

GOLDFISH

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Feiwei and Friends
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prologue

you'd think it would feel weird being nearly naked in front of so many people, but it doesn't.

I ping my swimsuit straps for luck, once right, twice left, walk out poolside, and take a deep breath, inhaling the familiar tang of chlorine and feet. It sounds gross, but that smell is so exciting. I'm where I belong.

I'm one of the fastest swimmers in my county. That's why I'm here—trying out for a High Performance Training Camp that will set me on my way to Team Great Britain. I've wanted this for as long as I can remember. So . . . you know, no pressure, not a big deal, whev.

I think I'm sweating inside my ears.

I pad along the side of the pool, watching the heat before mine. Older swimmers power up and down; they look so strong—they're not so much swimming as punching their way through water.

We're all in a vast glass room. I want to use the word *palace*. It's a palace made of glass, filled with four Olympic-sized swimming pools! It's basically my dream home. The sounds of splashing and

shouting bounce off the concrete walls. Ninety percent of the people in this room are having the most important day of their lives.

I look around for my best friend, Hannah, and spot her by the changing room. I give her a quick smile. I think she feels a bit queasy, because she does an elaborate mime of puking into the pool. An official eyes her, unimpressed.

I know how she feels. I tuck a stray hair into my swimming cap with a shaking hand.

Hannah rotates her shoulders backward and then forward. She swims butterfly, which gives you really big shoulders, but she's not self-conscious about it; she just wears men's T-shirts. People love Hannah. She's fun. She has huge blond curly hair and big blue eyes and she never stops talking, organizing, and planning. She's been my best friend since we were six, and now, looking at how nervous she is, I find myself feeling protective even though I'm in the same position.

Well, not exactly the same; her parents are really pushy. She ignores it or it would drive her crazy. Mine think swimming is less important than either schoolwork or being a well-rounded human being—we agree to disagree.

Hannah's standing next to me now. She smiles and pulls at the front of my swimming cap. I fold my arms and pretend to ignore her. She pulls the elastic six inches away from my forehead and I brace for her to snap it, but instead she nudges her face next to mine and starts trying to pull my swimming cap over her head as well as mine. Ridiculous human being. This is why I bring spare caps.

I can't keep a straight face. I start giggling and help her pull the thick elastic further over her head. It hurts—her nose is digging hard

into my cheekbone, but I'm determined to get it. *Beep!* Hannah's eyes widen at the sound of the whistle. This is her race!

She hurriedly pulls her head away, making her swimming cap ping off and nearly land in the pool. I can see a couple of swimmers looking very unimpressed at us. Sor-ree. Just trying to lighten a very heavy mood here. I dive to retrieve Hannah's cap while she fights her frizzy mop of hair into a bun.

We hug quickly and she hurries to the nearest pool, where the butterfly swimmers are waiting by the diving blocks. Some impressive shoulders in that group.

Now I'm alone and back to feeling sick and scared about my own race. I tuck my ears into my swimming cap, and everything becomes a smooth roaring noise.

An official comes to check my name against a list she has on her clipboard. I can't help but notice that she has a very fluffy top lip. She catches me staring at it and I quickly look down.

"Louise?" she asks.

"Brown," I say, to her shoe, and she ticks my name off.

She must be one of only ten people in the place who aren't feeling hysterical. If the fire alarm went off, I think we'd all run in circles, screaming and slapping our faces.

My race is called and I join a line of girls who look just like me. Tall girls with no hips, no boobs, and frizzy hair are the norm here. I'm going to fit in so well in the Training Camp! Finally, someone to borrow clothes from.

I look around for Debs, who coaches me and Hannah. She's standing by the pool where I'll be doing my race, arms folded, staring intently at me. She gives me a nod. She's not the most affectionate

person. That nod means “Go on, Lou, I know you can do it! Supportive things, etc.!”

Up on the blocks I scuff my feet and stare dead ahead. You swim no one’s race but your own.

