



“The music galloped along, and any second, I would have to start singing. But the lights were too bright and the crowd was too big”



Ash is in year six. He loves costumes, lights and smoke machines, and standing centre stage with all eyes on him. However, on the opening night of the school play, it all becomes a little too much and his courage fails him. Everyone gets nervous sometimes, and Ash is determined to make amends. Soon, though, his year six exams are on top of him and he's convinced that he's going to fail.

Feeling alone and under pressure, Ash reaches out to his friends and family. Can he find the courage to face his exams, and find his voice again?



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A note from Ash

My name is Ash, I'm twelve years old and I love to sing.

This is the story of the time I stopped singing. It all happened one year ago, at Morton School. It wasn't just singing that went wrong, it was everything: friends, birthday parties, brain maggots, and most of all, the big, scary exams that we had to do at the end of the year.

They looked scary, back then. Now, I don't know what I was worried about.

Anyway, Miss Underbridge said that if I wrote everything down, it might help other people who are doing their exams. She asked Janelle to, as well, so we're racing to see who can write more. The loser has to buy the winner tickets to a Glitter Riot concert. Glitter Riot are the best band in the whole wide world, so I have to win.

Oh, and look out for the chapter titles. They're all things that people said to me last year - all except one - and they all have something in common. I bet that you can't work out what it is.



Chapter One

“It’s no big deal.”

Ever since Mr Rivers told me that I’d got the lead part in our school play, *Robin Hood: Superstar!*, I’d dreamed about opening night. Whenever I was stuck on a tricky maths question or drifting off in assembly, my mind would wander to the moment when I would step out on stage in front of a hundred wide-eyed, gaping-mouthed kids and parents, and belt out my first solo number:

*I'm Robin Hood – superstar!
I steal from the rich to give to the poor.*

But now that the moment had arrived, I had the jitters. This made it *very* hard to put my costume on.

“Ash?”

I pulled on my green leggings, only to realise that one leg was inside out and twisted round and very uncomfortable.

“Ash...”

I tried to tie my laces, but they ended up looking like balls of spaghetti.

“Ash!”

I tried to balance my feathered cap on my head, but somehow it fell off and rolled under the art trolley.

“Earth to Ash.” A grubby hand waved in front of my face. “Are you ready? Everyone’s waiting to go on.”

That’s when I realised that the classroom was empty. Everyone had already put on their costumes and

trotted off to the hall. Everyone but me and Hassan, that is.

My friend Hassan stood in front of me in his peasant costume. It wasn’t much of a costume: just one of Hassan’s foster dad’s shirts over some joggers with the legs cut off in zigzags at the knees. It was no surprise that he hadn’t made an effort. Hassan dislikes anything to do with music and drama almost as much as he dislikes running in PE.

“Give me a minute, Hassan,” I said. “Can’t seem to get my costume on.” I reached over my shoulders to try to fasten the Velcro on my Robin Hood top.

“You’re doing it up all wonky,” Hassan said. Before I could stop him, he ripped the Velcro apart. “Oops,” he muttered, nearly too quietly for me to hear.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he said, in a high-pitched voice which meant that he was definitely lying. “Just a minor Velcro mishap. I’ll sort you out, don’t worry.” He tugged at my costume for a while and patted my back reassuringly. “Don’t know why you went and got yourself the lead part, anyway,” he said. “Just means

you have to learn more lines than anyone else, and actually sing instead of just pretending to.” He fished my cap from underneath the art trolley and plonked it back on my head so hard that it was wedged right over my eyes. “Plus, you’re wearing tights.”

“They’re leggings,” I said, yanking the cap up, “not tights.” Usually, I didn’t get that tingly feeling before a performance until I was just about to go on stage. Not today; my head was already spinning.

“You! In tights! In front of all those people! Unbelievable!”

“Hassan, can you stop blathering and actually help?” I was starting to not be able to breathe very well, even though I’m not asthmatic and there were no cats nearby. What if I went on stage and I couldn’t breathe and then I passed out in front of everyone? What if I fell over and knocked into the dancers and they went down in a long line, like dominoes?

Now that I’d started, I couldn’t stop thinking of all the things that might go wrong.

“Ooh, nice tights, Ash,” said Janelle, sticking her head round the door.

“They’re leggings,” I repeated, trying to untwist the left leg.

“Hey, no judgment from me. I’m wearing tights, too.” Janelle flicked her braids over her shoulder and put her hand on her hip. Her costume was even fancier than mine, with a silk tunic and real leather boots. Janelle had been ill on the day of the audition and had ended up with the part of Merry Man 6. She wasn’t too pleased about it; Janelle loves to be centre stage and singing her heart out, almost as much as I do.

Almost as much as I *normally* do, that is.

“Come on, Ash, we’re all waiting,” said Janelle, as if I didn’t already know. Suddenly, I started to think: what if Mr Rivers decided to start the play without me? What if I forgot all of the words to my solo number? What if there was a power cut in the middle of the show?

I was halfway through imagining all of the parents getting out their phones to light the stage with their built-in torches when Janelle said, “Um, Ash? Did you know that your Velcro is broken?”

“Shut up, Janelle,” said Hassan urgently, but it was

too late.

“My Velcro’s *broken?*” I whirled round to face a sheepish Hassan. “You *broke* my costume? On *opening night?*”

This was a disaster that I hadn’t even thought of. I felt prickles in my eyes and wobbles in my chin. But I wasn’t going to cry; I was too old for that.

“Look, we can fix it,” said Janelle. “I’ll get some glue from the art trolley. It’s no big deal, Ash.”

“It *is* –” I tried to tell her, but suddenly, I couldn’t breathe properly again. What was wrong with me?

I tried to keep sucking in air as Janelle rubbed glue onto my costume. I put my hands over my face to stop it twitching, while Janelle got out some paperclips and clipped them down my back.

“You’re not nervous, are you, Ash?” she asked.

“Er.” I tried and tried to suck in enough air. “A bit,” I gasped.

“What have you got to be nervous about?” she said, as she tugged and tucked in my tunic. “You’ve performed

loads of times with choir. And you were the Angel Gabriel in the infants. Don’t you remember?”

It was true. When I’d played the Angel Gabriel, I’d had to wear one of my mum’s nighties and a halo made of tinsel and I hadn’t been nervous at all. So what was different now?

“There,” Janelle said at last. “Now, no one will know that your costume is broken.”

“You lot!” Miss Underbridge poked her head round the door frame. She frowned behind her thick-rimmed glasses and her bobbed hair swung about in a way that seemed particularly stern. “Where have you been? We’re all waiting. Mr Rivers looks as if he’s about to explode. Come on!”

We rushed to the door. Hassan had to move his legs twice as fast as me to keep up. Janelle, on the other hand, practically glided towards the hall.

I tried to squash all of my shivery thoughts and shaky worries into a very small ball at the back of my head, where they wouldn’t bother me for at least an hour and a half.

The hall was dark and silent. A yellow glow lit the

stage. The other kids were already sitting in hushed, excited rows on either side of the hall. I saw Miss Underbridge give the thumbs up to Mr Rivers, who stood beside the sound system. He gave me a warm smile and suddenly, I just knew that I was going to let him down.

The opening music started. The Merry Men leapt onto the stage and started to jig about. Janelle bounced from side to side with a huge grin on her face. At least *she* was enjoying herself. Miss Underbridge handed me a microphone and pushed me towards the steps.

My fingers were so sweaty that I thought that the mic was going to slip from my hand. As I shuffled in front of the Merry Men, my knees jiggled and my teeth chattered. The music galloped along and my heart galloped with it. Any second, I would have to start singing. But the lights were too bright and the crowd was too big. Too late, I remembered that I was supposed to strike a dashing pose. I stuck my arm out and felt a paperclip ping off the back of my costume.

“I’m wearing tights!” I squealed. My face went hot. As I stumbled from the stage, the Merry Men collapsed in giggles behind me. I threw the mic at Miss Underbridge and ran back into the classroom, sobbing.



Chapter Two

“Look on the bright side.”

I was sitting in the classroom in my falling-apart costume, trying to have a good cry by myself, when Miss Underbridge burst into the room. Marching behind her were my parents. They all started to speak at once.

“Ash, did you forget your words?”

“We’ve stopped the play. Don’t worry, we can start again from the beginning.”

“Did you know that your costume’s done up with paperclips?”

Mum, Dad and Miss Underbridge crowded in on my every side, patting my arm and stroking my hair like I was a toddler.

“I’ve got some safety pins in my desk, Ash, to fix your costume,” said Miss Underbridge, yanking a drawer open. “Now, let’s practise your lyrics one last time, so that you feel extra confident.” She started to sing. “Robin Hood: Superstar!” Miss Underbridge is the sort of teacher who likes to just get on with things.

“I don’t –”

But Mum cut me off. “Look on the bright side. Something always goes wrong on opening night. Now, it’s out of the way and you can enjoy the rest of the performance.”

“But –”

“Ashraf?” Dad sat on the table beside me and leaned in close. “You don’t have to do the play if you don’t want to.”

I looked into my Dad’s calm, brown eyes and my chin went wobbly. I remembered that Dad had swapped shifts with another nurse especially to be here. Then, I imagined getting up on stage again, and just thinking about it was like being knocked down by a huge wave.

“I don’t want to.”

“All right,” he said. “It’s all right. Carmen? Let’s take him home.”

“Home?” spluttered Miss Underbridge. “But you’re Robin Hood!” Her eyes were wider than they had been when Hassan brought a slug into class for a science experiment (“I want to find out if he’s any good at long division, Miss.”). I could tell that she was wondering how the show could go on without me.

“Surely, you want to stay,” said Mum. “You’ve been practising for so long, Ash. It’s probably just stage fright – pre-performance wobbles. It’s quite normal.”

The funny thing was, I wasn’t nervous any more. My lines were clear, like printed words in my head. I knew that I could blow the audience away if I wanted to... but I didn’t want to any more. I’d already totally embarrassed myself and now, all I wanted was to

crawl into bed and hide. There was no way that I was going back on stage now. That was final.

I tried not to think about how disappointed Mr Rivers would be. We'd been working on this play for a whole term.

"I expect that you were just feeling a bit stressed, weren't you?" said Miss Underbridge. "It's a difficult year. Everyone is growing and going through changes, and then there's exams to think of."

She said '*growing*' and '*going through changes*' in a very significant sort of way. If I could have shrivelled into a ball of embarrassment, I would have.

Miss Underbridge carried on, oblivious. "It probably just felt a bit overwhelming, didn't it?" I buried my head in my hands. This was not happening. "I expect that you're feeling better now," she went on, as unrelenting as a speeding train. "Let's get you back out there, shall we?"

"No!" I said, suddenly on my feet. "I'm not doing it. In fact, I'm going home."

The grown-ups stared. I grabbed my everyday clothes

from the heap on the desk and hurried outside.

* * *

When we got home, Dad made me a giant mug of hot chocolate with marshmallows and whipped cream. Mum felt my forehead, in case I was ill.

"Well, you feel normal," she said.

After I'd finished my hot chocolate, I put on my favourite pyjamas and tried to get to sleep, but my mind wouldn't shut up. I kept imagining what had happened at school without me. What if someone had fallen off the stage and broken their leg? What if lightning had hit the school hall and set the roof on fire? And who had played Robin Hood?

After a while, I grabbed my phone, shoved my earphones into my ears, and played the latest Glitter Riot album on repeat. Glitter Riot are the absolute best band in the world, and sometimes, when I can't sleep, listening to their songs magically helps.

Not tonight.

In the morning, my brain was filled with fog and

nightmarish Glitter Riot lyrics.

Like a shadow, you only see me in sunlight...

“Uh oh, zombie alert!” said Dad, as I dragged myself into the kitchen. Our kitchen is painted yellow and has just the right amount of clutter to feel comfy. Mum’s empty teacup sat on the table. She had already left for work.

“Rrghgh,” I replied.

“You really do look undead,” Dad said, putting down his tea. “Your skin is grey and you have bags the size of footballs under your eyes. Did you get any sleep?”

“Mmmrghghgh,” I informed him.

“There’s another performance this evening, isn’t there?” said Dad, and my stomach sank down to my knees. I just wanted to forget about the stupid show. “Do you feel up to getting back on stage?”

“Ngh-ungh.”

“It’s not called Zombie Hood: Superstar!” Dad agreed. “Look, you’ve had a rough night. You should stay at

home today. Get some sleep.”

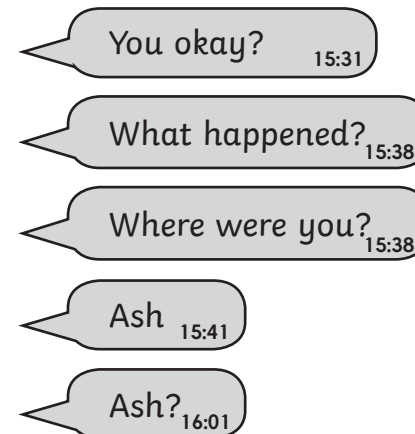
The relief that filled me from my fingers to my toes was so huge, I almost cried again. I blinked until my eyes stopped stinging. Then, I dragged myself upstairs to bed.

* * *

When I woke up, hours later, I felt around for my phone. Eventually, I fished it out from where it had fallen between the mattress and the wall.

16:13. School was already over.

I had a billion messages from Hassan.



Ash!? 16:06

Hey, Hassan 16:14

Hey, man! 16:15

What happened? 16:15

Dunno 16:17

You ill or something? 16:17

Er. Something. 16:18

Guess what? 16:18

Janelle did your part. 16:19

WHAT? How come? 16:19

Miss Underbridge was flapping about. 16:19

You know how she does. 16:20

She was convinced she was going to have to get up onstage and read your lines! Can you imagine? 16:21

OMG! No way. 16:22

Then Janelle just stepped onto the stage in front of all the parents and said, "I know all Robin Hood's lines. I'll do it." 16:22

She was all right, I suppose. But you would have been better. 16:23

Thanks, man. 16:24

It was silly but for some reason, I felt jealous of Janelle, even though I was the one who had dropped out. How could Janelle just get up in front of hundreds of people and do a part that she hadn't even practised, when I was too scared to?

