

DOROTHY
KOOMSON

THE
QUIET
GIRLS

H
REVIEW

‘No one is better than you. Never forget that.’

Noelle Kingston

This story contains a storyline some may find triggering.

Prologue

Axton Manor, 1991

She stood with her hands folded like an X across her chest, facing away from the open first-storey window of the clock tower. The wind whistled as it blew through, rushing around her like a threat, a warning of what was to come.

She had to do this.

Her mother had done it. Her aunt had done it. Her grandmother had done it.

She had to do it.

Her stomach lurched when she looked again at the group in front of her. *Run*, her mind told her. *Don't do this – just run!*

The eight figures were shrouded in black robes, the hoods pulled up to hide their hair. They all wore shiny, silver-coloured fox masks to obscure their faces. They were giant human–animal hybrids: face of a fox, body of a girl, mind of a killer.

If she went through with this, it could kill her. She was sure it had killed others. It had certainly left others close to death. This was dangerous and deadly. *RUN!* her mind screamed again. *RUN!*

She had no choice: if she wanted the bullying to stop, if she wanted to make her family proud, if she wanted to take her rightful place, she

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had to do this. She had to prove that she was worthy. That she had everything it took to be one of them. She had to do this.

She closed her eyes.

‘For the pure, to the pure,’ she said, loud, clear, strong. ‘For the pure, to the pure.’

It happened quickly, suddenly. Several hands on her, pushing. It was too quick for her to change her mind. Too sudden to decide she couldn’t go through with it.

Too rapid, almost, for her to register that she was falling.

She had to do this. She had to do whatever it took to become one of the Quiet Girls.

Part 1

Kez

March 2026, Brighton

‘I believe you,’ she says, the gun in her hand pointed directly at me. ‘I believe you want to help me.’

I have my hands up, and I am trying to hold my breath, trying to stop this happening. And then I see the flash, I hear the bang, I feel the bullet rip into— I start, rousing myself out of my wide-eyed trance.

I keep slipping into this waking trance where I relive the moment I was shot last year because I am sitting in the large hall of our children’s school, attending a parents’ conference. Throughout the year there are smaller parent forum meetings for each year’s class reps (representatives), and then they hold this larger once-a-year meeting for everyone in the second term. That’s when everyone has settled into that year and their gripes are real instead of the product of not knowing how things work in the school or that year group.

It’s Jeb who usually gets involved in these things. I tried once – years ago – to do the involved-in-the-school-community mum thing when the school bursar pretty much goaded me into signing up for the parent–teacher association by telling me I wasn’t the type of person they wanted on the committee. Talk about red rag to a bull. I called her out in front of everyone and signed myself up . . . only to resign the position after the

first meeting. It really was not for me. But Jeb likes to come to these meetings. He finds it interesting and he always gives me such a comprehensive rundown of what happens – sometimes with the voices – that I always feel in the loop. Tonight, though, he absolutely insisted that I come to this meeting because . . . burble, burble, burble . . . I forget why. All I remember is he said it was essential that I attend.

My husband leans in to loudly whisper: ‘Are you paying attention?’

‘Yes,’ I hiss back, outraged by the suggestion that I might have slipped off into a waking trance or something. ‘Of course I am.’

‘You don’t look like you’re paying attention,’ Jeb replies.

‘Well, I am.’

‘Are you though?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you though?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are—’

‘*Shhh*,’ comes from behind us, the person clearly irritated that we aren’t paying attention but we *are* making it difficult for them to listen. Jeb and I turn at the same time to stare at the shhh-er. Those sitting on either side of her immediately shrink away, not wanting to be caught in the approaching crossfire, and she offers us a weak but brave smile.

‘Sorry,’ I whisper to her, and we both turn back.

I lean in towards Jeb, ready to restart our argument even though we’ve just been reprimanded, when he cuts in with, ‘This is her.’

‘This is who?’ I reply.

‘The woman I was telling you about.’

I glance at the stage as a tall, slender, honey-blond woman in dark-blue stonewashed jeans and a chunky roll-neck jumper under a royal-blue blazer strides into the middle of the stage. As she approaches, the

headteacher, Mr Greenburg, who is currently behind the microphone stand, introduces her as Penny Pressman (Mrs) then moves aside so she can take his place. Once installed behind the microphone, she uses her left hand to tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear, the move making her seem quite young and extremely vulnerable.

