

THE HOUSE ON STOKES CROFT

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The House on
Stokes Croft

The House on Stokes Croft

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Preface

This is a story about leaving.

Leaving home. Leaving expectations. Leaving the version of yourself that other people felt comfortable with.

It is also a story about arriving — though arriving is rarely as tidy as it sounds. Sometimes you arrive somewhere broken. Sometimes you arrive angry. Sometimes you arrive with just a weekend bag and no plan.

The House in this story is fictional, but the feelings inside it are not. The tension between freedom and responsibility. The sharp edge of wanting to belong while insisting on being different. The quiet panic of realising you've stepped outside the life that was mapped out for you.

Ayla is not meant to be perfect. She is not meant to be a hero or a cautionary tale. She is simply a girl at a threshold — between childhood and adulthood, between obedience and choice, between who she was and who she might become.

This book does not pretend that rebellion is pure or that found families are easy. Freedom has consequences. Community requires care. And belonging, real belonging, demands more than changing hair colour.

But it also insists on something hopeful: that young people are not problems to be managed, but people to be heard. That mistakes do not cancel worth. That identity is not something handed down — it is something discovered, often messily.

If you have ever stood in front of a mirror and wondered who you were allowed to become, this story is for you.

Dedication

This story is dedicated to those who are different.
To those who don't quite belong.

You are not wrong.

You are not broken.

You just haven't found your house yet.

Chapter One

“Ayla!”

Mum’s voice rolled down the hallway and crashed against Ayla’s bedroom door.

She pulled the duvet over her head, curling into herself, like if she made her body small enough the whole day might shrink with it. Her cheeks were on fire. Shame, probably. Or anger. Or both, tangled together so tightly she couldn’t tell where one stopped and the other started.

It had all happened so fast.

Not the kissing.

That had been slow. Careful. Nell’s hand warm in hers behind the bike sheds, the late afternoon sun catching in her hair, that nervous little laugh before their mouths finally met.

No. What happened fast was everything after.

Someone had seen. Of course they had. Marlborough wasn't exactly subtle about keeping tabs on its own. And whoever it was had decided it was their civic duty to report it straight to her parents.

A knock thudded against her door. Sharp. Controlled.

"Ayla, I know you're in there."

Ayla squeezed her eyes shut.

"You can hide all you like," Mum called through the wood, her voice tight as pulled thread. "You are grounded for the foreseeable future. And you will unlock this door before your father gets home."

There it was. The real threat.

Dad.

Ayla dragged the duvet higher, as if cotton could protect her from what was coming. She didn't answer. Didn't move. Didn't even breathe properly until Mum's footsteps retreated down the hall, each one echoing like a countdown.

For a moment, the house went quiet.

But it wasn't the peaceful kind.

It was the sort of quiet that waits.

It wasn't even the first time.

She and Nell had been careful — properly careful. No holding hands in corridors. No lingering looks in lessons. No stupid, obvious flirting. The bit behind the library was practically abandoned after three o'clock. No one ever went round there.

Except someone had.

Someone had seen them. And worse — recognised them. Recognised her.

Ayla pressed her face harder into the pillow and let out a slow, furious breath. Since when was it a crime to kiss someone you actually fancied? She was fifteen, for God's sake. Not a kid.

But two girls.

That was the problem.

Marlborough could cope with lads snogging girls behind the sports hall. That was practically a school tradition. But two girls behind the library? Suddenly it

was moral decline. Front-page scandal. Alert the parents immediately.

She hadn't known what Mum would do.

Well. She did now.

Horrificed silence. Tight lips. The word *disappointed* hanging in the air like smoke. Grounded “for the foreseeable future,” which in Mum-language basically meant until Ayla left for uni.

Dad, though...

That was the real unknown. And somehow the unknown felt worse. Mum did icy and cutting. Dad did loud.

Her cheeks flared again as she replayed it — Nell's hand at her waist, the nervous little pause before leaning in. Nell wasn't exactly girlfriend material. A bit too posh. A bit too... Marlborough. But kissing her had felt electric. New. Like stepping into a version of herself she'd only ever imagined.

They were always hiding. Always ducking behind corners, timing their exits, checking reflections in windows.

Maybe that was part of it — the secrecy. The stolen-ness of it all. Like they were getting away with something magnificent.

Her fingers twisted together, weaving and unweaving, a habit she'd had since she was little whenever her thoughts ran faster than she could catch them.

She could understand Mum's reaction. Sort of. In this town, everything was a scandal. People lived for it. Whispered about it over garden fences and in the queue at the Co-op.

Fine. She would apologise for the embarrassment. For the inevitable phone calls. For the raised eyebrows at church. The gossip.

But she would not apologise for liking girls.

That wasn't rebellion. It wasn't a phase. It wasn't something she'd picked up from the internet like a dodgy trend.

It was her.

And somehow, before Dad got home, she needed to work out how to say that without the whole house exploding.

Chapter Two

Ayla shoved the duvet back and sat up.

It was far too hot to be lying there fully dressed anyway, jeans sticking to her legs, T-shirt twisted round her middle. Still, getting up felt like stepping into open ground. Exposed. Vulnerable.

She crossed the room and unlocked the door as quietly as she could, wincing at the tiny click of the latch. Then she just stood there, hand still on the handle, listening.

Her own pulse thudded in her ears. The house, though, stayed silent. No footsteps. No Mum hovering dramatically outside.

She let out a sharp breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding and padded back to the bed, this time sitting on top of the covers instead of burrowing underneath them. Hiding clearly hadn't worked.

Dad would be home soon.

She tried to picture it.

The front door slamming. Heavy footsteps up the stairs. Her door flying open so hard it cracked against the wall. His face red, jaw tight, words tripping over themselves because he was too furious to get them out properly. Maybe something about respect. About shame. About what the neighbours would think. Maybe even threats — boarding school, military camp, some dramatic exile.

She swallowed.

Or... he could come in quietly. Sit on the edge of her bed. Ask what happened. Ask how she felt.

She snorted under her breath.

Yeah. Right.

If she was being honest, it would be much closer to the first one.

Though, to be fair, he probably wouldn't send her to an all-girls boarding school. That would be counterproductive.

Despite everything, a small, traitorous smirk tugged at her mouth at the thought.

Her phone buzzed faintly in her hand as she unlocked it. Without really thinking, she ignored the notification that had caused the buzz and opened Safari. She typed: *ways to tell your parents you're gay.*

Article after article popped up. Lists. Advice columns. Soft, reassuring headlines that felt written for someone braver than her. She clicked one. Then another.

Some were hopeful. Careful steps. Pick the right moment. Stay calm. Give them time.

Others were... not.

Stories of being thrown out. Of parents refusing to speak to their kids. Of things she tried not to picture too clearly. Her chest tightened the further she scrolled.

She dropped the phone onto her stomach and stared at the ceiling.

Maybe she could just pretend.

Apologise. Say it was experimenting. A phase. Curiosity. Blame it on teenage confusion and too much time online. Promise it would never happen again.

It would smooth everything over. Calm Dad down. Let Mum hold her head up at church.

It would also be a lie.

And the thought of going back to hiding — not just behind the library, but inside her own house — made something in her chest feel small and suffocated.

Outside, a car door slammed.

Ayla froze.

Chapter Three

She was still arguing with herself when she heard it — the front door, low voices, the heavy tread on the stairs.

It took seconds.

One footstep. Two.

Her bedroom door opened.

Not ripped off its hinges. Not kicked in. Just opened.

Well. That was something.

Ayla's heart thumped so hard it felt visible beneath her T-shirt. Tell the truth? Lie? She searched his face for clues, like it was an exam she hadn't revised for.

Dad stood in the doorway. He didn't come in. Just planted himself there, filling the frame. Behind him, softer steps hovered in the hall. Mum. Of course. Close enough to intervene. Or to add fuel. Hard to say which.

He hadn't smacked her for years. This wouldn't be that.

This would be worse.

His hands settled on his hips. He looked like he was physically holding his temper in place. That scared her more than shouting would have.

"This stops now, Ayla Catherine."

Her stomach dropped at the name.

"You will not be spending any time with Eleanor. If I hear that you are anywhere near her again, you will be moved to a different school. Immediately."

Her thoughts scattered.

Okay. Fine. She could manage that. She didn't even... it wasn't like she was in love with Nell. It had just been...

She drew breath to speak, to apologise, to smooth it over.

Dad lifted one finger.

He wasn't finished.

"And this... homosexual exploration," he said, the word sounding sour in his mouth, "ends here. This is

not some bohemian free-for-all. My job depends on my reputation. Our family depends on it. I will not have that jeopardised because you're confused."

Confused.

"You will sort yourself out and get back in line. Am I clear?"

Ayla realised she'd been biting her lip hard enough to make it throb. She tasted salt, maybe the threat of blood. Inside her head, a panicked voice screamed at her to agree. Nod. Say yes. Make it easy.

Lie.

Deny it. Pack it away. Be good.

She didn't even consciously decide to move, but her head shook. Just slightly.

Dad's eyes sharpened.

"No? What do you mean, no?"

She didn't know what she meant. Not fully. She only knew that if she swallowed it now, she'd be swallowing it forever.

“I won’t see Nell again,” she heard herself say. Her voice sounded thin, like it belonged to someone else. “And I’ll change schools if you want. That’s fine.”

Her breathing had gone strange — too fast, like she’d run up a hill.

“But the... the homosexuality—” She almost choked on the word, hated that she had to use it like that. “It’s not exploring. It’s not a phase.”

Her hands were trembling in her lap.

“That’s me,” she finished, quieter now. “I like girls.”

The words landed between them.

Small. Ordinary. Explosive.

Dad stared at her. Not shouting. Not yet. Just staring, like she’d started speaking a language he didn’t understand.

She couldn’t tell if he was more shocked that she’d contradicted him or that she’d said it so plainly.

It didn’t matter. It was out.

“Stay here,” he said finally, voice clipped and cold. “I will be back.”

This time the door did slam.

Mum's voice floated through the closed door — a sharp whisper she couldn't quite make out — and then Dad's deeper tone cut across it. The rest blurred into muffled fragments as they moved away.

Ayla sat perfectly still on the bed.

Her heart was still racing.

But beneath the fear — beneath the dread of whatever was coming next — something else flickered.

She had said it.

Out loud.

Her thoughts weren't just messy. They were chaos.

Every instinct screamed at her to run after him. To take it back. To say she'd got carried away, that she hadn't meant it like that, that she was just being dramatic. Blame hormones. Blame confusion. Blame anything.

She even half-leaned forward, like her body might obey before her integrity stopped it.

But she didn't move.

Couldn't.

She shook her head, hard, as if that might settle things into neat lines. It didn't. Her thoughts were frantic, fluttering things, like butterflies, battering themselves against the inside of her skull.

He would be back.

Of course he would.

He'd come up the stairs again, slower this time. Mum would either stand beside him like quiet reinforcement or hover just out of sight, listening. There would be consequences. There were always consequences.

Maybe no shouting. Maybe no theatrics.

But something.

Restrictions. Isolation. Confiscated phone. Cancelled plans. A new school. Sent to stay with some distant aunt for a "change of environment". She had no idea. She'd never pushed back like that before. Not properly. Not on something this... fundamental.

That was the word, wasn't it?

Fundamental.

This wasn't about curfew or homework or attitude. This was about who she was.

And he wouldn't understand that. He couldn't. Ever.

Dad's job had always come first. His reputation, his standing, the careful way he moved through town like everything was part of a performance. Mum adjusted around it. Ayla adjusted around it.

They all did.

And now she'd stepped out of formation.

She pressed her palms into her eyes until little sparks flashed in the dark.

She was getting in the way.

Of his image. Of their tidy family narrative. Of Sunday mornings and polite smiles and whatever version of a daughter he'd planned on presenting to the world.

So what now?

Going after him wouldn't fix it. Explaining wouldn't soften it. She'd already said the one thing he didn't want to hear.

The house felt different now. Smaller. Like the walls had edged in while she wasn't looking.

If she stayed, she would have to shrink. Apologise. Fold herself back into something acceptable.

If she didn't...

Her gaze drifted to her wardrobe. To her overnight bag slumped on the floor from last week's revision session. To her phone lying silent beside her.

Her pulse ticked up again, but this time it wasn't just fear.

It was possibility.

Chapter Four

Ayla caught a few of her fluttering thoughts mid-spin. Stay and wait for whatever came next? Or leave? And if she left... where would she even go? Nell's? She almost laughed at the idea. Nell's parents would most likely be in the same state as hers. Ridiculous. Not happening.

Her phone buzzed in her hand. She unlocked it, again ignoring what had caused the buzzing, intending to check her contacts, maybe text someone. But the screen wasn't her contact list — Safari was open, still on the tab about coming out to parents. She'd barely read it before, but her eyes landed on a line that made her pause:

"...wasn't welcome, and they had cut me off entirely. With nowhere else to go I went to 'The Lighthouse' in London."

The link glimmered on the screen. She pressed her thumb against it.

A safehouse. For kids with nowhere else to go.

It sounded perfect.

Except. London. Too far. Too impossible to get to alone.

Her fingers moved almost by themselves, tapping, scrolling, searching. Another place came up. Not London. Not far. Twenty minutes by train. Close enough to reach. Close enough to be real. Close enough to get her away from here.

Her heart thumped in her chest. Loud. Fast. She could hear it in her ears, pounding over the quiet of the house.

Without thinking, she jumped up. Grabbed the bigger weekend bag off the shelf — the one she used for sleepovers — and started packing like a whirlwind. Drawers swung open. Tops, jumpers, trousers, underwear — she shoved them in without thought. Socks in a corner, her favourite jumper on top.

Her eyes flicked around the room. Phone charger? Packed. Toiletries clutch? Packed. Plushie on the bed? Paused. Then left it. What sort of impression would it make, arriving with a plushie of all things?

She zipped the bag with one practiced motion, the sound sharp in the quiet room, and yanked her summer

jacket on. Not really needed — June heat pressed against her already sweaty back — but it felt like armour.

She opened the door and immediately heard footsteps in the hallway. She froze, heart threatening to jump out of her chest. Silence, and then footsteps again. This time further away. She shut the door — didn't want to take any chances. She counted to a hundred.

She eased the door open, careful, holding her breath. Of course it squeaked. It hadn't always, and she thanked God that it hadn't before. But now it had. Like it was mocking her.

Door cracked, she stayed in the room for a second, listening. Voices carried from the hall. Her parents. Talking. Yelling.

She edged closer, the weekend bag heavy over her shoulder. One wrong step, one glance, and she'd be grounded for life. Perhaps even disowned. But instinct pushed her forward anyway.

She caught fragments of Mum's voice: "...*not done anything like this before. She will come arou—*"

Then Dad cut her off, sharp and final: "*It won't matter. The word is out, and people will be talking already.*"

Even if she comes around, it won't help one tiny bit by now. The damage has been done, Mabel!"

Ayla's heart beat fast, but her decision was made. She wasn't hiding. She wasn't going back. Not tonight. Perhaps never again.

Silently, she padded to the front door, grabbed her shoes, didn't even pause to put them on. She twisted the handle. Door opened.

And then she ran.

Feet hitting the pavement, bag bouncing against her side, she didn't look back. Not at the shouting, not at the house, not at the life that had suddenly become impossible. She ran straight into the summer evening, into the unknown, into freedom.

Chapter Five

Ayla ran down the streets in nothing but socks, the soles slapping lightly against the pavement. The adrenaline kept her moving, heart thudding, lungs steady. It wasn't until she rounded the corner onto Calton Road that she stopped. Not because she was out of breath — her physique was decent enough for running — but because she needed her shoes.

She bent down, untied the laces, then paused. What if she just slipped her feet in? It might be faster. She did. One foot slid in, heel bending against the back before settling properly. Strange, deliberate, like she'd never done anything quite that reckless before. The other foot followed. She started walking, only to realise the heel was pinching her ankle.

Ayla pushed her thumb in, wiggled it around, and felt it pop into place. Ah. Comfort. Progress.

She moved on, stepping into the evening warmth, the streets quieting as the sky dimmed. The train station

wasn't nearby, but she wasn't in a hurry. Urgency was less about speed and more about movement, about putting distance between herself and the house that had suddenly become a trap. Walking fast felt better than waiting for a bus, anyway.

Sweat ran down her back, soaking the backside of her top. She didn't care. Personal hygiene was a concern for later.

Phone in hand, she power-walked, scrolling through train times, her bag continuously bouncing against her side. She almost collided with a man stepping out of her path, muttering under his breath.

Her first instinct was to apologise. Like she always had.

Then she decided not to. That was something the old Ayla — the Ayla of yesterday — would have done. It was still the right thing to do; she had been the one not paying attention after all, but not tonight.

She looked over her shoulder — nothing but the man she had almost bumped into and the dim street behind him — then she turned and focused forward.

The train station came into view. Solid. Practical. A gateway to somewhere else. A chance.

Ayla picked up her pace. Not running, not panicked. Determined. She wasn't looking back anymore.

She stepped onto the train just as the doors hissed shut behind her, moving quickly down the carriage to find a seat. Sliding into one by the window, she planted her bag on the seat next to her, making sure no one would try to squeeze in.

For a moment, she just sat there, chest still hammering, listening to the soft rumble of the train settling on the tracks. Then she pulled out her phone, scrolling absently, thumb hovering over maps and timetables, counting down the minutes.

Less than half an hour, and she would be in Bristol.

Her heart fluttered in a strange mix of fear and relief. Marlborough was shrinking behind her with every passing second, fading into streets she didn't want to see again, into a house that had suddenly become a cage.

Ahead was a city that pulsed with possibility — unknown streets, strangers, life that didn't care about who she was or who she liked.

She tucked her phone down, stared out the window as the station slipped away, and let herself imagine what it

would feel like to finally be somewhere she belonged,
even if she didn't quite know where that was yet.

Chapter Six

Ayla scanned the streets as she stepped off the train. The city wasn't exactly new to her — she'd been here before. Shopping trips with friends, quick stops at cafés, or drives with her parents — always in the car, always with directions, always with someone else steering. But this? This was different.

Now, she was on her own.

And lost.

The streets looked familiar, but the angles and corners felt strange. The city was alive in a way she hadn't noticed before: sirens in the distance, people rushing past, buses groaning to stops. Her heart ticked faster.

She dug into her bag, her fingers brushing over the things inside. Different textures. Then the cold metal of her card-holder. She reckoned there would be 300, maybe 400 quid on her credit card. A small fortune for a fifteen-year-old, courtesy of Dad's success. Money

had never been a problem at home. It might become one soon, but she would cross that bridge when the time came.

Her stomach growled. She checked her watch: 5:48. Right. No wonder.

Her eyes landed on a glowing sign: McDonald's.

If she'd been here with friends, they'd have wrinkled their noses. "So... Labour class," one would have teased, waving their nose in the air.

Now, she didn't care.

She walked in and headed straight for the self-service terminal, relief washing over her. No one to judge her, no awkward conversation, no forced smiles. Just her, the screen, and the simple task of ordering food.

She tapped in her choice, feeling a small thrill of independence. She could navigate this city, figure out her own way.

Even if it was just starting with fries and a burger.

She sank into the seat, forcing her shoulders down and focusing on her breathing. In... out... just like in yoga class. It helped. The butterflies in her chest — her

runaway thoughts — began to settle, landing briefly as if to take a rest.

Her lip throbbed. She realised she'd been biting it again and let go, massaging the small soreness. Her eyes wandered around the restaurant. Surprisingly, there wasn't a huge queue. Did people here eat later than at home? Or was it just that McDonald's didn't attract the fuss of Marlborough's judgmental eyes?

She spotted a mum juggling two small kids. A cluster of teens, a few years older than her, laughing too loudly over fries. She hurriedly looked away.

A boy sat by himself in the corner, headphones on, typing on his phone. He seemed absorbed in his own world, and for a second, Ayla envied him.

Focus.

Maps. Address. Stokes Croft.

It wasn't far. But it looked like the longest road in the world.

Her thumb hovered over the screen, ready to enter the house number, when a voice broke through the soft hum of the restaurant. She jumped and let out a small squeak — a mix of fright and nerves.

“Sorry! Didn’t mean to startle you!”

A girl, around her own age, wearing a plain McDonald’s uniform, appeared beside her with a tray. She grinned, slightly embarrassed.

“I was just... sitting in my own thoughts,” Ayla muttered, cheeks burning.

The girl nodded politely, murmuring a soft, “No worries,” and put down the tray with her order. Ayla exhaled, heart still hammering, and turned back to her phone.

Right. Focus. Stokes Croft awaited.

Chapter Seven

She ate quickly, deliberately. The food wasn't bad at all — in fact, it was surprisingly good — and she wondered again why she and her friends had always snubbed it. Perhaps it was only so good because she was absolutely starving.

Once the tray was empty, she tossed the rubbish into the bin and pushed the door open, stepping out into the heat of the afternoon.

She pulled out her phone to check directions and had to tilt it this way and that, squinting at the screen, before realising she'd walked out on the wrong side of the building.

Ayla blinked, cheeks warming. Silly. But there was no way she was going to march straight back through the restaurant, letting everyone know she was lost.

Instead, she took the longer route around, keeping her bag tight against her side and her head down, letting the

city hum around her as she finally started moving in the right direction.

She'd been walking for what felt like forever, sweat dripping down her back, hair sticking to her neck. Finally, she spotted the sign for Stokes Croft. Relief surged — and then her chest sank. The street looked endless.

She pulled out her phone again and froze. She'd forgotten the house number.

Quickly, she typed it in, holding her breath as the map recalculated. Nearby? Not even close. She wasn't even halfway there.

Ayla groaned and muttered under her breath, pacing herself. She looked from side to side, left... right... left again...

Wait. Right. Definitely right on Stokes Croft.

She adjusted her path, shoulders hunched against the afternoon sun, and started moving again, hoping that somewhere down this long, winding street, the place that could be her refuge was waiting.

