

I love it when a butterfly emerges from its chrysalis and unfurls its tiny, shrivelled wings. It's freeing – the idea that whatever your problems, you can transcend them; wake up one day and find that you've changed into a different creature, grown wings and can fly away. Everyone gets excited about the miracle of nature, the power of transformation. At the same time, no one asks what the caterpillar had to sacrifice to achieve those wings. But then everyone loves the Disney version, don't they? We all want to see the ugly grub become a thing of beauty. We all want the fairy tale.

In the real world, orphans go unadopted and little girls who are abandoned by their mothers are raised by wolves only to be eaten by them. But no one wants to hear that. People aren't interested in the cruel and messy truth, so I don't tell them about me – the same way I don't tell them what really happens to the caterpillar.

It's Friday morning and I'm sitting on the specimen room floor at work, wedged between two cardboard boxes (there's at least one advantage to being small), and hoping my jerk of a boss doesn't find me. Before me is a row of wooden display

cases containing various chrysalides, and in my hand is my phone. I glare at it, as if that might somehow shame it into ringing. It doesn't. Eventually the screen dims and somewhere in my heart a light goes out.

Lifting the locket from my neck, I open the tiny, hinged door and take out the slip of folded paper as I've done a thousand times before.

I'm so sorry. I tried to keep you safe, but I see now that I can't. They won't stop until they have you, but I can't let that happen. Be strong, little one, trust no one, and know that

Like me, the scribbled note was abandoned, a half-finished story containing more questions than answers. I stare at the words until they become as blurred and indecipherable as their meaning. Who was my mother keeping me safe from? What was bad enough to make her dump her baby at a motorway service station? I'm named after the cleaner who found me – Ivy. But what name did my mum give me? Where were the rest of my family? I have so many questions, but it always comes down to a single word beating inside me like a second heart. *Why.*

I fold the paper back inside and then tuck the brass locket into my shirt, my fingers briefly tracing the raised butterfly design. I guess it's fitting that I ended up working at a butterfly zoo, but then I've always loved the tiny creatures. The locket is all I have of my mum, so to me butterflies are an emblem of hope, a sign that one day I'll find her.

And now maybe I have.

I've spent years posting on missing person sites asking for

information, and last week someone actually replied. The man said he was looking for his brother when he came across my photo – he has a memory for faces and I looked like a woman he'd met on holiday once. She lived at the lighthouse on Bardsey Island, off the west coast of Wales, and he saw her go to the mainland with her baby and then come back alone. He seemed so certain and the dates checked out, and somehow I just have this feeling.

Getting to Bardsey isn't easy – a bus, two trains and a boat crossing – so I decided to send her a letter with my phone number. That was seven days ago. From what I've read online the island is tiny and barely populated so it's not going to have the best postal service, but even if she's moved surely *someone* would have received it. I fiddle with the silver stud in my nose and sigh. One thing's for certain, I can't stay in here. My boss will notice I'm missing and I'm the only assistant in work as Tom is late again, which means I have to give this morning's talk.

I crawl out from my hiding place then wrap my arms around a display case which is almost as big as me. There are plenty of smaller ones, but I haven't done three years of martial arts training to take the easy option. With a grunt of exertion, I lift the case and shove the door open with my foot. I love my job – I enjoy seeing the customers' excited faces when a butterfly lands on them and I like teaching them about the different species we have at the centre. I just need to pretend it's an ordinary day at work. You know, forget that my entire life could be about to change with a single phone call.

As I enter the glass butterfly house, I'm greeted by the familiar sound of wet hissing from the vents, a constant tic-tic

and fizzling hum of artificial jungle. It's always warm and humid, but the air feels stifling today. Beneath the scent of nectar is a cloying smell of overripe fruit and rotting vegetation and something I can't quite place: a stench of decay that doesn't belong here. It sits on my lungs and makes it hard to breathe.

