

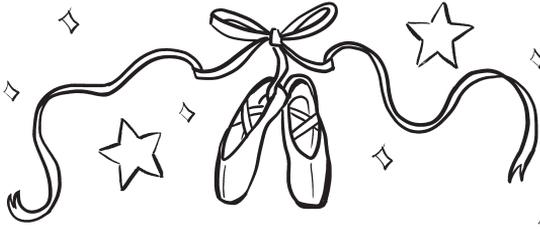


Prologue

Olá! You've probably heard of me and the Bramrock Stars before. If you haven't, you will have soon because we're almost famous. Well, first things first: let me introduce myself since you'll be hearing a lot from me. I'm left striker for the Stars. I'm in Year 6 at Bramrock Primary School in a town called Bramrock, which is a half-hour drive from Brighton. Oops – I've forgotten to tell you my name! Well, to make it worth the wait, I'll do it in Portuguese, shall I? *Meu nome é Jasmina Santos-Campbell.* That means, 'My name is Jasmina Santos-Campbell.' Don't bother about remembering all of that,

though – nearly everyone calls me Jaz! That is, unless I'm in trouble, which as you'll find out happens quite a lot . . . but more about that later. Quite honestly, I'm not sure where to start, but Dad always says the beginning is a good place, so that's where I'll go. Right back to the beginning . . .

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1

Dizzy Dancers

Every corner of Bramrock Primary dance studio was buzzing with excited dancers. It was the last class before we got into full rehearsal mode for the annual showcase. This year Ms Morgan's dance club were putting on a jazz-ballet version of *Alice in Wonderland* called *Spinning Alices*. We were going to perform the story of *Alice in Wonderland* through a series of specially choreographed dances.

I scanned the busy dance hall, searching for Charligh. The door swung open and in burst my

best friend, looking so relaxed, as if we weren't already exactly seven minutes late for the warm-up. Her long burnt-orange hair was gathered loosely into what could only just pass as a dance-class-approved bun.

'Where have you been?' I said.

She dropped her bag behind the bench and stripped down to her black leotard and pink tights in seconds. A light sprinkling of gold glitter twinkled on the apples of her round, freckled cheeks.

'How about the stage diva sprinkles her glitter dust *after* dance class next time?' I said as we hurried over to join the others at the barre.

Charligh raised her left eyebrow in a perfect arch. 'Since when did Her Royal Lateness care about being on time for anything? You've made us late –' Charligh wiggled her fingers, pretending to tally it up – '*four hundred and forty-four* times this year alone.' Charligh's middle name was Drama. Well, not really, but it should have been. She exaggerated everything, although she was just about right in her calculation of my lateness record.

'Come on, girls! Last ones to get started again?' Ms Morgan swept through the hall, observing

everyone's form and ensuring our outfits were just as she wanted.

We took up our positions at the barre. After all, we didn't want to be told more than once by Ms Morgan. She had a special saying about repeating instructions. It was 'twice, not so nice'.

I started my warm-up with a simple mix of pliés and demi-pliés. I looked at Charligh. 'This is our last chance to impress Ms Morgan before she decides on who is playing what in *Spinning Alices*,' I said.

'Either of you'll be lucky to even get in the chorus line,' Rosie Calderwood observed, butting in. 'Everyone knows I'm the best dancer and I'll get the lead role.' She flashed a dimpled smile that didn't reach her ice-blue eyes and smoothed her chocolate-brown hair that was already tucked neatly into a perfect bun.

Now, Ridiculous Rosie is *definitely* not part of my team. In fact, she's kind of a bad guy in this story, so any time she shows up you might want to boo, really loud. Rosie's the leader of the VIPs and, in case you can't tell, she is basically my arch-nemesis.

‘Everyone knows Rosie will get the leading role,’ Erica Waters gushed like a drippy tap. So Erica is pretty much Rosie’s echo. She wasn’t too bad until last year, when she was recruited into the VIPs along with Rosie’s other sidekick, Summer Singh. Charligh and I call them the Very Irritating People. They had never actually told us what VIP stood for, so we could only assume, based on the evidence . . . I mean, the entire class knew exactly how many times Rosie had been to Orlando, Florida (three times), and just how much spending money she got for her family’s annual shopping weekend to Paris (a thousand euros) and how big their villa in Spain was (very big).

Charligh tottered on one leg, stretching the other as high as she could. ‘Rosie, do you take extra lessons on the side to become so good – or does it just come naturally to you?’

‘Good at what?’ Rosie said with her trademark smugness.

‘Being incredibly annoying, of course,’ Charligh replied.