How hard could it be to follow a street? Ayla muttered under her breath, frustration bubbling up with every mismatched number she passed. Surely she had to be close by now.

She slowed her pace, squinting at the dot on her phone. It had to be wrong. It couldn't possibly be *this far*. Nothing around her gave any clue that she was in the right place — no signs, no group of kids hanging out, nothing that matched the picture she'd seen online.

The feeling of being watched crept over her. Heads turned as she passed. People glanced, whispered, or stared too long. She wasn't entirely sure if she was imagining it or if they really did. Her skin prickled.

She hugged her bag tighter and forced herself to breathe. *Focus. One step at a time.*

But every step felt heavier, the street stretching out endlessly before her, and the city's noise, all the chatter, the traffic, the music from a café seemed to be getting louder, it felt like it was pressing in on her from all sides.

She took a step back, retracing her path, convinced she'd missed a sign or some clue. Her eyes darted from door to door, searching.

"You lost?"

The voice made her jump. A boy, about her age or perhaps a few years older, was walking toward her. Her cheeks burned for no reason she could pin down. She felt completely out of place, like the city itself was reminding her that she didn't belong here.

She nodded slowly, throat tight, then forced herself to speak.

"I... I'm trying to find a place. To stay. There should be one here, but... it seems to be gone now..."

Her voice faltered at the end.

The boy just grinned, wide and easy, like he knew the world better than she did.

"The House? Oh, it's here alright. We just... don't advertise it. Follow me."

He didn't slow down, didn't even glance back. She hurried to match his pace, heart hammering in her chest, stomach twisting in anticipation and nerves.

A few steps further down the street, he led her between two houses, through a gate she had passed at least two or three times already. Her mind protested — *I've walked past this! How is this the way?* — but she didn't stop. She followed. Somehow, she trusted him.

Chapter Eight

The boy led her into a small courtyard. There wasn't much to see — a few rubbish bins, a bike shed, and a little trailer stacked with old newspapers. It felt ordinary, even a little scruffy, but she didn't have time to think about that.

He darted across the courtyard and slipped into the house. Ayla almost had to run to keep up, bag bouncing against her side as she hurried after him.

Inside, the dim light made her blink. It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust. The walls were covered in graffiti, some of it messy, some of it strangely artistic. Colourful scribbles and slogans layered over each other, giving the place a lived-in, chaotic personality.

He didn't bother switching on any lights. She followed silently, the shadows swallowing her as she trailed behind him.

He moved through the building with purpose, weaving between rooms and corners until they reached the other side. Ayla's stomach fluttered with nerves and curiosity. She had no idea what she was stepping into — only that somewhere beyond this dim corridor, there was a place she might finally belong.

When they emerged on the other side, Ayla realised her eyes had finally adjusted to the dim interior. The early evening sunlight made little specks dance before her eyes as they stepped out of the building at the back. She squinted against it, struggling to keep the boy in sight as he moved along the wall.

Behind the house, there was a little park — or maybe a garden. She hadn't expected that. A few kids lounged on a bench and in some old lawn chairs, lazily passing around a cigarette and sipping from cans of soda.

She scrunched her nose. The cigarette wasn't exactly pleasant. It smelled acrid, a sharp reminder of just how different this place was from home.

Still, there was something about it. The way the kids were relaxed, half-laughing, half-absorbed in their own world. It was chaotic, messy, and unpolished — but it felt alive.

The boy didn't slow down, weaving around the group as if he belonged here completely. Ayla's heart beat faster, half nerves, half curiosity.

This was it. She was stepping into a world completely her own — or at least, one she hoped could be.

He called out a greeting to the kids on the bench, who were mostly boys, though a few girls were there too. Some waved, some smirked, some just stared. Ayla took a moment to look around, taking it all in. They seemed friendly enough, curious even, but there was that unmistakable flicker in their eyes — the question: Do you belong here?

Which she really didn't feel like she did.

“Who's your friend, Eds?” one of the girls asked, leaning back on the bench.

He turned to her, grinning wide. “I forgot to ask!” Then he looked at Ayla. “Who's my friend?”

Ayla couldn't help herself. A laugh bubbled up — almost a chortle — and she covered her mouth with her hand, cheeks warming.

“Ayla. I'm Ayla...”

She trailed off, unsure what else to say. Unsure what she should share, what they wanted to know, what was appropriate, how much she should let slip.

The kids watched her, half-smiles forming. Some leaned forward slightly, waiting. She took a deep breath, trying to steady herself, and added softly, “I... I just got here.”

Chapter Nine

They stepped inside, and Ayla immediately noticed the smell. Not like the cigarette outside — thankfully — but not like home either. It was... alive somehow. A mix of food, old wood, paint, and something she couldn't name. Different. Strange. Surely nothing like home.

The house was full of sounds. Someone was playing music in the next room — not a recording, not Spotify, but real instruments, the kind that hit your chest in a satisfying thrum. Voices drifted from another room, laughter mingled with quiet arguments, clattering from the kitchen somewhere down the hall.

“Paddy!” the boy called, his voice loud enough to make her jump. “Someone will be with you in a minute. Just wait here.”

Before she could protest, he had darted further into the house, leaving her alone in the entrance area.

Ayla looked around, taking in the walls. They were crowded with paintings — some abstract, some chaotic, some so rough they might have been made by someone who had never held a brush before. Nothing like the carefully curated art at home. No Van Goghs, no Magrittes, not even a Hopper.

She wondered briefly if this was the kids' own work. Probably. It felt like it.

Footsteps approached, and she straightened her back, wiping her hands on her jeans. Damp from sweat, as if her nerves were escaping through her pores. Now they would send her away. Tell her she didn't belong here. That this place was for kids from poor homes, from real struggles. Not some doll from the rich part of town with a perverted side.

“Hi there. Can I help?”

A man in his thirties stood in front of her. His greeting was generic, like she might have been delivering a package or asking for a friend. Yet there was a kindness in his eyes, a softness in the way he looked at her, that made her feel, just a little, like she wasn't completely out of place.

Ayla nodded, swallowing. “I... I'm here to... stay. Someone said I could?”

He smiled faintly, just enough to be reassuring. “Right. We’ll get you sorted out. You’re safe here.”

Paddy gestured to a small corner where she could set her bag down. “Put your things there, and we’ll do a quick tour of the house.”

Ayla hesitated for a moment. Was it safe to leave all her belongings here? Strangers, kids she’d never met... But then she reminded herself, if this was home, she had to trust the others. She carefully set her bag down, patting it as if to reassure herself.

Following Paddy into the next room, she realised it was a living room. A couple of girls sat at the table, focused on something that looked like bracelets, threading beads with delicate fingers. They looked up as she and Paddy entered, and one of the girls smiled warmly.

“Hi, I’m Willow, but everyone calls me Willa here.”

Ayla returned the smile, cheeks warming slightly. She straightened her shoulders, trying to sound confident.

“Pleasure. I’m... Ayla. I am... new?”

Her voice faltered at the end, and she cursed herself silently. *What kind of lame introduction was that?* She even sounded unsure, but Willa didn’t seem to mind.

“Welcome,” Willa said, her smile never faltering, before returning to the bracelet on the table.

Ayla looked down, focusing on the colourful threads and beads, trying to calm the fluttering in her chest. This was her first small step into something she hoped could be... home.

They moved on into the kitchen, and Ayla spotted the boy from before unpacking groceries, stacking tins and boxes on the counters with careful precision. Paddy walked over to help him, and the two of them moved together with a quiet rhythm, like they’d done this a thousand times.

“So, this is our kitchen,” Paddy said, glancing back at her. “And Eddie, you know better than to leave the poor girl in the hallway all alone when it’s her first time here.”

His voice wasn’t harsh, not scolding at all, actually, but there was a tinge of disappointment. Ayla appreciated it. Being left alone hadn’t been terrible, she thought, but it would have been far better to have someone there to ease her in, to make her feel less like an intruder.

She took a slow breath, letting herself settle a little. The kitchen smelled faintly of bread and something sweet, maybe leftover cake, and the sound of their movement

and low chatter made the house feel... lived-in, warm, and oddly welcoming.

Even in her nerves, Ayla allowed herself a tiny thought: maybe this place could really be home.

As they stepped out of the kitchen, a door at the far end of the living room swung open. A few kids spilled into the room, laughing and joking. One carried a guitar; another a bass.

The girl with the bass had her hair hanging in sweaty bangs over her face. She grinned at something the guitar player said, then, just as quickly, turned to look at Ayla. Her smile stayed on her lips.

Ayla stared. Not at the smile, not at the bass, but at the lower arm exposed by the sleeveless top — a tattoo snaking along her skin — and the dark tufts of armpit hair peeking out. Somehow, seeing it felt intimate, personal, almost shocking. Masculine, defiant. Out of place.

Her face warmed and she quickly tried to look away, forcing her attention to the guitar player instead. She was probably a couple of years older than her, casually leaning against the doorframe, watching the bass girl with easy amusement.

Ayla felt a strange mix of curiosity and hesitation. Everything about this place felt raw and real, unlike anything she'd known before. She took a careful breath, reminding herself to keep moving, to keep looking like she belonged — even if she didn't quite yet.

Chapter Ten

The house had settled into a quieter rhythm as evening fell. A couple of kids still hung out outside, but inside, the noise had dulled to a gentle hum. Ayla found a seat in the kitchen, letting herself sink into it for the first time since arriving.

Willa moved around the counter, filling a kettle and putting together tea. Somewhere in the living room, the soft strum of a guitar floated through the air. From the open window, she could hear the low chatter of the group outside, the occasional burst of laughter carrying in.

“So, is this your first time?” Willa asked, turning around with two mugs in hand and setting one down in front of her.

Ayla nodded, staring into the mug as if it might answer the question for her.

“Yeah... I didn’t even know I was gonna...” Her voice trailed off, unsure, and she swallowed, letting the warm scent of tea fill the pause.

Willa’s smile softened, gentle and understanding. “I had it all planned the first time. I was only thirteen, so I was pretty scared when I ran away.”

Ayla glanced up at her, meeting that steady, calm gaze. There was comfort there — in the voice, in the words. It wasn’t like home, but it felt safer. She let herself relax a little further and tucked a leg under her on the chair, unaware she was mirroring Willa’s pose in the other chair.

Ayla wasn’t sure if it was okay to ask why Willa had run away, but she figured Willa probably wouldn’t want to answer that from someone she’d just met. Best not to push. She let it go, taking a small sip of her tea.

Her thoughts wandered to the sleeping quarters. They’d been up there a little while ago, and she’d been given a mattress on the floor, just like everyone else. Willa had helped her set up the bedding, showing her how the space worked. She had called it the sleeping room. Not bedroom. Considering the layout, that made sense.

“Everyone sleeps together because of the size of the house,” Willa had explained, shrugging as if it were

obvious. “We tried using the band’s music room once as a bedroom, but... nobody really cared.”

Instead, they’d hung up sheets in the middle of the room to create a division between the boys and the girls. Ayla had been grateful for that. She wasn’t used to changing in front of others, especially not boys. She did note, though, that the boys had to walk through the girls’ area.

She stirred her tea slowly, letting her thoughts settle. The house was messy, loud at times, and a little chaotic — but it had boundaries, too. Small gestures, like the sheets in the bedroom, made it feel... liveable. Safe. Maybe even like a home. She realised her mind kept returning to that question. Was it home? Something interim? Something not for her?

While they sat quietly, lost in their own thoughts, a sudden commotion erupted outside. Loud voices, shouting, the unmistakable sound of people arguing — maybe even fighting. Ayla glanced at Willa, expecting concern, but Willa just sat there, mug clasped between her hands, leaning forward on her elbows, and shrugged.

“Happens all the time. Fucking asocial arses,” she muttered.

Ayla nodded, trying to peer through the window, but the kitchen light made it impossible to see anything outside.

Then a door inside the house slammed open. The girl with the bass from earlier — hair clinging in sweaty strands, bare legs — came marching through, her gaze fixed straight ahead. She moved with the precision of someone leading a charge, a soldier on a mission.

Ayla blinked. She hadn't expected... that.

A second later, the front door banged shut behind her, and her voice carried, sharp and commanding:

“Bedtime, kids! You get us one more complaint and I swear to God I will kick you so hard in the nuts you’ll end up sitting on your arse out on Stokes, not knowing what day it is!”

The door slammed again as she marched back inside, leaving silence in her wake.

Ayla turned to Willa, wide-eyed.

“Nobody fucks with Joni,” Willa said, grinning.

Ayla didn't know what to say. She just nodded and stared down into her mug, letting the warmth seep into her hands, and her thoughts swirl with the realization

that this house ran by its own rules — and Joni ran the toughest of them all.

Suddenly, a wave of exhaustion hit Ayla. Her limbs felt heavy, like she hadn't slept in days. She yawned and stretched, the muscles in her back and shoulders loosening just enough to make her sigh.

Willa mirrored her, stretching her legs out before pushing herself to her feet.

Together, they carried their mugs over to the sink and set them down, the clink of ceramic sounding unusually loud in the quiet kitchen.

Without a word, they walked side by side toward the sleeping room, the house settling around them as the evening deepened. Ayla's steps felt slower now, weighted with the fatigue that had been building all day, but also with a strange, comforting relief.

She imagined herself curling up on the mattress, surrounded by the hum of the house, the faint music drifting in from other rooms, and finally — finally — letting herself rest.

Chapter Eleven

Ayla woke with a start, unsure where she was. Everything felt off. The sun hit from the wrong angle, harsh and unfamiliar. The blanket tangled around her limbs felt strange against her skin. A scent lingered in the air — soap or deodorant, she couldn't place it — mixed oddly with the faint smell of car exhaust drifting in through the open window.

The sounds were equally foreign. Someone whispered nearby, a distant shout carried through the house, and the constant hum of traffic pressed in from outside. Nothing here matched the rhythm of home, and for a moment, Ayla felt unmoored, like she had woken in a place that wasn't supposed to exist.

She blinked slowly, taking in the room around her: the mattress on the floor, the sheets hung up for privacy, and the faint glint of morning light catching on the walls. The house was alive, but not in a way she was used to.

Ayla let out a small sigh, hugging the blanket closer. She wasn't sure she was ready to be awake in this new world, but a part of her — a quiet, stubborn part — knew she had no choice but to face it.

And then it clicked.

The house. Stokes Croft. The courtyard. Paddy. Joni. Willa.

It all slid back into place, and the smells and sounds stopped feeling wrong — just different.

Ayla opened her eyes properly. Two girls were sitting cross-legged on a mattress nearby, whispering to each other, their heads bent close. Morning light filtered through the thin sheets that had been strung up for privacy, turning everything pale and soft.

She pushed herself up on her elbows and instinctively glanced down, making sure she wasn't topless. Still in her bra. Relief.

As she sat there, still shaking sleep from her head, a boy walked through the room wrapped in nothing but a towel, damp hair dripping onto his shoulders. He moved as if the room were entirely his, entirely safe. Like being half-naked in a room with near strangers was the most natural thing in the world.

He didn't hurry. Didn't apologise. Didn't even look embarrassed.

Ayla felt heat rise to her cheeks — not outrage, not exactly discomfort. Something else. A strange flicker of admiration. The ease of it. The confidence. The absence of shame.

After he disappeared behind the hanging sheets that served as makeshift curtains, she quickly reached for her trousers. She wrestled them on beneath the blanket, careful and strategic, trying not to flash anyone by accident. The duvet twisted around her knees, and she nearly lost her balance sitting upright, but eventually she managed.

Her heart was beating faster than the situation really called for.

Around her, the house was waking up. Someone laughed downstairs. A cupboard door banged. The whispering girls broke into quiet giggles.

Ayla smoothed her hair back and sat still for a moment, feeling the unfamiliar texture of this morning settle over her.

She was here.

And the world hadn't ended overnight.

She shimmied the trousers up properly, tugging them into place before standing. The denim felt stiff compared to her soft sleep-warm skin. She buttoned them quickly, aware that the two girls nearby had turned to look at her.

She didn't know their names yet, but she was almost certain one of them had been sitting with Willa the day before, threading beads onto a bracelet.

"Morning," she mumbled, voice still thick with sleep.

"Morning," one of them replied gently, offering a small smile before returning to her whispering conversation.

Ayla reached for her toiletries — the little clutch she'd packed in such a fever the night before — and stepped carefully between mattresses toward the door. The floor creaked under her weight. The house felt less chaotic this morning, more lived-in than overwhelming.

In the hallway, the air was cooler. She followed the faint sound of running water and found the bathroom door ajar. Steam drifted out into the corridor, carrying the scent of cheap shampoo and something minty.

She paused for a second before knocking lightly on the frame.

"Occupied?"

“Nope, all yours!” a voice called from inside — the towel boy from earlier, now fully dressed and brushing his teeth in front of the mirror. He gave her an easy nod as he squeezed past her to leave, as unbothered as before.

When the door clicked shut behind him, Ayla finally allowed herself a long breath.

She set her things down by the sink and looked at her reflection. Her hair was messy, eyes slightly puffy, skin flushed from sleep and nerves. She didn’t look like someone who had run away. She didn’t look brave or reckless or ruined.

She just looked like herself. Her old tired self.

The thought steadied her more than she expected.

She washed at the sink as quickly and quietly as she could. The tap squeaked when she turned it, and she winced, glancing at the door even though it was closed. She didn’t dare take a shower — not yet. The idea of someone walking in while she stood there under running water felt like too much.

Instead, she splashed her face, scrubbed yesterday’s sweat from her neck and arms, and leaned closer to the mirror to brush her teeth. The mint burned pleasantly, sharp and clean. When she pulled a fresh top over her

head, the cotton felt cool and reassuring against her skin.

A small reset.

She carried her things back to the sleeping room and dropped them onto her mattress, smoothing the blanket out of habit. The room was emptier now; most people had drifted off downstairs.

Her stomach gave a quiet but unmistakable protest.

Breakfast.

She hesitated for a second, wondering how this worked. Was there food provided? A system? A rota? Or did everyone just fend for themselves?

Only one way to find out.

She made her way down the stairs, the wooden steps creaking under her weight. Voices floated up from below — softer than last night, threaded with morning sluggishness. The smell reached her before the kitchen did: toast, maybe, and something frying.

Her pulse quickened slightly.

This was her first morning here. First morning away.

She stepped into the kitchen doorway, unsure whether she was about to be welcomed into breakfast — or told she'd have to figure it out on her own.

Chapter Twelve

Ayla hovered just inside the kitchen doorway, suddenly unsure what to do with her hands.

There was a grown-up in the room — a woman this time. She stood out immediately. Maybe because there hadn't been many adults around last night. Maybe just because the kitchen wasn't very full yet. Either way, the difference was obvious.

Ayla scanned the room instinctively, hoping to spot Willa. She wasn't there. Just a couple of kids at the table she didn't recognise, hunched over mugs and cereal bowls.

Her gaze drifted toward the counter where someone was standing over a frying pan. The smell hit her properly now — eggs, butter, something warm and solid.

As if summoned by the look alone, the person at the stove turned around.

Joni.

Hair tied up today, sleeveless top again, tattoo visible when she shifted the pan. She smiled at Ayla and nodded toward the stove.

“I’ve made way too many. I hope you can help me eat this.”

Ayla nodded quickly. “Yeah. I mean — sure. I can.”

Why did that sound so awkward?

For some reason she felt every pair of eyes in the room settle on her, even if they probably hadn’t. Heat rose to her cheeks. She focused very hard on the frying pan, on the yellow folds of egg, on anything but herself.

Before she could think of something intelligent to say, the woman crossed the kitchen and stopped in front of her. She held out her hand.

“Good morning. You must be Ayla.”

Her voice was calm. Not fake-friendly. Just steady.

Ayla hesitated half a second before taking the hand. It was warm and firm.

“I’m Ruth,” the woman continued. “I help out here. Make sure you guys aren’t drowning in dust and dirt

and the house is at least vaguely functioning.” A faint smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

Help out.

Not in charge.

That detail lodged somewhere important in Ayla’s mind. She wondered whether Paddy was in charge, or if the kids were.

“Welcome,” Ruth added gently.

And for the second time in less than twelve hours, Ayla felt something inside her loosen — just a fraction.

Ruth gave her a quick rundown of how things ran in the house. Some kids had places to be, some didn’t. People moved in and out all the time. Nothing ever really stayed steady.

Ayla just nodded along, taking it in. She was grateful for the insight — but also a little overwhelmed. Her head spun with names she didn’t know, rules she wasn’t used to, and the sense that this world ran on its own strange logic.

“Thanks, Ruth! I’ll let her in on the rest of our secrets while we eat breakfast,” Joni said, sliding two plates

across the counter toward Ayla. Eggs and toast, golden and steaming.

Ayla grabbed one almost on autopilot, not trusting herself to think about anything else right now.

Joni turned and walked out of the kitchen, leaving Ayla holding her plate like a nervous prop. She gave Ruth a quick look — an unspoken “sorry” — before hurrying after Joni.

They passed through the living room, past the scattered cushions and low tables. Ayla had expected them to sit at the main dinner table, but Joni veered sharply to the left, leading her into the band’s room.

The space was filled with instruments — guitars, a bass, drums, and scattered sheet music. Posters covered the walls, and a faint smell of polish and resin hung in the air. Sunlight spilled in through a large window, catching dust motes like tiny dancers in the beams.

“This is where I usually eat,” Joni said, gesturing to a small coffee table pushed against the wall. “It’s quieter here. I usually just sit by myself, enjoying a bit of quiet time while I wake up.”

Ayla looked for a place on the cluttered table to set her plate down, still holding it tightly, and let her gaze wander over the room. It wasn’t fancy. It wasn’t neat.

But somehow it already felt alive — chaotic, yes, but welcoming in a way she hadn't expected.

She stood there, not wanting to sit down first, although her tummy was growling. She was still watching Joni, trying to figure out how to fit in without saying too much, without making a mistake.

She realised that this wasn't just breakfast. This was Joni measuring her. Perhaps assessing whether she would fit in? Perhaps she did this with everyone new. Ayla just hoped she would pass.