Tightening my grip on the case, I head to the display area on the far side of the room. October half-term is one of our busiest times and the walkways are full of visitors. They wander amongst the glossy-leaved plants and tropical orange flowers, pausing every now and then to point at a flash of colour flitting about their heads. In other words, not looking where they're going.

'Excuse me, coming through!' I can't see around the case, so I have to shout and hope that people move out of the way.

'You've got your hands full there, Ivy. Can't you get young Tom to help?'

'Hey, Dot. How are you?' I recognise her voice and slow down to let her catch up.

Dot is one of our regulars. It's mostly families that visit, but in winter we get older people who come for the free heating. Dot is one of my favourites. She wears an immaculate red wig with matching lipstick and hates wearing ugly shoes, but they help with her bunions. She usually brings a romance novel and will read it while eating pick 'n' mix. I once made the mistake of accepting a jelly baby and then had to listen as she spent ten minutes describing a sex scene in alarming detail.

She ambles alongside me and whispers, 'Shame to let a strapping lad like that go to waste. He's a handsome specimen. If I was fifty years younger, I'd rip his clothes off and -'

‘Yeah, thanks, Dot. I’ll keep it in mind.’

The truth is that Tom would be more than happy to help me, but I don’t intend to give him the satisfaction. We’re the same age and started working here around the same time, about ten months ago, and we have this rivalry thing going on. Some days I think he only comes into work to wind me up. Besides, I make it a rule never to accept anyone’s help.

Dot lays an affectionate hand on my arm. ‘You’re too proud by half. You want to snap him up before someone else does.’

She hobbles off, presumably heading to her usual bench, and a huff escapes me. Tom’s a good laugh, but that’s as far as it goes.

When I get to the display table, I set down the case and then wipe my hands on my trousers. Sensing someone behind me I spin around, but there’s nobody there. Damn my stupid boss, always loitering and making me feel uncomfortable – it’s no wonder I’m paranoid. After checking he’s not around, I peek at my phone. Mobiles are strictly forbidden at work so I’ve set it to silent. I don’t want to get fired – I’m already on my second warning – but I have to answer if she calls. Not that I need worry: the screen is blank.

Nearly ten o’clock: time to start. I stand on tiptoes and raise my voice. ‘Hello, if I could have your attention, please? The talk will begin soon if anyone would like to join me.’ A couple glance over but keep walking. Maybe it’s my appearance – pastel pink bobbed hair, blunt micro fringe and nose stud, but people often seem surprised that I work here, even in my uniform. Or maybe seventeen-year-old girls are just easy to overlook.

I make my announcement again, louder this time, and a

bearded man in a dirty anorak shuffles over, followed by a family, then two guys holding hands and a woman and her moody pre-teen daughter who come every few weeks. The woman wears her hair in a scraped-back ponytail and lives in leopard-print jumpsuits, which means I spend more time than I should wondering how she pees. We've chatted a few times, and now she waves and gives me a friendly smile. The girl sees me and rolls her eyes, seemingly convinced that Wye Valley Butterfly Zoo is lame and nothing I can say will change her mind.

I feel her pain – the border between England and Wales is blessed with amazing views (if you like hills and sheep) but isn't exactly known for its entertainment options, and the poor thing must have heard my talk a dozen times. Her mum tries to hug her, but the girl shoves her off and takes out her phone. The casual indifference of the gesture cuts a hole in my chest and jealousy reaches in and squeezes my heart, quickly followed by resentment. Between them, they have a mighty strong grip.

Get it together, Ivy. Focus on work.

I avert my eyes, uncomfortable with my own feelings, and bring my attention to the dozen people who've gathered to hear my talk. The man in the anorak stares at me, his facial muscles rigid as if they've been frozen into place. I wait for him to say something, or at least blink, but he doesn't. We get some odd characters at the centre; dealing with them is part of the job. Even so, I can't help feeling a little unnerved. He strokes his beard, repeating the movement robotically, and I wonder if he has a nervous tic or anxiety. I smile reassuringly

at him, then thank the group for their patience and scan the walkways for latecomers.