I snorted.

‘You cheeky little –’ Rosie hissed.

She was cut short by Ms Morgan's three loud claps – her signal that warm-up was over. We gathered together on the mats in front of her.

‘As you all know, this is our last rehearsal before Saturday, when we’ll begin on all the group and solo routines for *Spinning Alices*.’ She looked round at everyone. ‘Consider this a final audition, because I still haven’t made my decision on the lead solos. I have an idea, of course, but it’s not too late to dazzle me today.’

I grinned at Charligh. I knew it! There was still time to show Ms Morgan that I could be lead soloist at this year’s showcase. Mãe (you pronounce it like ‘my’, by the way, and it’s Portuguese for ‘mum’) bought four tickets last year – one each for her, Dad and my brother Jordan, and the fourth for her youngest sister, my Auntie Bella. Mãe hadn’t even made it to any of my parents’ evenings for the last two years – Dad was so used to attending by himself now. But there she was at last year’s showcase in the front row. It made me feel all sparkly inside when I took the final bow with everyone and heard her cheers above the crowd.

‘OK, dancers! Split up into your groups of four. It’s time for the mirror routine,’ Ms Morgan said.

For the mirror routine, each person in the group took a different corner of the room and then performed an identical set of steps so that all four met in the middle. I was in a group with the K triplets from Year 5, so I sat down next to Katy, Keeley and Karina to wait our turn.

This year the showcase was going to be even more special. An army of butterflies took off in my stomach. My mother, who was the best dressmaker in all of Bramrock, was going to make the costumes. Imagine how proud she would be if I turned out to be the girl she had to measure for the grand solo dance at the end? I sat up, back straight, crossing my legs neatly, and noticed a plum-coloured bruise on my ankle. It must have been the vicious tackle Zach Bacon went in for today at lunchtime. *The next time I play him at football, I thought, I’ll run rings round him.* I’d win the tackle, dribble fast and tight, flick the ball up and head it into the goal. Catching a look at my reflection in the mirrored wall, I realized I looked a bit silly

because I'd been miming the actions. I quickly held my head and legs still before anyone saw. Too late.

Rosie waltzed over. 'You're such a weird loser, Jaz. What are you doing – throwing your head about like that? You're an awkward duckling who'll never grow into a graceful swan,' she sneered.

I'd been attending Ms Morgan's after-school dance club twice a week for two years now, learning ballet, jazz and modern dance, but I knew I could be a bit of an elephant among the more dainty dancers. I did goof around sometimes, but even when I tried my hardest, my grands jetés or straddle jumps never seemed to feel as easy to me as dribbling a football down the wing. Still, I wasn't going to let Ridiculous Rosie have the last word.

'Maybe the next time you go on one of your *amazing* holidays, your family can do us all a favour and just leave you there?'

Ms Morgan looked over. 'Jaz! I need you to stop distracting Rosie. We've all worked very hard to get our standards up this term. I won't let you spoil it for everyone.'

The rest of my group were standing in their positions, ready to do the drill. I folded my arms, stung by Ms Morgan's comments. It was dreadfully unfair of her not to notice that Rosie had started it – but then teachers never, ever noticed when Rosie did that sort of thing. Perhaps there was an invisible halo above her smug, heart-shaped face that made everyone treat her like an angel. As I twirled across the studio, I stared hard in the mirror to make sure there weren't invisible horns above my head, because I always got blamed for everything.

This year it *had* to be different. Mãe and Dad had been arguing a lot lately. And even when they weren't actually snapping at each other, there was this horrid feeling in the air that made me feel they were going to start. I had to stop getting into trouble so much because it was just one more thing for them to fight about – like the way they argued over the comments on my report card in Year 5, which were mostly 'must try harder', 'needs to pay more attention' and 'can be a bit disruptive'. So seeing me standing on the stage with a lead part in *Spinning Alices* wouldn't fix everything,

but it would help. I could just picture it now: a star-shaped spotlight shining on me, Mãe and Dad crying tears of pride – and Rosie scowling from the shadows . . .

‘Ouf!’ gasped Katy. She’d collided with me as I began my second pirouette, crashing me out of my dream.

Ms Morgan paused the music. ‘OK, let’s try that again with the last group. Some of us –’ she looked pointedly at me – ‘are not paying attention. We need to get this right. How we make our entrance sets the tone for the entire performance. The plan is to make a dramatic entrance, not a comedic one.’

I ignored the snickers of Rosie and Erica from behind me and took a deep breath. *Focus*, I told myself. *Grand jeté. Plié. One, two, three. Pirouette, pirouette, pirou-*

BANG!

