

Ruby Rogers is a Waste of Space

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Chapter 1

You idiot! You blinking idiot!

My name's Ruby Rogers and I'm going to be a gangster when I grow up. Sort of like a modern Robin Hood, only female. I'm going to live in the treetops with my gang. I haven't thought of our name yet but it'll be scary. We'll have swinging rope bridges and Tarzan-type vines up in the forest canopy. And whenever any horrible people come, we'll drop disgusting stuff on their heads.

We'll drop babies' dirty nappies and carrier bags full of sick. We'll pelt them with bombs made from bogeys. Then, when they're totally grossed out, covered with gunk and frozen with fear, we'll slide down the trees and steal their valuables. They'll run off screaming and we'll give all the money to a charity that helps kids.

Hmmm. Nice thought! And it was all going to begin today. I had a secret plan. OK, I may not be grown up yet, but inside my head I'm a gangster already.

It was the first day of the summer hols. The perfect moment to reveal my secret plan to my unsuspecting family. I had to tell them because I needed their help. Who would be the lucky person to hear it first? It would be awful if my big announcement was spoiled by somebody being In A Strop.

My brother Joe? Hmm. Not sure. Usually Joe is a bad-tempered, snarling, wild beast. But he's been on holiday for ages already. The sixth form escape from school the moment their exams are over. He'd been out all day with his mates, doing something cool.

I knocked on Joe's bedroom door. There was a weird, sinister silence. No reply. I knocked again. 'You dirty rat!' I drawled, trying to sound gangsterish. Still no answer. Maybe he was fiddling about with one of his dreary old projects.

Joe's into art. He makes little sculpture thingies out of wood. They're really models for great big enormous things, as big as a room. Or even bigger. His ambition is to make a huge Christmas pud by covering the dome of St Paul's Cathedral with yellow custard-type stuff and a gigantic sprig of holly. It's called 'installation art' apparently.

'Joe!' I called. 'Can I borrow a pencil?'

I couldn't just say, 'How was your day?' He'd smell a rat.

'Don't go in my room!' His voice came thundering out from the bathroom. 'Use your own stupid pencils!' I was annoyed. My pencils aren't stupid.

Joe didn't deserve to hear my secret. He had insulted my pencils. Besides, he would probably be in the bathroom for hours. He reads comic books in there.

'OK, OK, relax, why dontcha?!' I called gangsterishly, and slouched off in search of Dad.

I thought Dad might be in the garden. You never quite know with Dad. Sometimes he sits on his bed, playing his guitar and trying to compose songs. The lyrics are usually something to do with city streets. '*A stranger stalks ... the city streets ... his name is George, no Fred, no Clive ...*'

But Dad doesn't actually *like* being in city streets very much. We went to London for the day once, just him, Joe and me. Big mistake – Mum's the only one capable of organising a day out. Dad had a panic attack in the waxworks.

'I've got to get out!' he gasped, racing for the exit. Dingbat! Can you imagine anything more embarrassing?

Many people have dads who are the strong, silent type. My dad's the panicking, noisy type. H

only really relaxes in the garden. And he grows peas, which I like to eat raw, straight from the pod.



I found Dad in the garden shed. He was standing with his back to me, nailing something to the wall.

‘SURPRISE, SURPRISE!’ I shouted.

Dad jumped, hit his thumb instead of the nail, and let out a yowl of pain.

‘You idiot!’ he yelled, hopping about and cradling his hand. Dad’s not very brave when it comes to injuries. ‘You blinking idiot, Ruby! Never do that again!’

‘Sorry, Dad!’ I backed off, quick. I could see it wasn’t the moment. Dad can lose it just like that. Even on an ordinary day he’s only moments away from a full-blown panic. And he does hate hitting himself with a hammer. He’s such a wuss. I decided to run indoors and talk to Mum. She was my only hope now.



Chapter 2

Frankly, this evening sucks

If Mum's in a good mood, somehow the whole house is. Although she's quite small, she bosses everyone about. She's a bit plump and she's got wild, curly, reddish-gold hair and a Welsh accent. She can be a bit strict about things being clean and tidy, but it's because she's a midwife. She spends all day delivering babies. It's a family joke: 'Did you have any nice babies today?' 'Oh no, love. I only had a rather nasty one that looked like a turnip.'