A family enters through the hanging plastic strips that cover the entrance and something occurs to me. I included both my work and home addresses in the letter, so my mum might turn up here.

No. It's so far to come; surely she'd ring me first. I don't care how hard it is to get to Bardsey. If she doesn't call by the end of the day, I'll phone in sick and go to the island tomorrow. I *have* to know if it's her.

A loud gasp brings me back to reality. People are pointing and staring at a spot above my head. 'What the hell are *they*?' asks jumpsuit woman. I glance up and fluttering over me are three huge grey moths – *acherontia atropos* to be precise. These ones are adults of the species, each with a twelve-centimetre wingspan.

'They're death's head hawkmoths,' I tell my audience. 'They get their name from the skull-shaped pattern that adorns their thorax.'

The sight of them makes me shiver, despite the heat. Not because they're an omen of death, but because there's something unnatural about the way they circle over me. Butterflies and moths usually fly haphazardly, going one way and then another, not around and around in a neat pattern. But this is like watching a few frames of film on repeat.

A high-pitched, pulsating screech fills the air and I raise my voice. 'They make that noise to scare away predators. It's particular to the species: not many moths do that.'

A few people in the crowd nod and look relieved, and then

the creatures flit towards a fern and the sound disappears as quickly as it started. Unable to pull my eyes away, I watch their strange flight with a growing sense of unease. I've never seen *anything* here fly like that.

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Needing to get the group's attention, I clap my hands and turn up the wattage on my smile.

'Well, that was quite a display. Hello, everyone, my name is Ivy Jenkins and I'm an assistant here at the centre. As you may know, the female butterfly lays its eggs on plants, which then hatch into larvae called caterpillars. These voracious eaters spend their days consuming as much vegetation as they can and will shed their skin several times as they get bigger.' I point at the case. 'Once fully grown, the caterpillar forms a chrysalis.'

The man in the anorak hasn't looked away once. He stares at me with bulbous eyes but doesn't seem to actually see me. It's like his eyeballs have stopped working. A prickle of dread creeps over my skin and I hurry on with my talk. I'm halfway through explaining the process of metamorphosis, when the moody girl interrupts. 'Ew, can't we just look at butterflies? I mean, that's why it's called a butterfly zoo, right?'

Pretending I haven't heard, I continue. 'They may look like cute little sleeping bags, but these chrysalides are actually made from the caterpillar's own skin. It sheds it one final time and remains inside while the metamorphosis takes place.' The

group peers at the branch and I smile sweetly at the girl and whisper. 'You might think the caterpillar is resting inside, but it's actually busy dying. The enzymes it used to digest its food are now used to break down its body. It devours itself and from the leftover juices, the butterfly is born.'

The girl's face pales and a flush of satisfaction runs through me. The science is way more complicated than that, and the last bit is *not* in the approved script, but then why shouldn't she know the truth? Nature is like life – cruel to some. Refusing to look at anorak man, I ask if there are any questions and a small boy tugs my sleeve. 'Does it hurt?' he asks.

I start to answer, when one of the chrysalides sways and pulsates as the tiny creature inside wriggles and moves about. Who's to say the caterpillar didn't panic as it shed its skin and formed a prison from its own body? Maybe it had been aware of another being inside it trying to take control; perhaps it didn't want to die so that a new version of itself could be born. A while ago I mentioned this to a group of schoolkids and their heavily pregnant teacher complained afterwards, saying I'd upset them. Yet as far as I could tell, she was the only one who had cried. People are strange.

I smile at the boy and try to sound reassuring. 'No, of course not. Don't worry. They're just grub-like little things. They can't tell what's happening to them.' The man in the anorak grunts and my body tenses, but then I notice his eyes are no longer staring and he's stopped touching his beard. His face is relaxed and he seems normal.

'I think you'll find that's putting the process rather simply, and they aren't grubs. They're larvae,' he says.

