

ROLE MODEL



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ROLE MODEL

Elle McNicoll



*To Aimée, Lauren, Eishar, Dee, Kay, Annabelle,
Marssaié, Clem, Kim, Grainne, Anna and the readers.
We really showed the world new ways to dream.
You are, and always will be, my role models.*

CHAPTER ONE

“Smile!”

Voting Day is also Picture Day. I care way more about these class photographs than whether or not my mother will be voted in as the new Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. This is still a new school for me; every day feels like a test where I get all of the questions wrong, even though I know the answers.

We’re being lined up in the assembly hall, one year group at a time. The other Year 8s are finished, our form is the last to be called in. I’ve been at Lady Catherine’s in London for almost two months and I miss Scotland. In Scotland, we would say S2 instead of Year 8. I miss our house in Linlithgow. I miss being able to walk to my school and the small bookshop in town. I even miss the terrible weather.

The Scottish wind. There is nothing like it down here.

Just smoke in the air where the wind should be.

Mum always came down to London for work before, but now the whole family is here. Dad, who says that an accountant can happily work anywhere. Mum, who works in the huge palace next to Big Ben and shouts a lot on television. My younger brother, Gideon, who is good at every subject at school, but doesn't enjoy speaking. I have an older sister, but she doesn't live with us.

"Aeriel Sharpe, get to stepping!"

Then me.

I step towards Miss Leslie, who barked out my name. She's got Sable, Jaya and Ana already waiting. They're my friends.

I know they are. I think they are. I really do.

They do the class photos a little differently here in this school. We assemble in smaller groups and then the photographer photoshops us all into one big class picture. As I approach my friends, Ana gives me a warm smile and Jaya steps back a little so that there is room for me to join them. Sable gives me the slowest appraisal, a long look up and down. She has always been a little more difficult for me to get along with, and she rolls her eyes a lot when I speak. Her once-over speaks for itself—she doesn't think I look good.

"I'm wearing the same uniform as you," I say, trying to sound cheerful.

"If you say so," she mutters to the others, smirking at me.

I don't understand it. We're all dressed the same, but they all look more confident than I do. The clothes sit differently on them.

Ana was my 'buddy' on the first day of term. She introduced me to Jaya and Sable. Jaya was civil and polite. Sable was too, at first, but recently it feels like she's been trying to get me out of the group. I don't know why, I haven't done anything wrong. I've done everything to make them happy. Sometimes I don't want to come into school because I don't know if it will be a day where Sable is nice or a day where she's not.

"Smile, girls," the photographer says and I close my eyes for a moment.

I think I hate it here. I hate being told to smile. I hate the noise, there is so much of it because there are so many other students. I hate the way their shoes squeak as they scrape across the shiny floor. I hate the shrieking bells. I hate the rules. No talking allowed in the school hallways. Always make eye contact with the teachers.

It's as though they drafted up a list of the most uncomfortable things for a neurodivergent student and then called them the official school values.

"Aeriell!"

Miss Leslie wakes me up and I force the grimace. Mum always says I don't actually know how to smile which, shockingly, didn't make me less self-conscious about it. The flash goes off a few times and I hate it.

I just hate it.

★

"My dad says he's going to vote for your mum!" a boy from Year Eleven tells me as I exit the toilets. I glance around, nervous about a teacher spotting illegal conversation in the hallway.

"Thanks," I mouth at him.

I head to the lunch hall, flashing my pass at a prefect who also says her parents are voting for Mum. I thank her, too. When I collect my tray, I'm given some rubbery penne pasta and a very bland tomato sauce on a clear white plate. I grab cutlery and a glass of water and head for our usual spot by the window. Sable, Jaya and Ana are already there, all three of them eating expensive and elaborate lunches that they've

brought from home. They eye my school meal with distaste as I slide into the only empty seat at the round table.

"So, do you think your mum is going to win the election, Aeriell?" Jaya asks. Mum once told me Jaya would grow up to be the prettiest one of the group and I can see it more and more. Her hair is sleek and black, her nails always look pristine. She has an air and manner of walking that make the rest of us look like peasants. She's never overly warm but she's fair. I like her, for the most part. Her parents are quite strict and the teachers like her the most out of the four of us.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. Mum and Dad never talk about Mum's job with us. She just told me an election is a contest between groups who want to run the country, and the people are the ones who go to the polling stations and vote for them. Dad said it was more complex than that, but Mum waved him away.

"If enough people vote for me and my party, we'll be moving to Whitehall," was all Mum said this morning, before she was rushed away to vote for herself and talk to the press.

