



CHAPTER 2

BLOCKERS

Lucy

Lucy was finding dinner kind of awkward. Mum was talking in her too-bright voice. Dad occasionally answered Mum's questions, but soon even he tired of her story about the next-door-neighbour's cat.

In the end, Lucy just couldn't bear it.

"Why are we all just pretending that everything's OK?" she asked. "Why do you all think that having a life-changing operation is not a big deal?"

Mum tried to reach for Lucy's hand but Lucy pulled away.

"And what about the risks? The consequences?" Lucy asked. She threw her cutlery onto her plate.

"We know all about the risks," said Dad. "This isn't an overnight decision. We've been asking questions of the experts for a very long time now."

A look of defiance flashed in Dan's eyes. "You'd know all of this if you just spoke to me about it, Lucy. You'd know that it's the first thing I think of when I wake up in the morning and the last thing I think of at night."

Lucy took a deep breath. "I just don't get why I'm the only one who can see the problem here. When I was 12, I wanted Ryan's name tattooed on my wrist. Imagine if you'd let me do that!"

"It's hardly the same, love," said Dad. He looked tired. He rubbed his hand across his face. "If you'd come to the counselling sessions then you'd..."

"Then I'd what?" snapped Lucy. "Be brainwashed into thinking that it was OK to give a 14-year-old hormone blockers? Be forced to think that it was



CHAPTER 1

KEEPING CONTROL

Nicole

The alarm clock beeps, dragging me out of a deep, heavy sleep. 7am. I reach over and hit the snooze button. I keep my eyes closed and lie there waiting for my thoughts to come flooding in, like they do every morning. Like a tidal wave, ready to drown me. But I'm ready, too. Ready to fight all my worries; control them and file them away into little boxes, so they can't all come at me at once.

I have so many worries, but I've learnt that it's no use trying to tackle them all together. It's easier to deal with them one at a time. My alarm beeps again. I switch it off properly and climb out of bed. As usual, my heart begins racing. I have a

vague sense that something bad might happen today, but I don't know what. Slowly, I breathe in and out, pushing back against the worries spinning around in my head. As I make my way to the shower, I force myself to focus on just one thought. What should I do about Alex's birthday party?

Alex is my boyfriend. I've been seeing him for a few months. It's his sixteenth birthday soon. He's having a big party, and has invited all his friends and lots of his family. I've met his mum a few times and she's lovely. But I don't know if I can cope with meeting everyone else in one go. I imagine being there with so many people I don't know well. I know I'll find it hard.

Just be yourself, I say to myself. There's nothing wrong with you. You can handle it. The party isn't even about you, it's about Alex, I tell myself sternly. A second later, a voice comes into my head taking me back to square one. *You won't be able to handle it,* the voice says. *I can handle it,* I tell myself. My thoughts about Alex's birthday party go round



CHAPTER 1

CALLING NAMES

Anu

“Anu!” Grandad calls loudly. I grab my bag and run downstairs from the flat, straight into Grandad’s corner shop. It is warm and toasty. It always is. Especially on a cold morning like today. Grandad is arranging something at the back, his familiar orange and blue jumper peeking through the shelves.

“Bye, Grandad,” I call, running out of the shop.
“See you at 3pm.”

“Bye, my princess,” he says. “Keep smiling.”

That’s how Grandad always sends me off to school, ever since I was in reception.

I’ll try, I think to myself. If Hannah lets me.

The shop bell jangles behind me as I step out. The road is already busy with peak-hour traffic. The fog hasn’t even lifted yet. The city looks like a scene from an old Tamil horror movie — grey and dark.

Just two more days to half term. I just want to keep my head down and get through them. I like the studying part of school. It’s Hannah I can’t deal with. She’s like a monster coming out of the fog to get me.

She makes fun of how I look, how I run during PE, and pretty much everything else. I pull up the hood of my fleece and walk through the gates.
“Hey!” a voice rings out.

