

I knew we were going to get caught this time.

We weren't doing anything different to what we'd done before. But it felt different. Everything was brighter, as if someone had cranked up the lights. My skin prickled like I was standing in the sun. My palms were slippery with sweat. My heart was going da-dub-da-dub-da-dub in my throat. I was the kind of scared you are when you're six, alone in the dark, and afraid that something is under the bed, waiting, waiting for you to poke so much as a toe over the side. If you do – gotcha.

I wanted so badly to look over my shoulder but Samara always said that was the worst thing you could do.

Apart from doing what we were doing.

I was wearing jeans with a long-sleeved shirt over my tank, and Samara was wearing a jacket over her dress. We each had a bag with our purses in. Samara's didn't have much in her purse except a few coins and a picture of her mum, looking beautiful. Nobody else would carry around a picture of their

mum like that, but Samara doesn't care. Samara never cares about little things like what other people think. It is one of the things I like most about her.

We wandered around the stationery section first, flipping through the cheap notebooks with the sale tags.

'I really need one of these,' Samara said, rehearsal-perfect.

'Me too,' I said, going through the pile. They all had different covers. Samara picked up one with pink flowers on it; I chose one with a generic cartoon-head, a girl's face with glossy hair and oversized eyes – which looked a bit like Samara, only not as pretty.

We placed the notebooks in the shopping basket I was carrying. Like we were doing regular shopping, like regular kids.

Then we wandered toward the back of the store, casually looking this way and that, working out where the cameras were.

And then we sauntered into the confectionery aisle.

My heart beat even faster, and it seemed harder to take a breath. I knew without having to look exactly where the other shoppers were. I could tell if they were moving or standing still, looking at items on the shelves or pushing trolleys past them, or hissing at their children to put that back right this minute. I could tell whether people were looking at us or not. It surprised me that people didn't look at Samara much: at

school, everybody was looking at her all the time. Everyone wanted to be around her, have her smile at them, have her laugh at something they did. In the shops, we were just a couple of twelve year olds.

'You know what you need to get?' Samara asked.

'Of course,' I said.

The chocolate bars slid easily enough up my sleeve. Like I always did, I picked up another, cheaper one, scanning the information label on the back, and reading it aloud to Samara.

'Do you think this one has palm oil in it?' I said. 'Those poor orangutans.'

That part wasn't an act. I really do care about palm oil, because of Katy. Katy cares about orangutans, threatened bees and endangered frogs. It is one of the things I like most about her.

'How about this one,' Samara held up another bar. 'This one has nuts.'

'Okay,' I said. 'Let's get both.'

Samara dropped her chocolate bar in my basket. She was so smooth I hadn't noticed her slip what she'd taken into her side pocket. It was an art, being able to sneak stuff in a way that even if they were watching behind the cameras, they wouldn't see. And then, without saying anything more, we glided off toward the checkout. I swung the basket onto the black conveyor belt.

‘Hi,’ Samara said to the checkout guy, taking out the notepads and chocolate. I dropped my basket on top of the others at the end of the conveyor belt. It made a hollow clunk as it fell.

I felt a desperate urge to look behind me. But I knew I couldn’t. I had to act completely normal. More normal than normal.

‘Just these?’ the checkout guy said. His eyes were glazed, and his jaw was studded with pink pimples. He barely even looked at Samara, keeping his eyes on the screen in front of him. He was her favourite kind of assistant: Samara would have spotted him on the way in.

‘Yes,’ she nodded. She delivered a big smile, but he didn’t smile back, almost as if he was embarrassed.

I got out my bag, and made a show of passing Samara coins. My hands were even sweatier now. Samara’s palm was dry and warm.

‘Oh, here, do you want to check our bags?’ Samara asked.

We both opened our bags, unzipping them and holding them wide. The guy glanced in, then glanced away.

Samara slid our shopping into her bag and swung it over her shoulder.

‘Come on,’ she said.

‘Coming,’ I replied.

We walked away, our pace slow. I always fought the urge to

run at this point, and today, it was all I could do not to bolt to daylight, through the doors that hissed open and closed, out to space, and air, and freedom. Out to where I could go back to being myself, Maddie, schoolgirl, dreamer of dreams, player of the clarinet, former member of the Rule of Two. A girl who would never take things from a shop without paying, no matter how good the reason was.

I pressed down the panic, and kept step in time with Samara, who was singing along with a song spilling out of the hair salon. Her voice was sweet, and it calmed me down, just a little.

We were almost at the sliding doors when a woman in a black uniform stepped in front of us. Later, I could never work out where she came from. One minute she wasn’t there, and then she was. Forcing us to stop, frowning down at us. Knowing everything.

‘Girls,’ she said. ‘I believe you have some items there that you haven’t paid for.’

Gotcha.

