

LOOKING
FOR
Emily

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*For Sophie, who all my stories
have been for.*



One

Lily Hargan was not happy. Edge, her new home town, was tiny and scruffy. One of those blink-and-you'll-miss-it seaside towns glimpsed from a car as you zoomed off somewhere more exciting. An in-between sort of place, all rugged cliff edges and sun-bleached shutters and lopsided pavements.

Lily was also tiny and scruffy, and you might have thought this similarity would inspire a little fondness for the town. Kindred spirits and all. You would be wrong.

Lily missed the city. She missed the buildings stretching to the sky, the noise, the rush of people, the thousands of stories piled in on top of each other. She liked to sit in the park, writing elaborate backstories for the people scurrying past. The woman in the enormous sunglasses was a famous actor in disguise. The one wheeling the old suitcase was on the run from her cruel family. The lady in the fancy coat? The greatest jewel thief in the world.

Here, the game was ruined. Everyone in Edge

knew everyone and that was that. They all had solid, mundane lives. What was anyone supposed to do with that?

Lily had felt a brief glimmer of hope on discovering that Edge had a pirate museum, and had packed her binoculars and a peanut butter sandwich and set off with the intention of finding some buried treasure, or at the very least some grisly pirate stories.

No luck. The museum was just a load of tatty old books filled with unreadable curly handwriting, pieces of smashed-up wood that might have once been pieces of boats, and photographs of the town that confirmed Lily's suspicion that it hadn't changed a bit in about a hundred million years. She couldn't believe they had managed to make *pirates* boring.

With nothing else to do, Lily had taken to sloping around her new house looking melancholy. Her mum either failed to notice or chose not to – she was relentlessly cheerful, bringing home pocketfuls of seashells and banging on endlessly about the wonders of fresh air. As far as Lily could see, there was plenty of air in the city. And it didn't smell like fish.

In the days leading up to the start of school, Lily had consoled herself that at least there was a hint of glamour in being the new girl – she was the mysterious stranger, the big-city girl, a swan in a flock of humdrum seagulls. But as the first day approached, her confidence wavered and cracked. Really, there was nothing fun about being the new girl.

The well-meaning smiles of her classmates sent irritation prickling across her skin. They felt sorry for her – she knew it. They pitied her for having no friends. She could just imagine their questions and polite, practised responses. *Oh, you're from the city? What do you think of Edge?* She'd rather die. Which was how she ended up eating her lunch in her English teacher's classroom.

Lily liked Ms Hanan. She laughed a lot, and with her bright lipstick and pretty patterned hijabs she seemed to be the most glamorous person that Edge had to offer. Not that there was really much competition.

Books were scattered around the classroom and

Ms Hanan encouraged Lily to dive in.

"It's one of my favourites."

Lily looked up. "What?"

Ms Hanan gestured to the book in Lily's hand. "*Charlotte's Web*. It's one of my favourites."

"Oh. Yeah, me too."

This particular copy was Lily's own. It was well worn and Ms Hanan's mouth twitched approvingly as she took in the battered cover and lovingly dog-eared pages. Lily had always surrounded herself with books. They were more reliable than people. A book would never break a promise to you. A book would never ask how you were just so it could talk about itself. A book would never have a super-annoying laugh. Books were always there, ready to sweep you up and hold you tight whenever you needed them. They were the perfect company.

She suddenly realised she'd been reading the same sentence over and over for about five minutes.

"I always saw a little of myself in the farmer's daughter," said Ms Hanan. "When I was a kid I was a sucker for a lost cause. Always coming home with

jars of caterpillars and buckets of crabs and crying inconsolably when my dad told me we couldn't keep them."

Lily wrinkled her nose. She had always thought the farmer's daughter was a bit of a drip.

"I think I'm more of a Charlotte the spider."

Ms Hanan nodded. "That's a good thing to be. Intelligent. Loyal."

"Weird?"

"We all need a bit of weird in our lives, Lily. Weird is good."

Lily shrugged.

"She's independent too. Like you. But you know, her adventures begin when she's brave enough to make a friend."

Lily snapped the book shut. "Are we still talking about *Charlotte's Web*?"

Ms Hanan laughed. "I'm just making an observation. She might have spent her whole life in that barn corner if she hadn't worked up the courage and said hello to someone."

"She says 'salutations.'"

"That's because she's a show-off."

"No point being smart if you're not going to show it off."

Ms Hanan shook her head. "You were right. You *are* a Charlotte. And that being the case, I'm going to set you some homework. I want you to do exactly what Charlotte does. I want you to make a friend. Well, nothing quite as hard as that. I want you to pick someone in the school and say hello to them before class on Monday."

Lily's head jerked up. "You can't set that as homework."

Ms Hanan's eyes were sparkling. She looked thoroughly pleased with herself. "Watch me."

"But, miss!"

"No. No buts. I expect you to arrive in my class on Monday morning with your homework completed."

"But everyone here is so..." Lily let the sentence trail off under Ms Hanan's arching eyebrow.

"I'm not asking you to get married. Just say hello. I don't care if you yell it and then run away. Although people might find that a little strange."

“People already think I’m strange.”

“They do not. Now, go and choose someone. They might surprise you.”

Lily highly doubted it.