Thank goodness I'm not one of her patients. I'm not going to have babies anyway. I'm going to have pets instead. Monkeys, mainly. They'll live with me in the forest canopy.

I found Mum asleep on the sofa. She often has catnaps after work. Waking her up is strictly against the rules. If you wake her, she's grouchy as anything. If you let her wake up naturally, in her own time, she's only *slightly* grouchy.

I watched her for a little while. She was lying on her back with her mouth half-open, frowning. Mum often talks in her sleep.

'Where's the nearest toilet?' she muttered, all of a sudden. 'That one's full of snakes!' Same old dream! I sighed.

Suddenly I remembered that I hadn't tidied my room. I'm supposed to tidy it every day, but somehow I always forget.

I went upstairs. Not to tidy my room – obviously. I'd never do it without being nagged. I felt a bit low really. Not a single member of my family had been ready to share in my fabulous secret plan.

At times like this I like to hide in a den. The airing cupboard is a favourite location. I'm still small enough to curl up in the middle section, where the sheets and stuff are kept. I climbed up, pulled the door almost shut and closed my eyes in the darkness.

I thought about my secret plan. It was so exciting! If only I could tell somebody! I heard Joe come out of the bathroom and go back into his room. Right away he put on some loud, shouty music. I don't understand teenage boys. Thank goodness I'm not one. Besides, if I had been a boy, apparently I'd have been called Tristram after my uncle. He runs a bookshop in Bath and knits his own ponchos. Not really a gangsterish role model.



Suddenly someone walked past the airing cupboard and pushed the door shut with a click. Immediately I panicked. ~~Although I have inherited Mum's love of curling up somewhere cosy, I've~~ also inherited Dad's fear of being shut in. The airing cupboard only opens from the outside. Ohmigawd! I was in danger of being aired to death!

'Heeeeeelp!' I yelled. Moments later, Mum flung the airing cupboard door open. Her face was still a bit crumply from her recent sleep.

'Oh, Ruby, get out of there!' she said grumpily. 'You'll crumple all my sheets! I spent hours ironing them!'

I scrambled out. I was tempted to growl, 'Iron yuh face, why dontcha, lady?' but it didn't seem like the right moment somehow.

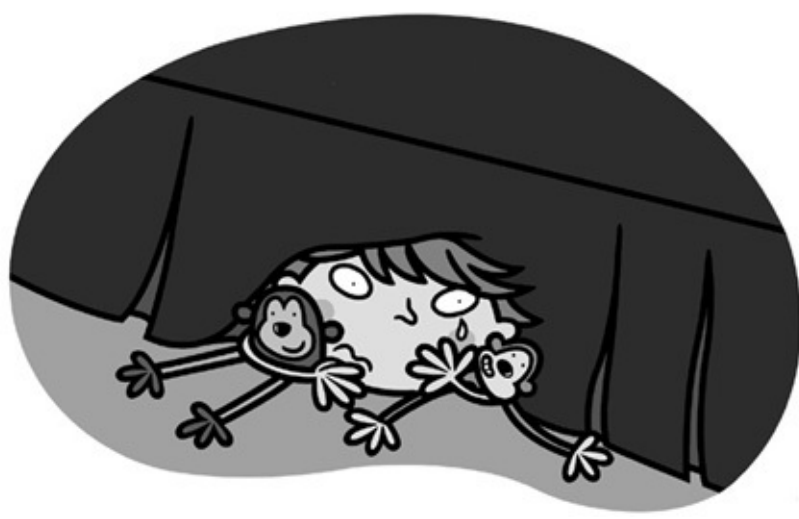
'Supper is in ten minutes sharp!' said Mum. 'Tidy your room! I'm going to inspect it and if it's not tidy you won't get any supper!'

I didn't worry. I knew she would never knowingly starve a child. Mum does sometimes shout or snap, but she's not really strict underneath.

I went into my room, shut the door and lay down on my bed. My two monkeys, Stinker and Funky, were lying on the pillow. Stinker is fat and bald and the boss. Funky is thin, woolly and very bendy.

'Stinker, Funky,' I told them sadly, 'it may be the first day of the hols, but frankly, this evening sucks.'

It wasn't the ideal moment to reveal my fabulous secret plan to my family. But I just *had* to tell somebody tonight. I needed grown-up help. My plan was that big. It was *immense*.



