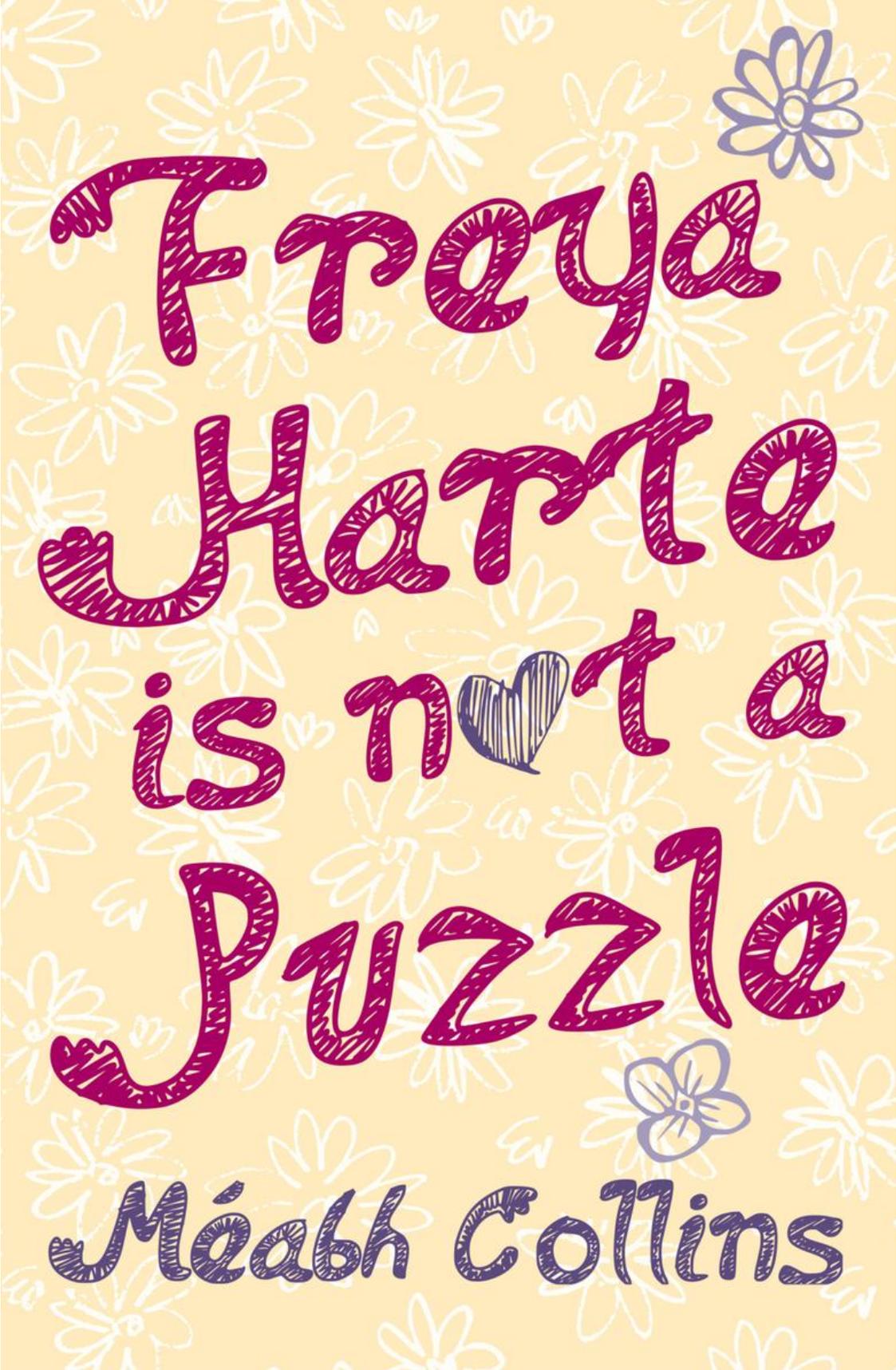


Fraya
Harta
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Chapter 1

For the third time this month, I find myself sitting on the plastic chair outside Ms Connolly's office, my hands clasped between my knees, as I wait for her to call me inside. Her office door is slightly ajar, and I can hear the incoherent mumble of her voice on the phone, punctuated here and there by polite laughter. I try not to think about her, or my presence on this too-familiar brown chair that creaks every time I lean back. Instead, I focus my attention on the poster across the hall. 'Great Irish Writers' the title reads, and there are twelve sepia-tinted images of writers below. I count the number of glasses, moustaches and ties I see. They are all men.

