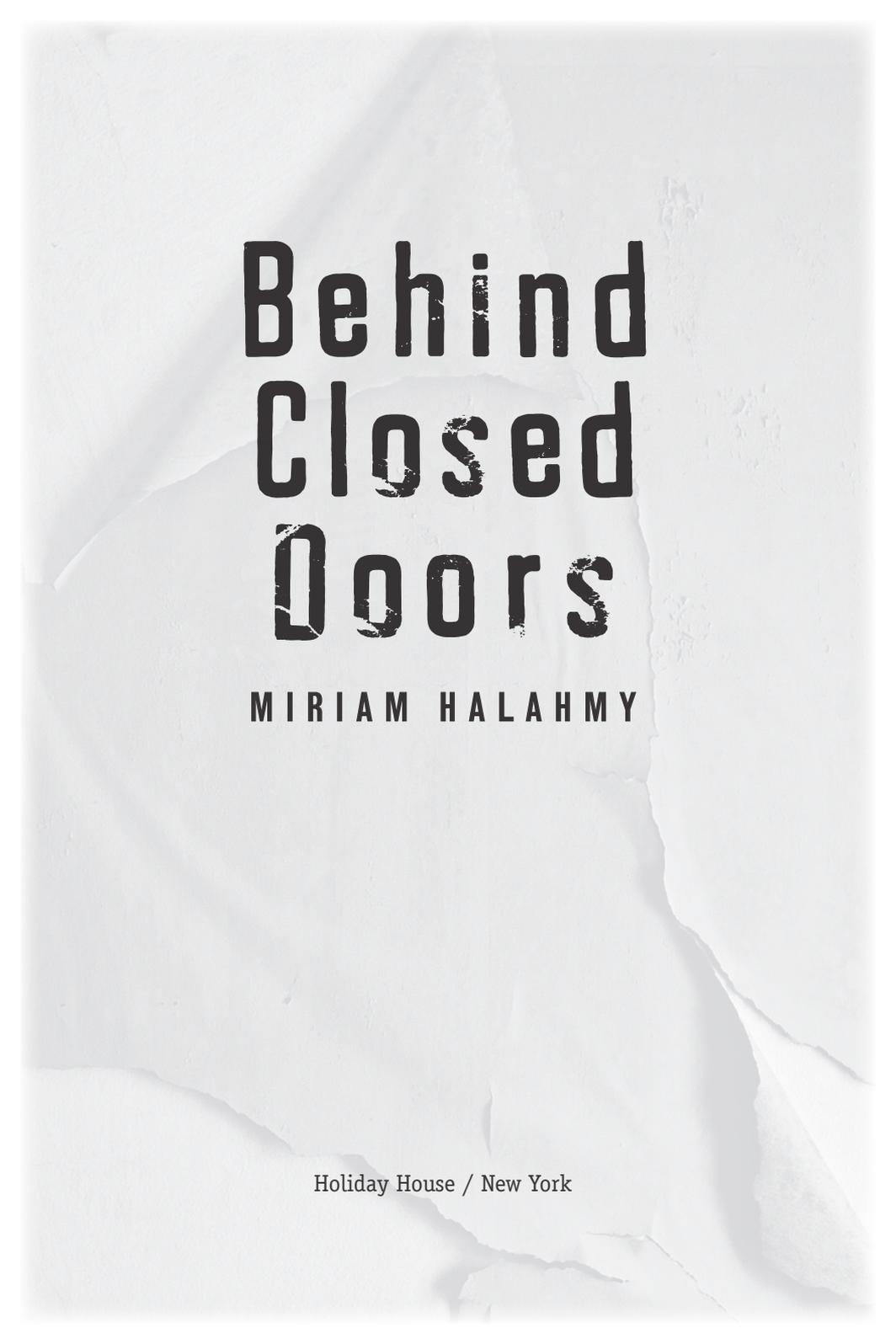


Behind Closed Doors



Behind Closed Doors

MIRIAM HALAHMY

Holiday House / New York

Copyright © 2017 by Miriam Halahmy
All Rights Reserved

HOLIDAY HOUSE is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Printed and Bound in March 2017 at Maple Press, York, PA, USA.

www.holidayhouse.com

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Halahmy, Miriam, author.

Title: Behind closed doors / by Miriam Halahmy.

Description: First edition. | New York : Holiday House, [2016] | Summary:

In alternating chapters, teens Tasha and Josie tell how each becomes temporarily homeless and how they find strength and friendship together as they try to regain control of their lives.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015040847 | ISBN 9780823436415 (hardcover)

Subjects: | CYAC: Homeless persons—Fiction. | Family problems—Fiction. |

Mothers and daughters—Fiction. | Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. |

Friendship—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.H12825 Beh 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23 LC record available at