The official nods and I bend into my dive, wrapping my fingertips over the edge of the block and swaying gently to loosen my hips. There’s a pause that feels never-ending, and I focus on the spot in the water where I want my dive to take me.

The starting pistol bangs. There’s an explosion of power from my legs, and I dive hard. I can hear the block rattle as I push away from it with all my strength. A cold, hard slap against my thighs, and I spring into butterfly stroke. Hannah’s faster at this, but I’m pretty good too. I whip my arms up and over my head, my fingers then cutting into the water in front of my face. As my arms pull down, my hips tilt and my legs kick together like a mermaid tail. This is the closest I ever get to elegant.

Backstroke now, my second fastest stroke, and I hold my head steady as I stare up at the ceiling. I practiced this last night when everyone else had finished training. I count signposts on the ceiling so I don’t ram my head into the side of the pool and slow myself down. Debs says this is the mind-set of a consummate pro.

I had to Google *consummate*. It’s either a compliment or a French soup.

I feel so happy when I swim, strong and graceful and like everything is right with the world. This is my Thing.

The individual medley is a strange race—most people are slowest on the breaststroke, fastest on the crawl. I’m the other way around, so I always pull ahead on laps five and six, hopefully opening

up enough of a lead that some freakish monkey-armed girl with a devastating crawl time can't catch me on seven and eight.

And here's seven and eight, harder in a pool where everyone's so powerful. The water is churned up and throwing me about. So much for feeling graceful—this is like fighting water. But I can't sense anyone on the left or right of me, so I must've pulled ahead. Excellent, it's all going according to plan.

Now it's about hanging on to this lead. I carve my right hand back past my face to make a groove in the water just long enough to turn my face and grab a huge, ragged breath. In this choppy water it's difficult, so each time I'm just praying I find air. I can't afford to choke.

Final lap and I'm completely in my rhythm. I know the end is approaching, but I have to keep swimming my hardest so no one catches me. I don't care if I smash my head into the edge of pool—anything to maintain this speed to the end. My wrist hits something hard with a crack that I feel down to my hip, and I've done it.

I've done it! I won.

I fling my head out of the water, rip off my swimming cap and goggles, squeeze the water from my eyes, and look behind me. That's my first thought—how far behind are they?

But there's no one there.

They're all next to me. Everyone. There is *no one* behind me, no one still swimming.

The girl on my left looks bored; the one on the right is casually cleaning her goggles with spit. Oh my . . . *one of them is already out of the pool?! I did that once, against a crap team in Swindon that was so slow I got out before the last girl finished. Debs yelled at me for that. Unsportspersonlike, she said.*

Debs! Where is she, where's my coach? Maybe I swam extra lengths by mistake? Of course, that must be it. Hilarious, of course that's what happened. Dumb but understandable on a high-pressure day. This is *not* a Big Deal. Should I talk to someone, an official? Where is everyone going? Coach! Debs! Hello? No one is looking me in the eye. Did I *die* in that pool? Am I a ghost?

I might as well have. I came in last. For the first time since I started competing at ten years old, I was the slowest swimmer. I'm weak and cold. My legs are heavy as the adrenaline drops out of me. I don't know what to do . . . where to go. . . .

I have to find Hannah, and I look around frantically for her. There she is! She's throwing back her hair, laughing and shaking hands with an official who's handing her a slip of paper. That means she won. She catches my eye and her smile fades.

My best friend and I want to kill her.

chapter 1

my pillow smells. I should've changed it weeks ago, but I haven't, and now it smells like my head. Which I did not realize was so smelly.

I can hear my family moving around downstairs, slamming drawers and clattering bowls. I'm not used to these morning noises because I'd usually be up at five a.m., grab my swim kit, and be training by six. Forty lengths of breaststroke, forty backstroke, forty crawl, ten butterfly, then a quick shower, sleepwalk through school, and be back in the pool by four p.m. YOLO!

But I haven't swum since the time trials three weeks ago, and now I'm stuck with a surprising number of useless hours. Who knew days were so long? I sometimes used to wonder what I was missing as I pounded out the lengths in the pool. Now I know. *No-thing.*

Except I'd never met our mailman before. He has a lot of nose hair. That's it.