Whoa, I think. What's going on that has her looking so meek and defenceless? What's been happening at this school that I haven't noticed because I've been so focused on my ridiculous job?

'The woman who gave me the leaflet,' Jeb murmurs.

'What leaflet?'

'The one— Do you ever listen to a word I say?'

'Yes!' I hiss loudly, remember where I am, turn to the woman behind me, mouth 'sorry' then turn back to my husband. 'I do listen to a word you say. I listen to *every* word you say . . . I just don't remember all of them. Or some of them. Well, most of them. But I do listen.'

Shooting me a sour look, Jeb says, 'This is the woman who came up to me a couple of weeks ago and handed me the leaflet about the book banning.'

'I'm sorry, what?' I have to stop myself screeching. I turn to my mate behind me, raise a placatory hand, mouth 'sorry' again, return my attention to my husband.

'I knew you weren't listening,' Jeb accuses. 'All that "I can do two things at once" stuff you're always spouting and look, you were not I—'

'Listen, Quarshie,' I cut in. 'You need to get me up to speed right now! What book banning?'

'Two weeks ago, she came up to me in the playground, bold as brass, hands me a leaflet and tells me that she knows I'm one of the good ones so she's sure I'll support her "little group" in trying to get certain books removed from school libraries.'

Every single hackle on my body, even the ones that have been slack-ing off of late, is suddenly at attention and ready to fight.

‘One of the good ones?’ I reply.

‘Yes. One of the good ones. So I ask her, “What does one of the good ones mean?” because I needed her to be specific in front of everyone about what she was saying. And she goes, “I know you’re not a radical like some others. I know you’ll agree that some of those books in the libraries are inappropriate and damaging, especially to sensitive children. They can make children feel bad about themselves by misrepresenting history, while accusing their ancestors of unspeakable acts. And the lifestyles some of those books depict are shocking. I know you’ll agree with our little group – Mummies Making Moves Matter – that some of those books need to be removed. I’ll be bringing it up at the next parents’ conference.”

‘I stared at her and she sort of shrank away, acting like she was scared of me or something. So I said, “I don’t agree with book banning and disagreeing with book banning is not radical.” And she said, “I’m not talking about book banning – I’m talking about protecting children from damage.” And then her little mate who’s there in the front row said, “It’s not on for you to say that when we’re just thinking of the children.” And then everyone looks at me like I’m some monster because I have not been “thinking of the children”.’

I am pretty certain that I am staring at my husband as though he has just told me to do something unpleasant to myself. I am also pretty certain that the fluttering in my chest and the rising adrenalin is because I am in one of *those* moments. One of those moments when my friend Remi, if she was here, would say, ‘You could just leave it, you know. Leaving it is an option.’ She would say this despite knowing that leaving it is never an option for me.

‘That’s why I said you had to be here,’ Jeb is explaining. ‘We need to see who is on her side. We need to see who we need to be careful of and—’

I am on my feet before he can finish his sentence. ‘Excuse me,’ I say loudly once I am standing. Penny, the honey-blond on stage, who is speaking passionately about how certain books can ruin children’s lives by merely existing in the same building as them, stops talking. She blinks back the tears in her eyes, and stills her trembling hands. (I’m surprised she hasn’t brought pearls to clutch.)

‘There will be time for questions at the end, Mrs Quarshie,’ says Mr Greenburg.

‘This isn’t a question, it’s more of a comment.’

My husband inhales deeply as he folds one arm across his body, rests the opposite elbow on that arm and then covers his eyes with his hand. He’s regretting insisting I be here now. He is regretting that so hard because he knows what is coming.

‘This isn’t the time for comments, either,’ Penny says. Annoyance flitters across her face, because, alpha female that she believes herself to be, she does not like to be interrupted. Quickly, though, she pushes her mask back in place, returns to looking delicate and in desperate need of protection.

‘All right, well, it’s not a comment, then. Maybe think of it more as a promise? Threat? No, promise?’

Jeb quietly clears his throat, telling me if I have to do this, then I need to get on with it. ‘*Promise*. Let me call it a promise so we can keep this nice and civil.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Penny says.

‘Sorry,’ I reply with a broad smile. ‘I haven’t actually told you my promise. My promise is this: if even one book is removed from the

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school library or prevented from being read on school grounds because of you and your group, I will sue you. I will sue you, I will sue your group and I will sue the school.'