I’m not kidding, I was afraid that I was going to wee, right there in the middle of the shopping centre foyer. Right in front of the people who were not passing by, the way they had been seconds before, but slowing down, staring. Whispering to the person they were with. Some kid took a photo, and showed it to his friend. They laughed, and moved on.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Samara said calmly.

‘Come with me,’ the woman said. ‘I’m sure you don’t want to do this here.’

Samara looked as if she was going to argue, but then shook her head, making her ponytail shimmer under the blue-white fluorescent lights.

We walked in front of the woman, following her instructions. I tried to keep my eyes straight ahead, to not see the people who stopped and stared. My face was hot with shame, from my neck to my hairline.

I wished I was anywhere but here.

I wished I’d never done it, any of it. I wished that back when Samara had first asked me – begged me – I’d said no.

I heard Samara whisper, ‘Maddie. Maddie? I can’t get in trouble. You know why not.’

‘I know,’ I replied.

‘So we’re okay? You’ll tell them?’

I hesitated.

‘Maddie?’

I didn’t want to do it. But Samara was my friend. And I knew her secret.

You’d do the same thing, wouldn’t you? You’d lie to help your friend? You’d do what you had to, because your friend needed you.

You’d take the blame for what she’d done.

‘You can count on me,’ I said.

‘You’re the best,’ Samara said.

But she looked worried. Worried I wouldn’t do what I’d promised.

And when I saw her face, I worried too.

Would I really be able to do it, now the worst had happened?

‘Be quiet and keep moving,’ said the woman, prodding me in the back.

We kept moving.

It started at the beginning of the year. It started with a small uncomfortable feeling, like a pebble in my shoe.

‘And so, welcome, everyone, to our new school year,’ Katy says into the microphone. ‘And now, please say it with me, our new school motto!’

Katy holds out her hands, as if she is conducting, and chants, ‘Do your best, help the rest, put your spirit to the test!’

The whole school joins in, and cheers and claps wildly when we finish.

‘Go forward into the new school year and do your best!’ Katy calls over the top of the ruckus. ‘Have a great year!’

Katy beams at everyone, cheeks pink with pleasure. I can’t believe it. This is her first speech as head councillor, and she makes it look easy, like it is something she does all the time. But Katy is Katy, and Katy makes everything look easy.

I am way back in the gym, where all us year sixes sit. I

cheer and clap harder than anyone else, because Katy is my best friend. I am so proud of her, standing there and talking in front of the whole school. But as I clap, I also feel a heavy feeling low in my stomach. The pebble in my shoe.

I knew that Katy was going to be a councillor when we voted last year: everybody did. Katy isn't only good at everything, she is also enthusiastic about everything, all the time. She is especially enthusiastic about music: she wants to get into a special music program for high school, so she practises the flute whenever she can, and over the summer she started learning piano with a private teacher. Sometimes her interest in everything can be annoying, especially when I want to just lie around and watch YouTube. But even girls like Jordi, Elsa and Grace, who don't seem to like anyone else much, like Katy. So being voted councillor wasn't a surprise.

But when it was announced that she was head councillor – well, even Katy was blown away by that. And ever since then, Katy has seemed a little bit taller, a little bit more confident.

If Katy wasn't my best friend, I would be jealous of her. In fact, I do wonder if the uncomfortable feeling is something a bit like jealousy. Something that wishes, for the first time, that I was more like Katy.

I shake my murky thoughts away. I am impatient, waiting for all the kids to file out. The noise of five hundred kids talking and laughing presses against my ears. Teachers shush

them, but the noise bounces off the hard walls and the tall tin roof of the gym. The air smells of shoe rubber and the spray perfume that all the year six girls are obsessed with. My skin is sticky and all I want to do is get outside, even though the February air is going to be just as hot.

Katy is waiting for me at the bottom of the stage, saying 'hi' and 'thank you' to people who are going past.

'Hey, superstar,' I say, making sure my smile is as wide as it can be. 'You were amazing!'

'We're the queens of the school!' Katy sings. She loops her arm in mine and marches me out of the hall. 'What a fantastic year it is going to be!'

'I hate to break it to you, but we are not queens,' I say. 'Elsa and Jordi and Grace, maybe, but we are just ourselves.'

'Oh, you are so negative!' Katy says. 'We can be anything. We can think anything. This is just the beginning!'

'You're head councillor, you're guaranteed a year of achievement and wonders,' I say. 'What magic is this year going to bring me, huh?'

Katy pulls me tighter as we weave through clumps of kids to the senior school undercover area. 'Enough of that, our Madeleine. We are the Rule of Two, aren't we?'

Katy looks at me, takes a breath, and we launch into our motto:

*The Rule of Two*

*Since year two*

*You and me*

*Me and you!*

It's something we made up in year four, and even though it's silly, it always makes us laugh.

So I laugh. Or try to. Being so close to Katy is making me feel hotter, but I don't say anything.