<https://lcn.loc.gov/2015040847>

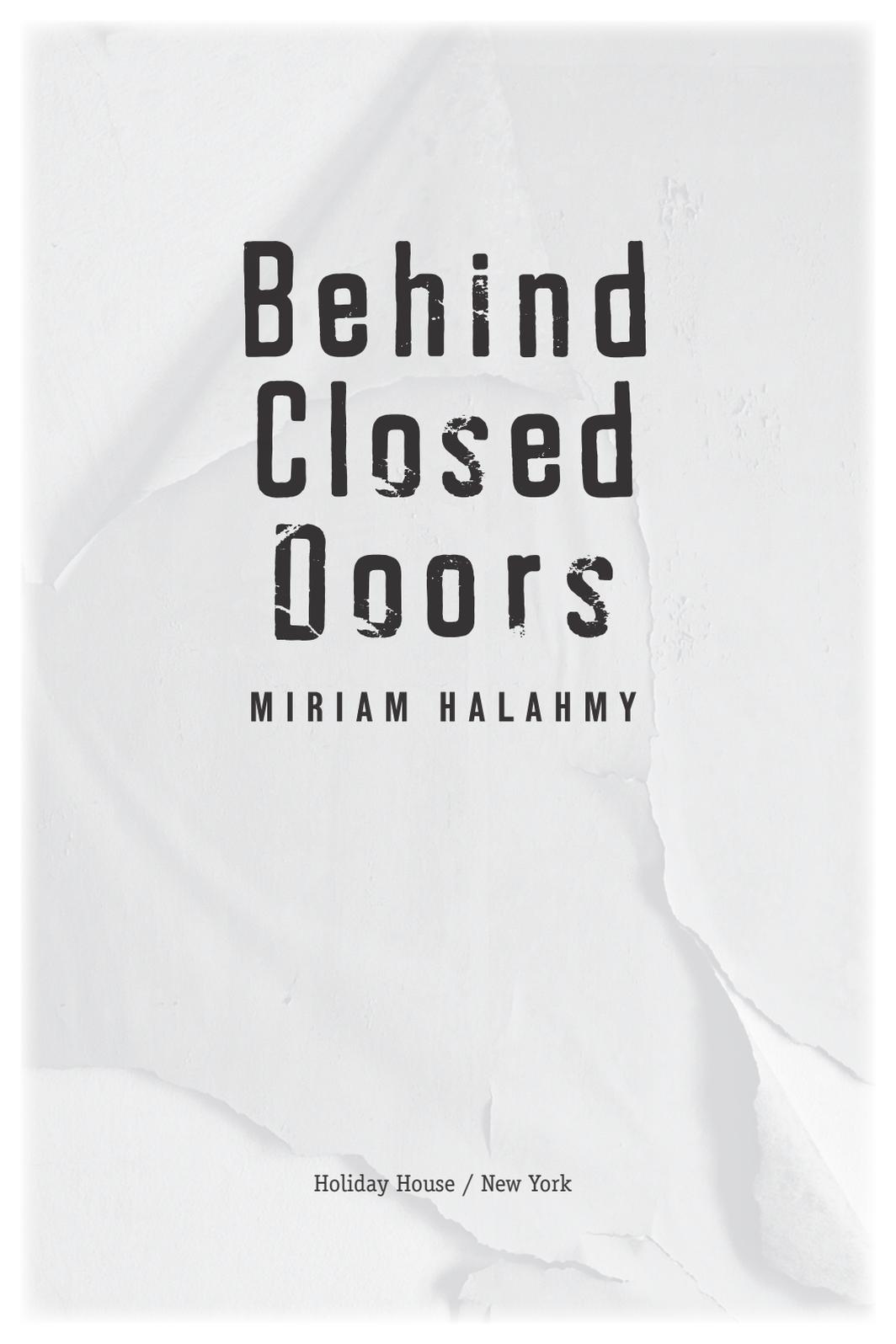
For all homeless young people who have
no safe place to sleep tonight

Home! Home! sweet, sweet home!
There's no place like home!
John Howard Payne, "Home, Sweet Home," 1827



Home is where we start from.
T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "East Coker"

Behind Closed Doors



Behind Closed Doors

MIRIAM HALAHMY

Holiday House / New York

Copyright © 2017 by Miriam Halahmy
All Rights Reserved

HOLIDAY HOUSE is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Printed and Bound in March 2017 at Maple Press, York, PA, USA.

www.holidayhouse.com

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Halahmy, Miriam, author.

Title: Behind closed doors / by Miriam Halahmy.

Description: First edition. | New York : Holiday House, [2016] | Summary:

In alternating chapters, teens Tasha and Josie tell how each becomes temporarily homeless and how they find strength and friendship together as they try to regain control of their lives.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015040847 | ISBN 9780823436415 (hardcover)

Subjects: | CYAC: Homeless persons—Fiction. | Family problems—Fiction. |

Mothers and daughters—Fiction. | Dating (Social customs)—Fiction. |

Friendship—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.H12825 Beh 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23 LC record available at

<https://lcn.loc.gov/2015040847>

For all homeless young people who have
no safe place to sleep tonight

Home! Home! sweet, sweet home!
There's no place like home!
John Howard Payne, "Home, Sweet Home," 1827



Home is where we start from.
T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "East Coker"

Behind Closed Doors

1. Josie

“Until I was ten years old, I thought everyone had Christmas in the bedroom.”

Shrieks all down the line at the bus stop.

Oh God!

I pull my earphones out. I’ve done it again. Spoken out loud when I’m listening to music. But everyone’s been talking about Christmas, and it’s only the first week in October. They’re driving me crazy.

“The bedroom?” says Tasha Brown, not looking up from her phone. “Like, how crazy weird is that?”

I duck my head and look around for the bus as I flush right down my neck.

“Sounds cool,” says Dom, with his kind smile. “My little brothers would kill to have a tree in the bedroom.”

He’s Tasha’s friend. “Sweet little Dom,” she calls him, which is a bit patronizing.

“Yeah, right,” says Tasha in a bored voice. “They can electrocute themselves on the fairy lights. Very cool.”

She still doesn’t look up from her phone. Tasha manages to look goth even in uniform. It’s the black tights with laced boots and short skirt.

