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The enemy has returned to the park in front of the flat. This time they are armed with fireworks as big as missiles. Jordy, Michael and Dennis have surrounded Kayleigh. She is standing next to the swings and there is no way for her to escape. The boys are setting off firecrackers and are throwing them right at her. As she tries to walk away, they push her facedown into the snow. Kayleigh curls herself up and doesn't defend herself.

I storm out to the park with my Super Soaker. The boys are scared. Kayleigh crawls away and covers behind the climbing frame. She's safe, which is more than I can say for the boys. I drench them with my Super Soaker. Only this time, they don't back down. Instead of sloping off with their tails between their legs, they idiotically start charging towards me. They are wet through and wielding their missiles with menace. Jordy slips in the snow and Michael trips up over him. 'Run!' shouts Kayleigh. She runs away, although it's not to our flat – she takes off to hers which is twice as far away. I follow her lead. The boys come after us shouting and bawling.

After entering the flat, we dive down the stairs to the basement. Kayleigh runs ahead of me along a maze of

corridors. We seem to have lost the boys. Well, I thought we had until she stops next to a storage unit and takes too long getting a key out of her pocket. I hear Jordy, Michael and Dennis coming closer along the corridors, three bloodhounds who have caught our scent. Just as Dennis flies around the corner, Kayleigh throws the door open. I kick him in his belly and jump after Kayleigh into the storage unit. Jordy jams his foot in the gap just before the door closes. We try to push it shut with all our might. Michael pushes a firework inside and tries to hit us with it, but he whacks Jordy's head instead. He cries out and moves his foot out from the door. The door closes shut.

“Idiots!”

“You two are dead!”, the boys shout from the corridor.

The boys punch and kick the door. “Girl power!” I scream and pump my fists in the air.

Kayleigh doesn't join in my celebration. She points to the door, which is reinforced with a steel sheet. “We're safe,” she says.

The sheet is a centimetre thick and even a team of armed police couldn't get in. This room seems more like a vault than a storeroom.

“You two are dead!” I hear Michael yell again. He already sounds less convincing. This is what happens all the time. Eventually they'll slope off.

“We'll get you,” says Jordy. His voice sounds weak and has a note of desperation to it.

These guys aren't three bloodhounds on the warpath. They're three clowns, whose mission has failed yet again. It's not the first time they've been humiliated either.

“What a bunch of idiots,” says Kayleigh as she goes to perch on a box. Her cheeks are red from the snow the boys tortured her with.

“Girl power!” I repeat. Yet, there isn’t a sound to be heard. They’ve finally stopped with their idle threats. Jordy, Michael and Dennis have gone back home to cry. They’ll try to dry out their fireworks, ask their mothers for hot chocolate, and then go to bed like good little boys.

“What did they want from you?” I ask.

“Nothing,” says Kayleigh. “They wanted to set fire to a swing and I told them it wasn’t allowed.” She blows on her hands to warm them up. I sit down beside her. She’s wearing a jumper so big it almost comes to her knees. She’s rolled her sleeves up three times over and still she can only stick her fingers out.

“Well, at least we’re safe here,” she says.

“What’s all this?” I point to the boxes covered in Chinese symbols.

“My Dad sells fireworks.”

Her comment that we were safe suddenly takes on a different meaning. This was supposed to be a safe house, a place to hide from the terrors of a few brainless losers. The only thing the boys had to do now was throw a firecracker through the air vent and the whole flat would light up in flames.

“I’m a pacifist,” says Kayleigh. “I hate fireworks. Every year, I’ve lost count of the number of kids who are injured by wayward fireworks.”

“What’s a pacifist?”

“Someone who is anti-violence. Someone who refuses to join a war.” She makes a V sign with her index and middle

fingers, the same symbol the security guards display on their jackets at the entrance to the shopping centre.

“Then you've got a problem in this neighbourhood.”

“That's why I hate this neighbourhood. So much violence and so much concrete. So much aggression.”

“I've lived here my entire life and know every flat like the back of my hand. I'm used to it. But deep inside, I'm a nature lover.”

“How come?” asks Kayleigh.

“I've went to the a forest once with my Mum. We picked mushrooms and collected chestnuts and pine cones. We saw roe deer on the edge of the forest.

“I come from the harbour. That's where I grew up. With a view of the water and the ships that sailed past. I can't get used to it around here. Everything is grey and people spend the whole day glued to the TV or putting each other in hospital. They're our neighbours, which is the worst thing.” Kayleigh covers her face with her hands.