My phone beeped again.

You gonna be there tonight? 16:27

Or are you ill still?

16:27

I didn't know what to say. I wasn't exactly ill, was I? I hadn't got tonsillitis or the flu or cholera or anything. I just... couldn't do it for some reason. But that wouldn't make sense to Hassan.

Nah. I think I've got a bug.
Been in bed all day.

16:29

Lucky!

16:30

Underbridge was going
on about exams ALL DAY.

16:30

"Make sure you remember
mean, median and mode."

16:30

"Don't forget how to find
the volume of a cuboid."

16:30

"If you can't calculate the
area of a trapezium, I won't
be there to show you how."

16:31

But you DO know how to calculate
the area of a trapezium.

16:31

But when she said it like that, I thought
that I might have forgotten.

16:32

I rolled my eyes. If Hassan failed his maths exam, I'd wear tights every day for a year. Still, I could have done without the exam chat. It was making me feel like runny jelly.

Better go. Still feeling ill.

16:34

Will you be in on Monday?

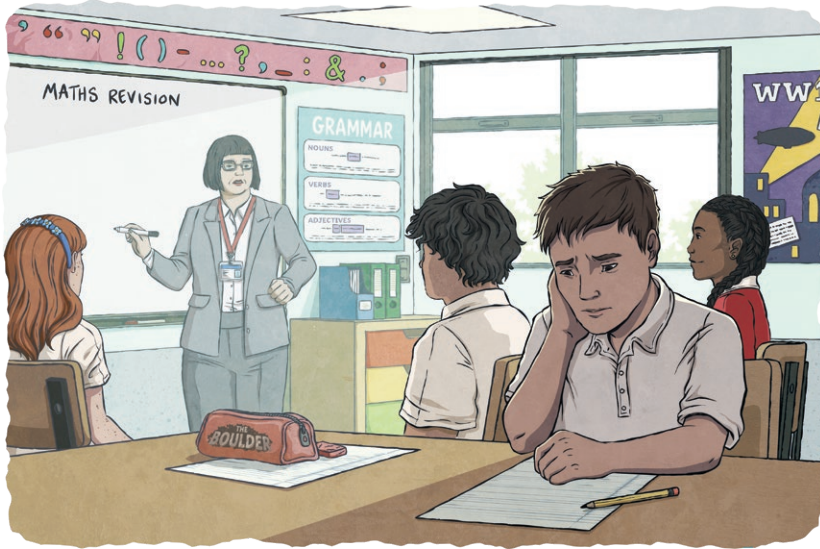
16:35

Probably. Don't know yet.

16:36

I put my phone away and lay back on the bed. My eyes drifted shut and I tried to get back to sleep. My brain wouldn't let me. However hard I tried, I couldn't remember how to calculate the area of a trapezium.

“You’re overthinking it.”



Chapter Three

“You’re overthinking it.”

Mum drove me to school on Monday. As we drove, I imagined stepping into the classroom after my humiliating dash from the stage. I imagined everyone falling silent as they turned to glare, wondering how I had the guts to even set foot at school. I imagined whispers behind hands and dirty sniggers.

I almost refused to get out of the car. Then, Mum distracted me at a key moment by singing the lyrics to a Glitter Riot song so devastatingly wrong that I

had to correct her.

“It’s *dancing in a starlit tide, not parking in a park and ride!*” I shouted, momentarily forgetting my fear.

As I walked into school, I decided to pretend that everything was normal. I hung up my coat in the cloakroom in a normal way. Then, I walked my most normal walk into the classroom. The class carried on chatting about normal things: vloggers, new puppies and pencil sharpeners shaped like robot zombies. The only person who even noticed me was Hassan. Perhaps everything would be perfectly normal after all.

“Ash!” Hassan waved enthusiastically.

I sat down beside him in a very normal manner.

“Oh, look,” said Berry, who also sat at my table. “You’re back.”

I wondered if this was a normal thing for Berry to say.

“Were you ill?” asked Tamsin. Tamsin and Berry were the sort of friends who coordinated hairstyles. This was very easy, since they lived together now. Today, each had a long ponytail snaking from the the top of

her head: one blonde, one shiny and black.

“Obviously,” said Hassan, rolling his eyes at me. “You can’t just not go to school for no reason, can you? Or none of us would bother.”

“Yeah – if you miss school, your parents can get arrested, I heard,” said Berry.

My belly wriggled in alarm. I suddenly pictured my dad being dragged down the driveway in handcuffs, shouting, “Look at what you’ve done, Ash! Why couldn’t you just do the play?”

Things were getting not-normal very quickly.

“Oh my goodness, your voice is *amaazing*,” gasped Berry. She made the word ‘amazing’ nearly as long as a whole sentence. My belly fizzed. I half hoped that she was talking to me but she was looking at Janelle, who had just swaggered into the classroom.

“Thanks,” Janelle beamed. She tossed her braids and posed. She practically sparkled with happiness. Usually, Janelle and I are friends, but she didn’t say anything to me as she went to find her seat. She didn’t even look at me.

That definitely wasn’t normal.

“Why didn’t Janelle look at me?” I whispered to Hassan.

“You what?”

“She totally avoided me. She probably thinks that I’m a complete embarrassment.”

“Mate, you’re overthinking it. Hey,” Hassan continued, not apparently noticing that the world was being engulfed in a tidal wave of abnormality. “Do you want to practise wrestling at break?”

Hassan loves wrestling. His bedroom is covered in wrestling posters and he spends most of his free time watching classic wrestling matches online. Hassan likes me to help him act out his favourite wrestling matches at break. We don’t really hit each other; we just pretend. If I had it my way, we’d practise singing instead, but Hassan is my friend – and I was starting to think that he was my only friend.

Besides, wrestling with Hassan is normal.

“Of course I’ll practise wrestling with you,” I said. “But please don’t make me be Demon Jones again.”

“But I want to recreate The Boulder’s classic victory in two-thousand-and-nine!”

“We always do that one...” Hassan’s sad face was so pathetic that I sort of had to give in to him. “Fine,” I said. “I’ll be Demon Jones.”

At that moment, Miss Underbridge bustled in, carrying a box of marking. She was in the sort of smart, grey suit that means:

1. I am a serious teacher.
2. Your exams are serious exams.
3. Things are looking *really* serious right now.

“Morning, Class Six,” she said. “Book monitors, please hand the homework back. There’s a writing challenge on the board for you all to get started on. Oh, and Ash, we need to have a chat at break. Don’t forget, please.”

Hassan pulled a sympathetic face. I sighed and buried my head in my arms. All I wanted was a normal day!

I couldn’t concentrate on revising long multiplication. At break, I tried to slink out of the classroom behind

Hassan. Unfortunately, he’s much shorter than me, so I poked over the top.

“Ashraf?” said Miss Underbridge from her desk. She pulled a chair out and tapped it, loudly, with her fingernail. Even her nails were painted a serious grey.

I dragged my feet across the pencil-littered floor. Her desk was grey. Her computer was grey. Even the brightly-coloured wall displays seemed somehow grey.

“Don’t worry,” said Miss Underbridge, which, if possible, made me worry even more. “I just want to check in with you – see if you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly, half getting out of my seat. Perhaps she’d let me leave.

“You didn’t seem fine last week. I’m just wondering if you’re feeling a little anxious.”

“Really, I’m fine,” I said again. I imagined Hassan waiting for me on the playground benches, dreaming of The Boulder.

“Sometimes, when we’re anxious about things, it can affect how we behave. Sometimes, we don’t even know

how we're feeling until we start acting differently from usual. Going on stage is scary for lots of people, Ash, but I've never known it to intimidate you."

"Well, it *did*," I grunted. I didn't really get what she was saying. How could I *not* know how I was feeling?

"If you need to talk, you know where to find me," Miss Underbridge said.

In the staffroom, eating secret staffroom snacks, I thought, but I didn't say it.

"Oh, and I want you to speak to Mr Rivers. I think you need to apologise for upsetting his production."

I nodded once, then fled outside.

Breaktime was nearly over. For some reason, everyone in Class Six was gathered together under the trees in the corner. No one was playing football, and Hassan wasn't wrestling. Apparently, he hadn't found a replacement Demon Jones.

It was only when I got closer that I realised: Janelle was at the centre of the huddle. Everyone jabbered at once.

"Will there be laser tag?"

"It's a surprise," Janelle said, smiling.

"Trampolines?"

"It's a surprise!"

"Ice skating?"

"Do you even know what 'surprise' means?" Janelle rolled her eyes.

"What's going on?" I asked, slithering through the crowd to get to Hassan.

"Janelle's birthday party, next weekend. We're trying to guess what it's going to be," Hassan rubbed his hands gleefully. "I bet it's going to be wrestling."

"Oh," I said. But inside, my belly was doing gymnastics. This proved that I hadn't been overthinking it when Janelle had avoided me that morning. She was having a party, and she hadn't even invited me. I had thought that we were friends.

"Look," said Janelle, in a voice that carried over the

excited babble. “It’s an actual, real-life surprise. You’ll all just have to find out when you come over next Sunday. Wear your coolest outfit, though.”

“Ooooh!”

“I can’t wait.”

“Please tell us! Please, please!”

It seemed like everyone had been invited, except me. As the bell went and we started to traipse inside, my mind felt like a piece of paper, scrunched up very small.

I trudged through the corridor, staring at my feet and not really seeing them. That’s how I ended up walking into Mr Rivers.

“Watch out,” he said, as I jumped off his pointy, black shoes.

“Oh! Sorry!” I knew that this was my chance to apologise and explain properly why I hadn’t been able to go through with the play. “Mr Rivers,” I began, but the music teacher frowned and gave me a look that was so piercing, I felt like I’d been sliced in two.

Suddenly, I couldn’t speak. Mr Rivers was my hero, and I’d let him down worse than I ever imagined.

“It’s all in your head.”



Chapter Four

“It’s all in your head.”

Hassan is obsessed with wrestling. He has a wrestling-themed pencil case, wrestling-themed pencils and a wrestling-themed handwriting pen. When he couldn’t find a wrestling-themed eraser, Hassan customised a plain one by writing the names of his favourite wrestlers on each side. That Wednesday, he put this eraser on the desk for luck during our practice maths exam. It seemed to work.

“How did you do?” asked Hassan, as Miss Underbridge handed back our papers.

I sighed at the green ‘26’ circled at the top of my sheet, then turned my paper over so that Hassan couldn’t see. Last time, I had got 28. I was going backwards.

“Not great,” I said.

If I made a lucky eraser, I wouldn’t put wrestler names on it, obviously. I’d put on famous singers, instead.

“I’m sure that you did fine,” said Hassan, flourishing his paper. His sported a gigantic number ‘36’ and a smiley face, so I knew that I was doomed.

“Now, I expect that a few of you found this test tricky,” said Miss Underbridge, reading my mind, “but what do we do when we want to improve?”

Hassan’s hand shot up. So did Noah’s. Noah is very shy. It’s easy to forget about him, even though he is possibly the cleverest person in the whole school. I was willing to bet that Noah had scored 40.

“Yes, Noah?”

“Um,” said Noah. “Um, well. Well, um.” Even though Noah knows everything, somehow, he can never explain what he knows. “We could – we could – we could look

at where we went, um, um, wrong and – um –”

“Revise those topics? Fantastic idea, Noah. Take note, Class Six, as that’s what I’m setting you for homework.” Class Six moaned. “Because that’s how we *grow our brain muscles*,” Miss Underbridge said, like always. At that moment, the bell went for lunch.

“Choir today,” I groaned. Normally, I loved choir but today, all I could think about was how I still needed to apologise to Mr Rivers.

“If you want, you can skip choir and come to computer club instead,” Hassan offered. He carefully folded his test and tucked it under his elbow.

“Nah, I’d better go.”

“It’s just that in computer club we’re making animations, and mine involves wrestling, explosions and aliens.” I let Hassan tell me about his idea for a green jelly alien that turned wrestlers into goo while we plodded along the corridor. Berry and Tamsin brushed past us, giggling about something with Janelle.

“Do you think Janelle still likes me?” I asked Hassan, interrupting a description of Andrew the Ogre

exploding in a shower of purple slime.

“What do you mean?”

“She hasn’t spoken to me since – well, you know – since the play. Not even one word.”

“I’m sure that it’s all in your head, mate,” said Hassan, patting me firmly on the back.

“She hasn’t invited me to her birthday party, either.”

“Oh.” Hassan’s hand dropped to his side. He bit his lip thoughtfully. “Maybe she doesn’t like you then.”

“You really think so?”

“I don’t know.” Hassan looked as confused as I felt. “You’re the one who said it. Why don’t you just ask her?” With that, he disappeared into the computer room, leaving me alone and terrified.

Our school choir wasn’t like your average school choir. We sang rock songs and blues tunes and hits from the musicals. I had never missed choir before, even when I was deathly ill. Once, I went to choir with flu. I made it through nearly three whole songs before I threw up

on the carpet and Mr Rivers sent me home. So it was silly to miss it just because I was scared of apologising.

As I walked towards Mr Rivers' music room, I decided that the best thing to do was just get it over with. I'd march in there, say sorry, and it would be over.

But when I arrived, I saw that Mr Rivers was already talking to Janelle. She said something behind a cupped hand, and Mr Rivers grinned.

"Sounds like your birthday party is going to be the bash of the year," he said.

Janelle did an excited dance. "I know!"

"She won't tell us what it is!" whined Berry. "Please tell us, Mr Rivers, please!"

"I don't want to spoil the surprise," he said, standing up. I thought about apologising right then and there, but there were too many people talking and suddenly, everyone was getting into a circle, and Janelle was still dancing, and I had missed my chance. "Time to warm up," Mr Rivers announced, and everyone went silent because Mr Rivers' warm-ups are amazing.

First, we wailed like fire engines.

"NEEEEEOOOOoooooeeeeEEEEOOOOW!"

Then, we did robot singing.

"Beep. Boop. Borp. Blip. Zonk."