This time I skidded all the way past Katy and my elbow connected with the mirrored wall. Then it happened. It always appeared at the worst time. The Laugh was creeping up on me like a rising tidal wave. I tried to keep it down but the pressure was unbearable. It surged in my

belly, pulsed up my chest and throat, and chugged out through my mouth and nose.

‘Sorry, I’ll just –’ I spluttered.

Ms Morgan didn’t let me finish. ‘Take five minutes, Jaz. You can just sit over there and come back when you’re ready to stop being silly,’ she said. My cheeks burned as I saw a pleased smile flicker across Rosie’s face now that I’d given her the chance to steal the spotlight. I watched her land gracefully on her feet after a series of three perfect pirouettes.

It was boring watching the others practise, so I decided to pretend I was actually on the bench, ready to run out on to the pitch to play for England in the finals of the next Women’s World Cup. A sports commentator was announcing my arrival on the field . . .

Newly signed Jaz Santos-Campbell runs on to the pitch and immediately gets possession of the ball. She speeds down the centre . . . through three Italian defenders, passes neatly to Rachel Yankey on the wing, who takes it wide before sending it back in a perfect cross to Jaz . . . who SLAMS it in the back of the

net with that great left foot in the final minute of play! What a pair of champions! Their supporters have hope again . . . it looks like they could win this . . . Wembley has never seen such an incredible final . . .!

The fans were chanting . . . *Jaz! Jaz! She's our star! Jaz! Jaz! . . .*

'*Jaz! Jasmina!*' Ms Morgan said loudly. I leaped to my feet, hoping she hadn't been shouting my name for too long. 'If you'd like to join us from whichever world you've drifted off to, you're more than welcome.'

Luckily we'd moved on from those pesky pirouettes and it was time to practise a new dance. It was a mix of jazz and ballet. Ms Morgan came over to my group, just as it was my turn. I took a deep breath, listening to the music as I moved to the upbeat jazz rhythm, and ended in an arabesque: front leg steady, back leg stretched out, and head tilted upwards. The best way for me to stay perfectly still was to imagine I had my size-five football balancing on my head. I held my breath while Ms Morgan's eyes focused on me.

‘Excellent,’ she said briskly, before she moved on. I exhaled and relaxed from my position. A seal of approval from Ms Morgan. Finally!

Later, as Charligh and I filed out at the end of class, Ms Morgan stopped me. ‘Can I have a word, Jaz?’

‘Text me tonight,’ Charligh said in a stage whisper. I gave her a small nod as the others zipped out past me.

Perhaps Ms Morgan was feeling bad about how terribly unfair she had been to me earlier. Maybe she was going to apologize because she had finally realized – and not a minute too soon – that it was me, and not Rosie, who had the potential to be a star dancer. My toes tingled. I was already expecting Ms Morgan to give me the biggest hint that she was going to choose *me* as the lead dancer. I giggled, thinking of Rosie’s face when I told her . . .

Ms Morgan sighed heavily. ‘Jaz, do you still think this is funny?’

I frowned. Judging from the look on her face, maybe I’d got the wrong end of the stick after all and that lead role wasn’t quite mine . . . yet.

‘You know what I’m going to say, don’t you?’ she continued, sounding even more impatient.

No, I didn’t. I had absolutely no idea. That was part of the problem: I could never tell what the grown-ups were thinking. Take Fussy Forrest, for example, the deputy head-dragon – I mean deputy *headteacher* –

‘Jaz! Are you even listening to me?’ Ms Morgan said. ‘You have the potential to be a good dancer, but you have to knuckle down. Do you think Rosie achieved the level she is at by picking fights and being disruptive?’

‘But Rosie –’ I protested

Ms Morgan held up her hand. ‘I don’t want to hear anything more about Rosie, or Erica or anyone else. You always have an excuse. My mind is made up. You’re on report for the next week. I’ll be watching you extra closely in dance and checking with all of your teachers to make sure you’re behaving, paying attention and not bickering with Rosie.’

Her words rained down on me, her warning looming over me like a steely cloud. One week of ignoring all of Rosie’s nasty digs. One week of

concentrating during Fussy Forrest's boring classes. One. Whole. Week.

'Understood?' said Ms Morgan.

My stomach lurched, but I nodded. It was only one week, I told myself. I could do this ... couldn't I?