Everyone's eyes jerk wide open, their brains that had been sliding into waking trances of their own are suddenly on high alert and their slumped bodies sit up to pay attention.

'I will sue all of you for blocking access to education for my children,' I continue. 'I will also sue you for creating a hostile learning environment for my children. On top of that, I will sue you for demonising and slandering known protected groups because by attempting to have books banned by those in the groups you are suggesting there is something wrong with them because they are talking about their experiences.'

A tense, expectant silence descends upon the hall and people switch their line of sight between me and the pair on the stage. Mr Greenburg seemed to petrify the moment I mentioned suing the school.

'I'm just . . . I'm just thinking of the children,' Penny says, her wavery voice about to bury itself in tears.

'So am I,' I say gently, regretfully. 'Which is why I have to do this. You do understand that, don't you?'

'But some of those books . . .' Penny allows her words to fade away to emphasise that those books are so awful and threatening that to even talk about them is dangerous.

'Let me be honest with you,' I plough on. 'In court, I might not win. Suing all the aforementioned people will definitely take a long time and cost a lot of money. But, in that time, no books will be allowed to be banned – sorry, what was it you called it? – “removed” from the library until the matter is resolved.'

Penny is outraged. Absolutely livid that I am not arguing with her

on her battleground, I am not putting myself in a position where she can manipulate and guide the conversation into either agreeing with her or making myself seem radical and dangerous by not ‘thinking of the children’. I am supposed to enter her arena and ‘debate’ on her terms. But, instead, I am, much to her chagrin, changing the rules of the conflict by not engaging in her narrative, and instead bringing my own. I am about to make her fight on terms for which she hasn’t prepared.

‘As I said, it’ll be costly, but, for me, it will be worth the time and the cash to get to the discovery stage. In case you don’t know, that’s when you have to hand over all your communications related to this matter. You know, your WhatsApps, texts, emails, voicemails, voice notes, letters, group chats. *Every* single piece of communication will have to be handed over for *me* to look over. And, if I’m suing the school, you’ll have to hand over all communications with the school and its members, too. The school will have to hand over all its meeting minutes and anything that could be even vaguely taken as being related to the case.’

I stop talking then. I allow what I’ve just said to sink in. Not only for Penny and Mr Greenburg, who has paled so much with every second I fear he is going to fall over, but for those words to sink in for everyone in the room. I want the assembled parents to know that this is how you fight these people. This is how you stand up for what is right. You don’t have to allow those people to set the agenda, to define the rules of engagement. You can change the rules at any time. You can fight on your own terms. You can fight dirty. You can fight to win.

‘You are more than welcome to stop your children reading books you deem “wrong” and “damaging”, *Penny*. You can do whatever you like with your children in your house, but you’re going to have the fight

of your life on your hands if you *ever* presume to impose *your* bans on *my* children.'

With every passing moment, every one of my words, Penny's vulnerability has been peeling away; her fragility is now cracking, any hint of her being a woman in desperate need of coddling and protection is gone. Her hatred is naked and open; her anger is total and all-consuming. She stands on the stage, where our children have performed plays and nativities and music recitals, glaring at me in murderous rage.

I stare right back.

I have stared down psychopaths who want me dead, I have stared down people who have guns pointed at me – Penny from the playground is not going to get me to look away first.

The atmosphere in the room immediately ramps up several notches, everyone on the edge of their seats, waiting for Penny's next move.

Penny's stance suggests she is going to leap off the stage and come running down to where I am and grab a handful of my hair. The look on her face indicates she is trying to erase me from existence through sheer force of will. The tensing in her hands hints that if she was any closer to me she would be squeezing my neck until I stopped moving.

Penny's glare intensifies, her fingers curl into fists and her jaw undulates with the grinding of her teeth. She's going to do it. She's going come charging down and take a swing at me. I stare back, waiting. Ready. Oh so ready.

One beat.

Two beats.

She drops her gaze.

She drops her gaze and everyone in the hall, me included, exhales at the same time.

After Penny drops her gaze, the audience who, moments ago, she

had held rapt as she spun her narrative of sensitive young children needing to be protected from big bad books, now watch her with a mix of fascination and pity.

Suddenly Mr Greenburg, still holding his microphone, comes to life and steps in front of the microphone that Penny has now backed away from. ‘Erm, well, yes,’ he says, and the sound is duplicated then feeds back LOUDLY through the speakers, making everyone jump and cringe.

