



ketchup clouds

A NOVEL BY ANNABEL PITCHER



ketchup
CLOUDS

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ANNABEL PITCHER



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For my husband and best friend, Steve, with all my love and heartfelt thanks

“How sad and bad and mad it was—but then, how it was
sweet!”

—Robert Browning, *Confessions*

S. HARRIS #993765
POLUNSKY UNIT (DEATH ROW)
LIVINGSTON, TEXAS 77351
USA
August 1

Dear Mr. S. Harris,

Ignore the blob of red in the top left corner. It's jam, not blood, though I don't think I need to tell you the difference. It wasn't your wife's jam the police found on your shoe.

The jam in the corner's from my sandwich. Homemade raspberry. Gran made it. She's been dead seven years, and making that jam was the last thing she did. Sort of. If you ignore the weeks she spent in the hospital attached to one of those heart things that goes *beep beep* if you're lucky or *beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep* if you're not. That was the sound echoing around the hospital room seven years ago. *Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep*. My little sister was born six months later, and Dad named her after Gran. Dorothy Constance. When Dad stopped grieving, he decided to shorten it. My sister is small and round so we ended up calling her Dot.

My other sister, Soph, is ten. They've both got long blond hair and green eyes and pointy noses, but Soph is tall and thin and darker-skinned, like Dot's been rolled out and crisped in the oven for ten minutes. I'm different. Brown hair. Brown eyes. Medium height. Medium weight. Ordinary, I suppose. To look at me, you'd never guess my secret.

I struggled to eat the sandwich in the end. The jam wasn't rotten or anything, because it lasts for years in sterilized jars. At least that's what Dad says when Mum turns up her nose. It's pointy, too. Her hair's the same color as my sisters' but shorter and a bit wavy. Dad's is more like mine, except with gray bits above his ears, and he's got this thing called heterochromia, which means one eye's brown but the other's lighter. Blue if it's bright outside, gray if it's overcast. The sky in a socket, I once said, and Dad got these dimples right in the middle of his cheeks, and I don't know if any of this really matters, but I suppose it's good to give you a picture of my family before I tell you what I came in here to say.

Because I am going to say it. I'm not sitting in this shed for the fun of it. It's bloody freezing and Mum would kill me if she knew I was out of bed, but it's a good place to write this letter, hidden away behind some trees. Don't ask me what type, but they've got big leaves that are rustling in the breeze. *Shhhhwiiishhh*. Actually, that sounds nothing like them.

There's jam on my fingers so the pen's sticky. I bet the cats' whiskers are, too. Lloyd and Webber meowed as if they couldn't quite believe their luck that the sky was raining sandwiches when I chucked it over the hedge. I wasn't hungry anymore. In actual fact I never was, and if I'm being honest, I only made the sandwich in the first place to put off starting this letter. No offense or anything Mr. Harris. It's just difficult. And I'm tired. I haven't really slept since May 1.

There's no danger of me dropping off in here. The box of tiles is digging into my thighs, and

a draft is blowing through a gap underneath the shed door. I need to get a move on because, just my luck, the flashlight is running out of battery. I tried holding it between my teeth, but my jaw started to ache so now it's balancing near a spiderweb on the windowsill. I don't normally sit in the shed, especially not at 2 AM, but tonight the voice in my head is louder than ever before. The images are more real, and my pulse is racing racing racing, and I bet if my heart was attached to one of those hospital things, all the fast thumping would break it.

When I got out of bed, my pajama top was sticking to my back, and my mouth was drier than probably a desert. That's when I put on my bathrobe and tiptoed outside because I knew it was time to write this letter. I can't keep it in anymore. I have to tell someone, and you're the person I chose.

I got your contact details off a Death Row website, and I found the website because of a nun, and that's not a sentence I ever thought I'd write, but then my life isn't exactly turning out the way I'd imagined. There was a picture of you looking friendly for someone in an orange jumpsuit with a shaved head, thick glasses, and a scar down one cheek. Yours wasn't the only profile I clicked on. There are hundreds of criminals who want pen pals. Hundreds. But you stood out. All that stuff about your family disowning you so you haven't had any letters for eleven entire years. All that stuff about your guilt.

Not that I believe in God, but I went to confession to get rid of my guilt after triple-checking on Wikipedia that the priest wouldn't be able to say anything to the police. But when I sat down in the booth and saw his silhouette through the grille, I couldn't speak. There I was, about to confess to a man who'd never done anything wrong in his life, except for maybe having an extra sip of Communion wine on a bad day. Unless he was one of those priests who abuse children, in which case he would have known all about sin, but I couldn't be sure so I didn't risk it.

You're much safer. And you sort of remind me of Harry Potter to be honest. I loved those books when I was little. I can't remember when the first one came out, if it was before or after your murder trial, but anyway in case you're confused Harry Potter has a scar and glasses and you have a scar and glasses, and he never got any mail, either. But then all of a sudden he received a mysterious letter saying he was a wizard and his life was miraculously transformed.

Now, you're probably reading this in your cell thinking, *I wish this letter was about to tell me I had magical powers*, and if the website is anything to go by, I bet you're imagining healing every single one of those stab wounds in your wife. Well, sorry to disappoint you and all that, but I'm just an ordinary teenage girl, not the headmaster of a School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Trust me, though, if this pen was a wand, then I'd give you the magic to bring your wife right back to life, because that is the thing we have in common.

I know what it's like.

Mine wasn't a woman. Mine was a boy. And I killed him three months ago exactly.