The sound of footsteps approaches and Ms Connolly pokes her head into the corridor. 'Right then, Freya. Shall we?'

I follow her inside.

'You're supposed to be in Geography at the moment, correct?' Her eyes are fixed on her computer, where she has pulled up my timetable.

I nod.

'More trouble with Ms Kavanagh, I take it.'

It is not a question.

She sits back in her chair and looks at me, tilts her head to the side in that way adults do to let you know they're *really* listening. 'Why don't you tell me what happened this time.'

I shift awkwardly in my seat, sink my teeth into my bottom lip, pinning my mouth shut. I know that as soon as I try to speak my voice will wobble and a film of tears will coat my eyes. It's not that I've done anything wrong

(I haven't), but being wrongfully accused of something in front of your entire class and being sent to the Vice-Principal's office as punishment is a humiliating experience that would surely make anyone want to cry.

But Ms Connolly is nice, I remind myself. She has been kind and understanding about everything this year.

I take a breath. 'We were looking at Ordnance Survey maps,' I begin, tugging at the scratchy sleeve of my school jumper (yet another thing I hate about secondary school). 'Ms Kavanagh asked me to find a tourist attraction on the map of Carrick-on-Shannon, and I pointed to the little blue symbol, which means boating activities.' I pause and look up at Ms Connolly, who is still sitting back, eyes fixed on me. I can't read her expression. I return my gaze to my lap and continue.

'Ms Kavanagh asked me which *specific* boating activities were there, and I said that it was impossible to know from just the symbol because it could mean water skiing or fishing or basically anything that happens in a boat. Then *she* said that I had to be more specific, because that's what the examiner would expect, and *I* said that wasn't true, you only had to say 'boating activities'. Then *she* said-

'How do you know that you don't have to be more specific?' Ms Connolly says, sitting forward now and knitting her fingers together on the desk. She looks... amused, I think.

'Because the map doesn't show you what's actually there, it only shows the symbol. And Ms Kavanagh said a few weeks ago that you only have to identify the *symbol*.'

'And now she's saying you need to be more specific.'

'Yes. Which you don't.'

Ms Connolly's brow creases. 'Freya, can you remember the reason Ms Kavanagh sent you to see me the last time?'

I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes. 'The thing about the food chain. She said that camels eat storks in the desert and that it's all part of the circle of life. I said that camels are herbivores and that that was impossible, and *she*,' - I stop myself from saying *went ballistic* - 'wasn't happy. She said I was *giving her lip* and sent me here. But I wasn't giving her anything,' I add defensively. 'I was just pointing out her mistake. It's not my fault that she makes so many.'

Ms Connolly nods her head thoughtfully. 'I wonder, Freya, if Ms Kavanagh thought you were trying to get a rise out of her when you did that. Do you know what I mean?'

I shake my head.

'Is it possible she thought you were being cheeky?'

My eyes are now rolling of their own accord.

'Now, look,' Ms Connolly continues, '*I* know that's not what happened. But Ms Kavanagh doesn't know you like I do. She hears a student challenging her or speaking up without raising a hand and thinks the worst. She thinks you're being belligerent, trying to make her look foolish.'

I chew the inside of my cheek as I consider this. 'But what am I supposed to do when Ms Kavanagh teaches us things that are wrong? What if desert climates come up in the Junior Cert and everyone writes about camels eating storks? Isn't it unfair on the rest of the class if I *don't* point out her mistakes?'

'Of course, but I'd like us to think about ways you can do that and also be,' - Ms Connolly searches for the word - '*mindful* of Ms Kavanagh's feelings.'

This is the part I hate. The part where, although we've established that I've done nothing wrong (on the contrary, I was being helpful), I'm in trouble for not being polite enough about it. 'Ms Kavanagh wasn't mindful of my feelings,' I mumble, wincing at the memory of the

other girls sniggering as I was ordered out of the classroom. A tear slips onto my skirt.

‘If she knew, she wouldn’t be so hard on you,’ Ms Connolly says softly. ‘Maybe it would be a good idea if we tell her why these... *misunderstandings* keep happening. I know you said you’d rather keep things to yourself but, at the end of the day, teachers want the best for their students. They can only help you reach your full potential if they understand you properly.’

