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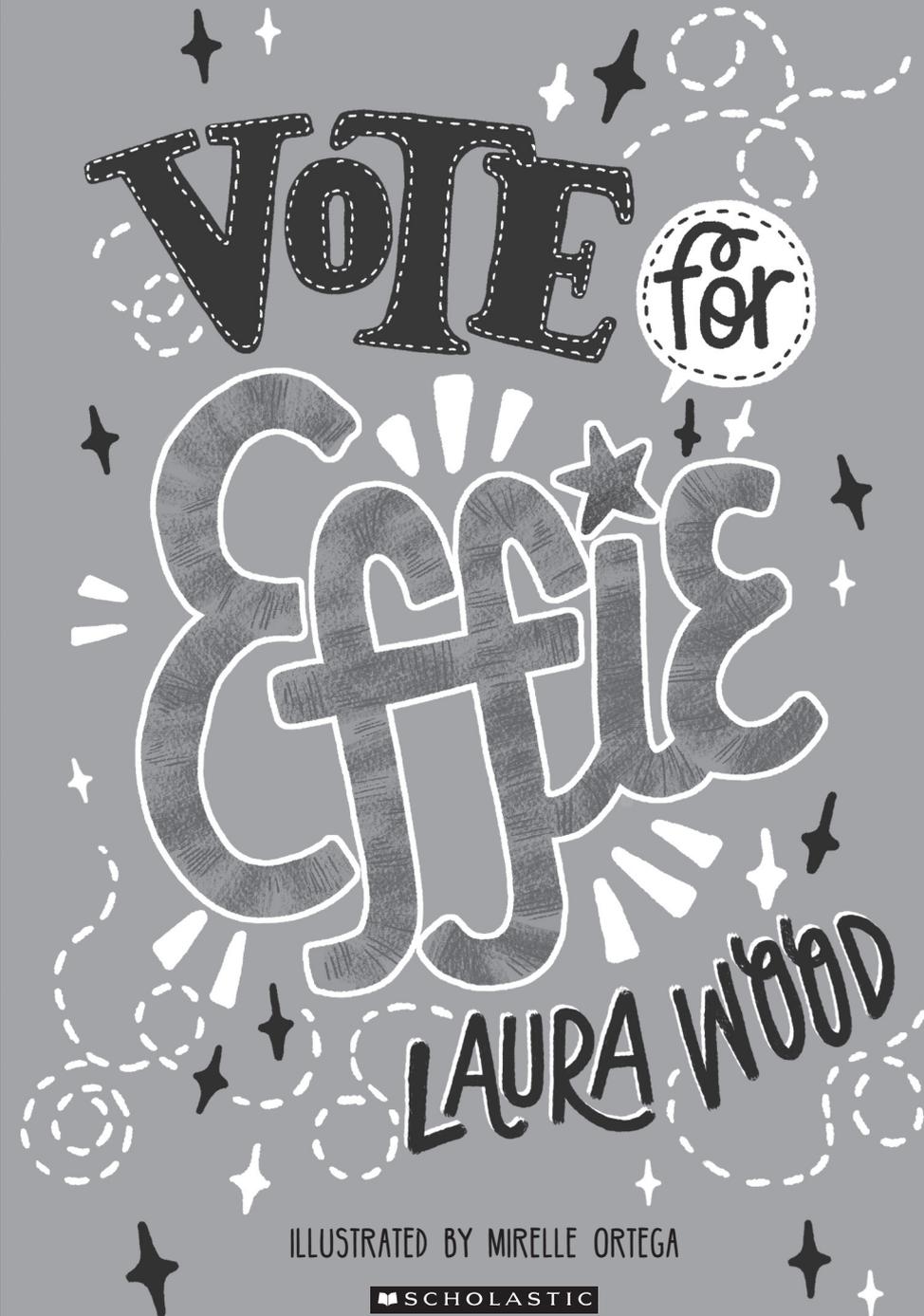
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Laura Wood:

Poppy Pym and the Pharoah's Curse
Poppy Pym and the Double Jinx
Poppy Pym and the Smuggler's Secret
Poppy Pym and the Beastly Blizzard

A Sky Painted Gold

*For everyone who marched, with
love and gratitude.*

PART ONE

The Candidate

CHAPTER *One*

“Yoo . . . fee . . . mee . . . a Kostas?” the teacher’s voice rings out uncertainly.