Do you want to know the worst thing? I got away with it. No one's found out that I'm responsible. No one has a clue and I'm walking around saying all the right things and doing all the right stuff, but inside I'm sort of screaming. I daren't tell Mum or Dad or my sisters, because I don't want to be disowned and I don't want to go to prison, even though I deserve it. So you see Mr. Harris I'm less brave than you, so don't feel too bad when you go for the lethal injection, which I wouldn't worry about, because when my dog was put to sleep, it really did look peaceful. The website says you'll never forgive yourself, but at least now you know there are people in the world far worse than you. You had the guts to own up to your mistake, but I'm too much of a coward even to reveal my real identity in a letter.

So yeah, you can call me Zoe. And let's pretend I live on Fiction Road, I don't know, somewhere near Bath, which is an old city with ancient buildings and lots of weekend tourists taking pictures of the bridge. Everything else I'll write will be the truth.

From, Zoe
1 Fiction Road
Bath, UK

S. HARRIS #993765
POLUNSKY UNIT (DEATH ROW)
LIVINGSTON, TEXAS 77351
USA
August 12

Dear Mr. Harris,

If you've opened this letter, I guess it means you're interested in what I have to say. That's nice but I'm not taking it as too much of a compliment, because let's be honest, you must be bored in that cell with nothing to do except write your poems, which by the way are really good, especially the sonnet about lethal injections. I read them on your profile and the one about the theater made me sad. I bet you had no idea when Dorothy followed the yellow-brick road that in forty-eight hours you were going to commit murder.

Funny I can write that almost without blinking. It would be different if I hadn't done it, too. Before, I might not have touched you with a barge pole, but now we're in the same boat. Exactly the same boat. You killed someone you were supposed to love and I killed someone I was supposed to love, and we both understand the pain and the fear and the sadness and the guilt and the hundred other feelings that don't even have a name in all of the English language.

Everyone thinks I'm grieving so they don't ask too many questions when I turn up looking pale and thin, with bags under my eyes, my hair hanging in greasy clumps. The other day, Mum forced me to get it cut. In the salon I stared at the customers, wondering how many of them had skeletons in the closet, because the nun said no one's perfect and everyone's got good and bad inside them. Everyone. Even people you don't expect to have a dark side, e.g., Barack Obama or Lisa from *The Simpsons*. I try to remember that when the guilt gets bad enough to stop me from sleeping. It didn't work tonight so here I am again, and it's just as cold but this time I've used Dad's old jacket to cover the gap underneath the shed door.

I can't remember the nun's name, but she had one of those raisin faces you could still imagine as a grape because somewhere underneath the wrinkles there was something beautiful. She came into my school a week before the summer holiday to tell us about capital punishment. When she spoke, it was in this quiet voice that wobbled around the edges, but everyone paid absolute attention. Even Adam. Normally he pushes back his chair and throws pen lids at girls' heads, but on that day we could take down our hoods because no one was doing anything they shouldn't, and we all gawped at this old lady as she told us about her work to abolish the death penalty.

She'd done a lot. Petitions and protests and articles in newspapers and letters to criminals, who'd written back and confided all sorts. "Like their crimes and stuff?" someone asked. The nun nodded. "Sometimes. Everyone needs to be heard."

That's when I had the idea, right there in the middle of the Religious Education classroom as the nun said a load more things I can't even remember. When I got home, I ran upstairs to the

study without taking off my shoes even though Mum had just bought beige carpets. I turned on the computer and found a ~~Death Row~~ website, ticking the box that said *Yes, I am eighteen*. My lie didn't shut down the computer or set off an alarm. It took me straight to the database of criminals who want pen pals and there you were Mr. Harris, second man from the left on the third row of the fourth page, as if you were waiting to hear my story.

It all started a year ago with an unexpected phone call. For a whole week last August, I'd been plucking up the courage to ask Mum if I could go to a house party on a Saturday night. This house party wasn't just any house party, but Max Morgan's house party, and everyone was invited to mark the end of the summer because we were due back in school a couple of days later. Unfortunately the chances of Mum agreeing to let me go were less than 1 percent because back then she never let me do anything, not even shopping in town with Lauren, because she was worried about me being abducted and also about my homework.

There was no slacking off in our house because Mum quit her job as a lawyer when Dot was little. She was a sickly baby, always in and out of the hospital, so I guess it was a full-time job to look after her. Mum was there when I woke up to ask what lessons I had that day, and she was there when I got home to supervise the work I had to do that night. The rest of the time she did chores. Because of the house's size, it was hard to keep it spick, never mind span, but Mum managed by sticking to a strict timetable. Even when she watched the news, she folded the laundry and paired the socks, and when she was supposed to be relaxing in the bath, she wiped the taps with a flannel to make them shine. She cooked a lot as well, always with the best ingredients. The eggs had to be free-range and the vegetables had to be organic and the cow had to have lived in the Garden of Eden or somewhere with no pollution and no chemicals so the meat wasn't contaminated with anything that could make us ill.

Mr. Harris I tried to Google your mum to find out if she was strict, making you try hard at school and be polite to your elders and stay out of trouble and eat all your greens. I hope not. It would be a shame to think you spent your teenage years munching broccoli now that you're locked up in a cell with no freedom to speak of. I hope you had some crazy times like sprinting naked through a neighbor's garden for a dare, which is what happened last year at Lauren's party after I'd gone home early. When Lauren told me about it at school, as per usual I put on my unimpressed face to show I was too mature for such things. But when my History teacher asked us to stop whispering and look at the worksheet, I didn't see the Nazis, just all these boobs boinging in the moonlight.

I was sick of missing out. Sick of listening to Lauren's stories. And jealous, really jealous, that I didn't have a few of my own. So when I was invited to Max's party a couple of months later, I made up my mind to ask Mum in a way that would make it impossible for her to refuse.