Then, we chewed pretend sweets. "Imagine you're an alien who is tasting chocolate for the first time," ordered Mr Rivers, as we each tried to pull the silliest face that we could. "Mmmm, this chocolate is out of this *world!*" Mr Rivers can never resist the chance to be theatrical.

As we wriggled our faces back into their normal, human shapes, Mr Rivers said, "Now, choir. The school play is over, which can only mean one thing. We have to start planning..."

"The leavers' assembly!" shouted six voices at once. Everyone from Class Six grinned at each other. We'd been waiting for this moment since we first joined Morton, half a lifetime ago.

"This will be your last Morton School performance." Mr Rivers sniffed and wiped away an imaginary

tear. “So, let’s make it the best leavers’ assembly in Morton history. I want each and every one of my Class Six wonder-performers to have their own moment in the spotlight, whether it’s a duet, a solo or an instrumental break.”

I didn’t hear much more than that. This was it: my chance to show the whole school that I was still Ash, still a singer, still a star. It had to be perfect.

“All I need,” Mr Rivers continued, “is for you to tell me what song you want to perform.”

For the rest of choir, I was lost in a dream. I know that my mouth moved and notes came out, but I couldn’t have said what songs we’d sung. I was too deep in imagining the leavers’ assembly: me, on stage under a spotlight... the lights dimming, and a disco ball sending glittering lights around the hall... a smoke machine... electric guitars... everyone screaming my name. “Ash! Ash! Ash! Ash!”

It didn’t matter to me that no assembly in Morton history had included a disco ball and a smoke machine. I knew that I had to have them.

“Knock-knock. Is anybody in there?”

I shook myself into the present. I’d been so busy dreaming, I hadn’t noticed that choir was over. The music room was empty except for Mr Rivers and me. Now was my chance to apologise.

“Wakey-wakey, Ash.”

“Sorry for not being Robin Hood!” I said quickly, and dashed from the room.

“So are you coming to my party, or what?” asked Janelle, grabbing my elbow as I rushed down the corridor. I breathed in so fast that I choked on my own tongue. As I coughed and spluttered, Janelle said, “All right, mate, no need to fake an illness to get out of it. I just wondered.”

“You didn’t – you didn’t invite me,” I rasped after a few calming gulps of air.

“Course I did,” said Janelle, steering me round some younger kids coming in the opposite direction. “I gave the invites out last week. You’re the only person who hasn’t replied. Oh, wait!” Janelle stopped dead in the middle of the corridor. Since she was still hanging onto my elbow, I nearly fell over. “You were off school.” She turned to me, looking exactly like an alien who has

just tasted chocolate for the first time. “Your invite is still in my bag.”

“You mean, you want me to come?”

“Of course! If you want to, that is. I didn’t know if you were still my friend, after, y’know, the play.”

“But I didn’t know if *you* were still *my* friend,” I said. I could tell that I looked like an alien who had just tasted chocolate for the first time, too: shocked, but very, very happy.

“You complete banana. Of course I’m your friend.”

It was like the bad dream fog had evaporated away; I felt normal. I felt complete. Janelle was my friend and I was invited to her party. Of course I wouldn’t fail my exams and of course I wanted to sing a solo in the leavers’ assembly. The school corridors seemed to be bathed in sunshine. I could have skipped, danced and sung, and all the birds in the sky would have swooped down to sing with me.

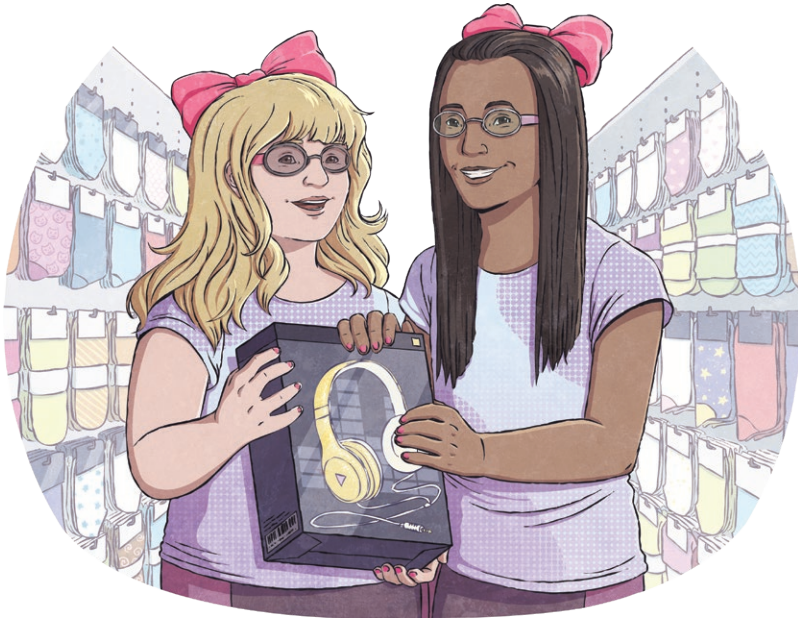
“So, Janelle,” I said, leading the way back to the classroom, “if you wanted to make a lucky eraser like Hassan’s, but with singers instead, who would

you choose?”

“Well, my first pick would be Brick Canady from Glitter Riot, *obviously*.”

“*Obviously* him.”

“Don’t be a flake.”



Chapter Five

“Don’t be a flake.”

“I’m going to Janelle’s party!”

As soon as Mum arrived to pick me up from after-school club, I roller-skated towards her, waving my invitation in the air and dodging other skaters as they zoomed in every direction. I nearly knocked Mum over but at the last second, she dived towards the soft play

and I swerved into the wall.

I went to an after-school club at the leisure centre, and they had a cupboard full of roller skates. On days when there were no troublemakers, the grown-up helpers would let us get the skates out and have our own roller disco. It was great fun. It would have been even more fun if the helpers had better taste in music.

Mum staggered to her feet. “When is Janelle’s party?” she yelled over the thumping beat and cheesy lyrics.

“This weekend. I can go, can’t I?” I said, rubbing my elbow where it had hit the wall. “Janelle only just gave me the invitation.” I held out the carefully-folded piece of paper. It was very Janelle, with lots of purple and gold and stickers all over it.

Mum pulled open her phone to check her calendar. She organises everything down to the last minute. Today’s entry probably said something like:

17:16 – collect Ash from after-school club

17:42 – put lasagne in oven

17:45 – watch TV while writing more items in calendar

18:02 – remove lasagne from oven

“I’ve got a hair appointment in the afternoon but as long as your father picks you up, that should be fine.”

“Yes! Yes, yes, yes,” I swept into a victory lap of the sports hall on my skates, weaving around kids and helpers and stray rucksacks. When I glanced over at Mum, she was looking at her phone and tapping her foot. I was probably making her late for her appointment with the lasagne.

I slid to a stop and yanked off the skates. As I was searching through the identical school shoes piled against the wall, Mum said, “So, things have been all right at school then?”

“Yeah.” My stomach wriggled around. “Why wouldn’t they be?”

“Oh, I just wondered. After your little meltdown at the play.”

Meltdown? I imagined myself melting like ice cream in the sun. That wasn’t how I’d felt at all. More like cookie dough crammed with too many chocolate chips.

“Wasn’t it nice of Janelle to step in?” Mum went on.

“I did her a favour, really.” I tried to sound totally cool. “She wanted a bigger part, but she missed the audition. Oh, and Mum,” I pulled on the two shoes I’d found that were probably-almost-definitely mine. “I need a really cool outfit. Janelle says that there’s going to be a surprise and we have to wear our best-ever clothes.”

* * *

The rest of the week passed in a blur. Janelle wouldn’t tell us what the surprise was, no matter how much we pleaded, poked, bribed and blackmailed her. The only thing that she said was that we were all having chips and burgers for tea. “But that’s not the surprise,” she said quickly. “That’s just in case you have allergies.”

On Saturday, one day before the party, I interrupted Mum while she was on her laptop (11:34 – shop online for vintage dresses; 11:38 – get distracted by puppy videos). Dad sat beside her, doing the crossword.

“I don’t have any clothes for the party,” I said.

Mum paused the puppy video with a sigh. “Ash, you’ve

got loads of clothes.”

“*They’re always top of the class, twelve letters...*” said Dad, but he was just reading out a crossword clue.

“But Janelle said to wear something special. And I should bring her a present, too. What do you think the surprise is?”

“I’m sure it’ll be something nice,” Dad said. “Does the clue mean someone who does well at school? Or something literally at the top of the classroom like... a blackboard?”

“But what if I wear the wrong thing?”

I’d had dreams about it all night. In one dream, I showed up to Janelle’s party wearing my Robin Hood costume. In another, I wore a giraffe onesie. In the last dream, I was wearing the perfect outfit: jeans that were exactly the right cut, a shirt which struck the perfect balance between dressed-up and casual, and brand new trainers a bit like the ones everyone had got for Christmas, but even cooler.

I’d woken up feeling like a giant weight had been lifted off my chest. Everyone would wish that they looked

like me! Then, I’d remembered that those clothes didn’t exist; they were just dream clothes. The weight came crashing back down.

“I’ve tried on all of my clothes, and none of them are right,” I explained. This was true: my room looked as though a whirlwind had come over for tea.

“Overachiever!” Dad announced.

“I don’t understand, sweetheart, but –” said Mum, closing her laptop lid.

“It’s twelve letters,” Dad said, scribbling eagerly onto his paper.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Mum said, but Dad wasn’t listening. “Look, Ash, I had some chilling-in-front-of-the-TV time planned for this afternoon, but why don’t we go shopping instead?”

* * *

We were at the shops, pushing our way between bustling Saturday shoppers, when two hands grabbed my elbows.

“Hey, Ash.”

“What’ve you got there?” It was Berry and Tamsin, shopping with their mums. Their mums got married last year and Berry and Tamsin were bridesmaids. That’s when their obsession with looking identical started. It’s not easy: Tamsin is blonde and round, while Berry is dark and pointy. Today, they were wearing matching leggings and giant bows in their hair. Tamsin wore sunglasses almost exactly the same as Berry’s actual glasses.

“Just, erm...” I trailed off. I was clutching a pair of pink socks covered in kittens. They were completely *not* Janelle’s sort of thing.

“We’ve got Janelle these,” said Tamsin, holding up a pair of gold, glittery headphones. It was the perfect gift.

“Oh,” I said. “That’s really cool.” I shoved the socks to the back of the nearest shelf, hoping that they hadn’t noticed the kittens. “I haven’t thought of anything yet.”

“What are you going to wear?” asked Berry.

Tamsin butted in before I could reply. “I think we should wear our sparkly dresses,” she said, “but *Berry*

thinks we should wear our new jeans.” It sounded like an argument that they’d been having for a long time.

“I *told* you,” said Berry. “Janelle said that jeans would be better.”

“But she also said to wear our *best outfits*.”

“Well, I don’t think our sparkly dresses *are* our best outfits.”

That’s when I saw something down the stationery aisle. I left Tamsin and Berry arguing and ran to grab the massive, purple eraser.

I elbowed my way to the next aisle and shoved the eraser under Mum’s nose. “I could write so many singers’ names on this. It’s the perfect present!”

* * *

The next morning, I woke when it was barely light. The thick curtains turned my bedroom a gloomy blue. From the wall opposite my bed, my poster of Brick Canady glared at me judgmentally.

I couldn’t go to the party. There wasn’t any one definite

reason. I just couldn't go.

When Mum called me for breakfast, I pulled the duvet over my head. When she knocked on my door, I squeezed myself into a ball.

"Ash?" she said, pushing open the door. I groaned. Mum whipped the duvet off me in a gush of cold air. "What are you doing?"

"Not going," I said into my pillow. "Hiding –"

"Don't be silly."

"– staying perfectly still until I fade to nothingness –"

"Come on, Ash."

"– turning to black slime and slithering away."

"This is ridiculous. Up you get," she said. "We spent all that time making Janelle's... special present." I'd been so certain that Janelle would want a lucky eraser like Hassan's but Mum had kept suggesting keyrings, or photo frames, and now it seemed silly.

"I just don't want to." I said it into my pillow so it

came out like, "Mm-fm-mm-mf-mff."

Mum threw the T-shirt that she'd bought me yesterday onto the bed, along with my oldest jeans and a pair of socks which I hadn't worn in a year because they were too orange. The T-shirt had a spaceship on it. No one in my class liked spaceships. Why had I let her buy it?

Dad appeared in the doorway. "Breakfast is getting cold."

"Ash is having a funny moment," said Mum, but she obviously didn't mean *ha-ha* funny. "He says that he doesn't want to go to the party."

"But you were so excited, Ash. What changed?"

"Ash, don't be a flake," said Mum. "If you don't go, your friends will stop inviting you to things."

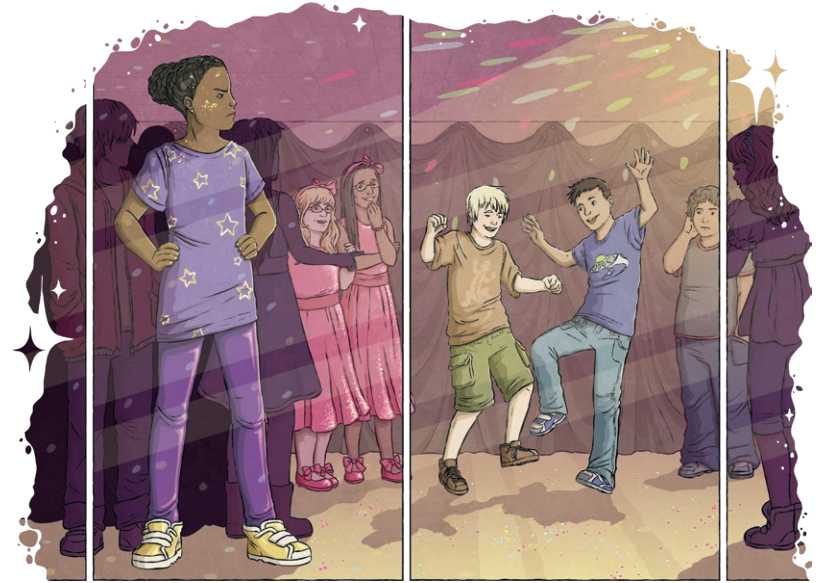
I sat up, remembering how miserable I had felt when I found out that Janelle was having a party and I thought that I wasn't invited. What if I really wasn't invited to any future party, ever?