My uniform's recycled. Mum's a collector, and she's saving the planet.

"We're having Christmas in Spain this year," says someone, and the chatter turns to high-top bikinis.

I put my earphones back in and try to look as though I'm listening to music, but I can still hear Tasha's bored voice. "The only good thing about Christmas is the cash."

She's not even looking at her sweet little Dom, but he grins and nods, his head bobbing up and down like an eager puppy. They're a strange pair, I can't help thinking, but I still wish I was part of the crowd instead of being out on the edge all the time.

What do you expect, Josie Tate, when you say stuff like having Christmas in the bedroom? I feel myself shudder. I hate anyone knowing our private business.

The bus to the swimming pool arrives, and I make my escape. Everyone else takes the other bus to the shops. I'm so desperate for a shower. No hot water in the phys ed block all week, and I haven't washed my hair since Monday. They built the new pool two years ago, miles away on the edge of town, and the showers are exactly the kind I want in my own flat one day: high pressure, constant hot water.

By the time I've showered and dressed, it's so late that I don't even dry my hair. I push all my stuff into my backpack and hurry out into the corridor. But my hair's dripping in my eyes and I bump into someone. My backpack spills all over the floor, and I'm down on my knees grabbing my underpants, the polka dot ones. Can today get any more embarrassing?

"Here, let me help."

Looking up, I see a boy bending down, tanned skin, very long arms—and he's naked!

“*Cover up,*” I hiss, but I don’t think he heard me. What if he saw my underwear? But why would he care? He’s not wearing *anything*.

I’m trying to push my hair out of my eyes and repack my stuff. When I look up again the boy’s stood up, and he’s wearing a pair of black Speedos. Relief whooshes through me.

“Your toothpaste?” he says, holding it out in his right hand.

He’s so tall—must be at least six feet—but he’s lean with such long legs and arms. His nails are perfectly scrubbed, white half-moons gleaming against golden skin, and he has these amazing almond-shaped eyes.

“Thanks,” I say, getting up and taking the squashed tube. I stuff it into my pack.

A noise starts up at the end of the corridor. A couple of girls are coming toward us with long, slender bodies and black suits, and I can see the word *Torpedoes* emblazoned in silver over the hip.

“Coming?” says one of the girls, a blond ponytail swinging over her shoulder.

“Not right now, uh, Chantelle,” says the boy, and for some reason I feel another little whoosh of relief.

Chantelle shrugs and walks on with her friends. The boy turns back to me and says, “I was going to the canteen before my next swim. You wanna get some coffee?”

“I can’t,” I say. “I’m late.”

“Oh.”

There’s something about the way his mouth settles in a line that’s familiar. Relief, I think, looking at the long thin line of his eyes. They’ve retreated into the sockets, almost disappearing.

And then I realize. He’s lonely, like me, and I almost decide to skip my paper route. Only Friday’s payday, and I need the money.

“I’m a working girl,” I say with a grin.

“Oh sure,” he says, his arms hanging loose at his sides.

We stand there for a minute in silence, and I’m about to go when the boy says, “Maybe we could have a swim sometime. I’m here every morning.”

I open my mouth to say I can’t swim and don’t even own a suit. Then I shut it again. “Every morning?” I say.

“Sure. How about tomorrow?”

“Sure,” I say.

His body shifts slightly as if he’s pleased and I walk off, a grin spreading across my face.

All the way back on the bus I try out the word *sure* in my mouth. The boy has an American accent and *sure* is an American word, isn’t it? It’s such a strong, confident word, so much better than *okay*, or *all right*, or *maybe*, or any of the other things he might have said.

My paper route flies by as I call out “Sure!” to customers on their doorsteps. By six thirty I’m finished, and I take my pay packet to Terry’s Café. My routine’s always the same: a mug of tea, then check my pay and split it into three piles—expenses, school stuff, savings.

I’m saving for my own flat. That’d show Tasha Brown, I think, scooping the money up.

I want a studio, which means one bedroom, a kitchen/living room and a bathroom. I need £500.00 for a deposit. I’ve saved £35.50, so it’s a long-term plan. I want my own high-pressure hot shower and my own toilet.

Then as I walk home I start wondering which school swim boy goes to. He’s older than me, maybe eighteen. He could be at college. How can someone so gorgeous and with such a

lovely, deep American voice and almond-shaped eyes possibly be lonely? He must have hundreds of friends and loads of girlfriends. That Chantelle looked like a model.

He's not lonely; you're mad, Josie Tate, I tell myself as I turn onto my street.

A couple is lingering right outside our front door. We don't have a front garden, and we never open the door when anyone's around. Now I'll have to wait until they move on. I look at my watch and walk past, glaring at them, but they don't seem to notice.

Then the woman calls out, "Pick me up by nine."

"Fine," says the man, and he grabs her again for a totally long kiss. They're practically leaning against our door.

Finally, they walk off in opposite directions. I take out my key, turn it in the lock, squeeze through the tiny space and kick the door shut behind me.

"Mum?" I call out.

"Up here."

I turn sideways and shuffle down the narrow space in the hall, taking care not to tip the boxes at the far end that loom toward me like badly stacked bricks. But when I get to the stairs, they've almost disappeared since this morning.

"What's happened?" I call out.

"Just sorting. Mind the stairs."

"What do you think I'm doing?" I mutter as I haul myself over the first two steps and clamber to the top floor.

