

CHAPTER SAMPLE

FRIENDS
ARE WHAT HAPPEN
WHEN YOU'RE
MAKING OTHER
PLANS

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KATE FOSTER

CHAPTER ONE

Jared's giving me the look. I'm pretty good at recognising the signs now.

A light breeze tickles my cheeks, and I lift my chin, letting it cool my sweaty neck. Distracted, I wonder if it might be cooler inside the classrooms than outside today – probably even cooler than here in the undercover area, actually. It's a hot day for November, though I can't remember the weather on all the days in all the Novembers that I've been alive.

I glance away from Jared's freckly face and his flushed, pink cheeks, and concentrate harder on my mouth and my voice, on finding the right words to tell him about how far I got on Tunnels of Disaster and Doom Map 5 and the forty million new Orbsicles I won last night, but I can't stop my eyes moving back up to him.

He's looking over my shoulder at the kids playing on the field, and his feet and hands are shifting and fidgeting. This all tells me he doesn't want to be standing with me any more, and that his ears

aren't listening to what I'm saying.

It's the same look most people get when I'm telling them about OrbsWorld.

But I absolutely have to finish telling Jared about Tunnels of Disaster and Doom Map 5. OrbsWorld is my favourite computer game ever, and last night I was messaging Jared – username *rugballlove4578* – and he's already completed Map 5 *and* he's the most popular boy *and* the best sprinter in the whole school!

I decide to talk faster.

“... and it was that ladder that I got stuck on every time, for like two weeks, but then I figured it out and–”

“Mm hm.”

I recognise these types of oral responses because of Mystery Game number 3, and I know to watch out for visual clues like body language and facial expressions because of Mystery Game number 4. I learned all of this at the Be Aware classes I went to last year with Mum, Dad and Ned. But the problem is, I don't know how to change it or to make Jared interested in what I'm saying, so I just keep talking.

“I had to climb the ladder halfway . . . ”

“Yep.” Jared takes three small steps backwards, wiping his hands on his shorts.

“... and then hop on to the platform when the ants—”

“Oh yeah.” He adjusts his watch.

“Um . . .” My brain has stopped working and the right words aren’t coming. “. . . when, when the ants charge down the wall and, um, then I—”

“Okay, good job for doing it, Alex. I gotta go.” Jared runs off, legs and arms pumping and his last words carried back to me on the humid air.

He charges across the undercover area and onto the grass, weaving through a group of girls singing and a game of handball between Isaac and Frank on the concrete and the new kid with white hair sitting alone on the swing. Now Jared’s calling for Henry to pass him the ball. Henry’s dodging Rahul, his hands waving in the air, his brown hair flapping beneath his blue cap. The sun beats down on all of them, but not on me, not where I stand in the shade.

The shouts and pounding feet of the other kids are suddenly loud.

Too loud.

I didn’t hear them when I was telling Jared about OrbsWorld, about Tunnels of Disaster and Doom Map 5, but now the noises make my breathing go funny, and I wince.

Two kids, Joshua and Wu, rush by, Joshua roaring something to Wu that goes through my left ear and comes out my right and I startle, my tummy lurching, a squeak escaping out my mouth.

I can feel my eyes burn and I want to cry. But I won't, not here. Not now that I'm in grade 6. So I press the feeling back down into my tummy and put my hands over my ears.

I want to shout at them, all of them, particularly Joshua and Wu, but Ned tells me I can't stop people running and shouting and doing other things like that at lunchtime or morning tea. Ned says that policing people is bad and will get me picked on at secondary school – even though Ned is forever telling *me* what to do. But Dad always agrees with him and then tells me how rough his school was when he was a kid, and Mum gives me a sad smile, which makes me angry because I know it means she also agrees but feels sorry for me, because Mum feels sorry for me about everything.

None of them think I listen or see or understand.