On Saturday morning I lay in bed trying to work out how to word the question before my shift at the library, where I stack shelves for three fifty an hour. That's when the phone started ringing. I could tell from Dad's voice it was serious so I climbed out of bed and went downstairs in my bathrobe, the exact same one I'm wearing right now, which FYI has red and black flowers and lace around the cuffs. A moment later, Dad was jumping into the BMW without even having breakfast and Mum was chasing after him onto the drive in an apron and yellow washing-up gloves.

"There's no need to rush off," she said, and Mr. Harris now we're getting into the proper

conversations, I think I'll set them out properly to make them easier for you to read. Of course, I don't remember every single thing that everyone said so I'll paraphrase a bit and also miss out any of the boring stuff, i.e. anything at all about the weather.

"What's going on?" I asked, standing on the porch, probably with my face looking worried.

"At least have a slice of toast, Simon."

Dad shook his head. "We've got to go now. We don't know how long he's got."

"We?" Mum asked.

"You're coming, too, aren't you?"

"Let's think about this a minute."

"He might not have a minute! We need to get going."

"If you feel you have to go, I'm not going to stop you, but I'm staying here. You know how I feel about—"

"What's going on?" I said again. Louder this time. My face probably more worried. Not that my parents noticed.

Dad rubbed his temples, his fingers making circles in the patches of gray hair. "What do I say to him after all this time?"

Mum grimaced. "I've no idea."

"Who're you talking about?" I asked.

"Do you think he'll even let me in his room?" Dad went on.

"By the sound of it, he'll be in no fit state to know if you're there or not," Mum said.

"Who won't?" I asked, stepping onto the drive.

"Slippers!" Mum called.

I stepped back onto the porch and wiped my feet on the mat. "Will someone tell me what's going on?"

There was a pause. A long one.

"It's Grandpa," Dad said.

"He's had a stroke," Mum said.

"Oh," I said.

It wasn't the most sympathetic reaction, but in my defense I hadn't seen Grandpa for years. I remember being jealous of the wafer Dad received during Communion when Mum stopped us going up to the altar at Grandpa's church. And I remember playing with the hymn book, trying to snap it shut on Soph's fingers, humming the *Jaws* theme tune as Grandpa frowned. He had this big garden with huge sunflowers, and once I built a den in his garage and he gave me a bottle of flat lemonade to serve to my dolls. But then one day there was an argument and we never visited him again. I'm not sure what happened, but I do know we left Grandpa's without even having lunch. My stomach was rumbling, so for once we were allowed to eat at McDonald's and Mum was too distracted to stop me from ordering a Big Mac and extra-large fries.

"You're really going to stay here?" Dad said.

Mum adjusted the washing-up gloves on her hands. "Who else is going to look after the girls?"

"Me!" I said suddenly, because a plan had popped into my mind. "I can do it."

Mum frowned. "I don't think so."

"She's old enough," Dad said.

"But what if something goes wrong?"

Dad held up his phone. "I've got this."

~~"I don't know." Mum bit the inside of her cheek and stared at me. "What about your shift at the library?"~~

I shrugged. "I'll just ring and explain there's a family emergency."

"There you go," Dad said. "Sorted."

A bird flew onto the car hood. A song thrush. We watched it for a moment because it had a worm dangling from its beak, and then Dad looked at Mum and Mum looked at Dad and the bird fluttered off as I crossed my fingers behind my back.

"Listen, I really think I'm better off staying with the girls," Mum muttered without much conviction. "Soph's got to practice her piano scales and I wouldn't mind helping Dot with her —"

"Don't use them as an excuse, Jane!" Dad said. "It's obvious you don't want to come. At least have the guts to admit it."

"Fine! But it goes both ways, Simon. We both know your dad won't want me there."

"He'll be in no fit state to know if you're there or not," Dad replied, looking Mum straight in the eye. It was a clever tactic to repeat her words, and she knew it. With a defeated sigh, she turned toward the house, taking off the gloves.

"Have it your way, but I tell you now, I'm not going anywhere near his room," she said before disappearing through the front door.

Dad gritted his teeth, checking his watch. I walked over to the car, my fingers still crossed behind my back.

"So, do you think you'll be at the hospital for a while, then?"

Dad scratched the back of his neck and sighed. "Probably."

I smiled my most helpful smile. "Well, don't worry about us. We'll be fine."

"Thanks, pet."

"And I just won't go to the party if you're not back in time. It doesn't matter. I mean, Lauren will be disappointed, but she'll get over it."

I said it just like that—so off-the-cuff, Dad might think Mum had already agreed. He beeped the horn to tell her to hurry up.

"When does this party start?"

"Eight," I replied, my voice a little higher than normal.

"We should be home by then.... Hope so, anyway. I'll give you a lift if you want."

"Brilliant," I said, trying not to grin as I ran back inside the house.

In the afternoon Mum rang to let us know that Grandpa was stable and Dad was coping and they'd be back in time for dinner. Everything was turning out perfectly so I made myself an orange and lemonade with ice cubes that clinked against the glass. I spent the rest of the day in the garden, writing this kids' story called *Bizzle the Bazzlebog* because it's my ambition to be a children's author. In case you're wondering, Bizzle is a blue furry creature who lives in a tin of baked beans at the back of a family's food cupboard.

The story's supposed to be a fantasy for ten-year-olds and it probably sounds lame, but I enjoy doing it, pretending I'm still small and believe in magic or whatever. Anyway, I wrote for ages, then filled up the bird feeder that hung from the branch of a tree near the back door. Birds zoomed toward it—a magpie that I saluted, a chaffinch landing on the ground, and a swallow swooping over the flower bed—and I watched them for ages, ridiculously happy, because birds are my thing and not to boast but I know pretty much every type in England.