The landing's stacked to the ceiling with newspapers, boxes, piles of clothes, plastic bottles and cans. The bathroom door's jammed permanently open, the tub full to the brim with more stuff and so many sacks and boxes on the floor that half

the sink's covered. You have to put your feet on a bulging black sack to sit on the toilet.

So nothing's changed up here, I tell myself with relief.

I put my head around Mum's door. "Sorting what?"

"Socks and plastic bottles."

Mum's sitting cross-legged on the bed, piles of socks and squashed bottles over the half of the duvet that isn't piled with bags. She was laid off from her office job months ago and wants to work in a recycling center, but nothing's come up.

"My severance pay will last ages, Josie, so don't worry," she keeps telling me.

She helps out in secondhand shops Monday to Thursday and doesn't really bother to get dressed on Fridays, just lounges around in baggy tracksuit bottoms and the same sweatshirt.

Now I glare at her and say, "We need the stairs, Mum. It's basic."

"Stop fussing and decide which of these should go to charity and which we should keep."

I look down at the heap. "You decide," I say in a weary voice, and go on down the landing to my bedroom.

I push the door. Usually it swings open, but today it won't go more than a few centimeters.

"What the . . . Mum! I can't open my bedroom door!"

Mum doesn't answer, and I get a horrible sinking feeling as I push into my room.

"No way!"

I can't believe it. Piles and piles of sacks have appeared in my room while I've been out at school and then on my paper route. My desk is completely covered.

"My English coursework!" I scream out, trying to push things off the desk, but there's just no room anywhere. Even the

window's covered with a stack of boxes reaching almost to the ceiling.

A huge pool of anger whirls up through me as I go back down to Mum's room and roar, "What have you done? Don't you care about anyone but yourself?"

"The planet," she starts, and I let out a high-pitched scream.

That stops her and she stares at me, her eyes wide open.

"I'm sick of the planet! I hope it blows to a million pieces and your collection with—"

"Josie! What a terrible thing to say. I can't believe—"

"Well, you'd BETTER believe it!"

Mum just sits there, her mouth shaped into a big *O*, as if she's surprised.

I can't stand it. I turn back downstairs, and suddenly I'm picking up boxes, bags, piles of newspapers, anything I can grab. I'm chucking them against each other.

"Stop that right now!"

But I can't stop. Then a wall of sacks and boxes comes rolling toward me like a giant wave. Something sharp tears into my forehead. I put out a hand and grab what feels like a picture frame. It's got vicious corners, and that's blood on my face.

I turn the frame over and there's a picture of a pretty cottage in a garden full of flowers. Along the bottom in bright yellow letters is written *THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME*.

"It's about time I moved out!" I yell, and with all the force I can muster, I throw the picture over the pile of boxes.

"You nasty girl!" Mum's face is looming over me.

"Me? Your collection's trying to kill me!"

"Oh, stop fussing and get yourself up. That cut needs a Band-Aid," she says, turning away and piling up the boxes again in an even more dangerous pile.

I'm out of here, I tell myself. I get up, squeeze down the hallway and out the front door.

The thought of swim boy with his golden skin and immaculate nails seeing me now makes me want to die of shame. I stagger down the street, almost blinded by tears and blood, and all I can think is, There is definitely no place like *my* home!

2.

There's a pharmacy in the parade of shops in the next street, and I go there if I need anything. Mum hates doctors, so we've never had one. Mel, the pharmacist, always gives me advice about period pain or anything.

Maybe she'll give me a Band-Aid now, I think, as I storm off down the road. I'm furious I might have to buy first aid supplies and cut into my savings.

I won't have dinner, I decide, and then when I pass out starving to death in front of Mum, she'll feel sorry she mucked up my room and clear the stuff.

But I know that will never happen. Mum just can't *see* beyond collecting. She goes to secondhand shops every single day, and now she evens works in one. She's like a kid in a sweet shop, bringing home more and more stuff.

"It's my principles, Josie," is one of her favorite sayings. "All this waste, everywhere you look. How long before the whole planet is one big rubbish dump?"

I've heard it all my life but somehow, since I turned fifteen last autumn, I find Mum's principles and her ever-growing collection harder and harder to put up with.

The kitchen was completely full to the door by the time I was ten. That's when I got my paper route. Food became

unreliable. I've been showering outside the house since I started secondary school, and in the past few months I've decided to move out as soon as I can afford it.

The sooner the better, I tell myself now as I reach our local shops.

"What happened to you?" calls out Mel as I go in the pharmacy and the little bell chimes.

The shop's empty, which is a relief.

"Tripped," I say. The tissue I'm holding to the wound is disintegrating.

"Let's have a look." Mel comes around the counter, pulling on plastic gloves like a paramedic. She has very straight blond hair that gleams in the fluorescent lighting, and she's wearing a clean white coat. I feel as though I'm messing up the place.

She splits open an antiseptic wipe and dabs at the cut. "It's not deep. Just needs a Band-Aid. Hold that."

I put my hand over the wipe as she goes off and gets a Band-Aid. Once she's smoothed a see-through one over the cut, I feel much better. I peer into one of the shaving mirrors on the shelves. Doesn't look too bad. Will swim boy notice? I want to go back to the pool tomorrow and see if he shows up. Why would anyone go swimming every single morning? I shiver at the thought.

"Saw your mum in a secondhand shop this week. She was buying a lot of stuff," comments Mel. She's back around her side of the counter, tidying up the cough medicines.

"Tell me about it," I groan.

