



SUE WALLMAN

 SCHOLASTIC

Published in the UK by Scholastic, 2021
Euston House, 24 Eversholt Street, London, NW1 1DB
Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,
Glasnevin, Dublin, D11 HP5F

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ISBN 978 0702 30270 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

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Printed by Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
Paper made from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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*For every student who missed their school
library during the pandemic*



CHAPTER 1

I've never been stared at this much in my whole life.

That's not completely true – there was a time before this. But still, right now a substantial proportion of the students in the canteen seem to think it's OK to openly gawk at the new girl.

We find a table with three spare seats. I'm with a tall, serious-looking girl called Georgia, who's been assigned to show me round today because we have the same form tutor and timetable, and her friend Amber.

“Just so you know, Ruby,” says Georgia, as she places her tray down. “You have a banned hair colour. That's why they're staring.”

Dove-grey covers my natural blonde. “How’s *grey* a banned colour?”

“When it looks too ... noticeable,” Georgia says. Her own long hair is dyed auburn at the ends. She’s attractive in a big-eyed, fragile-featured way, and her black blazer looks as brand new as mine. She stops churning her kung pao chicken into the rice, holds her fork up and fixes me with an intense gaze. “How come you joined late, and in your GCSE year? It’s a really rubbish time to move schools.”

Like I don’t know that. Everyone else started the school year at Robinson Academy two weeks ago, and it sucks. I snap my KitKat in two and eat one half. I brought a random selection of food with me from home today, in case my lunch card wasn’t ready. The satsuma in front of me has greenish peel on one side. “House move,” I say. “It was supposed to happen in the holidays.”

Georgia nods. She’s trying to work me out, and I bet the most likely options in her head are *attention seeker*, *awkward loser*, or *loner*. In each class there’s been a seating plan. I’ve been put at the back of the class on my own, clearly a holding measure until the teachers can work out what sort of student I am and where I can be suitably placed in their ecosystem.

Being at the back of the classroom suits me fine. I like to observe people.

“Where’ve you moved from?” asks Amber. She’s petite with short hair and dark eye make-up. The sleeves of her blazer are rolled up to just below the elbow.

“Out of the area,” I say. Her narrow eyebrows stay raised. She wants more. I name a town not far from my old one. “My mum got a new job and she had to take it,” I add. I eat a bite of KitKat, suddenly hungry. It’s pretty much the truth. Mum’s new job is far better paid than her last one and I’m pleased for her, but I hope she can manage it.

Amber nods. “So you don’t know anyone in Barchester?”

I shake my head. She doesn’t know what a relief that is. Georgia finishes her mouthful of chicken and says, “Amber and I have known each other since we were at the same preschool. Like, *years*.” She looks at Amber expectantly.

Amber doesn’t quite run with it. She nods, and says, “What d’you think of Robinson so far then, Ruby?”

I look around the noisy canteen. There’s a slice of pizza sliding down a wall, rubbish under the tables, a couple of students having a fight in the lunch queue and the supervising member of staff is on her phone. “A bit crap, to be honest.”

“Seriously?” says Amber with a faint air of surprise, as if she can’t see what I can.

“It is,” says Georgia. “But you get used to it, don’t you, Amber?”

I eat my remaining KitKat. “It’s pretty similar to my old school.”

“Most people in our year are all right,” Amber says. “There are different groups, like anywhere – we’ve got

the Sporty Lot, the Theatricals, the Weirdos, the Absolute Neeks and the Glossies –” She nods her head towards a table of girls laughing. “The Head Glossy is Naz. She’s minted and thinks she’s better than everyone else.” I immediately work out who Naz is – tall and haughty with glossy black hair and enviable cheekbones.

“Then there are the Linesmen,” continues Amber. She points to a noisy crowd at a table near us. Good-looking, with a lot more edge than the Glossies and the Sporty crew.

“Linesmen?” I repeat.

“Because it’s Isaac Linesman’s group,” says Amber. “They’re a sub-branch of the Sporty Lot. Some people find them amusing, but they’re best avoided. That’s Isaac,” says Amber, as a tall, broad boy stands up with his tray. The other three get to their feet immediately. “And he has an on-off thing with Monique, the girl with the hoops.”

I identify Monique, a girl with big earrings and blonde-brown hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun.

“We hate Monique,” says Georgia. “She’s vicious.”

I watch as Isaac makes his way to the tray station. He walks slowly, as if he owns the canteen. The others follow, chatting, laughing. Walking past us, he turns to Monique and says loudly, “Who’s that with the granny hair?”

“I don’t know, but she should sue her hairdresser,” she says. The whole bunch crack up.

Georgia shrinks and occupies herself with her phone,

and Amber carries on eating her panini.

