

CHAPTER 1

There was a boy in the window across from hers – a boy she'd never seen before.

Esme was lounging on her bed, her eyes glued to her laptop screen, when she saw movement in the corner of her vision: a curtain being pulled open. She glanced out of her window to the house directly beside hers, and that's when she saw him.

The boy had tan skin and dark hair swept up stylishly at the front. She couldn't quite see his eyes from that distance, but she guessed they might be green. He was far too cute to be a new neighbour. Esme was never that lucky.

She blinked a couple times. Was she imagining him? Had she fallen asleep at her computer again? She instinctively brushed her hair behind her ear.

The house beside Esme's had been empty for as long as she could remember, and the only thing she had ever seen through that window was the back of an ugly beige cotton curtain.

Until now.



Clay pushed the curtains aside and his eyes fell on the girl in the opposite window. She had strawberry blonde hair that she kept in two pigtails, and lots of freckles on her polka-dot face. Her blue eyes were so sharp, he could see them even from here.

He saw her sit up suddenly, her lips parting in surprise. He also noticed her blue penguin pyjama bottoms and pink bunny slippers. He had to bite his lip to keep from smiling.

A moment of silence passed between them until Clay lifted his hand and waved. The girl waved back nervously. Then she forced her eyes back to her laptop and pretended she was busy with some important work.

Cute as his new neighbour was, Clay decided to leave her be. He turned away from the window and finally addressed the mountain of cardboard boxes filling up his new bedroom.

CHAPTER 2

After dinner, Clay fell onto his bed, eyes sweeping over his unfinished room. He'd made his way through half the boxes then gave up out of sheer laziness. He would do the rest tomorrow.

His gaze went to the window again and he thought of the girl he'd seen earlier – wondered what she was up to, if she was perhaps thinking of him in return – but the pale pink satin curtains in the window opposite were now closed. He felt a twinge of disappointment.



Esme selected a more flattering pair of pyjamas – plain pink with no animals on – and changed into them. She kept glancing back to her curtains, wondering if the boy was still waiting on the other side. The sight of him had frightened her at first after sixteen years of staring at beige curtains, but now she was merely curious about her new neighbour.

She crept over to the window as though afraid that louder steps might be heard over in the other house, and slowly peeked out.

His curtains were still drawn back, and she could see into his now semi-furnished bedroom. There was a Star Wars poster on the wall and a bookshelf bearing several action figures all in a row. The boy was there on his bed, scrolling through his phone.

He glanced up and Esme jumped back, letting go of the curtain. She waited ten seconds, then ten more, then another five, before she took another peek. The boy's eyes had returned to his phone and stayed there. Esme dared to open the curtain a little wider.

The boy looked up again and they made eye contact for the second time that day.



The girl didn't disappear this time. She stared back at Clay with eyebrows raised. He got up from his bed, tempted to open the window and call out to her, but he could see that she was shy, so he decided to try a different tactic.

He grabbed his spiral notebook out of his backpack and flipped to a blank page, making the girl lean forward with curiosity. Clay took a marker from his pencil case and wrote in big letters:

#1!

He sat on the end of his bed and held the notebook up to the window.

The girl finally caught on, a smile caressing her face. She drew her curtains right back then retrieved her own notebook and a pen to go with it.

She began to write.

CHAPTER 3

Hi!

Hello

I'm Clay

I'm Esme. Are you a burglar?

No, I just moved in.

A likely story

I'm *unpacking* items, not stealing them.

Good point

Do you go to the public high school here in town?

No

Oh. So private then?

There was a pause. Esme bit her lip, pen hovering above the paper. Clay waited patiently for her response.

Yeah

Oh. I start at the public school tomorrow.

Cool. Hope it goes well.

Thanks. So how long have you lived here?

My whole life

Cool. I only just moved in.

Yeah, I know.

Right. Of course...

Clay paused, glancing back at Esme, taking note of the way she pushed her hair behind her ear.

Do you want to hang out sometime?

Another pause. Esme frowned.

I have to go. Mum's calling me.

She closed her notebook and the curtains followed suit.

Clay watched the window a little longer, waiting for Esme to return. A moment later, the lights in her bedroom flicked off.

CHAPTER 4

After school, Clay chucked his backpack into the corner of his room and collapsed onto the bed with a sigh. He lay there for several minutes before finally allowing himself a glimpse of the window.

In the house next door, Esme was on her laptop again, making a start on her homework, but a faint knocking from outside distracted her. She looked up to see another note held against the window opposite, and a faint smile tugged rebelliously at her lips. She slid off her bed and moved closer to read it.

Hey

Esme's smile grew as she grabbed her spare notebook and wrote back.

Hey. How was your first day?

Terrible. Math teacher called me stupid straight to my face.

Sheesh! That's harsh :O

Tell me about it. And no friends yet either :(

Aww. Well I'm sure you'll find some soon :)

Do you have a lot of friends?

Esme's smile faded. She fiddled with her pen.

Yeah. Just a few.

Cool. What are their names?

Another pause.

Sorry but I really need to get this homework done. Can we talk later?

Oh, okay. Bye

Bye

Esme turned away from the window, closing the curtains behind her.

CHAPTER 5

As they sat at the dining table for dinner, Esme's mother asked, "Have you met the new neighbours yet?"

Esme presumed she was talking to her father who grumbled, "Met them? He scratched my car!"

"What? How?"

"I was reversing out of the driveway this morning and the kid from next door had just hopped on his bike. Didn't bother to look, of course! Just started riding and as I passed the hedges, he ran right into my side!"