It's after seven and I'm starving. On Friday night we usually sit on Mum's bed, have fish and chips, and talk about our week. Mum's a vegetarian, of course, because she doesn't believe in keeping animals for food and ruining the land. But she makes an exception for fish. I eat anything.

Should I go home? I wonder, feeling utterly miserable.

“Where does she put it all?” says Mel, and something about her tone makes my skin crawl.

“Our home is no one’s business,” Mum’s told me all my life. “Once we close the door we are in our own special world. Don’t tell your friends; they wouldn’t understand.”

Which translates into don’t bring them around. So I never get invited. I’ve never been to a sleepover in my whole life.

Or had a boyfriend, Josie Tate, whispers a little voice in my ear. I picture swim boy looming over me, with his long golden body and those lonely almond eyes.

“Where could I get a swimsuit this late?” I ask Mel.

She looks me up and down for a moment and then she says, “I’ve got one you can have.”

“Borrow?”

“No, actually, it’s brand new; a friend gave it to me. I’m not a swimmer. You can have it if you want.”

What if I hate it? I think, but beggars can’t be choosers. “Great. Thanks.”

“I’m just closing, so you can come up and get it.”

In a few minutes we’re out of the shop and Mel’s putting a key into a front door.

As she opens it someone calls out, “All right, Mel. How’s your grandparents?”

It’s a man lounging in the doorway of the pet shop two doors down. He’s almost bald, has a huge belly and his trousers are held up by suspenders.

“They’re fine, Ron,” snaps Mel. She pushes the front door, jerks her head at me and almost slams it shut. “Always poking his nose in,” she mutters as I follow her upstairs.

We go into a living room with two very old-looking people,

a woman who's flicking through a magazine and a man staring at the TV. The man doesn't move or turn to look at us.

"Ooh, visitors, how lovely. I'm Ivy and this is Len. Who are you, dear?" says the woman.

"Josie," I say. "I live down the road."

Mel has disappeared, and Ivy chatters on and on. Everything about her is miniature; her legs are short and thin in her old-lady tights, her shoes would fit a six-year-old, and her face, which is very lined, is not much bigger than a large doll's face. Even her voice is a bit high-pitched, as though her throat only lets out tiny sounds.

Just when I think I can't listen anymore, Mel returns, holding out a green swimsuit with a black stripe going diagonally across the front.

"Ooh, matches those lovely green eyes of yours," says Ivy.

"What do you think?" says Mel.

"Are you sure? I could give you, er, something for it." It must have cost a fortune. There's a tiny expensive-looking logo on the side.

"Nope, it's all yours," says Mel, and then something about the way she looks at me makes me feel it's time to go.

"Thanks, Mel." Nodding at the old couple, I say, "Nice to meet you both."

The old man doesn't move. Ivy beams and tells me to come up anytime, but Mel's already moving toward the door.

As I walk home I think about Mel's flat, just like the one I want someday. She might have her grandparents staying at the moment, but otherwise she's got it all to herself. She's not married—she's maybe only twenty-three or twenty-four—that's just about ten years older than me. But she's in control of her whole life. Her flat gleams like her white coat. There's hardly

anything in the living room—two armchairs, a small sofa, a TV, a dining table with four chairs. No shelves, no boxes, no plastic bags.

That’s what I want. I just have to finish school and get a job so I can live like Mel. I don’t even have grandparents to clutter the place up.

Mum’s at the bottom of the stairs when I open the door, where she’s banging a nail in the wall. Her green eyes look awash with tears, and I feel a pang of guilt.

“Fish and chips?” She finishes banging and offers me a ten-pound note.

After Mel’s immaculate appearance, I can’t help thinking how shabby she looks. Mum’s hair is light brown, like mine, only longer and even more frizzy. She puts it up in a neat bun to go out and always dresses smartly, even to work in the secondhand shop. She likes two-inch heels at least. But in the house, she lets her hair hang loose and shaggy around her face.

“All right,” I say.

She gives me a little smile, suddenly looking so fragile standing next to a great pile of boxes leaning like that tower in Pisa toward her. But just before I turn back to the street I see her pick up a picture and hang it on the nail. I catch a flash of a cottage with flowers in the yard. The picture that sliced my head open.

“There’s no place like home,” she says.

I slam the front door behind me and hope it rattles the teeth in her head. Imagine if the immaculate Mel came in the house. Or swim boy.

When are we ever going to tidy up?

3. Tasha

“I want to vid you for my vlog.”

“I didn’t understand a word of that.”

I give an exaggerated sigh.

Dom smiles and fiddles with the sugar packets.

With a brain like his he can’t help being a geek, but sometimes I wish he’d just tune in.

“I can’t be a filmmaker unless I practice, yeah?” I say.

“I suppose so.”

“So I’m making a vlog. You know, it’s like a blog only it’s a *video* log...”

“Oh right, got it.” Dom’s dark eyes widen, and he gives my arm a playful punch. “Good idea, Tish Tash.”

That’s the baby name he made up for me when we were little. We’ve been best friends since forever, so who else would I ask for my very first attempt at making a vid?

“I thought you wanted to be a singer, go on television.”

“That’s so last summer,” I groan. “Come on, let’s get started.” I fiddle with my phone and set it on video mode.

“Can’t.” He’s pushed his chair back and now he’s standing over me, the only time he’s taller than me. Dom’s taking his time growing up. His voice hasn’t even broken yet. “Homework.”

“But...”

“No buts, not if you want me to come to the gig tonight.”