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Happy Families

I arrived at my house damp from the shower of rain and breathless after my ten-minute uphill cycle. Mãe had forgotten to drive over to pick me up. Again. Now I don't want you to think I'm complaining about my mum, because I'm not. If there was a Coolest Mum Ever award, it would definitely go to her. She speaks Portuguese *and* English, she doesn't nag me about homework, and she wears beautiful patterned headwraps that she makes from her own fabric. It was just that lately she'd been so busy. I'd have thought

she'd have been pleased that everyone could see how talented she was at designing and making clothes. But instead she was so stressed, and was spending nearly all the time she used to spend with me and Jordan on getting through her orders for customers.

I dropped my bag in the hall and poked my head round the door to the back room, where Mãe worked on her designs. Her room reminded me of a sunny rainforest. The back wall was crowded with lanky ferns in terracotta pots. The plants leaned over, casting interesting shadows along the pale-yellow walls.

Mãe was sitting hunched over her sketchbook at the huge mahogany desk Dad had made for her. Her sewing machine was by her side. She gave a tiny cry and put her hand momentarily to her forehead. 'Ah, *minha anjinha*, my angel! I'm sorry. I forgot to pick you up again, didn't I? How was the *dança*?' In her left hand she held a charcoal pencil poised in mid-air.

'Hmm – OK,' I said, hoping she wouldn't ask any more questions. The last thing I wanted to tell her was that I was one step away from *not* getting to star in the showcase.

Mãe's tight dark curls were scrunched up on the top of her head, held by a turquoise silk scarf that made her hair stand up like a black crown. 'Are you hungry? Do you want me to cook something?' she asked. Already her pencil was back down on the paper, skating and flirting across it as she crafted one of her wonderful creations. The closest thing my mum got to cooking was bunging things in the microwave. What was the point of sweating over a hot stove when she could buy perfectly good ready meals from frozen-food stores? Or at least that's what she used to say before Dad took over all the cooking. Unlike Mãe, Dad loved sweating over hot stoves. He was good at cooking all kinds of healthy but tasty things. My favourite was his delicious homemade pizza.

'No, I'm not hungry, thanks, Mãe,' I said, hoping she couldn't hear the rumbling of my stomach. I didn't mind the ready meals too much, but the last thing I wanted was for Dad to come back and start arguing with her for feeding us 'junk food' again.

'OK, love. Your dad's running a bit late. He had an emergency call-out in Brighton.' My dad

was a carpenter and worked for the council. He often got called out to fix things. ‘So he’ll pick Jordan up from orchestra practice on his way back,’ Mãe said. She started chewing on her lip and her knuckles tightened over the pencil as she focused intently on what she was drawing. Mãe already seemed to have forgotten I was there, so I backed out of the room, leaving her to float off into her world of designs again.

In the kitchen, there was a pile of plates stacked up from breakfast and crumbs all over the green marble worktop. The magnolia vinyl floor was smeared with muddy grass stains near the back door where Mãe popped out to smoke. I hated her horrid cigarettes. So did Dad.

First, I packed what I could into the dishwasher until it was full, then I grabbed the long yellow rubber gloves hanging over the tap, thrust them on and hand-washed the rest. Next, I squirted Mr Strong lemon cleaner along the worktop and cooker. I scrubbed and wiped until the stove top gleamed and the worktop was rid of all the crumbs and spills. Last of all, I mopped the mucky floor. My arms were aching by the time I’d finished, but it was worth it to have the kitchen

looking clean. *That's one less thing for them to fight over*, I thought as I went up to my room.

Tuesday night was mac and cheese night in our house. Dad always made it with a creamy, mouth-watering vegan 'cheese' sauce that wasn't actually made of cheese. Instead, he used a mix of coconut milk, cashew nuts and turmeric.

'Hey! Leave some for me,' I said. I was the last to sit down at the dinner table. Jordan was helping himself to the crusty browned part, the best bit, of the macaroni cheese. He was super annoying sometimes, but according to Charligh (and she reckons she should know because she has two) he was OK as far as brothers went.

'Plenty for everyone, *princesa*,' said Mãe.

'Yeah, plenty!' Jordan grinned. He was shovelling what seemed like half the dish on to his plate.

I gave him a swift kick under the table.

'Ow!' he said, letting go of the serving spoon.

I picked it up before it even hit the bowl again and served myself a generous portion. 'Right, plenty,' I said sweetly as I handed him back the spoon.

‘So how was everyone’s day?’ Dad asked. He loved hearing about how Jordan and I had got on.

‘Mr Bianci liked my interpretation of Mozart’s *Sinfonia Concertante*. He thinks I have a good chance of making it into the National Youth Orchestra next year,’ said Jordan. My brother played viola and piano, and was one of the youngest in Brighton Youth Orchestra.