My name's Lou and I am a fifteen-year-old ex-swimmer. I have

an older sister, Laverne. Yup, Lou and Lav. We have a brother called Toilet.

That's a lie. It's just me, Lav, Mom, and Dad, in a small semi-detached house in the most boring town in the world.

So this summer I stopped swimming and I met our postman. And I finally got all that crying done that I've been meaning to do for ages, so that's good, isn't it? Plus I really explored the concept of Lying in Bed All Day Feeling Nothing but Despair. A summer lived right to the edges.

It's the first day of school. I'd mark the occasion by wearing a dress, but I don't own one. In our most private moments Hannah and I have accepted that the only way we'll find a dress to fit our shoulders is if we go to that cross-dressing shop in town. They've got nice stuff in the window; we'll cut the labels out.

It's also my first day without Hannah, as she's already left for the High Performance Training Camp in Dorset. She'll be there all term. Mom says that now that we're separated for a bit, I'll come out of Hannah's shadow. But she doesn't understand—I liked it there! I was very happy hanging out in it.

Going back to school would be fine if Hannah hadn't got through the time trials either. We could face it together, maybe hint that the competition was a big conspiracy. That we were *too* fast and we'd have threatened international relations at the next Olympics when we smashed everyone out of the water with our awesome times.

"Yeah, well, Russia," we'd have said, with careful looks around us. "They do *not* like silver, if you know what I'm saying." Then we'd have tugged our fedoras down and skulked off to double physics.

Wonder if the other side of my pillow is less smelly? I flip it. No.

But now Hannah has gone to the High Performance Training Camp without me and I won't see her all term. We're so far away from each other! She's in Dorset and I'm in Essex. She's heading to the Olympics; the most exciting place I'm heading is the bathroom.

Miraculously, it's free—pretty impressive in a house of four people, three of whom take showers you could time with a calendar.

I'm still using that special harsh shampoo for swimmers, the stuff that strips the chlorine out of your hair. Money is a bit tight at the moment, so Mom won't chuck it. I have to use it all up first, and we seem to have found a never-ending bottle. I soap my head and reflect that it really doesn't help that the smell reminds me of my old life.

I step out of the shower, fold a towel dress around me (the only kind I fit in, because it's sleeveless), and scuff my feet along the hallway. The carpet is worn in patches, so I'm careful not to catch my toe on a snagged thread. No one needs to start their day hopping and screaming.

I open my clothes drawer and drag out some jeans and a T-shirt—I don't have any "nice" clothes. Since I was eleven I've been caught up in some desperate, endless growth spurt. There's no point buying decent clothes, because they probably won't fit in a month's time. I'm five ten and *still* growing.

It's fine; if I ever get a boyfriend, I can carry him when he's tired.

I stab a wide-toothed comb gently into my hair because I don't have time to cut it out if it gets tangled. My hair doesn't grow down; it goes *out*, like Hannah's. We don't look like the princess in a fairy tale. We look like the enchanted vines that covered her castle for a hundred years.

It was always comforting to have a best friend who looked as different as I do. And we never minded, because we had swimming. We had a Thing. Now my Thing is gone and so has my friend.

I can't delay this much longer. I'm going to have to eat some breakfast and then . . . gah . . . *school*. I swing around the end of the banister and can't help smiling when I catch sight of my family.

The kitchen is too small for the four of us—we only fit in there if everyone stays very still. If you actually want to *move*, then elbows will get bumped and cereal will get tipped down backs. You know your house is cramped when you can start making a sandwich and end up in a food fight.

Dad is cooking (carefully), Mom's reading a book, and Laverne is troweling makeup onto her ridiculously beautiful face. They are such a good-looking family; they look like they're in an ad. They don't need a Thing. Everyone's just grateful they get to look at them.

I'm proud of them, but I wish I didn't look adopted.