I feel my face redden but keep my smile in place, even when the girl shoots me a smug look as if she's caught me out. 'I didn't call them grubs. I said they were grub-like.' Remembering the customer is always right, I add, 'But thank you for pointing it out, sir. Both caterpillars and grubs are insect larvae, but they come from different families.'

A figure walks through the hanging strips of plastic and my heart sinks. My boss *would* have to turn up when I have a difficult customer. As usual, he's wearing shorts that are a size too small for him. I don't have anything against the vertically challenged – I'm one of them – but his tiny shorts only accentuate the fact his hairy legs are disproportionately small for his body. To make it worse, he walks at twice the normal speed, like a mechanical toy that's been wound up too tight. Right now his face is bright red, telling me he's one angry outburst away from firing someone or having a heart attack. Possibly both.

Thankfully, anorak man doesn't push the grub issue so I carry on speaking. 'We have more than fifty species of butterflies and moths here at the centre. You'll have noticed that they have lots of different patterns on their wings. Butterflies have many predators, and their wings help to keep them alive. Some act as camouflage, making it harder for them to be seen. Others have brightly coloured wings that are designed to make them look poisonous and trick predators into leaving them alone.'

I glance up and see another figure walk through the door. This one is tall and well built and wearing shorts that fit. Tom. He flicks his floppy brown fringe from his eyes, a rueful smile on his face, and lopes along like he's just won a prize he can't

be arsed to collect. Tom is Mr Neeson's nephew, which means he's safe from getting fired, unlike the rest of us, and often saunters in late. With his crumpled uniform, he looks like he's just rolled out of bed. And he probably has. Tom is a gamer and often boasts about his latest weaponry haul to the other staff, so I imagine he stays up at night killing people. We all need a hobby, I guess.

As he walks by, he crosses his eyes and sticks out his tongue and I suppress a smile. Tom's favourite pastime at work is trying to put me off whenever I'm giving a talk to the public. Yesterday he left a plastic cockroach on top of the display case, which I calmly placed in my pocket before any of the visitors noticed. I'm surprised he didn't think to put one in my lunchbox, which he *still* hasn't given back after our little game of hiding things last week.

I got him back by filling his half-empty water bottle with salt. He took a gulp while giving a talk and nearly spat it out over everyone. The shock on his face made me laugh so hard I had to hide behind a banana-leaf palm and take calming breaths. Maybe Tom sent the guy in the anorak to freak me out? No. He's not that devious, or that smart.

Turning my attention to my audience, I invite people to ask any final questions. How many species do you have at the centre (more than fifty, you clearly weren't listening); can we buy a pet butterfly from the gift shop (no, you cannot); where are the toilets (just before the exit on the left). The group thank me and start to wander away, apart from anorak man.

'What qualifications do you have?'

I get this sometimes and it's always men that ask. I step

back, determined to keep my cool yet feeling a little wary now it's just the two of us. I've no idea what triggered his odd behaviour before, and I don't want it to start again. 'I'm taking Biology and Life Science at A-level and I've got a place at the University of Worcester to study Ecology and Environmental Science next year. I make a point to learn about all the species we have here.'

He huffs as if unimpressed then glances at something behind me. I turn and see Tom, or rather his collarbone. Standing over a foot taller than me, he lowers his head and whispers, 'You look like you need rescuing, Shorty,' before straightening up and addressing the man. 'Is there something I can help you with, sir? I work with Ivy at the centre.'

I smile through gritted teeth and introduce him. 'This is Tom. He has zero interest or qualifications in zoology, but I'm sure he'll do a much better job of answering your questions as he has a penis.' I mutter the last part under my breath, but evidently not quietly enough as Tom's lips begin to quiver. Tom has a very distinctive laugh. It starts with a twitch of his lips and then builds to a full-on giggle that makes his face turn pink and his shoulders shake. It's the kind of laugh that keeps coming back. You think he's got it under control, but it starts again a few seconds later. I've seen him dive inside a giant fern, tears streaming down his face, trying to contain it. It's a ludicrous laugh really, but also weirdly compelling. When you've seen him giggle like that once, you want to see if he'll do it again.