Chapter 3

I knew I was going to cry

Supper was pizza and salad. I ate some salad because I knew Mum was watching me. And there was nothing like eating healthy stuff to make your mum happy.

‘That’s right, petal!’ she said. ‘Lovely salad, isn’t it?’ She’d forgotten to inspect my room, of course. I could tidy it later anyway. I couldn’t concentrate on anything else until I’d revealed my secret plan.

OK, Mum was in a better mood now, but Dad hadn’t smiled at me since The Incident in the shed. Joe was glaring at his plate as usual, wolfing down his pizza like – well, like a wolf, I suppose.

Any minute now I would reveal my amazing secret. But I thought I’d better soften them up a bit first.

‘I’ve decided to keep my room tidy for the whole holidays,’ I said with a sneaky goody-goody sort of smile. Mum looked amazed.

‘I’ll believe it when I see it, petal!’ she said, shaking her head. Although I quite like it when she calls me ‘petal’, she’s going to have to stop all that nonsense when I’m a gangster.

‘No, it’s true,’ I went on. ‘I’m going to tidy my room every day after supper, round about eight o’clock.’ Mum still looked pleased, but it was as if she’d already started to think about something else.

‘Well done, then,’ she said. ‘Good girl. That’s the spirit. Pass the salad dressing, please, Joe.’

‘Did you have any nice babies today?’ I said. The family joke.

‘Oh yes,’ she said. ‘I had a lovely one with ginger hair all down his back.’

‘Hmmm – sounds like a werewolf,’ muttered Joe.

‘The water heater’s set too high,’ said Mum to Dad. ‘Can you adjust it? I nearly burnt my hand earlier.’

Dad looked startled. You could see he was beginning to panic.

‘Couldn’t we get a man in to do it?’ he said. ‘A proper man, I mean. With spanners and things. I think I need a spanner to do that. Where have my spanners gone, in fact? I haven’t seen one for months.’

Joe finished his pizza with a greedy grunt, and drained his glass of juice.



‘What’s for pudding?’ he asked.

‘Yogurt or fruit,’ said Mum defiantly. Joe groaned and dropped his head in his hands.

God, my family were so DULL! I had to reveal my magnificent idea to them now, to brighten up their tedious little lives.

‘You know it’s my birthday in a fortnight,’ I said loudly, in a silence. They all looked at me kind of anxiously. Even Joe.

It was the moment of truth. It was so quiet, you could hear traffic going up and down the main road, miles away. My knees felt weak, even though I was sitting down.

‘Well, come on, Ruby!’ snapped Mum. ‘We haven’t got all night. What is it?’

‘I want a tree house!’ I said.

‘A tree house, sweetheart?’ said Mum. Her eyes went big and strange, and puzzled.

‘In case you hadn’t noticed,’ said Joe, ‘we haven’t even got a tree.’ He gave a mocking smile.

‘It doesn’t have to be in our garden,’ I said. ‘I realise that, obviously. I’m not a complete moron. It could be in any old tree in the countryside somewhere. Or in the park.’

‘But if you had a tree house in the park,’ said Mum, ‘it wouldn’t be just yours, would it, love? Anybody could use it. Big rough boys could use it. They might not let you go anywhere near it.’

‘Big rough boys would trash it,’ said Joe.

‘It wouldn’t be allowed in the park anyway,’ said Dad. ‘Health and Safety regulations. You might fall out and hurt yourself.’

‘Local Child Falls from Tree and Starts New Life as a Pizza,’ said Joe. He often talks in newspaper headlines.

Dad went pale at the thought of my tragic fall and fiddled nervously with the pepper mill. I knew he was secretly trying to think of a song to be performed at my funeral. ‘*Oh, my beloved child, dear Ruby ... She never lived long enough to roam the city streets ...*’

Sadly, nothing rhymes with Ruby except Scooby. Or booby. Hardly a dignified funeral-type song.

‘I could have a tree house out in the countryside, then,’ I said. ‘Or at Auntie Megan’s house.’

Auntie Megan lives in North Wales, in a place with a weird long name that sounds like somebody sneezing. Something like *Lllantishoo!* It’s lovely up there. She’s got loads of trees in her garden. We climb them every time we go, in the summer hols.