A few snickers rattle around the room, but I paste on a bright smile.

“Here, miss,” I say. “But you can call me Effie.” It’s the third time I’ve had to say that today. That’s one of the problems with starting at a new school if you have an unusual name – the register can be a bit of an ordeal for you *and* your teacher. Especially if you’re stuck with a name like Euphemia. (It’s actually pronounced “Yoo-fem-ia”, by the way.)

“It means well-spoken,” I add, and the teacher, who was about to move on to the next name on her list, falters.

“I’m sorry?” She looks over at me, and there are more muffled laughs from my fellow students.

I push back my frizz of dark hair, which seems to be growing bigger and bigger as the day goes on. “My name,” I say. “It’s from the Greek for well-spoken, or good speaker.” I like to try and get this fact in whenever my full name comes up. I don’t really like it very much, to be honest, but it is important to try and make lemonade out of lemons. Being saddled with a name like Euphemia is a pretty sour lemon to suck on, but at least I approve strongly of the meaning behind it.

“My dad chose it,” I continue, though the teacher is still looking a little blank. Perhaps she needs a cup of coffee? (I’ve actually got into coffee lately. Well ... I drank a vanilla latte with extra sugar and whipped cream on Saturday and



the effects were most invigorating. Mum said my eyes were a bit wild-looking and that she thought in future I should stick to decaf, but I got ever such a lot of unpacking done, and I sorted all my books – by genre (and alphabetically, of course, I’m not an animal) – ready for shelving once Dad helps me to put all my new bookcases together.

I was quite keen to tackle this myself as I’m all for female empowerment, but Dad said he thought that my female empowerment should come without its own power tools until I’m at least sixteen, and even though I told him that response was sexist nonsense I have to admit that he might have a point after that tiny little incident with the water pipe in our last house, but all of the furniture dried out fine so I don’t really know what the fuss was about.)

Anyway, the point is that the teacher standing in front of me definitely looks in need of a caffeine boost. We’re not that far into term but this lady looks completely frazzled already; her dark hair is falling out of the messy bun she has it stuffed into, and she keeps pushing a loose lock out of her eyes. Her hands are covered in ink stains and – now that I look at it a little more closely, the front of her shirt seems to have a big ink stain on it as well, one that

she has tried to cover up with a brightly patterned scarf. I make all of these lightning-fast Sherlock-style deductions and something clicks as I realize that my new English teacher is having a Bad Day. I inject even more brightness into my voice as I continue to fill her in on the origins of my name.

“Dad said that my name fit me perfectly even as a baby,” I beam, hoping that a little of my cheerfulness might rub off on to her. “Apparently I was quite noisy.” I fold my hands in front of me on the desk, considering this. “But I do think it’s important to make yourself heard, don’t you, miss?” There are some more slightly nervous giggles from my classmates. As I look around I notice most of them look a bit dazed.

“Yes,” the teacher agrees faintly. She is also looking, it has to be said, a little bewildered.

“I—” I begin, ready to deliver more interesting information, but I am cut off by the teacher, who slices her hand through the air in an impatient gesture.

“Yes, thank you, Effie,” she says coolly. “Perhaps I had better share *my* name now. I am Miss Sardana.” She pushes the stray bit of hair away from her face again in a frustrated motion. “I was going to wait

until the end of the register to have you introduce yourself, but as you seem to have started that ball rolling, perhaps you’d like to do it now?”

This is fine with me. I am not exactly what my mum calls a “shrinking violet”. I get to my feet, and my chair makes a little squeaking sound as I push it backwards. I smooth my hands over my school skirt, annoyed again that I don’t have the option to wear trousers like the boys do if I am in the mood (what is this, Victorian times?!).

“Well, my name’s Effie,” I say, using my best public speaking voice, which is good and loud. “I just moved here last week, which is why I’m a bit late starting school. I have a little sister called Lil. She’s eight, so she’s not at secondary school yet. My dad is a copy editor and he works from home so that he can look after us. My mum is a lecturer and she’s doing research on a poet from the thirteenth century who no one has ever heard of, but that will all change when she’s finished her book. That’s why we moved here,” I add. “Because she got a new job at the university.”