“That time I went to the forest, my Mum and I laid down in a clearing at night to gaze at the stars. I just laid down so quietly and I'd never done that before. We saw shooting stars and every time one fell, we made a wish. I still remember it. A car, a damp-free house and the *Inside Out* DVD.

“What about your Dad?” asks

Kayleigh.

“I've never met him.”

“Really?”

“My Mum was 15 and she met him at a party. They fell asleep on the balcony and when she woke up, he was gone.”

“That's awful.”

“She was head over heels in love. But it turns out, he didn't feel the same way.”

“Do you sometimes miss your Dad?”

“My Mum does everything for us. She made the base for the Christmas tree. She can repair a coffee machine, keeps me off the streets and if we had a car, she would wash it on Saturdays. We don't need a man in the house.”

“Do you fall in love fast?” Kayleigh suddenly asks.

“Who would I fall in love with?”

“I don't know.”

“What about you?”

“It can happen in an instant, so they say.”

“I know. My Mum falls in love a lot.”

“And it could happen anywhere. On the street. In class. In the playground.”

“Or at a party when the lights go down and the slow dancing starts. That's how my Mum fell in love with my Dad.”

“Who do you like?” asks Kayleigh.

“What do you mean?”

“What's your type?”

“I'm 12.”

“Me too.”

“I've haven't fallen for anyone yet.”

Kayleigh moves towards me and throws her arms around me. “Thank you for saving me from the boys.”

I put my arms around her and she lays her cheek against my ear. I suddenly notice she has grown boobs. I let go of her in shock.

“What's up?”

“Nothing.” I step back until my back is up against the boxes of fireworks.

You can see from a mile away that Jennifer and Britney, even Cindy, have got boobs. But I never noticed Kayleigh's, even from close up they look fried eggs. Just like mine, as it

happens. With the over-sized jumper covering her, they've never been obvious.

I look back at the place I just felt, but all I can see is that Kayleigh sees I'm looking. She blows on her hands. "I'm cold."

"It didn't feel like that."

She looks at me questioningly. "How did it feel then?"

I don't reply. It's quiet. Not just in here, but outside too. It's as if everyone has abandoned their fireworks. If I say what I felt, all the neighbours will hear.

My cheeks turn red and she certainly doesn't look as if she will freeze to death. She hasn't turned blue or purple. Her teeth aren't chattering. Kayleigh looks at me as if the light in the storage unit has dimmed and she wants to start slow dancing. I can't go back any further. I am stuck between her and the fireworks. What I could do is look away, but I don't. My cheeks are burning red. It's still quiet outside. The whole street is on the edge of their seats waiting for what is going to happen next. Kayleigh looks away. My eyes skirt over her huge jumper or what is hidden underneath it.

"I have to go", she says. It sounds almost as if she has read that off a box of fireworks. Then she looks up.

"Me too. My Mum will be wondering where I am." I look at my wrist and I think about how daft I'm being because I never wear a watch.

Near to the flat, a firework goes off. We hear whistles in the air. The neighbourhood resumes setting off fireworks. The smoke enters the store room through the air vent.

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I notice that Mum has written our names on the framed mirror above the sink, with flowers emerging from the vertical lines of some of the letters. I add a few flowers, so I can see myself better without rubbing out our names.

There might be more nice mothers in the world, but I have the nicest. And the prettiest. Her big blue eyes sparkle all the time, even if there's nothing to be happy about. She has freckles across her nose and two dimples in her cheeks. And the sweetest smile.

Despite that, our bathroom looks like a paint shop. The make-up cupboard is bursting with beauty products. Four types of mascara surround the sink. Mum disguises her freckles under foundation and paints her lips so red, it stops men in their tracks.

I pick up a brush and comb my hair back. Using my Mum's hair clip, I see how a French plait looks on me. I put my hair behind my shoulders, as Kayleigh as hers, and using a hand mirror, I try to see if the side looks as good as the front.

I turn the tap on, but the water doesn't drain. The plughole is blocked with dark curly hairs.

Mum doesn't just shave her armpits and legs; she shaves her pubic hair as well. I think hair grows there for a reason, but she still shaves her private parts because the men in Club Paradise don't want that part to be private. It's something I don't like to think about, but every time I see the hairs in the sink, it pops into my head.

I rip open a rubbish bag on the balcony. In amongst the kitchen waste I find the streamers from the party poppers my Mum and I fired at the table during our Christmas breakfast.

The tree is now taking centre stage in the middle of the room on an opened newspaper. Mum has sprayed the pine-scented shower foam over the newspaper, which is why the tree, now on a base of fake snow, is starting to smell like pine trees.

We carefully arranged the streamers over the needles, to stop even more dropping out. Since we don't have any lights, we put our light-up trainers in a circle around the tree.