‘But then everyone will know,’ I say, wiping my wet cheeks with the heel of my palm.

‘They won’t. I promise you they won’t. It’s confidential information.’

‘But I’ll start getting special treatment and they’ll know something’s up.’

Ms Connolly lets out a clipped, exasperated laugh. ‘Freya, I guarantee you every one of your classmates is too consumed by her own worries to even *think* about you. They won’t notice a thing.’

I think Ms Connolly greatly underestimates the beady eyes of bored schoolgirls.

‘Tell you what,’ she continues, ‘since it’s only really Ms Kavanagh you’ve been having trouble with, we could just tell her. We don’t need to tell your other teachers yet. Does that sound OK?’

I nod reluctantly. Part of me relishes the thought of Ms Kavanagh clumsily trying to defend herself when Ms Connolly confronts her. How guilty she’ll feel when she realises how spectacularly unfair she’s been.

‘All right then. Look, the bell’s about to ring for lunch. Why don’t you head down to the library?’

I stand to take my leave.

‘And Freya?’ Ms Connolly calls as I press on the door handle. ‘You know you have nothing to worry about, don’t you? You’re a wonderful girl and a wonderful student. A

diagnosis doesn't change anything. It just helps us to understand you better.'

I push the toe of my shoe into the flecked grey carpet. 'Yes, Ms Connolly.'



If I don't show my face in the Third-Year common area, everyone will think something far more dramatic occurred in Ms Connolly's office and there'll be further gossiping. I steel myself as I walk past the lunch tables, try my best to ignore the heat in my cheeks and lick of sweat coating my spine. As I pull my lunchbox from my locker, Orla appears.

'So, what happened? Did you get detention?'

Typical. She has expressed precisely zero interest in keeping my company this year, but can always be relied upon to come sniffing for details whenever I get into trouble. I can just picture it: the whole class laughing after I was thrown out by Ms Kavanagh, keen to know what happened next, and Orla generously offering to approach the weird girl on their behalf. *It's OK*, she'll no doubt have assured them. *She thinks we're friends*. My jaw clenches and I shut my locker door more forcefully than intended.

'Of course I didn't,' I say, affecting a casual tone of voice and breezily brushing past her for added effect. 'Ms Connolly needed help checking the names of next year's First Years. Since I was already there, she asked me to do it.'

Orla looks disappointed. 'She didn't even write in your journal?'

I give my best exasperated sigh, which I hope conveys impatience at this tedious line of questioning. 'Why would she? Ms Connolly used to teach Geography. She knows all

about Ordnance Survey Maps. She actually thanked me for bringing Ms Kavanagh's incompetence to her attention. She said Leslie Park was one of the best schools in Dublin and that there was a certain standard to uphold.'

I fidget with the clasp of my lunchbox as the lie falls from my lips, but Orla seems to have bought it. She smiles weakly to mask her disappointment. She will have nothing to offer her new friends, no morsel of entertainment from her encounter with the class freak.

'At least you're not in trouble,' she says vaguely, and drifts back to her table.



In the library, I spread the contents of my lunchbox across the empty desk: two satsumas (it doesn't count as a full portion of fruit if you only eat one), a tuna sandwich (toasted makes it easier to digest) and a cashew bar (a good source of iron when eaten with the oranges).

'Are you planning on eating any of that or just staring at it?' a voice says behind me.

I turn around and see Shannon Mulhern leaning over the back of a chair. I turn away again without responding.

'Here, are those cashew bars any good?' Shannon asks. 'My mum gets the ones in the blue wrapper. They're made from dates, I think. They're grand. Better than the cacao and orange ones, which just taste like regurgitated jaffa cakes.'

I have no idea what to do with this pile of ramblings and focus my attention on Ms Horgan's Wall of Inspiration instead. She prints out quotations from famous authors and mounts them on colourful cardboard speech bubbles every week. It's a lot of effort, but it makes this windowless old classroom feel more like a real

library, while our new one is still being built. This week, a pink bubble reads: *Life, with its rules, its obligations, and its freedoms, is like a sonnet: You're given the form, but you have to write the sonnet yourself.* – Madeline L'Engle.

'Len-gle,' Shannon whispers.