So I don't shout at Joshua and Wu. Or go after Jared and try talking to him again. Because even though I might not always say the right thing or think the right thing or do the right thing, I don't want to be beaten up or shouted at.

I'm not stupid.

I spin, the gravel crunching under my feet, and my left heel slips out of my black leather shoe because the laces came undone earlier. I need to tuck the ends in before I trip, because I can't do laces properly, but I don't. Instead, I head towards my classroom, hands still over my ears, because all the noises and the rushing children are pushing up a scream, and a sob is rising into my chest.

Ms Westing and Mum say I can always head to the classroom if I can't regulate my emotions, and right now I can't. My coping beaker, the name we use for all the feelings inside me, is full full full.

Pale blue uniforms blur in my vision, and screeching voices and vibrating footsteps shudder through me, so I focus on my laces, the black threads like two skinny snakes attached to my shoe, flicking back and forth. I don't like snakes, but I'm more scared of spiders. Though the dangerous ones like the redbacks stay hidden away, the orbs and the huntsman spiders are big and fast and make huge webs in trees and bushes everywhere, and they give me the creeps.

I hate spiders but I love dogs. Especially *my* dog. And Kevin, my cockapoo, and I have been

working on a plan, something that will definitely make Jared, and maybe the other popular kids, want to be my friend. If I can't be good enough at OrbsWorld or fast enough at running, I only have one other chance, and that's Kevin.

I want to go home now and see him, but I can't. Mum doesn't come and get me any more. She probably would, but Ms Westing doesn't call her every time school becomes too loud for me or something happens that makes me emotional. They decided this without me – even though I was there in the meeting – at the beginning of this term, my last ever term at primary school. They decided I had to try harder to handle the difficult times, because secondary school would be even tougher.

I'm nearly at my classroom, the sounds of kids fading behind me. I take deep breaths, just like I've been taught – in through my nose and out of my mouth. My reflection floats along beside me in the windows of the grade 6 classrooms, all of them decorated in colourful artwork – sea creatures designed with bottle tops, handwritten school rules on card cut into flower shapes, night city scenes in black and red paper.

I like art and I love sketching Kevin, and Dennis, Ned's lazy bulldog. I have a green robot notebook

almost filled up with my newest dog sketches.

Thinking about drawing dogs makes me calmer. Plus, it's quieter at this end of the school. My classroom is at the end of D block, beside the new tree garden.

I should've stayed at the tree garden today, like usual, but Jared accepted my friend request on OrbsWorld last night and we traded Orbsicles for rations, so I thought . . .

I sigh and remove my hands from my ears, then sit on the chipped, green bench outside my classroom. An ibis wanders past, pecking at schoolbags in search of leftover snacks. Lucky dinosaur bird. He can leave school whenever he wants. I hate school so much, but I hate the thought of secondary school even more, because I'm afraid of the big kids and all the noise and the extra homework and the strict teachers.

But most of all I'm afraid of never having a real-life friend.

CHAPTER TWO

Mum pulls into a nearby parking space in our Mitsubishi Outlander – my favourite car. Dad’s silver truck is dusty and loud and bumpy and I don’t like it. She’s late, which is normal, because she has to collect Ned from secondary school first, even though it would be quicker for him to walk here because his school is just on the other side of the lake. There’s always traffic, she says, so I should never worry that she won’t come – she’ll always come.

Before I approach the car, I double-check the colour and the registration plate to be completely sure it’s Mum. It is.

I push off from the black, barred fence and adjust my bag on my back, then swig from my aqua water bottle as I walk over. Ned pokes his tongue out at me from the front seat. He’s so rude to me. Mum says that’s because he’s fourteen and fourteen-year-olds don’t always think. She says that he actually loves me and is trying to have fun.

“Don’t *do* that,” I say and slap a hand on the window. Mum jabs a finger at the back seat, her lips pursed, so I open the car door and throw my bag across the seat.

Coldness and quiet envelop me as I poke my head inside.

