

## Absent

### ONE

The kitchen smells of stale beer. There are loads of glasses in the sink. One of them is full of cigarette butts and blobs of chewing gum. I wrinkle my nose up. Mum had people over after the pub again last night. I can hear her snoring and rasping from the sofa. I get a knife and scrape the chewing gum from the glass as best I can, then empty the butts into the bin.

'Jackson!' I shout. 'Are you up yet? You've got twenty minutes. Don't make me kick your butt.'

I hear scratching at the back door and notice that Ruby isn't asleep in the corner, like she should be.

'Oh no, poor baby! They locked you out all night?' I unlock the door. She's frantic. She jumps up at me with a little bark.

'Hello, my little munchkin!' I crouch down and wrap my arms around her. She licks my face.

'Watch it, you – I've just done my make-up. I'd better get you some breakfast, hadn't I?'

I pour some food into her bowl. No one else ever remembers.

'Jackson! This is getting silly, now!' I run up the stairs to see what he's doing.

'I'm getting up,' he whines. His voice is muffled, so I can tell he's still in bed.

I open his bedroom door. I'm hit by that little brother room smell: It's like sweat and stale biscuits, with a hint of weed (he says he doesn't smoke weed, but yeah, right).

'Jacks, you can't be late for school *again*. You'll get excluded.'

'I know, I know ... Anyway, shut up, Emma. At least I go to school.'

'I'm going to school today, actually. I've got a meeting.'

'Whatever. Have you made me some toast?'

'There's no bread. Mum went to the pub. She didn't buy any.'

Jackson probably slept through the racket coming from downstairs last night. He sleeps through anything. I was lying awake until after two, listening to all the slurring, singing and cackly laughing.

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'Someone should call social services,' he says. This is his joke. We already have a social worker. In fact, we've had about fifteen social workers – probably more.

He throws the quilt off. He's wearing boxers and odd socks. Jackson is short for a twelve-year-old, but big-built. No one guesses we're brother and sister because I'm white, he's mixed race and we have different surnames. He has Mum's surname – Lynch. She's white and Jackson's dad is black. He was a two-night-stand, apparently. Mum says he wasn't from our area and never knew she got pregnant. She was engaged to my dad, but I only have a few memories of him. Apparently, he's half-Italian – my surname is Corti.

Jackson is the one I'm closest to in this family. If anyone hurt him, I'd kill them. The school say he has special needs. They have all these different letters to describe the things that are meant to be wrong with him. I don't really understand it all. Nor does Mum.