He immediately steps away again, raises the microphone. ‘Erm, well, yes,’ he repeats. ‘Thank you, erm, yes. I think that concludes the any-other-business part of the evening.’ He looks around at the other teachers, all of whom clearly want to be anywhere else but here. ‘And, in fact, that concludes the evening. Thank you all for your attendance. Goodnight.’

Adrenalin still spiking in my veins, I plop myself on the seat next to Jeb. He still has his hands over his eyes. And I suspect he’s pretending he doesn’t know me.

‘So,’ I ask him, ‘how quickly do you think we’d be able to move the kids to a different school?’

Fredi

● Record Voice Note ► Recorded: September 2025

It was one of those days today. When Mum woke me up, I was not ready to leave my bed. I was not ready. [*Groans*]

I kept saying, ‘Five more minutes, Mum.’ And she kept coming back after five minutes until she finally pulled the duvet off and said she wasn’t able to drive me to Everglades today and neither was Dad, so if I didn’t get out of bed NOW, I would be late for school. Again.

I’ve only been late, like, three times this term, but late is late. And four times you get a weekend detention. I did not want a weekend detention. If I got weekend detention that would mean no netball or Mathelion. And if I missed those I wouldn’t get to see my friends and the tutors who ran those classes wouldn’t pick me for the squads. Which would mean I wouldn’t get to go to Leeds for the UK Netball Championship tournament and I wouldn’t get to go to Birmingham for the Mathelion Grand Slam. I have been working really, *really* hard for the past year to get onto both those things. This morning, I was not going to let anything get in the way of my mission. Not even myself.

I had literally just stepped into the shower when I heard: ‘Fred! *FREDI!*’

‘Yes, Mum?’ I called back when I turned off the water.

‘You have exactly seven minutes to get out the shower, get dressed, eat breakfast and leave the house if you want to catch the last bus before you’re late.’

What? No! That’s when I noticed my phone was flashing because the alarm had timed itself out. Turned out I’d set the alarm, but I didn’t turn my ringer up after I turned it off last night, so I didn’t hear it. Couldn’t believe my phone would do me dirty like that.

‘I’ll just skip breakfast,’ I said to Mum as I went to rush past her.

Her arm came out and connected to the wall next to the bathroom door, halting me in my tracks. ‘What did you just say?’ she asked in *that* Mum voice.

‘I . . . erm . . . said that I was going to get dressed super quick so I can make sure I leave the house with a nutritious breakfast inside me.’

Mum moved her arm and let me run past. She shouted after me: ‘That’s what I thought you said.’

Breakfast – bagel with cream cheese and smoked salmon, a cup of lemon, ginger and honey – went down quick, quick and I ran out the house for the bus stop. The bus was late so I didn’t have to be. It arrived exactly seven minutes later than scheduled, which meant I arrived just when it did. The driver made up time en route, so I arrived at school right on time. I didn’t even mind that much that I left my headphones at home. Nor that I forgot my history book. I was just happy that there’d be no detention for me today.

I walked through the gates this morning like nothing could touch me, nothing could go wrong. So, yeah, that’s why *everything* started going wrong, isn’t it?

■ End Voice Note ↓ Save Recording ↗ Send To Private Cloud

Kez

March 2026, Brighton

Jeb keeps laughing at me. At the look on my face before I stood up, at the way my voice sounded, at my face when I sat down, at the way people waited for Penny to hurriedly leave with her husband and group of friends before they came over to give me a nod, a pat on the back or a smile of approval. My private messages on the group chat have been pinging non-stop with people thanking me for speaking up.

Zoey and Jonah are spending the night at their friends' houses, which is a shame because they're very likely to hear what happened from other people and that could cause problems. *For me.* That could cause very real problems for me. They'll absolutely back me up to other people, but I can just imagine their faces as they walk through the door tomorrow, mortified that I've shown them up in front of everyone. Determined to get assurances that I won't do that to them again.

As Jeb does another impression of me, while unlocking our newly painted yellow front door, I notice the sleek black car parked at the corner of our street. It doesn't look out of place here, but its blacked-out windows do get my attention.

I make a big show of straightening the big black recycling wheelie bin so I can surreptitiously clock the car's number plate and take in

more details of its make and shape. I think I've seen the number plate before . . . but it could be just my imagination.