“Hey Alex,” Ned says, swivelling in the front seat and taking out one of his earphones.

“Don’t hit the car windows, please,” Mum says, peering over her sunglasses at me.

“Why didn’t you bring the dogs?” I ask, clambering into the car.

“Because.” Mum shakes her head and turns towards the front again.

Is she cross with me? I don’t think I said anything rude.

“How was your day?” Ned asks.

I reach out to shut the car door and a bike whizzes by.

“Bye, Al,” a voice calls.

It’s Tony, cycling home. “Bye Tony.”

Tony’s nice to me but he’s not in my class any more, so he isn’t my friend. He was last year, when I was in 5T, but now I’m in 6W with different kids. I didn’t know all of them when the year started, but I do now. Most of them are nice to me, and I’m

happy I don't have Ryan in my class, though he's always around at morning tea and lunch. Ryan says I can play with him on some days but not others, and whacks my cap off my head and takes my pencils. That's why I don't do drawing at school any more and keep my sketches a secret. Ryan doesn't do this every day, but he does it some days. Mum says it sounds like he has some problems too, but I don't behave like that so I'm not sure.

I yank the door closed, shutting out the voices and the noises of car and bus engines, then I secure my seatbelt until it clicks, pushing it down to make sure it's definitely, definitely locked in.

"Alex, Ned asked how your day was." Mum flicks the car indicator, *tick tick tick*, and then joins the traffic leaving school.

"Yeah," I answer, breathing in the berry scent from the car air freshener.

"So rude," Ned mumbles and turns back to the front.

What? "I'm not rude. I said yeah." My day was good, I think. I can't remember much of it, apart from Jared not wanting to be my friend again, so I don't know what else to say.

"You are," Ned replies, staring down at his phone – probably at a Fight Forest live stream,

Ned's favourite game. "I asked you how your day was and you just said yeah."

I screw up my face, ramming my lips together as Mum says something to Ned, her voice low. I can hear my mum and brother talking, but not the actual words, so I watch out the window as kids in Jessops Lake Primary School uniforms walk home with their parents, and teachers in orange vests wander up and down the path by the crossing . . . and then I see it. The huge white poster tied to the school fence at the corner.

I see black and red lettering. The hand-drawn picture that changes every year, because it's chosen in a competition – this year the winner was a Chinese Crested Dog drawing – and then photos of other dog breeds, a German shepherd, a poodle, a golden retriever and a pug. An illustrated bunch of balloons. And the best words ever, which I've read every day since the poster first appeared thirty-two days ago.

"Go slow, Mum!" I yell, pressing my nose up against the glass. She tuts, and I read it as quickly as I can as our car rolls slowly past, anxious not to miss anything. I need to read all the words – all of them – and I'm not the fastest reader. I don't like reading at all, but I like reading these words.

PAWS –

AUSTRALIA'S BEST DOG SHOW

(AS SEEN ON TV!)

JESSOP LAKE SHOWGROUND

SATURDAY, 12 NOVEMBER

10 AM TO 4 PM

REGISTRATION GATES OPEN AT 8 AM!

DOG PARADES! COMPETITIONS! STALLS!

POLICE DOGS! PERFORMING POOCHES!

SEE YOU THERE!

I notice how they've missed off the "s" at the end of Jessops and tap my teeth in irritation, but then I read the smaller black letters at the very bottom, the bit that makes the insides of my tummy twirl.

REGISTER YOUR DOG INTO ONE OF

OUR CONTESTS BEFORE 10 AM!

EVERY WINNER RECEIVES A TROPHY AND GIFT.

PAWS is coming to Jessops Lake, which is where I live! A real-life, actual dog show. And this is the best dog show ever. It's the same one I watch on TV every year, the one that travels around Australia. I've wished super hard for six years and two months, since I was five years and five months old, that PAWS would come to a town on the Gold Coast, and this year, the year I turned eleven, the year I graduate from Jessops Lake Primary School, my wish has come true.

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