Ayla's eyes went back to the band room again, drinking in the details. Posters lined the walls — not professional ones, not the kind you'd find in a shop, but clearly made with care. Some were digital prints, crisp and colourful; others looked like they'd been painstakingly cut and glued in an arts-and-crafts frenzy.

Her gaze drifted to the corner where they stood and where the small table sat, surrounded by a mismatched set of garden chairs. Joni nudged a few things onto the floor to make space for Ayla's plate and gave her a small grin.

Ayla walked over and sat her plate down, still taking in the room. The walls were dark — maybe black, maybe a deep navy — and the back wall was a mural in itself.

A huge Woodstock poster, painted directly onto the plaster, stretched across most of it, partially layered with graffiti. Some of it was surprisingly pretty — swirls of colour, delicate lettering — and some were nothing more than quick tags, sharp and chaotic.

It all felt alive. Messy, yes, but vibrant. Every mark, every poster, every scratch of paint told a story, and Ayla felt a strange thrill at being surrounded by it.

She sat down across from Joni, who was already digging in. For a moment, Ayla just stared at her plate, then back around the room. The chaos of it all — the mural, the posters, the worn chairs — didn't feel intimidating anymore. Somehow, it felt like a home she could belong to.

And for the first time since she'd run away, Ayla allowed herself to believe that maybe, just maybe, she had.

Chapter Thirteen

They talked while they ate — or rather, Joni talked, and Ayla listened.

Joni spoke with her mouth half full at times, gesturing with her fork, completely at ease in the room as if she owned every inch of it. Maybe she did, in a way.

“The boys outside,” she said, rolling her eyes slightly, “they smoke weed and then suddenly they’re all economists. Proper debates about supply and demand and who owes who what.”

Ayla let out a small, surprised huff of laughter before she could stop herself.

“They don’t mean harm,” Joni continued. “Mostly. But we’ve had complaints. Noise. Smoke drifting into the wrong windows. I get it.” She shrugged. “Still. Not much to do.”

She leaned back in her chair, balancing it briefly on two legs before letting it thud back down again.

“The House is open. That’s kind of the point. If you need it, you’re in. We don’t ask too many questions.”

Ayla looked down at her plate, absorbing that.

“We only kick people out if they steal from someone here,” Joni added, her tone shifting slightly — still casual, but firmer. “Or if they bring in hard stuff. That’s a hard no. We’ve lost people to that before. Not doing it again.”

The air seemed to settle differently after that.

Ayla nodded slowly. The rules were simple. Clear lines. In a strange way, that comforted her. It wasn’t polished or official or written down anywhere, but it was understood.

Open door. No stealing. No hard drugs.

She took another bite of egg, chewing thoughtfully.

It wasn’t what she’d grown up with. There were no framed certificates on the walls, no polite dinner conversations, no careful silences over dessert. But there was something here too — something raw and protective and strangely structured beneath the chaos.

And as Joni kept talking, voice steady and animated, Ayla realised she was no longer just listening out of politeness.

She was listening because she wanted to understand how to stay.

Joni talked about herself the way she seemed to do most things — plainly, without polishing the edges.

“I got banned from home,” she said with a small shrug, as if she were mentioning being banned from a library. “Long story.”

She didn’t elaborate.

Ayla didn’t ask.

There was a quiet understanding in that — some stories were offered in layers, not pried open.

“This time,” Joni continued, scraping the last of the egg onto her toast, “I’ve been here a couple of months. Longest stretch so far.”

“That’s good?” Ayla ventured carefully.

“Yeah. I think so.” Joni tilted her head, considering it. “I’m trying to sort stuff out properly. Get help finding a job. Maybe an apartment eventually.”

She said apartment like it was a far-off country. Possible. But distant.

“And the band?” Ayla asked before she could stop herself.

Joni’s expression shifted instantly — not softer, not exactly — but brighter. Charged.

“That’s the real plan,” she admitted. “Make a living from music. Touring, recording, the lot. I don’t want to just survive, you know? I want to actually live.”

The way she said it made Ayla’s chest tighten slightly.

“I mean, I’ll stack shelves if I have to,” Joni added with a crooked grin. “But I’m not giving this up.” She gestured vaguely toward the instruments around them. “This is the one thing that’s mine.”

Ayla looked around the dark room again — the painted walls, the layered graffiti, the slightly battered drum kit. It didn’t look like a stepping stone. It looked like a beginning.

“You’re good,” Ayla said quietly. She wasn’t even sure why she said it. She had only heard a little yesterday, but it had stuck with her.

Joni huffed a small laugh. “We’re alright.”

There was that we again.

Ayla noticed it.

For the first time, she wondered what it might feel like to belong to a we that wasn't decided by blood or obligation — but by choice.

Ayla felt the weight of the silence after Joni finished speaking. It wasn't uncomfortable — just open. Waiting.

She swallowed. If this place was built on honesty, she couldn't just sit there nodding forever.

"I... sort of ran too," she began, keeping her eyes on her plate. "My parents found out about something. They weren't exactly calm about it."

That was an understatement.

Joni didn't interrupt. She just listened, elbows on her knees, chin resting lightly on her hand.

"They were shouting," Ayla continued. "About how people would talk. How the damage was done." She gave a small, humourless laugh. "Like I'd set fire to the house or something."

She stopped there.

The why sat heavy in her throat. It felt like standing on the edge of something high — knowing if she stepped forward there would be no taking it back.

This felt like a safe space. It did.

But safe didn't mean guaranteed.

What if Joni's expression changed? What if she laughed? Or worse — told the others? What if the word spread through the house the way it had at home?

If they turned on her, she had nowhere else to go. No backup plan. No second address tucked into her phone.

Her fingers tightened around the fork.

"I didn't really have a plan," she admitted instead. "I just... left."

The room felt very still.

Joni leaned back slightly, studying her — not in a sharp way. More like she was trying to read between the lines.

"That's brave," Joni said finally.

Ayla blinked. "It was stupid."

“Most brave things are,” Joni replied, a faint smile tugging at her mouth. “Running without a plan? That’s not weakness. That’s desperation mixed with hope.”

Hope.

The word caught Ayla off guard.

Joni shrugged lightly. “You don’t have to tell me everything. Not today. Not ever, if you don’t want to.” Her tone was steady. No pressure. No prying. “You’re here. That’s enough for now.”

Something in Ayla’s chest loosened — just a little.

The why was still there, coiled and waiting. But it wasn’t being dragged into the light against her will.

And for the first time since she’d sat down in this dark, graffiti-covered room, she felt like maybe she wouldn’t be pushed away after all.

Chapter Fourteen

The house felt different once breakfast was over. Less directed.

Ayla wandered from room to room without quite knowing what she was meant to do. She paused by the coffee table in the living room, flipping idly through a stack of dog-eared magazines. Music. Politics. Art. A random gardening one with a torn cover.

Her eyes travelled over the walls again. Paintings hung next to spray-painted tags. A careful charcoal portrait sat beside something that looked like it had been done in five furious minutes with a thick marker.

The place didn't have a style.

And yet it did.

A style made from fragments. From whoever had passed through and left a mark. It shouldn't have worked — but somehow it did.

She drifted into the kitchen. Empty now. The morning buzz had dissolved. The house seemed to breathe more slowly at this hour.

She imagined the boys from outside still asleep somewhere upstairs, wrapped in duvets that smelled faintly of smoke and last night's arguments.

Her gaze landed on the sink. A few plates. A couple of glasses. A frying pan soaking in cloudy water.

She looked around automatically for the dishwasher.

Her eyes scanned under the counter. Opened a cupboard. Checked the other side.

Nothing.

The absence hit her harder than it should have. A small, sharp pang. The world here was so different from home. No silent humming machine to swallow the mess away. No seamless systems running in the background. Everything here had to be handled by someone's hands.

The sadness rose quickly — and just as quickly, she huffed out a quiet laugh at herself.

Missing the dishwasher, are you, Ay?

Of all the things to ache for.

She rolled up her sleeves without thinking and reached for the sponge. If this place worked because everyone left something behind, maybe she could start small.

Not with a mural. Just with clean plates.

Ayla had just opened yet another cupboard, squinting at mismatched stacks of bowls, when a voice broke the quiet.

“Good morning, Ayla!”

She nearly dropped the glass in her hand.

Willa stood in the doorway, leaning lazily against the frame, arms folded, hair still slightly rumped from sleep.

“The glasses go in that one,” she added, pointing across the kitchen.

Ayla gave a small, sheepish smile and crossed the room to the correct cupboard. Of course.

“First night can be rough, I guess,” Willa continued, stepping fully into the kitchen. “How did you sleep?”

Ayla shrugged, folding the tea towel carefully before placing it back on the counter.

“I slept okay, I guess. For a first night.”

She smiled — a small one, but real.

Willa smiled back, warm and knowing. “That’s a win, then.”

There was no interrogation in her tone. No pressure to confess nightmares or homesickness. Just quiet acceptance.

Ayla leaned her hip lightly against the counter, feeling less like she was trespassing now and more like she was simply... there. Existing in the space without having to justify it. Not quite belonging. Not yet. But not entirely an outsider either.

“Gets easier,” Willa added. “The noise. The smells. The weird towel parade in the mornings.”

Ayla let out a soft laugh at that.

The kitchen didn’t feel as big anymore. Or as foreign. The sunlight through the window caught the clean glasses she’d just put away, and for the first time that morning, the unfamiliarity didn’t sting quite so sharply.

Maybe sleeping okay on the first night really was a win.

They made coffee together — strong and slightly bitter — and carried their mugs outside.

The courtyard was still cool in the shade, so they crossed over to a park bench where the sun had just begun to reach. The wood was warm already. Ayla tilted her face slightly toward the light without thinking, letting it settle on her skin.

For a while, they sat in silence.

The sound of traffic from Stokes Croft threaded faintly between the buildings — not loud, just a distant, steady hum occasionally broken by a horn tooting. The house behind them was quiet, except that sometimes she saw shadows move behind the windows. Otherwise, the morning felt suspended.

Willa broke the quiet first.

“So, do you have any plans for the day?”

She peered at Ayla over the rim of her mug.

Ayla considered the question seriously. Plans implied direction. Intention. A sense of belonging somewhere specific at a certain time.

She had none of that.

She shrugged.

Willa's mouth curved, as if that had been the exact answer she expected.

"Then I know what to do!" she declared lightly. "Are you good with arts and crafts?"

Ayla hesitated. At home, "good" had meant polished. Proper. Worth showing. She wasn't sure she qualified under that definition.

She shrugged again.

Willa laughed softly. "Perfect. That's exactly the level of skill required."

Ayla felt a flicker of something she hadn't felt since yesterday morning — curiosity.

"What are we making?" she asked cautiously.

Willa's eyes gleamed a little. "You'll see."

And for the first time since arriving, Ayla realised she was about to do something not because she had to — but simply because she could.

Chapter Fifteen

“Dammit!” Ayla muttered under her breath, though the frustration was real. She had let go of the bracelet at just the wrong moment, and tiny beads spilled across the floor like miniature stars scattered in every direction.

“It’s fine! Happens all the time,” Willa said without looking up, her fingers nimbly threading beads into a pattern far more intricate than Ayla could manage. “We’ll Hoover when we’re done making a mess.”

Ayla sank a little lower into the couch cushions and shook her head, trying not to groan. She had never thought of herself as an arts-and-crafts person. She had always admired people who could make something delicate out of thin wire and string, who could sit for hours creating patterns without getting fidgety.

Yet here she was, sitting cross-legged on the couch, surrounded by string and tiny boxes with beads and pearls, a bracelet taking shape slowly in her hands.

The sound of the band's music drifted from the practice room next door. Something light and free, vaguely hippie, the kind of tune that seemed to bend in the air and curl around the walls.

It was entirely out of character for her, and yet, in a way that made her heart lift, it felt like home. Not the home she knew, but the home she wanted.

Ayla picked up another pearl and added it to the string. Her hands trembled slightly at first, then settled into the rhythm. Bead by bead, the frustration ebbed a little, replaced by a quiet satisfaction she hadn't expected.

Willa glanced over at her and smiled. "See? You're a natural. Told you, skill doesn't matter here. Just your hands and a bit of patience."

Ayla laughed softly, the sound mingling with the music and sunlight spilling into the room. For the first time since she had arrived, she felt like she belonged. Even if just for a moment.

The door slammed open and the band members spilled into the room, laughter and chatter tumbling behind them.

Ayla couldn't help but look up. Her eyes darted from one to another, taking them in. One girl's left arm was a tapestry of tattoos, intricate and bold. A boy had half a

dozen piercings glinting in the light, catching the sun like tiny shards. And then Joni — Joni, with her confident grin and armpit hair, rocking it like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Ayla bit her lip, suddenly self-conscious. She felt exposed, like a mirror had been held up and reflected every bit of normality she carried from Marlborough, every inch of the girl she'd been hiding.

She had a strange urge to do something. Not to fit in, but to bring distance to home. She considered what she could do.

Tattoos? Definitely not. She barely had the courage to keep her own thoughts straight, let alone wear ink permanently on her skin.

Piercings? Maybe, if she was braver, but the idea made her wince.

Armpit hair? Joni owned it with effortless defiance, but Ayla knew she didn't have that kind of confidence. She would be hyper-aware every second, constantly tugging at sleeves, curling inward.

And the truth was, she didn't need any of it.

She looked down at her hands, at the bracelet in progress, and realised something. She didn't have to

copy them to belong. She just... had to show up. Be present. Participate in her own way.

Even if that meant being the “normal” one for now.

Joni spotted the girls on the couch and made her way over, grinning wide. She reached out and gently shook Ayla’s shoulders.

“That looks difficult!” she laughed.

Ayla tightened her grip on the nearly finished bracelet, half irritated that Joni had chosen this moment to tease her, and half thrilled that she had noticed her at all. She tilted her head back to meet Joni’s smile and returned it, shy but genuine.

“Has Ruth talked to you yet? House meeting, three o’clock. Probably just to introduce Ayla, I guess.”

Both Ayla and Willa shook their heads.

House meeting? Ayla’s imagination went wild. Were they going to chant like some wild tribe? Pass around a pipe? Vote on whether she could stay? She doubted it, especially since Joni had told her everyone was welcome here. Still, it stirred a mix of nerves and excitement in her chest.

She let out a quiet breath and focused back on the tiny pearls in her hands, threading them carefully. The band had got something to drink and withdrawn back to their room. The sound of music started again, first the guitar, then the drums and bass joining in. And in here, she started carving out her own little corner of belonging.

Three o'clock? She glanced down for the time, only to remember she'd left her phone upstairs, still in silent mode, hidden in her bag. She hadn't dared check it that morning, and now she felt the tug of curiosity mixed with worry.

Had her parents reported her missing yet? Probably not, at least not her father — his career would come first, and she doubted anyone outside their home knew she'd run off.

She made a mental note: she'd try calling her mum later, when she felt ready. For now, she had a bracelet to finish and a house meeting to survive.

Chapter Sixteen

The windows upstairs were covered, but a streak of sunlight cut through the fabric and landed on her mattress. Ayla sat there for a long moment, staring at it. Her phone buzzed again, though she didn't touch it. Two voice messages from her mum, one missed call from her dad — no message attached — and a stream of texts that seemed endless. She had read them all. Twice.

Her mum was all over the place. Threats, pleading, reasoning. A flood of emotion compressed into tiny rectangles of text.

Ayla's stomach dropped as it finally clicked. Dad would block her credit card. Maybe he already had. The thought made her pulse quicken.

She sprang to her feet, heart hammering. Her jacket. Her little cardholder. She grabbed them both without hesitation, stuffing the cardholder into her pocket.

Downstairs now, she scanned the kitchen for someone — anyone — who could let her leave without drama. She wasn't sure who would care enough to notice, but she knew she had to go. And soon.

She wasn't sure if there were any grownups around. It seemed like they also came and went just like the kids did, slipping in and out without much notice. As she stepped into the kitchen, she spotted Willa leaning against the counter.

“I need to go do some stuff. Do I have to check out or tell someone?” Ayla asked, and something in her tone — a mix of uncertainty and polite caution — made Willa look up and crane her neck.

“There's no rules like that,” Willa said, pushing herself off the counter and stretching her arms overhead. “Nobody tells the grownups, but we usually tell a friend if we go, so they know and know when to expect you back.”

Ayla blinked, relieved but still unsure.

Willa gave her a small, easy shrug. “But unless it's something urgent, let's wait until after the house meeting. Then we can go together, yeah?”

Ayla nodded, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Okay... that works.”

“Cool,” Willa said with a grin, leaning back on the counter. “Don’t worry, you’re not stuck here. We’ll make a plan.”

Ayla felt a small weight lift off her shoulders. For the first time since she’d arrived, it felt like someone here understood her — no judgment, no hovering, just a little bit of quiet, practical kindness. She tucked her hands into her pockets, glanced around the kitchen, and let herself breathe a little easier.

Ayla shifted slightly on the couch, feeling the weight of the bracelet on her wrist. It was simple, a little uneven in places, but it felt like a tiny claim to belonging — a quiet signal that she was part of this messy, loud, alive place. She glanced around at the others, taking in the scattered energy: some sprawled on the floor, heads bent over sketchbooks or phones, two giggling girls sharing a beanbag, a boy perched on a kitchen chair drumming lightly on his thighs.

Joni flopped down beside her on the couch with a careless ease, stretching one arm along the back. Ayla’s chest warmed, her heart skipping in a way that made her both excited and nervous. She wasn’t sure if Joni noticed, and she didn’t dare look too closely, just letting herself settle a little closer to the girl, feeling part of the rhythm of the room.

Ayla's eyes wandered again, catching the glint of sunlight on a few of the other bracelets, mismatched and bright. Everyone here had a story, a style, a claim to the house just like hers. And for the first time in a long while, perhaps for the first time ever, she felt like she had one too.

Chapter Seventeen

Paddy arrived along with a woman Ayla hadn't seen before. She shifted on the couch, trying to make herself smaller, wishing she could disappear under the cushions. Every pair of eyes in the room seemed to land on her at once, and the heat creeping into her cheeks felt like it might give her away entirely. She forced a small, awkward smile, looking down at her bracelet, tracing the beads with her finger as if that could anchor her somehow.

Paddy's voice carried over the room, friendly but firm. "Everyone, let's remember — this is our space, our home. Let's treat it as such." The new woman beside him nodded in agreement, her gaze warm but observant, taking in the room as if noting who was present and who was missing.

Ayla could feel Willa's presence beside her, a reassuring weight she hadn't realised she needed. Joni leaned back on the couch, arms crossed casually, her

grin teasing but relaxed, and that gave Ayla a little courage.

She inhaled, letting her shoulders drop a fraction, and whispered to herself, *Okay... you're here. You're allowed to be here.* Even if it was nerve-wracking, even if everyone was watching, she let herself sink into the couch a little more, willing herself to stay.

Ayla fidgeted with her bracelet, twisting it gently around her wrist as her mind tried to absorb the rules without really hearing them. She caught bits of phrases — *noise, respect, boundaries* — and realised that these weren't just scoldings; they were reminders of the fragile balance keeping the house alive.

She stole a glance at Joni, whose expression was calm but sharp, like she had heard it all before and could tune it out if she wanted. Willa, on the other hand, seemed to be listening intently, nodding every so often, making Ayla feel like she should do the same.

The woman's voice softened slightly as she continued, explaining how the complaints weren't about them personally, but about perception. Ayla tried to imagine what the neighbours must think — a house full of kids, music, laughter, the occasional argument. In Marlborough, this would never fly. But here, this chaos somehow made sense.

By the end of the meeting, Ayla felt a strange mix of relief and tension. Rules were rules, yes, but she could see why they existed — and also why, somehow, this was the closest thing to home she had ever known.

Chapter Eighteen

As they popped out onto Stokes Croft, Ayla felt like everyone was staring at them. She tried to ignore it, but her pulse raced until they blended into the crowd of people heading home from work. Willa strode ahead with purpose, moving at a brisk pace as if she owned the street, and Ayla did her best to keep up without tripping over her own feet.

They reached a cash machine and Ayla fished her card out, half-expecting the machine to flash “CARD STOLEN” or something equally dramatic. She held her breath as she slid it in, and when the screen lit up, she let out a quiet sigh of relief. She typed in her PIN and glanced at the balance: 471 quid.

She tapped “Other Amount” and punched in 471, but the machine refused. Her stomach twisted, and she looked around nervously before realising the problem was the amount. She quickly typed in 470 instead. The machine whirred and spat out the notes. Ayla grabbed

them, shoving them into her pocket so no one would see how much she was carrying, and finally turned to Willa.

Willa gave her a little grin.

“Nice! Don’t spend it all in one go, yeah?” she said, sounding casual, but Ayla could tell she’d clocked her nerves.

Ayla shoved the cash deeper into her pocket and tried to act nonchalant, but her fingers kept twitching around it. Stokes Croft buzzed around her, noisy and messy, but alive in a way she hadn’t felt before. For once, she wasn’t just a visitor — she was somewhere she could be herself, at least for today.

“Shall we go shopping now?” Willa asked, already striding toward a small corner shop sandwiched between a café and a record store. Ayla nodded and hurried to keep up, the weight of the money in her pocket making her feel simultaneously thrilled and terrified. Independence was exhilarating... and terrifying.

It felt like they'd been walking forever by the time Willa finally darted across the street, Ayla close behind, heart thumping at the near-misses with the traffic.

"I love this shop. It's second-hand, but they've got some really good stuff," Willa said, pushing the door open. The little bell above jingled, and they stepped inside.

Ayla's eyes took a few seconds to adjust to the dim light, and Willa had already headed straight for a rack of clothes. Ayla followed, letting her fingers brush over the worn fabric. Old military shirts and jackets hung in neat rows. She tried to picture herself wearing one. Willa? She could definitely pull it off. But her? She feared she'd look like some kid attempting a school play — all stiff and awkward, trying too hard.