I’m speaking quickly, because even when you’re quite a confident person, it’s often difficult to stand in front of a group of strangers and talk. I take a deep

breath. “I play the violin . . . but not very well,” I add hastily, because I really do think that honesty is the best policy. “I’m trying to convince my dad to let me have a dog. I would call it Emmeline Pankhurst, even if it was a boy dog. I’m a feminist and musical theatre enthusiast.” I tip my head thoughtfully to one side, trying to work out if I’ve forgotten anything. “Ah –” I lift my finger “– and my favourite colour is green or sometimes purple.”

If anything, Miss Sardana looks even wearier now. “Thank you, Effie,” she murmurs as I sit back down.

“Oh!” I leap to my feet. “And I forgot to say, miss. I think anyone should have a choice to wear trousers OR a skirt to school if they want. This school uniform policy is from the dark ages.” I glance around at my fellow pupils, expecting their enthusiastic support, but most of them aren’t even looking at me, and those who are look vaguely startled by my outburst.

“That is not really an appropriate subject for our English lesson,” Miss Sardana sighs. “Let’s not get distracted. Please sit down quietly now so that we can get on.”

“But, miss,” I persist. “Someone should do something about it!”

“Well, that is something for you to take up with

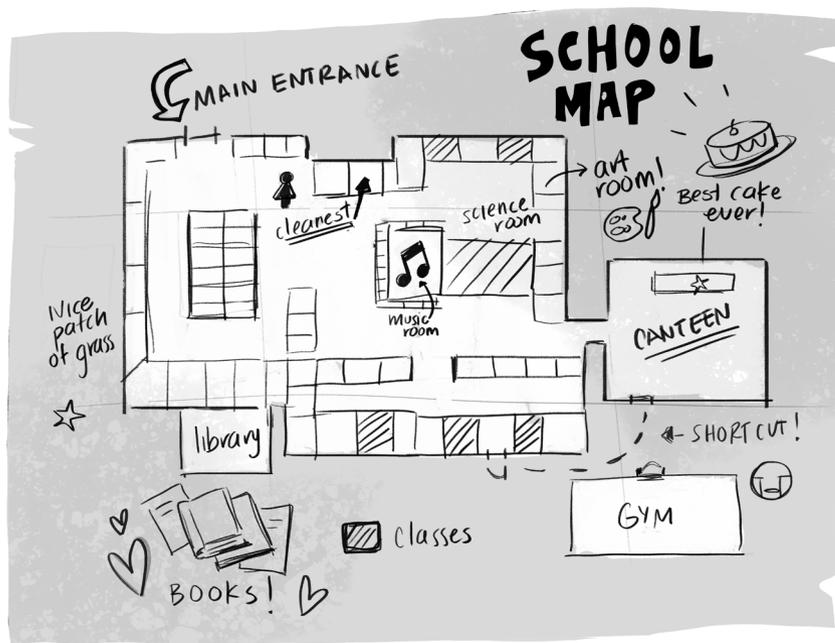
the student council, Effie, now *please, sit down.*” I do so, reluctantly, as the rest of the class bursts into muted chatter.

The giggling and whispering continue and so Miss Sardana lifts her voice with a visible effort, moving on with the register and then beginning to talk about *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which is the play the class have been studying since the start of term. I scribble a lot of notes, pulling out all of my different coloured highlighters and sharpening my pencils, surreptitiously breathing in the woody pencil-sharpening smell. I love the start of the school year.

Not that it’s exactly been easy this time. Today is my first day at Highworth Grange secondary school and I’m already a whole month behind everyone else. I don’t know anybody, and the school is absolutely massive. It’s one of those buildings that’s had loads of bits added on to it over the last hundred years or so and none of the room numbers make any sort of logical sense, and some of them have random letters in front so sometimes you think you’ve reached the top of a staircase and then there’s another sort of extra bit that takes you by surprise. Still, it’s important to remain positive. I am trying very hard to think of the move as a new opportunity, and ignoring the pang

of homesickness that I feel when I think of my old familiar house and my old familiar school.

I pull a map from my pocket and have a quick look at it, noting Miss Sardana's name in the little square that represents her classroom. The school secretary gave me a map when I came in for a tour a few weeks ago, but this is one that I drew myself while they were showing me around. It's a lot more accurate and has important notes about things that I noticed, like which are the cleanest toilets, and the shortest route to the canteen.