‘Wonderful!’ said Mãe. ‘I don’t know where you get your musical talent because you certainly didn’t get it from either of us.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ Dad said. ‘Don’t you remember how everyone would beg me to get up and sing whenever we had our karaoke nights?’

‘How could I forget, Drew? Whenever we felt like some comedy, your singing was just the thing.’

I smiled. It was good to see my mum and dad joking around with each other again. Things had been so weird lately. If they weren’t snapping at each other, they mostly weren’t speaking at all. Maybe, just maybe, things were getting back to normal now – finally.

‘And how did Favourite Daughter get on today at dance?’ Dad said.

‘I’m your only daughter, Dad.’

‘OK. How did my Only Favourite Daughter do?’

I paused. My parents were getting on so well tonight I didn’t want to be the one to ruin things. ‘Ms Morgan reckons I have the potential to be one of the best dancers,’ I said.

It wasn’t a lie, right? Not really. I just wasn’t telling the *whole* truth.

‘You didn’t tell me this earlier,’ Mãe said. A smile danced across her face. ‘It looks like I’ll have to make the lead dancer’s costume extra special now.’

I nodded vigorously. ‘Ms Morgan said she didn’t know what she would do without me . . . The class just wouldn’t be the same.’ I did feel a bit guilty, but then if I told them what had really happened, the mood would have curdled faster than that milk I left out of the fridge by mistake last week.

‘She’d be daft not to choose you for the lead anyway,’ said Dad firmly, even though he didn’t know a thing about ballet and jazz.

Telling the whole truth about what teachers said never did any good.

After dinner, I took my ball out into the garden. The sky was the colour of baked apricots and a

warm breeze blew through my curls, ruffling my fringe. Back when Dad used to play for the local team, Bramrock Rangers, in the Sunday league, we'd take turns practising shooting at goal. The 'goal' was two broad oak trees at the back of the garden that Dad had tied a bit of string between to form a crossbar. But everything changed after Dad injured his Achilles' tendon last year when taking a penalty kick. He'd been on crutches for months. Even though his injury was healed, he said he was taking a break from the Rangers, and he'd stopped practising with me too.

I couldn't wait to get out and kick a ball around. Football made everything better. The excitement when my feet made contact with the ball to dribble or kick, the spark that shot through me as I ran down the wings, and the pride when the ball rolled past the posts. In school, at dance and even at home . . . basically everywhere . . . I was always messing up. On the pitch, though, I understood the rules; I knew just how to dribble, and block and strike!

I'd been practising my keepy-uppies every night that week. Using my feet, knees or chest, I fought

to keep the ball from touching the ground. My record was thirty-three and I was proud of it. The previous week Zach Bacon (whose record was thirty-one) sneered at me and said I played like a girl. I didn't mind playing like a girl – some of the best football players in the world were girls, like Saki Kumagai, Marta Vieira da Silva, Fran Kirby and of course my very favourite, Rachel Yankey. I chucked the ball on to the top of my left foot and began counting as I kicked it upwards . . . *One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . .* I dropped it after twenty-eight. I knew it didn't make sense, but a little niggling voice in my head said if I could beat my record it would be good luck and the arguments inside would stop for good. I tried again and got to thirty-one. *Not good enough*, I thought as I headed back in with the ball tucked under my arm.

The telly hummed softly downstairs. I could hear snippets from the ten o'clock news. Maybe my parents were sick of arguing now. I relaxed a little, thinking of the nice dinner we'd just had as I snuggled down in bed. I was still a bit worried about what Ms Morgan had said, but I was determined not to fail.

The TV kept getting a little bit louder every few minutes. I squirmed, willing myself to fall asleep so I wouldn't hear what was coming next. They always put the volume up when they were arguing.

Before long, bubbles of harsh words from yet another argument floated upstairs: *It's always about you, isn't it? . . . Drew, I can't speak to you like this . . . You keep avoiding . . . When are you going to discuss this like a reasonable adult?*

I could only hear bits of what they were saying, so I got out of bed and went down the stairs two at a time, trying to miss out the creaky steps. *Two, four, six, eight . . . OUCH!* I crashed down on my bottom and slid across the wooden floor in the hall. My right knee connected with the tall cornflower-blue vase. It wobbled nervously and I scrambled up to stop it rocking over.

'Is that you, princess? Is everything OK?' Dad called from the living room. He stuck his head round the door before I could even answer. He looked worried. 'You should be in bed, Jaz. It's really late. Is the TV disturbing you?' he asked.

'Yes, and I, erm . . . I wanted a drink of water.'