Mom is half Indonesian, all curves and shiny brown hair and skin, while Dad's a bit less dark, and he's chiseled like a doctor on a TV show. Admittedly, he has a bit of a belly these days, but he just holds his breath for photos. Laverne is sixteen, with glossy black hair, actual boobs, and a tattoo that Mom and Dad don't know about.

Nature made her and then, a year later, took the same ingredients and made me. It's baffling. Good thing they didn't have a third child; it would probably have a face like a knee.

"Morning . . ." I sigh at the room, and they mumble back sleepy responses. Dad slides a brick of scrambled egg onto my plate as I sit down. Mom subtly slides Lav's makeup bag away from her.

"Enough, Laverne."

"A little more highlighter and blush and I'm *done*, I swear."

Mom keeps reading as she drops the makeup bag into a drawer next to her. Lav looks mutinous, but she's still got her mascara wand, so she makes good use of it before Mom reunites it with the bottle.

The mood in the kitchen is a little, well, moody. Lav's grounded because she was texting a boy late at night. I never have any boys to text, regardless of the time of day.

I poke up a forkful of egg and stare at it. Eyes down, I say, "Um. Caaaaan I . . ."

"No," Mom says.

"You don't even know what I was going to say!"

Mom imitates my voice with annoying accuracy. "Can I not go to school today or maybe ever, can I just lie and get a job instead and we'll tell everyone at school that I changed my name, had plastic surgery, and made it onto Team Great Britain after all?"

Damn. Spot on.

Laverne finishes applying her thirty-second coat of mascara and leans toward me as if she's going to impart the secret of immortality.

Expectations low, I lean toward her.

"It's going to be OK at school," she says.

"Really?"

"Yes. Because no one cares about your swimming. Only you think it's a big deal."

"It *is* a big deal."

"Shut up, I'm trying to help you. I swear, if anyone even *mentions* swimming—which they won't—and you tell them what happened, they'll say, 'Huh.' And they won't ever think of it again. It's boring. No one cares. Amelia Bond from eleventh grade? She had her big hairy face mole removed over the summer. *That* is interesting."

I'm unconvinced but not willing to have an argument about it. Lav's wrong; it's not true that no one cares. Hannah cares. Hannah understands that swimming is extremely important. But thinking about Hannah feels like poking a blister, so I make myself stop.

Dad slings the frying pan into the sink. He does all the cooking. Mom's specialty dish is food poisoning.

"You girls ready to leave for school in ten?"

"Shotgun!"

"Lav! You always sit in the front!"

"Yes. Because I always call shotgun. Please stop me if this confuses you."

"Fine. Infinity shotgun!"

"You can't call infinity shotgun—everyone knows that," says Mom. "Now off you go."

"Are you home tonight, Mom?" I ask.

"Uh, no, I have a . . ."

"Daaa-ate," we all chorus.

"So go on, what's his name?" Lav asks.

Mom hesitates.

"It's OK," says Dad kindly. "If you don't know it, you don't have to pretend."

"You can check his wallet when he goes to the bathroom," Lav suggests.

"Though if he takes it with him, he's possibly not coming back," I finish.

Mom gives out three death stares and returns to her book.

Yeah, date. So it's a little odd in this house.

Mom and Dad divorced when I was little but are the nicest divorced couple. They never fight and they get along really well. I'm not sure why they divorced, but I don't want to ask in case the answer involves sex and I'll *never* stop being sick.

Dad lost his job last year and he had to move in with us until he finds a new one. It's taking a lot longer than he thought it would. Sometimes when he leaves his email open, I see all the rejections in his in-box.

It's not ideal. Lav and I have to share a room, but we don't say anything because we don't want to hurt his feelings. I worry about him. He gets up early every morning, like he's still got a job, and dresses in a suit and then just . . . I don't know . . . waits for the day to pass until we come home.

It's like having a professionally dressed but depressed dog.

Between me and him, this house hasn't been much fun this summer. No wonder Lav and Mom are dating like men are off to war.

We call goodbye to Mom and trudge out to the car. Lav forces me into the back, which is not easy. Three-door cars are such a lie; you can't call it three doors unless you see the trunk as an acceptable way to enter a car.