'All right, laughing boy,' I say to Jeb, and close the door behind me, shutting out the car and whoever is watching me. And they *are* watching me. It's obvious from the way the car is positioned and the fact that there is someone inside the car with the engine off, that they are watching our house, observing me. I am not flattering myself; like it or not, this is the type of thing I've been trained to notice. This is the type of thing that my ridiculous job in a government-adjacent organisation makes me constantly aware is happening. I'm glad the children aren't here now that I know I'm being watched, but anxiety dances in my stomach wondering if they are safe where they are. *Is there someone watching them, too? Or watching my other family members?*

As soon as the door shuts behind us, Jeb grabs me and holds me close to him. He stares down at me, amused, but also intense. I sling my arms around him, careful in that way of mine, to not touch him with my hands because I touched the recycling bin and haven't washed my hands yet.

'In all seriousness, though, I am proud of you,' Jeb says. 'It's not often I get to see you in action. And you were – are – magnificent.'

'Yeah, sometimes I wish I could just keep my mouth shut.'

Jeb laughs. 'Never going to happen.'

'Yeah, I know,' I reply. I'm trying not to get distracted. I'm trying to focus on my husband and the fact that we have an empty house and neither of us has any work to do. I'm trying – and failing – not to run that number plate through my head, trying to work out where I've seen it before. I'm trying – and failing – not to panic at the thought of who is outside and what they want.

This is what it's like working for Insight. Although I am technically

just a profiler and therapist working with the intelligence services and law enforcement as well as other government bodies, and although I am technically not someone who comes that close to real-life danger or to being targeted, last year, I was shot. I was shot by someone I was trying to help, and it was a reminder that anything I do can become dangerous in the space of minutes or seconds. I mean, I say that like I haven't had people wait for me in car parks, put trackers in my car, stalk me, assault me and other things. I say that like I haven't always walked with an extra layer of danger and it was only last year that I realised it. The year before last, after finding a baby on the back seat of my car, I ended up in a hostage situation that I very nearly didn't survive. My life is ludicrous sometimes, so I shouldn't really be surprised that someone has tracked me down and is waiting outside to . . . what? Kill me? Kidnap me? Teach me how to sew invisible zips? My life is so ridiculous that it could be any of those things, all of those things or none of those things.

My husband kisses me, bending me backwards so he can passionately move his lips against mine, slip his tongue into my mouth, bring me close to his body. I pull away slightly, gasping with how he has literally taken my breath and the thoughts in my head away.

'Wait, wait,' I say to him, when he moves in to kiss me again. 'I have to wash my hands.' I hold my hands up. 'Recycling-bin hands. Why don't you go upstairs, wash your hands and then slip into something sexy while I wash my hands down here.'

'What, you want me to put on your underwear?' he laughs, trying to kiss my nose.

'No, well, not unless you really want to. I was thinking maybe a bath? We haven't had a bath together in an age and since the kids are not here . . .'

‘All right,’ he says. ‘I will go and run us a bath. Lots of magnesium salt to relax the muscles. And I will make a decision on the underwear afterwards.’

I laugh at him again. He drops another kiss on the end of my nose and then heads for the stairs. I go to the bathroom under the stairs to wash my hands. Jeb pauses halfway up the staircase.

‘You know, you could have just told me that you were going to check out who is watching us from that black car across the road? I wouldn’t have stopped you,’ he says.

Gah. I always, *always* forget how well my husband knows me.

‘Actually, I would have told you to “call for back-up” before you went out there, but you know what I mean.’

I nod. I know what he means.

‘So, since I doubt you will call for back-up or whatever, as I always say, just do whatever you need to do to come home to us.’

‘I’m not in danger,’ I state to him.

‘Course you’re not,’ he replies. ‘Course you’re not.’

He forces a smile and then carries on upstairs, probably with dread in his stomach and his heart galloping in his chest. He’s getting better at not allowing his overprotectiveness of me to outwardly show, but I’m sure he’s going to go straight upstairs to our bedroom window to watch the car, clutching his phone so he can call the number that is to be used strictly in emergencies. That was the deal I made with him after I was shot. I had to give him a number that would mean he could summon help for me the second it looked like I’m in trouble. I’d told him I wasn’t in any danger then, too. It might have been a bit more convincing if I hadn’t been lying in bed with a gunshot wound, acquired during the course of my work. But it was true then and it is now – I’m not in any imminent danger. Kind of.