‘But we only go to Megan’s for a week or so every year,’ said Mum. ‘And anyway, we couldn’t

just ask Megan if we could build a tree house in her garden. It would be rude, petal.'

~~'And anyway,' said Dad, 'if you're expecting me to build you a tree house, forget it. You know carpentry's not my strong point. I'm still reeling from my last injury.'~~ He sucked his thumb.

'And Dad can't stand heights, remember,' said Mum.

'I can't even stand the thought of other people standing heights,' said Dad.

'So,' said Joe with a kind of sadistic grin. 'Looks like your tree house idea is a non-starter, huh?'

I knew I was going to cry. I jumped down from my chair, ran out and slammed the door. I raced upstairs to my bedroom, slammed that door too, grabbed my monkeys and hid under the bed. Then I burst into tears.



Chapter 4

Temper, temper!

When I'd finished crying, and I was just doing that sort of shuddering you get afterwards, I heard the TV being switched on downstairs. I knew I was going to get into trouble for jumping down from the table and slamming the doors. But not right now, it seemed. Nobody came.

Sometimes when Joe goes off in a strop and slams the doors, Mum just says, 'Leave him! Give him time to cool off.' She'd probably said the same thing about me.

I stayed under the bed. It's one of my best dens, although there's always a bit of a mess down there. In fact, right now, there were a few stale crisps in my hair. I could smell them – salt and vinegar. I grabbed my monkeys.

'OK,' said Stinker to Funky, in a gangsterish sort of voice. 'These cellars are right under da House of Parliament. We gotta seventeen boxes of high explosives. Gimme da matches.'

'Oh heck!' said Funky. 'I forgot the matches!' And he tried to make up for it by kissing his own ankles.

Suddenly there was a rough knock on my bedroom door. It was Joe's knock. It goes *Knock-knock-knockety-knockety-knockety KNOCK!* I ignored it. Stupid boy! I lay still, under the bed, hoping he hadn't heard my monkeys talking.

Joe opened my door. There's no privacy in this house. I'd ask Dad to put a bolt on the door if he wasn't so useless at carpentry. I stared at Joe's feet, which were encased in rancid old trainers. No wonder he hasn't got a girlfriend.

'Great news,' said Joe. He knew I was under the bed. 'I've been looking at tree houses on the internet for you. They start at four thousand pounds and go up to twenty thousand. Amazingly cheap, huh? Won't take you long to save up, will it? Then all you have to do is plant the tree. Or maybe grow it from a conker.' And with a cruel laugh, he was gone.

A boiling wave of pure rage washed through me from top to toe. It was bad enough that Mum and Dad had so utterly dashed my hopes of a tree house. It was tragic that I'd been crying under my bed for what seemed like days. And what did my darling brother do? Twist the knife.

I crawled out from under the bed and jumped up, seething. I flung Stinker and Funky on the bed. Monkeys couldn't help at a time like this. It was up to me. I had to turn myself into a lean mean killing machine.

Joe and I often have fights, and I have to admit that so far it's Joe 299, Ruby nil. But I still attack him occasionally when he's been even more vile than usual. And this was one of those moments.

I burst out of my room. Joe was on the landing, holding a comic. I hurled myself at him, but he ducked sideways, jumped into the bathroom and locked the door.

'Temper, temper!' he jeered from within. He can whip me up into a white-hot fury. Suddenly I realised it was a waste of time waiting for him to come out of the bathroom and then attacking him. He'd only hit me back twice as hard.

I longed to drop something disgusting on his head. But there's never a carrier bag of sick around when you need one.

Wait! His bedroom was right there, at my mercy. I rushed in. His little art installation model thingies were everywhere. One was a model of a boat, designed to look like a bird. He'd spent ages on

it. It had an eagle's head on the front, and along the side, instead of rows of oars, it had sort of wings

~~'Stupid Schoolgirl Gets Stuck in Tree House!'~~ Joe's voice called again, in a newspaper headline voice, from the safety of the bathroom – mocking, taunting. 'Fire Brigade Called. "I'll Never Leave Planet Earth Again," Sobbed the Tearful Tot.'

A wave of heat exploded in my tummy. I wanted to kill Joe. But he wasn't available. I brought my fist down on the bird boat and it splintered into pieces.