Laverne fiddles with the radio until she finds a pirate station. It sounds like people shouting in a cramped space. As if she doesn't get enough of that at home.

"Oh, Lav, you're so alternative. I cannot get my head around how nonmainstream you are." I sigh from behind my knees. "Move your seat forward."

Lav squeezes the lever and slowly pushes her seat back as far as it goes, crushing me into an even tighter S shape.

“It’s garage, idiot.”

“Is that the name of the music or just *where* they are? Come on, Lav, seat forward!”

“*Laverne!*” says Dad. “Move the seat forward or you can walk the rest of the way. Do you want to walk in those shoes? *Can* you walk in those shoes?”

I peer around to see what Dad’s talking about. She’s wearing black, studded, chunky boots—it looks like she’s got weapons on her feet.

“Yes, I can! Not very far, or fast, or . . .”

“I don’t know why you do that to your feet,” Dad sighs.

“You don’t get me, Mark,” she sighs back dramatically.

“Dad!” he corrects her.

“No, Lav, *everyone* gets you,” I say, defending him. “You’re so instantly gettable that if you were an exam question, everyone would be happy to see you. And that’s the only time they would be happy to see you, ha ha ha—ow! Legs legs legs!”

As Dad approaches the school gates, I can see a tall boy with long hair loitering. Lav slumps in the seat.

“Drive, drive, drive!” she hisses at Dad.

“What?” he asks, but drives past the school gates.

“Ah . . .” Lav sighs.

“Was that Beau Michaels waiting for you?” I say.

“Yes, and shut up. Dad, can you drop us at the back entrance, please?”

“Wait.” Dad is puzzled. “Someone named their son *Beau* and that was allowed to happen?”

“Daaa-aad.” Lav rolls her eyes.

“Like, no one was arrested? They were just allowed to do that to an innocent child?” he asks.

“You’re not funny,” Lav tells him firmly.

Dad circles a mini traffic circle and heads back to the school entrance.

“No, no, no!” Lav slumps down in her seat again. “I mean you’re hilarious, Dad! Really, very witty!”

“I thought so,” he agrees serenely, and we sail past the entrance again, poor Beau Michaels watching us with the dawning realization that all is not well in his love life.

Dad pulls up at the back entrance to school. Lav hops out and flips her seat forward, and I unfold myself into a normal shape. Well, normal for me.

“Come on, LouLou,” says Dad.

I pick at some dry skin on my lip and look down. Maybe Dad will get bored of waiting and just let me sit quietly in the back of the car for a few years. Eventually I’ll be old enough to shuffle forward and share the driving.

Lav leans down at my window.

“I *swear*,” she says, “this isn’t a big deal unless you make it a big deal. You *nearly* got to the Olympics. That’s the closest anyone I know in this crappy little town has ever got to achieving anything! No offense, Dad.”

“No, that’s fine,” he murmurs.

“So please, just don’t even *mention* it. Now the school day begins, and you do not know me.”

She wobbles away on her monstrous shoes. She looks like a baby gazelle. I can’t imagine how dumb I look when I clump

along behind her. Gazelle and the mammoth, off on their adventures.

That thought makes me even sadder, so I push it aside and give Dad a brave smile. My dry lip splits and bleeds.

“It’s going to be a good day,” he promises.

“OK,” I mumble through blood and a semiclean tissue I found in the door handle. I clamber out of the car and follow Lav at the agreed-upon distance of six feet.

chapter 2

Weez!! I can't believe I've been here a week, time is flying!
People are nice, but I haven't scoped out any real friends
yet (you have no grounds for jel). I'm learning so much, I
thought everyone would be terrifyingly good, but I'm OK, you
know? Not saying I'm the best but I think I've got a chance.
I MISS YOU.

Hxxxxxx

I av and I don't hang out at school—she's in the grade above, and we're so different I'm not sure people know we're related. She's pretty popular but seems to get in endless long-running fights with other girls. She thinks they're intimidated by her maturity.

