

ONE

Caecilius

Last thing every night, I lie in bed and gaze at a grey face with big, white eyes and tiny pupils, a face with a black line for a mouth which stretches left to right like an equator, a face that has arms and legs. This is my twin. Or at least a substitute for my twin.

I got my Uglydoll when I was seven and my parents moved me into a room of my own. Till then, I'd shared with Jack, my older brother by six-and-a-half minutes. Because Jack's in a class above me at school, people think he's just my brother. My parents have won. They always wanted us to be 'individuals'.

At first, I needed Uggs to see another face before I fell asleep. Now he's like a friend. The night Mark and I got together, I hugged him so tightly I'd have killed him if he'd been real. Actually, he *is* real. To me. The night my friend, Alex, had a baby, I soaked him in tears – it was also the night our friend, Shane, died, leaving Sarah behind, a widow at seventeen. That was two weeks ago. Sometimes it feels like two minutes. Sometimes two years.

Tonight, I stretch Uggs's tiny arms across his non-existent tummy and try to join them together. I make it only because he's a flexible, little guy. I close my eyes and make a wish. That Alex and Sarah will be OK. I make another wish. For myself. Tomorrow, at drama class, I'll hear the outcome of an audition I did for this really



popular soap, *Eagle Crescent*. My drama teacher, Charley, who is also my agent, has this thing about discipline. She does not call us with the results of auditions. Even if we get a part. She waits to tell us at drama class. She says, 'we need to have rhino hide in this business'. I don't think it's possible to create rhino hide. You either have it or you don't. I'm not a rhino.

Charley (think Edna Mode from *The Incredibles* but tone it down a bit; she's Irish) calls me back after drama class.

'I've good news and bad news,' she says cheerfully. 'Which do you want first?'

'Bad news.'

She smiles like she knows me. She does. I've been coming here since I was four.

'You didn't get the part in *Eagle Crescent*.'

I close my eyes. There is no good news.

'But,' she says. Then stops dramatically. So Charley.

I open my eyes.

'You did get a small part in *D4*.'

'What? How?' *D4* is a medical drama. That I never auditioned for.

'The casting agent interviewed you last year for that play, *Break Even*. She's moved to *D4*. She remembered you.'

'Wow.' My mind is racing. No one I know watches *D4* but it's still TV. And my first ever part. Yaay.

'You're to play a trouble-maker.'

I'm smiling.

'You have to come between a couple.'

'You mean split them up?' I ask enthusiastically.

'I'm not sure yet if you actually split them up.'



I so hope I do. That's what I love about acting. You get to do things you'd never do in real life. 'When do I start?'

'Monday.'

'Next Monday?'

She looks a bit guilty. 'Someone else backed out.'

'Their loss.'

She smiles. 'That's the spirit.'

It's a dream come true, a dream I've held since I was four.

'It's a small part, Rachel, but if you play it right, it could lead to bigger things.'

'I'll play it right.'

First thing I do is go straight to Alex's house, where she and Sarah have been spending all their time since, well, since two weeks ago. I'd be spending all my time there too, if it wasn't for school.

I don't tell them straight away. Because when I get there, it hits me how small my news is compared to what's going on in their lives. We go up to Alex's room, which is more like a nursery now. There's all this colour. Bright greens, reds, oranges, yellows. A wall-lamp like the sun. Loads of cuddly toys. A cot that's too big for Maggie. And inside the cot, Maggie's Moses basket.

Sarah is holding Maggie. She kisses Maggie's forehead and passes her to me. (We have this rule that whoever arrives, gets to hold Maggie.) Maggie is Alex's baby but it feels like she belongs to all of us. We each have a job: Alex, mum. Sarah, aunt. Me, godmother. She's only two weeks old, but already Maggie is one of us. I look down at her now and fall in love with her all



over again. Happens every time I look at her. She has these hazy, Caribbean blue eyes that gaze up at you like you're the only person in the world. Everything about Maggie is innocent - the tiny creases under her eyes, her little eyebrows that have learned to frown already, her tiny rosebud lips that smile when you least expect or purse for no obvious reason, her little pointy chin, her tiny, expressive hands and, most of all, her gums. I never want her to get teeth.

I sit on the bed, loving the weight of her in my arms. Sarah sits on the floor. She picks up an orange llama, brings it right up to her face and says: 'Hello.'

She's wearing Shane's hat, the one with the flaps that hang down over her ears. She never takes it off. It makes me want to hug her. Constantly.

Alex, smelling the tiny babygros she's putting away, stops for a moment to ask me how drama went. So I tell them about the part. How small it is. How it's nothing to get excited about.

'Oh, my God!' Sarah says so loudly that Maggie jumps in my arms. 'That's amazing.' She drops the llama, hurries over and hugs me. And Maggie. (We're a package.)

'Go you,' Alex says, smiling.

'When do you start?' Sarah asks.