Just then, I see Jordi, Elsa and Grace walking across to the senior school canteen. They are a tight trio, but there are always other people – girls, boys – who try to talk to them, make them laugh, sit with them at their spot near the oval at lunchtime, or near the undercover area at recess. Katy never seems bothered by them, but I always feel uncomfortable around them. Elsa and Grace are nice enough when they're by themselves, but Jordi has a way of looking that makes you know she's thinking something mean. They're all good at sport, good at school (not as good as Katy, but still good), and always join in the citizenship activities the school is so keen on.

But today, Jordi, Elsa and Grace are with someone new.

A girl with long shiny hair who moves like she is gliding instead of walking.

A girl with a face that is not just pretty but serene, like she

knows the secret of how to be calm when you've just walked into a new school and don't know a soul.

A girl who happens to look over at me, as Jordi is explaining something to her, and smiles. And when she smiles, I want, more than anything in the world, to be her friend. And then the girl disappears in the crush of kids clamouring to get in the canteen queue.

'What's wrong?' asks Katy.

I have stopped dead at the edge of the undercover area.

Katy pulls at my arm.

'Nothing,' I say, trying to keep my voice normal. 'Did you see that new girl?'

'Who?'

'Doesn't matter,' I say. The strange feeling in my stomach turns into a different, lighter sensation.

'Then let's get some food,' Katy says. 'My snack is in my bag, and I'm starving.' She pauses for dramatic effect. 'You too?'

'Me too!' I say.

We look at each other, grinning, and say, 'The rule of two!' and clap our palms together. We smile all the way to the classroom, walking in perfect step, skipping every eighth step, the way we've always done since we first became friends. As if nothing has changed.

I look for the new girl at lunchtime, and at afternoon recess.

But I can't find her. There are three year six classes: she must be in one of the others. And maybe she is with Jordi, Grace and Elsa: I don't see them, either.

I am surprised at how disappointed I feel. I decide the new girl is going to be my friend. She will be a different kind of friend to Katy. I don't want to replace Katy, or anything like that. Katy will always be my best friend. But the new girl – the new girl will be a new friend for a new year. With the new year and a new friend, maybe Katy is right.

Maybe anything is possible, after all.

When I get home from school, I am all jiggly with energy. I hang my banner with the school motto across the top of my pin-up board: *Do Your Best, Help the Rest, Put Your Spirit to the Test*. We were all given one after the assembly, and most of my class stuffed them into their trays or at the bottom of their bags. It is kind of lame, after all. But in my secret heart, after seeing the mysterious new girl, I feel the banner means something special.

So I hang it above the photos of Katy and me in various poses – trying to look serious, laughing when we can't – and the photo of my cat Wolfie halfway through a yawn, his pointy teeth making him look devilish. And a photo of Mum and me before she moved up north with her new partner Adam and his annoying boys.

'Do My Best,' I chant to myself, glad Dad isn't home yet to ask why I am talking to myself. I check my tablet quickly,

to see if I can find the mysterious new girl, but it is a bit tricky seeing as I don't even know her name. So I start on my homework. This is a noteworthy event, because normally I start my homework no more than five minutes before it's due. But now, I feel different somehow. Like there is a better version of myself hovering nearby. I'll have to work hard to have my new self overtake my old self. No way can I be like Katy, for example, with her colour-coded files and folders and neat bookshelves and her desk always looking like it's in a display home. But I can do better for me. Be better. Someone Dad can be proud of. Someone Mum will be proud of, maybe so proud she'll leave Adam and come and live back down here. (I know that's never going to happen, but I can still wish.)

Someone who can be proud of herself.

*Do My Best.*

I am even about to start clarinet practice when Dad arrives home. He sticks his head in the door and says, 'Quality conversation time with my only daughter while cooking dinner?'

'Sure, Dad,' I say, putting my clarinet case back on my desk. Wolfie, who is curled at the foot of my bed, flattens his ears when he sees me move the clarinet case. Wolfie hates the clarinet.

I slide onto a kitchen stool while Dad continues chopping and mixing and getting out pans and bowls. Wolfie emerges

from my room and butts his head against my shins, wanting a pat. I bend down and give him a scratch behind one ear. His purr starts up, sounding like a rusty motor.

'So, how was school?'

'Well,' I say, 'it was Katy's first assembly as head councillor.'

'Kate the Great,' Dad smiles. It is his nickname for Katy. I sometimes wonder if he'd rather have Katy as a daughter than me. I know he loves me, but maybe in his secret heart he would prefer someone a bit more special.

'She was,' I say. 'She can just do things.'

'She can't strike the fear of death by clarinet into a cat,' he jokes.

'True,' I say. 'I excel in this.'

'Ready to set the table?'

'I'm on it,' I say. 'It smells great, Dad.'