I plucked a fat dandelion and twirled it between my fingers as I flopped onto the grass and put my feet on a plant pot. The sun in the sky was the exact same color as the flower in my hand and the two were linked by a hot beam of yellow. A bond blazed between them, and so yeah, it was probably just the start of sunburn on my knuckles, but for a moment it felt like me and the universe were connected in a giant join-the-dots puzzle. Everything had meaning and everything made sense, as if someone really was drawing my life by numbers.

Someone other than my little sister.

“Do you like it?”

Dot was standing over me in a pink dress, with a puzzle book tucked underneath her elbow, signing because she’s deaf. I squinted at the picture. She’d joined the dots in the wrong order so the butterfly that was supposed to be soaring into the sky looked more like it was about to crash-land in the trees. I put the dandelion behind my ear.

“I love it.”

“More than you love chocolate?”

“More than that,” I signed.

“More than you love... ice cream?”

I pretended to think. “Well, it depends what flavor.”

Dot dropped to her chubby knees. “Strawberry?”

“Definitely more than that.”

“Banana?”

I shook my head. “Definitely not.”

Dot started to giggle and leaned in close. “But really more than banana?”

I kissed her nose. “More than any flavor in the whole world.”

Dot threw the puzzle book onto the grass and sprawled next to me, her long hair blowing in the breeze.

“You’ve got a dandelion behind your ear.”

“I know.”

“Why?”

“They’re my favorite flowers,” I lied.

“More than daffodils?”

“More than any flower in the entire universe,” I signed, shortcutting the questions as the front door opened and footsteps sounded in the hall. I sat up, listening. Dot looked confused.

“Mum and Dad,” I explained.

Dot jumped to her feet, but something about my parents’ voices made me grab her hand to

stop her from running into the kitchen. They were arguing, the sound drifting through the open window. ~~Before they had the chance to realize I was there, I ducked behind a bush, pulling Dot after me.~~ She laughed, thinking it was some sort of game, as I parted the leaves.

Mum banged a cup on the kitchen counter. "I can't believe you agreed to it!"

"What was I supposed to do?"

She jabbed the switch on the kettle. "Talk about it with me! Discuss it!"

"How could I when you weren't even in the room?"

"That's no excuse."

"He's their grandfather, Jane. He has a right to see them."

"Don't give me that! They've had nothing to do with him for years."

"All the more reason for them to spend time with him now, before it's too late."

I watched Mum roll her eyes as I tried to keep hold of Dot, who was twisting and turning, trying to get free. Putting my hand over her mouth, I did a *shush* face with very stern eyebrows. In the kitchen, Mum grabbed a teaspoon out of the drawer, banging it shut with her hip.

"We made a decision about this years ago. Years. I'm not going back on it now just because your father's a little bit—"

"He's had a stroke!"

Mum flung the teaspoon into the cup. "That doesn't change a thing! Not one thing! Whose side are you on?"

"I don't want there to be any sides, Jane. Not anymore. We're a family."

"Try telling that to your—" Mum started, but just at that moment, Dot bit my finger and broke free and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. She ran off as fast as she could and did two cartwheels on the lawn. Her dress fell around her shoulders, showing off her knickers, and she ended up in a big heap on the grass. As Mum and Dad stared out the window, Dot picked a dandelion. Only this one was white. Fluffy. Full of those wispy things that look like dead fairies. The sun disappeared behind a cloud as Dot blew hard and the dandelion vanished, and Mr. Harris I'm going to stop writing now because I'm tired, plus I've got pins and needles in my left leg.

From,
Zoe
1 Fiction Road
Bath, UK

S. HARRIS #993765
POLUNSKY UNIT (DEATH ROW)
LIVINGSTON, TEXAS 77351
USA
September 2

Dear Mr. Harris,

The best thing about this shed is definitely the lack of eyes. No eyes at all apart from eight on the spider, and they're not looking at me. The spider's in the web on the windowsill, staring through the glass at the silhouette of the tree and the cloud and the half-moon, silver reflected in her eyes as she thinks about flies or whatever.

It'll be different tomorrow. The eyes will be back. Sad ones and inquisitive ones and some that stare and others that try not to look but keep on glancing as I walk into school to start the new term. There'll be nowhere to hide, not even the toilets if that's what you're thinking, because last term some girls waited for me to come out of a stall then pounced on me, wanting to know everything—what and when and where and how but not who, because they'd all been to his funeral.

Questions questions questions questions getting louder and louder just like that and I didn't know what to say. My back started to sweat, a hot white bone burning from my bum to my brain. I turned on the tap as far as it would go. Water gushed over my hands trying to wash away the guilt. I started to scrub harder and harder as my breath came quicker and quicker and the girls moved closer and closer, and I couldn't stand it for a second longer so I ran for it. Barging through the door, I collided with my English teacher, who took one look at my face and ushered me into her office.

On the wall there was a picture of Lady Macbeth above the quote "Out, damned spot," and Mr. Harris I don't know if you're familiar with Shakespeare but in case you're wondering, Lady Macbeth wasn't banging on about a pimple on her chin. I stared at Lady Macbeth's bloody hands as my own shook violently. Mrs. Macklin cooed, "There there don't worry there's no rush take as long as you need," and I wondered if she actually meant it, if it would be okay for me to sit at her desk next to her pile of marking till the end of time. I couldn't stand her being nice, patting my arm and telling me to breathe, saying I was doing so well and I was so brave and that she was so sorry, for all the world as if it were her fault, not mine, that his body is in a coffin.