Esme glanced up from her meal. "Was he okay?" She wondered why Clay hadn't mentioned this earlier.

"Oh, the kid was fine," Dad said dismissively, "but now I've got a big dirty scratch down the side of *my* Porsche that *I* have to get fixed because *he* wasn't paying attention."

"You should make the kid pay for it," Mum said. "Or his parents, at least."

Dad shook his head. "Tried that. I went to speak with them after work. The father wasn't home, but the mother was, and she refused to take responsibility. I asked her to bring her son down to speak with me, but she wouldn't allow that either! Said that road rules state that the driver should always be aware of pedestrians and cyclists, not the other way around. Stubborn cow."

Mum nodded eagerly. "I went over to say hello today and she was just as rude to me. Didn't apologise about the state of her house and said she couldn't talk long because she had 'places to be'. She was practically shoving me out the door! And I know why the husband wasn't home, it's because he doesn't live there. I asked about him and she went all quiet then said it was 'just her and her boy'. Divorced, I imagine. No wonder with manners like hers. I made her a casserole as a welcome gift, and you should have seen her face when I handed it over! As if I'd given her an eviction notice! She even tried to hand it back! I mean, who tries to give *back* a casserole?"

"Total loons, the both of them," he agreed. "I liked it better when the house was empty."

Esme sat quietly in the middle, her ears burning with every harsh word she heard. She should have kept her mouth shut but she decided to interject.

“I spoke to the boy, and he seemed alright to me,” she said.

Esme’s parents looked up in surprise as though having just remembered she was there. Their eyebrows furrowed.

“When did you speak to him?” Mum asked.

“Last night, and after school today. Through my bedroom window. He was writing notes to me, so I wrote some back.”

Her mother’s lips pursed. Her father’s face became stern.

“I’d rather you didn’t talk to that boy,” he said. “I saw the direction he was riding in. He goes to that public school on the east side. You don’t want to mix with kids like that.”

“Yes, and if his mother doesn’t have manners then he can’t have been taught many either,” Mum added. “Best to stay away from boys like that. They cause trouble.”

Esme wanted to say more. She wanted to disagree with them both and ask if they were perhaps overreacting. But she didn’t. She just nodded and returned to her meal in silence.

The TV blared in the living room as Clay sat with his mother on the sofa, watching reruns, his knees up to keep his plate balanced. Mamá's eyes were purple with fatigue and her hair was in need of a brush, but she didn't seem to mind. She still chuckled along with the laugh-track on the TV.

"How did the job-hunting go?" Clay asked as the commercial break started.

"Oh, it was fine," Mamá replied in her usual carefree manner. "There are a few housekeeping jobs available, some gardening, babysitting, and one secretarial position. I applied for everything but I'm hoping for the secretary job. I've done enough housekeeping in my time. I'd like to go up in the world, even if just a little. Sitting at a desk for once instead of changing bedsheets. Much more sophisticated. You won't even know me then. I'll be a whole new person."

She winked at him, and Clay smiled.

"Maybe we'll even put the table together tomorrow so we can eat there instead of on the sofa," he said. But he was only joking because even when they did have a table, they always preferred to sit in the living room and watch TV.

She smiled back but it didn't last long. Her tired eyes drifted back down to her plate as she said, "The neighbours came round today."

Clay's focus shifted away from the TV. Had Esme been over while he was at school? Wait, no, she would have been at school too...

"What are they like?" he asked.

"They... might take some getting used to. The wife seemed okay. She was trying to be nice, I think. This was her casserole," she answered, gesturing to their plates. "But you know I don't like gifts. I tried to give it back, but she refused to take it – a little aggressively, I might add. She's incredibly stubborn."

Not unlike you, Clay thought, having expected this. Mamá hated charity. She preferred to do things for herself.

“But she was looking at the house as if it were a dumpster,” Mamá continued. “Of course it isn’t clean! It’s been empty for sixteen years! That’s why it was so cheap. The walls need repainting. The floors need polishing. I haven’t finished washing everything down yet because I can’t do that *and* look for a job at the same time. I haven’t finished unpacking. We still have furniture to put together. I mean, what did she expect? A five-star hotel? And the husband... *oof*.” She grimaced as though no matter how much she disliked the wife, she could still feel sympathy for her now that she knew who she lived with. That part came from experience. “He has a nasty temper that one. So fired up about his little car.”

It was Clay’s turn to grimace now. “I’m really sorry about that. It was an accident. I couldn’t see anything past those hedges. They’re too big.”

Mamá patted his knee. “I know, *nene*, that’s why I don’t blame you. So long as you said you were sorry, that’s all there is to it. If he can afford a car like that, he can afford to fix it. We can’t. And besides, road rules state—”

“—that the driver should always be aware of pedestrians. Yes, I know. I heard you shouting.”

“Good. So if he tries cornering you about it, you tell him that.”

Clay nodded as he chewed then swallowed. His food suddenly lost all flavour.

“Did you know they have a daughter?” he asked.

Mamá shook her head. “I didn’t see one.”

“Her bedroom is right across from mine. I can see her through the window. She seems nice. Very shy.”

“No wonder with parents like hers. I imagine she barely gets a word in, poor girl. Anyway, that was my day, but what about yours? How was school?”

Clay put his fork down, no longer hungry. “It was fine. The people are nice, I guess.”

Mamá smiled encouragingly then went quiet as the current commercial break ended and the show came back on.

He was usually very open with his mother – had been ever since Dad left – but there were some things he chose to keep to himself. She worried enough. He didn’t want to make it worse.

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