'Your favourite, sweetheart,' Dad says. 'Tuna, corn and parsley fritters. With a side of guacamole, no chili.'

'Yum,' I say. 'When's it ready?'

Dad looks at his wrist and says, 'Estimated time of completion, three and a half minutes.' He nods at Wolfie, who has jumped up on the end stool and is looking at Dad with the cat version of a begging smile.

'Yes, Wolfie,' Dad says. 'And there's some tuna for your dinner too.'

‘Back in a tick.’ I dash to my room and turn my tablet back on. Dad has a rule that there is no technology at dinnertime, so I stand in the middle of my room and quickly scan, again. I go through Grace’s friends first, then Elsa’s and finally Jordi’s. But she isn’t there.

I don’t know why I feel so disappointed. I’ll see her tomorrow, won’t I?

‘Mads!’ Dad calls. ‘You are being derelict in your duty, daughter!’

‘Coming!’ I throw the tablet on the bed and return to the kitchen.

The fritters and avocado dip are in the middle of the table. I grab plates, knives and forks, serving tongs, a salad spoon. After putting Wolfie’s dish down in the laundry, Dad serves me.

‘Yum, Dad,’ I say through a mouthful of fritter. ‘So good.’

Dad bows with a flourish, before he takes his seat.

‘MasterChef Michael, at your service.’

Apparently my dad couldn’t always cook. But when Mum left, and I stayed with Dad so I didn’t have to move schools, he taught himself. After a while of us mostly having fish fingers or occasionally toast and Vegemite for dinner, he started watching videos and went to cooking classes. Now, his food is delicious. When Katy comes over, she’s always angling to be asked to stay for dinner.

‘You’re so lucky,’ she said to me, once, after she’d demolished pasta with creamy fake-bacon sauce that Dad made specially for her.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘It’s great that my mum is living in Port Hedland with Adam and the droobs, thus forcing my dad to learn to cook.’

‘I didn’t mean that,’ Katy said quickly. ‘I just meant – well, you’ve eaten at my house, right?’

It was true. Katy’s parents were super smart, like Katy. Her dad was a teacher and her mum did medical research, but everything they cooked was either burned, raw or completely tasteless.

‘It’s okay,’ I said, even though it wasn’t.

‘No, no,’ Katy insisted. ‘I’m really sorry. I’m sorrier than the sorriest person in the whole entire universe. I’m sorrier than all the people who voted for Donald Trump. I’m sorrier than that guy from the bus who ran face-first into the light pole.’

I started laughing, remembering how during the holidays this teenager had been calling horrible things to this girl, and then he stepped off the bus and slammed straight into a pole.

Katy got down on her knees. ‘I’m sorrier than the dog in that video when the cat rode around on its back and it couldn’t shake it off. I’m sorrier than –’

‘Katy, it’s okay,’ I said, dragging Katy up by her arm and shoving her onto the couch.

This time, I meant it. Because Katy might be loud and overenthusiastic and sometimes her enthusiasm spills over into bossiness. But she tries hard not to hurt anyone's feelings, and if she does, she tries to make it better.

'So, beginning of the last year of primary school,' Dad says, snapping me back to the present.

'Yes,' I say. 'We're the queens of the school, apparently.'

'Exciting,' Dad nods, spooning out another big helping of guacamole onto my plate before he adds some more to his.

'I've even done my first S&E homework,' I say.

'No,' Dad says in mock horror. 'Not so soon. You'll burn out!'

'Haha,' I say.

'So how's Katy going to juggle her highly responsible head councillor duties with her arduous academic load and musical ambitions?'

'Katy is Katy.' I don't mean to sound like I am annoyed with Katy, but there is an edge to my voice.

Dad raises his eyebrows. 'So, anything else notable, first day?'

I think of the new girl, and how she'd been surrounded by Grace, Elsa and Jordi, but how she'd smiled at me anyway.

'Nothing,' I say. I feel tiredness wash over me, making my limbs turn to lead. I take a bite of the fritter, but find it hard to chew.

'You all right, sweetheart?'

Clever Katy. Mysterious new girl. And me. Plain, old, ordinary me. Even if I *do* do my best, how am I ever going to be somebody special, somebody important, somebody who matters?

'Just tired, Dad.' I try to smile.

'Then let's go watch *Family Guy*, shall we?'

*Family Guy* is something we always watch when we've had a bad day, or something hasn't gone right. Or on days after Mum has Skyped, and the conversation felt weird, or I missed her. Today, though, I just don't feel like it. But Dad is looking at me, expecting me to say yes like usual. So I say, 'All right,' and we watch it, Wolfie curled on the couch next to us. After a while, we laugh where we always laugh, and my weird mood gets lost in the funny bits.

When I go to bed, later, I look at my banner, and I get a warm feeling in my heart. Tomorrow is a new day, and I will see the new girl, and everything will be all right.