That's the hardest thing of all—the knowledge that he's under the ground. With his eyes wide open. Brown eyes that I know so well, staring up at the world they can no longer reach. His mouth's open, too, like he's screaming the truth but no one can hear. Sometimes I even see his fingernails, bleeding and torn because he's been scratching words into the coffin lid, this long explanation of what happened on May 1, buried six feet under so no one will ever read it.

But maybe these letters are helping Mr. Harris. Maybe as I get more and more of the story to you, more and more of the story will disappear from the coffin until it's all gone for good. His

fingernails will heal and he'll cross his hands on his chest and close his eyes at long last, and then the maggots will come to eat his flesh but it will be a relief and his skeleton will smile.

That's a reassuring thought but I suppose I'd better get back to telling you what happened last year after Mum and Dad had the argument about Grandpa. From what I can remember, they were trying to act normal after their fight but there was tension I could have cut with my knife, which probably would have been easier than slicing through the steak on my plate. Mum never normally made a mess of the food but that night everything was overcooked. I hope I don't sound ungrateful Mr. Harris. I mean, you must be sick of prison meals, which I imagine to be some sort of gruel as seen in the musical *Oliver!* Maybe the guards eat pizza right in front of your cell, so close you can smell it, and it's all you can do not to start singing "Food, Glorious Food" in a cockney accent.

If it's any consolation, the food Mum cooked that night wasn't the slightest bit glorious and we gave up on the steak after five minutes.

"Why haven't I met Grandpa before?" Dot signed suddenly.

Dad picked up his wineglass but didn't take a sip.

"You have, my love," Mum signed. "You just don't remember."

"Did I like him?"

"You... well, you were too young to have an opinion," Mum replied.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"We hope so. He's very ill, though."

"Will he be okay tomorrow? Or the next day? Or the day after that?"

"Stop asking stupid questions," Soph muttered. Dot stared at her blankly because she struggles to lip-read. "Stop asking stupid questions," Soph said again, moving her lips even faster on purpose.

"Sophie," Mum warned.

"Grandpa's going to be fine, pet," Dad signed, his hands slow and clumsy. "He's in the hospital but he's stable."

Mum put her arm around Dot's shoulders and nuzzled the top of her head. "Don't worry."

"I'm worried, too," Soph announced suddenly. "Like what if he *dies* or something."

Dad sighed. "Don't be dramatic."

I glanced at the grandfather clock. Forty-five minutes until the party started. I started to whistle. I never normally whistled. Mum watched me suspiciously as I took my plates to the sink, my bare feet cold against the tiles.

"Where're you going?" she asked.

I didn't dare look at her. "To get ready."

"For what?"

Dropping my knife and fork into the water, I stared at the bubbles. "The party at Max's house."

"What party? What party, Zoe?"

I spun around. "Dad said I could go!"

Mum glared at Dad as he dipped his finger into some ketchup on his plate and licked it clean. "Well, she's been good all day." It was more than I could have hoped for. I had to fight the urge to run over and kiss him.

“Were you going to mention it to me, Simon?”

—“I don’t have to run every decision by you.”

“Oh, so this is how it’s going to be from now on, is it?” Mum flared up. “You making decisions—ridiculous decisions—that affect the whole family, without considering—”

Dad’s cheeks flushed. “Don’t start all that again, Jane. Not in front of the girls.”

Mum exhaled noisily, but she dropped the subject. I moved to the kitchen door as Dot picked up a green bean and threw it back onto her plate in the manner of a javelin.

“Gold at the Olympics!” she signed. “And gold in the shot put!” She chucked a carrot. It bounced off Soph’s elbow and landed next to the salt pot.

“Mum, will you tell her?” Soph moaned.

“Stop it, girls,” Dad snapped.

“Why are you having a go at me?” she exploded.

“Leave it, Soph,” Mum said.

“This is so unfair!” she cried, flinging a hand into the air and accidentally hitting a glass. It flew across the table, black currant juice spilling everywhere. Dad swore as Mum leaped up to grab a tea towel.

“So can I go, then?” I asked.

“No!” Mum said.

“Yes!” Dad said at the same time.

They glowered at each other as black currant dripped onto the floor.

“Fine!” Mum snapped. “But I’m picking you up at eleven.”

Before Mum could change her mind, I charged out of the kitchen and raced up the stairs two at a time, bursting into my bedroom. It was tidy, of course, because Mum made me keep it that way, my clothes hanging neatly in my closet and my purple duvet completely straight. My lamp stood in the exact middle of my bedside table, and on the shelf above my headboard, my books were stacked so all the titles faced the same way. Only my desk was messy, pages of *Bizzle the Bazzlebog* spread all over it, Post-it notes stuck to my bulletin board with details of characters and plot twists scribbled in pen.

I got ready quicker than ever in my life, pulling on a pair of black jeans and a top. Really I should have washed my hair but Mr. Harris there wasn’t time so I tied it back in a messy ponytail, then put on a pair of earrings, nothing fancy or girly, just plain silver hoops. Before I ran out of my bedroom, I slipped on a pair of flat shoes, then hopped into Dad’s car.

We heard the house before we saw it, all this music, heavy beats throbbing in the air. Dad pulled up near a row of terraces. They were small and simple, pretty much how Dot would draw a house if I gave her a crayon and a piece of paper. Two windows at the top. Two at the bottom. A front door in the middle and a long, thin garden with one tree next to a straight path half covered in grass.

Balloons in the shape of beer bottles bobbed about in the distance, silver strings tied to the gate at the very end of the row. I climbed out of the car, my face probably pink and my mouth definitely dry, because I remember struggling to swallow without any spit.

“Be good, eh?” Dad said, catching sight of the balloons. “I could do without any more drama today.”