I think it's because she flirts with their boyfriends. We agree to disagree.

I used to head into school with Hannah, exhausted and damp from swimming, do some work, chat with some people (well, she

would; I'd hang out in her shadow—*happily*, thanks, Mom), then head back to the pool. Hannah and I always treated school like a chore, a little like the Queen snipping a ribbon on a hospital wing.

I don't think we missed much; our school is very ordinary. A horse walked onto the soccer field six years ago and people *still* talk about it.

But despite my whining, I have resolved to make an effort. Today I'm launching Operation: Make Friends. I'm an idiot for having only one friend. I needed a spare!

I'm so used to having Hannah's arm slung round me as she makes me laugh with nine years' worth of stupid private jokes. I've got all my halves of those jokes and nothing to do with them.

I feel shy as I enter my homeroom, so I check my bag to make me look busy, not lonely. Classic move. I delve through it, looking at my books and pencils. Yup, all there. Hi, guys.

I get so carried away with my acting that I trip, my backpack swings around with surprising force, and eight small objects fall out. What eight small objects, you ask? Oh, you *know*.

Eight tampons.

ARGH!

What is *wrong* with tampons? Seems like every time I open my bag, they leap out in a group suicide bid. I haven't even started my period yet; they're just in case. My face burns with a blush as I crouch and start shoveling them back into my bag, desperate for this moment to end. It couldn't get worse.

Yes, it could. I feel a light tap on my head—someone is “helping” by throwing an escaped tampon at me.

And *then* Mr. Peters races in late. Perfect—the nicest teacher in school (and not bad-looking, actually, if you like cardigans) begins

his morning by falling over me as I scrabble on the floor, chasing tampons and trying not to cry.

The class falls silent as he gets up and helps me to my feet. I like Mr. Peters; he's one of the few people in school taller than me, and not in a stooped, have-to-get-my-shoes-specially-made sort of way.

I give him a "thank you and that never happened" smile and weave through to our desk at the back. *My* desk, now. Teachers always knew they could sit Hannah and me there. We weren't particularly *good* students, but we were quiet. You don't need to pass notes to someone you've known that long.

I sit down, face still burning, and hope everyone develops amnesia by lunch. I don't want to be Tampon Brown all semester.

"Did you see that video I posted on your wall?" The two boys in front of me chat, and I lean forward to join in. After a bad start, Operation: Make Friends begins *right now*.

"Yeah! That guy looked so much like Hatsy it blew my mind."

"That's why I put it up there!"

"Oh, right! But everyone looks like Hatsy."

They collapse into quiet hysterics. For some reason.

I'm watching the conversation go back and forth, feeling the smile die on my face.

Who is Hatsy? Is it funny that everyone looks like him? Apparently. And what was that video? This conversation is like code; there's no way I can join in.

"Double history next, nightmare!" I say to the back of their heads in a friendly, eye-rolly sort of way. But too quietly, so they don't realize I'm talking to them. I look out the window and bite my nail. I'm not embarrassed, I'm busy! Busy biting this nail.

“Sorry, did you say something?”

I nod, suddenly choking on a piece of nail. Now I’m coughing right in his face. *Right in his face.*

“No talking in the back!” Mr. Peters calls over. The boys turn back, one of them frowning and wiping his face.

I sit, stunned by my own social idiocy, and wonder if I will ever stop blushing or if my family can use my head as a radiator and cut their heating bills.

Then I’ll have to be homeschooled, right?

My phone vibrates (it’s up my sleeve) and I slide it out for a peek. It’s a text from Mom, a picture of a badly stuffed otter. She may be grumpy in the mornings (and some afternoons and evenings), but she gets me—bad taxidermy always makes me laugh.

There’s a picture of an annoyed-looking stuffed fox holding a handbag that never stops being funny, no matter how many times I look at it (and I needed to look at that fox a lot this summer). I scroll around my phone and then tap my in-box.

I really should reply to Hannah’s last message. We’ve been chatting every day, but she starts all the conversations and I feel like everything I write is fake—things like *I’m soooooooo happy for yooooooo!* Xxxxx.