I glare at him, remembering why I'm annoyed. What was he thinking, interrupting me like that? I don't need rescuing, and

I certainly don't appreciate him offering to 'help' a customer I'm already dealing with. Thankfully the man doesn't seem to have heard my remark and looks confused when Tom stifles a giggle. 'Ivy's right. She's far more qualified.' Barely able to contain his laughter, he strides off to find someplace private where he can explode.

I watch him go, annoyed at myself. Why didn't I just let Tom answer the man's questions? Now I'm stuck with him. Taking a deep breath, I turn to face him, but his broad back is already disappearing off down the walkway.

I blow out a sigh, but my relief doesn't last long. A hand squeezes my waist, startling me. My boss is right behind me. As always, it's reassuring to know he values and respects me highly, as he does all his female employees.

'I'm watching you, young lady.'

Don't I know it. I swear the man has tiny crosshairs stamped on the back of his eyes.

'I hope you're *behaving* yourself.'

I smile weakly. 'Of course, Mr Neeson.'

His eyes shine as he looks me up and down, taking an audit of my body. 'Hmm, that shirt is a little tight.' He says it with a faint smirk and I glance down at my uniform, which is loose fitting and buttoned up to the neck. He starts to say something else, but I point to Dot on her bench. She has her head in a book and is sucking the legs off an unsuspecting jelly baby. 'The lady over there wanted my assistance earlier, so . . .'

He steps closer and I move back, bumping into the table. The last time he pushed up against me in the staffroom I *accidentally* tipped hot coffee over him, but he obviously hasn't got the

message. I've dealt with worse than him before. Teenage girls are like butterflies: we have a lot of predators.

'Can you smell something?' I ask.

He grins and sniffs the collar of his polo shirt. 'Picking up my pheromones, are you?'

I turn my head away. 'I don't know – it smells rotten, like a dead animal.'

He frowns as if he can detect the weird smell in here too.

'Might be rats,' I say helpfully. 'It's the time of year when they come inside.'

His face turns redder. 'Why, have you seen one?' He spots Tom and hurries after him, his legs working overtime, presumably about to send him on a rat-finding mission. I smile at the thought, and then I get another waft. Whatever the horrible smell is, it's getting stronger.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, making my heart leap. I fumble with it and it drops to the floor. I should go somewhere private, but there isn't time. Cursing, I snatch it up and swipe to accept the call.

'Hello?'

A timid voice answers in a Welsh accent. 'Is that Ivy?'

I try to answer, but the words are too big for my throat and it takes me a moment to speak. 'Yes. Is that, are you my mo—?'

'Listen, there isn't much time. You're in danger.' She speaks in an urgent whisper then snatches a breath, her voice trembling. 'They can take control of anyone or anything, people you know or strangers. You won't know who they are, but they're coming for you.'

'What? Who are – ?'

The man in the anorak is paused at the far end of the path, his head twisting to look over his shoulder at me and then forward again. He stares with lifeless eyes, his nostrils flared and his fleshy cheeks pale and clammy. He keeps on turning his head, repeating the motion as if he's stuck in a bizarre time glitch.

The woman gabbles down the phone. 'You shouldn't have put your work and home address in the letter. They're always watching me. Now I know where you are, they will too. Go somewhere else, anywhere, but whatever you do, stay away from the island. Their powers are strongest at the lighthouse. I'm sorry, but you have to run. Please, Ivy – run!'

She repeats the warning and I lower the phone, my heart pounding. Anorak man starts walking, his eyes bloodshot and his forehead beading with sweat. He's coming straight for me.

I swallow hard, my mouth dry. Even if I run, I can't reach the exit or even the staffroom without going past him. Maybe I should shout for help. But then what I am going to tell people – I didn't like the way a customer looked at me without blinking? A family with young children appear at the end of the walkway, but no one pays the man any attention. But why would they? He's not moving his head back and forth now.

No one is out to get you, Ivy. Take it easy.

