

BY MY SIDE

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CHAPTER 1

BLACKOUT

I see stars.

Flashing lights.

Blurred faces peering down at me.

I'm lying on the ground.

Maybe I'm lying in the road, or in the gutter.
I could be on my bedroom floor. That wouldn't
be so bad. Then I see that I'm indoors – four
walls are spinning around me.

Slowly the spinning stops. Blurred faces come
into focus. I'm on the classroom floor. Kids from

my class are looking down at me – and Jake.

I groan and wish the floor would open up and swallow me.

“Lie still, Zoe. You’ve had another seizure,” says my teacher, as if I didn’t know.

Of course I’ve had another seizure I want to scream at her. I’m not lying here for fun!

And I don’t want to lie still. I want to get up. I feel such a fool splat out on the floor. I bet my arms and legs have been jerking and twitching. Bet my tongue has been lolling out. Bet I’ve been dribbling.

I close my eyes, wanting to die.

“Move back! Give her some air,” says Miss Howe. “Jake, get a chair.”

“Yes, Miss!”

No, Jake! I want to shout. Go away Jake. Don’t look

at me like this.

But I hear the scrape of a chair being placed close, and then Miss Howe is stroking my hair back from my face.

“Take your time, Zoe,” she says, looking scared. She doesn’t want me to drop dead in her class. That wouldn’t be good for her CV would it?

“I’m OK,” I tell her, trying to sit up.

They all shuffle back like they’re scared of catching something. *You can’t catch epilepsy!* I want to shout. *You’re born with it.* Or, at least, I was. Born with some sort of messed-up brain. Lucky me!

Miss Howe and Emma help me to sit up. Then I get shakily to my feet. My head starts to spin now, legs go weak. Jake grabs me and stops me from hitting the floor again. He’s strong.

They help me onto the chair. Emma and Miss Howe stay close. Their faces say how sorry they are for me.

Don't pity me! I want to scream.

“Back to your desks, everyone,” says Miss Howe. She smiles at me – a pitying smile. “When you’re ready, Zoe, we’ll get you down to the office. We’ll ring your mum to come and fetch you.”

I nod, wishing I was home now, where no one stares and feels sorry for me. So I get up, trying not to wobble. Emma grabs me round the waist, and Jake hovers, looking like he’s ready to catch me again.

I wish...

I wish he’d be this nice because he likes me. Not because he feels sorry for me.

But Jake is kind, so yeah, he’s going to be nice to me – Zoe the loser!

He’s more than nice, actually. He’s gorgeous – really, really gorgeous! He’s a bit taller than me, with crazy black hair and the cutest smile. He doesn’t know I fancy him. He’s never going to

know that!

I walk slowly down the corridor, Emma on one side of me, Jake on the other.

“How are you feeling now, Zoe?” Emma asks, looking at me sadly.

“I’m OK,” I say. But I’m not. My knee hurts, my shoulder hurts and my head hurts. I must have banged them all as I went down.

“You hit the floor with such a thud,” says Emma.

“I saw you going,” Jake says, looking at me with worried eyes. “I knew you were about to fit. You went so pale. I tried to catch you, only I wasn’t quick enough. Sorry.”

“I’m used to it,” I shrug. “It’s no big deal.”

They sit me down on a chair in the office. Mrs Burns rings my mum. She doesn’t even have to look up her number. She’s done this so many times.

“Will you be all right?” Emma asks, looking like she can’t wait to wash her hands of me and get back to her mates – her normal mates. Not ones who have seizures. Who twitch, eyes rolling, their body out of control, looking like they might drop dead any minute.

Who’d want a mate like that?

I totally understand why I don’t get asked to their parties or the cinema. I’m too big a risk. Anyway, I don’t want to go to their boring parties. And I can watch films at home. I wouldn’t go out with them even if they did ask me.

“Your mum’s on her way,” says Mrs Burns.

“Thank you, Emma and Jake. You can go back to your class now.”

Jake gives me a sad little smile and, to my surprise, Emma hugs me. A big, warm hug.

“Take care,” she says softly.

It's so stupid, but I feel my eyes starting to sting
and fill up with tears. I choke them back. I
mustn't cry. I'm a big enough loser as it is. I don't
want them feeling even more sorry for me.

I'm glad when they go. I don't need their
sympathy.

I don't need anyone.