I turn and look at her blankly.

She points to the bubble. 'It's pronounced Madeline *Len-gle*. In case you were going to get all French about it.'

I frown. Shannon is the one catch to being on the Third-Year Library Committee.



That evening, I lie tummy-down on my bed and sketch a picture of Scrump, the ugly doll from *Lilo and Stitch*, in my journal. As I add the stitching detail to its button eyes, my mind replays the events of the day. I'm frustrated with myself for having landed in yet more trouble with Ms Kavanagh and for how I handled my interaction with Orla. She'll never want to be my friend again if that's how I talk to her, and I'll continue to float through school like a weird, friendless ghost. I set my pencil down and look at my drawing. It's my best Scrump yet, I think. I've had a lot to think about this evening, a lot of fuzzy energy to push through my pencil.

I hear the front door open and scoot my journal under my bed before heading downstairs. In the kitchen, Mum fixes the kettle into its cradle. She has taken off her coat, but her bicycle helmet is still on her head.

'Hi, love,' she says cheerily. 'Had you a good day?'

'Fine,' I say, leaning against the counter and fidgeting with a bobbin on my wrist.

'Good. I'd a long day myself. I'm still up to my eyes with emails from the students about fees and

registration.’ She shakes her head. ‘Anyway, did you eat today? Sorry, I meant have you had dinner? I was going to pop a few salmon fillets in the oven, boil up some broccoli and baby potatoes. Very healthy.’

‘Sure,’ I say indifferently, as if food hasn’t been a tiptoe subject between us for the last few months.

Mum looks quietly relieved. ‘So, how was school?’

‘Fine,’ I say, then quickly scramble to pad out my response. ‘Except the teachers are all talking about the Mocks in January, which is still ages away.’

I’m not usually so forthcoming with details about the school day, but I need to distract Mum in case she catches on to the Ms Kavanagh incident.

The kettle starts to rumble on the counter. Mum reaches for an old Donald Duck mug and makes herself some tea. ‘No harm in getting a head start on the study, I suppose,’ she says. ‘And how’s Orla getting on? I haven’t seen her in a while.’

I twist the hair bobbin around my fingers, cutting off circulation. ‘She’s fine.’

‘Great. And how’s Katie finding college?’

My fingers are throbbing from the pressure of the elastic. ‘Likes it,’ I say, as if I have any clue.

‘That’s good. God, can you believe it? Katie in college and you and Orla doing the Junior Cert. I don’t know where the time goes. I can still picture the pair of you here, singing your hearts out for me and Dad at one of your sleepovers. What was that song from the Rapunzel film again? The duet you always sang together.’

‘Can’t remember,’ I lie, and stretch the bobbin from my thumb to my baby finger and around again. It snaps and goes flying across the room. I shake out my hand as the blood flow returns to my fingers. ‘Can we make dinner now?’

‘Of course. Sorry, love.’

She begins fumbling with the knobs on the oven and I'm suddenly consumed by giggles at the sight of her.

'Freya?' She looks up at me. 'What's so-'

I have to cover my mouth to stop myself from spluttering. 'Your helmet,' I say. 'You're still wearing it.'

'Oh,' she says, touching the side of her head self-consciously. 'What am I like? I knew I was forgetting something.'

I laugh again and let the sound burst into the air unchecked. I bask in the feeling of relief it brings. Home is the only place I can do this. The only place I feel safe enough to let everything out, whatever messy shape it takes. The only place I can be myself.

Chapter 2

I'm still reeling from the flustered look on Ms Kavanagh's face when she saw me in the corridor this morning. It was obvious Ms Connolly had spoken to her, and although part of me regrets that she now knows my weakness, an even bigger part of me is relieved. She can't single me out anymore, can't humiliate me in front of the others. I doubt she'll even speak to me again.

'Freya, are we listening?' My Irish teacher, Mr Regan, waves a hand in my direction. I hear murmurs of laughter around me as I compose myself.

'*Brón orm,*' I mumble.

Mr Regan raises an unimpressed eyebrow.

'Right. Now, as I was saying, we've the Oral coming up after Christmas, and anyone taking it is invited to do an intense prep course in the Slievanure Gaeltacht over Midterm. Ms Garvey teaches at a college there during the summer and has arranged everything for us.'

A hum of excited whispers fills the classroom.