Forcing my shoulders to relax, I remind myself that I'm at work surrounded by people – perfectly safe. The guy's been acting oddly all morning. He obviously has some kind of problem, but that doesn't mean he wants to hurt me. He's probably just going to ask me a question or bore me with some random fact about grubs.

He's moving quickly, just twenty paces away. I slide my phone into my pocket and flash him my best customer-service smile.

'Hi, can I help you?'

He doesn't answer – just keeps heading towards me, his face fixed in a grimace. It has to be a coincidence. My mother couldn't have known about him.

My mother.

I should be jumping for joy that I've found her, but I don't know how to feel. The things she said were so strange. And then I remember the note. *I tried to keep you safe, but I see now that I can't.* I always presumed she was protecting me from someone in my family, or maybe she was unwell. Whether the threat was real or imagined, surely that's all in the past now.

Ten paces away. I try to read his expression, but there's no anger there. There's no emotion at all. His gaze is vacant; it's as if he's looking *through* me.

Six paces.

Why isn't he slowing down?

Three.

He lunges for me and my stomach clenches with sickening realisation. He's going for my throat. It happens so fast I barely have time to think. I block his hand with my right arm, the movement automatic, and then steady my weight on my back leg. He reaches for me again and this time I'm ready for him. He's big, maybe twice my weight, but I'm fast. I grab his wrist and twist sharply, tripping him with my front leg and using his weight to propel him forward. He lands on his knees with a thud, his bulk sprawling face down on the floor.

A toddler cries out in alarm and I glance up to see her mum grab her and shield her face. The woman looks at me, her eyes wide with shock, and I stare back. We're trained in first aid and what to do in case of fire and missing children, but the staff handbook didn't cover this. Before I can think what to say my boss hurries over. He takes one look at the man at my feet and glares at me like I'm a poacher who's brought down a majestic beast.

'Ivy, unhand that man!'

Anorak man whimpers. Realising I should probably let go, I release my grip and watch as he cradles his arm to his body. More visitors appear and the man blinks up at them, seemingly as confused as everyone else.

'Why would you . . . how dare you!' he blusters.

He looks embarrassed and more than a little outraged, but otherwise normal. And yet just a moment ago . . . If I hadn't witnessed it myself, I wouldn't believe it was the same person.

Mr Neeson heaves the guy to his feet, both men sweating and grunting from the exertion, and I watch in disbelief as my boss fusses over him. 'I'm so sorry, sir. Here, let me help you.' He *actually* apologises to him. Injustice throbs in my throat, but I know how this could go and there's no way I'm being dismissed as the hysterical girl in all this.

I speak loudly, my voice steady. 'Mr Neeson, this man attacked me.'

Anorak man's cheeks wobble with indignant alarm. 'I did no such thing. There's been a mistake.'

My boss surveys the herd of bewildered mums then narrows his eyes at me. Surely he can't imagine this is my fault.

'Do you know this man?' he asks.

'No.'

'Why would he attack you?'

'I don't know.'

Mr Neeson addresses the onlookers. 'Did anyone see what happened?' A few people murmur but most watch in silence. I point to the mum who was staring wide-eyed at me just now, but she shakes her head.

‘I only saw him on the ground. I didn’t see what happened before that, sorry.’

Suddenly everyone is talking. My boss gestures for quiet, but several of the women raise their voices, outraged he’s questioning my version of events. A pretty woman with an afro puts her arm around my shoulders and then the lady in the jumpsuit does the same on the other side. I smile at them and my heart softens with gratitude.

While my boss calms the crowd, I gently extricate myself from the women and take out my phone. I’m hoping my mum might have messaged or left a voicemail, but there’s nothing. Mr Neeson grabs my wrist and hisses through clenched teeth. ‘Put that thing away and tell me what the hell’s going on here.’

Dot’s voice warbles out. ‘Someone needs to call the police! If you won’t let the poor girl do it, then I will.’ She winks at me then rummages in her handbag and I feel a surge of affection for her. Dot doesn’t own a mobile; it came up during one of our chats once. She buried hers in the garden after the *Daily Mail* said they make your hair fall out.