"I think she *will* win," Ana says and I throw her a small, grateful smile.

Ana grew up on her mother's vlogging channel

and knows all about trends and fashionable things. She has a designer handbag for her school supplies and always carries a big water bottle with a built-in straw.

“If she does win, will she let you get your hair done properly?” Sable asks.

I don’t look at her, letting the silence become slightly awkward. All I really know about Sable is that she can be pretty awful and it looks like today is going to be a “not nice” day.

“Sable,” Ana finally says, with only a little chastisement in her voice.

“What?” Sable looks around at everyone, pretending to be shocked. “That’s not being mean, that’s just asking a question? Can’t I ask her questions?”

I eat my lukewarm, unappetising pasta and ignore her. When I glance across the lunchroom to the door leading out to the grounds, I see Dr Mars. She’s the school SENco and I like her name. It conjures up images of the galaxy and faraway planets.

Stratospheres away from here.

She’s beckoning me so I excuse myself and abandon my lunch. I walk over to her. She’s short and round and always smiling.

“I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer, Aerial,” she says, beaming at me like she’s proud of me, even though she

doesn’t know me. Not even a little. “Come and join us in the SEN Space for a bit today, hm? Just until the end of lunch. I’m sure your friends won’t mind.”

“Dr Mars, I’m honestly good.”

“Just for a bit. You’ll love Txai and Niamh.”

“Sorry but I’m with my friends at lunchtime.”

Her eyes drift to something behind me and the slightly stricken look on her face makes me turn around. I see Sable pulling Jaya and Ana by the wrists. The three of them run from the lunchroom, giggling and glancing back at me. I watch Sable, full of glee. Jaya, full of middling amusement. Ana, guilt mixed with excitement. She knows it’s wrong but she likes doing it anyway.

“Some friends,” Dr Mars says softly.

I clench my fists, so dangerously hard I feel as though my nails might pierce the palm of my hand. I watch them dash out into school grounds. They go to sit on the edge of the grass, beneath the old tree with the wooden box. A few weeks ago, a bird was there with her nest but she decided to leave it. The baby birds were left alone.

The rest of the day is an angry haze and when I get home from school, Gideon is doing his homework on the kitchen table, utterly relaxed. He’s nine and

his homework is his happy place. Dad is talking to somebody on the phone. He gives my shoulder a squeeze and quietly tells me that we'll know at ten o'clock at night if our lives are about to change.

He seems to definitely think that they will.

I watch the television with him as the exit polls come in. Those are the early guesses at who will win the election. They say it's going to be my mother. Dad is crying with joy and he wakes Gideon up to tell him, then calls our grandparents and everyone we know.

I don't care about any of it. I fixate. I ruminate. I wonder if it's normal for your friends to hate you.

I think about the wooden bird box again, and the little birds that were inside of it.

I wonder who is going to teach them to fly away from here.

CHAPTER TWO

I know, as soon as we arrive, that Downing Street will be very different.

Our rooms are above the official parts of the famous building and Ilya, who helps us with security, mutters something about how it's ugly and dull. I disagree with him. I like looking at all of the portraits on the walls and I slide down the huge banisters a few times before Dad and Ilya wrestle me away from them. Mum is in full robot mode. Which means she's smiling and laughing and only talking to grownups. Dad is on the phone constantly, speaking to friends about Mum's new job. Her face is all over the news, according to Gideon.

I hate the attention. I can't keep count of how often I think of the word 'hate' since moving away from Scotland. The anger sits inside my head like a bundle

of heavy beads, cluttering up my mind and giving me a sore, aching head.

Mum turns off robot mode for one minute to tell me that Fizz is coming to pick me up and take me out, while Dad takes Gideon to his gifted children's art class.

"Why is Fizz coming?" I ask, and my voice must sound angrier than I mean it too because both Mum and Ilya look at me with confused expressions.

"I'm going to be swamped for the next few days," Mum starts but Keren, one of her aides, interrupts.

"You're going to be busy for the next few years, Ma'am. Now, Aerial. You and your sister are going out for the day, understood? We need you out from beneath our feet. Ilya will go with you."

Fizz. My older sister and not someone I enjoy spending time with, let alone being related to. She's twenty years old and too loud. Her hair is a different colour every time I see her. She has tattoos and clothes that she buys on the street. She chugs caffeine and is always too happy and too excited about everything.

I feel like I'm a sensible pencil, the kind you're supposed to take tests with, and Fizz is a sparkling, fluffy, brightly-coloured gel pen. The pen the teachers tell you not to bring to school.