Instantly I felt sick. I felt sorry. The bird's neck had snapped and its head had fallen off. No matter how horrible Joe was, the little model itself looked sad and wrecked. It wasn't to blame. I backed off quickly and rushed back to my own room and hid in the wardrobe, my heart thudding.



How was I ever going to be a gangster? This was my first crime (not counting the sweets I stole from Harry Mills' lunchbox), and I felt totally limp and horror-struck with guilt. I was going to have to toughen up, no question. Here I was, in a terrible state, and I'd only attacked a piece of wood.

Eventually I heard Joe come out of the bathroom and go into his room. There was a kind of pause when he must have seen what I'd done. I cringed in horror and ate a mouthful of my own winter coat. I knew he'd find me in the wardrobe in about three seconds flat.

His bedroom door burst open and I heard him storm out. My bedroom door burst open and I heard him storm in. I cringed so hard, my entire body shrank to the size of a two-year-old. Even Joe wouldn't lay a finger on a toddler, surely. But Joe didn't open the wardrobe door.

I heard a thump and a thud and a sort of scuffling noise, and after a moment he went out again and slammed my door. I waited in dreadful suspense. What had he done? Was he coming back for a second attack? Would he hit me this time?

I heard loud nasty music start up in his room. Phew! It seemed his raid was over. Gingerly, I ventured out to survey the damage. The first thing I saw was some wild red writing scrawled all over my dressing-table mirror. It read: *Ruby Rogers is a waste of space.*

Then I saw something ten times worse! Ohmigawd! Stinker's head had been pulled right off! It just lay there on the bed, staring at me, miles away from his poor bald fat old bod!

I was just about to burst into tears, when above the sound of Joe's music, I heard Mum's voice down in the hall.

'Ruby! It's Yasmin on the phone!'

I raced downstairs. Yasmin's my best friend. Everything was kind of hectic today. Whatever next?

'Ruby! Listen!' said Yasmin. 'Guess who my sister brought home this afternoon? Holly Helvellyn!'

This was exciting! Holly Hellcat is a really weird girl who looks as if she might be our town's very own teenage witch.

‘Tell me more!’ I demanded. ‘What’s she like?’



‘She didn’t say much,’ said Yasmin. ‘But she’s coming back tomorrow. She and Zerrin have got a holiday job just across the road. She’s going to have lunch with us every day! Come over tomorrow and see for yourself!’

This was breathtaking. Holly Hellcat doing lunch at Yasmin’s? I decided not to waste time crying about Stinker’s head. I knew Mum would fix it back on, like she had when Joe had last ripped it off. I couldn’t even think about monkeys at a time like this.

OK, so my main monkey was temporarily headless and my tree house plan was in ruins, but tomorrow I would go to Yasmin’s and actually meet the amazing, the super cool, the fabulous Holly Helvellyn.



Chapter 5

She's so cooooool!

Next day I was over at Yasmin's like a shot. She lives in a town house near the city centre. On one side there's a car park. At the back they've got a huge garden with several really big trees. But we're not allowed to climb them. It's such a waste. One of Yasmin's uncles fell out of a tree once and broke his leg or something. And Yasmin's parents are quite strict about things like that.

Yasmin's more into dolls anyway. She's a bit clumsy, to be honest, and if she even *tried* to climb a tree, she'd probably end up with a branch up her jumper and a bird's nest on her head.

Yasmin's mum, Mrs Saffet, opened the door. She's beautiful, with black shiny shoulder-length hair. She always wears fabulous clothes. Today she was in a long grey dress and a billowing purple scarf. She is a big lady, though. If you were pretending to be her, you'd have to shove a whole pillow up your jumper.

'Ruby!' she cooed. She has a soft voice like a dove, and she says 'Ooooo!' quite a lot. 'Come in! Yasmin's just doing a liddle bit of tidying in her room. Go on up! Yasmin! Ruby's here!' (Yasmin's mum always says 'a liddle bit' of this and that. Perhaps it's because she's so big.)

I dived in, ducking under her enormous bosom, and ran upstairs. Yasmin's mum padded upstairs after me on her big velvety slippers. She has a study on the top floor where she works. She's a translator and she spends all day tapping away at her PC, surrounded by dictionaries.