Which is essential, because no one else will come. Only Dom stays loyal to our amazing local band, Rough Steel, and of course he knows I’m crazy in love with Rory, the lead singer. Dom comes to every gig and sort of jigs around with me when I want to dance, trying to get Rory’s attention so that he’ll dedicate a song to me. Which hasn’t happened yet, but hey, maybe tonight?

“No sweat,” I say now. “We can do this another time. I’m going to ask Rory for an interview. What do you think?”

Dom has black skin and large dark eyes, and it’s not always easy to know what he’s thinking. He turns slightly to untangle his leg from the chair. When he turns back, his face is sort of deadpan.

When I stand up, I’m looming over him, two inches taller, which makes me feel a bit goofy sometimes. But I’ve got narrow shoulders and thin arms. Dom’s stockier, although he’s quite proud of his biceps.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” he says.

“I’m wearing the killer outfit.”

“That’s all right, then,” and he gives a snort as we walk out of Terry’s Café and say good-bye on the pavement.

There’s more than two hours before I have to start getting ready. As I let myself in through the front door of our flat, I can hear Mum and Chaz all loved up on the sofa.

“Tasha?”

I put my head around the living room door. “Yeah?”

Chaz gives me a grin, his arm around Mum, her head lolling on his shoulder. Mum’s had loads of boyfriends. She keeps saying, “This is the one, Tash, I know it is.”

She’s already forty-three and Chaz is eight years younger,

but he's okay-looking and a good laugh. He took us to the fair last weekend and spent loads of money.

"You out tonight?" says Mum, pulling on her top so her bra strap doesn't show.

"Yeah," I say. Chaz catches my eye and gives me a wink. I give a bit of a laugh, and he frowns slightly and nods down to Mum. No idea what that means.

"I don't want you taking the bus home late," says Mum.

"She's a big girl now, Hev," says Chaz. He reaches into his shirt pocket, pulls out a twenty-pound note and hands it to me.

"Wow! You sure?" I say, a bit overwhelmed.

"Course."

"You spoil her," says Mum, flicking back her hair. She keeps it long, halfway down her back, and hennas it every month. She says it makes the men look twice, and I have to admit it does look good. "Are you going with Dom?" she asks now, craning her neck to look up at me.

"Yeah, his dad'll give me a lift."

"Dom's a good boy. He'll take care of you."

Yes, I think with a sigh, but I'd much rather the gorgeous Rory take care of me. A flash of his long, thin body, floppy red hair and cheeky, totally sexy grin wafts across my mind. I am so in love. He's only twenty and I'm very nearly sixteen.

"I said, pizza or curry?" Mum's asking me about dinner.

"I'll get myself a sandwich." As Mum starts to protest that I have to eat properly, I dodge out of the room and down the hallway to my bedroom.

Time for the first entry on my vlog, I decide, flopping on the bed. I open my laptop and click on the icon.

I stare at myself on the screen, and for a moment I don't

know what to do. I feel a bit like I'm on TV, which is totally stupid because no one else can see this.

I take a deep breath and start talking.

Tasha Brown's Vlog

Saturday, October 5, 4:45 p.m.

Little laugh. Hi—no idea who I'm saying hi to. Myself, I suppose. This is my very first vlog, and the reason I'm doing this is to practice being a filmmaker because that's what I want to do when I leave school. I'll probably have to work my way up from tea girl or something, but one day I'll be on the set with a famous filmmaker like Sofia Coppola or Steven Spielberg, and the cameraman will keel over having a heart attack or something just at the most crucial moment, and then I'll leap into his place and finish the shot and everyone will clap like mad and say, "How amazing! She's so young! A precocious talent!" And I'll be made for life.

Pause.

Phew! I'm all out of words! I press playback. I look okay, I think, although I need Dom's opinion. Not that he'd ever criticize me, he's so sweet.

I've just had my hair restyled, shaved at the back and hanging very straight halfway down the left side of my face. Sort of an arty, filmmaker style. The pin through my eyebrow looks good, and I've decided to ask for a nose stud and tongue bar for my sixteenth. I'm wearing my denim shorts tonight and the

black tights with huge holes. One of the girls hanging all over Rory last Saturday had tights like that.

I finger Chaz's money. I could get some vodka and a couple of bottles of Coke and make some drinks, offer some to Rory. The thought makes me feel warm all over.

I press Play and continue.

Well, this is my room.

Camera pans around room.

That's Mickey Mouse. I've had him since I was three. If you shout at him, he used to make a noise and move a bit, but it doesn't work anymore. That's my bed, and that's all my makeup, and the photo in the frame is my dad holding me when I was a baby. He got killed in an accident at work—I don't remember him. Mum says she can't be a widow all her life, so she dates all these different blokes. Now she's with Chaz and maybe they'll get married, so I can be a goth bridesmaid, all in black—bet Chaz would let me—and maybe they'll have a baby and I'll have a little brother.

I press Pause.

My mouth seems to be running on and on, but I can't help picturing myself at the playground, pushing my little brother on the swing and making him laugh. Rory comes past and sees us and thinks, Tasha would be such a great mother, and he proposes to me on the spot.

My phone goes. It's Dom. "Seven at the bus stop?"

"Yep. I've done three minutes, fifty-two seconds on my vlog."

“Cool. Later.”

Dom tries to be cool but just saying it isn't necessarily being it. He wants to be an engineer or a research chemist. He's doing A Levels a year early, and he's already thinking about uni. He's way ahead of everyone in our year and probably the sixth form too.