The bell rings to signal the end of the lesson and it's time for lunch. I join the stream of students in boxy black blazers headed towards the canteen, but unfortunately I can't join in any of the excited conversations that surround me. I do almost try with one group of girls from my English class, but they all have their backs firmly turned to me, like an impenetrable wall. I queue up, glancing longingly around for a friendly face, but none appear until the dinner lady smiles at me. I hand over my dinner money in exchange for a cheese and tomato sandwich and a packet of salt and vinegar crisps. I tried going vegan for a few weeks but my dad caught me gnawing on a lump of Edam in the middle of the night and insisted that I give it up so now I'm a vegetarian instead. Well, apart from chicken and bacon. And the occasional burger.

Looking around the crowded canteen, I feel an unfamiliar wave of panic rising inside me. I really don't know *anyone*. Not a single soul. And there aren't any encouraging, smiling faces looking in my direction, either. Instead everyone seems to be sitting in cosy, tight clusters, chatting and laughing quite happily. There's a table full of people who look like they're having a good time. They're shouting at each

other and bursting into noisy explosions of laughter. There's a spare seat at their table on to which they've all dumped their coats and bags. *I should go and talk to them, I think. These could be my new best friends. There's no need to be nervous... I'm a nice person, anyone would be lucky to have me for a friend.* I can't help but notice that my own inner voice seems to be trying a bit too hard to convince me of this fact. I hover nearby and clear my throat. No one seems to notice, not even a flicker of attention comes my way. I clear my throat again, louder this time. Still nothing.

"Excuse me," I say finally, and my voice is a little croaky.

"Mmm." One of the girls slides her gaze over in my direction.

"I just wondered if I could sit here?" I say, pointing at the chair. I beam at her in my absolute friendliest manner.

"Sorry." The girl shrugs, not sounding particularly sorry at all. "That seat is taken." She turns immediately back to her neighbour and carries on her conversation as if I was never there at all.

I am left pink-cheeked and open-mouthed, gasping like a goldfish unceremoniously scooped

out of its bowl. I look once more at the pile of bags and blazers that are apparently better company than me and I can feel tears burning at the backs of my eyes. *Don't you dare cry!* I tell myself sternly. Maybe it's not so bad, maybe they're just saving the seat for someone else who isn't there yet. There's no need to take it personally.

I blink hard and with a determined sniff, I sweep off, eventually perching on the end of a long table with a few empty seats. The boy nearest me doesn't even seem to notice. With a sigh I peel the cling film from around my sandwich and carefully remove the tomato slices. If I was in charge no one would be allowed to hog a whole chair like that. And no one would have to sit alone. I'd make sure that new students always had somewhere to sit and a friendly person to talk to. I munch forlornly on my sandwich.

Still, I think, recovering some of my brightness, it's only the first day. I'm sure I'll have made loads of friends by the end of the week. No need to panic.

CHAPTER *Two*

Absolutely no need to panic, I repeat to myself several times through the rest of the day as I battle increasingly violent waves of what can really only be described as panic. *It's fine. Everything is fine.* By the time the final bell rings my head is buzzing full of facts about Henry VIII and tricky long division and new faces and endless maze-like corridors. My total lack of friends has been weighing pretty heavily on my mind, I must admit, and so I have found it more difficult than usual to really concentrate on what my teachers were saying. Not ideal if you're already behind. Despite my usual cheeriness, by the time the last bell rings, I'm having to work hard not to let a general cloud of glumness engulf me.

It takes about fifteen minutes to walk to our new house from the school – sixteen if you're unlucky with the pedestrian crossing lights.

Our *new* house is actually a pretty *old* house. My mum and dad say that it's "bursting with character", which seems to be code for "none of the walls or floors are quite straight". It is nice though, our funny, wonky house. It is tall and thin and I have a whole attic room to myself, and I will get to choose how we decorate it once we've saved up a bit of money. It turns out moving house is an expensive business. The house has a little scruffy patch of garden out the front and a red door.

I am just pulling out my new set of keys when I hear someone talking.

"So you're the new neighbour then." A croaky voice reaches my ears.