Yasmin's bedroom door opened and Yasmin stood there grinning at me. She flung out her arms to hug me and banged her hand quite hard on the door.

'Ow! *Stinking Sickbags!*' she said, rubbing her hand. Yasmin swears quite a lot. I knew she wasn't hurt too badly, though, because her worst swear word of all is, '*Blood and Guts and Dog Muck!*'

Yasmin's room is cheerful and white, and has wonderful sparkly cushions and turquoise curtains and lovely mobiles hanging from the ceiling. My bedroom is basically a dump.

'Where's The Hellcat?' I whispered. Yasmin grinned.

'She and Zerrin have gone to work,' she said. 'They'll be back for lunch, though. She looks amazing! She's had another piercing – it's in her eyebrow. It's wicked!'

Yasmin and I had first noticed Holly Hellcat a few weeks ago in the park. A gang of us from our class were all playing cricket. It was a slightly insane version of cricket, with martial arts overtones. And suddenly this Vision in Black strolled up and sat down under a tree to watch us.

She was quite tall, with dyed black hair arranged in a strange off-centre kind of rocket shape on top of her head, and carrying a camera. She had about a zillion bracelets and six earrings at least in each ear. Oh, and loads of silver rings. Her make-up was straight out of a horror movie. Best of all I liked her lips: bright scarlet and shiny in the white mask of her face.

I was so distracted that for a moment I forgot to look out for the ball. It whizzed past my bat and the stumps flew everywhere.

'Out!' yelled the umpire. I didn't mind being out. Yasmin was out already. We spent the rest of the afternoon under a tree, watching the Vision in Black.

She was listening to her iPod. Sometimes she read a great big thick book with a picture of daggers on the front of it. Sometimes she wandered around and took photographs. And sometimes she watched the cricket in a distant, slightly mocking way.



Later Yasmin's big sister Zerrin told us she was a mate of hers from school and her name was Holly Helvellyn. So she had to be The Hellcat, obviously.

She's so cooooool! I thought. And today I was actually going to have lunch with her!

'What's she like?' I asked.

'She's quite nice really,' said Yasmin. I felt a bit disappointed. 'She said, "Hi, how are you Yasmin?" this morning and smiled at me. They'll be back at lunchtime. You can see for yourself.'

I couldn't wait for lunchtime. I helped Yasmin tidy her room. We even arranged all Yasmin's dolls in rows.

'Wanna play snakes and ladders?' asked Yasmin.

'Couldn't we play gangsters?' I asked. Yasmin frowned.

'Last time we played gangsters my mum was cross afterwards,' she said, 'because of the dolls being thrown about everywhere and the curtains being on the floor.'

'Look, it was a major crime scene,' I said. 'You can't use explosives without making a bit of mess. OK, a few guys got hurt,' I started to drift into my gangster voice, 'but they was askin' for trouble. They was Big Al's henchmen.'

'I was the one who had to tidy up afterwards,' said Yasmin, pulling her stropy face. She has a fiery temper and I try to avoid stirring her up.

We played Snakes and Ladders. After a while, she had a run of luck, went soaring up the biggest ladder and stopped frowning.

At last Yasmin's mum came down from her study. She stuck her head round the door and admired the room.

'Oooo, lovely!' she cooed. 'I've never seen Yasmin's room look so tidy! It's a total make-over! Thanks for helping, Ruby! There'll be a liddle bit of lunch in ten minutes.'

Then she went off downstairs and soon a yummy smell of soup came wafting up. We heard the front door slam and girls' voices downstairs. Zerrin and The Hellcat were back!



Chapter 6

Don't mess with him, babe!

We bounded downstairs and ran into the kitchen.

'Hi, Ruby!' said Zerrin with a charming smile. She is so nice. Amazingly pretty, with the family hair: long, black and shiny. Her teeth stick out a little bit, but she's got a brace at the moment so that will be sorted. I love it when she shakes her long hair about. My own hair is what Joe calls 'mousy rats' tails'.

The Hellcat looked at me and smiled. Her lips were redder than ever.

'This is Holly,' said Zerrin graciously. Although she's very shy and gentle, she's always polite. 'Holly, this is Yasmin's friend Ruby.'

'Hi,' said Holly. Now she really looked *amazing*. She had the usual white face and red lips, and she was wearing a black lacy top that looked like a spider's web, and a purple velvet skirt.