“Bit much, isn't it?” I said when he told me.

But his eyes glazed over and he said, “It's cool.”

I take a shower and when I'm back in my room, I lie down on my bed in my underwear, hands under my head, and stare at the ceiling. I try to picture my first movie with the sound track by Rory and Rough Steel. Suddenly my bedroom door swings open.

It's Chaz, and he sees me in my bra and underpants!

I sit up and grab my duvet to cover up. He stands there staring at me. Then he shakes his head with a little smile and mutters, “Sorry, wrong room,” and he's gone, the door still wide open.

I leap to my feet, shut the door and dress really quickly, without worrying about what Rory will think when he sees me. Why did Chaz do that? Crazy weird. Our flat's just a series of doors off a corridor. Anyone could make that mistake, I tell myself. When he smiled at me, it was a sort of fatherly smile, wasn't it?

By the time I've got my makeup on and slung my purse and bus pass into a bag, it all seems something of nothing, as Mum says when I moan. I pull on my black denim jacket, go down the corridor to the front door and call out, “See you later, Mum.”

“Stay with Dom,” she calls out, like always.

And then just like always, Chaz calls out, “Have a good time, love.”

See? I tell myself as I go out of the downstairs door and onto the street. It was just a mistake.

I've got Chaz's money in my pocket, and I've already decided what I want. The little grocery on the corner isn't fussy, so soon I'm stuffing a small bottle of vodka and two bottles of cola into my bag.

"How old did you say you were, babes?" I imagine Rory saying when I offer him some.

"Eighteen," I'll answer, giving Dom a big kick.

But inside a little corner of me knows there's another reason why I bought the vodka tonight.

4.

“Put that away,” Dom hisses as we get to the gig.

“It’s just Coke,” I say, and take another swig. I’ve drunk a third of the bottle already. My head’s a bit woozy.

“What’s up with you tonight? You’re strange.”

“No, I’m not. I’m the same.” I offer him the bottle.

He shakes his head. “No, Tash, and you’ve had enough too.”

I’m just about to call him a wimp when we’re inside and Rory’s right in front of me. This is my chance. I sidle up, hold out the bottle and say, “Drink?”

Rory’s wearing a black T-shirt and faded blue jeans with a leather belt that almost matches his hair. He’s way taller than me and he grins down, saying, “Is it diet?”

“No way! I mean, yes.” I sound ridiculous. “Try it.”

I offer the bottle and he takes it and drinks almost to the bottom in seconds. He comes up for breath, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Nice one, babes,” he says with a smile that zooms straight through me.

Babes. Yaay!

Dom’s hovering around so I don’t get out the second bottle. Rory’s walked to the front and grabbed the microphone.

“So this one’s for the little girl with the cola eyes.” He’s looking straight at me, and I feel like swooning, just like in the

old black-and-white films. Would he catch me before I crashed to the floor?

They're playing "Angel Storm." I so love that part of the song when Rory hits the top note and the bass goes crazy behind him. I grab Dom and push him into a dance. I've got the second vodka mix in my hand, and I keep taking swigs. Dom's mouthing stuff at me and frowning but I ignore him.

I want to dance until the morning. I want Rory to kiss me. I want to finish all the vodka and send out for more.

Rory. Dom. Vodka. Storm.

The words are in my head, crazy weird, and they're pushing out the one word I don't want to think about tonight.

Chaz.

The song's over and Dom pulls me to a table. Everyone's high but Dom's hissing in my ear, "If Dad smells the drink when he picks us up..."

"Chill. He won't."

I sway a bit and put my head in my hands. Then I reach into my bag and pull out a stick of chewing gum. I put it in my mouth and look at Dom, my mouth wide open as I chew.

"Have you gone mad?"

"Nope," I say. "Just mad in love."

For some reason his head drops, probably because he's so annoyed with me. A couple of the girls from school call me over to join them, and I'm dancing again, passing around our bottles. We giggle and swig until it's all gone and Dom doesn't have anything to whine about anymore.

It's getting late, and the other girls leave.

Dom calls out, "Shall we wait for Dad outside?"

I ignore him. I'm still hoping something will happen with Rory.

“Tash?” Dom’s almost whining, and I feel like batting him away like a fly. Why’s he being like that? He knows how I feel about Rory.

There’s a beer coaster on the floor. It’s a bit damp but I pick it up and then I have a thought.

“Pen,” I say to Dom, holding out my hand.

He looks up at me, the whites of his eyes suddenly caught in the strobe, making them gleam out of his dark face.

He’s so much *younger* than me, I think, even though we’re both sixteen in December.

Dom never leaves home without a pen. He’s holding it out to me. I scribble my mobile number on the mat and walk over to Rory. There’s a girl hanging over his shoulder, but the vodka’s pumping me up. I hold out the mat to Rory and say, “Call me. Anytime.”

Rory gives a little grin and he looks so gorgeous I feel weak at the knees. He stuffs the mat in his shirt, which is unbuttoned halfway down his chest, and says, “Cool, babes.”

The other girl gives a titter as I turn away.

Am I ugly? I think.

The memory of Chaz’s face looking at me in my underwear creeps back in and a chill goes through me. Then a hand slips through my arm. It’s Dom, and the warmth of his body feels so good I flash him a grin.

“Okay, Tish Tash?” His voice is a bit deeper for once. He gets embarrassed when it suddenly hits a high note. He’s still going through puberty is my little Dom.

I lean into him and he squeezes my arm. “Dad’s texted me. He’s outside.”