The words stuck in my mouth. I didn't have the heart to tell Dad that it was their angry words keeping me awake. He would feel so bad and that would give him and Mãe something else to argue about.

'Sorry, love.' He went into the kitchen and came out with a glass of water for me. 'We'll switch the TV off and go to bed too.' I thought that was a good idea; the skin around Dad's green eyes were dry and puffy. He didn't look as if he'd slept well for a while.

By the time I got back to bed, the TV was turned off, just like Dad said, and the house was totally quiet except for the occasional gurgle from the pipes. I heard one set of footsteps come up to my parents' room. I listened hard for the other, but it never came.

I gazed up at the luminous purple stars on my white ceiling and wished hard that I could be like one of them. I wished I could brighten the thickening darkness that was swallowing up my family.



Bake-off

Charligh and I weaved our way through the grey-topped tables to the back of the hall. We always sat at the broken half-table that had six seats instead of twelve. Naomie Osei and Steph Richardson made their way over to us, carrying strange-smelling hot dishes on their red plastic trays. Naomie and Steph are my other two best friends, although Charligh is my BBF (that's bestest best friend, if you didn't know).

I bit into my tuna-salad baguette, thankful once again that Dad made my lunch every day

because, unlike Steph and Naomie, I didn't like school dinners. Out of nowhere, a gummy bear whizzed through the air. The orange sweet collided with the centre of Naomie's smooth dark-brown forehead. The other three of us turned, scanning the lunch hall for the culprit, but Naomie just rolled her eyes.

'They're so obvious,' she said wearily. Naomie dug her fork into something pale and wobbly, which the dinner ladies claimed was 'Chicken Surprise'.

Zach and his friends sniggered and stared at us from across the hall. If it wasn't for football, I don't think I would speak to any of the Year 6 boys. Ever. Unfortunately for me, most of the girls in my class didn't like football at all. So the Fabulous Four – that's me, Charligh, Naomie and Steph – had a theory to explain their behaviour. The year we were born, there was a science experiment conducted on all the baby boys, where part of their brain was removed. The part that made you not act like an annoying human being. It was the only logical explanation, right?

Half of the (half-brained) boys in our class had a crush on Naomie. OK, maybe not half . . .

more like *all* the boys. She'd won the Excellence in Science award for the school last year, and with her high cheekbones, glowing skin and big dark eyes she looked as if she could be a model. Naomie didn't want to be a model, though. She wanted to be an astrophysicist. I wasn't sure exactly what that was, but I knew that if anyone could do it, Naomie could. So, yeah, basically the Year 6 boys acted goofy to catch the attention of the smartest girl in the class. I know . . . like I said, science experiment?

'It's depressing how childish the boys in Year Six are,' Charligh groaned.

'They're even worse than they were in Year Five. Do you think they are ageing backwards?' Steph said, narrowing her pale-green eyes. Steph was school captain this term and she was about the most mature person in our class. She was one of Bramrock Primary's Eco-Champions. That meant she spent a lot of time creating posters and giving class presentations about climate change, how we could be kinder to the earth and all the creatures in it by doing things like recycling, turning off lights when we weren't using them and eating less meat.

‘Olly seems OK. He picked me first for his team last time,’ I said. Olly Fitzpatrick had only joined our class at the start of term a few weeks ago, but he had already put Zach’s nose out of joint because he had taken his place as fastest runner in Year 6. Anyone who took Zach down a peg or two was OK in my book.

‘Hmm, I suppose he may have missed out on the experiment,’ said Naomie.

The hall had suddenly grown quiet. I looked round and saw that Olly, Zach and all that lot had vanished. As much as I hoped they’d been transported to a secret planet (where they’d be given new personalities before they came back to earth), I knew just where they had gone.

I stood up. ‘I’d better head off to the football pitch. Zach would love it if I miss this game . . .’

‘Which is exactly why you need to be there,’ finished Charligh.

‘Exactly!’ I said, giving her a high five.

I played football with the boys most lunchtimes, and had done since the beginning of Year 5 – before that, I’d only practised with Dad in the garden and the park. The problem was, some

of them didn't like a girl getting the ball off them, so they'd go in extra hard for tackles, or some wouldn't even pass to me. That just made me more determined to show them what I could do! I dribbled down the right wing with Zach and Sebastian coming at me from either side. I weaved round both of them, so they almost ran into each other, and then kicked the ball to Olly, who was standing in the centre. I ran behind him and he back-heeled the ball, then stepped out of the way, and – with a short, sharp kick – I tucked it into the back of the net with my left foot.