My hand curls over my satsuma. I need to get my head down and pass my exams in this school. Otherwise, I might have thrown it at either Isaac or Monique.

Amber is looking at my hand, clenched around the fruit. “Ignore them. Your hair’s kinda cool,” she says. “Not my vibe, but it suits you.”

“Thanks,” I say. I take my planner out of my bag. Next period is English. I was warned before I came that I’d be studying different set texts to my old school. Three brand-new books are at the bottom of my bag, making it heavy. My phone is lit up with a message. A Snapchat from Luffy, telling me his brother has a court date.

I feel a pang of nostalgia. I miss Luffy. We would hang out behind the maintenance shed at my last school and he would share his endless political theories, which only worked on the premise that everyone in the world was as free-spirited and pacifist as him. I tell him to make sure his brother ditches the joggers for court. Then I take a sneaky selfie showing the Robinson logo on my school blazer: the initial R, a lion and the words *Together We Can*.

He replies with *Together we can what?* and I send back *Get mauled by a lion?*

As Georgia, Amber and I leave the canteen, we’re stopped by a plump, thin-haired boy with a neon-green backpack. I have no problem picturing him in ten or twenty years’ time.

“Time to buy your tickets for the Halloween disco,

raising money for performing arts.” He looks me up and down, then holds out his hand. “I’m Scott. We haven’t met. You’re gorgeous!”

“Oh. Thanks?” I shake his hand. I’ve never heard the word *gorgeous* used in relation to me. “I’m Ruby Marshall.”

Amber shakes her head slowly. She doesn’t need to. I know he’s hamming it up.

“Disco ticket, Ruby?” Mr Self-Confident holds up a wad of badly photocopied tickets. “Dressing up is compulsory.”

“I’ll pass, sorry,” I say. “I’m not a fan of dressing up.”

Scott gasps dramatically, recovers himself quickly and says, “It’s *the* event of term. You’ll want to be seen there. Amber will be covering it for the school newspaper.”

School newspaper? That sounds cool. We didn’t have one at my last school.

“Yeah, about that,” says Amber. “I shouldn’t have to pay for my ticket if I’m there as a reporter for the *Robinson Record*.”

“Watch out!” says Georgia, as a crowd of raucous younger students comes careering towards us. She pulls Amber out of the way, leaving me standing there.

I don’t move quickly enough and one of them, a short, muscly kid, slams hard into my shoulder. I use both hands to push him off me, and he ricochets into the opposite wall.

“Hey!” he yells. “What’s your problem?”

“Haven’t you heard of social distancing?” I shout. My

shoulder really hurts.

“Freak,” mutters the boy. They move off down the corridor.

“You nearly sent him through the wall,” says Amber. I can’t tell if she’s impressed or horrified.

“Weasels,” says Scott, and I smile at that. “Anyway, if you change your mind, Ruby, come and find me in the performing arts office. I’m there most lunchtimes.”

“Did you get my piece about Recycling Week?” asks Amber.

“Yeah, not gonna lie, I think it’s one for the back page. We need a big story. Sorry. Better luck next time.” He speed-walks off.

Amber makes a huffing sound. “He thinks he’s editing a tabloid.”

I shift my heavy bag on to my other shoulder. Georgia glances at her watch. “Come on, Ruby. We’ll be late for English.” She looks genuinely worried by the thought and sets off at speed. I have to jog a couple of paces to catch up with her.

“So that’s Scott,” she says, not breaking stride. “He’s a massive gossip. Don’t tell him anything.” She glances at me. “Seriously.”

English goes OK, until I’m asked to read out loud from *A Christmas Carol*. I stumble over the words. In my head they flow and make total sense, but out loud they become obstacles waiting to trip me up. Monique keeps up a low-voiced commentary with her neighbour about me,

which the teacher either can't hear or ignores. I'm asked to stop before I finish the page. I keep my head low after that, distracted only by the light from Isaac Linesman's phone screen, which is propped up against his book. He's watching a film on mute.

After English, it's the end of the school day.

"The first buses can be crowded," Georgia tells me. "Better to wait a few minutes. I need to go. Maths tutor."

I watch her disappear, checking her phone as she walks purposefully, clutching her bag like a briefcase, as if she's off to a business meeting.

The crowds start to disperse. I need to head to my locker and get my coat. As I walk, I feel my phone vibrate with a call. It's my sister. I reject the call and realize I'm going in the wrong direction to the lockers. The school looks different when it's virtually empty. There are just a few people still in the corridor, making their way to clubs or waiting for friends.

When I reach my locker area, I see that there is something attached to one of the lockers. A piece of white paper.

It's my locker.

I move more quickly. I tug the paper free. There are five words written in capital letters in black felt-tip pen.

I KNOW YOU DID IT.