The voice seems to be coming from the small hedge that separates our garden from next door, and for a second I stare at it in bemusement. My heart beats rapidly. Perhaps this is the start of a story where I get pulled into a magical hedge and I live among the tiny hedge people, helping them to battle injustices until I reluctantly agree to be their queen, ruling with wisdom and kindness for five hundred years.

“Why are you staring at my hedge like that?” the voice asks, and I realize with a mixture of sadness and relief (after all, I have a lot to do here and I haven’t really got the time to become a hedge queen and to give my subjects the ruler they deserve) that the voice belongs to a woman.

I’m surprised I didn’t notice her before, to be honest, but then her garden is so overgrown that she’s pretty well hidden by weeds. She is sitting in a fold-out garden chair on her front step. The woman is quite small and old, maybe about eighty, but she has short, bright pink hair and she’s reading a book.

“Hello,” I call back, the key in my hand, as I stand poised to enter the house. Instead, I step over towards the (ordinary, non-magical) hedge because it’s good to be polite. “Yes, I’m

one of your new neighbours,” I shout. “My name’s Effie.”

“There’s no need to shout,” the woman grumbles. “I’m old, not deaf.”

“Sorry,” I say, lowering my voice to a more normal volume.

The woman looks me over for a moment, a thoughtful gleam in her pale blue eyes. It’s not terribly warm out here, but she seems to have prepared for this by wrapping herself in a gigantic purple woollen poncho.

“Effie,” she says finally. “Well, I’m Iris.” She gives me another sharp look. “I hope you’re not planning on having a lot of noisy parties? Loud music and hooligans arriving at all hours of the day and night?”

“No!” I splutter. “Of course not. I’m only twelve.”

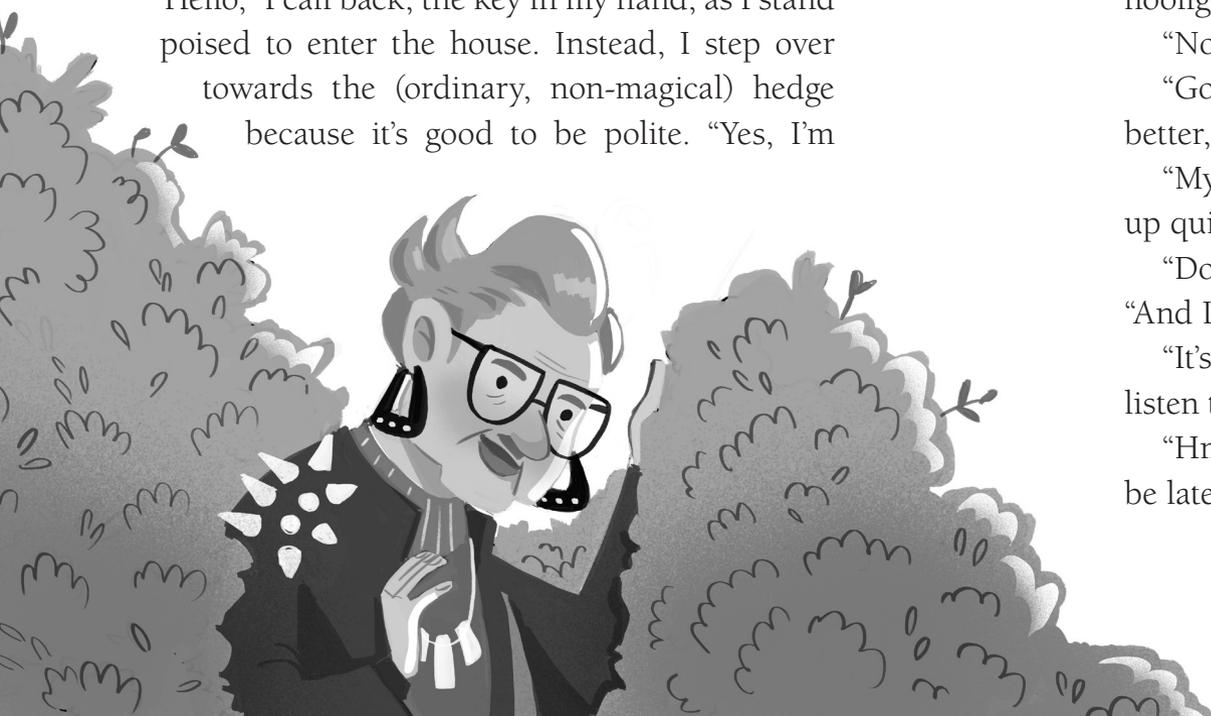
“Good,” Iris grunts, although if I didn’t know better, I’d think she was a bit disappointed.