'Nice one, Jaz,' said Olly. He gave me a high five as the bell rang, signalling the end of lunch. My last-minute goal meant we won two-nil against Zach's side.

'You let a girl score,' I heard Zach taunt Theo Masanga, who was in goal.

'Yeah, the same girl who got the ball round you and Sebastian,' I shot back. His face went bright red as his friends snickered at him. I gave him my best smile as I jogged off the pitch to line up with the rest of the class.

*

I perched on a stool next to Charligh in the cookery room. I felt great. I'd scored the winning goal *and* now it was time for our weekly cooking class.

Mrs Tavella, the cookery teacher, was pretty cool in a grandma type of way. She always wore a wipe-clean floral apron and sensible flat shoes and she had wispy silvery hair always tucked neatly behind her ears. In Year 6 at Bramrock Primary, to help us prepare for secondary school, we had different teachers for some lessons, like music and cooking, and sometimes we had PSHE (personal, social, health and economic education) taught by Mrs Rivers. She's the headteacher, and the only one Fussy Forrest doesn't get to tell what to do.

'Today's baking challenge is spiced cinnamon and apple cake,' Mrs Tavella said. She switched on the whiteboard to show the recipe on-screen. 'Ingredients . . . what do we need to collect from the food cupboard?' she asked, rubbing her hands together.

'Flour, eggs, oil, brown sugar, cinnamon and apples!' we chorused.

'Perfect!' she crooned. 'And what do we do before we start cooking?' she prompted.

‘Wash our hands!’ we chanted.

‘Wonderful!’ she exclaimed as if we had just told her the answer to a really hard maths problem. Even Summer Singh, the moodiest member of the VIPs, smiled. Mrs Tavella was one of my favourite teachers – her enthusiasm for cooking was infectious. According to Mrs T, baking was a ‘delicate balance of art and science’.

We split into pairs and got out all the dishes and ingredients. Each pair was to make one cake and then we would put our cake tin on one shelf in the oven and another pair would put their cake tin on the shelf below it. Naomie and Steph sat across from me and Charligh at our cookery bench. The Fabulous Four would share an oven.

‘One more thing,’ Mrs T said, ‘the winner of the most delicious cake will get this.’ She held up a glossy recipe book with colourful cupcakes pictured on the front cover.

‘Who’s judging?’ called out Theo. He was Olly’s cooking partner.

‘I am,’ Mrs T said, looking rather pleased at the idea of tasting all our cakes.

Rosie raised her hand to speak. ‘Miss, my mum is a professional baker and she’s been giving

me special one-to-one lessons in gourmet cake-making and now she says I'm nearly as good as her.'

I bit down on the laughter that wanted to spill out, remembering my promise to Ms Morgan.

Erica chimed in: 'Rosie makes the best cakes, miss.' I could tell she was lying because the tips of her ears went pink when she told fibs.

'What a surprise! How did we know Erica would say that?' Charligh said behind her hand.

I giggled, then tried to disguise it as a cough when Mrs T gave us a stern look.

'Thank you, ladies, for your contributions,' Mrs T said, not sounding very thankful at all. 'I'll be judging solely on what you bake today in this class. May the best baker win!'

I couldn't bear Rosie and Erica looking down their noses at us again. We were every bit as good as them and we had a decent chance of proving it right here in cooking class. The best thing about beating Rosie this way was that it wasn't breaking any rules.

Charligh and I got to work on our cake. After adding the cinnamon to the flour and sugar, we stirred the dry ingredients into our eggs, milk

and oil mixture. Our batter was thick and smooth, and the wholewheat flour we were using gave it a warm brown colour.

I greased the side of the cake tin and lined it with baking paper. Charligh poured the cake mix in carefully until eventually the tin was filled.

We had sliced three apples thinly and all that was left to do was to arrange them over the top of the cake.

I took a stroll round the class, stopping at Rosie and Erica's bench. While our table looked like a flour bomb had exploded on it, theirs was sickeningly immaculate. I spotted sultanas dotted through their cake mixture.

Rosie caught me sneaking a look at the ingredients on her table and snatched them up, hiding the labels protectively. 'I know we're the best, but *pleeease* don't copy us. Excellence cannot be imitated,' she said. Then she flicked her hair at me.

'Don't flatter yourself. I was looking at the flour you've got all over your face,' I retorted, leaving Rosie to paw anxiously at her forehead.

I got back to our own bench, feeling a bit nervous. Their mixture did look good. 'Maybe

we should have added our own twist, or a little more cinnamon,’ I wondered aloud. I dabbed my finger gently into the mixture and tasted it. ‘It could do with, you know . . . a little more kick.’