Mr Neeson drops my wrist with a forced laugh that’s as tight as his shorts. ‘Oh, I don’t think there’s any need for that. I’m sure we can sort this out, can’t we Ivy?’ He glares as if daring me to say otherwise and I keep quiet, enjoying his discomfort. Having the police here isn’t good for business, but it might not be good for me either. I don’t want the man to be taken away; I need to find out why he tried to attack me. I nod and my boss lets out a breath. ‘Good girl,’ he says, rewarding me with a smug smile that makes me want to drop-kick him into next week.

A few seconds later he jumps up and waves his arm, seeming to spot someone along the path. 'Ah, just the man! Could you take this gentleman to the staffroom, please?'

Tom pushes his way through the crowd and my heart drops a notch. He's the last person I want to see right now. I brace myself for his look of glee and inevitable ridicule, but he takes in the scene with a worried frown.

'You OK, Ivy? What happened?'

I shake my head. I don't know how to explain any of this – to my boss, Tom, or even myself.

Mr Neeson snaps, 'Come along, Tom,' but he doesn't. He looks at me as if I'm the only person in the world. 'Someone said you'd been attacked?'

'I'm fine. I just . . .' I glance at the dozens of people watching me and suddenly I want to get away. 'It's not me who needs to be answering questions. It's *him*.'

Tom follows my gaze and his brow wrinkles in surprise. But before he can say anything, my boss puts a protective arm around anorak man, evidently deciding to take him to the staffroom himself. 'Come on, I'll make us a nice cup of tea and we can sort this out.'

As he's steered away, anorak man throws me a look over his shoulder. 'I'm within my rights to press charges, you know,' he grumbles.

Mr Neeson chokes back a cough, his eyes watering like a toad that's swallowed a larger-than-expected fly. 'Everything's under control,' he calls to the spectators. 'Please enjoy your day out.' Lowering his voice, he glares at me. 'You – stay here, understand?'

‘Yes, Mr Neeson.’

I understand perfectly well. But am I going to stay put while the grown-ups talk? No, I am not. Once he’s gone, I hug Dot and thank her and the others for their concern, then make my way to the staffroom. There has to be a reason why the man went for me. Maybe he’s had episodes like this before; he might have some kind of condition. The woman’s words – my *mother’s* words – ring in my head, but I can’t believe something made him try to hurt me.

As I walk to the staffroom, a trio of death’s head hawkmoths flit around me. They’re flying normally now, yet their movements were so strange earlier. No one seemed to notice, just like they didn’t see the man attack me.

Tom catches me up. ‘So, Karate Kid, you kept that quiet.’ He walks by my side, mock karate-chopping the air, and I roll my eyes. For a moment I thought he was actually concerned for me, but I should have known better. ‘Hey, don’t worry,’ he whispers. ‘You don’t have to explain. I know exactly what happened back there and I don’t blame you.’

I search his face, confusion and hope swirling inside me, and he grins. ‘You can only keep up the fake smiles and customer service bullshit for so long. You had to snap one day.’

My shoulders drop and I let out a sigh. I know we’re not exactly friends but I hoped he might be supportive. That’s what you get for putting your faith in people: disappointment. I pick up my pace and he follows me, each of his long strides easily matching two of my own.

‘I’m busy right now, Tom. Can I ignore you some other time?’

He laughs and flicks his fringe from his eyes. 'So are you going to tell me what happened or not?' I keep walking and he touches my arm, his voice serious. 'That weirdo didn't actually hurt you, did he?'

'No.'

'Good. I would offer to beat him up, but it seems you've got it covered. I'm amazed you managed to throw a guy that size, but hey, kudos to you. I like a woman who can take care of herself.'

The phrase triggers something in me and I stop and scowl at him. I want to tell him that I didn't learn martial arts the way that some girls take up yoga or gymnastics. For the past few years I've taken the bus into town after school and paid for lessons using the allowance my various foster families gave me, and then the wages from this job. I did it to keep myself safe. I *take care of myself* because I have to, because there's no one else to do it.