Dom’s dad is all smiles in the car, and Dom does the polite conversation thing about what a lovely evening we’ve had.

When we get to my flat, Dom says, “Go carefully, Tish Tash.”

I give him a hug and get out of the car.

“I’m always here for you,” he calls after me.

I don’t look back as they drive away, but when I get to the front door I suddenly wish Dom *was* with me, which is stupid. He couldn’t stay overnight; we don’t have a spare room. We’ve been best mates since we were five and started in the same class at school. The teacher made us all hold hands with our partners to go into assembly. The girl next to Dom said, “If I hold hands with Dom, will my hand go all black?” Someone giggled and Dom’s head dropped down. I marched up, took Dom’s hand, and said, “I’m your partner now.” I remember how he smiled at me all morning. My sweet little Dom always looks out for me, doesn’t he?

No sign of Mum or Chaz as I tiptoe to my room. It’s just gone midnight, and they must be in bed, sound asleep.

I undress quickly, prop a chair under my door handle—just to be fully private, I tell myself—and fall asleep under my duvet.

In my dreams a squirrel’s scratching at my window for nuts. We haven’t got any nuts, I think, and then I wake up. The sound has changed into a knocking sound. How can a squirrel knock on a door? I wonder, still half asleep. My head’s thumping. A proper hangover. I can’t help feeling proud of myself.

The knocking’s more persistent. The time on my clock says two a.m.

“Open up, Tasha. I need to ask you something.”

Chaz? God!

Suddenly I’m wide awake. What’s going on? Why doesn’t he ask Mum if he needs something?

I creep out of bed and check that the chair’s stuck under the

door, but he's rattling the handle now and I'm not sure if it will hold.

Then I hear Mum's voice calling out, "Is that you, love?"

The rattling stops and I imagine Chaz frozen in his tracks. I can hear breathing, but I think it's mine.

"Chazzie?"

"Coming," he calls back.

I hear him padding down the corridor and I collapse back into bed, my heart thumping more than my head. This is unreal. What did he want? I toss and turn for the rest of the night and by morning I decide to ask Mum about it when she's on her own.

I grab my chance around eleven when Chaz goes out to get a paper. Mum's buttering toast in the kitchen and flicking through a magazine.

"Don't you think Chaz is a bit young for you?" I say casually, filling the kettle.

Mum grins and shakes her head. "He likes older women."

Oh yeah? I think.

"He's a bit weird, you have to admit."

She frowns and drops the magazine. "Oh, here we go. I wondered how long it would take you."

"Mu-um."

"Don't Mum me. It's always the same when I've got someone..."

She's off like an express train, and yeah, I have been stupid in the past, getting jealous and wanting her attention. It's been a couple of years since she's gone out with anyone but this time it's different. Only I don't know how to make her see.

Direct action, I decide. "He came into my room yesterday when I was in my bra and underwear."

She cocks her head to one side, pursing her lips, which

means she's getting proper angry, and says, "I know. He said. He wasn't thinking and opened the wrong door."

"Yeah, well, why was he knocking on my door in the night?"

"I asked him to make sure you were home okay if I fell asleep. Honestly, Tasha. You're nearly sixteen. I'm really sick of this. Can't you be happy for me, just this once? I told you, he's the one. You'll be leaving home in a couple of years, off to college with all your mates, getting off your head and whatever students do. I'll be stuck here all on my own. Is that what you want? Is it?"

I shake my head, feeling really miserable. Maybe it *is* me and I've got it all wrong about Chaz.

Tasha's Vlog

Sunday, October 6, 11:21 a.m.

Nothing from Rory. I thought he'd send me a text. But he dedicated a song to me and called me babes, twice. I drank too much vodka, my head's splitting and look at those circles under my eyes.

Pause.

I reach across my bed for some eye gel and smear it on. It feels cool and refreshing. Can I say anything on my private vlog? Is it safe or will someone hack into my laptop and read it?

Chaz's name floats like a whisper in my ear. Mum thinks I'm jealous and maybe I am and that's why I'm down on Chaz. Or maybe he's—

My phone goes. It's Dom. "Yeah?"

"Just wanted to see how you're feeling this morning, Tish Tash."

“Okay.”

“Lucky you. I thought you’d have a terrible hangover. What are you up to?”

“Just doing my vlog.” And then I get an idea. “I was wondering, you know, if someone stole my laptop . . .”

“It’s too antique to bother with.”

“Hmm, maybe. Anyhow, listen, Dom, just as an example . . . if someone stole my laptop and hacked in, they could watch my vlog, couldn’t they?”

Dom gives a bit of a laugh. “What’s so private? Is it rude?”

“You’re such a child!”

He goes silent. So I say, “Can’t you see, it would be like someone reading my diary, so just put me out of my misery.”

“Okay,” he says in a more serious voice. “Anyone can be hacked. People have hacked into American Secret Service computers and ended up with thousands of years in prison. So none of us are safe.”

Wonderful, I think. “So no privacy.”

“Bottom line? Nope. Keep it in your head. Safest place unless they waterboard you. Gotta go, Mum’s yelling.”

I press Play and hiss toward the screen,

If you’ve hacked in and you’re watching my
vlog, you’re dead! Don’t say I didn’t warn you.

I grimace at the screen and wave my fist. I so wish I had a skull tattoo on my forehead or a razor blade through my tongue. But when I press Replay, I just look like a thin, grumpy, fifteen-year-old girl.

I’m in my own home and I don’t feel very safe. Crazy weird.