"Okay," I said, picking up the new spaceship T-shirt. "But Mum, can we throw these orange socks away? I

never wear them.”

“Hmph,” said Mum, snatching the socks and marching from the room.

Dad pulled my bedroom door closed, but just before it snapped shut, I caught the look on his face. It was exactly like he was thinking about a particularly difficult crossword clue.



Chapter Six

“What’s wrong with you?”

“This is a strange place for a party,” said Mum as she pulled into a scrappy car park at the back of the Southgate shopping centre. We were nearly half an hour late and I had expected the place to be heaving, but there were only two other cars parked, both old and rusty. A huge dustbin overflowed with black sacks. A one-legged pigeon eyed us suspiciously from a garage roof. I wondered if I’d been sent here as some kind of joke.

“Maybe we should go home,” I said.

“Oh, no you don’t. It’s too late to back out now.”

My insides felt like jelly again, but I tried to ignore it. “It’s number 3A. Look, there’s a balloon tied up outside.”

There was only one balloon, bobbing sadly on a piece of string, but at least it was gold. That meant that it was about three percent more likely to have been put there by Janelle. I sighed, tugged at my new spaceship T-shirt, grabbed my wrapped present, and slammed the car door shut.

Beside the chipped, blue door were three buttons on a steel panel: ‘3A’, ‘3B’, and ‘Deliveries’. Next to ‘3A’ was a little card that read ‘TJ and CJ Dance Studio’. I pressed the button and heard it buzz.

“If Janelle was going for mystery, she’s outdone herself.” Mum tapped her foot and glared at the pigeon. The bird launched itself into the air, and with a *splat* that echoed across the windswept car park, it pooped right on Mum’s windscreen. “Lovely,” she said, just as the door behind us burst open.

“Ash!”

“Janelle!”

Janelle was wearing shiny, purple leggings and huge, gold trainers. Her face was covered in glitter.

“You missed the first part,” she said, grabbing her present, “but you’re just in time for pink lemonade.” Then she ran up the stairs before I could ask what she meant by ‘first part’.

As we sped along the stuffy corridor, the sound of many chattering voices grew. Janelle burst into a room already heaving with everyone from Class Six, all wearing their best clothes. One wall was completely covered in mirrors.

Janelle raced inside and flung my present onto a table already heaped with gifts. “Help yourself to lemonade,” she said, and pranced away.

Hassan stood by the snack table, stuffing his face with cheese and onion pasties. “Since when did you like spaceships?” he asked, nodding to my T-shirt.

“Since yesterday,” I said, taking a glass of lemonade.

“Why? What happened yesterday?”

I didn’t feel like explaining the whole clothes-shopping fiasco. “Aliens planted a mind-control maggot in my brain.” I tapped my head. “Now all I can think about are spaceships and how to enslave humankind to serve my alien overlords.”

Hassan gave me a funny look. My heart sank. I should have just told him about the clothes-shopping fiasco.

Then, he burst out laughing.

“Ash, mate.” He hooted so loud that people turned to look. “Never – never –” eventually, he stopped laughing long enough to finish his sentence. “Never stop being you.”

I grinned and sipped my lemonade. The fizzy sweetness stung my throat and I almost giggled. “So, what’s the surprise then?”

“Ugh!” Hassan pulled a tortured face. “Typical Janelle. We’re doing a flash mob.”

I couldn’t remember what a flash mob was. Not that I was going to admit that to Hassan. “Ah yes, the aliens

have flash mobs too. We run down the streets in leather jackets shooting mind-control lasers into the crowd. It’s a great way to quickly enslave many people at once. I didn’t know that Janelle was an alien like me.”

Hassan was laughing again. “That’s not – that’s not what a –”

“Did you just say that you’re an alien?” said Tamsin, sidling up to me with Berry at her side. Tamsin had won the argument: they were wearing sparkly dresses.

“Yes, human,” I said, in my best alien voice. I tipped my head to one side and wiggled my fingers enigmatically. “I’m from the planet Tralala, and I’m here to conquer Earth for the High Emperor, known as Klorp.”

“I think that you’ve been drinking too much pink lemonade.” Berry wrinkled her nose.

“Pink lemonade? Disgusting. To alien brains, it tastes of rotten potatoes.” I gulped the last of my lemonade so quickly that I burped. The noise reverberated around the room. Suddenly, thirty pairs of eyes were on me.

Then, everyone burst out laughing. I grinned into my empty lemonade cup. Apparently, overnight, I’d

become a comic genius.

“Right!” yelled a deep voice. Janelle’s older brother, TJ, stood at the end of the room with all the mirrors. His dreadlocks were knotted on top of his head and he was dressed from head to toe in sports gear. “Time to learn the next bit of the dance. Don’t worry if you missed the first bit,” he shouted, looking at me. “The beauty of flash mob is that you can just stay in the crowd for a bit longer before you join the dance, right?”

“Right,” I said, still trying to piece together what was going on.

“Ash is a performer,” Janelle said. “He’ll pick it up quickly.” She smiled at me, and I puffed up with pride. This party was going great. I was glad that Mum made me come.

That is, until TJ started dancing. He went over the moves so quickly, I could barely keep up. I slunk to the back, between Hassan and Noah. Hassan puffed and panted and threw his arms in the opposite direction to everyone else.

“Why did it have to be dancing?” he moaned.

Noah wasn’t even trying. He jiggled nervously from foot to foot.

“Don’t you want to learn it?” I asked, trying to copy everyone in front, who all seemed to remember the moves perfectly.

Noah shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. Mum said I’m not allowed to be in the video anyway.”

“There’s a video?”

“Yeah, mate, that’s the whole point of a flash mob,” said Hassan. His forehead dripped sweat as he bounced in a circle, three beats behind everyone else. “We’re going to be Internet stars.”

“Oh,” I said. I’d fallen behind and none of the moves were sticking in my head. There was only one thing for it...

Hassan watched me for a moment. Then he said, “What are you doing?”

“Alien dancing.”

“You what?”

“Alien dancing. It’s the maggot in my brain. It’s making me dance like an alien instead of a human.” I wiggled my arms and jiggled my legs and waggled my tongue.

“Er... okay,” said Hassan, obviously not sure what to do. Then Noah joined in, pulling silly faces and waving his limbs about like he was floating in space. We were having a really good time. People in front began to point into the mirror and giggle.

Then, the backing track suddenly stopped.

“Okay, what’s going on?” asked TJ. I stopped mid-waggle. Janelle spun round and glared. Noah’s shoulders hunched as he stared at his feet, his pale skin suddenly brick red. I wanted to crawl into a wormhole and vanish to a parallel universe.

“You’re spoiling it,” Janelle snarled.

“Guys,” said TJ, “we don’t have loads of time to learn this dance. Now are you joining in, or are you going to sit out while the rest of us get on with it?” He spoke in the wise, serious voice of a grown-up used to dealing with troublemakers. I felt paralysed. I’d never been one of the troublemakers before.

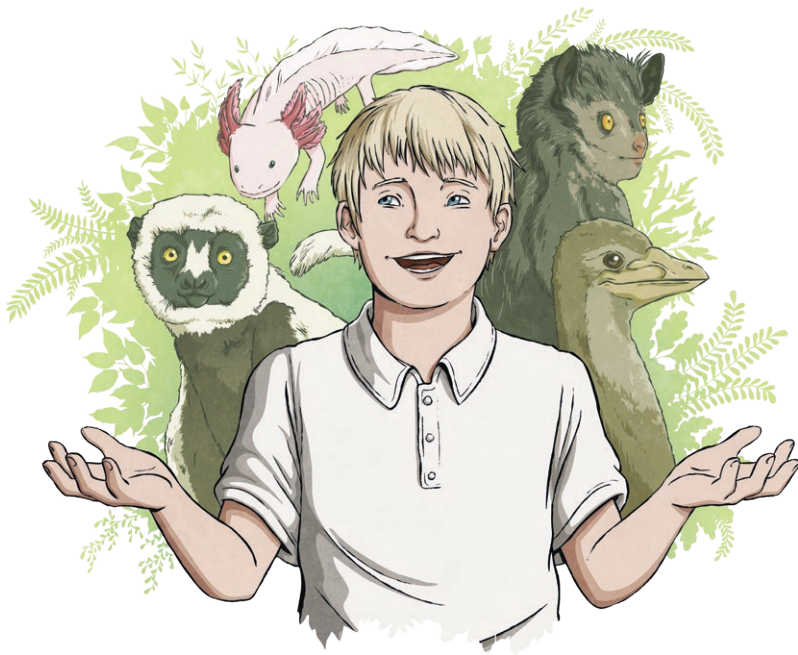
“You’ve been acting weirdly since we got here, Ash,” said Tamsin.

“Yeah, saying you’re an alien,” added Berry. “What’s wrong with you?”

I couldn’t breathe in. It was very sudden. My lungs just didn’t work at all. I was going to suffocate to death.

Janelle put her hands on her hips. “Just be normal, okay?”

I heaved in a huge gulp of air and ran from the room.



Chapter Seven

“You’re fine.”

“Do you want to tell me what’s going on?”

I sat in the car, on the way home from Janelle’s party. Mum was trying to start one of those deep and meaningful conversations, I could tell. But I wasn’t talking. My brain seethed with a million horrible thoughts, but there were too many to make sense of. I

“You’re fine.”

stared at the windscreen wipers as they swished up and down, smearing the pigeon poo across the windscreen.

“Ash, stop twiddling your hair, or it’ll all fall out.”

I hadn’t even realised that I was twiddling my hair. I sat on my hands so that I’d stop. But after a few seconds, my fingers wound themselves in my hair again, without me even telling them to.

“Ash!”

I ignored her.

Mum sighed. “You hadn’t even been at that party half an hour before TJ called.”

I twiddled harder and harder. I didn’t need Mum to remind me what an embarrassment I’d been. Maybe there really was an alien maggot living in my head. Maybe that’s why I was acting so weirdly. It was the only thing that made sense.

* * *

On Monday, I tried to convince Mum to let me stay off school. I wore every jumper that I could find and

wrapped myself in two duvets until I started sweating. Then, I limped downstairs.

“Mum, I’ve got a temperature.”

Mum was already in her smart work clothes. She took the thermometer from the ‘useful things’ drawer and unclipped it from its special case.

“Open wide.”

I let her poke the cold metal end under my tongue and clamped my mouth around it. I felt myself burning with the heat of a thousand jumpers. At last, the thermometer beeped.

“Thirty-seven degrees,” read Mum. “You’re fine. Get your uniform on, quickly, Ash.”

* * *

That week, school was exactly as bad as I expected. Everyone seemed to be avoiding me. Everyone except Hassan.

“Did you know that The Boulder was fostered as a child, like I am?”

“I did.” Hassan loves The Boulder so much that he’ll repeat the same facts again and again.

“And did you know that he actually started a charity for children in care, and he gave ten million dollars to it last year?”

“You’ve told me.”

“Wrestling isn’t really a sport, it’s a performance art. So in some ways, The Boulder is an artist.”

That was the same morning that Janelle brought in her fully edited flash mob video. She handed a memory stick to Miss Underbridge, who displayed it on the whiteboard. The class whispered and nudged each other as Berry and Tamsin hastily shut the blinds.

Miss Underbridge pressed play. On the board, crowds of shoppers milled around the Southgate shopping centre. They just looked like normal people but when I peered closely, I kept spotting kids from Class Six walking in and out of the crowd.

The video zoomed in on Janelle, walking alone and playing on her phone. Then, a beat kicked in. Janelle stopped in the middle of the shopping centre and... just

began to dance.

She was really good. Even though it was just her dancing on her own to begin with, shoppers stopped to watch.

Then, the other kids joined her: Berry and Tamsin ran out of the clothes shop. Freddy and Isaac from choir jumped out from behind a stall selling phone cases. The troupe of dancers grew and grew, and the audience grew bigger and bigger.

“I can’t see you,” I whispered to Hassan.

“I didn’t start dancing till the very last moment,” he whispered back. And there he was, on screen, running in from the pick ‘n’ mix stand. He threw his arms in the wrong direction, and jumped in a circle a beat behind the rest, just like in the practice, but it didn’t seem to bother him. Next to me, Hassan started to dance in his seat. “You know, Ash, even though dancing isn’t really my thing, it was a fun party.”

I caught Noah looking at me from across the classroom and I remembered that he wasn’t in the video, either. He smiled at me and looked away.

* * *

That lunchtime, I was supposed to go to choir but just as I reached the music room door, I heard loud voices from inside.

“Janelle, are you going to do a Glitter Riot song with Ash?” asked Tamsin.

“After what he did at my party?” said Janelle. I froze and bent forwards to listen. “Not likely.”

“Yeah, he was acting really weirdly,” said Berry.

“Hey, you know which Glitter Riot song he should do?” Janelle said. She paused for effect. “‘Monster’.” Then, she started to sing:

*“I’m the odd one in the crowd,
People point and laugh out loud.”*

“It’s perfect!” gasped Tamsin, then everyone started to laugh.

I didn’t stay to hear any more. I sped away, pushed open the playground door and headed to the tree in the corner, far away from everyone else. Not that there

was anyone to avoid; almost all of Class Six went to clubs on Wednesday lunchtimes.

I leant against the tree trunk, twiddling my hair and worrying about whether the alien maggot that infested my brain was eating anything important, like my memories or the way to calculate the area of a trapezium.

That was when I noticed Noah shuffling towards me over the tarmac. He had his hands in his pockets and he was shivering slightly in the blustery spring wind.

“How come you’re not in choir?” he asked, looking at the tree roots, which poked like tentacles out of the ground.

“Didn’t feel like it,” I mumbled.

“Oh.”

We stood in silence for a moment. I forced myself to stop twiddling my hair. Then, I started stripping leaves from the lowest branches, instead. Noah kicked the roots, first with one foot, then the other. I suddenly realised that I’d never really hung out with Noah, not unless there were other people around. Come to think

of it, no one hung out with Noah. He was a bit of a loner. Just like I felt, right then.