'Will all the Irish classes be going?' a girl called Izzo asks.

'Any Third Year student who wants to can attend. You'll be taught by local teachers in the area, and myself and the other Irish teachers will supervise.'

'Where will we be staying?' Izzo's best friend, Chloe, asks, reaching excitedly for Izzo's hand across the desk.

'You'll be split into different houses around the village and a *bean an tí* will look after you. Just like on the summer courses.'

Then Orla raises her hand. 'Can we pick who we want to stay with?'

Her question gets the biggest reaction of all as it occurs to the others that they will have roommates. Chloe reaches across to squeeze her hand too, and Orla looks as deliriously excited as a dog with a bone.

Orla had worked hard on befriending Izzo and Chloe last year. They had been positioned as popular from the early days of First Year, so it wasn't hard to see why she coveted their friendship so desperately. She made all kinds of efforts to win them over, from changing her route to school to walk with them, to buying them lavish birthday presents and writing them notes in class exclaiming how much she loved their headbands. She probably would have won their affection sooner had I not been clinging to her the whole time, hurting her image.

'OK, settle down,' Mr Regan says as my classmates chatter excitedly. 'I take it you'll want to pick your own roommates then.'

A collective high-pitched squeal tears across the classroom. I flinch at the sound.

'Right. Decide among yourselves and I'll send around a list tomorrow.'

For the rest of class, little attention is paid to Mr Regan and his efforts to teach us the *modh coinníollach*. I watch as the others lean over their desks when his back is turned, whisper and fire scrunched up notes at each other across the classroom. All the while, butterfly wings beat frantically in my chest. I am not excited about picking roommates. I have nobody to choose and nobody will choose me. I burrow my fingertips under the hem of my skirt, dig my nails deep into the sides of my legs to control myself. *Don't cry*, I warned myself. *Not now. Not here.*

As soon as the bell rings, I rush out of the classroom, stash my books in my locker and grab my lunchbox. I wind through a sea of navy woollen jumpers until I reach the makeshift library, then quickly claim my usual spot at

the edge of the cluster of desks. I have hardly steadied my breathing when Shannon walks in.

'You know, you're going to have to find somewhere else to eat your lunch when the new library is finished,' she says, eyeing my lunchbox disapprovingly and taking a seat in what I've grudgingly come to accept as *her* usual spot. 'There's no way Ms Horgan is going to allow food in her shiny new library.' She glances over at the school librarian, who is busy cataloguing boxes of books in the corner of the room.

'I know,' I say, pulling my lunchbox towards me defensively.

'And you're going to have to do something on the committee besides spending lunchtime here. I don't think you can count *Freya ate lunch in the library every day* as an OAL, you know?'

I feel my cheeks start to warm. I can't tell if Shannon is giving out to me or being sarcastic. It's not like I wanted to be on the Library Committee. It was Ms Connolly's idea. She said Ms Horgan was looking for more Third Years to join and that it would be good for me to be more involved in school. She also said I could eat my lunch here, since it was only an old classroom anyway.

'Maybe if we both come up with a few ideas for projects, we can sit down and talk about them. You are *not* allowed to suggest making the new library a lunch spot though,' Shannon says. She looks disapprovingly at my lunchbox again, but in a more theatrical manner this time, which suggests she might be joking. I don't touch it just in case.

I watch as Shannon rummages through her bag. The sight of so many loose, crumpled sheets of paper and dog-eared copy books makes me uneasy. She whips out a slender paperback and holds it up in front of her. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

'Ever read it?' she asks.

I shake my head. I've never even heard of it.

'One of my favourites. The main character, Charlie, reads all of these classic books that his English teacher gives him, and I'm making a list of them to read. Did you know that *Peter Pan* was originally a book? I thought it was just a pervy old Disney film.'

My jaw tightens. This is the real reason I don't like Shannon Mulhern. Not only is she bossy and annoying, but she openly hates Disney. Her CBA in English last year was dedicated to it. She dressed up as the old hag from *Beauty and the Beast* and gave a talk called 'Sexism in Disney Movies: A Tale As Old As Time'. Ms Lee gave her a standing ovation. I ground my teeth the whole way through.

Despite myself, I can't help asking Shannon what she thinks is wrong with *Peter Pan*. I inspect my nails to appear indifferent as she begins to rant.