Willa grabbed a thin jacket and slipped it on, then wandered over to a big mirror. Ayla followed, but her eye caught something else on a nearby shelf. Hair dye. She'd never done anything like that before, but suddenly it felt... like it could be her thing. Not tattoos, not piercings, but perhaps a change of hair colour!

She hesitated, picking up a box and reading the label, weighing the colours as Willa turned back around.

“Forty quid for a jacket? It’s nice, but...” Willa leaned in, squinting at the box Ayla was holding. “Hey, what’s that?” She nudged it gently. “You should try one of those instead.” She nodded toward the next shelf while shimmying out of her jacket.

Ayla glanced over and saw the row of bright, unnatural colours. She frowned, unsure, but couldn’t stop her fingers from hovering over them, feeling a flicker of excitement.

Chapter Nineteen

As they walked back to the house, Willa swung the paper bag in her hand, talking as she went.

“So, we have to make our own food,” she said. “It’s not like it’s provided, unless someone donates something — which happens less and less, because, well... we’re getting more unpopular by the week.”

Ayla raised an eyebrow, silently egging her on.

“Not that we were ever super popular,” Willa continued, “outcasts of society and all that. But then there’s the noise, the weed, all that stuff — it’s grinding on the neighbours’ nerves, like you heard Bethany go on about.” She nodded at the mini-market they passed.

“At least a couple of the boys are banned from going in there for stealing,” she added. “Which means the rest of

us get followed around whenever we do the shopping.”

Ayla bit the inside of her cheek. It sounded messy, chaotic — exactly what she’d expected. But somehow, it didn’t scare her.

They came back into the house and packed away the groceries. Just as Willa had predicted, they had been followed around the store while picking up ingredients for their dinner.

The blue hair dye sat on the table like some kind of omen. Ayla wasn’t sure if she was scared or excited. Her mind kept drifting back home. She missed her mum — no denying that — but the feeling of actually being free, of making her own choices, overshadowed it all.

Willa straightened up from the cupboard she’d been filling with toast and folded the paper bag.

“Ready to become a punk chick, Ayla?”

Ayla nodded, though she wasn’t sure she really was. Her fingers brushed over the hair dye on the table. Punk hair... could she really do it? A small thrill ran through her chest. Maybe this was her thing. Not the piercings, not the tattoos — this felt like hers.

In the background, she could hear music drifting from the living room. Just the bass. Joni. She wasn't sure what song it was, but the riff felt familiar, like she'd known it forever. Her mind flicked to Joni — what would she think of the hair? Was she trying too hard? Trying to fit in? Trying to break free? Trying to... deny who she was? Ayla didn't know. And honestly, it didn't matter. Whatever she'd done before, it hadn't been her.

She wanted a life where she could decide for herself. Decide if she wanted a girlfriend instead of a boyfriend. Decide if she wanted blue hair instead of dirty blonde. Her fingers closed around the box, and she nodded, mostly to herself.

“Let's do this” she said. Perhaps to Willa. Perhaps to herself.

She perched on an old chair in the bathroom. Other kids drifted in and out, but mostly it was just her and Willa. Her hair was wrapped up in the dye, and she caught sight of Willa's hands — completely blue from rinsing her hair — and couldn't quite believe she was actually doing this.

“How much longer?” she asked, trying not to sound too anxious.

Willa glanced at her watch and held up five fingers.

Ayla nodded. Five more minutes. Then she'd be the new Ayla. Or maybe just 'Ay' from now on. Ay. The punk girl. She thought about it — how she had always thought of herself as Ay instead of Ayla. Her mum had always stuck to Ayla, and her dad would call her Ayla if she wasn't in trouble, and Ayla Catherine if she was.

Willa stood behind her, both of them staring at the mirror. The blue was bright. Proper bright. Willa grinned and muttered, almost to herself, “Wicked.”

Ayla didn't say anything. She honestly didn't know what she felt. Blue hair was wild enough on its own. Seeing it on top of her own head, framing her own face, was something else entirely. She tilted her head slightly. The girl in the mirror tilted hers back, a tendril waved in front of her eyes. It was real. It was her.

While she was still trying to process it, the bathroom door creaked open and Eds stepped in — then froze.

“Sorry, didn’t know anyone was—” His voice trailed off, like someone had turned the volume knob down. He looked at Ayla. Then at Willa. Then back at Ayla.

He let out a low whistle.

“Wow. You don’t look half as lost as you did yesterday.”

He gave a little approving nod and wandered back out again.

Willa snorted with laughter, but Ayla barely reacted. She just kept staring at her reflection.

No. She wasn’t lost.

Or at least... not as lost as she’d been yesterday.

Chapter Twenty

Ayla had never been so aware of herself in her entire life as she was right now, sitting at the kitchen table. Every time the front door creaked or someone crossed the living room, her shoulders tensed and she instinctively lifted her coffee mug a little higher, as if she could hide behind it.

Willa had just nipped to the loo, and the thought of being on her own made her stomach twist. What if someone came in and asked who she thought she was? What if they laughed and told her she was trying too hard? What if the blue hair just screamed *desperate*?

The front door opened and shut. Footsteps moved down the hallway towards the kitchen.

Her pulse jumped. She strained to hear the toilet flush — some sign that Willa was on her way back — but even if it did, she wouldn't catch it. The bass thudded from the band's room, voices overlapped outside in the yard, and traffic hummed through the open windows.

The whole house felt loud and alive, and she felt tiny in the middle of it.

The footsteps came closer.

She kept her eyes on the dark surface of her coffee, pretending to be very interested in it, willing herself not to flinch.

It wasn't one of the kids who stepped into the kitchen. It was an older woman. Proper older — grey hair neatly pinned back, sensible coat, the sort of handbag that looked like it had seen twenty years of bus rides and shopping trips.

She peered in and gave Ayla a warm little wave.

“Hi, love! I'm just dropping a few things off. Would you mind helping me carry them in?”

Ayla blinked, slightly thrown by how normal she seemed. Not weird exactly — just... out of place. Grown-ups didn't usually wander into The House. Not like this.

“Yeah. Of course,” Ayla said, pushing her chair back and following her outside.

A small trolley stood by the kerb, stacked with boxes. They each picked one up — Ayla surprised by the weight of hers — and headed back inside. The woman

walked confidently through the hallway, clearly knowing her way around far better than Ayla did.

By the time they reached the kitchen, Willa was there. Her face lit up.

“Mrs Warwick! That’s so kind of you!”

Ayla glanced between them, then carefully lowered her box onto the table. They went back for the rest, carrying them in one by one until the trolley was empty.

While Willa and Mrs Warwick chatted — something about the weather and how the neighbours were “less grumpy when properly caffeinated” — Ayla started unpacking.

Tea bags. Coffee. Long-life milk. Tins. Pasta. Biscuits. Proper biscuits, not the cheap broken kind.

She paused for a second, looking at the small mountain of supplies spreading across the counter. Donations.

So it wasn’t just chaos and complaints and kids scraping by. There were people out there who cared. People who brought tea and milk and snacks in cardboard boxes on little trolleys.

For the first time since dyeing her hair, Ayla forgot to feel self-conscious.

After Mrs Warwick left, promising to “pop by next week if the weather behaved itself”, Willa leaned back against the counter and folded her arms.

“There’s a few good souls like her,” she said. “People who still believe in us. Even if we’ve got more than enough enemies out there.”

Ayla didn’t ask what she meant. She didn’t need to. After last night, it wasn’t exactly a mystery.

Being different was one thing. Being loud, unapologetic, taking up space — that was part of it. She could understand that. But the shouting late at night, the fighting, the weed smoke drifting into other people’s windows, the stealing from the corner shop... that was something else entirely.

Freedom was powerful. It felt electric under her skin. But it wasn’t the same as not caring. Perhaps it was the opposite.

She lined up the tins neatly in the cupboard, more out of habit than anything else, and wondered where the line was. Where did being yourself end and being reckless begin?

The blue strands of her hair slipped forward as she bent down, catching in her vision. She tucked them behind her ear and stood back up.

Maybe she'd figure it out.

Maybe that was what being here was really about.

Chapter Twenty-One

Willa was painting something that looked like a girl beneath a waterfall — or at least that's what Ayla thought it was. It was all loose strokes and bleeding watercolours, blues and greys running into each other until it was hard to tell where the girl ended and the water began. It was messy, but in a deliberate way.

Ayla sat cross-legged on the floor beside her, finishing another bracelet. This one she was doing entirely on her own. Blue beads this time. Obviously. If she was committing to the hair, she might as well lean into it. Maybe the others would start calling her Blue. Or Cyan. She gave a tiny shake of her head at the thought, her new fringe slipping into her eyes.

It didn't matter. She was Ayla. Or perhaps Ay.

But definitely not yesterday's Ayla.

This one was braver. This one did things.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, then paused behind her. She looked up. Of course it was Joni.

This time she didn't grab her shoulders. Maybe she'd realised Ayla wasn't big on that sort of thing. Or maybe it was just because of what happened instead.

Joni kneeled down behind her and slid her fingers into Ayla's hair, gently massaging her scalp like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Looks proper good on you," she said.

And then she leaned down and pressed a quick kiss to the top of Ayla's head.

Just like that.

Before Ayla could even decide how she was supposed to react — laugh? blush? combust? — Joni had straightened up again.

"Making tea. Lapsang for Willa," she said casually, already turning towards the kitchen. "What about you, Ayla?"

While Joni rattled about in the kitchen, the house buzzing with the clatter of mugs and the hiss of the electric kettle, Willa slid Ayla's new blue bracelet onto her wrist next to the first one. Ayla barely had time to

admire how it sparkled against her hair when a sudden, deafening noise erupted from outside.

Voices had been rising out there earlier, but this was different. Shouts, crashes, a loud thump — it sounded like someone had tipped over a table and the others were shoving and yelling on top of it.

Ayla's stomach flipped. She glanced at Willa, but Willa just shrugged, eyes wide, clearly as clueless as she was.

Before they could even decide what to do, Joni appeared at the kitchen doorway, muttering something under her breath, and then strode straight outside.

The noise outside only grew — shouting, crashing, the occasional loud thump that made Ayla flinch. It sounded like a proper fight was unfolding, and she turned to Willa, worry twisting her stomach.

"Should we go out there? To help Joni?" she asked, her voice barely above the chaos.

Willa shook her head, though her eyes flicked toward the window with a hint of doubt. "If she calls for help, we'll go," she said carefully. "But Joni's in good shape, and I doubt anyone's dumb enough to try anything to her."

Ayla nodded, though her chest still thudded in anxiety. They stood frozen for a moment, listening, until the wail of sirens cut through the clamor, mingling with the chaos outside and making her heart jump even faster.

Everything happened so fast — the police shouting orders, chaotic lights flashing through the kitchen windows, Joni's voice. Some of the other kids came inside, but they ignored Willa and Ayla and just went upstairs like dogs sent to their doghouse.

Ayla and Willa perched on the kitchen window ledge, staring out at the aftermath. The police had gone, but the park area still looked chaotic. Two of the kids had been arrested — one for assault, the other for possession, she guessed — and the rest had scattered when the sirens had blared.

Joni was still out there, striding among the chaos like she owned the place, barking orders. One kid had been told to come back once he was sober, a few more were sent off to tidy up and get to bed.

Ayla felt the tremor in her hands and arms, realising she'd been shaking. Apart from a couple of schoolyard scraps, she hadn't seen anything like that before. The violence of it all made her chest tighten. She shook her head, letting the strands of blue hair fall across her face,

and somehow — absurdly — the colour dancing in front of her eyes made her feel a fraction calmer.

Joni's shoulders slumped a little as she sipped her tea, the steam curling up around her face. Ayla watched her, fascinated despite herself. She was loud, brash, impossible to ignore, but there was something else there too — exhaustion, a hint of worry tucked under the anger.

Willa leaned back against the counter, arms crossed, watching Joni with a quiet patience. Ayla felt small in comparison, the blue strands of her hair flicking against her cheek. She wanted to say something — anything — but the weight of Joni's presence, of the fight outside, kept her silent.

Joni finally exhaled, letting the mug rest on the table. "Anyway," she said, voice softer now, "we survive. We always do. House meeting tomorrow. Don't be late, Ayla. You'll see how it all works."

Ayla nodded, unsure what to say, but her fingers flexed over her bracelet, the two colours resting side by side. Somehow, even in all the chaos, it felt like she belonged here.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ayla let her phone fall onto her lap and rubbed her eyes, still half-dreaming. The faint hum of the house around her felt almost comforting now, a mix of quiet breathing, creaking floorboards, and distant laughter from the living room. She tucked her bag closer, tracing the edge of her bracelet absentmindedly, blue and silver catching the sunlight streaking through the window.

She took a slow breath, feeling the tension in her shoulders ease just a little. Messages could wait. Friends could wait. For the first time in a long while, she didn't have to explain herself, didn't have to justify why she was here or what she'd done. She was here, alive, free in her own little bubble of the House, and for now, that was enough.

With a sigh, she swung her legs over the mattress and stood, stretching again, the sunlight warming her skin. She'd figure out the day ahead, one step at a time. First breakfast, then maybe some music, maybe a walk

outside, maybe just sitting somewhere, letting the chaos of the house wash over her. It was hers now, in a way it never had been back home. But first, she wanted to hide away in the shower, alone with her thoughts.

Ayla let the water hit her, hot and sharp, and closed her eyes. The sound of it pounding against the tiles, the steam curling around her, made everything else — her worries, her mum's texts, the chaos outside — fade away. For a few minutes, it was just her, the water, and the way the blue strands stuck to her fingers when she ran them through.

She felt the tension slowly seep out of her shoulders, the tightness in her chest loosening just a little. It was strange, seeing herself in the mirror this morning, the wild blue hair framing her face, the skin of her arms and legs finally hers to move freely. She could feel it even now, under the water, as if the heat was melting away the last remnants of who she had been when she arrived. The shy, scared Ayla who'd run from her own bedroom.

When she finally turned off the tap, steam still clinging to the tiles, she stepped out and wrapped herself in a

towel. The House felt alive even here, somewhere in the distance a door creaked, a laugh echoed faintly, and she smiled. She was still Ayla, but the new Ayla, the one who could choose. The one who could be a little bold, a little reckless, a little... herself.

As she came out of the bathroom, she heard voices from downstairs. Adults. It didn't sound like Paddy, but it was a man's voice. She padded down the hallway to the sleeping room, dropped her bag, took one last look at her phone before tucking it inside and zipping it up. She straightened her bed and then went downstairs, partly to see what was going on and partly to grab some coffee.

Paddy wasn't downstairs, but Bethany was. The woman from the meeting. She was talking to a man who looked like he'd just swallowed a bucket of anger.

"I don't care what kind of homes these kids come from, this is a proper neighbourhood, and having police business, fights and drugs... well, that just isn't on!"

Bethany nodded, all calm and understanding, like she always somehow knew what to say. It didn't seem to faze her at all. The man muttered something under his breath and seemed to take a breath, maybe trying to calm himself.

Then another voice cut in, just as Ayla rounded the corner and could see into the living room.

“There isn’t any excuse for what happened last night. We are sorr—”

The words just stopped, but Ayla knew instantly it was Joni. Her stomach twisted a bit — she hated it when people got cut off, especially by someone storming around like that.

“You’re right, there isn’t any excuse, and this won’t do.”

And just like that, he was gone. Slammed the door so hard it shook the frame. Ayla stood frozen for a second, wishing she could disappear into the wall, wishing the noise hadn’t made her jump.

Bethany turned and spotted Ayla. Standing there, Ayla suddenly felt a bit small, like she’d been caught in the middle of all that shouting. But Bethany’s face was warm, welcoming — none of the tension from before.

“Good morning, Ayla! Weren’t you a blonde yesterday?”

Ayla opened her mouth to answer, but Bethany didn’t wait. “Well, blue suits you really well!”

Joni appeared beside her, grabbed Ayla's hand, and practically tugged her towards the kitchen.

"We're getting breakfast and take a walk before the house meeting," she called over her shoulder to Bethany, who just nodded, smiling faintly.

Just like yesterday, Joni made them some eggs, and balancing a plate and a mug of coffee, they walked to the band's room and sat down. The room was soundproof, but instead of trapping the music inside, it felt like it shut the world out, letting them eat in a bubble of quiet.

They talked about the house meeting. Joni seemed to know a bit about everything around here, and Ayla mostly let her do the talking, nodding along and trying not to fidget. Then something Joni had said earlier came back to her.

"You said we were taking a walk? Where to?"

Joni pushed her plate aside and leaned back, legs folded under her, cradling her coffee mug like it was a tiny shield.

"Figured we could use some fresh air. Do you know the second-hand store?"

Ayla nodded. That was where she'd picked up the blue hair dye. She felt a tiny spark of excitement — something normal, familiar, in the middle of all this newness.

They decided to go straight away and carried their plates and mugs back to the kitchen to wash up together. Ayla felt her stomach do a little flip at how close Joni was, brushing shoulders, standing so near that even a tiny lean would make them bump hips. It made her pulse quicken, and she had to bite back a small smile. It was stupid, really, but... nice. Safe. Comfortable.

Chapter Twenty-Three

When they stepped out onto Stokes Croft, it felt like stepping into a completely different world. The street buzzed with life — murals splashed colour across the walls, the smell of fresh bread from a corner bakery mixed with the faint scent of coffee and something fried, and music drifted out from a shop somewhere, raw and alive. Ayla realised she'd felt the same way yesterday when she and Willa had wandered around.

It was comforting to know roughly where they were going, even though she got a little turned around at a corner she'd forgotten from yesterday. Joni didn't rush like Willa had. Walking slowly felt... nice, easy. Their hands brushed whenever they had to squeeze past someone, and Ayla felt a small, thrilling spark each time. She kept sneaking glances at Joni, noticing the way the sunlight caught her hair, the quiet way she surveyed the street, and something about it made Ayla's chest feel warm.

They ducked into the second-hand store, and Joni immediately headed for the rack of military jackets. Ayla figured it was some kind of fashion trend in the House — or maybe just how kids around here dressed — but she'd never seen anything like it on her trips into the city with her parents.

She nudged Joni. “Hey, that’s the exact same jacket Willa liked yesterday.”

Joni gave a small shrug, slipped the hanger back onto the rack, and instead grabbed a t-shirt with Che Guevara’s face stencilled across the front.

“This is probably more me anyway,” she murmured, tucking the shirt under her arm. They made their way to the counter, and Ayla felt a little flutter of excitement—not from the clothes, but from being here with Joni, walking side by side, together, the faint buzz of the shop all around them, and the way the air smelled faintly of old fabric and polish.

Outside, they made their way down the Croft. The buildings here were taller, older, and the traffic noise felt almost intrusive, like it didn’t really belong. Joni led them across a crossroad, and a minute later they were stepping into a park.

“Care to tan for a bit?” she asked, striding straight across the grass instead of sticking to the path. Ayla nodded, though she wasn’t quite sure what that meant.

But Joni just flopped down on the grass — no towel, no blanket, just flat against the blades. Ayla hesitated for a moment, imagining green stains on her trousers, then shook her head at herself. That was something old Ayla would have worried about. She slid down beside Joni, letting the soft, cool grass brush against her ankles where the skin was exposed between her socks and trousers, and felt a little thrill at how easy it was to just... be here, like the world outside the park could wait.

Ayla lay back on the grass beside Joni, letting her fingers trail through the cool blades. The sun was warm on her face, and she could feel the faint scent of earth and flowers mixing with the faint smoke of traffic from the street. Bees hummed lazily around a patch of daisies, and a breeze rustled the older trees nearby, making the leaves whisper. For a moment, everything felt quiet and slow, like the world outside the park could wait. She noticed the gentle slope of the land, the way the sun dappled across Joni’s hair, and how natural it felt just to lie here, side by side, without a rush.

Then, suddenly, Joni sat up and, without warning, pulled her top off. Oddly enough, it wasn’t her bare

breasts that caught Ayla's attention — it was the tufts of hair at her armpits. She froze, a little startled, cheeks burning hot. Joni wasn't wearing a bra, but Ayla couldn't seem to focus on that. She forced herself to look away, her eyes landing on the flowers nearby, but her pulse still thumped in her ears.

Joni let out a soft giggle.

“Not used to seeing breasts?” she teased, pulling her new top back down and adjusting it.

Ayla couldn't meet her eyes, so she kept staring at the flowers, trying to calm herself.

“Not really... used to seeing... hair,” she admitted, biting her lip and feeling her cheeks burn even hotter. She looked around to see if anyone was staring, but nobody seemed to have noticed the two girls laying in the grass.

Joni just chuckled softly and nodded.

“Yeah. I don't care what others think. It's natural. If it wasn't, it wouldn't have grown there.”

They talked for a while about other things. Ayla's cheeks slowly returned to their usual colour, and her fingers played with the tassels on her bracelets. The warmth of the sun, the scent of flowers, the quiet of the

park in the middle of the day — it all felt so easy, so peaceful.

Then, suddenly, reality snapped back when Joni's phone buzzed.

“Oh, it's Paddy. House meeting's been moved up — we should head back,” she said, and pushed herself up onto her legs in one smooth, graceful motion, not even using her hands.

On the way back, they talked about their dreams for the future. Ayla wasn't even sure what hers were. Maybe just... live quietly. Be who she was without having to explain it all the time. That felt like enough, didn't it?

Joni glanced at her, one eyebrow raised slightly, like she wanted to ask what that actually meant. But she didn't. She just gave a small nod and started talking about her own plans instead.

They walked down the Croft, the afternoon light turning everything a softer gold. The traffic still roared past, but it didn't feel as loud now. Or maybe Ayla just didn't care as much.

Then, out of nowhere, Joni's hand slipped into hers.

Ayla's breath caught. She knew her cheeks were burning again, and there was absolutely no way to hide

it this time. Still, she couldn't stop the huge smile spreading across her face. Her fingers curled slightly, like they'd made the decision before her brain had.