“How come you’re not at computer club?” I asked.

“I’m not in computer club.” Noah sighed and kicked the tree again. “I tried it, but it was full of people who wanted to make videos of slime explosions.” Hassan loved slime explosions, but I wasn’t surprised that Noah didn’t feel the same way. “No one wanted to do anything serious, like researching the wildlife of Madagascar or the evolution of axolotls. So I stopped.”

“What’s an axle otter?”

“*Axolotl.*” Noah’s face lit up. “They’re a type of salamander. They’re critically endangered, and they only live in lakes in Mexico, and they exhibit *neoteny*, which means that they never metamorphose, even though they’re amphibians, and they can regenerate limbs, and...”

Noah used lots of words that I didn’t know, but it didn’t really matter. Talking to Noah was like watching a wildlife programme. As we walked around the playground, he told me about sifakas, which shriek from the jungle canopy, and elephant birds, which are

now extinct, and then about aye-eyes.

“Aye-eyes are a type of nocturnal lemur, and they have a long, thin middle finger for clawing insects out of small holes, and some people think that aye-eyes bring bad luck, but they don’t; they’re just shy, gentle creatures.”

“I think that you’d be an aye-eye,” I told Noah.

“And you’d be a sifaka, showing off to the whole jungle.”

“Hmm.” I realised that I was twiddling my hair again, and stopped.

“You would, though. You’re a really good singer. I think you should be a singer when you grow up. I’d buy your songs.”

“Maybe,” I replied, but I wasn’t so sure any more. I felt an ache as I thought of the choir, who were practising for the leavers’ assembly without me. “What about you? What do you want to be when you grow up?”

Noah tucked his hands back into his pockets and looked up as a crow flew overhead. “There was a famous

conservationist called Gerald Durrell, who spent his life helping endangered species. I’d like to be like Gerald Durrell.” As Noah spoke, I realised that he had been talking for ages and hadn’t stuttered once. Perhaps it wasn’t explaining things that he found tricky. Perhaps it was just doing it in front of everyone.

“That sounds perfect for you,” I said.

Noah scuffed his feet. “It all depends on how I do in my exams, though, doesn’t it?”

“What?” I didn’t get it; Noah was top in every subject. “Noah, you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“But yesterday’s English test was impossible.” Noah looked really worried. His pale face went paler and his eyes were red around the edges. “I didn’t get that poem at all.”

I shivered, but it wasn’t just the blustery wind. If Noah was worried about his exams, what hope was there for someone like me?

“Man up.”



Chapter Eight

“Man up.”

By the time playtime was over, I had forgotten all about choir. I walked inside with Noah. He was telling me about different types of octopus:

“...like the mimic octopus, which pretends to be an eel or a stingray so that it doesn’t get eaten...”

We walked past the supply cupboard and the staff

toilets, towards our classroom. Without warning, Mr Rivers stepped out of the music room like a secret agent stepping from a dark alley.

“Ash?” he said. He wasn’t smiling or pulling silly faces today. “In here, please.”

Noah gave me a nervous look – maybe it was meant to be sympathetic – and scampered off. Mr Rivers held the door open, and I followed him inside.

“You weren’t at choir today,” Mr Rivers said, perching on his desk. “How come?”

I stood and twiddled my hair. I knew that I was doing it, but I decided that there was no point in stopping.

“Ash? Is something going on?”

I thought of the alien maggot in my brain, eating things up and making me act weirdly. I couldn’t explain that to Mr Rivers. So I just twiddled my hair.

“Look, Ash, I need to know if you’re serious about being in the leavers’ assembly.”

“What?” I stared. I knew that I looked like a dazed

rabbit, but I didn't care. "Yes! Of course."

"Really? Because people who are serious turn up to choir rehearsals."

"I am! I want to be in it. Please." I'd gone to choir every week of my school life, except today. I'd been imagining what I would sing in the leavers' assembly since I was seven. I couldn't leave Morton without performing in front of everyone one last time – without proving that *Robin Hood: Superstar!* was just a weird moment, or possibly the result of alien brain maggots.

"Be here next week, then."

"The thing is," I began to babble, suddenly desperate to explain, "I was about to come to choir, but when I was outside the door I heard Janelle say something, and –"

"Ashraf," said Mr Rivers. He stood and walked to the classroom door. I tripped after him. "Man up. Even if you're having a difficult time with your friends, you still need to be present. Got it?"

I looked into the stern eyes of the man who had been my hero for years. "Yes, Mr Rivers," I said. At that, he

shut the door with a snap.

* * *

That afternoon, Dad picked me up after his early shift at the hospital.

"How was your day?" he asked as we drove home. It seems to be a rule that parents have to ask this question, even though every day is pretty much the same.

"Usual."

"*Usual*. What does that mean?"

There was no way that I was telling Dad about missing choir and getting in trouble with Mr Rivers. "Spellings. Wrestling with Hassan. I hung out with Noah at lunch. That was cool –"

But Dad had stopped listening. "Wrestling?" His eyes went wide and I could see that he was getting ready to tell me off. Dad hates violence of any sort, even if it's not real, like on TV. I think that it's because he's an A&E nurse, dealing with emergencies and fending off angry relatives.

“Not proper wrestling, Dad.” Sometimes, parents don’t get it. “We just act out the moves. We don’t actually hit each other.”

“I should hope not.”

“Anyway, Hassan says that the sort of wrestling that he likes is more like performance art.”

“*Hassan* said that?” Dad parked the car outside our house. As we traipsed into the kitchen, I could see that Dad was thinking about saying something else, so I decided to change the subject.

“Dad, I can’t work out what song to sing for the leavers’ assembly.” I swung my backpack off onto the kitchen floor and helped myself to a chewy fruit bar.

“Oh, you’re singing something?” Dad asked, putting on the kettle.

“Of course!” I plonked myself in a dining chair.

“I just wondered. After the play.” Dad frowned at his crossword, which lay on the table. It looked as if he hadn’t started it.

“I still want to sing, Dad.” I felt like a part of me was coming loose and people were forgetting about me. I was Ash, the singer. Even Noah knew that about me. I had to sing in that assembly.

“How about that song you like? About, erm, changing the world through the power of music?”

“Which one?” I should have known that it was useless to ask Dad. He only likes old stuff.

“By the band you like. Sparkle Party.”

“Glitter Riot.”

“That’s it.” Dad picked up his paper and sighed. “I am completely stuck on this crossword. *Mexican amphibian*, seven letters. I don’t even know any Mexican amphibians.”

“I think that Janelle and that lot have already bagsied all the best Glitter Riot songs.” I chewed the last of my fruit bar. “Wait! Is it an axle otter... no, an axolotl? Your Mexican amphibian? Noah told me all about them today.”

“Brilliant!” said Dad, picking up his pen. But he didn’t

write anything. “Er... you don’t happen to know how to spell that, do you?”

I didn’t.

Dad sighed. “I don’t get it,” he said, looking the spelling up on his phone. “Usually, I can solve the crossword in about an hour. I’ve been staring at this one for ages.”

“I guess we all have bad days.” I pulled my bag open and fished out my homework. We’d done another maths test, and Miss Underbridge wanted us to have a go at any questions that we’d missed (“Remember, the more you practise, the stronger your brain gets,” she’d said). It seemed like my alien maggot was making my brain weaker, not stronger. On this test, my score had gone down again, to 23. Just looking at the paper made me feel a bit woozy.

I opened the first page, but the questions looked like a jumble of meaningless symbols, so I closed it again. “Do you ever feel like you’ve got an alien maggot in your brain?” I asked Dad, quietly enough that he might not hear.

“What? A maggot?” Dad looked at me like I was from another planet.

“Well... erm...” I could hear the words that I wanted to say but they just wouldn’t come out. “Like, I couldn’t do the school play, and that’s stupid, because I love doing plays...”

Dad nodded.

“And at Janelle’s party I was acting really weirdly and I don’t know why. I told people that I had an alien maggot in my brain and I started doing an alien dance. It was like I couldn’t stop myself.” Now that I’d started talking, suddenly, it all wanted to come out. “Janelle hasn’t talked to me since and now, I think that it might be true about the maggot, because my test scores are going down every week, as if everything that I know is being eaten away. And our exams are soon, and I think I’m going to fail them.” I squeezed my eyes shut to stop them from tingling and tried not to think about how I wanted to throw up.

Dad gazed seriously at me for a moment. Then, he nodded. “Well, Ash, there’s no such thing as alien brain maggots.” He put down his pen. “But it sounds like you’ve got a lot on your mind.”

I nodded. “It’s like everything is going wrong all of a sudden.”

Dad tapped his pen on the table. "Is that true? Or is it just that you're worried that everything will go wrong, so you find ways to get out of it?"

That felt like a punch to the guts. How could Dad think that I wanted to make a fool of myself and fail my exams?

"Look," he went on, "imagine you're play-wrestling with Hassan." I had no idea where he was going with this. "Hassan raises his fist and tells you, 'I'm going to punch you.'"

"Dad, we don't actually –"

"No, let me finish. That's what Hassan says, but he doesn't mean it. He's just playing. His fist is real, he really says he's going to punch you, but he's not telling the truth. The worries that you're feeling at the moment are a bit like that."

I stared at my dad for a minute, wondering if we were both aliens. "I don't get it."

"Your emotions are real, like the raised fist and the threat. Because they're real, it is totally fine to feel scared and upset." Dad gave me a hard look, so I could

tell that this part was important. "But that doesn't mean that those emotions are telling you the truth. Sometimes, you have to use your head to work out what's true and what isn't."

"Like knowing that Hassan isn't really going to punch me?"

"Exactly." Dad rolled up his paper and brandished it about as he spoke. "Take your exams. In your exams, you'll be asked some tough questions, including some that you won't know the answer to. That's scary, and it's okay to feel scared. But when your fear tells you that you're going to fail just because you get a few questions wrong, you don't have to believe it."

"But I might fail," I told him. My chin was wobbling and my eyes weren't just tingling, they were fizzing. "It might happen."

"So, what happens if you fail?" asked Dad. I opened my mouth to reply, but I found that I didn't know the answer. Dad has a way of asking questions like that.

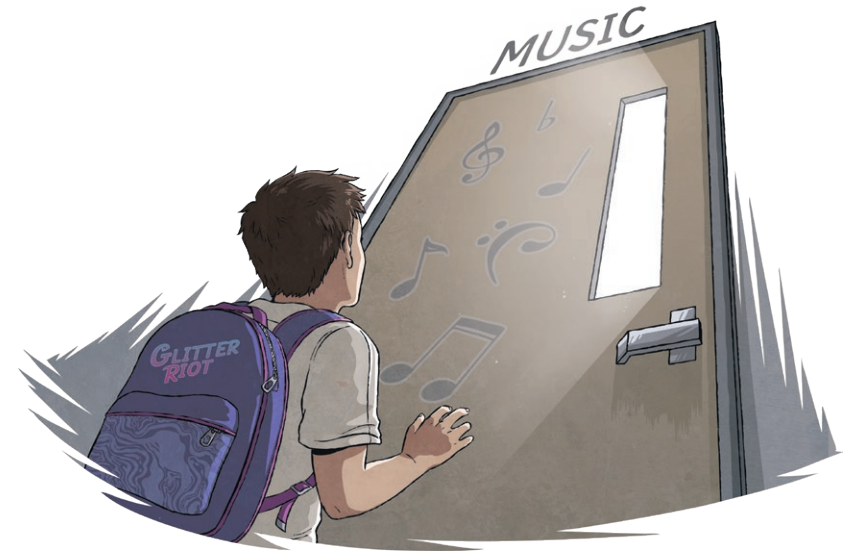
After a moment, I said, "I'm a failure?"

"No. If you fail, you get a piece of paper with your

test results at the end of the year, and instead of a high number, it will have a slightly lower number. But you're still you. You're still Ash: a brilliant singer and a fabulous performer, with friends who love him and who always tries his best. You're still my bright boy who does well at school, but just happened to have a bad day on the day of exams. And we all have bad days." Dad waved his crossword, which still only had one word filled out.

My chin wobbled and my eyes leaked. Without asking, Dad handed me a tissue from his pocket.

"And I wish that you and Hassan would find something to do other than wrestling," he added, unrolling the paper again and taking the lid off his pen.



Chapter Nine

"Here we go again."

The next Wednesday, I stood in front of the closed music room door, shaking.

I hadn't meant to start shaking. I'd planned how lunchtime would go before I even got to school. I would march inside, smile at Janelle and say 'Hi' (even though she still wasn't talking to me), then walk right up to Mr Rivers and tell him the song that I wanted to sing for the leavers' assembly. The song was 'Under

the Lights' by Glitter Riot, and it was exactly the right choice. If you don't know it, the chorus goes like this:

*It doesn't matter what I think or how I feel,
It's only when I'm under the lights that I'm real.*

The song is all about being on stage. It's as if Brick Canady, the lead singer, is right inside my head, singing my thoughts.

There was only one problem. Just as Miss Underbridge let us go for lunch, I heard Janelle telling Berry that she'd decided what song she was going to sing.

"When I thought about it, there was only one choice," Janelle had said. "'Under the Lights'. It's so obvious."

"So obvious," Berry agreed.

So now, all of my plans had shrivelled up like an old party balloon.

As I stood outside the music room, shaking, I could hear everyone in choir gossiping and showing off. Then, Mr Rivers clapped his hands for quiet, and they started to warm up.

"NEEEEEOOOOoooooeeeeEEEEOOOOW!"

What if I went inside now and Mr Rivers told me off for being late? What if I asked to sing 'Under the Lights' and everyone laughed at me? What if Mr Rivers said that I couldn't be in the leavers' assembly at all?

I knew that the longer I waited, the less I would want to go in, and yet each moment passed and I just stood there.

As the warm-up was finishing, Miss Underbridge came out of the staffroom holding a slice of cake. "Ash? What are you doing in the corridor?"

I sort of jerked, like a really bad shake. Without even bothering to answer, I dashed through the door to the playground. Before it slammed shut, I glanced over my shoulder, just in time to see Miss Underbridge tap on the music room door. Praying that she was only going inside to give Mr Rivers some cake, I ran off to my usual hiding place under the big tree in the corner.