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While I was lathering my hands, rinsing them off and then drying them on the blue towel in our downstairs toilet, I worked out where I have seen the number plate before. Or one very similar to it. And if I'm right, then I am definitely not in any danger. Not imminently, anyway.

As I approach the car, coming at it diagonally across the road, the driver's side door opens. By the time I arrive in front of the car door, the person has exited the vehicle.

'Hello, MJ,' I say.

Fredi

● Record Voice Note ► Recorded: September 2025

‘Why doesn’t he know I’m alive?’ Bev wailed as we set our trays down on our table in our part of the dining room.

Tuesday was sandwich day. We didn’t get hot food, we got pre-packed sandwiches, a tube of yoghurt, an apple or orange and a juice box with cardboard straws. Good food it was not. Mum had brought it up a few times in the parent–teacher conferences, explained that growing children needed more food than that to keep them going. She even said that for some children, lunch at school was the only hot meal they get a day. She always said it in a reasonable tone and smiled and . . . and *still* the catering manager would burst into tears and act like Mum had insulted her and everyone in her bloodline going back generations. More than once, Mum has muttered, ‘If this was ancient times we’d be out here duelling with pistols at dawn and if it was the nineties we’d be having a dance-off.’

Either way, nothing ever changed and we had to eat sandwiches that feel like mashed cardboard and taste like a slimy butter-wannabe spread no matter what the filling is meant to be. And Bev constantly crashing out about why Marvin didn’t like her didn’t add any kind of seasoning to the proceedings.

‘Maybe it’s because two people with Vs in their names aren’t meant to be together,’ Carina said, because she was fed up of this. *Either make a move or make a shut up*, she’s said more than once to Bev. But Bev ain’t budging. Bev was in love and Bev needed to talk it out.

Bev shot daggers at me for smirking at what Carina said.

‘It’s all right for you,’ Bev said to Carina. ‘You’ve got a man.’

‘Boy,’ I said. ‘There’s no way that Dexter Robison can be called a man.’

Bev burst out laughing. ‘Cold.’

Carina unwrapped her sandwich and arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow at Bev and at me. She was about to bite into her sandwich when Jeanette Reyes, who was walking past, purposely bumped into her, making her sandwich fly out of her hands.

‘Oh, sorry, didn’t see you there, *Carina*,’ she said nastily.

Oh, this was a beef that has been stewing for a long time. Jeanette used to like-like Dexter Robison. And he didn’t like her, at all. I don’t know why he didn’t want to know her, but he didn’t and he made it clear. Which she, who always acted as though she was the prettiest girl in the school – the world, actually – took really badly. At every party since Carina got with Dexter, Jeanette has tried it on with Dexter. Carina’s mum is really strict so she’s not allowed to go to most parties, so she only ever hears about it on Snap and the group chat. And of course Dexter tells her. But Dexter never does anything and that makes Jeanette crash out all the time. And everyone takes vids so she can never even pretend that anything happened because it’s right there in 4K that nothing ever happened.

She’s been trying to cause trouble with Carina for a long time, but today was the first time she’d done something. Me and Bev were on our feet straight away, standing right behind Carina. My best friend got slowly to her feet and faced down Jeanette.

‘What’s the matter, Jeanette? Can’t walk straight?’ Carina said, staring at Jeanette like the nothing she was.

Jeanette’s other two friends, Pearl and Marcella, stood behind her like they were ready to fight, too. It was a bit pathetic, really. These girls are going to fight us over a boy. Really? Like isn’t there something better for Jeanette to get upset about? Dexter wasn’t even that good-looking. He doesn’t shape his Afro and his clothes are always creased, but he was nice to Carina so we kind of backed her being with him.

‘Pathetic,’ Bev coughed into her hand.

And that set it off. Jeanette reached out and tried to grab Carina’s hair. Carina ducked back out of the way and Jeanette fell forward, landing flat on her face. Everyone in the place erupted in laughter, and suddenly everyone from around the room was coming over to laugh at her, too. For someone who thought she was so pretty and popular, a lot of people were running up to laugh at her. Thing is, I noticed that she didn’t put her hands up to stop herself when she fell so she smashed her face onto the ground. When she sat up, her face was covered in blood.

‘Oh wow,’ Bev said.