Uh-oh! It’s Hannah. I pretend not to hear and hurry in. Maybe she’s not calling me. But she catches up with me.

“Do you think your grandad will sell me some cigarettes?” she asks, coming closer.



CHAPTER 2

NOT ALONE

Trinity

I love being in the library after school. It's quiet, but there's always a gentle buzz of activity. Students wander about getting the books they need, writing notes, doing research or tapping away on the computers. I never feel like I'm alone in the library.

I'm working on my history report that's due in two days. History is not my favourite topic. But I still prefer staying in the library working to going home and being on my own.

I know that Mum will probably still be at work. She doesn't usually get back until about 8 or

9pm. She has a huge workload. She's a lawyer. She often brings work home, even though it's late when she gets back.

Dad will probably be at home, but even if he is I'll still feel like I'm on my own. Dad is an accountant. A year ago, he left the firm he worked for to set up his own business. He's always shut away in the front room he uses as an office. I know he hates me interrupting him.

No talking is allowed in the library. But I often break the rules and try to find someone to whisper to when I get bored of my work. Today I can't see anyone. The only other person here who's in my year group is Aliyah. I notice her looking over at me and I smile and wave. She gives me a quick wave back and puts her head down to carry on working. She doesn't look like she wants to talk, so I don't go over.

I wonder what it must be like to have a life like hers. Sometimes I see her walking past my house with her little brothers and her mum. They're



CHAPTER 1

FROZEN

Sara

I could hear it as I walked up the drive. Muffled shouting. Arguing. My dad's voice, low and booming. Mum's voice, high and panicked.

My heart rate doubled by the time I reached the door. Maybe I shouldn't go inside yet.

Every fight was worse than the last. Sometimes Dad threw things, or got in Mum's face and screamed at her. He bullied her. Twice she had bruises — said she walked into a door, but she was lying.

After a big fight, things would be great for a while. Dad would apologise. He'd take us all out

for dinner, buy Mum perfume, call her beautiful. Totally different person from that gross, angry bully. Mum would start to relax, then she'd say he'd changed, or he was trying to be better and he deserved a second chance.

The last three months or so — since Christmas — had been good. Calm. Everyone getting along. I had started to believe Dad was trying to be a better person. Mum seemed happy. And I was happy, too. I did love my dad, after all. I wanted things to be nice and normal.

Then the cracks started to show. Dad began making mean comments about what Mum was wearing, and checking her phone to see who she was texting. There were raised voices at night. I'd had a nervous stomach ache for the last few days because I knew a big fight was brewing.

But I still wasn't ready for it.

My feet felt frozen to the front doorstep. I reached for the door handle, but didn't turn it.



CHAPTER 2

INJURY TIME

Ola

Hospital was boring and everywhere smelt like bleach. We had to wait around for the results.

“What’s Zane’s problem?” Becky asked as she paced the room. She was fuming. “I can’t believe he floors you and then vanishes!”

“He always rushes off after practice,” I explained. “He has to collect his little sister from after-school club.”

I couldn’t feel anything down one side of my leg. I had no idea why Zane went in so hard on that last tackle. He’d looked really fired up. I’d only ever

seen that expression when he talked about the homophobic and sexist rubbish his dad used to come out with. We’d do impressions of his dad and make fun of him, trying to change anger to laughter.

Luckily, Becky was there to keep me company. She showed me memes on her phone to take my mind off the pain. Neither Mum nor Dad had answered their phones. Coach stayed for the X-ray, which confirmed no bones were broken. Then he left.

My Friday night was pretty much ruined.

“Reckon we can get a chicken place to deliver?” I joked.

But Becky kept going on. “Zane came at you like a charging bull. He looked possessed.”

There was no point trying to reason with her when she was in this mood. I’d seen it before.

“Just leave it. Let’s talk about something else.” I shifted forwards in my chair and winced. I