Joni started explaining how her biggest dream was to become a musician — properly successful, popular enough to actually make a living from it. Ayla nodded. She remembered Joni talking about this before. She didn't dismiss it, but thought that it was important to Joni. But right now, she said, all she really wanted was to put on a concert with the house band. Go out there and show everyone what they were capable of.

As she spoke, her whole face lit up. And Ayla realised she wasn't just listening to Joni's dream — she was watching it happen in real time, glowing right there between them as they walked.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The house was already packed with kids long before the meeting was meant to start. The living room felt smaller somehow, full of restless energy and low murmurs. Ayla sat down with Willa, and Joni explained it was because of the text Paddy had sent round.

She read it out loud from her phone. “House meeting. Mandatory! 4.30 p.m.”

That was it. No smiley face. No explanation. Nothing.

Ayla didn’t really know how these things were normally worded, but from the little she’d seen of Paddy, he wasn’t usually that blunt. It made her stomach tighten slightly, like she’d missed a step on the stairs.

Joni perched in one of the chairs, legs folded up under her, phone still in her hand. The Che Guevara shirt actually looked pretty cool on her. It suited her somehow.

But every time Ayla's eyes drifted that way, her brain betrayed her. All she could think about was earlier in the park. The flash of skin. The unapologetic body hair.

And, okay... her breasts too.

Ayla swallowed and quickly looked away, pretending to be very interested in a crack in the ceiling. She felt ridiculous. It wasn't like she'd never seen a body before. Still, there was something about the way Joni just existed in hers — so unbothered, so sure — that made Ayla's thoughts feel loud and messy in comparison.

She hugged her knees a little tighter and tried to focus on the meeting that was about to start instead.

Willa got up and wandered into the kitchen. A second later, Ayla heard the electric kettle click on. Normally she would've followed, helped grab mugs, done something useful with her hands.

But instead, she stayed where she was.

The noise in the room felt suddenly too loud, like it was pressing in on her from all sides. The last few days rushed through her head all at once — new faces, new routines, new rules that weren't really rules but somehow still were. A new version of herself, maybe. It was a lot.

Her fingers found a tendril of blue hair and twisted it around and around, pulling it into view before letting it spring back into its corkscrew curl. She watched it bounce, oddly fascinated. At least the hair made sense. She'd chosen that.

She should probably ring her parents. Actually talk to them. Figure out what this was — this pause, this in-between place she'd landed in. The past few days had felt like walking through fog. She hadn't really stopped to think about her options. Not because she was avoiding it. At least, she didn't think she was. It was just that everything had happened so quickly. There hadn't been space to think.

Her chest tightened slightly at the thought of home. Not in a dramatic way. Just... complicated.

Before she'd properly sorted any of it out in her head, Willa came back balancing a tray of mugs. She dropped down beside Ayla again, close enough that their shoulders brushed, the normality of it grounding her a little.

Joni was quiet in her chair, twirling her phone between two fingers, her expression distant and thoughtful. She looked like she was somewhere else entirely, even though she was right there in the middle of the room.

Willa passed her a mug, the smell of coffee warm and familiar, and Ayla's thoughts scattered like someone had shuffled them out of order. She wrapped her hands around the cup, letting the heat sink into her palms.

She glanced around the room. More kids had drifted in, spreading out across the floor, the other chairs, the beanbags. It was chaotic, but in a strangely organised way, like everyone just knew where they usually landed.

The sofa, though—that felt different. It felt like her spot. Hers and Willa's. A tiny island in the middle of everything.

Her eyes flicked back to Joni without meaning to. She wondered if she'd come and sit with them once the room filled up properly. The thought sent a small, hopeful flutter through her chest, and she immediately told herself not to be stupid about it.

Still, she shifted slightly, making just a bit more space on the cushion beside her. Just in case.

Paddy came down from upstairs, and Ayla's head snapped up. It was the first time she'd seen one of the adults up there. She opened her mouth slightly, about to ask Willa if that was normal, but Paddy answered the question without even knowing he had.

“Woke up the boys. Told them to be down here in five minutes.” He checked his wristwatch, looking more tired than strict, like he hadn’t slept properly.

A few more kids drifted in through the front door, bringing a rush of cooler air with them. Bethany followed, her expression calm as ever, like nothing ever really rattled her.

Ayla counted without meaning to. Nine kids. Two adults.

Then Ruth arrived, along with the boys from upstairs, louder than the rest, filling up the remaining space. The room felt properly full now, like the walls had inched closer.

But Joni still hadn’t moved. She stayed in her chair, phone resting loosely in her hand, gaze steady.

Ayla tried not to look at her too much. Tried not to care whether she came over or not.

Still, she noticed. But before she could think more about it Paddy started speaking.

Now he actually sounded strict. Not tired. Not gentle. Strict.

Ayla tried to follow what he was saying, but her brain kept splitting in two — half listening, half watching. She studied Joni's face. Then Willa's. Both of them looked tense, jaws tight, eyes sharp.

So this was bad. Not just awkward-bad. Proper bad.

Paddy explained that there had been complaints. Not to the house this time, but to the council. They were holding an extraordinary meeting that evening to decide whether funding for The House could continue with the pressure from the neighbourhood—or whether they'd have to cut it.

Cut it.

The words seemed to hang in the air.

Willa spoke before anyone else could. "If the council cuts funds, The House will close, right?"

Paddy nodded. He didn't even get the chance to answer properly before Willa pushed on.

"This is threatening all of us. Those of us who haven't done anything. Who actually need this safe haven. Because of a few antisocial arseholes, we're all being threatened!"

She stood up abruptly. The movement made Ayla flinch. Willa turned, scanning the kids scattered across the floor and beanbags, but her gaze lingered on the boys who'd been upstairs. The ones everyone clearly knew she meant.

Then she turned back around, facing Joni, Ayla, the adults, and a few others. Her eyes were blazing now.

"I propose we take a vote! I know we've never kicked anyone out. I know the whole point is that this is meant to be a safe haven for everyone. But when a few are ruining it for the rest of us..."

Her voice didn't shake. If anything, it grew stronger.

"Then it's time to do things differently. Let's kick out the troublemakers."

The room went still.

Ayla's stomach dropped. She suddenly felt like she was balancing on something fragile, like one wrong word could crack the whole place open.

Paddy took over again, his voice calm but firm. Willa didn't sit back down. She stayed standing in front of the couch, shoulders squared, holding her ground. She took responsibility for what she'd just said, owning it without a hint of hesitation.

“It’s your house. So you’ll have to vote. Who’s in favour of changing the policy and effectively saying goodbye to some of your housemates?”

He scanned the room. None of the boys in the corner spoke up, but their eyes flicked around, watching who would raise their hands.

Willa had hers up. Joni’s hand followed, curled into a fist, the same way Che Guevara’s face on her shirt seemed to demand — defiant, uncompromising. Ayla lifted hers without really thinking.

Some of the other kids had their hands up as well, but not everyone. The ones who were out late at night, smoking pot, getting into fights — they stayed silent, eyes lowered or darting around, as if admitting anything would be a kind of betrayal.

Ayla felt her stomach twist. The room felt heavier now, like everyone’s choices were pressing down on her. But she kept her hand raised, alongside Willa and Joni, the warmth of solidarity sparking quietly through her.

There was a clear majority of hands in the air. Ayla kept hers up too — not because Willa or Joni had, but because Willa’s words made sense. Even if it meant kicking out kids who didn’t really have anywhere else to go.

If The House closed... she wouldn't have anywhere to go either. She would end up with no options, because other kids couldn't be responsible.

The thought tightened in her chest, a sharp little twist of fear and urgency. She swallowed hard, staring at the floor for a moment, then lifted her gaze again, hand still raised. It felt heavy, the weight of the decision, but also... necessary.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The room was quiet now. It had been chaotic right after the meeting — shouting, tension, even one of the kids had threatened Willa — but Paddy had shut that down immediately, and now the storm had passed.

They didn't have to name who should leave. Somehow, the group had already decided, silently. Everyone knew who could stay and who would have to go. Ayla made a note to ask Willa or Joni about it later; she needed to understand how that worked.

But then there was Eds. The boy who had brought her to The House in the first place. He was clearly part of the group that had to leave. One of the loudest boys from that crowd had shot him a look.

“Coming, Eds?” he asked, voice casual but sharp. Nothing more.

Eds looked bewildered for a moment. Then he glanced at Joni, not Willa. “Can I stay?” he asked quietly.

Joni looked back at Willa, who simply shrugged.

“Drugs, fights, noise... the slightest misstep and you’re gone, Eds.”

He nodded, the weight of it settling over him. Without another word, he left the room, probably trying not to face his former friends as they watched him go.

Ayla felt a pang in her chest. Part of her wanted to call after him, to tell him it wasn’t personal, but another part of her knew this was how The House worked. Harsh sometimes, yes — but fair. And necessary.

The door to the band’s practice room stood open, but it was silent. No instruments, no music, just empty space waiting for sound.

Most of the kids were still scattered between the kitchen and the living room, lingering after the meeting like they couldn’t quite move on. Joni had slipped away, muttering something about needing to clear her head.

Willa stayed on the couch with Ayla. She’d laid her head in Ayla’s lap, eyes half-closed, and Ayla ran her fingers through her hair, careful and slow. The familiar rhythm was grounding in a way Ayla hadn’t realised she needed.

Nobody cooked dinner. Nobody really spoke. The house seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for something — anything — to break the quiet.

Ayla let her fingers wander, listening to the soft, even rise and fall of Willa's breathing, and felt herself settle into the pause. For once, being still didn't feel awkward. It felt like exactly where she was meant to be.

Paddy was still in the house, talking to some of the kids in the kitchen. His deep voice carried through the walls, low and steady, and somehow it was comforting, even though Ayla couldn't catch a single word.

She shifted on the couch, restless. She needed to know. She had nowhere else to go if The House closed. Would it happen tonight? Tomorrow?

She guessed everyone else was sitting with the same thoughts, maybe quietly planning, or at least knowing what their options were. But she didn't. She knew nothing.

The thought pressed against her chest, tight and heavy. She wanted to ask someone, anyone, but even opening her mouth felt impossible. So she stayed still, fingers idly twisting Willa's hair, pretending the world outside their little bubble didn't feel like it was closing in.

Ayla decided she couldn't just sit there with her hands in her lap, waiting for everything to crash down. She had one option she actually knew — going home. But even that felt uncertain. Was it really an option anymore? Maybe her parents had reconsidered. Maybe a few days of her being away had softened their views...

She thought about it. Had she softened hers? Not in the slightest. No matter what, she wasn't about to hide who she was. Changing herself... that wasn't possible. Not ever.

The thought settled in her chest, heavy but steady. She let her fingers curl around Willa's hair, grounding herself in the only certainty she had: herself, unedited, unashamed, and unwilling to compromise.

She got up, leaving the entire couch to Willa, and made her way upstairs. When she stepped into the sleeping room, she paused in the doorway.

The sheets that had served as makeshift curtains between the girls and the boys were gone, pulled down, and suddenly the room felt much larger, emptier in a way that was almost startling. Six mattresses at the back sat empty, but a couple were still in use.

Well, tonight she'd probably see a few boys in their jammies, she thought, but the idea didn't make her smile. Instead, it just made the space feel... different, like the quiet of the day had slipped away and left something tense in its place.

She grabbed her phone from her bag and sank down onto her own mattress. More texts from Mum, nothing from Dad. A couple from Nell. She ignored them all and called Mum.

It felt like forever before the dial tone clicked through. She tried to imagine Mum — was she at home in tears, shocked to hear from her? Or was she out, doing her normal things, not even thinking about her phone? Maybe at book club, or pilates. Ayla tried to remember what day it was... and realised she couldn't. She didn't dare take the phone down to check on the screen, in case it got picked up — and then it was.

“AYLA!”

Her mum's voice was far from calm. Ayla hadn't even thought about what she wanted to say before Mum carried on.

“I was worried sick! Come home this instant! Your father is out of his mind! He is the talk of the town

these days, I tell you. Of course your frivolities are the headline and now with you missing! We had to—”

Ayla stopped listening. Worried? Not once had Mum asked if she was okay, if she was safe, if she’d eaten. Just accusations. Just blame.

She shook her head, disbelief hot in her chest, and only then noticed Mum had gone quiet.

“Are you there? Are you listening?”

Ayla breathed in slowly, gathering herself. “Yeah. I’m here. But I’m not coming home, Mum. I’m a lesbian, and that’ll never fit into your... or Dad’s... worldviews. I’m sorry.”

The phone buzzed with more scolding, more blaming — how she was dishonouring the family, her father, all of them. Ayla hung up, tears blurring the screen, making it almost impossible to see, and sat there for a moment, letting it all settle around her like a weight she’d carry a while.

She turned off the phone and tucked it back into her bag where she’d found it. The tears turned into full-blown sobs, and she let herself fall apart for a moment, shaking with the weight of it all.

Then a voice came from the doorway.

“That sounded bad, love.”

Ayla whipped her head around and saw Willa standing there, calm but concerned.

“You know,” Willa said softly, “you don’t have to be brave all the time. You don’t have to keep it all to yourself. Tell me.”

She moved closer, settling onto the mattress in front of Ayla, and took her hands in hers. Warm, steady, grounding.

Ayla blinked through her tears, her chest heaving, and felt the first flicker of relief she’d had all day. Maybe she didn’t have to carry it alone.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ayla woke up and immediately felt eyes on her, watching, observing. She opened her eyes and took in the room. A few mattresses over, Joni was sitting cross-legged in her usual way, neck craned slightly, and when she saw Ayla was awake, she smiled.

“Good morning, sunshine! It’s almost ten.”

Ayla nodded, her brain still grinding into gear, trying to catch up. Paddy had left last night without giving any news to share from the council. She and Willa had talked for hours — or, rather, Ayla had talked. She had spilled everything, letting it tumble out in one messy, confusing stream while Willa listened.

How she’d been caught kissing Nell. How her parents had reacted. How she’d never left home before, except for sleepovers. How everything here felt so different, so... weird.

When her words finally ran dry, they just sat together in the quiet. Willa had tucked her in, told her to get some sleep, and let her rest.

Ayla blinked a couple of times, letting it all sink back in as she stretched and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. The weight of yesterday still lingered, but somehow, sitting there and seeing Joni's calm smile made it feel a little lighter.

She sat up and looked at Joni, taking a moment to admire her. The low morning sun hit her face just right, setting her hair aglow, almost like it was on fire.

"Any word yet?" Ayla asked, though something told her either they hadn't heard anything or it was good news, judging by Joni's smile. Unfortunately, it was the first.

"Everyone's waiting just like you," Joni said, her tone calm. "Let's go make breakfast and get some coffee. Before we know it, we'll know."

Ayla nodded, letting a small spark of hope push her out of the mattress and toward the day, however uncertain it might be.

They went downstairs, and Ayla immediately noticed something was different. Even though there were fewer kids than yesterday, the house felt more alive. More of

them had stayed home, all waiting for the verdict. Paddy wasn't around, but Bethany was.

They made breakfast and settled at the little café table in the music room. Joni poured coffee into their mugs and explained. "The grown-ups — you know, there are four in total, all social workers — they're here to make sure things don't get too crazy, but mostly to help if needed. Normally there'd just be one around at a time, except at night. So the fact there's been so many the last few days... that just shows how unusual all this is."

Ayla nodded, taking a sip of coffee, letting the warmth spread through her. It was grounding, the small normality of it, even with the tension still buzzing quietly through the house.

Ayla tried to keep herself busy. Joni had left a little while ago — gone to meditate and shower — so Ayla didn't push to follow. Instead, she sank onto the couch, letting her hands idle for a moment before picking up a bracelet she'd started.

Soon after, Willa came and sat beside her. She showed Ayla a new way to weave the threads, guiding her hands with hers. It was absorbing enough to distract her just a little, giving her a break from the nervous hum of waiting and the weight of everything on her mind.

Around noon, something finally happened. Paddy arrived, and the kids sprang to their feet, a jumble of questions and chatter. He didn't answer any of them. He just stood there, waiting, until everyone finally went quiet.

"Let's get everyone down here. House meeting."

Nothing more. That didn't bode well. Ayla glanced at Willa, but Willa just shook her head. That could mean anything, really.

Kids trickled in from outside, the music room, and upstairs. Then Joni came down the staircase. She looked... different. No band t-shirt, no Che Guevara top. Just a cute burgundy camisole and denim shorts, a towel wrapped around her hair. Ayla's chest gave a tiny flip — she silently hoped Joni would sit on the couch this time.

Joni did sit down on the couch, and Ayla felt as safe as she could, wedged between Willa on one side and Joni on the other. But before she could let herself think more about it, Paddy began speaking.

"No need to keep you waiting. The council has decided to cut the funds."

A collective groan swept through the room. Questions bubbled up instantly, but Paddy held up a hand and continued.

“The decision wasn’t unanimous, and it clearly wasn’t an easy one. But their reckoning is that there’s been too much trouble. The House, while helping a few kids, is causing grief to a much larger part of the community.”

He paused. Hands shot up across the room. Paddy looked at Joni and gave a small nod, encouraging her to speak.

“When will this go into effect? What other options are there for the kids from this area? Why—”

Paddy lifted his hand gently, cutting her off, but not rudely. “They realise this is your home, and they’ve agreed to fund it for another month. Effectively, from the 1st of August, this house will no longer be open. There’s no news yet about other options, but there’s always the Lighthou—”

Joni interrupted him, sharply this time. “The Lighthouse isn’t an option! That’s where the boys we kicked out yesterday are now. In a month there’ll be police raids, drugs, violence... all the things we didn’t want here!”

Paddy let her finish and just nodded. Then his face hardened, tired lines around his eyes and the shadow of stubble darkening his cheeks.

“There isn’t much we can do. This isn’t in my hands, and you bloody well know that. So let’s not divide, let’s not fight among ourselves. I wish I had a solution — a big reveal, something to fix it all. But I don’t. Do you?”

The weight of his words hung over the room, heavy and real, and Ayla felt it settle into her chest like a stone.

When Willa spoke, her voice was quiet — soft, very unlike the confident, fiery tone from yesterday.

“We’ve taken this place for granted for too long. We’ve never really given back to the community around us. Yeah, we’ve talked — art exhibits, concerts, performances — but we’ve never actually done something. And we should. We should show this town what we can do. That we’re more than drugs and fights, that we’re creative, that we make art.”

Her voice trailed off, almost like she didn’t quite believe it herself, or maybe she was afraid no one else would.

Joni cut in sharply, her tone loud and fierce. “Bloody hell. She’s right. It might be too late to save The House. And some of us will be gone soon enough, considering

the news we just got — I don't blame you for that. But we should actually do something. Something positive for a change. Make a statement. Let them know exactly who it is they're kicking out."

Ayla felt her chest tighten, a mixture of fear and excitement. The words sparked something inside her, a little flicker of possibility. Maybe they could still fight, in their own way.

Ayla felt a sudden urge to cheer, half-expecting the others to join her — but nobody did. In hindsight, she guessed they were probably still too overwhelmed by the news that their home might disappear. A few murmurs of agreement rippled through the room, soft but present.

She knew she couldn't do much. Couldn't really contribute. Unless, of course, there was going to be an exhibit of helpless friendship bracelets. She let herself smirk at the thought.

Paddy didn't say anything, but Ayla noticed it in his face — just the tiniest flicker of hope, like he could imagine them making something good come out of this. It made her chest feel a little lighter, even as the weight of what was to come pressed down around them.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

She didn't know the music they were playing, but it felt old. Like she'd somehow time-travelled straight into the 1970s. The sun was high in the sky, streaming through the single window, and the dust motes danced in the light, moving perfectly to the rhythm.

Ayla sat on the floor, threading bracelets while the band practised. After the meeting, the house had come alive. Some kids were sorting the paintings, others were huddled in the kitchen planning what play they wanted to perform. And the band — well, they were in here, playing as if their lives depended on it.

Outside, Willa swept and tidied, erasing every trace of the nights when the weed-smoking gang used to hang around.

Ayla wasn't sure how — or if — she could contribute. But just sitting here, quietly, she felt her presence mattered. Every time she looked up, the band played in

her direction, as if she were the Queen herself, and it made her smile, warm and shy and a little proud.

Right after the meeting, Joni, Willa, and Ayla had talked. Willa and Joni were hopeful that a performance could change the way the town saw The House. Probably not enough to convince the council to reconsider the funding, but at least enough to leave a better impression than when they'd arrived.

Paddy had gone off to the town hall, and the band carried on playing. Then Joni's phone buzzed. The music stopped while she answered, and when she hung up, she turned to the others.

"Paddy wants me to come down there and explain the idea."

Nobody seemed surprised. Joni was a powerhouse — confident, sharp, and capable of making people listen, and clearly a spokesperson of the House.

The band high-fived and cheered, certain she could land the deal that would let them perform in the town square.

As Joni walked past Ayla, she stopped, leaned down, and kissed her on the mouth.

"For good luck!"

And just like that, she was gone.

Ayla sat frozen for a moment, fingers still on the bracelet threads, cheeks burning, heart thumping. The room felt a little brighter, a little bolder, and somehow, impossibly, full of hope.

After that, Ayla couldn't concentrate on the bracelets anymore, so she went outside to help Willa. She told her what had happened — Paddy had called, and Joni had been asked to go. Willa didn't seem in the slightest worried that it had originally been her idea.

“Joni's going to absolutely rip the room apart until they agree to the performance,” Willa said with a big grin. Then she glanced around the now-tidy terrace.

“All done here! Let's have coffee!”

Ayla smiled. For the first time since the police had been at The House, she felt a spark of hope. The weight in her chest lifted just a little, and she let herself enjoy the small warmth of the sun, the smell of the fresh air, and the quiet sense that maybe, just maybe, things could turn out all right.

In the kitchen, they found Eds and Bethany talking. Neither Ayla nor Willa wanted to interrupt, so they padded quietly about — boiling water, fetching mugs — while listening in.

Eds was telling Bethany about his past, about how nobody had ever shown a desire to spend time with him until he'd met the weed-smoking gang at The House. Bethany didn't say much, just a hum here or a nod there, encouraging him to keep going.