He sounded so fed up, I stuck my head back through the door. “You okay?”

A yawn. A flash of fillings. “I’ll be fine.”

“Grandpa’s going to get better, you know.”

Dad gazed out of the window without seeing the group of girls stumbling past in dresses and high heels. ~~Four inches, they must have been, and I suddenly wondered if I looked ridiculous in my flat shoes and jeans.~~

“He just seemed so... oh, I don’t know. Old, I suppose.”

I stared down at my feet, trying to imagine them from someone else’s perspective. “He *is* old, Dad.”

“He used to run marathons.”

I looked up, surprised. “Really?”

“Oh yeah. He was fit. He did it in just over three hours once.”

“Is that good?”

Dad smiled, but it was sad. “It’s more than good, pet. And he could dance. Gran, too. They were quite something.”

The music in the house got louder. Dad was far away in his thoughts but the party was right there in front of me, and I didn’t want to be rude but time was ticking ticking ticking. When enough seconds had passed, I leaned into the car and pecked him on the cheek before setting off, wondering what music Grandpa had liked and how he had looked, dancing with a body as young as mine.

Just because I could, just because I wasn’t stiff or frail or stuck in the hospital after a stroke, I sped up, grateful for my working limbs and moving joints and the fact that I wasn’t old. By the time I reached the end terrace, my pulse was racing. The front door was open, people making their way inside. I paused by the gate, batting the balloons to one side, taking it all in, and honest truth, it looked like a whole new world and not just a hall with an old blue carpet. My stomach fluttered and my adrenaline tingled and I felt young Mr. Harris, really young in this precious sort of way. I savored the moment, then hurried up the path, avoiding the cracks between the slabs.

“Stepping-stones over a fast river? Or hurdles in the Olympics?”

A boy I didn’t recognize was sitting on a bench in the front garden. Brown eyes. Messy blond hair that looked as if it had never been brushed. Tall enough. Lean. “What were you imagining?” he called over the music, pointing at the cracks.

I shrugged. “Nothing. I’m superstitious, that’s all. If you tread on the cracks it’s bad luck, isn’t it?”

The boy looked away. “Disappointing.”

“Disappointing?”

“I thought you were playing a game.”

“I can play a game if you want me to play a game,” I replied. My voice surprised me. Confident. Flirtatious, even. A brand-new sound.

The boy looked back, interested now. “Okay. Here’s a question. If the cracks were something dangerous, what would they be?”

I thought for a moment as three girls tottered into the party, smirking at my outfit. “Mousetraps,” I replied, trying to ignore them.

“Mousetraps? You can have any fantasy in the whole world, and you choose *mousetraps*?”

“Yeah, well...”

“Not alligators or deep black holes with snakes at the bottom. Tiny little mousetraps with bits of cheddar stuck on the snappy thing.”

I took a step closer, then another, enjoying myself immensely. “Who said they’re *tiny*

mousetraps?" I prodded the cracks with the end of my shoe. "Maybe they're huge ones with poisonous cheese and spikes that can rip my toes to shreds."

"Are they?"

I hesitated. Then smiled. "No. They're tiny little mousetraps with bits of cheddar stuck on the snappy thing."

Above our heads, something flew into a tree and hooted.

"Owl!" I exclaimed.

The boy shook his head. "There you go again."

"There I go what?"

Sighing, he stood up. His shoulders were wide as if they could carry the weight of the whole world or at least give me a good piggyback. He was wearing faded blue jeans and a black T-shirt that bagged in all the wrong places. He'd made even less effort than me. All of a sudden my flat shoes seemed to float four inches off the ground.

"Can you see the bird?" he asked, putting his hand over his eyes and gazing into the leaves.

"Well, no, but—"

"So how do you know it's an owl? It could have been a ghost."

"It's not a ghost."

The boy walked toward me and my breath caught in my throat. "But how do you know? It could have been a spirit that—"

"I know it's an owl because of the hoot," I interrupted. The bird did it again, right on cue. I held up my finger. "Hear that? That's the cry of the little owl. The mating cry, actually."

The boy raised an eyebrow. I'd surprised him.

"The mating cry, huh?" His eyes twinkled and I felt triumphant. "Tell me more about this amorous little owl."

"Well, it's one of the most common species in Britain. And it has feathers. Obviously," I said, feeling self-conscious. "But they're beautiful, sort of speckled, brown and white. It's got a big head, long legs, yellowish eyes," I went on, warming to my theme, "and this bounding, undulating sort of fly, similar to a woodpecker, really, and..."

The boy started to laugh. Then I started to laugh. And then the owl hooted as if it was starting to laugh.

"What's your name?" he asked, and I was just about to reply when the gate creaked and heels tapped up the path.

"Bloody hell, you actually came!" Lauren shrieked. "Let's get a drink!" Before I could protest, she grabbed my hand and tugged me toward the house, stumbling on a crack.

"Mind the alligators," I said. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the boy grin.

Lauren stopped, looking confused. "What?"

"Doesn't matter," I muttered, and then I grinned, too.

The living room was small with a faded red carpet and a beige sofa pushed to one side to make room for dancing. Lauren threw off her coat and joined in, all *Wooooo* and waving her arms in the air. She twirled in the middle of the room as I grabbed a glass off the drinks table and poured myself some lemonade. And then, after a pause, some vodka. I mixed it with my finger, music pounding in my ears and my blood and every single one of my organs. *La la la la la*, my heart sang, just like that. I downed my drink in one as people gyrated between the sofa and the mantelpiece as if they were in a nightclub rather than a living room, and honest truth they looked ridiculous, grinding against each other on the rug.