‘We need to be finished by 3 p.m.,’ Mrs Tavella called. ‘So if you haven’t already done so – it’s time to put your cakes into the oven.’

Everyone started rushing around, while the VIPs calmly placed their cake tin in their oven.

Charligh shrugged. ‘It’s up to you, but we don’t have much time left.’

I hurried over to the spice rack, where the spices were ordered alphabetically. A . . . B . . . C. I grabbed the jar of ground cinnamon and sprinkled a little more into the tin. Then I bunged the cake on the top rack of the oven, above Steph and Naomi’s.

Thirty minutes later, our timer went off. Mrs T came over and supervised us while we took the cake out and set it on our cooling rack. I looked over at the VIPs’ cake, which had been out for a few minutes now. It looked a bit flat and sad compared to ours. ‘Look at our cake,’ I crowed.

The cake stood rather majestically. It was golden brown and ever so perfectly crusty at the

edges. Some of our classmates came over to peek at it. Even Zach looked impressed. He and Sebastian had managed to burn theirs.

‘It probably tastes *dis-gus-ting*,’ Rosie said confidently. She pushed through Zach and Sebastian to get a better look.

Charligh held up a butter knife, eased it into our cake and hacked out a generous slice. It sure smelled . . . spicy. I suddenly started to have doubts. Perhaps I’d overdone it with the cinnamon. But Mãe always said half of winning was about looking like a winner, so I put on my best confident smile and ripped off a piece of paper towel and slid the large slice on to it.

‘Really? If I didn’t know better, Rosie, I’d think you’re afraid of the competition.’ I thrust the cake at her. ‘Why don’t you try it, if you are so sure it’s “dis-gus-ting”,’ I said, mimicking her.

‘Afraid of the competition?’ Erica said, tittering.

‘Uh-oh, looks like we have an echo again,’ said Charligh with a smirk.

‘Do you think I really want to try anything you lot have made?’ Rosie said, wrinkling her nose disdainfully.

I shrugged. ‘You could just say if you’re worried it will taste better,’ I said.

Rosie scowled and took the slice of cake, then she ordered Erica to cut a slice of their cake for us to taste.

‘I’m never afraid of you, Jaz!’ Rosie said.

‘It’s a cake-off,’ whooped Zach.

Mrs T was still helping other pairs get their cakes out of the oven so she didn’t notice the small knot of pupils watching Rosie and me with interest.

Erica handed me the slice of their cake. I couldn’t help thinking, although wild dragons wouldn’t have made me say it out loud, that it smelled wonderful. I nibbled a little. Despite looking rather ordinary, it was quite nice. It wasn’t mouth-wateringly, earth-shatteringly, life-changingly delicious, though. Not like ours would be.

‘Um, it’s OK,’ I said. ‘Go on, then – try ours. It will be lush. I promise you’ll have never tasted a cake like it.’

‘Whatever,’ Rosie said, coughing a little. She must have caught a whiff of the spice too, but she took a large bite anyway. She wolfed it down,

barely chewing it before swallowing hard. Within a few seconds, her eyes were shining, bulging with delight.

‘Spit it out, then – what do you think?’ I asked her.

Then I saw it. Her face was turning an unusual blend of grey and green. The shine in her eyes . . . it wasn’t delight; it was queasiness. And then she really *did* spit it out. All over the paper towel.

‘Ewww,’ said Summer, holding her nose.

Rosie clasped her hands over her mouth. She clutched her stomach. Zach and the other boys guffawed loudly. I blushed. This was a bit much even by Rosie’s standards. It was just like her to make a joke out of something we’d made and embarrass us! I narrowed my eyes as she continued her dramatics and theatrics.

‘Mrs T is the judge anyway. The final decision is down her,’ I said, feeling thoroughly exasperated.

Steph stepped forward. ‘I don’t think Rosie’s joking,’ she said grimly. ‘Miss!’ she shouted, waving Mrs Tavella over from the other side of the classroom. As the crowd surrounding us parted to make way for Mrs T, I heard a horrible

retching sound and the air suddenly filled with a warm, bitter smell.

I froze, hardly daring to turn my head towards what I knew would be there. I edged back and held my breath before sneaking a look. Doubled over, Rosie was standing in a pool of her own sick. Some of it had managed to get all over Erica's arm, so she was looking pretty green now too and making retching sounds of her own as she headed towards the toilets.

Everyone groaned and backed off, horrified, holding their noses, while Rosie had a vengeful glint in her eyes. She straightened up a little.

'Jaz did it!' she croaked, pointing a limp finger at me. 'She's gone and poisoned me!'