Ayla and Willa sat down at the table, quietly taking it all in. Eds glanced over his shoulder at them, and Ayla noticed how vulnerable he looked — tired, defenceless, as if he'd spent too long carrying everything alone.

Willa leaned forward, a small, warm smile on her face. "You know... what you did after the meeting was so brave. Standing up to them. With no one else to lean on."

Eds smiled faintly and shrugged, a quiet acknowledgement. There was no grand applause, no fanfare — just the calm, steady recognition that sometimes meant more than words ever could.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The afternoon's energy had drained out of the house entirely. When Joni came back after dinner, everyone gathered in the living room, buzzing with anticipation, waiting for her to speak.

"The performance is approved," she announced. "We'll get three hours on the first Saturday of July—less than two weeks away."

The house erupted. Cheers, clapping, shouts of excitement — Ayla half-expected someone to lift Joni into the air. The joy was contagious, and she couldn't help grinning from ear to ear herself.

Joni came over and lightly brushed her thumb over Ayla's cheek.

"The good luck kiss worked!" she teased, then leaned down and pressed another kiss to Ayla's lips.

Ayla felt her knees go weak, her heart hammering, and for a moment she thought she might actually pass out. The rush of warmth, excitement, and... something else entirely left her dizzy, smiling, and utterly breathless all at once.

That had been hours ago, and all the restless energy from earlier seemed to have seeped through the floorboards. Most of the kids had gone to bed early, leaving the house unusually still. Ayla sat alone in the kitchen, a sketchbook Willa had given her balanced on her knees.

She wasn't sure what to do with it — she'd never written or drawn before — but with five bracelets now wrapped around her wrists, she needed something else to occupy her hands. She doodled across the page, occasionally writing a single word: *home*, *Lighthouse*, *London*.

She was trying to sketch the outline of a girl's face, using the O's in *London* as eyes, when Willa and Joni came in.

"What a day, huh?" Willa sighed, flopping into the chair across from Ayla.

Ayla looked up and nodded, a small smile tugging at her lips. The quiet around them felt soft and safe, like the world had paused for just a moment.

Joni grabbed a soda from the fridge and dropped down between them. She stretched her legs across Ayla's lap, and instinctively, Ayla took them in her hands, rubbing her feet. She didn't know why — she didn't have siblings, and she didn't have friends she'd give a foot massage to — but somehow it felt... right. The only thing to do.

“So, where are you going, Willa? After July, I mean.”

Joni popped the tab on her soda, and the fizz sounded impossibly loud in the quiet kitchen, like a tiny explosion. Ayla glanced up at her, catching the spark in Joni's eyes, and felt that familiar mix of nerves and warmth swirl in her chest.

Willa leaned back and let out a long sigh. She stretched, giving herself a moment to think before answering.

“I could go home, I suppose. One of the few here who could, really. But I think I'll see what the others do.” Her fingers idly turned a ring round and round as she spoke.

“What about you?” She glanced at Joni.

Ayla didn't feel left out. In fact, she felt a flicker of relief — she didn't have the slightest idea what she wanted yet. Or what was even possible.

Joni stared at the soda can in her hands for a moment, then looked up.

“I guess I'll go to the Lighthouse... unless the potheads get it closed before then. It's mostly grown-ups over there, but I can't see myself moving to London if everyone else from here ends up there. What about you, Ayla?”

Joni's gaze met hers, and for some reason, Ayla felt herself blush.

“Not sure. If you guys go somewhere I'm welcome, I think that's my best shot. Not going home, that's for sure.”

Willa looked Ayla in the eyes and nodded, remembering — the tears, the sobbing, the breakdown. A silent understanding passed between them, and for a moment, Ayla felt a little less alone in the uncertainty.

Joni broke the tension, wiggling her toes in Ayla's lap.

“You're forgetting to massage!” she teased, a sly smile lingering. Ayla couldn't help a little laugh before she

resumed, letting her fingers trace over Joni's feet, enjoying the quiet intimacy of it.

"Anyway, it's bedtime. We've got a lot of work tomorrow — putting an agenda together for the performance, figuring out how to line everything up: the art exhibit, the play, the concert... what music we should play... Hell, even find a name for it!"

Joni's eyes glazed slightly, clearly drifting somewhere deep in her head where the music lived, probably already running through songs they might perform. Ayla watched her, a small, fond smile tugging at her lips, feeling both calm and electrified by being near her.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The room was dark, except for the faint light from the street that slipped in between the makeshift curtains they had made from sheets. Ayla stared up at the ceiling, her thoughts bouncing everywhere. She felt... like she was part of the house, just as much as anyone else — and that made her happy.

Then she thought of her parents, and the warmth in her chest faltered, replaced by a sharp tug of sadness. She tried to think about the future, but that only made her feel uncertain, small, and insecure, so she let it go.

She turned onto her side, and a soft whisper cut through the quiet.

“Can’t sleep, love?”

Ayla turned toward the sound. Joni’s face was bathed in the pale glow of the streetlight, and she whispered back, voice small.

“So much has happened. Good things too. But... it’s just a bit much.”

Joni’s hand reached out, brushing lightly against hers, and for a moment the world narrowed to that tiny, steady connection — comfort in the chaos, quiet in the storm.

“Would you feel better if you slept over here?” Joni asked softly.

Ayla didn’t trust her voice enough to speak, so she just nodded. Then she realised Joni couldn’t see her in the dark, and quietly crawled over to her mattress.

Joni held up the blanket, and Ayla noticed, just for a moment, that she wasn’t wearing a top. She swallowed the sudden warmth in her chest and snuggled in close. Joni lowered the blanket over them both, and the quiet comfort of it — the warmth, the closeness — made Ayla feel a little safer in the dark.

They lay close, quiet, careful not to wake anyone else. But Ayla wasn’t feeling tired at all. She could feel Joni pressed gently against her side, the warmth and steady rhythm of her breathing grounding her. Joni had turned onto her side, an arm draped lightly over Ayla’s stomach.

For a while, Ayla just stayed like that, letting the closeness calm her racing thoughts. Eventually, Joni's breathing evened out, and she drifted off to sleep, leaving Ayla awake but feeling oddly safe and comforted in the quiet dark.

Chapter Thirty

When Ayla woke up, she was lying alone — but still on Joni's mattress. She tugged the blanket up to her chin and took a deep breath. Joni's blanket. The thought made her smile without even trying. She let it fall back and looked around. A few kids were still scattered across the floor, asleep, but most of the mattresses were empty.

She slipped out of the bed and padded over to her own mattress to grab some clean clothes. That's when she realised — she hadn't seen a washer anywhere in the house, and she was almost out of fresh clothes.

She gathered the last pair of clean knickers, socks, and a camisole and headed for the bathroom, silently hoping today would be a normal, uneventful morning — whatever “normal” meant here.

As she pushed the door open, she realised she'd secretly hoped Joni would be in there. Someone was in the shower behind the curtain, steam curling up towards the

ceiling. The curtain suddenly swished aside—but it wasn't Joni. It was Willa, grinning.

“Morning.”

Ayla hadn't even realised she was going to speak until the word was already out.

Willa burst out laughing.

“I think that's the first time you've said something before I have since I've known you, Ay. So I suppose it *is* a good morning!” she chuckled. Then she added, “Noticed your mattress was empty earlier. Found yourself a new sleeping spot, yeah?”

Willa disappeared back behind the curtain, but Ayla could hear the smile in her voice. It wasn't mean. Just playful.

And to her own surprise, Ayla laughed out loud.

“I guess. And don't use all the hot water! Oh — and... I've got some washing.”

She instantly felt awkward just standing there. She'd got used to people wandering in and out while she brushed her teeth—boys, girls, no one really caring. At first it had shocked her. Now she sort of liked how free everything felt at The House. Still, she wasn't quite

ready to get undressed with Willa right there. So she stayed where she was in her knickers, half-hidden behind the clean clothes clutched to her chest like a shield.

“We don’t have a washer,” Willa called over the sound of the water, “but there’s a laundrette a bit down the road. We all use that. I could do with clean stuff too, so we can head down later.”

The water stopped. The curtain slid back and Willa stepped out, reaching for a towel as she kept talking. She must have sensed Ayla’s awkwardness, because she wrapped it around herself straight away and grabbed her things.

“I’ll get dressed in the sleeping room. Enjoy your shower!”

And then she was gone, leaving the bathroom warm and steamy and suddenly very quiet.

Ayla drifted somewhere else entirely under the shower. The hot water pounded against her skin, steady and loud, drowning everything out. She closed her eyes and just stood there, letting herself breathe.

The last few days flickered behind her eyelids in soft flashes. The House. Breakfast with Joni. Making bracelets on the floor. The park, sunlight and laughter.

Late-night talks in the kitchen. And then last night — sharing a mattress, the quiet closeness in the dark.

Her thoughts kept circling back to Joni, again and again, like a song stuck on repeat. And when she realised how much of her mind was taken up by her, Ayla found herself grinning, properly grinning, alone under the water.

It felt new. It felt terrifying.

But mostly, it felt good.

It wasn't until the water turned lukewarm that she finally switched it off. She hoped no one else had been waiting outside, desperate for their turn.

She dried herself quickly behind the curtain, moving faster than she probably needed to, just in case someone barged in. Even though everyone at The House seemed completely unbothered by nudity, she still wasn't quite there yet.

She pulled on her clean knickers, socks and camisole in record time, then stepped over to the mirror. It was completely fogged up, but she wiped a small circle clear with her palm and leaned closer.

Her blue hair looked darker when it was wet, almost inky. She tilted her head, studying herself for a moment, feeling oddly fond of the girl staring back.

Then she wrapped the towel around her hair and headed out, ready to face whatever the day decided to throw at them.

Chapter Thirty-One

She stirred the coffee slowly, watching the pale swirl of milk disappear into the dark. From the band room, music spilled out — uneven at first, then finding its shape. Someone missed a chord. Someone laughed. She could tell which laugh was Joni's without even trying.

Ayla had a feeling Joni wouldn't stop for breakfast. Not properly. She'd get caught up in tuning or arguing about tempo or changing her mind about something at the last second. So instead of hovering awkwardly in the kitchen, Ayla took her mug outside and sat on the bench in the soft morning sun.

The air smelled faintly of flowers — something sweet and a bit overgrown round the edges. The garden at The House was like that. Not tidy, exactly. Just... alive.

She sat there for a while, warming her hands on the mug, listening to the music through the open window. It drifted in and out with the breeze. She tried not to think too far ahead, but her mind did it anyway — the

performance, the square, people watching. Whether anyone would actually listen.

She took a sip. It was slightly too strong. She didn't mind.

For the first time in days, the morning felt steady. Like it was waiting to see what they'd do with it.

She didn't have to wait long before something shifted.

The back door banged open and a small crowd spilled out onto the grass. Willa and Eds were carrying a massive cardboard box between them, arms straining slightly, laughing like it was heavier than they'd expected. They set it down right in the middle of the lawn with a soft thud.

Ayla stayed where she was, quiet, watching.

The box was full of costumes — she could tell as soon as the flaps fell open. A flash of sequins. A bit of feather boa. Something neon and ridiculous. Within seconds everyone was crowding round, diving in properly, not even pretending to be dignified about it.

She pulled her legs up under her and turned sideways on the bench so she could see better, chin resting lightly on her knee. From here she could just observe, unnoticed. It felt safer that way. Like being at the edge

of a swimming pool, feet dangling in, not quite ready to jump.

Willa emerged holding up a glittery jacket with mock seriousness, as if presenting something sacred. Eds disappeared almost entirely into the box. Someone found a hat and immediately put it on backwards.

Ayla felt a small, unexpected smile tug at her mouth.

They looked daft. And happy. And completely themselves.

She hugged her knees a little tighter, sunlight warm against her back, and wondered when she'd start feeling like she belonged in the middle of it instead of just watching from the side.

She'd never seen anything like this before. Sure, there'd been school plays — but she'd never been part of them, never really known what the drama and performance team got up to all year to make it all come together. This, though... this was different. It felt like peeking behind the curtains, seeing the gears turning, the chaos before it became something polished.

Willa, of course, was in charge. Or at least that's what it looked like. She was directing and performing at the same time, shifting people from one spot to another, glancing at the playbook, nodding, then turning back to

adjust someone's stance again. And she was doing it all in a flowing dress that moved like liquid when she spun, a flower crown perched slightly crooked on her head. Somehow it suited her completely, made her look like the sort of person who could make all this madness make sense.

Ayla just watched, mesmerised. There was a rhythm to it, a gentle order hiding under the laughter and the mess of costumes. And for the first time, it didn't feel like she was entirely on the outside.

She thought about the band still playing inside and decided to see what they were up to. As she walked past the group on the lawn, one of the boys suddenly called out,

“Lord, what fools these mortals be!”

Ayla felt a spark of mischief she hadn't recognised in herself before. She grinned, tiptoeing a little behind Eds, and leaned close enough to whisper,

“He is referring to your britches for sure!” Then she slipped inside, laughing quietly to herself, the warmth of the morning following her in.

She topped up her coffee mug and made her way to the band room, easing the door open so it barely creaked. She didn't want to interrupt their practice.

She hurried to close the door behind her and slipped into a chair at the little café-style table in the corner, the one tucked out of the way. From there, she could watch without being in the way, coffee warm in her hands, letting the music carry her into the quiet bubble of the room.

The song ended, and Joni wandered over, brushing a strand of hair from her face as she said hi. Ayla felt a surprising surge of courage this morning, and before she knew it, she was on her feet, wrapping her arms around Joni and pressing a quick, tender kiss to her lips.

Joni didn't hesitate, her arms sliding around Ayla in return. Ayla wrinkled her nose with a grin.

“God, you're sweaty! How long have you been playing?”

Joni laughed, leaning her damp forehead against Ayla's. “A couple of hours now. We're still deciding on our set list, but we've got a few we agree on, so figured it was best to practice those.”

Ayla nodded, letting go and sliding back into her chair as the band readied themselves for the next song, warmth lingering in her chest from that small, brave moment.

She stayed at the table for ages, hands busy weaving threads into bracelets while the music floated around her. Every so often, she couldn't help but glance at Joni, who was sprawled across the floor with her bass, utterly absorbed in the chords. Her chest felt light, almost fluttery, and she didn't want to break the spell.

Then Willa's head popped around the doorway, breaking her reverie.

"Got your stinky undies ready, Ay? Going to the laundromat in a few."

Ayla blinked, and unsurprisingly she turned red, but a laugh bubbling up before she could stop it. The spell shattered, but in a good way — warm and real. She shook her head, tugging at a bracelet. "Yeah... I'll grab them in a sec."

Willa just grinned, slipping back out like she'd never been there at all.

Chapter Thirty-Two

As always, stepping out onto Stokes Croft felt like stepping into another world. A world with its own rules, its own rhythm. She couldn't believe this had been hers once. Not that long ago, either.

She slung her bag over her shoulder while Willa lugged two plastic bags of washing down the street toward the laundrette.

"I talked to Joni this morning," Willa said, breathing a little from the weight. "We're having a little meeting outside this afternoon. All of us. Planning this properly. Joni suggested I do the opening speech, but I've no idea what to actually say."

Ayla thought for a moment. That wasn't a bad idea. But whatever they said would need to be sharp, clever — at least a little. She didn't have much hope that anyone would be persuaded to save The House. That decision was already made. She wasn't naive. But maybe...

maybe they could try to explain themselves, their right to exist here, in their own messy, loud way.

“I suppose,” Willa went on, “telling a bit about who we are, where we come from... that we’re not troublemakers. Well, not all of us, anyway. Not those who are left.”

Ayla nodded, chewing on the edge of her lip. It was a start. And somehow, that felt like enough for now.

They pushed open the door to the laundrette, and a quiet hum from a tumble dryer greeted them. It was mostly empty, the smell of detergent sharp in the air. Ayla had never been anywhere like this before, and she’d certainly never had to do her own laundry. Willa patiently showed her how to get a machine going, lending her washing powder, guiding her hands and pointing out buttons, until both washers were humming and tumbling with their clothes.

They slid into the plastic chairs in the corner, the vinyl cool against their legs.

“Best to stay here,” Willa said, nodding at the machines. “Some people will nick clothes if you leave them unattended.” She leaned back, eyes softening. “Will you help me write the speech when we get home, then?”

Ayla nodded. The idea of having something to do, a role she could actually play, made her chest lift. Up until now, she hadn't felt she could contribute much. But this — this felt real. Something she could do. Something that mattered, however small.

While they were waiting, an older lady shuffled into the laundrette. She glanced at the girls, frowned slightly, and then turned on her heel and left just as quickly.

“That was odd,” Ayla muttered, half-joking. “She think we'd nick her bed sheets or something?”

Willa didn't laugh. “Probably not,” she said. “But she might expect us to smoke weed in here, or try taking coins from the washers. Happened before. Before we decided to kick out the troublemakers.”

Ayla nodded, the warmth and boldness of the morning slipping a little. Out here, they were outsiders. Outcasts. They carried The House with them wherever they went — and sometimes that didn't feel like a good thing at all.

Once their laundry was done, they packed up and stepped outside. The sunlight hit hard, almost blinding, and the summer warmth felt good on Ayla's bare shoulders. Willa paused just outside the doors.

“Mind a little detour? I’ve decided I want that jacket from the Second Hand shop after all.”

Ayla nodded, and they turned down the side street, further away from anything familiar.

They had plenty of time. The meeting wouldn’t start for a couple of hours, and though Willa had more play practice to do later and they still needed to write the speech, there was no rush.

Being out here was both exhilarating and slightly terrifying. Just sitting at home could get boring, but stepping into the world felt like swimming in shark-infested waters. She imagined people looking at them, judging. She tried to see herself and Willa from the outside: Willa with her anarchist logo top, Ayla with her blue hair. They didn’t fit in. And they made sure everyone knew it.

The cashier at the second-hand shop didn’t stare, though. Here they were used to the kids, and she smiled and welcomed them as they came in with all the clean clothes in bags.

They wandered the aisles for a while. Willa had grabbed the jacket straight away and was balancing it carefully on top of her plastic bags, while Ayla moved

slowly, scanning the racks, hands free now that her own bag was slung over her shoulder.

Ayla paused at a top that made her blink. Black, sleeveless, with a rubber duck printed on the front — but not any ordinary duck. This one had a pink mohawk and was scrawled over in graffiti-style scribbles. A month ago, she would have laughed and walked straight past it. Now... she hesitated. She held it up in front of her and glanced at Willa.

“How’s that?” she asked, a small, uncertain smile tugging at her lips.

Willa craned her neck, squinted at the top, and nodded.

“Old ladies in the laundrette definitely won’t like you any more than they already do,” she smirked.

Ayla shuffled over to the mirror, holding the top up and taking a good, long look at herself.

“Perhaps not. Do you think Joni would like me more, though?” Her cheeks flared a bit as she asked it, daringly direct, but Willa didn’t laugh.

“I think Joni would like you no matter what you wore. She’s way into you, you know!”

Ayla's eyes met Willa's in the reflection, and for a moment she wondered if she was serious. But Willa went on, a grin tugging at her lips.

"I've never seen her kiss anyone before, and Joni and I go way back. You really could wear anything or nothing at all and she'd be into you!"

Ayla just nodded, feeling her blush fade a little. She turned back to the racks, gathering a few more tops that felt like the new her — bold, a bit ridiculous, and entirely hers.

On the walk back to The House, they didn't talk much, but the quiet between them didn't feel awkward. Ayla's mind wandered over her new tops — a couple of them sleeveless. She realised she hadn't shaved her armpits since she'd arrived. It wasn't a lot, just a little stubble, but it would be visible in a sleeveless top.

She found herself wondering, not for the first time, if Joni would notice. And if she did... what she would make of it.

Chapter Thirty-Three

When they got back, the house was buzzing. The band was still at it, practising their set, and Paddy was helping some of the younger kids paint a backdrop for the play. Willa didn't even pause — she dropped her bags the moment she saw it and went straight over to lend a hand. Or perhaps to tell them how it should be done.

Ayla carried her bag upstairs to the sleeping room and set it down. She didn't have much, but all her clothes were now clean, and her wardrobe had even grown a little. She scanned the new tops, finally picking a sleeveless one — not the rubber duck, but the one with the big red star. She wasn't entirely sure what it symbolised, but she liked the print.

She pulled off her camisole, then paused for a second and decided to take her bra off as well, before sliding the new top over her head.

It felt strange, not wearing a bra. Her nipples pressed against the fabric immediately, erect from the movement of the fabric rather than anything else. She glanced down at herself, wondering if it looked too much. Joni never wore a bra and never seemed bothered about it, never seemed to mind if anyone noticed. Ayla took a breath and decided to give it a go — if it felt too much, she could always go and change again.

She wandered down to the kitchen and found it empty, the quiet only broken by the hum of the fridge. The clock caught her eye. Lunch time.

A thought struck her. She could actually be useful. While everyone else seemed absorbed in their projects, she could make lunch. A small, satisfying feeling of purpose swelled in her chest. She rummaged through the cupboards, pulling out whatever she could find. Mrs Warwick's donations had been dropped off a few days ago, and there was still plenty left — enough to make toast and boil water for coffee and tea.

Carrying plates and mugs, she shuffled into the living room and pushed the two dinner tables together. Usually, the kids just ate in little groups or on their own, but things had shifted since the troublemakers had left. There was a quieter, gentler rhythm to the house now.

She ran back and forth, setting out cups and cutlery, adding a small potted plant to the centre of the table for a touch of life. When she finally stood back and looked at it all, satisfied, she went outside and called the others in.

“Lunch is ready!” she announced, a little proud of herself for carving a place in the day.

She stepped into the band room, catching them just as they were wrapping up.

“Lunch is ready!” she called, and a few eyebrows shot up.

Joni set her bass down and walked over, stopping a few steps away. She gave Ayla a slow once-over, and suddenly Ayla felt hyper-aware of herself.