'Well, "What Made the Red Man Red?" for one thing.' She screws her face in disgust. 'So racist. And then there's the treatment of basically every female character. The guys say stuff like, *a jealous female can be tricked into anything* and are constantly humiliating them. Peter Pan literally *spanks* Tinkerbell to get her to produce more fairy dust. How messed up is that?'

I feign a neutral expression and shrug. I don't want Shannon to know how distressing I find having Disney, my favourite thing in the world, ripped apart in front of me like this.

'So, yeah,' Shannon concludes, 'it'll be interesting to see what the original book is like. Hopefully poor Tink catches a break.'

She turns away to read, and I sit staring at my lunchbox, still unsure whether I should open it or not.



'A holiday in Slievanure!' Mum exclaims, looking up from the TV. 'That sounds lovely, doesn't it?'

'We'll have classes every day,' I reply, confused. 'And they're making us go during Midterm, when we're supposed to be off from school.'

'But you'll go on lovely walks and fill up on healthy sea air. It'll be great. How do we sign you up? Do I need to write a cheque?'

I am suddenly hit with the same feeling of punched-gut panic I felt in Mr Regan's class. I don't want to go on this trip. I don't think I *can* go on this trip. Four whole days away from Mum and Dad, sleeping in a different bed and eating strange food. And then there's the roommate situation. I can't handle the humiliation of being the only person without one, or of being placed in a room of girls I'm not friends with and who don't want me there.

'Are you all right, love?' Mum asks, and I realise there are tears slipping down my cheeks.

'I don't think...'

I feel my throat begin to close.

'Oh, Freya,' Mum says softly, pulling me in towards her. 'You're a bit *overwhelmed*, are you, love?'

Overwhelmed. That was one of our new words. One of the dictionary's worth we acquired during the summer.

I nod as Mum soothes my back.

'Is it the thought of being away from home? Because you're well able for it, and you'll have your friends looking out for you. Orla will be going, won't she? Maybe we just need to visualise it a bit. Isn't that what Elaine said to do whenever there's a new plan?'

Mum took everything Elaine, the psychologist who assessed me last summer, told us as gospel. She had a way of normalising things, of making a diagnosis seem like something that simply needed to be *managed*.

'Tell you what,' Mum says, smoothing back tear-wet hair from my face. 'As soon as the school sends home

more information about the trip, we'll look closely at everything so that we'll know what to expect. I'm sure that when you see the place you'll feel better about going. And Orla—'

'Orla's not my friend anymore,' I say, suddenly prickly and pulling away from her.

Mum looks confused. 'What do you mean? Did something happen?'

'She just doesn't like me anymore, OK?' I cross my arms tightly, feel a wall building up inside me.

'But why wouldn't she... the two of you are best friends. If something happened, I'm sure—'

'Things are different now. She wants normal friends.' I stare at my feet, determined not to catch Mum's eye.

'Normal?' Mum laughs in that same exasperated way as Ms Connolly. 'Freya, what on earth does that mean?'

I ball my fists tightly under my arms. 'Friends who aren't autistic.'

Chapter 3

I cannot think about autism without thinking about last summer. In a way, I'm relieved that the problems I'd been having before then are no longer invisible, but I'm not sure that being identified as autistic is the outcome I wanted either. It all unravelled in June, after school finished for the summer and I was suddenly home all the time. Mum and Dad started to notice some of my behaviours more, especially around food. It's not like I stopped eating entirely; I was trying to be healthy. It gave me a sense of control over my life. Sometimes I wonder if I should have tried harder to be more secretive about my eating habits. Another part of me wonders if I wanted my parents to notice.

Mum started watching me more closely at the dinner table and noticing that the fridge was still full when she came home from work. It was easy to leave my lunch behind in school, but now I had nowhere to hide, no way to lie. It was also getting harder to come up with new excuses for refusing certain food. I could tell her patience with me was wearing thin, and when I collapsed on the kitchen floor one afternoon, she and Dad didn't hesitate in bringing me to the hospital. They said they didn't know what else to do. I begged them not to, swore things weren't that bad and that I'd do whatever they wanted, but they had already lost trust in me. I can still picture their faces in that moment, tired and sunken with worry.

What I mostly remember about the hospital is the horrible clash of smells and noises, all disinfectant and squeaky vinyl floors. People retched and groaned in the seats around us, and I sank my head into my lap to block