'Monday.'

'Really? That soon?'

I shrug. 'Someone else backed out at the last minute and I got the part.'

'Their loss.'

I smile. 'That's what I said.'

'Have they given you a script?' Sarah asks.

'Yeah but I've just one line.'

'What is it?' they ask together.



'Have you got a light?'

We laugh.

'Right, well, when you get some lines, we're rehearsing,' Sarah says. Since Shane died, it's like she's on this quest. To live till she dies. It was Shane's last wish. And she is fulfilling it, embracing every, little, thing. Always talking, always moving. Always living.

I think she might be expecting too much from my little part. So I remind her it *is* little.

'Yeah but you'll make it big,' Alex says.

And though I smile - because becoming a mum has given her all this authority - I so want to believe that she's right.

When I get home, the smell of baking fills the hall. I drop my bag and go straight to the kitchen. There are buns in the oven and Mum's kneading dough.

'Did you get a job?' I ask hopefully. Mum runs her own catering business. It's been a bit quiet lately. Not that this is, like, a major problem - Dad's a well-known barrister who gets almost too much work - she's just happiest when she's cooking for people.

'No. This is for us.'

I pick up the bowl by the sink that she used to make the buns. I skim the inside with my finger and stick it in my mouth. I lean against the worktop. I've always loved watching her bake.

'How was drama?' she asks.

'Good.' I enjoy the moment before telling her because I know she'll be excited. 'I got a part in *D4*,' I say casually.

'What? Are you *kidding*?' She yanks her hands out of the gooey dough, squeezes me to (almost) death,



then pulls back and punches me gently just below the shoulder. 'We'll have to celebrate.'

This probably means cake.

She puts the dough aside to rise and checks the clock on the oven. 'You're late,' she says questioningly.

'I called to see Alex.'

A look of concern crosses her face. 'How are they doing?' she asks, knowing that Sarah's practically living there now.

'They're great, Mum. It's Maggie. She's so amazing.' It was Maggie who got Sarah out of bed after Shane died. Maggie who got her moving. Maggie who gave her someone else to love.

'Must be hard on Alex, being a mum, without her own mum around.' Alex's mum died, two years ago.

'Her dad's great, though. And Jane, the nanny, is so good.' Three days after Maggie was born, Alex kind of lost it. She didn't think she could do it. She was so scared. And depressed. As soon as she got out of hospital, though, Jane took over, made her sleep. Showed her how to feed Maggie. Showed her that, with a bit of rest and confidence, she could be a good mum.

'So! Tell me all about *D4*,' Mum says. She asks a string of questions that I don't know the answers to. Like who'll meet me when I get there on Monday? How many hours a week will I be working? Will I get a schedule?

'I'll give Charley a call,' she says. She washes her hands and reaches for the phone. 'Would you set the table, pet?'

Though tempted, I don't groan.

Mum gets through, almost immediately. Question. Silence. Question. Silence. Then her voice goes all firm. I stop putting knives and forks on the table.

'Rachel's in Fifth Year, Charley. I don't want her



losing whole days at school for a minor part. They need to understand that.'

I hurry over and start waving my hands to get her to stop. Charley's doing her best. She always does. Mum puts her head down and turns her back on me. They talk some more. Then she hangs up.

'Mum, I can handle this,' I say. 'I'll work so hard. I won't fall behind. I'll . . .'

'I know you will, Rachel. I just don't want you under any unnecessary pressure.'

I look at her. I know what she's thinking about. But that was years ago. 'I can take pressure.'

'I know you can.'

'OK,' I say, looking her in the eye, to make sure she does.

After dinner, the doorbell rings.

'That must be Mark,' Mum says to me.

I get up and put my plate in the dishwasher.

'Don't keep him waiting,' she says.

Dad rolls his eyes.

After the first time Mum met Mark, she said to me: 'Go out with him. He's good for you.'

'I am, Mum,' I said.

'Good.'

'Why?'

'He makes you laugh.'

She is so in love with him that when he comes in to the house, it takes ages to get back out. I've told him to text when he's outside. He always forgets.

I open the door and burst into a smile. He has that effect.



'Caecilius est in horto,' he says in all his gorgeousness.

'Caecilius is in . . .' *horto? Horticulture? . . . the garden?*

I guess.

He smiles. 'Caecilius is in the garden. Now let him in before he freezes his balls off.'

We have this thing where I have to try to work out something he says in Latin - usually about his hero, Caecilius, a real-life, slave-turned-master who was killed in Pompeii. Mark has worshipped him since First Year. He's loyal like that.

Caecilius hurries inside and gives me a kiss with cold lips. God, I love cold lips. As long as they're his.

'Mark, is that you?' Mum calls from the kitchen.

We look at each other and smile.

She appears at the door to the kitchen. 'You can't go without some of my biscuit cake.'

I widen my eyes at him - as in, *let's go*.