“Nice ‘fit, Ay!” Joni said, leaning in for a quick kiss.

Ayla’s cheeks warmed. She wasn’t sure if Joni meant the print on her top or the fact that she wasn’t wearing a bra. It felt a little ridiculous — the band room was always dim, and Joni probably couldn’t tell either way. She shook her head, trying to clear the flutter of awkward thoughts.

“Lunch is ready,” she repeated, her voice a little less sure this time.

Joni just smiled and slipped her hand into Ayla's. Together, they walked into the living room, where the others were already waiting, and the nervous self-consciousness melted a little under the warmth of the moment.

Lunch was a welcome pause in the day. The room buzzed with chatter: band members leaning over to talk to the play crew, Willa going over her speech with Paddy, and the guitar player — Ayla thought her name was Piper, though she wasn't certain — debating with Eds whether the music should come before the play.

Ayla mostly just listened, letting the conversations wash over her. Every so often she got up to make more toast or top up the kettle, quietly slipping in and out, feeling useful without needing to say much. It was nice, being part of the hum of the house, even if only in small ways.

Ayla felt a little overwhelmed when everyone finished eating and started complimenting her efforts. She busied herself fidgeting with her bracelets, trying to brush it off. She knew it wasn't a huge amount she'd done, but at the same time, she felt... useful. And that feeling was surprisingly, wonderfully nice.

Soon the room had quieted down, leaving just her, Willa, and Paddy at the table. Paddy looked across at her and gave a small, warm smile.

“I’m sorry you had such a turbulent start in the House, Ayla.”

She blinked, a little puzzled.

“I mean... with everything that’s happened since you moved in. I guess you haven’t really had a chance to settle in before all that trouble kicked off, and now...” He waved vaguely at the room, as if to include all the chaos around them. “...all this creative energy. Which is good, though!”

Ayla nodded, thinking it over. “Yeah... it’s been chaotic. But it’s my first time away from home, so I guess I was kind of expecting chaos. I just... I don’t know if I’ve been much use, though.”

Paddy grinned. “First time I’ve ever seen the whole House eat a meal together. That’s a big feat on its own! And Willa tells me you’re helping her with her speech — another crucial thing. So, I’d say you’re doing your part. And maybe even more.”

He leaned a little closer. “Actually, Willa and I were just talking about something else, where you could help as well.”

Ayla tilted her head, curiosity sparking.

“Here’s the thing. The House is privately owned — it’s a rental. For years, the council has covered the rent, utilities, and some of the food funding. Stokes Croft is expensive, obviously, and rent isn’t cheap. I don’t know the exact numbers, but what we thought was... when you do the performance, put up some tip jars. Yeah, lots of people don’t like The House, but others will bring donations. And here’s where you come in: selling bracelets. Make a whole bunch and sell them in the town square that day.”

Ayla blinked. Her heart gave a little flutter — a mix of nerves and excitement. She had no idea if she could do it, but the thought of helping in such a real, practical way made her chest feel warm.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ayla brushed her teeth and stared at herself in the mirror. She barely recognised the girl looking back, and yet... somehow, this felt more like her than ever. The blue hair, the jangling bracelets with tassels that swung with every move, the top she'd picked herself — she was still getting used to it, but now she didn't feel as exposed as she had earlier.

Then it hit her: without a bra, she'd be topless next to Joni when it was time to change into nightwear. For a fleeting moment, she wondered if she should try sleeping that way, but she shook her head. This new Ayla was braver than the old one, sure, but there were limits. That wasn't a leap she was ready to take. Not yet.

Ayla slipped into the sleeping room. There weren't many kids there yet, but Joni was already settled.

She turned her back to her and peeled off her trousers and top, then pulled on a simple strap top,

half-wondering if Joni would notice or comment. She didn't.

"Want to share the mattress again, or prefer a bit of room to spread out?" Joni asked, her voice easy, like either answer would be fine.

Ayla grabbed her blanket and crawled over to curl up next to her.

"Going to bring extra blankets, I see," Joni teased. "You hogged it last night!"

Ayla laughed softly, tucking herself in. The warmth of the bed and Joni next to her made the world outside feel a little less urgent, a little softer.

Ayla felt a rush of sensations as she snuggled close to Joni. It was comforting, exciting even — the feel of Joni's bare skin, the gentle press of her hand on Ayla's tummy. She was knackered, yet her mind refused to quiet down, tumbling through thought after thought.

The big things still lingered, heavy in the background: her parents, The House facing closure. But for now, they were pushed aside by smaller, sharper moments. How she and Willa had spent evenings making bracelets while also working on the speech. How the House had changed — more energy, more purpose, everyone ready to fight for what they believed in. Yet

even in that excitement there was restlessness, a sense that the future had grown a bit less predictable than before.

Wrapped up with Joni, it all felt a little softer, a little more manageable, even if only for tonight.

It took Ayla a long time to drift off. Part of it was just the unfamiliarity of sharing a bed with someone else, but mostly it was her thoughts, bouncing around like restless birds.

Willa had mentioned that there were other places, other cities they could go to. They didn't have to end up at The Lighthouse. Ayla couldn't quite remember if Joni had said anything about plans, but if Joni went to The Lighthouse, she figured she would follow. And if Willa went somewhere else... the thought made her sigh.

Joni shifted in her sleep, curling a little closer, and the warmth pressed into Ayla's side. That simple contact pulled her back to the present, quieting the swirl of what-ifs a little bit, but not enough for her to really rest her mind.

And what about her parents? Would they really cut her off? Tell her to bugger off if she showed up at home? She hadn't used a lot of money since she got here, but her plan tomorrow was to go grocery shopping for the

house, just bread, coffee, butter, the essentials as well as some ingredients for dinner. She planned on serving dinner for them all tomorrow. Everyone was so occupied with their projects and this was one way that Ayla could contribute.

Her thoughts drifted back to money. She wouldn't hesitate for a second to spend what she had to feed the others, but she knew it wouldn't last forever. And then... what? Go home? Ask for forgiveness? Be turned away?

The questions swirled around in her head, circling like restless shadows, until it took a long while for her to finally drift into sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The next few days passed in a blur. Joni was mostly absorbed in the music, Willa buried in the play, and Ayla spent her time doing groceries, cooking and serving meals, and making lemonade to keep everyone cool. The summer heat kept climbing, so coffee and tea were now strictly for evenings.

Mrs Warwick had stopped by twice with groceries, which helped a lot. She and Ayla unpacked in the kitchen, and Mrs Warwick paused, looking around. “The House seems livelier now,” she said, though she noticed there were fewer kids than before.

Ayla explained what they were planning, and Mrs Warwick’s face lit up. She jotted the date down in her notebook.

“There’s a senior centre I visit nearby,” she said. “And there aren’t a lot of activities for them. I’ll tell them to come.”

Ayla gave her a doubtful look. “They probably won’t like us. Not many seem to.”

Mrs Warwick huffed. “They can’t hear or smell. I’m sure they have no idea there’s been trouble down here.”

Ayla laughed, the sound light and easy, a small relief in the midst of everything else.

After Mrs Warwick had gone, Ayla set about making lunch. By now she knew where everything belonged in the kitchen, so it didn’t take long. She even found an old bell at the second-hand shop — not exactly a dinner bell, more like a cowbell — but it worked just the same.

She grabbed the last tray, gave it a sharp ring, and stepped into the living room just as the kids came in from outside.

She knew the band wouldn’t hear it if they were practising, so she opened the door ajar and poked her head in. That was enough. The House had a new rhythm now, and everyone understood: lunch was served.

Over the last few days, Joni had started sitting next to Ayla. It wasn’t planned — it had just happened, naturally. Somehow, everyone seemed to find their own spots now.

Ayla thought about it for a moment, how even in the middle of chaos, people seemed wired to create a bit of order. She didn't care much for the psychology behind it, to be honest, but she liked it. Liked that Joni sat beside her.

Usually, after finishing her meal, Joni would perch on her chair and stretch her legs toward Ayla. Ayla would rub them, and she did so with quiet, focused pleasure, enjoying the small closeness between them.

Even though Ayla spent more time with Willa than with Joni, it all felt completely natural. She had often wondered what it would be like when she finally had a girlfriend. Back home, Nell had been both her best friend and, if you could call it that, her first love. But what would it be like when she had both friends and a girlfriend? Would there be misunderstandings? Would it be hard to know when to spend time with one and not the other?

Now, she realised, she had that. Sure, she had lost a lot, almost everything she knew — maybe her family, certainly her old sense of safety — but she had gained something else. And for the first time, it felt real. Not the kind of relationships that lasted because you went to the same school or lived nearby, but connections built from shared struggles and understanding, messy and honest and entirely hers.

Everyone had finished eating, and Ollie nudged Joni's shoulder with his hip.

"Time to get back to the grind. If you can tear yourself away from your girlfriend, that is!" he said with a grin, clearly teasing, but Ayla's cheeks immediately warmed. *Girlfriend*. Was she... really? She hoped so.

Before she could think too much about it, Joni pulled her feet out of Ayla's hands, placing them gently on the floor. Without even glancing at Ollie, she leaned in close.

"Yeah, I'd better get up and work instead of spending all afternoon with my girlfriend," she said, and kissed Ayla quickly before heading off.

It all happened in a heartbeat. Ayla was left alone at the table, sitting there for a moment, letting it sink in. *Girlfriend. Girlfriends. She had a girlfriend.*

When she finally got up to clear the table and carry the trays to the kitchen, it felt like her feet barely touched the ground, floating on a quiet, thrilling sort of happiness.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Performance day was creeping closer. The past few weeks had blurred together, everyone constantly busy with something. Ayla's days were filled with cooking meals, slipping out for walks when her head felt too full, and sitting cross-legged on the band room floor making bracelets while Joni and the others practised. She'd learnt the set list by heart without even trying. The way Joni's voice dipped on certain lines. The way her fingers moved over the bass strings.

In between all of that, she'd called home. Twice.

Both times she rang her mum's mobile. The first time, her dad answered. The sound of his voice — just "Hello?" — had made her chest seize up, and she'd hung up without saying a word.

The second time, it was her mum.

It had started quiet and then escalated quickly. Her mum's voice sharp, accusing. Saying Ayla had ruined

everything. Ruined the family. Ruined her father's career. The words had come fast, not leaving space for explanation.

Ayla had hung up again.

Afterwards, she'd cried so hard she'd had to sit on the floor with her back against the wall, trying to breathe through it. The kind of crying that left her empty and shaky, like something had been scraped out of her chest.

There had been good things too. So many, actually.

She and Joni were properly a couple now. Her first girlfriend. The word still made something bright spark inside her.

She'd made Joni a friendship bracelet — half as a joke, really — but she hadn't been able to stop smiling while tying the final knot. She'd fastened it round Joni's wrist herself, fingers brushing her skin, and Joni hadn't taken it off since. Every time Ayla caught sight of it with the tassels dangling against the neck of her bass or against a mug of tea, her chest lifted a little.

They shared a bed every night now. Their mattresses had been nudged together, almost absent-mindedly, and no one had commented. No raised eyebrows. No awkward jokes. It was just... accepted. Ordinary.

And each time she noticed how normal it was here — how unremarkable it was that she had a girlfriend — she was also reminded how unremarkable it *wouldn't* be back home in Marlborough.

The contrast sat quietly in her chest. Not sharp enough to ruin the good, but present all the same.

Today had felt big.

They'd all been gathered round the table after lunch, papers everywhere, half-finished mugs pushed aside, arguing over what to actually call the event. It suddenly felt real in a way it hadn't before. A name made it real.

And Ayla had spoken up. Properly spoken up.

"The House Festival," she'd said, her voice steadier than she expected. "With a subtitle. Like... *Curtains Up*."

There had been a pause. Not awkward — just thoughtful. Then nods. Willa's eyes lighting up. Joni grinning at her like she'd just done something brilliant.

It fitted. The play. The music. The idea of opening something instead of shutting it down. Letting people look in. Not to gawp — but to understand.

They lived differently. That was true. But they weren't dope heads or criminals or whatever else people liked to mutter under their breath. They were just... young. Trying. Loud sometimes. Messy.

Human.

And the fact that she'd helped shape that — helped give it a name — made her feel taller somehow, like she'd taken up the space she was standing in instead of apologising for it.

And then tonight.

Her and Joni had showered together. Been naked in the small bathroom and then in the intimacy of the shower. There had been a lot of giggling and awkwardness. Joni didn't seem to be very experienced with that either.

And while it had been awkward in the beginning it hadn't felt wrong at any point. Joni had washed Ayla's hair and as she stood with her eyes closed she just wanted that moment to last forever.

She edged a little closer to Joni, fitting herself into the warm space beside her as if she'd always belonged there. Joni murmured something half-formed in her sleep and shifted an arm round her waist.

Ayla let her forehead rest lightly against Joni's shoulder. The day — all its noise and nerves and bright, hopeful plans — finally began to loosen its grip on her.

This time, when sleep came, it was gentle.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“Oh, for *fuck’s sake!*” Eds’ face said it all — he was proper mad.

Another kid stormed inside, nearly colliding with Ayla as she carried a mug of coffee from the kitchen to the living room.

“Christ, what’s going on out there?” she muttered, juggling the mug as carefully as she could.

“Just... nerves,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Eds has had enough of rehearsals. I think we all have. Except... her.” He nodded toward the garden, but Ayla knew he meant Willa.

Shaking her head slightly, she turned back to the kitchen. The kettle was still warm, so she poured another mug before heading outside.

There wasn't a fight, exactly, but no rehearsal either. She spotted Willa on the bench and held out a mug of coffee. Willa took it with a small, grateful smile.

"Do you have a moment?" Ayla asked, feeling a little guilty for intervening, but everyone was on edge. It wasn't just them — it was the whole house. Her too.

They sat a little apart on the bench, the air warm around them. Ayla took a breath and decided to speak plainly.

"Good thing the festival is only a few days away," she said. "Then we can focus on what to do with ourselves."

Willa just nodded, and for a moment they sat quietly. Then she looked up, locking eyes with Ayla.

"Good timing," Willa said, letting out a small laugh. "We were just about ready to kill each other, I think."

Ayla smiled but didn't reply. After a pause, Willa continued.

"Yeah. Two more days. Where's Joni?"

Ayla wasn't surprised. The question didn't surprise her anymore. Not that they were accountable to each other, but everyone still saw them as a couple.

“Down at the square with Paddy, Bethany, Ollie, and Piper. They’re building the stage and putting up the backdrops.”

Willa glanced toward where the painted backdrops had been leaning against the house that morning. Now they were gone. She nodded thoughtfully.

The tension eased, and soon the others drifted over, talking through the play’s details without shouting or snapping at each other. Ayla stretched, feeling the sun on her shoulders, and decided she’d take a walk. She needed a few things for dinner tonight, and she was curious to see how the square was shaping up.

The theatre group was so absorbed in their discussion that they barely noticed when she left them and slipped inside to grab her money.

As she stepped onto the street, Ayla glanced around, half-expecting someone to be watching her. She’d been out on her own a few times now — mostly trips to the grocery store, where the owner would hover nearby under the guise of helping her, but she knew he was really just making sure she didn’t pocket anything.

She decided to head to the town square first. She wasn’t exactly confident with directions, but Joni had explained the route, and it sounded straightforward

enough. Taking a deep breath, she straightened her back and started walking — not striding proudly, but not skulking in the shadows either. Just moving forward.

She turned a corner, and there it was. Of course she'd managed to get a little lost on the way, but now she was here.

The square was mostly empty of cars, and in the middle, the crew was hard at work. The stage was starting to take shape, a jumble of wood and scaffolding that somehow already looked impressive. The backdrops were tucked under a tarp, and Ayla couldn't help but wonder what would happen if someone tried to swipe them.

She stepped closer, careful not to get in the way, and watched them work, feeling a little thrill at how much was coming together.

"How's things at the House?" Paddy interrupted, and Ayla finally pulled back from Joni's lips.

"They're about to slit each other's throats," she said, grinning, "but I managed to distract them with caffeine before I ran down here."

Paddy nodded, a hint of admiration in his eye. "If anyone could, it's you. Those skinny kids are all getting fatter thanks to your cooking, you know."

Ayla laughed and then started scanning the square. “Wow... it’s getting real, huh?” she said, not really addressing anyone in particular.

Joni joined them and grabbed her hand and began walking her around, pointing out details and explaining everything as they went. Ayla couldn’t help admiring how at ease Joni was with all of it — how natural she seemed in the chaos, knowing exactly where everything belonged and what needed to happen.

Soon after, the others picked up their work again, and Ayla didn’t want to be in the way. She leaned in, kissed Joni quickly, and whispered a soft goodbye. For some reason it felt natural to kiss her girlfriend, even here in public, on the town square of all places.

Then she turned and started retracing her steps, hoping she could find her way back to the House without getting too lost along the way.

She ended up coming home from a different side of town than usual. She’d thought about stopping at the second-hand shop, but that was completely the other way, so instead she ducked into a slightly bigger supermarket than the usual corner grocery.

Grabbing a basket, she wandered down the aisles. It felt strange not having anyone hovering or watching her

like she was used to. For a moment, she thought maybe she could do all her shopping here from now on — and then, uninvited, the thought added, *from now on, and until the end of the month*. She shook her head sharply to dislodge it and focused on what they actually needed for dinner.

Halfway through the store, she passed the hair and toiletry section. A glance at the hair dyes caught her eye: the same brand and shade she'd used a few weeks back. She tucked a box into her basket. It could do with a refresh, and, for some reason, the idea of going back to her natural colour made her shiver just a little.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Ayla leaned her head back, the warmth from the dye hood tingling on her scalp. Joni bent down and kissed her gently, and for a moment, it was just the two of them.

Then Eds barged in, feigning shock.

“You know, you could get a room! There’s a whole queue out here waiting for a shower!”

Ayla’s eyes went wide. She hadn’t realised how long they’d been there, and she definitely didn’t want to be a nuisance.

But when Eds caught her expression, his grin widened.

“Nah, just me, but I *am* waiting!”

Joni laughed and flicked a towel at him. “Well, have some modesty and wait outside! We’re busy kissing!”

She leaned back down, her tongue slipped out and she licked Ayla's lips, which made Eds groan before he muttered something under his breath, and finally turned around, letting the door click shut behind him.

They had moved downstairs and were sitting at the kitchen table, steam curling up from the two mugs of tea between them. Joni gently brushed Ayla's bright blue hair as they spoke quietly, the soft clink of teaspoons on ceramic punctuating their conversation.

"Nervous?" Ayla asked. Joni paused, thinking for a moment before answering.

"Yeah. I've never really performed for a proper crowd before. Unless you count all the times you've been sitting on the floor watching us." She smiled, then slid onto the chair opposite Ayla. Ayla understood immediately and reached out to massage her foot, kneading it with quiet care.

"You guys are really good! I'm not just saying that because I'm the girlfriend of one of the band members. You've got talent — all three of you. It's going to be great."

Joni nodded, taking a careful sip of her warm tea.

"Yeah... I don't believe for a second that the council is going to change their mind just because a bunch of kids

put on a song and dance. But I want this to work. For all of us. Mostly for Willa. She's been pouring her heart into this, day and night."

Ayla nodded. She knew exactly what Joni meant. Willa had this dream, this hope that somehow, by making a festival that really mattered, they could shift the world — or at least their little corner of it.

"By the way, where is she?" Joni asked, noticing Willa wasn't around like she usually was before bedtime.

Ayla thought back to her earlier chat with Willa. She'd been a bundle of nerves, pacing and fretting over the festival. Ayla had suggested taking a walk and even offered to go with her, but Willa had shaken her head and chosen to go alone.

Ayla explained that to Joni, and for a while they just sat quietly, sipping their tea, letting the soft warmth fill the space between them.

"Okay, Bluesy, let's get you to bed — Big day tomorrow!" Joni said, sliding out of her chair and washing their mugs.

While they brushed their teeth, they heard Willa come in. Her footsteps moved down the hallway, purposeful and quick, and she didn't stop or linger.

Ayla and Joni exchanged a quiet glance, then headed to bed themselves, the soft hum of the house settling around them.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

It was still dark when Ayla woke, and the memory hit her straight away — today was the big day. The House Festival.

Then a tiny, defiant thought nudged its way in: even if the police were looking for her, how would they know to watch for a blue-haired girl with bracelets dangling on both wrists, wearing a punk top and carrying a sense of stubbornness that made her stick out in every crowd?

She shook the thoughts away and got out of bed. With the room mostly empty except for a few sleeping heads, she had space to herself and didn't have to rush it, as she changed into fresh clothes before heading downstairs.

In the kitchen, she froze for a moment. Paddy was already there. At this hour? Her eyes flicked to the clock on the wall: 6:18. Somebody was up *early*.

“Morning,” she mumbled, padding over to the kettle to make coffee.

“Everyone’s busy hauling the band’s equipment down to the square,” Paddy said, his voice calm in the quiet kitchen. The silence of the house hit her in a new way, and she nodded, slipping a couple of slices of bread into the toaster.

“They’ll probably be starving when they get back, then!” she said.

Paddy got up, and together, in the soft stillness of the morning, they set the table, working side by side without much need for words.

Soon after, the first of the kids came back, their voices carrying so loudly she could hear them before they even reached the front door. The mood was a mix of nerves and excitement as they crowded around the table.

Nobody ate much, caught up in chatter and anticipation, but Ayla quickly realised she’d need to pick up more instant coffee from the store if this pace continued.

Paddy stood up, and the chatter slowly faded. He paused for a moment, like a coach about to give a pep talk before the big match. The chatter died down and they all looked at him.

“We’re not going to change the world today. Not by much. And any hopes you have that this might reverse the council’s decision? Probably in vain. I’m not saying this to hurt you, but to be straight — so you don’t let your hopes get carried away by what I’m about to say next.”

He looked around at the kids. They glanced at each other, silent, waiting.