And then all of a sudden there he was, leaning against the door frame, amused by the scene. ~~He caught my eye or maybe I caught his, or possibly they caught each other at the exact same moment.~~ As everyone danced, he shook his head and I rolled my eyes, and we both knew exactly what the other was thinking, like imagine our heads connected by a telephone wire. The boy didn't move toward me and I didn't move toward him, but that cable between our brains buzzzzzzed.

Someone with ginger hair got in the way, but the boy kept glancing at me and glancing at me as if I was worth a second and a third and a one-hundredth look. My body felt different under his gaze. Not just arms and legs and bones. Skin and lips and curves. I poured myself another drink as the boy chatted to his friend. My hands were unsteady. Lots of vodka went in my glass but lots splashed on the table. Cursing, I grabbed a napkin, and by the time I'd cleaned it up, the boy had disappeared. Just like that. One second he was by the door, and the next he wasn't, and my heart stopped dead with a big fat *Oh*.

I told Lauren I was going to the bathroom and took off at once, squeezing past bodies and ducking under arms into the hall. He wasn't outside or in the kitchen or in the cupboard full of coats. Pushing past people on the narrow stairs, I swigged my drink, opening three doors to find nothing but empty rooms. I tried the upstairs bathroom. The downstairs, too, filling my glass on the way there, just neat vodka this time, and I swallowed it in one go as I tried the handle.

It turned easily to reveal a dripping tap and a toilet, and I gazed at my frowning face in the mirror, my reflection swimming in and out of my vision as I gripped the edges of the sink. I steadied myself, then stumbled into a tiny sunroom. It was big and cool and dark, just the moon shining through the glass ceiling. In the far corner was a comfy-looking chair and I fell into it as the room started to spin. As my bum touched the cushion, a voice said, "Hey."

My head jerked up, but it wasn't the boy, Mr. Harris. It was Max Morgan. *The Max Morgan*. And he was grinning at me, a bottle of whiskey in his hand. Drink was splashed down his smart shirt and his forehead was shiny with sweat, but his eyes were brown, really brown, and his short hair was dark and styled, and his grin was crooked in a way that sent me all off-kilter.

"Hey," Max said again. "Hannah?"

"Zoe," I replied. Except of course I didn't. I used my real name, the one I can't tell you.

"Zoe," Max repeated. "Zoe Zoe Zoe." He burped behind closed lips then let it out slowly. He pointed at my chest suddenly. "You're in my French class!"

"No."

Max held up his hands and almost fell over. "Sorry. Sorry sorry. You just look like someone I know."

"We've been at the same school for three years."

Max completely missed my tone. "Is it me or is it really hot in here?" He stumbled toward the sunroom door and tried to open it. "This is broken. Hannah, it's broken."

I climbed to my feet and turned the key. "It's Zoe, and it's fixed."

Max hiccupped. "My hero. Heroine. Like the drug." He pretended to put a syringe in his arm then laughed at his own joke, holding out the bottle. "Drink?" I made to grab it, but Max jerked the bottle out of my reach then stepped outside. "You coming?"

The night was warm, perfect for sitting in. A breeze lifted my hair as Max took my hand. My stomach flipped over as our fingers interlinked and I wondered what Lauren would say if she could see Max Morgan's thumb rubbing one of my knuckles. I thought about telling the story on Monday morning. *And then Max led me to a stone fountain at the bottom of the back garden. A*

moth was floating in the water. Max touched it gently with the very tip of his finger before lowering himself onto the grass. Swigging the whiskey, he looked up at me and I looked down at him, and we both knew that something incredible was about to—

Max belched.

“You just going to stand there or what?”

I sat down as he handed me the bottle. One more sip couldn't hurt. That's what I told myself. That's what I told myself every single time Max held out the bottle, the rim shining in the moonlight, wet with spit. He put his hand on my leg, and I didn't stop it, not even when it crept up my thigh. At some point I started talking about Grandpa, and how he was ill, and how he'd been in shape when he was young.

“I'm in shape,” Max said, and then he hiccupped.

“They were quite something, my grandparents,” I added, and I remember having to work really hard to stop my words from slurring.

“My parents were, too. Before. Not now. They don't even speak anymore.”

“They were also really good at dancing,” I went on, weaving my hands together to show what I meant.

“I'm good at dancing,” Max said, nodding too hard, his head going up and down in the darkness. “Really good.”

“Yeah, you are,” I replied solemnly, though I had absolutely no idea. “And my grandparents were young once. Young. Don't you think that's weird?”

Max hiccupped again and tried to focus on my face. “We're young. We're young right now.”

“True,” I said. “Very true.” It was the wisest conversation anyone had ever had and I smiled wisely because of my great wisdom and also possibly because of the whiskey. Max leaned in close, his nose brushing against my cheek.

“You're nice, Zoe,” he said, and because he got my name right, I kissed him on the lips.

Now, Mr. Harris, you're probably shifting about on your bed feeling awkward about what's going to happen next and I bet you anything your mattress squeaks because a criminal's comfort is not going to be high on the list of priorities for jail funding when there are inmates trying to escape. Not you, though. I reckon you're just sitting in your cell, accepting your fate, because you think you deserve to die. You sort of remind me of Jesus, to be honest. You have to bear sins and he had to bear sins, only his were heavier. I mean, imagine the weight of all the sins of the world.

If you could actually measure it, pouring out sins on the scales like self-rising flour, I have no idea what the heaviest crime would be, but I don't think it would be yours. I reckon a lot of men would have done the same after what your wife told you. Think about that when you feel guilty. A couple of months ago, I printed off this list of all the men responsible for genocide, and at night when I can't sleep, instead of counting sheep, I count dictators. I send them leaping over a wall, Hitler and Stalin and Saddam Hussein jumping through the air in their uniforms with their dark mustaches blowing in the breeze. Maybe you should try it.

