

BRUISED



CHAPTER 2

RED MARK

Finn

Finn kicked at a stone as he walked past the biggest houses he'd ever seen. There was a man pulling up weeds in the front garden of one of them. Finn bet that he didn't live there. People who lived in houses like that didn't weed their own gardens. They had gardeners for that sort of thing.

Finn walked past the final garden in the row and cut down the alley that ran down the side of the huge house. When he came out the other side he was on the canal.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and frowned. He had no reception here. Finn would never get why Gran had chosen to live on a shabby houseboat right behind the poshest houses in town. The lads at school would rip it out of him if they knew he was living on an old, busted canal boat.

Finn shoved his phone back in his pocket. No reception and no Wi-Fi. Great. How was he supposed to know if his mum was trying to get in touch? She might need him and he'd be stuck out here.

Well if she needs me, it will serve her right for kicking me out, thought Finn. But even as he thought it, Finn knew that it wasn't true. It wasn't his mum who had kicked him out. It was Mark.

Mark was his mum's new boyfriend and he hated Finn. Finn didn't care because he hated Mark too.

Mark had been alright when Finn had first met him. He'd taken Finn and his mum to the

GIRL NEXT DOOR



CHAPTER 1 NEW HOUSE

Imani

We've been driving for nearly an hour.

"Almost there!" Dad says cheerily.

I'm squashed in the middle of the back seat. My noisy six-year-old twin brothers are strapped into car seats on either side of me. It feels like it's been a long journey. I can't wait to arrive, but I also feel nervous. What will our new house be like?

I've lived in the same place all my life: 25 Lanton House, on the sixth floor of a block of high-rise flats. But the flat feels too small for our family now the twins are growing up. Mum and Dad have

told me the new house is bigger, and it's closer to the hospital where they both work.

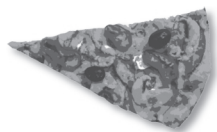
There are lots of reasons for us to move — but I still feel like I've got butterflies in my belly. Lanton House is the only home I've ever known.

"Just a few minutes more Imani," promises Mum. She knows I hate being stuck in the middle of the twins.

I see a sign which says Crayley Hill. Mum and Dad have told me this is the area where the new house is. I cross my fingers. I hope I like the new house. The car turns the corner and we pass some shops. I spot graffiti on one of the closed shop shutters, sprayed messily in red paint. It says OC Forever. My heart sinks.

Suddenly, I don't feel welcome here. OC stands for Our Country. It's the name of a horrible group whose members don't seem to like anyone who they view as not British. I've seen them on the news. They believe that anyone who is a different

LOOKING AFTER MUM



CHAPTER 1

DOUBLE CELEBRATION

Dani

Friday afternoon

I looked up at the clock on the classroom wall: 3.29pm.

I yawned. Still one minute to go until the end of school. But not just the end of school; the end of the week and the end of term, too.

It was tutor group. Ms Watson had already done the notices so we were just sitting there waiting. I started counting down the seconds. Ten, nine, eight...

At last the bell went. Everyone stuffed their books into their bags and made for the door.

I headed straight for the school gates.

“Dani!”

I spun round. Evie was racing towards me.

A word about Evie. I’ve known her since we were in nursery. She is my best mate. Not that we’re very much alike. Evie is tall and sporty. Her dream is to go to the US and become a professional footballer. Me? I’m not tall. And I’m definitely not sporty. My thing is singing. School talent contests, karaoke, in the shower — basically, I’ll sing anywhere. Evie says it’s because I like the sound of my own voice. She’s allowed to say that because she’s my best mate.

“Have you seen the boys?” Evie asked.

“No,” I replied.

Evie and I were meant to be meeting up with

SAM



CHAPTER 2

BREAKING POINT

Mum

Getting offered an extra shift tonight means Sam and I won't be going to the cinema for our usual Friday treat. Hopefully we can still go next week.

I plonk the laundry basket down on Sam's bed and push his laptop to one side. I'm tempted to open it to see if I can find out what he's so obsessed with lately, but no. That's how trust gets broken.

Sam's dad, Richard, has let Sam down twice in a row now by cancelling plans at the last minute. I've avoided calling him until now, but I can't let

this go on much longer. He might know what's bothering Sam. Maybe they've had a man-to-man chat, or even a row, and Sam just hasn't told me. Sam's probably worried about girls or his athletics trials, or exams.

I sit on the edge of Sam's bed and call Richard.

"Hello?" A woman's voice.

I cough. "Um, sorry, can I speak to Richard?"

His new wife sighs loudly. "Janet?"

"Yes."

"RICHARD!" she yells, and then the line goes quiet. Has she hung up? How dare—

"What?" Richard says gruffly.

"When did you last speak to Sam?"

"Why?" After a long pause he grunts, "Might have missed a few calls."



CHAPTER 1

MARKET STREET

Sergeant Wade

One of my officers was stabbed last week.

P.C. Hall is a nice guy. Hard working. He shouldn't have been alone on the Fisher Estate, where fighting and drug dealing are everyday things. The place is overrun with gangs.

He was just doing his job.

When I joined the police, I knew it would be dangerous work. Burglars, car chases, robberies — I never know what each shift will bring. I just get on with it. Normally I don't think much about the risk.

After something as awful as a stabbing, though, all coppers feel more nervous and worried. It's a shock when someone you know gets badly injured. It makes you think more about safety. It makes you think about all the other times when something dangerous could happen.

That's why I was happy to be given a safe, boring job on Friday night.

P.C. Blake and I were out with three lads from the cadets. The boys were all under eighteen and had volunteered to buy cider while Blake and I watched from a distance. We had to find out which of the local shops were selling alcohol to underage kids.

We parked the unmarked car outside a chip shop. I turned to the three lads squashed into the back seat.

“Lee and Kody, you can go first.” We had a list of fifteen shops to visit that night, so we were taking turns. Blake would go in with the two



CHAPTER 1

DETENTION

Jordan

Cam is a mate but sometimes he annoys me.

It's lunchtime at school but we can't go out and play football. We are stuck in the cafeteria picking up litter. This is because Cam can't keep his mouth shut in lessons. It's always me he talks to. I always end up in detention with him.

The only good moment is when Hannah and her friends walk in. Hannah is in the year below and she's gorgeous. I can't help staring at her. When she looks in my direction, I trip and nearly fall over the black bin liner I'm holding. Hannah smiles at me.

Cam groans. "Jordan, you idiot!"

I ignore him. I'm pretty sure Hannah likes me. I think Cam is jealous.

"You know what everyone says about Hannah, don't you?" Cam asks.

"No. What?"

"I can't believe you haven't heard."

Cam thinks he knows everything. I pretend that I'm bored. "Go on, then. Tell me."

"She cheated on her last boyfriend. And the one before."

I fake a yawn. "So what?"

"So, she cheats on everyone. And she lies."

"That sounds like gossip to me. Fake news."

Hannah's friends walk out but she stops near the door. She smiles at me again.