Carina pulled a shocked face and Jeanette’s friends didn’t do anything but stare. Even though she had literally started it, I felt bad for her because she was crying and bleeding and looking humiliated. So I go to her, try to help her up. And that’s when Miss Geraghty arrived. ‘What is going on here?’ she thundered. Everyone scarpered, leaving just the seven of us there.

‘She punched me!’ Jeanette says, pointing at me.

‘What?’ I replied, dropping her right out of my hands because, girl, what? ‘I didn’t.’

‘She did!’ Jeanette lied.

‘No, she didn’t,’ said Carina.

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‘No, she didn’t, you liar,’ Bev added.

Pearl and Marcella both said, ‘Yes, she did!’ And Miss Geraghty, who has always hated me, hated Carina, hated Bev, curled her lip up in the way she always did when she looked at the three of us. She didn’t like many children, but she seemed to *really* hate me and Carina and Bev.

‘Get yourselves to the headmaster’s office,’ Miss Geraghty said to us.

‘But we didn’t do anything,’ I protested.

‘Now!’ said Miss Geraghty with her pointy glasses and grey teeth. ‘Pearl, take Jeanette to the nurse’s office. The rest of you, to the headmaster’s office.’

We didn’t even get to eat our lunch. We all marched off to the headmaster’s office. Bev, Carina and I were furious! Absolutely furious, because we hadn’t done anything. But that was how it was at school sometimes. We got into trouble when we hadn’t done anything.

■ End Voice Note ↓ Save Recording ↗ Send To Private Cloud

Kez

March 2026, Brighton

‘Kez,’ MJ replies to my greeting, her voice so frosty you would think it was like our last two encounters when I have shown up uninvited and unwelcome to see her. You wouldn’t think that she has brought herself all the way over from the other side of town to my door.

‘I’m guessing hell is about to have a cold spell since you’re here about to ask me for help,’ I say when she doesn’t speak. ‘Or, will I be needing to go back inside, pack up my life and ship out because someone is coming to get me at dawn?’

The look of pure irritation that passes across her face before she hides it behind an expression of neutral disdain tells me that she *desperately* needs my help. Hell really is about to freeze over, then. The last time I spoke to her, when I was asking for help with a case I was working on, she told me this was ‘absolutely the last time’ she was helping me out. The implication from that being she didn’t want to see me again.

To be fair to me, though, she has been saying similar things to me since we first worked together nearly twenty-five years ago. Along with Brian Kershaw, we were three newbies recruited into The Human Insight Unit run by a man called Dennis Chambers. He bullied Brian

by constantly making digs at his masculinity, he made MJ – or Maisie as she was called back then – feel like she was stupid and had nothing but her family connections going for her, and he sexually harassed (and eventually sexually assaulted) me. When everything inevitably imploded and Brian hit Dennis and was forced to leave, MJ shipped out not long after. She'd been telling Brian and me for months that once she left she wouldn't keep in touch with either of us so she could forget all about her time with Dennis. I'd thought that was fair enough. But it didn't work out that way and we have been forced together far too many times in the last few years for MJ's liking. Me? I don't care either way. While there are huge swathes of my past I would like to forget, I'm not bothered if I see people from that past. Except Dennis. I hate having to see him every day because I work for him again now. But I'm starting to build immunity to him, too. In another five to ten years, being in his vicinity might not bother me at all.

'You owe me,' MJ says. 'I helped you out and you owe me. I'm calling in that favour now.'

'All right,' I say neutrally, because I am not used to seeing MJ in need of help. When I knew her, she had all the confidence in the world. She was brought up to believe that everything in the universe was hers for the taking. Even when Dennis was relentlessly bullying her, she eventually got it to stop by asking her father and godfather to have a word with him. And with her family connections, when she left T.H.I.U. it was to become second in command of a government-connected-but-not-run thinktank. In all the time I've known her, there has been absolutely nothing that MJ didn't think she could do. 'What is it?' I ask, because this vulnerable woman in front of me is not someone I know.

She inhales and exhales a few times, won't meet my eye. Suddenly,

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she becomes breathy and fragile, and I think for a moment she is going to start crying. Whatever has brought her here must be terrible. Really, really awful.

‘You’re going to have to tell me if you want my help,’ I tell her. ‘I’m good at profiling people and working things out, but I need a few clues?’

‘It’s my daughter,’ MJ finally explains. ‘She’s in trouble and I need you to prove that she’s innocent.’