I’m a very bad liar.

After the time trials, I did my best to seem OK. I sat at the front of the minibus instead of at the back with Hannah, because I had suddenly developed “car sickness.”

I kept staring up at the ceiling, because the fake car sickness was also making my eyes water. “Anyone else have wet eyes? I think it’s the air-conditioning. Look, my eyes are so wet they’re actually *leaking!*” (Sniff.)

Hannah had always been good, but I never realized she was much better than me. I think she swam one of her fastest times ever that day. I don't know my time; officials don't chase after the girls who come in last.

Hannah was so excited and I didn't want to spoil it. That night I texted her loads, things like: *I'm so proud of you my fish!!! Xxxxxxx*. Which is a bit fake and gushy, but *You stole my dreams* is not a cool thing to text your best friend, even if it's true.

And I am happy for her! I'm just sad for me.

"Louise?" I look up. Mr. Peters is staring, and the kids in the class are starting to turn and roll their eyes. What have I done *now*?

"Yee-urp?" I say stupidly, and he smiles at me, a little exasperated, and says, "Sasha Burrows?"

Oh. The attendance. Right.

The morning begins with a double block of history, where I learn a lot of really cool things, like how *I know nothing about history* and *I am basically as educated as a piece of toast*.

See, *this* is the problem with planning to be a professional swimmer for the rest of your life; you don't think that you might need an education. Basically, the moment I could read, I felt educated enough. After that I used school time to relax in. Can't believe I hadn't noticed how behind I'd got. Clearly, Han and I were oblivious in our bubble of idiot.

My history teacher corners me after class to say, "How exciting about Hannah. You must be so proud!"

"Yes, yes, I am, I really am!" I say back at her, nodding hard with big, fake eyes.

History is followed by physics, because this school believes in putting the *boring* in *educa-boring-tion*.

It's amazing how little I know on this subject too. I listen hard and take lots of notes. Maybe I'm an academic genius; perhaps *that's* my actual Thing, not swimming after all.

"Any ideas? Anyone?"

I shoot my hand in the air.

"Louise!"

"Potassium!"

"No. Pota . . . what? I haven't mentioned potassium once this lesson."

"Oh, OK."

People snigger. The physics teacher stares at me, baffled. "Did you mean *phosphorus*?"

"Uh. Yeah?"

"That's still wrong."

Finally the morning's over and it's lunchtime. I follow the smell of cabbage until I'm at the cafeteria. (We hardly ever have cabbage; there's just this lingering smell. Mysterious.)

I look around. I knew this would happen. There's no one to sit with, and every table "belongs" to a friendship group, so I wouldn't just be eating there—I'd look like I was trying to join their group. I don't want to be ignored or, worse, told to get lost.

Can I bring my own little table into school every day?

I buy a sandwich, stick it in my backpack, and head outside, day-dreaming about my new (unlikely) future as a physics genius. My first breakthrough would be to disprove its credibility as a subject, forcing thousands of unemployed physics teachers to rethink their snotty attitudes.

I walk in a circle around school, eating my sandwich. It's boring to have no one to talk to. I take out my phone. I'm tempted to call

Hannah, but then we'll have to talk about training camp, and the thought of *that* makes my food stick in my throat.

As I'm choking and spluttering, eyes watering, phone in hand, Mr. Peters appears next to me. He raises his eyebrows at the phone, which I'm not allowed to have out during the school day. I wave it weakly and whisper, "Ambulance." He gives a snort of laughter and keeps walking.

He stops and turns back.

"Lou, you *are* joking?"

I nod, putting my phone away. He makes a "phew!" gesture and keeps walking.

Great, I've found someone I can chat to—and they're paid to talk to me.

As I'm putting my phone away in my bag, I realize I've stopped in front of the one place that can help me.

The library.

Home of the introverted and people too quiet to say, "No, Lou, I don't want to be your friend. Leave me alone to read. Get that friendship bracelet *off* me. No, *you* shush!"