'Hi,' I said, and – stupidly – blushed. It was like being introduced to the Queen or something. Up close, I could see that one of her rings was in the shape of a skull. Somehow I felt she ought to be living in a high tower overlooking a spooky lake, not sitting down at Yasmin's kitchen table and saying she was 'absolutely starving'.

The soup was great. Zerrin and Holly told us all about their new job packing airline meals.

'God, it's exciting!' said Holly sarcastically. 'I'm so tempted to snack on the little bits of cheese. And we get to wear these fabulous protective clothes – shower caps and white coats. So Ralph Lauren!'

I had somehow imagined Holly would be rather grand and silent, and not say much. But once she started chatting, she barely stopped for breath. Even Yasmin's mum couldn't compete.

'Your brother's going to art school, right?' she said, suddenly looking straight at me. I almost choked on my soup.

'My brother?'

'Joe Rogers is your brother, isn't he?' asked Holly.

'Yes,' I admitted, my heart sinking. Joe is so awful I really didn't want people to know we're related.

'Holly worships Joe,' said Zerrin with a sly grin. 'What with him being in the sixth form and all that.' 'Everything.'

'He's a legend,' said Holly. I was shocked. They had clearly never smelt his socks. 'How old is he?' Holly asked.

'Seventeen,' I said. It sounded so terribly, terribly old.

'When's his birthday?' asked Zerrin with a giggle.

'May 15th. Just a couple of months ago.' Holly and Zerrin exchanged a strange smile.

'I told you!' said Zerrin. 'He's a Taurus!'

'Wow!' Holly raised one of her perfect eyebrows. 'A bull! Watch out! Don't mess with him, babe! You could end up being gored!' They laughed again. In fact, they went into giggle overdrive.

'Steady on!' said Yasmin's mum, collecting the soup dishes. 'Don't get hysterical. It could lead to indigestion. My uncle Sultan was laughing at a joke once, and he choked on an almond and nearly died.'

Everybody went a bit quiet at this story. I just hoped there weren't any almonds for pudding. It was nut-free, thank goodness: fruit salad.

'Now you girls can relax,' said Mrs Saffet, 'because you've had your five pieces of fruit and vegetables for the day.'

'I could eat fruit all day,' said Holly. 'I so adore it! I'm going to be a monkey when I grow up.'

Everybody laughed. I could hardly believe it. A monkey! We were obviously soulmates. She could certainly join my gang up in the canopy.

'Zerrin's going to be an astrologer when she leaves school,' said Yasmin.

'Oh, wow!' I said.

'Well, actually, of course, I'm going to do business studies,' said Zerrin in a sensible voice. 'But I'm going to do people's charts in my spare time.'

'Zerrin can tell what sign people are just by looking at them,' said Yasmin.

'Really?' I said. 'How amazing! What sign am I, then?'

Zerrin looked at me and frowned a bit, as if she was trying to read my mind. Holly watched, fascinated.



'I can't always do it,' said Zerrin, tossing her long black hair back off her face. 'But I think you're either a Gemini or a Leo. Yes?'

'Wow!' I said, astonished. 'Yes! You did it! I'm a Leo. In fact, my birthday's in two weeks' time.'

'What are you going to get for your birthday?' asked Holly. 'Or is it a surprise?'

Suddenly I felt a little bit sad, even though Yasmin's kitchen was so bright and sunny and cheerful.

'I wanted a tree house,' I said. 'But my parents said no.'

'Harsh,' said Holly. 'Never mind. The same thing happened to me. I wanted a pet iguana, and my parents said no. But I'm going to get one anyway. That's why I've got this job. I'm saving up for a pet iguana.'

'Can we have an iguana, Mum?' asked Yasmin.

'NO!' said Yasmin's mum, laughing. 'You know the rules. No animals in the house. Not even a little tiny one.'

'Apart from Dad, of course,' said Zerrin. We all laughed. Dads are rather animal-like sometimes. I'm a bit afraid of Yasmin's dad, to be honest. It's his moustache. But he's also quite strict. Thank goodness he was out at work. He's rich. He sells fitted kitchens (which is one reason why Yasmin's kitchen is so beautiful). My dad is a bit of a wimp compared to Yasmin's dad, but I wouldn't swap them for anything.

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