'Quit it with the Jackie Chan stare, would you? You're making me feel uncomfortable in the workplace.'

On any other day, I would ignore his feeble attempts at humour and remind myself that he doesn't know anything about me. He doesn't know that I've grown up in care – like the people at school and my martial arts class don't know, because I don't tell them. He doesn't have any idea of the things I've been through; what I've seen other kids in the system go through. Any other day, I would hold my head high and walk away – but not today.

'Get lost, Tom.'

A hurt look flashes into his eyes, but I don't have it in me to

feel bad. I march along the walkway, brushing aside overhanging palms and the questions of inquisitive visitors as I go, then round the corner to the staffroom.

Mr Neeson sees me coming and darts inside. A few moments later he reappears in the doorway, partially blocking my view of anorak man who is seated at the table behind him.

He holds out my coat and bag. 'You're fired.'

'What?'

'You know very well that using a mobile phone at work is a sackable offence. You're already on a written warning and if you check paragraph five of your employment contract, it states quite clearly that –'

'Some man attacks me, and I get fired for using my phone?'

Tom pushes in front of me. 'You can't sack someone after *one* written warning.'

My boss sniffs. 'You're forgetting the other little incident.'

I groan, realising what he's talking about. A few months ago I squeezed myself into a cupboard in the staffroom, intending to scare Tom by passing him the ketchup when he opened the door. Only it wasn't him who opened it. Mr Neeson was halfway through eating a jumbo sausage roll and was so shocked when I handed him the bottle of sauce that he started to choke. I regret bruising his ribs – but in my defence, I acted quickly and he was in no danger of dying, despite what he put in the disciplinary letter.

I mutter 'the choking thing' to Tom and he shakes his head.

'You gave her a written warning for that? It was an accident! Come on, you've got to be kidding, Uncle Mike.' He's never called him that before, and from the look on my boss's face I have the feeling he won't be doing it again.

Mr Neeson adjusts his shorts, his voice rising an octave. 'Well, I for one had hoped you'd learned a valuable lesson that day. These little pranks of yours have consequences. You need to take things more seriously. *Both* of you.'

Tom puts his hand on my shoulder, refusing to back down. 'Sack Ivy and I quit too.'

Mr Neeson laughs. 'We both know you'll be back by the end of the week. But fine, I accept your resignation.'

My shoulders drop and I stare at the floor. This job is one of the best things I have going for me. I've worked through most of the school holidays and nearly every weekend, and I've never once been late or taken a day off sick. I love seeing the wonder on children's faces when a butterfly lands on them. I like feeling I'm good at something, that I have knowledge worth sharing with people. I can get another job – I'm smart and I work hard – but I don't want to go anywhere else. I want to take care of the butterflies and moths and learn about the different species. My feelings must be written on my face, as Tom voices what I can't bring myself to say.

'Ivy is brilliant at this job and you know it. Please don't do this.'

Mr Neeson glances back at anorak man and clicks the door shut behind him. 'I don't have a choice. He's threatening to press charges.'

'But he attacked *me*.'

'So you say, but there are no witnesses.'

'What does he say happened then? Let me talk to him.' I try to push past and my boss draws himself up to his full height,

all five foot five inches, which is still enough to tower over me.
'Please, Mr Neeson, I need to know why he –'

'No, Ivy. I'm not letting you in there. He says he came over to ask you a question. He touched your arm to get your attention and you overreacted.'

'That's not what happened.'

'No?' Mr Neeson gives me a knowing look. 'You teenage girls are all the same. A man only has to look at a bit of skirt these days and she's filing a complaint. Why anyone would teach karate moves to schoolgirls is beyond me.'

'Excuse me?'

He opens his mouth and I snatch my coat and bag from him, stamping hard on his foot as I do. Whatever offensive rubbish he was about to come out with is replaced by a yelp.

'You know what? Stick your stupid job.'