“My sister sometimes turns the *Frozen* soundtrack up quite loud,” I offer.

“Don’t know what that is.” Iris purses her lips. “And I don’t think I want to.”

“It’s actually quite good,” I say. “If you don’t have to listen to it thirty-six times a day for months on end.”

“Hmmm.” Iris sniffs. “Well, in you go then, you’ll be late for your tea.”



We won't be having tea for hours yet but I don't want to be rude. "OK," I say instead. "It was nice to meet you."

Iris sniffs again, which I choose to translate as "the feeling is mutual".

I go back to the front door and turn the lock, tumbling into the warm hallway.

"Let it goooooooooooooooooo, let it goooooooooooooooooo," Lil's voice howls from up the stairs.

Dad appears from the kitchen, his dark hair rumpled and a pained expression on his face.

"I thought you hid her *Frozen* CD," I hiss.

"She found it," he replies mournfully. "Although I don't know how. I put it inside a bag of rice."

I shrug off my rucksack and my coat and blazer, hanging them on the hooks in the hallway, and follow my dad through to the kitchen. His laptop is open on the table, a stone-cold cup of tea beside it. The kitchen is a disaster area, full of half empty boxes and bags for life.

"How was school?" Dad asks as I sink into a chair.

"It was fine," I say as cheerfully as I can.

"Fine?" Dad repeats slowly, his eyes widening in concern. "Oh, no."

I suppose "fine" is a word I don't use that often. I'm

much fonder of "brilliant" or "amazing". Dad moves over the kitchen counter and plucks a pack of Penguin biscuits from the top of one of the bags, tearing the packet open with his teeth and chucking two right at me. He always knows how to cheer me up.

"I'll put the kettle on, shall I?" he says. "Then you can tell me all about it."

"OK," I say, summoning up a smile. "Sounds good."

After I've filled Dad in on the various injustices at my new school, like the restrictions on uniforms and the fact that no one seems very worried about welcoming new students, and helped him to unpack a couple more of the boxes, I head upstairs and stick my head around the door to Lil's room. She is lying on her bed dressed up as Olaf the snowman. We couldn't afford the proper Olaf the snowman costume so Dad made this one for her on his creaky old sewing machine and I think it's even better, apart from the slightly wonky nose, but Lil says that adds character.

"All right, Lil?" I ask.

She sits up and turns to me, a rather sinister grin spreading across her freckled face.

"Just in time for a duet!" she tinkles, heading for

the battered CD player that Dad gave her in what would prove to be the biggest mistake of his life.

“Can’t stop,” I say swiftly. “Homework, you know?” I spread my hands in front of me and arrange my face in an expression that I hope conveys plenty of regret.

Lil raises one eyebrow, a trick that she mastered surprisingly early in life, and one that she employs regularly to let her family know that she is wearied and unamused by them.

“How was the first day of school?” I ask.

Lil shrugs. “Good, I guess.”

“Did you make any new friends?”

“Oh, yeah.” Lil’s attention returns to the CD player, and she holds her finger down on the skip button so that Idina Menzel sings out all squeaky and in reverse. Lil chuckles.

“So the other kids were nice?” I press.

Lil shrugs again, totally unconcerned. “They’re OK. Treena, Kayla and Nadia all want to be my *best* friend. I told them I’d let them know my decision by the end of the week. We’re doing auditions tomorrow.”

“Right,” I say, weakly. Of course Lil has everyone under her spell already.

“Did you make any new friends?” Lil asks.

“Oh, yeah, loads,” I reply quickly, fixing a smile on my face.

“Never mind, Effie,” Lil says pityingly. “It just takes a while for people to get to know you.” She comes over and pats my arm reassuringly. “It’ll be all right.”

“Thanks,” I manage to choke out. *Wonderful*, I think. *Even my eight-year-old sister thinks I’m a loser.*

“If you want, you can borrow my lucky purple glitter scrunchie,” Lil calls after me as I leave the room. “That might help.”