Noah was already there. When he saw me, he smiled. "I thought that you'd be at choir."

"I'm meant to be." I twiddled my hair a few times,

breathing in and out, in and out. I was still picturing choir in my head, imagining everyone pointing and laughing at me. “I just... everything is... hard at the moment.”

I don’t think I’d have said that to anyone except Noah. Janelle would have laughed it off. Hassan would have looked awkward and then asked me to wrestle. It was partly because Noah’s a quiet and listening sort of person, and partly because Noah was a brand new friend. He didn’t expect me to be a certain way.

“I know exactly what you mean,” he said. “Everything is normal, then out of nowhere it’s like a... a wave crashes over you, and suddenly, school and exams and everything seem impossible.”

I stared. I couldn’t stop myself. Here was Noah, the cleverest person that I knew, telling me that he was finding things hard, too. I felt tingles of relief in my fingers and toes. It was so nice not to be the only one.

“I feel more like I’m staggering under the weight of hundreds of rocks,” I said, “and I’m going to drop one any minute, and it’s going to land on my feet and crush my toes.”

Noah grinned, “Oh yeah, I get that too. Sometimes I get this dream where I have to fetch everyone in Class Six to the hall, but every time I fetch someone new, three people have wandered off.”

“I have one where someone throws those bouncy rubber balls all around my living room, and you have to catch them before they break any ornaments.”

Noah grinned. We fell silent for a moment, looking out across the playground. Class Five were hogging the football pitch, and the kids from Classes Three and Four were arguing over whose turn it was on the monkey bars. I sighed, thinking how this time last year, my biggest worry was whether to play tag or do wrestling at lunchtime.

“I wish that things were like they used to be,” I said. “I wish that we didn’t have exams to worry about, and changing schools, and everything.”

“I didn’t think that you’d be worried about exams,” said Noah.

“Me?” I turned to him in shock. “I didn’t think that *you’d* be worried. You’re a genius!”

“Exactly,” he said, as if that explained everything. “You’re a singer, whereas I’m supposed to be clever. Your exams don’t make a difference to how good you are at singing. But if I don’t do well in my exams... well, I’m not good at anything, am I?”

While he was talking, my mind went back to everything that my Dad had told me last week. Here was my chance to help someone out, the way that Dad had helped me.

“No, it doesn’t mean that,” I said. “Look, Noah, you know *loads*. Everyone who knows you knows that you’re one of the quickest learners in the class.”

“I’ve got really good brain muscles,” said Noah, flexing his arm muscles, which really weren’t as impressive as the ones in his brain.

“Yeah! Ask anyone. Even if you have a really bad day during exams and somehow forget everything you know” – not that I thought that was going to happen, ever in a million years – “that doesn’t mean that you’re no good. It’s just... a weird blip.”

“Like how computers can process quadrillions of bits of information a second, but sometimes they crash?”

Noah nodded. “Okay,” he said, smiling to himself. “The wave about to smash over me doesn’t look so big now.”

“You’re not carrying quite so many heavy rocks,” I agreed. Telling Noah had made me feel better, too.

We wandered out from under the tree. Summer was nearly here. The sun shone brightly, and only a few fluffy clouds were skidding across the sky. I stared up as an aeroplane left a long, neat trail in the blue. For the first time in a while, I felt peaceful.

“So, do you think you’ll go back to choir?” Noah asked, and the peaceful feeling evaporated.

“I have to,” I muttered. “If I don’t, I can’t sing a song in the leavers’ assembly.”

Noah grabbed my arm, suddenly panicked. “Then you should be there now! You can’t miss this chance to sing, Ash. It’ll be your starring moment.”

“I know,” I mumbled, but Noah was already dragging me across the playground. “Come on, I’m taking you back there.”

“But –”

At that moment, the bell rang for the end of lunchtime. I tugged my arm free.

“You still have to talk to Mr Rivers,” said Noah.

“Noah.” I stopped and folded my arms. “I can’t. What if he’s angry?”

Noah opened his mouth to speak, then stopped himself. Eventually, he just said, “I’ll come with you.”

Noah led the way into the gloomy corridor towards the music room. As we reached the door, it burst open and everyone from choir streamed out.

“Look who it is!” squealed Tamsin when she saw me. “You missed rehearsal.”

“I know,” I mumbled.

“Oh, here we go again,” said Janelle. “*I’ve got an alien in my brain. That’s why I’m so weird. Get real, Ash.*” Tamsin and Berry laughed, and the three strode off together back to class. My fingers trembled.

“Don’t listen to them,” whispered Noah. Once the girls were out of sight, he marched me to the music room

door and knocked. Mr Rivers opened it at once and Noah cleared his throat. “Ash wants – wants – wants to talk to you.”

Mr Rivers looked from Noah to me then back again. “I’m glad to see you, Ash. Come in, have a seat.” I followed Mr Rivers inside and sat on a plastic chair. Noah hovered in the doorway, chewing his lip. “Noah, would you tell Miss Underbridge that I’m having a chat with Ash? I won’t keep him five minutes.”

Noah nodded, gave me a thumbs up, and scampered off.

“I’m so sorry, Mr Rivers –” I started, but he put up a hand to stop me.

“No, Ash, I’m sorry.” He gave me a long look and sighed a deep sigh. “You’ve always been so capable of everything that I forgot that even bright, capable people can find themselves struggling, too.”

At that, I felt my chin wobbling. Mr Rivers understood! He wasn’t angry!

“I shouldn’t have told you to ‘man up’. Emotions are what make us human, and ignoring them doesn’t make you more of a man.” Mr Rivers sighed. “I know

that you want to be in the leavers' assembly, and you deserve to be, so it's my job to help you to get there. Now," he said, pulling out a special choir notepad and pen, "let's find a way to make this work."



Chapter Ten

“What an overreaction.”

Soon after Mr Rivers and I made our plan for the leavers' assembly, exam week arrived and I forgot about singing completely. This was it. The shadow, which for so long had just seemed like a blobby shape on a far horizon, was suddenly here: huge, looming and inevitable.

The first exam was English. That morning, instead of vloggers and puppies, all that anyone could talk about was similes, bullet points and whether or not we'd get marked down for scruffy handwriting.

“I read a whole revision book last night,” Noah told me

as we meandered around the classroom to our seats. “Did you know that you can use a semi-colon to join two independent but related clauses? I’d forgotten.”

I just gulped. I could barely remember what a clause was.

As I sat down, Janelle came over to our table. For a moment, I hoped that she wanted to make up and be friends again, but instead, she started chatting to Tamsin and Berry.

“I’m not that bothered,” Janelle said breezily. “It’s just exams, isn’t it?”

All at once, Miss Underbridge bustled in with Mr Tariq, who was helping to invigilate. Once the register was done, she led us into the hall. Hassan took his lucky eraser from his pocket, kissed it (I’m not joking) and put it on the table in front of him. “Strong as The Boulder,” he murmured to himself. I wondered what had happened to the lucky eraser that I had made for Janelle.

“Right, Class Six,” Miss Underbridge said, handing out test papers. “You’ve done the learning.” Mr Tariq followed behind her with sharp pencils. “You’ve done

the revision.” Miss Underbridge was dressed in her serious, grey dress again and her bobbed hair was extra sharp, like she’d had it cut especially for exam week. “Now, it’s time to do the test.”

She gave us the usual speech about working in silence and putting our hand up if we needed a new pencil. With every sentence, I felt my belly squirm. My fingers shook on the crisp exam paper in front of me. I wondered if I was going to be sick. Then, before I knew what was happening, everyone opened their papers. The test had started.

First, we had to read a long story about a haunted house, only I couldn’t concentrate on the story over the noise in my own head that was telling me to concentrate on the story. Then, there were pages and pages of questions. The first ones weren’t too hard, but I kept losing my place. As I flicked back and forth through the paper, my answers smudged and the pages grew ragged.

“You now have thirty minutes left to finish the test,” said Miss Underbridge. My fingers felt like rubber and my brain like cotton wool. Thirty minutes? I still had a leaflet about a historical mansion to read, and a ton of questions worth three marks each. I couldn’t finish

in time!

Instead of working faster, I got slower. Sometimes, I forgot what I was writing in the middle of a word, or found myself scribbling my thoughts instead of the answer. For the question, ‘How does Tom feel at the end of the story?’ I wrote:

*Tom feels like stopping and thinking
at elephants for donuts.*

I scrubbed the sentence out. I couldn’t breathe properly and the words swam in front of me. I had a pain in my head and it took me a minute to realise that it was because I was twiddling my hair so hard. I wanted to just give up. I dropped my forehead onto the table and tried to breathe slowly. The trouble was, the more that I thought about breathing slowly, the faster my breathing got.

“Fifteen minutes to go,” said Miss Underbridge, and I heard a sob. At first, I thought that it must be me. But then it was followed by a bang, footsteps and a door slamming into the wall.

I looked up. I wasn’t the only one. Almost everyone in the class stared around at the empty chair and the

abandoned test paper. Everyone, that is, except Noah, whose tongue stuck out of the side of his mouth as he frantically scribbled a paragraph so long that he already had his spare hand in the air, signalling to Mr Tariq that he would need a new piece of paper.

“Janelle?” said Miss Underbridge, and I suddenly realised who was missing. “No need to worry, Class Six,” she said. “Keep working quietly for Mr Tariq. I’ll just go and check on Janelle.”

I caught Hassan’s eye and he pulled a face, so I pulled one back. I realised that my breathing was back to normal and my hands weren’t shaking so much. It was strange, but knowing that someone else felt as bad as I did somehow made me feel better. I was managing, and if I stuck this out until the end, then I would have done well.

By the end of the test, I had written five more answers, including one of the three-mark ones. I hadn’t finished the paper, and I knew that I hadn’t done as well as Noah, or even Hassan. But I remembered what my dad had said: when your fear tells you that you’re going to fail just because you get a few questions wrong, you don’t have to believe it.

Just as the test was about to end, Miss Underbridge led Janelle back into the classroom. Janelle's eyes were red and her mouth was a wobbly line, but she looked determined. Janelle took a deep breath and sat down to finish.

* * *

On the playground, all that anyone could talk about was the exam ("I'm pretty sure that 'sinister look' means that he was pulling a pouty face...") or Janelle ("*What an overreaction!*") but it all made me feel like jelly. In the end, I tapped Hassan on the shoulder.

"You wanna wrestle?"

It was nearly the end of break when Janelle stepped outside. I only noticed because Hassan and I were near the benches. Hassan was explaining safe landing techniques from his mixed martial arts class.

"And then you roll," he said, "which is really important..."

Janelle's eyes were still red. She looked over to the tree, where Class Six stood gossiping. Then, she sighed and sat on a bench, tucking her knees in and pulling

her sweatshirt over the top, like she was trying to be as small and wrapped-up as possible.

"...because rolling spreads out the energy so you don't put too much force on one area of the body."

"Hassan, I'll be back in a minute." I didn't know if Janelle would want to talk to me, but I had to try.

"What?"

"Just one minute, okay?"

I crept slowly towards Janelle, like I do with next door's dog. I thought that she might run away if I startled her. "Janelle?"

She looked up sharply. When I saw her face up close, she had tears rolling down her cheeks. Quickly, she sniffed and looked down again. "What?"

"I wondered if you were all right." I twiddled my hair. "I wanted to walk out, too."

"But you didn't." She said it almost like an accusation.

I shrugged and sat next to her on the bench. "I thought

that I was the only one panicking. My brain was mushy and my fingers were wobbly and everyone else looked so calm.”

“Same,” Janelle whispered into her knees. “Freddy sat on one side, two pages ahead of me, and Noah was on the other side, miles ahead of Freddy. I was going hot then cold then hot again, and I just snapped. There didn’t seem any point in going on. I knew I was going to bomb.”

“But you did go on. In the end.”

“Yeah.” She smiled a bit, looking at the bitten ends of her nails. “I did.” She nibbled on the edge of her thumb. “Sorry about ignoring you,” she said at last. “I was pretty wound up at my party. I just wanted everything to go exactly right.”

“That’s okay.” I mostly meant it. “Did you get my present?”

“The lucky purple eraser?” I nodded. “Yeah. I’ll bring it in tomorrow. It was really thoughtful.”

We sat together, watching the playground. It felt like every time I stopped to look around, I was another step

further away from Morton School, moving towards a foggy future.

“I have an idea,” said Janelle at last. “I promise to stick it out if you will.”

“Exams, you mean?”

“Yeah. If you stay to the end, I’ll stay too. Deal?”

“Deal!”

Janelle held out her hand, and grinned as I shook it.

“Get over it.”



Chapter Eleven

“Get over it.”

As I went to bed on the night of that first exam, I had things under control. Janelle was my friend again and we were going to get through exams together, no matter how scared we were. Not that I was scared any more.

An hour later, as I lay awake trying to remember what question ten was and whether I'd remembered to write a full sentence or use a conjunction, I realised that

everything was completely out of control. The exams were like quicksand, sucking me down into dark, suffocating depths and there was nothing I could do to pull myself free. In the morning, I felt like I hadn't slept at all.

“I can't go to school,” I groaned as Mum stomped into my room to see why I hadn't eaten breakfast.

“Ash, this is ridiculous.” Mum had a tight crease in her forehead, which meant that she was cross but didn't have time for an argument. “It's the middle of your exams; you have to go.”

“I'm ill,” I mumbled into my pillow. All of my limbs felt heavy.

“Not that again,” Mum picked up yesterday's school clothes from their pile on the floor and threw them at my feet.

“And I didn't sleep!” My brain felt all clogged up with bad dreams. There was no room left to think.

“That's not my fault.”

“I'm going to fail.”

“Ash,” Mum’s hands were on her hips and the crease on her forehead was deeper and angrier. “You’ll definitely fail if you don’t even go to school. I don’t know what’s got into you, but you need to get over it. I expect you in the kitchen in three minutes flat!”

