the small victories. Outside, the world felt distant, as if time itself was giving them this moment to breathe.

“The October midterm break is just around the corner,” Ten said, a note of excitement threading through her words. “Only a week away. I can’t wait—not just for the rest but for us. To not have to think about school at all, even for a bit.”

Harper’s fingers squeezed Ten’s hand gently. “I’m looking forward to it too. We deserve a proper break.”

The room was quiet except for the soft rhythm of their breathing, a sanctuary away from the noise of the world. They lingered there, in the warm calm, knowing the assembly tomorrow would bring new challenges—but for now, there was only this. This tender stillness, this shared comfort.

Ten’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Whatever happens tomorrow, we’re ready.”

Harper smiled, leaning her head against Ten's shoulder.
"Together."

The kitchen was bathed in soft morning light, warm and inviting. The faint scent of brewing coffee mingled with the sweet aroma of toast, filling the air with quiet comfort. Ten's mum moved about with practiced ease, her slippers padding softly across the tiled floor. Harper, still in her oversized hoodie and cosy pyjama bottoms, perched at the kitchen table like she'd always belonged there—because she did now.

Ten sat beside her, clad in a soft, well-worn jumper, her bare legs brushing against the cool wood of the chair legs. The easy silence between them was like a balm, threaded with the occasional hum or clink of a mug.

"So," Mum said, her voice bright but steady, "the big assembly tomorrow. Everyone's wondering what's going to happen."

Harper glanced at Ten, squeezing her hand beneath the table. "It feels like the start of something real, you know? Like things are finally changing."

Ten nodded. “Yeah. It’s scary, but good scary. Like finally getting out of the dark.”

Mum dropped into a chair with her tea mug. “And Lottie, is she back?”

“She’s in custody,” Ten replied, her voice firm but tinged with something like relief. “It’s not over for her, but at least there’s accountability now.”

A quiet pause settled over the table.

“Emily’s been walking the halls alone,” Harper said softly, eyes downcast. “She came back last week but no one’s with her anymore. It’s strange to see.”

Ten gave Harper’s hand a gentle squeeze. “She’s lost, like we were before. But this time, things are different.”

Mum smiled, reaching out to tousle Ten’s hair. “You’ve both come so far. Tomorrow’s just another step.”

Harper smiled, the warmth in it unmistakable. “Feels like I’m part of the family now. I’m not just visiting.”

Mum glanced at them both with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “Well, if you’re officially family, that means you’re now responsible for all the burnt toast and terrible tea-making. Welcome aboard.”

They all burst out laughing, the sound bright and easy, filling the kitchen like sunlight. For a moment, the worries of tomorrow slipped away, leaving just the warmth of togetherness.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The school hall was packed, every seat filled with students, teachers, and parents. The air hummed with a mixture of anticipation and relief — the kind of tension that comes when a long night’s storm has finally passed, leaving fresh hope in its wake. At the front, a large banner stretched across the stage: *New Beginnings at Ambleside High*.

Mum sat near the front with Richard and a few other parents, her calm presence grounding Ten and Harper as they sat quietly among the crowd. Ten squeezed Harper’s hand gently; the familiar warmth was steady and sure.

A senior council representative stepped up to the microphone, their expression serious but hopeful. “Good morning, everyone. I’m here to share an

important update on behalf of the council and the school governing body.”

The hall fell into silence, all ears on the official.

“Following the recent events and the removal of the previous headteacher, I am pleased to announce that Mrs. Evelyn Clarke will be the new permanent headteacher of Ambleside High. Mrs. Clarke comes with extensive experience in school leadership and a strong commitment to safeguarding and student welfare. We are confident she will guide the school towards a brighter future.”

A ripple of applause spread through the crowd. Ten and Harper shared a small smile — the wheels of change turning at last.

The council representative continued, voice steady. “We also want to take this moment to honour Poppy Ellis, whose courage and spirit continue to inspire us. The gymnastics building will now bear her name, a lasting tribute to her memory.”

Applause grew, some students dabbing at eyes. Ten felt Harper’s grip tighten, their shared pride and sorrow mingling quietly.

“Finally,” the representative said, “we recognise two students who showed extraordinary bravery in bringing

to light the issues that have affected this school community. Ten Hawthorne and Harper Midvale, please join me on stage.”

Hand in hand, Ten and Harper rose and walked up to the stage together. The hall fell into respectful silence, the applause that greeted them warm and sincere.

They accepted framed certificates — tokens of gratitude from the school and council. The representative smiled warmly. “Your courage has helped us all. Thank you for standing up for what is right.”

The applause swelled, and in that moment, Ten looked at Harper. Their eyes met, shining with quiet certainty.

Without hesitation, Ten leaned in and kissed Harper gently, right there on stage.

The room paused, then erupted into cheers and applause.

It was more than a kiss — it was a promise of hope, of love, and of a future reclaimed.

Hands still linked, standing side by side beneath the banner of new beginnings, Ten and Harper knew this was only the start.

When Ten transfers to a new school after her parents' divorce, all she wants is to disappear, to blend in, keep her head down, and maybe make it to the end of the year in one piece. But when a rainbow sticker on her bag sparks a vicious campaign of bullying, nothing feels safe anymore.

Harper is already a ghost in the hallways. Marked as violent and friendless after a mysterious incident years earlier, she's learned that speaking up only makes things worse. Until Ten comes along.

As the girls are pulled into a web of secrets, betrayals, and hidden records, they uncover a truth too dangerous for the school to allow—and too important to ignore. Together, they must decide: is the risk of telling the truth worth the price?

A deeply emotional YA novel about love, loyalty, and the quiet courage it takes to be seen.

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UK: anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk

US: stopbullying.gov