“Remember, the purpose of The House Festival isn’t to win anything back. It’s to make a mark. To show the world what you’re made of. But —” he hesitated, his voice softer — “I know at least a couple of people from the council will be there today. I’ve spent a lot of time down there, and with funding soon to be gone... well, my position as a social worker here is on coming to an end as well.”

Ayla felt a sharp pang in her chest. She hadn’t even thought about that. But he was right — if The House closed, the grown-ups would be without jobs too.

The kids exchanged glances, and Ayla realised she wasn’t the only one who’d missed that side of things. But Paddy went on.

“Besides... there might be a crowd!” He didn’t elaborate straight away, but a grin spread across his face before he continued.

“Both *The Post* and *Cable* have written about it. You kids really need to figure out how newspapers work!” He shook his head, still smiling. “Someone’s been talking to both, and while *The Post* will probably be critical in their article covering it today, *Cable* ran a piece yesterday — and they’re selling it! So, you’d better do your best if you want to show the city just how artistic and talented you really are.”

For a moment, the room was quiet. The news settled in. Then it erupted — voices overlapping, ideas bouncing across the table in every direction. Paddy just sat back and smiled, watching the chaos of breakfast unfold in front of him.

Soon after, chaos fully returned. The last sleepy heads had rolled out of bed, and now everyone was bustling about, helping each other carry costumes, props, and electrical gear down to the square. Joni was already there, directing where things should go and making sure everything stayed safe.

Ayla stayed behind in the House. There were still hours before the festival would begin, and she had a kitchen to clean. She rolled up her sleeves and set to work, the

quiet task giving her a little breathing space amid the morning madness.

Chapter Forty

Ayla had long since lost count, but there had to be hundreds of bracelets piled in the box she was lugging down Stokes Croft. She didn't hold out much hope that anyone would actually buy them.

Paddy had suggested three quid each, but Joni and Willa had vetoed that, settling instead on a sign that said five quid. Nobody would want to pay that for homemade bracelets, surely.

Still, she had promised to man the stall, and the empty money box rattled on top of the bracelets with every step she took.

She walked with purpose, even though there was still plenty of time. Her hands trembled slightly with anticipation, and she wanted to be ready long before the festival began.

The play would go first. She could already picture Willa down there, bossing everyone around, and a smile

tugged at her lips. Willa could be the gentlest girl in the world, but when it came to her art... she transformed into something almost feral, completely unstoppable.

She turned the last corner and came to an abrupt stop. There had to be a million people! Her chest tightened, and she felt completely overwhelmed. Looking around, she couldn't even see the stage from where she stood.

Okay, maybe it wasn't a million — a couple of hundred at most — but it felt like the entire Commonwealth had turned up.

She began to weave through the crowd, the box awkward and unwieldy in her arms. She silently counted her blessings that, at least, it wasn't heavy.

Finally, she caught sight of the stage area. Paddy and Joni had set up a tent behind it — a place for the actors to change and for the band to hang out before their turn.

Her eyes landed on the little makeshift stall they'd built for her. Simple wooden panels screwed together, but someone had painted it, adding a painting of bracelets on a board at the top. Somehow, it looked amazing.

She edged her way through the chaotic throng to her little spot and set the box down. Ducking into the tent behind the stage, the heat hit her instantly — it felt like a hundred degrees, and sweat prickled her skin.

The tent was quiet, no loud voices, just the soft hum of nervous energy. In the corner, she spotted Joni talking to Ollie. Joni looked up and gave her a small smile — not the usual wide grin, more a nervous little twitch.

Ayla leaned in and pressed a quick kiss to her lips, whispering, “Break a leg.” She didn’t dare speak any louder in the hush of the tent.

Outside, she set the bracelets out as neatly as she could, arranging them into a small display. With her own wrists covered in them, she felt like part of the exhibit herself.

A few people wandered over to look, but she didn’t dare speak. Their eyes felt judging, even if they probably weren’t. Soon enough, they drifted away, and her gaze swept over the crowd gathering in front of the stage.

A huge clock loomed over the square, allowing her to tell time and she glanced up, realising there were only a couple of minutes left before it all began.

And then Willa stepped out onto the stage. A smattering of applause rose, but it wasn’t from the whole crowd. Ayla guessed that some of the people were only there out of curiosity — or maybe to have their prejudices confirmed.

Willa didn't look entirely confident, and Ayla understood why. She wouldn't have wanted to stand up there right now, not for anything in the world.

Willa cleared her throat, then glanced over at Ayla. Unsure what else to do, Ayla offered a smile, hoping it came across as encouraging. Willa took a deep breath and turned back to face the crowd.

Chapter Forty-One

“Welcome to The House Festival...” Willa’s voice faltered, dying away for a moment. Someone in the crowd let out a sharp boo.

She paused, then squared her shoulders, the defiance in her posture clear as day. Ayla felt a flicker of worry — please, don’t let her lose it and start a fight with someone — but Willa didn’t.

“Welcome to The House Festival. *Curtains Up*.” This time, nobody booed. Her voice steadied as she continued.

“We’ve been looking forward to this day for a long time. This isn’t the Royal Albert Hall, and we aren’t knighted artists. But we are sincere. We’re here to do our best, to give you an experience of art.”

Ayla let her mind drift. She’d heard the speech countless times by now — parts of it she’d even helped write — so she let her eyes wander over the crowd

instead. Some people looked angry or impatient, but many were watching with curiosity, even anticipation.

The speech ended, and a few scattered applause echoed between the tall buildings. Willa slipped behind the back curtain, and Ayla knew she was changing into her costume for her role as Hermia.

Ayla stepped a little out of the stall to get a better view of the stage. She'd seen the scenes rehearsed a million times at home, but seeing them now — Eds and Willa in full costumes, props in hand, the backdrops shifting every so often — made it feel completely different.

She almost jumped when someone spoke her name. Mrs Warwick was there, whispering, balancing several boxes of fizzy drinks and snacks.

“Where can I drop these?” she asked.

Ayla hurried over, took some of the load to lighten her burden, and led her into the tent.

The mood in the tent was intense, but brightened as the kids smiled and waved at Mrs Warwick. Fizzy drinks were soon being opened left and right, much needed in the sweltering heat.

Ayla followed Mrs Warwick out, partly because the older woman insisted she would *die* in the heat, and

partly because she wanted to see the festival from the front.

As they passed Ayla's stall, Mrs Warwick paused and gave it a careful look. Then she asked, "Oh, are you selling these?" Her voice carried just enough for the people nearby to hear, but not so loud as to disturb the performance unfolding on the stage.

Ayla looked at Mrs Warwick, unsure if the older woman had done it on purpose. Then Mrs Warwick winked and bought ten bracelets on the spot. A few people nearby edged closer — most just to see, but a couple picked up a bracelet and paid as well.

The play ended, and applause rang out again — this time from noticeably more people. Ayla clapped as loudly as she could, only stopping when Willa returned to the stage in her regular clothes. Behind her, Ollie, Piper, and Joni began pulling out their gear, while Eds, still in costume, started hooking up equipment and untangling cords.

"We hope you enjoyed these selected parts of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Now we'll move on to the second half, so please give it up for The House Band!"

The applause swelled even higher this time. There were still a few boos scattered through the crowd, but Ayla

tried to ignore them — it was almost impossible to spot who they were with so many faces turned toward the stage.

The band looked sharp in their plain black clothes. Ollie stood in the middle at the back, with Piper and Joni flanking him just close enough to fit on the small stage.

Ayla could tell they were nervous — there was a tension in the way they played, subtle, impossible to pinpoint exactly what was off.

As the music went on, more people wandered over to buy bracelets, and Ayla found herself juggling both the stall and watching the band, stealing glances at Joni as she played and sang.

As the concert went on, more of the crowd started singing along, clapping to the beat, and the applause for each song grew louder. But at the same time, the booing didn't stop.

It seemed to be coming from a group on the opposite side of the stage from where she stood. She didn't recognise any of them, but she could see them jeering — even holding up their middle fingers.

After the final song, the crowd erupted into cheers and applause. But that corner group was still at it, shouting

that they'd had their moment and telling everyone else to "fuck off."

Suddenly, the curtain behind the stage parted, and Eds stepped out. He wasn't in costume this time. His face was bright red, probably a mix of the heat from the tent and his rising anger.

The band stayed frozen on stage as Eds stepped between Piper and Joni, his gaze fixed on the corner of the crowd that had been booing and shouting. His voice cut through the square without a microphone.

"How the fuck dare you? Do you know who we are?"

The crowd went dead quiet. Ayla's stomach sank — she worried the whole thing was about to collapse. Paddy peeked out from the tent, but Joni waved him off, silently telling him to wait.

"Yeah, we're not like you. Maybe we don't want to be like you. But we're not bad people. The ones you should be booing, the ones you should be flipping the bird at... they don't live at The House anymore. We kicked them out, because they didn't care about anyone but themselves."

The crowd went completely silent. A few people lingered near Ayla's stall, but nobody made a sound —

if she'd dropped a coin, it would have echoed like thunder.

Then the real thunder came. Hundreds of hands clapped, voices cheered, and the boos, if they hadn't already gone, were drowned out. Ayla glanced over and saw the troublemakers turning and leaving the crowd.

As the applause finally faded, Joni leaned into her microphone and delivered the official closing words. Then she looked at Ayla and added, with a grin,

“Now, if you want to buy a bracelet to support The House, you can by the pretty blue-haired girl right there.”

And that was when Ayla got really, really busy.

Chapter Forty-Two

The whole house was still buzzing. A bunch of kids were talking loudly in the living room, some were outside dismantling the backdrops, and the band was putting all their gear and instruments back in order.

In the kitchen, Paddy, Willa, and Ayla were gathered. Paddy leaned against the countertop, his tea gone cold and forgotten, but still clutched in his hand. Ayla stretched back in her chair, letting out a contented sigh.

“What a day. We should make a medal for Eds,” Ayla said, smiling.

Willa grinned. “You could make one out of bracelets. How many have you got left?”

Ayla’s face lit up. “Not many, actually! We didn’t sell out, of course, but we sold so much more than I ever thought possible. There must be a thousand quid in the money box!”

They sat in silence for a while, and then Joni appeared, dragging a chair over to Ayla's side and leaning against her. Words weren't needed; they just sat together quietly, letting the calm stretch between them.

Eventually Paddy straightened up and set his mug down.

"You kids are amazing," he said, glancing around the room. "The lot of you. I'm not surprised the three of you stick together in quieter moments like this. You're a dangerous trio when you get an idea. What you did today — all of you — was truly mind-blowing. And yeah," he looked at Ayla, "make sure Eds knows how well he did. He needs it. Remember, you almost kicked him out of the house a month ago."

With that, he left, leaving the three of them in their quiet corner.

The voices from the living room had died down too. Ayla guessed that most of the others had gone to bed, and the house settled into a comfortable quiet.

Finally, Willa broke the silence.

"I don't know about you lot, but I'm knackered! We might not know where we'll be living in a couple of weeks, but no matter what happens, we can always look back on today and know we did something."

Ayla and Joni both nodded, smiling softly, and then they all got up and went to bed.

Chapter Forty-Three

The days after the festival seemed to blur together. Two of the kids had packed up and moved down to the Lighthouse. The rest stayed. Nobody said it out loud much, but they all knew it would only be a matter of weeks before the same decision would press in on them too. For now, they simply weren't ready to face it.

Mrs Warwick had visited twice since the festival, both times arriving with arms full of boxes — food, drinks, little extras as if she couldn't help herself. Two other people had come by as well. One brought groceries. The other brought a donation in cash. He'd insisted on handing it to a grown-up, so they had to fetch Paddy to accept it.

Ayla found that curious — wanting to support the kids, but only trusting a grown-up with the money. Still, she shrugged it off. Money was money. And more than that, it was support. Proof that someone had seen them, heard them, and decided they mattered.

Paddy had told them the donation was enough to cover another month's rent. A whole month. The words had hung in the air like something fragile and glittering.

But then he'd gently asked them to think about it.

Buying a month wouldn't really change the outcome, he'd said. It would only postpone it. Give them more time in a house that might still slip through their fingers.

They hadn't decided anything yet. The idea of staying was tempting — another month of shared dinners, music drifting down the hallway, mattresses pushed together, bracelets scattered across the kitchen table. Another month of being exactly where they were.

But before they could reach a conclusion, before the debate could even properly begin... something else happened.

Chapter Forty-Four

Ayla blinked awake and for a moment simply lay still. Joni was beside her, still asleep — which in itself felt unusual. Joni was normally the first one up.

There was no clock nearby, but the pale strip of light slipping through the gap between curtain and windowsill told her it was early. Too early for the house to be properly awake.

She was just about to roll closer, to wrap an arm around Joni and steal a few more quiet minutes, when she heard it again.

Voices.

Not the familiar hum of sleepy teenagers. These were deeper. Measured. Adult. More than one.

That was what had pulled her from sleep. The sound didn't belong here. It felt foreign in the morning stillness.

She held her breath, listening harder. She thought she caught Paddy's voice — low and steady — but she couldn't be certain. There were at least two other voices she didn't recognise at all. Too far away to make out words.

Her stomach tightened.

Grown-ups didn't just gather in the House at dawn for no reason.

She was out of bed in seconds, dragging yesterday's top and trousers on with clumsy urgency. Her thoughts spiralled fast and loud.

The landlord?

The police?

Someone looking for a certain missing Ayla Catherine Bennett?

Her pulse thudded in her ears as she hurried down the stairs.

At the bottom, she stopped short. Three grown-ups stood in the living room. Paddy was one of them. The other two were strangers.

Paddy was mid-sentence, gesturing as he opened the door to the band's practice room, clearly showing them

around. When he turned and spotted Ayla in the doorway, his face softened.

“Ah, there’s Ayla. Our newest resident! She played a big part in planning and executing the festival — although if you asked her, she’d deny it.” He smiled.

Ayla didn’t deny anything. In fact, she didn’t say anything at all. Her mind was too busy trying to catch up.

Before the silence could stretch, Paddy continued, “Do you know where Joni and Willa are? I’d like the three of you to come sit with us for a moment.”

No explanation. Just that.

Her heart hammered as she spun around and bolted back up the stairs to wake Joni, dread and hope tangling tightly in her chest.

Ayla grabbed Joni’s shoulder and shook her harder than she meant to.

Joni jolted upright, the blanket pooling in her lap. “What the— what’s going on? You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“Two,” Ayla shot back, breathless. “Two ghosts. Downstairs. Waiting to meet you. Where’s Willa?”

The question was ridiculous the second it left her mouth. Joni had been asleep. Of course she wouldn't know.

Ayla didn't wait for an answer. She was already on her feet, glancing at Willa's mattress — empty — before striding straight to the bathroom. She flung the door open without knocking.

There could have been anyone in there.

There was.

Willa stood by the sink, mid-brush, and let out a full, startled scream.

But Ayla didn't even flinch. "Downstairs. Now," she said, the words sharp and urgent.

Willa blinked at her through the mirror, toothpaste foam at the corner of her mouth. "What? Why—"

"Just come. There's people. Grown-ups."

That did it.

Willa spat, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and followed, still looking half asleep and entirely confused.

Ayla's chest felt tight as the three of them hurried down the stairs together. Whatever this was, it was waiting for them.

Chapter Forty-Five

Paddy gestured to the two adults sitting across from them.

“Everyone, this is Mr. Calder and Ms. Langford,” he said, voice calm but carrying the weight of the morning. “They work with the city council and have been following The House’s situation for a while. They’re here to talk about your future, and to get a sense of what you all have built here.”

Ayla swallowed hard, the words sinking in. Joni fidgeted with the edge of the blanket still draped over her legs, while Willa wrapped her towel tighter, her eyes wide but steady.

Mr Calder leaned forward slightly, hands clasped on the table. “We’ve heard a lot about what happened at your festival. About the effort, the creativity, and the community you’ve built. We wanted to see it for ourselves, and to hear from you.”

Ms Langford nodded in agreement, her expression soft but attentive. "It's clear that The House means a lot to you all, and that you've turned it into more than just a place to live. We're here to understand what it represents to you, and how we might support that going forward."

Paddy smiled and looked from Joni to Willa. "Before we continue I suggest you two go upstairs and get proper dressed. And perhaps you can help me prepare some coffee and tea, Ayla?" She nodded and followed him into the kitchen. They whispered as they prepared a tray. "Is this really as good as it sounds, Paddy?" Ayla's voice was quiet, not just to make sure the two in the living room couldn't hear it, but she felt small. She knew that Paddy would tell the truth. The speech he had given yesterday morning was a testament to that.

Paddy poured the hot water into the teapots and handed Ayla a mug to fill. "It's exactly as good as it sounds," he said quietly, his eyes meeting hers over the rim of the kettle. "They've come to see the heart of this place. To see you all. Not just the buildings or the festival. This is your chance to show them that The House isn't just a house — it's a home, a community, a family. You've built something real here."

Ayla nodded slowly, gripping the tray a little tighter. "And... if we mess up? Or say the wrong thing?"

Paddy smiled gently, reaching out to brush a strand of hair from her face. “Then you speak from here,” he said, tapping his chest lightly. “Everything else falls into place when you’re honest. You’ve already done more than most adults ever do. Don’t doubt that.”

The tray felt heavier now, but not from the mugs. It was the weight of responsibility—and, somehow, pride too.

Ayla nodded, her chest still fluttering from the nervous energy. She glanced at Joni and Willa, both rubbing sleep from their eyes, still trying to process the morning’s surprise.

“Right,” she said, trying to sound confident even though her hands felt clammy. “We’ll get everyone up and tell them... what we know. No promises, just the facts.”

Willa gave a small, determined nod, and Joni reached over to squeeze Ayla’s hand. “We’ve got this,” she whispered.

Ayla took a deep breath, feeling the strange mix of excitement and dread. “Okay... breakfast first, then the briefing.”

The three of them moved quietly through the house, gently nudging sleeping children awake, their voices soft but firm.

By the time the house was fully awake, there was a low hum of anticipation—nervous, excited, but united. Ayla felt the weight of responsibility again, but this time it wasn’t quite as heavy. They were in this together.

Chapter Forty-Six

A collective exhale swept through the room, almost as if the walls themselves had been holding their breath too. For a moment there was stunned silence, then cheers erupted — shouts, claps, laughter, a few high-pitched squeals that made Ayla grin despite herself.

Joni squeezed her hand tightly, leaning over to whisper, “We did it... we really did it.”

Ayla nodded, feeling warmth crawl up from her chest to her cheeks. It wasn’t just relief — it was pride, a kind of exhilaration she hadn’t felt before. She looked around the table at all the kids. Faces that had once been wary, tired, or even downright hostile now shone with a new light, a mixture of disbelief and triumph.

Willa leaned back in her chair, her arms crossed but her smile impossible to hide. “So... we’re actually going to keep The House?” she said, almost as if testing whether the words were real.

Paddy stepped closer, his usual calm authority softened by pride. “Yes. But it’s not just me who’s impressed. It’s the way you all pulled together — the festival, the band, the play, the bracelets — every little thing. You showed people what The House really is. Not troublemakers, not nuisances... a community. That counts for more than you think.”

Ayla let go of Joni’s hand and ran it through her hair, trying to make sense of the whirlwind of emotions. Relief, yes. But also a sense of belonging she hadn’t realised she’d been craving. This place, this ragtag group of kids and mentors and musicians, was home.

Mrs Warwick appeared in the doorway, carrying another box of donations, and looked around the room with sparkling eyes. Paddy explained the situation to her.

“Well, I’d say you’ve earned every last bit of this. Look at you all! I can hardly believe it.” She chuckled softly. “Don’t forget, a house isn’t a home without people who care—and clearly, you lot do.”

Ayla caught Joni’s eye across the table and smiled, brushing her hand against hers. Joni grinned back, her leg still bouncing, but now with a lighter, freer rhythm. Willa nudged her shoulder playfully, and even the younger ones began laughing and joking, the tension

that had held them all morning melting like morning mist in sunlight.

Paddy clapped his hands once, sharp and commanding, and the room fell quiet again. “Right then,” he said, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. “You’ve got a house to enjoy. And yes, maybe some rules, but nothing to scare you off. Keep looking out for each other, and The House will keep standing. That’s the deal.”

Ayla looked around the table one last time. The bracelets on her wrists jingled as she lifted her hands to rest on the table, a subtle, constant reminder of how far she had come—how far they had all come.

“Bloody well done indeed,” she whispered to herself, echoing Paddy’s words. And in that moment, with the sunlight spilling through the windows and the buzz of laughter and chatter filling the air, she felt a fierce, unshakable certainty: they had won more than just the survival of a building. They had claimed a home, a place where they truly belonged.

The House, she thought, smiling to herself, was theirs—and perhaps, finally, it always had been.

“

Ayla ran down the streets in nothing but socks, the soles slapping lightly against the pavement. The adrenaline kept her moving, heart thudding, lungs steady. It wasn't until she rounded the corner onto Calton Road that she stopped. Not because she was out of breath — her physique was decent enough for running — but because she needed her shoes.

When Ayla walks out of her parents' house, she doesn't have a plan. She has a weekend bag, a half-charged phone she's afraid to check, and a heart that beats a little too fast whenever she thinks about going back.

The House wasn't supposed to be permanent. Just a place to land. A place full of loud music, second-hand clothes, broken rules, and kids who don't quite fit anywhere else. But inside its graffiti-covered walls, Ayla finds something she didn't expect — space.

Space to choose. Space to question. Space to become.

There's Joni with the bass guitar and fearless grin. Willa with her paint-stained fingers and quiet steadiness. There are house meetings, neighbour complaints, police sirens, donated tea bags, and nights that feel like freedom — until they don't.

The places mentioned in this book are either fictitious or not suited for children in Ayla's situation. Unfortunately there isn't a place like The House in real life, at least to my knowledge at the time of writing.

But there is help to get! **YMCA** receives children from age sixteen and up. And if you are exposed to sexual abuse there is <https://www.thelighthouse-london.org.uk/>

If you are under 18 and cannot stay at home, the law *requires* local council Children's Services to help you.