* * *

I still felt like sludge when I arrived in the classroom, a minute ahead of Miss Underbridge. This morning, she wasn’t wearing her serious, grey dress. Instead, she was wearing the old, paint-splattered cardigan that she usually saved for art days.

Hassan nudged me. “Painting this afternoon.”

In the assembly hall, once we were at our desks, Miss Underbridge spoke to us. “Class Six, I want to say something, and it’s something that I should have said yesterday.” She paced at the front while Mr Tariq handed out our papers. “I want you to know that how you do in your exams is only a small part of you. These tests won’t show me what you know about football or music or art, whether you’re a good friend or a kind person. I know all of those things.”

As she spoke, I felt the sludge of the morning seep

away. I’d thought that exams were all that Miss Underbridge cared about.

“And as for where you’re at in maths and English – I know that, too, because I teach you every day!” Hassan made a face. I made one back. Inside, I felt lighter. “What I mean is, don’t sweat it.” Miss Underbridge smiled. “And if you’ve all got your test papers... let’s go!”

I almost enjoyed that exam. The windows were open, and a warm breeze fluttered between the desks. The room was busily quiet, with just the sound of turning pages and scratching pencils. Instead of noticing all of the questions that I got wrong, I decided to focus on each one that I was confident that I’d got right.

Afterwards, on the playground, Janelle hugged me, grinning. “We did it!” she sang. “I put your lucky eraser on the table. I don’t know if it really brought luck but every time I got stuck, I just looked at it and remembered that I just needed to stay calm and keep breathing.”

Best of all, Hassan was right about painting. That afternoon, Miss Underbridge put on some peaceful music, got out all the art supplies and told us, “Create a picture of something that makes you feel calm. I’ll

hang them in the hall and then in tomorrow's exam, if you start panicking, you can find your calm picture and take a moment to breathe."

I actually had fun. Maybe exams weren't so bad, after all.

I bounced home, grinning like a loon. I listened to Glitter Riot all evening and danced around my room with my maths revision guide in one hand and a chewy fruit bar in the other. I even went to bed when Dad asked.

Then I lay awake, thinking about long division and quadrilaterals and fractions until numbers swam about in front of my eyes. When I finally got to sleep, I dreamed that the plus sign meant divide and the divide sign meant find the square, and everyone in Class Six knew, except me.

I woke up when it was barely light, with a feeling like I was being crushed by a huge rock. I didn't move until Dad came to find me. It was his turn to take me to school.

"Ash?"

"I can't go to school," I groaned, just like yesterday.

"What's this about?"

"I'm ill."

"Talk to me, Ash."

"And I didn't sleep. I'm going to fail."

Dad perched on the bed next to me and messed my hair like I was little again. "Sit up and tell me properly."

So I did. I told him all about the shaking and the not-breathing and the feeling like my mind was clogged up. Dad just nodded and said, "Mm," in a knowing way, until I'd told him everything and I was sure that we would be late to school.

At last, he said, "Ash, I think that you might be ill."

My chest felt tight. Dad had believed me about being ill! What if he was going to let me stay at home, and then the police took him away for breaking the law?

"No, I didn't mean that I'm actually ill," I said quickly. "I just said it because –"

“I know,” said Dad, in his deep, slow voice. “I don’t mean ill with a cold or a tummy bug. I think that your brain might be a bit ill.”

My chest got so tight that I stopped breathing altogether. “Do you mean that I’m *mad*?”

“No,” Dad said, and he said it so firmly, I knew that he meant it. “I don’t think that ‘mad’ is a particularly helpful word, so let’s not use it. Think of it more like... your thoughts might have the flu. Unfortunately, I don’t possess a magic brain thermometer, so the only way to check is to see a doctor. If I’m right, then they might be able help make your thought-flu better.”

“But, Dad.” Even if Dad didn’t like the word ‘mad’, I was sure that’s what other people would think of me. “What if no one will be my friend? What if they think I’m too weird? What if they lock me up?”

“Ash.” Dad gripped my shoulders. “This is really important. If you have a mental illness – *if* – it doesn’t mean that you’re going to be locked up. Lots of people have one at some point in their lives.” Dad squeezed my hand. “I did. When I was younger, I suffered from depression, quite badly. It still comes back from time to time, just for a bit. But I’m not weird, am I? Well,

no weirder than most people.”

“You’re actually quite normal,” I reassured him.

“I don’t know if being normal is a good thing or not,” Dad mused. “Right, here’s what I think: I think that you should go to school and do this exam, and I’ll book you a GP appointment.”

While Dad went to call the doctor, I thought about what he’d told me. I remembered that there were times when Dad went to read in his room instead of watching TV with Mum and me, when he stopped laughing easily and when the bad things that happened at work got to him more than normal. Was that because he was depressed? And if so, why didn’t he say anything? If it was just an illness like flu, what was the fuss about?

“There’s nothing wrong with you.”



Chapter Twelve

“There’s nothing wrong with you.”

After our last exam, there was a class party. Everyone brought in homemade cupcakes and cold pizza slices. As we moved the tables and chairs to the edge of the room, the air was filled with chatter and smiling faces.

People were just beginning to tuck in to the food when the school secretary knocked on the door.

“Ash? Your dad’s here.”

“What?” said Hassan, who had already stuffed a biscuit into his mouth. “You’re going?”

“Got a doctor’s appointment,” I mumbled.

“What for? There’s nothing wrong with you. You’ll miss the party.”

“Er...” I panicked, before my eye caught the First World War display. “I’ve got trench foot.”

“Gross.” Hassan made a face. “Is it contagious?”

“Probably,” I lied. “You should keep your distance, just in case.”

When Dad arrived, he handed me a chewy fruit bar. “How are you feeling?” I shrugged, pulling off the wrapper. I felt like goo. “Yeah, I bet,” Dad said, as if he understood. “Exam go all right?”

“Can’t remember.” I didn’t say it to be difficult; I actually couldn’t remember. I’d spent the whole test imagining how the doctor was going to react when I said all the stuff about having an alien maggot in my brain. In my head, the doctor wore a white coat and had frizzy hair, big glasses and wide, staring eyes.

'You're crazy! An alien brain maggot? Ridiculous! You're obviously completely doolally.'

After that, I'd tried to work out if there was any way that I could still be a famous singer after all this. Dad had had depression, and he still got to be a nurse. But he'd kept it a secret from me, so maybe he'd kept it a secret from everybody.

I know that Dad spent the car ride to the doctors' surgery telling me encouraging-sounding things, but I didn't hear any of them. I'd started to wonder whether people who were mentally ill were allowed to go to normal school, or whether there were separate schools. By the time we got to the surgery, I'd decided that there was no way that I could tell the doctor the truth.

Luckily, it turned out that I was completely wrong about everything.

Stepping into the doctors' surgery was like stepping inside a bubble. Everything was tranquil and hushed, as if everyone should speak in whispers. I nearly jumped out of my skin when Dad walked up to the receptionist and used his normal voice.

"Ashraf Hariri," Dad said. The receptionist typed frantically on his keyboard in a storm of sound.

"Dr Nash at two o'clock. She won't be long. Take a seat."

We followed the calm, green carpet to a calm, white room full of calm, blue chairs. I had bits of chewy fruit bar stuck in between my teeth, but I didn't feel like I could pick them out in the watchful silence of the waiting room.

Waiting quietly with nothing but your thoughts to distract you must be the worst experience ever. As I watched the second hand tick out each minute, I realised that the only thing worse than the doctor telling me that I was crazy would be if she told me that I wasn't: that I was just *growing* and *going through changes* and that one of those changes was that I was now scared of everything, and that I would be scared for the rest of my life.

After that, I stopped being able to breathe very well. But, with a lot of hair-twirling, I managed to not let on to Dad for almost three minutes.

"Ash, are you all right?" he asked eventually.

I shook my head. “I don’t want to go in –” I whispered, but just then, a door opened.

“Ashraf Hariri?”

I spun my head to look at the doctor. She wasn’t at all like I’d pictured; she was stout, with short, grey hair and a no-nonsense look about her. Her jumper was bright orange and her shoes were lime green.

“Come on,” said Dad. “I promise that it’ll help.”

I wondered if Dad had been to the doctor for this sort of thing before. I swallowed and let him pull me inside.

At first, I tried to pretend that I wasn’t ill, but Dr Nash didn’t believe me. Probably because I was hyperventilating at the time.

“No –” *gasp* “– honestly –” *gasp* “– I’m fine!”

“It’s called a panic attack,” Dr Nash told me. “Has this been happening often?”

When I started to give honest answers to her questions, I realised that she was nodding and agreeing with everything I said, as if it was just the sort of thing

that she expected. I wondered if she had met other people like me. I even told her about the alien maggot in my brain. “That’s an original one,” she said, but she didn’t use the words ‘crazy’ or ‘mad’ once. In fact, she said a lot of the same things that Dad had.

“Mental illness is just that: an illness. It’s not something that you can help. What we want to do now is manage your symptoms and help you to get better.” She told me that I had something called Generalised Anxiety Disorder. “Everyone feels anxious, but some people feel so anxious, so often, that it interferes with their normal lives. I’ll recommend you for a kind of therapy called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, or CBT. That will help you to manage your anxious thoughts. If necessary, there’s medication which can help as well. In the meantime, there are some techniques that you can use to help yourself.”

She printed off some sheets which were filled with self-help techniques, and handed them to Dad.

“Homework,” he said, waving the pages as we walked back along the calm, green carpet to the exit. “Just like school.”

But I was only half listening. “Dad, how come you

didn't tell me about your depression before? Is it a secret?"

"Oh, Ash," he said, "I'm sorry. Sometimes it's difficult to tell people, because not everyone understands what mental health is all about at first. But if we keep quiet, they'll never understand, will they? I'll be more open about it from now on. Now," he said as he unlocked the car, "what do you want for dinner?"

* * *

That afternoon, Dad and I sat in the warm kitchen with the windows open and the sunlight glowing on the yellow walls. My favourite Glitter Riot album played in the background and Dad said that, since it was a hot day and since I had just made it through my exams, I definitely deserved a cola float.

"Can I pour the cola?"

"Of course," he said, spooning ice cream into glasses.

I loved streaming the bubbly cola over the ice cream so that it fizzed and foamed. I timed my pouring perfectly so that the froth didn't spill over the top.

As we slurped our cola floats, Dad laid out all of the self-help sheets from the doctor on the kitchen table. "This one's on mindfulness," he said, holding it up.

"I've got one on keeping a diary," I said, "and – wait – is this a colouring sheet?"

"Ash, look at this." Dad held up another sheet for me to see. "This one is all about celebrities who have suffered from mental illnesses. Guess who's on here."

"Who?"

"That singer from Spangle Rave."

"*Glitter Riot*, Dad," I said, snatching the sheet. I picked out Brick Canady's picture immediately. Beside it, there was a quote.

Sometimes, panic takes over my brain, and I'm sure that I can't go on stage. When Glitter Riot were just starting out, it was a real struggle to fight the panic and win. I even cancelled shows minutes before we were due to play. Luckily, now, I know how to recognise it and what strategies work best for me.

"Dad, Brick Canady has anxiety, like me! He's been

too scared to perform, too! I can still be a singer!” I hugged the piece of paper to my chest and bounced around the kitchen singing ‘Under the Lights’ at the top of my voice, until I nearly knocked my float over and Dad had to mop up foam from where I’d spilled it on the table.

After that, I did some mindfulness colouring while Dad cooked dinner. Cheesy tuna pasta: my favourite. As the smell wafted around the bright kitchen, I felt happier than I had in ages. Not just happy, though – safe.

Then Mum got home.

Don’t get me wrong – I love my mum. But over the last few weeks, every time I had spoken to her, I had felt like I was making life difficult for her. Talking to Dad was easier.

She slung her smart work jacket over the back of a dining chair and picked up the nearest self-help sheet. Her look was grim.

“Is this from the doctor, then?” she asked. Dad nodded, and I gripped my colouring pencil hard to stop myself from panicking. Mum gulped. “So, what did this doctor say?”

Luckily, Dad took charge. He handed out steaming bowls of tuna pasta. “Tuck in,” he said. “I’ll tell you while we’re eating.”

So he did. Mum listened the whole time, completely silent, just nodding every so often. I could see that she had questions stored up in her brain, but she didn’t ask any of them. At the end, she just sighed and turned to me. I was scraping up the last bits of melted cheese with my fork.

“Ash,” she said. I couldn’t look her in the eye so I stared at the pattern on my bowl. “I’m sorry. I know that you’ve been struggling, but I just thought – well, I should have listened. Will you forgive me?”

I looked up, and realised that her blue eyes were swimming. I’m not used to seeing Mum upset.

“Yeah, of course.” I got up quickly to hug her. I didn’t want her to cry because of me.

“Oh, Ash,” she said, squeezing me hard and rocking me from side to side. “I love you. You’re my big, brave boy.”

I squeezed her back. “I love you too, Mum.”

Then a shadow loomed over us, and two huge, strong arms wrapped themselves tightly around us both. “I love both of you,” said Dad, crushing us so hard that I nearly choked. “You’re my favourite things in the whole world.”



Chapter Thirteen

“What are you waiting for?”

After our exams were over, everything seemed lighter. The sun shone brighter and the classroom became colourful, instead of grey. Everyone smiled wider, and each day seemed to fizz with change and new possibilities. Every now and then, there would be a day that was harder than the others, but I got really good at focusing on the good things, instead of dwelling on things that were going wrong.

Here are some of the good things that happened:

Firstly, we did a whole project on the Shakespeare play ‘Twelfth Night’. I got to read as Sebastian in class and Janelle got to be Viola, so we both loved it.

Secondly, I was working hard with Mr Rivers on our secret plan for the leavers' assembly, but I'll reveal all later.

Thirdly, Mum and Dad went to school to tell the teachers about my anxiety. I had a long talk with Miss Underbridge about things which could help in the classroom. She said that, if ever I was feeling overwhelmed, I could go to the reading corner by myself for a few minutes. I would sit there and focus on my breathing without any other children to distract me. I had to go a few times over those weeks, and each time, I felt better afterwards.