I tell myself I couldn't have known what was going to happen a year ago when Max put his arm around me in the garden. I try to remember how I was swept along in the moment, barely able to walk straight as Max ushered me inside, through the house, and upstairs to his bedroom. It smelled of dust and feet and aftershave. Max flicked on the light and closed the door as I stepped over a pair of boxer shorts crumpled up on the carpet. A hand on my back pushed me toward the wall. I glanced over my shoulder to see Max smile. He pushed harder. My hands

touched the wall, then my body, then my head, all pressed up against a poster of a naked woman. The poster was cool so I rested my forehead against the model's belly as Max kissed my neck. It was tingly, like if electricity had a mouth, then that is exactly how it would have felt.



Hitler jumping over a wall

That was the spark and we exploded into action, hands grabbing and lips hungry and breath quick and fast in our throats. Max turned me around and pushed his tongue into my mouth. His arms wrapped around my back, lifting me off the carpet. My hands gripped his shoulders as my head spun and the room whirled, blue curtains and white walls and a messy bed lurching toward us as we fell onto it in a heap.

Max was above me, his eyes fierce and focused as he dived in for the kiss. His lips found my cheek and my ear and my collarbone, traveling down my skin as he pulled up my top then yanked down my bra. There were my breasts, in the middle of Max Morgan's bedroom, pale and pointy, and Max was gawping. And then he was touching. Soft at first, then harder and harder, and he knew what he was doing all right and it felt good so I groaned. I closed my eyes as Max's lips found my nipple and Mr. Harris that's probably where I should leave it tonight because I've got school in the morning, and besides, I'm blushing like anything.

Believe it or not the spider's still here, staring out the shed window at all the black and silver, and if you ask me she must be sleeping because amazing as the universe is, I don't think anyone can look at it for that long without getting bored unless they're Stephen Hawking. I wonder if you can see the sky from your cell and if you ever think about the galaxy and how we're just tiny specks in all this infinity. Sometimes I try to picture my house in the suburbs on the edge of the city, and then I zoom out to see the country, and then I zoom out to see the whole world, and then I zoom out to see the entire universe. There are fiery suns and deep black holes and shooting stars, and I fade into nothing and the trouble that I caused is just a microscopic blip among the mighty cosmic explosions.

There was a mighty cosmic explosion in Mum's car after Max's party. Somehow I made it outside for eleven. I was sobering up fast, but there was no disguising the smell. Of course, it all kicked off as soon as Mum caught a whiff of alcohol. I can't remember what she said, but there was loud stuff about disappointment and angry stuff about trust, and she yelled all the way home as my head started to bang. Dad joined in when I got back in the house, but when I was sent to bed, I shoved my head under the pillow and grinned.

The Boy with the Brown Eyes. Who on earth was he and where had he gone and would I ever see him again? And Max. What would happen when we saw each other at school, and would he kiss me, most probably behind the recycle bin, where no teachers could see? Turning onto my back, I marveled at having two boys who might be interested when a few hours before I'd had none, and as I drifted off to sleep, I found myself thanking Grandpa. I only went to the party because of his stroke, and Mr. Harris even though I was in trouble and most probably grounded for the rest of my life, I couldn't help but think of it as a stroke of good luck.

From,
Zoe
1 Fiction Road
Bath, UK

S. HARRIS #993765
POLUNSKY UNIT (DEATH ROW)
LIVINGSTON, TEXAS 77351
USA
September 17

Dear Mr. Harris,

For once my legs aren't digging into the tiles because I picked up my pillow before I tiptoed out of the house. I put it on top of the box and it's quite comfy even though it's a bit damp. I must have been sweating in my dream and it was so real, with the rain and the trees and the disappearing hand. I bet you're no stranger to this so I don't need to bang on about how terrifying it was. Probably you have nightmares all the time, like when the guard turns off the light I bet you zoom right back to the moment your wife told you the truth.

Funny to think it wasn't your wife who got you the death penalty. I didn't understand that at first. No offense or anything, but stabbing a woman you've been married to for ten years sounds a whole lot worse than shooting a random neighbor who'd popped around with a mincemeat tart because it was Christmas. But then the article, which FYI I found on Google, said something about a crime of passion. When you attacked your wife, you weren't thinking straight. You were blinded by rage and seeing so much red I bet your wife was practically scarlet, which would have been appropriate. That's what you call a woman who's had an affair. A scarlet woman.

In a court of American law, acting out of anger is not as bad as killing in cold blood. When you didn't answer the door the next morning, your neighbor opened it up and strolled into your house. If you ask me, that's bad manners, but I suppose your neighbor learned her lesson when the bullet blew out her brain. Shooting a potential witness was calculating. According to the jury, you knew exactly what you were doing when you pulled the trigger and fed her tart to your dog. You went on the run for three days, but I'm guessing the guilt got too much because you turned yourself in.

Sometimes I think I'd be better off doing that. It's getting harder to pretend now that I'm back at school. Now his mum's sniffing around, too. There I was in English the other day with my phone in my hand, and before you say it, I know I shouldn't have been looking, but I was checking the time, willing it to be lunch so I could escape with Lauren. We've developed this routine where we grab sandwiches then hide away in the music block in this room full of brass instruments where no one can stare. She sits on the case of a trumpet and I lean back against the wall with my feet on a trombone, and we don't say a lot, just complain about the soggy cucumber or the hard tomatoes or the rubbery chicken.

There were five minutes of English left when the time disappeared and a name replaced it on the screen.

SANDRA SANDRA SANDRA

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