We step back to the sofa to see how it looks. When I see how festive our shoes look as they twinkle, I think it's a shame Santa didn't stop at our house again. I saw him walking through the shopping centre ringing his bell.

"Ho ho ho" he cheered. But when he heard that one of his helpers had been hit on the head with a firework, he didn't dare visit our neighbourhood anymore.

"When will my boobs develop?" I ask.

"What?"

“When did you first notice you had boobs?”

“That was such a long time ago. I think I was in my first year at secondary school.”

“As late as that?”

“That’s not late.”

“I am now the only the girl in class who doesn't have anything. I’m flatter than a pancake. Most of the girls in class have drawers full of bras and I have nothing. I hate it.”

“We can go into town sometime to find something nice.”

“Something nice? What do I need a bra for if I've got nothing?”

“In six months, you’ll be in secondary school. Boobs develop of their own accord, Angel. You really don’t need to stress yourself about it. It’s not a competition to see who gets them first, is it?”

“It might not have been when you were growing up. Now, you don’t fit in if you don’t have any. Even little kids laugh at me.”

“Don't be ridiculous.”

Suddenly, something strikes the window. Mum leaps up. “What the hell was that?” She storms out to the balcony.

I peek over the window sill and see Jordy, Michael and Dennis.

“Get lost!” Mum shouts at the group. The boys look up and laugh.

“Mum,” I say. “Come back inside.”

“We’re trying to have a conversation!” she hollers at them.

“And I can’t hear myself think with your noise.”

“What?” shouts one of the boys.

“A conversation! Where two people share information!”
She makes gestures as if she is talking to a deaf person.

“Come back inside, Mum.” I pull her away from the balcony.

“Ever heard of a conversation?!” she shouts over her shoulder.

“Shut your stupid mouth.”

“We’re coming for Angell!” shouts Michael.

“Bunch of idiots.”

I close the balcony door and push her toward the sofa.
“Did you have to do that? As soon as they find out you’re my Mum, there’ll be even more trouble for me.”

“Does one of the boys fancy you?”

“What are you on about? I’ve been at war with those clowns for months. I’ve already survived several bombings and rocket attacks. And you think one of them fancies me?”

“When a boy teases you, he probably likes you.”

“I don’t get you at all. Just because that’s what happened to you and that Polish guy.”

“With who?”

“With Janek Szymánski.”

“Was there something wrong with that guy?”

“Come on, Mum. The Monster of Warsaw,”

“Janek didn’t hurt a fly.”

“Maybe not when he was sober. But how many times did you have to lock him in the toilet because he’d had too much to drink and wanted something from you?”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

Mum came across the Monster of Warsaw standing in the queue at McDonald’s. We were supposed to be getting a

Happy Meal. She started chatting but she didn't know a word of Polish, so it was mainly through body language that they managed to communicate. He tried to make an impression with those gold teeth in his mouth. Half an hour later, we walked out. I had a McFlurry in my hand. Mum was arm in arm with the Monster.

“Mum... I've learnt something useful at school.”

“What is it?”

“Have you heard of the Pacific?”

“What do you mean?”

“It's so deep that nothing can survive on the ocean floor.”

“And?”

“That's how low you sunk with that guy.”

“Shut up talking rubbish. He could be really romantic.”

I stick my finger down my throat and pretend to throw up.

“We had bad days but I never sank.” She pumps a fist into the air to show what she means. “I will never sink. Never! There is no man on this Earth who can take me down with him. I might duck my head under now and again, but I will always come up for air.”

“That's not what I'm talking about.”

“Janek was a tough guy,” says Mum.

“With a tattoo of a bull on his neck. Oh, it was such fun to be on the sofa with him. Do you know how it feels to be second best?”

“Yes!” she snaps. “I do know! I know how it feels to never win anything.” She sits up straight and cracks her knuckles. “I know what it's like to never be allowed to take any place on the podium. To always have to stay back at the back of the peloton, and if you're lucky, be picked by the broom wagon, even if it's sometimes driven by a Polish man. Yes, I do know.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were mad. I just hate that guy. Grandad liked a drink, but when the Monster moved in with us, the housing association came by because the balcony was buckling under the weight of a wall of crates. There wasn’t any daylight in the kitchen anymore.”

“We removed everything straight away.”

“But surely you had to have known that before Mum? Everyone knows that that type of man drinks himself stupid once they’ve finished work. Honestly, if anyone shouldn’t be allowed near men, it’s you. Take it from me.”

“You drive me up the wall!” she shouts. “You’re 12 and you don’t need to lecture me about my life all the time. I have feelings too.”

“We know.”