He widens his back - *can't be rude*. When really, he just loves her cooking. His mum's a diplomat and is out a lot. He told me once that the smell of baking makes him happy. He follows Mum into the kitchen like she's the Pied Piper. Dad looks at me from behind a newspaper and shakes his head sadly. I smile.

I sit opposite Mark, drumming my fingers and giving him hurry-up vibes. He looks so cute, though, like a little kid. I feel like tying a napkin around his neck and giving him a glass of milk. Mum calls out the recipe for biscuit cake to him. As if he'll actually go cook something himself. She glances at me like I should be doing this, fussing over him. I worry about her.

When I finally manage to get him out the door, he's biting into a second slice of cake. He catches me looking and holds it out.



'Bite?'

'No, Caecilius.'

He smiles and bleeps his car open. I love Millie, a black VW golf, currently (and mostly always) covered in dust with a bumper sticker that says, 'Meh'. Millie is the one place we can be alone – without anyone walking in.

He holds the cake between his teeth as he starts the engine, then he pulls away. I love watching him drive. It's the only time I get to see him frown, well, apart from when he's reading. I pretend he's moody and mysterious. Possibly French.

He goes through an orange light.

'Fuck the system,' he says.

I laugh and turn to him. 'Why did you do Latin, anyway?'

He shrugs. 'There was a trip to Rome.' So Mark.

'Why didn't you give it up after the trip?'

'I liked it,' he says simply.

'Kind of useless, though, isn't it?'

He looks at me, an eyebrow up. 'Tell me one useful thing we do in school.'

'Leave.'

He points at me. 'Exactly.'

Really, though, I love the way he loves Latin. He's a Roman at heart. I look at his profile and picture him in a chariot, reins in hand, shouting whatever Romans shouted at their horses. I imagine women throwing flowers and crowds screaming his name. Marcus Delaneyus.

We drive up into the mountains, listening to his weird taste in music. 'God Save The Queen' by The Sex Pistols. The Sex Pistols were huge – in the last century. I don't



mind most of the punk stuff he listens to. It's actually kind of funny. 'God Save The Queen' is just bad, though. I skip to 'Gordon is a Moron' by Jilted John. Which always makes me smile.

Mark changes it back.

'Hey!' I reach out to change it again.

He play-slaps me away. 'My car, my music.' He starts jerking his entire upper body in time to the song.

I shout-sing 'Gordon is a Moron'. My favourite bit: 'Yeah, yeah, s'not fair. Yeah, yeah, s'not fair.'

He covers my mouth with his hand.

I bite his fingers.

He pulls back, laughing. 'Jesus.'

'That's what happens when you cover someone's mouth. Remember that.'

He's still laughing when we pull into the car park. The city lights twinkle, down below. I look around. There are two other cars here, windows fogged up. Otherwise there's no one around. I think of possible serial killers lurking in bushes. I lock the doors.

'It's OK. I'll protect you,' he says in a macho voice. 'I know karate.' He starts to climb into the back.

'Where you going?'

'Hang on.'

After rooting around, he climbs back in front. He's carrying something. He hands it to me. Oh, my God. It's a present. Gift-wrapped and everything.

'Wow. What is it? Is it like a congratulations present?'

'Open it.' He turns on the light.

I rip off the wrapping. It's a book. *Macbeth*. I look at him. We got together acting in *Macbeth* at school. *Exactly a year ago*. I can't believe he remembered. And I didn't.

I want to find the line he said to me just before he



kissed me for the very first time. I know it's corny but I want to read it out. When I open the book, though, I can't find any line. He's cut a square through the pages, the way people do when smuggling guns into prisons. Inside is a little box. I look at him in amazement, then take out the box and slowly open it. Inside is a charm bracelet. The charms: acting masks, a little turquoise heart and a butterfly.

I look at him. 'I love it.' I try to put it on but he has to help. I hold it up to the light. 'It's beautiful.'

He smiles, like he's glad he got it right.

And he did. He got it so right. I lean over and kiss him.

'I'll get you something tomorrow. I'll go to Dundrum.'

'I'm grand. I don't want anything.'

'Yeah, well, I'll get you something anyway, *sweetie*.' I say *sweetie* in an American accent, the way Angela from *Bones* says it. It's kind of a thing we do.

He smiles. 'Well done on today.' He pauses, then looks into my eyes. 'You're great, you know that?' he says, hoarsely.

My heart stops. Because this is so not like him. *Oh, my God, could this be it, the moment he tells me he loves me?*

'I'll go in with you,' he says.

'What?'

'On Monday. I'll go in with you to the TV studio.'

'Oh.' I try to hide my disappointment. 'I don't think you can. Only the cast are allowed on set.'

'Oooh. Look at you, sounding all actory all of a sudden,' he smiles.

I smile back and tell myself it's still the most perfect moment. I know he loves me. He doesn't have to say it.