I told Hassan and Janelle about having Generalised Anxiety Disorder. They were really nice about it. Later, I told more and more people. Some were a bit confused at first, and I had to explain to them that there was a difference between feeling anxious in the normal way and feeling so anxious all the time that it affects your life. But no one ever even mentioned the word 'crazy'.

A few weeks after exams, everyone in Class Six visited our new schools for an activity day. I thought that I was going to be scared – in fact, I nearly made myself panic just by thinking that I ought to panic – but when we got there, I was so busy meeting people

and doing science experiments and trying out the instruments in the music room that I forgot to worry. The best bit of all was the drama department. It had a proper stage with curtains and stage lights and even a smoke machine.

One of the very best things that happened was Noah's birthday party. It was nothing like Janelle's, because Noah is a very different person from Janelle. Noah only invited three friends, and we all went to visit the wildlife park together. It was brilliant. We saw rhinos and pangolins and red pandas and wolves. Then, we went into a very dark building where we had to whisper. Behind the glass, climbing some twisty tree trunks, was a fluffy creature like a cross between a monkey and a fox. It had big, round eyes and huge ears and two long, stick-like fingers.

"An aye-aye," hissed Noah. "One of the most endangered types of lemur. This zoo is part of a lemur breeding programme. Lots of the money that it raises goes towards research in Madagascar, where lemurs are from." Noah sighed wistfully. "I'd love to visit Madagascar." I could just imagine him in the jungle, wearing khaki shorts and a wide-brimmed hat, crouching in the undergrowth as lemurs scurried around him.

As the end of term grew closer, I felt as light as a balloon, scudding through the sky on a soft breeze. That is, until the day that we got our exam results.

By then, summer was so close that when I closed my eyes, all I saw was sunlight. But on the morning of results day, I woke to a world that seemed cloaked in grey. I'd kept myself so busy that I hadn't even thought about exam results, but now the day was here, and all of those thoughts came crashing down on me at once. What if I had failed everything?

That day, Miss Underbridge had us playing maths games, designing towers with spaghetti and marshmallows, and writing our own rap lyrics. I think that she was trying to distract us. Normally, it would have worked, but not today. Half an hour before the end of school, she sat us all down on the carpet and sent Tamsin and Berry scampering about, handing out envelopes with specially-printed labels.

"In here are your school reports and test results," said Miss Underbridge. Already, my thoughts were running so fast that my breath couldn't keep up, and I didn't even have my envelope yet. "You can open them now, or you can open them at home with your parents. Congratulations, everyone! You've worked hard, learnt

loads, and I'm proud of all of you."

I was hardly listening. Berry had stopped next to me and I sat frozen while she waved the envelope in front of my face.

"What are you waiting for?" she moaned. I grabbed it and dashed to the reading corner. My heart hammered so hard that I could feel it in my ribs. I started counting each breath: *in, one, two, out, one, two...*

"Can we open them now?" asked Janelle.

"Yes, if you'd like."

I heard lots of tearing and muttering, gasps, squeals and sighs. I looked at the envelope in my hands. The corner was crumpled where I'd clutched it too hard. I couldn't do it. I didn't want to know.

Instead, I kept counting my breaths. *In, one, two, three, out, one, two, three...*

"Wow, Hassan, look how well you did in maths," said Janelle's voice.

"Bombed English though," said Hassan.

“Hey, others have it worse. Look how I did.”

Janelle sounded too cheerful to have done really badly. I wondered what she’d think of someone who’d totally failed.

“I got one mark more than you in English,” said Tamsin to Berry.

“Well, I got one mark more than you in maths,” Berry replied.

“Woah, Noah!” Hassan yelled, drowning them both out.

“Wh- what?”

“You did incredibly.”

“I just tried my hardest. That’s all.” There were yells and gasps as everyone shuffled to see Noah’s results.

“Noah, has anyone ever told you that you’re a genius?” said Hassan.

It seemed like everyone had done fantastically. I gulped and wiped the leaks from my eyes, as Miss Underbridge announced that it was time for everyone to leave and

share their results with their parents. Eventually, I was sure the classroom was empty. The only person left was Miss Underbridge, shuffling around as she tidied up.

I sniffed.

“Who’s that?” she said, peering into the reading corner. “Oh, Ash. Have you looked at your results yet?”

I shook my head.

“Be brave. They won’t bite.”

“What if I fail?”

“You can’t really fail these exams, Ash. You can do well or you can do not so well, but really they’re just a measure. If the measure isn’t as high as you would like, you can always –”

“Grow my brain muscles.” I sniffed again. “I know.”

“Shall we take a look, then?”

I nodded and poked my thumb under the sealed flap to tear it open. Then, I pulled out my report card and

the sheet with my printed test results. I stared at the numbers.

“What do they mean?” I asked at last.

“That means that you did a little below average for maths,” Miss Underbridge said, pointing at the first number, “and that means that you did slightly less well in English,” and she pointed again. I remembered the first English exam, the one where I’d almost walked out.

“Below average?” I could feel that I was going to cry, in front of Miss Underbridge of all people.

“Ash, I think that you should read your report card as well.”

I pulled out the folded card with the Morton crest printed on the front and opened it.

What a fantastic year you’ve had, and a fantastic journey during your time at Morton school. Always cheerful and kind, you love to sing and act, and have been a star of the stage every time that you have performed.

This year, you also faced your fears at one of the most stressful times in your school life. As well as trying your best in every exam, you were learning to manage your anxiety. You were working harder than anyone to get through! I am so proud of you.

I didn’t know what to say. Miss Underbridge knew that I had ‘below average’ results, but she still believed that my school year had been a success. That I was a success. I wasn’t a failure in her eyes.

“Are you ready to go out and celebrate now?” said Miss Underbridge. “You deserve to.”

I nodded and climbed to my feet. The breeze in the classroom rushed in and rattled the bad thoughts from my brain. Miss Underbridge had made me see things from a different perspective. While most people had been worrying about their exams, I had been worrying about... well, everything.

Outside, on the playground, Janelle ran over.

“How did you do?”

“Not too badly,” I said, “if you take everything else into account.”

“Yeah,” said Janelle, and she nodded to herself. “Same.”

“So, are you coming to mine to practise?”

“Of course. We only have three more days, don’t we?” Janelle said, linking her arm through my elbow. “But remember, you promised to teach me how to meditate, as well. I want to be the Queen of Chill by the time we start our new school.”

We grinned at each other and strolled out of the school gates in the streaming sunshine.



Chapter Fourteen

“I am not my anxiety.”

The lights were dim, the stage was up and the hall thronged with parents and teachers.

As the choir sang the last notes of their last song, I clapped along with everyone else in the audience. Standing at the front of the stage, Janelle took a deep bow. She was already in her special purple and gold outfit. As she swung upright, I noticed two glittering baubles hanging from her ears: mini disco balls.

Hassan nudged me. “Are you ready?”

I took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

"Is your anxiety staying quiet?" he whispered. I nodded. Today, my anxiety was just a quiet murmur at the back of my brain, rather than a loud babble. Part of that was because I had a plan in case I got anxious: I knew ways to make sure that I was breathing properly and to keep my brain busy so that it didn't spend too much energy worrying instead of singing.

The other part was knowing that I was surrounded by people who were on my side.

"By the way, I made you something for luck," said Hassan, passing me something small and slightly sweaty. I opened my fingers to look at it.

"A keyring!"

"It's a lucky keyring, like my eraser. Jill told me that I had to stop drawing on things that aren't meant to be drawn on. Look, I put the guy from that Glitter Riot band on it," said Hassan. Brick Canady's photo grinned at me from one side of the keyring. "And on the other side, there's The Boulder. Just in case your singer thing doesn't work out."

"Thanks." I grinned. I wasn't sure that I believed in luck, but as I looked at Brick Canady's floppy hair and smiling eyes, I remembered that he'd had setbacks, too. If Brick had got back on stage again and become a famous singer, then I could.

"Break a leg," said Hassan, as the choir finished a song and left the stage, and I scrambled to my feet, "but not literally."

I watched as the choir shuffled off, grinning and giggling at each other. It felt weird, not being up there with them, but an okay sort of weird. I would be moving on soon.

Besides, Mr Rivers and the leavers had been working on a secret plan; we were about to blow everyone's minds.

"And now," said Mr Rivers into the microphone, "an extra-special performance, by an extra-special group of musicians: the Morton School Glitter Club!"

Everyone in the hall went wild as we ran on stage. Berry grabbed her acoustic guitar and Tamsin dashed to the drums. Freddy and Isaac took up their positions as supporting percussion, while Janelle and I strode to the mic stands.

This was it. The big moment. Our final performance at Morton school. There was no smoke machine, and the only disco balls were dangling from Janelle's ears, but the spotlight was on me. I was excited and terrified both at the same time and it was brilliant.

Mr Rivers swung his electric guitar over his shoulder and twanged a note. It reverberated around the room and everyone cheered. I spotted my mum and dad at the back, with Janelle's grandma on one side and Hassan's foster mum, Jill, on the other. They waved and smiled and someone yelled, "Go on, Ash!"

I could do this.

Mr Rivers nodded to Tamsin, who started to tap out a beat. Berry strummed a chord, Mr Rivers twanged his guitar, and I could tell that the audience recognised the song by their grins and nudges. Then, Janelle started to sing.

"When I was younger, I dreamed of being a star..."

Janelle has the sort of rich, husky voice that's made to sing swinging, soaring melodies. As she sang, she swayed to the music.

"...but I didn't know if I could climb that far."

Now it was my turn. My fingers tingled. My chest fizzed. I stepped up to the mic, took a giant breath and –

"Now that I'm grown, I'd travel back in time to say, Just believe in yourself, kid, and you'll go all the way!"

My voice poured out as easily as pink lemonade. Behind me, Tamsin's arms were a blur on the drums. Berry strummed hard enough to rub her fingers raw. Mr Rivers picked out a riff while Isaac and Freddy jangled and tapped.

The audience grinned, nodding their heads to the beat. Hassan pumped his fists. As I caught Noah's eye, he gave me two big thumbs up.

I smiled and closed my eyes as, together, Janelle and I launched into the chorus.

"It doesn't matter what I think or how I feel, It's only when I'm under the lights that I'm real!"

I had shivers. Not the bad kind that meant that I needed to sit quietly in the reading corner – the good kind, like I was full of fizz. Even though there was no smoke

machine, the air seemed thick. Even though there was no disco ball, the room glittered. After everything – the play, Janelle’s party, the scary exams and my not-so-great results – I was still me, still Ash, and I was still able to do things. I was on stage again, singing my heart out to a captivated audience, lost in the music. Having anxiety didn’t change that. As if a light had clicked on in my head, I realised: I am not my anxiety.

As we reached the last chorus, I clapped my hands above my head and soon, the whole audience was joining in, clapping and stomping and singing.

I hadn’t just gone back to being the old Ash. I was a new Ash – an Ash who knew himself better. I knew what my real talents were, what I valued in myself and what others valued in me. Most of all, I knew that when everything felt difficult and scary, I had the strength to carry on and to achieve the things that I set out to do.

The song crashed to a triumphant end. I threw my arms up. The crowd went wild. Someone was chanting: “Ash! Ash! Ash! Ash!”

I was under the lights, and I was more real than I’d ever been.

Another note from Ash

Now, you know everything that happened to me last year. When it happened, it felt huge and unbeatable, like if I made one wrong move, I would lose everything. But one year later, I look back and I just see all of the things that I achieved: I made new friends, I finished my exams (even if they didn’t go as well as I wanted) and I eventually got back on the stage.

By the way, did you work out my puzzle about the chapter titles? Do you know what they have in common? Don’t read on until you think you know the answer. No cheating allowed!

Have you worked it out? Definitely? You’re sure?

Okay, here it is: all of the chapter titles are something that I heard someone say last year which did not help. Sometimes, people thought that they were being helpful or sympathetic, but really, they were saying exactly the wrong thing. When you’re feeling very anxious, one thoughtless comment can send your brain spiralling.

That last chapter title is the odd one out. That’s something that I said about myself, and it’s true.



I learnt lots of different techniques to help me when I'm feeling anxious. They're not just for people managing anxiety, like me. Janelle does lots of them, too, because they make her feel happy, and Hassan says that being mindful for five minutes gets him in the zone for wrestling. Even Dad has tried some of them.

Mindfulness

Whenever I was feeling anxious, it would make me think about bad things from the past or imagine terrible things that might happen in the future. Mindfulness means stopping to notice the present: twittering birds, roaring traffic, and whether or not your jumper is itchy. It helps to stop you dwelling on past events or worries about the future.

Writing my thoughts down

Sometimes, worries spun round and round in my mind until I felt seasick. Now, I have a notebook. Whenever I have a thought that worries me, I write it down. It's as if it leaks out of my brain into the paper and I don't have to worry about it any more. Sometimes, I have a hard time explaining to Mum and Dad what's going on in my head, so I can show them the notebook instead.



Keeping busy

My worst thoughts happen when I don't have anything to distract me. If I start to think of things which aren't true or helpful, I find something to distract myself, like learning a new song, talking with my friends, exercising or reading a good book.

Counting the positives

Good things happen every day, but it's easy not to notice them. When I go to bed at night, I try to remember three good things that happened that day. Today, my things are:

1. I learnt the lyrics to the new Glitter Riot song.
2. I ate tuna pasta for lunch (my favourite).
3. I finished writing this story.



My name is Ash, I'm twelve years old now, and I love to sing. That was the story of when I stopped singing, and how I learnt to sing again.

(P.S. Janelle didn't write even half as much as I did, so I won the bet over who could write more, easily. Now that I've won, she says that she can't actually afford Glitter Riot tickets. She's bought me a chocolate chip muffin instead. Typical!)





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People I Can Turn To

People I Can Turn To

People I Can Turn To

Under the Lights
Reading Questions & Story Discussion Prompts

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Character Cards

Character Cards

Character Cards

Character Cards

Missing Punctuation

Missing Punctuation

Missing Punctuation

Under the Lights
Glossary of Terms: Mental Health

Under the Lights
Glossary of Terms: Mental Health

Terms and Definitions

Under the Lights
Glossary of Terms: Mental Health

Under the Lights

Glossary of Terms: Mental Health