We don't look right together.

Ilya walks silently to the door and I know that's his silent signal. We're leaving. Everything is going to take so much longer now. Getting to and from places will require Ilya and the wider security team to check that it's safe. He'll follow me like a shadow. Dad is making arrangements with the school already.

I think a part of me was hoping Mum might lose the election and we could all go home.

Silly.

I wait for Mum to say goodbye. I hover in the doorway. But she's murmuring with Keren and reading something on a tablet. Her frown lines are showing and two more people have come into the room.

So, I leave. Without her even noticing.

★

When we're safely away from Whitehall and in Green Park, we both spot Fizz under a tree. It looks like she's asleep. I feel myself scowl. Of course, she's the kind of person to happily sleep in public. Her long hair is candy-floss pink today. Her earrings are enormous and she's wearing a denim jacket that has loads of different signatures scribbled on it. She has a beauty

mark tattooed onto her upper left cheekbone. When Mum confronted her about it, she said it was easier than drawing it on every day.

I clear my throat and her eyes shoot open.

“Well, good afternoon, babe.”

She calls everyone ‘babe’. “Why didn’t you come to the house?”

She stays on the grass, her back still pressed against the tree. “The house? Is that what we’re calling it? I think it’s more of an office. Or a prison.”

Fizz is a lot older than me and was in boarding school for most of her life. She moved away from home when she was seventeen and went to Paris. Then Dublin. Then Prague. When she finally crash-landed in London, Mum would call and ask her about going to university to get a degree and it would always end in an argument.

I’ve never really lived with her. She doesn’t feel like a sister. Just a colourful stranger who comes over for Christmas.

“Looking very serious there, babe. But then, you always do,” she says to me.

“Can you get up? I want to go.”

“Where are we going? What could be better than this big old tree? I’ll give you a boost, you can climb it!”

“Anywhere else is better.”

“Fine,” she sighs. She reaches out to Ilya. “Give me a hand, comrade.”

His lips twitch and he helps her up. He’s the only one in our entire family circle who finds her amusing.

“So,” she says as we walk across the frosted grass in the cold November sun. “How’s school?”

Awful. Weird. I have these friends but they make me want to cry every single day. “Fine.”

“Uh oh.”

I scowl. “No, it’s fine.”

We’re walking up Regent Street and as we pass Hamleys, the toy shop, Fizz squeals and throws her body against the big glass window.

“Oh, babe, look at the beautiful dolls!”

Ilya smiles a tiny smile, but I feel my ears turn red. I glance around, making sure that none of the passers-by have seen a grown woman cry in delight over some children’s toys in pink dresses.

“They’re stupid and they’re for little kids.”

“Ssh, they’ll hear you!” Fizz cries, aghast at me. “And they’re not just for little kids, they’re for anyone. Come on, I’ll buy you one. Ooh, look at the one in the pink spacesuit.”

She clasps my hand but I wrench it away. “No!”

“Babe, let me get you a toy. I can get you a truck if you don’t want the pretty ones? Or a board game. What about the one with all the frogs?”

“No, can we just go!”

I’m irritable and snappy. I never used to be. I don’t like how I sound. I sound like someone no one would want to be around and I don’t know why. Some unknown force is making me like this.

I turn to start walking up the street, when I stop dead. I see three girls looking into the window of the designer shop a little further up from the toy shop. They’re taking a picture on their phones of one of the bags on display.

Sable, Jaya and Ana. They’re all together without me.

The sight of the three of them makes me want to never go to school again. In fact, it makes me want to leave the country. We’re all in an email thread, because Mum says I can’t have a smart phone, and on it they all promised that they were too busy with family stuff this weekend. Jaya had this whole story about her cousin’s wedding and Ana said her mother needed her to help with a video.

I realise now that they probably have a group chat without me.

Ana glances away from the window display for

a second, and catches my eye. Surprise lights up her face and then I see the mortification of being caught. She turns as red as the buses that pass us on Regent Street. She looks away quickly and Jaya and Sable both notice. They glance over and Jaya’s face is completely emotionless. Sable splutters out a laugh and slaps her hands over her mouth.

“Come on,” she tells the others, and they walk speedily away from me. I watch them rush up towards Oxford Street. When they think they’re out of earshot, they all break into shrieks of laughter and my blood is as cold as the air around us. I feel frost creeping in, winding around my bones and clenching my heart.

I read a story once about a boy who had a piece of ice in his eyes and it spread to his heart.

This feels like that.