



Hello!

Knowing that *Fortune Cookie* would be the last in my *Chocolate Box* series has been hard; of all the books, it has been the toughest, yet the most satisfying, to write. I guess I just didn't want to let go of my characters and say goodbye to Tanglewood, but I hope the final story will make you smile!

When Jake Cooke gets himself into serious trouble, he runs away to find the half-sisters he has only just discovered in the hope that they can help him save his family from disaster. Will Cookie find the answers he's looking for . . . or perhaps find something more important still? You'll have to read his story and see!

Make yourself a smoothie, sit in the sunshine and soak up the very last adventure at Tanglewood; I think you'll love it. And if you really can't bear to let go of the *Chocolate Box* world, check out my new book *The Chocolate Box Secrets*, out now . . . Find out the sisters' style secrets, fab recipes and fun ideas, and bring a little Tanglewood cool into your life!

See you soon,

Cathy Cassidy, xxx

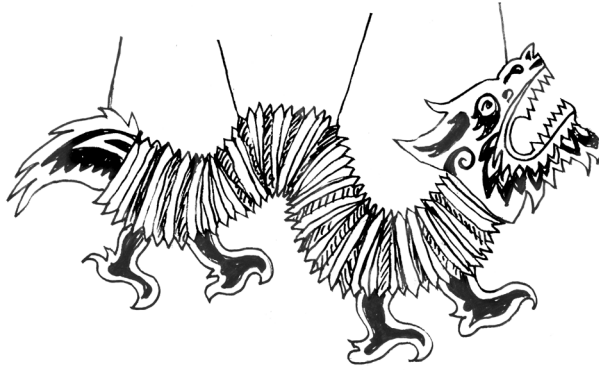
Cathy Cassidy,



the
chocolate box
~~girls~~
boy



PUFFIN



RUNAWAY

My mobile buzzes a quiet alarm at four in the morning, and I push the duvet off and sit up, still wearing my jeans and T-shirt. My little sisters look like they're asleep when I peer over the edge of the bunk, but although I'm really careful as I climb down the ladder, I'm clearly not quiet enough.

Maisie opens her eyes and looks right at me, stricken.

'Shhh!' I whisper. 'Go back to sleep. I'm just going to the loo.'

But Maisie isn't stupid. I don't usually go to the loo in the middle of the night, especially not fully dressed and carrying a rucksack. I see the shine of tears in her eyes, but I pretend not notice. I want to reach over and ruffle her hair, tell her it will be OK, but I daren't. That would scare her even more, and be proof that I was saying goodbye.

‘Shhh,’ I whisper. ‘Don’t tell. I’ll call you, I promise.’

‘Cookie, please don’t go . . .’ she whispers, but I raise a finger to my lips and she trails away into silence.

I tuck the quilt round her and slip out of the door.

In the living room, Mum is asleep on the sofa bed, the duvet pulled over her head. The flat smells weirdly of damp carpet, washing-up liquid and joss sticks. I step into the little hallway and open the door as quietly as I can, then close it softly behind me. My footsteps sound hollow on the uncarpeted wooden steps as I creep down the stairs and let myself out of the front door; then I am free, stepping into the cool air of an early summer’s morning as the dawn light begins to wash through the gloomy streets.

I pause for a few moments to scrawl a few words on the plate glass window of the Chinese restaurant next to the front door; I write the words in letters half a metre high, etched in scarlet lipstick stolen from my mum. She’ll be mad about that, but luckily I won’t be hanging around to face the flak.

I take a deep breath, check the rail ticket in my pocket and start to walk.

I don’t look back.



1

BEFORE

Tanglewood House
Wood Lane
Kitnor
Somerset

Dear Jake,

You don't know me, and this is going to sound slightly crazy, but hear me out. I have recently found out some shocking and amazing news about my dad, who's kind of loaded and now lives in Australia. It turns out that he had an affair with your mum, like about fourteen years ago or something, and that makes you my half-brother. I know, awesome, right?

I am almost sixteen and my name is Honey Tanberry.

I



I have twin sisters, Skye and Summer, who are fourteen; and a younger sister, Coco, who is about to turn thirteen. So you actually have four half-sisters. There is even a stepsister, Cherry, but I am not sure she actually counts, so we'll just say four for now. This might be a massive shock for you - it was to me - but I am very curious to meet you and find out more about you. Family is important, especially when your dad turns out to be a bit of a let-down, like our dad has.

I haven't actually told my sisters about you yet, as it's quite a bombshell and I am not sure how they will take it. I don't think my mum knows either. So if you have any bright ideas for breaking the news to them, please let me know.

I look forward to hearing from you soon,

Best wishes,
Honey Tanberry

When that first letter arrived, I hadn't believed it. I thought it was some kind of elaborate hoax, like the time Mum got an email saying a distant relative had died unexpectedly in the jungles of Borneo and if she would just reply giving her bank details, a settlement of £500,000 would be paid into her account.



‘Is this for real?’ I’d asked when she showed me.

‘No, Jake, it’s just spam,’ Mum had said sadly.

It was a different kind of spam from the tinned meat we got at the food bank two years ago, of course. It wasn’t mottled pink meat that tasted of rubber, but a hoax, a wind-up, a trick to get Mum’s bank details and swipe all her cash.

‘Good luck to them with that,’ she’d said. ‘I am all of seventy-five pence in credit right now. If they need it that badly, they can have it.’

So, yeah, that first letter from Honey Tanberry . . . I thought it was spam.

The letter told me that I might be surprised to learn that I had four half-sisters and a stepsister who I knew nothing about, plus a no-good dad living in Australia. I already knew I had a no-good dad, because Mum had told me often enough; he’d done a vanishing act when he heard I was coming along. As for the sisters, that was nothing to shout about; I already had two, Maisie and Isla, aged nine and five, and they could be annoying enough as it was.

Maybe that first letter was spam, maybe it wasn’t; I didn’t much care. I scrunched it up and chucked it into the bin.

The second letter came four months later, fizzing with



enthusiasm as if I hadn't blanked the last one. Honey Tanberry was clearly a girl who couldn't take no for an answer. She told me that her family lived in some rambling Victorian house by the sea in Somerset, that I was welcome to visit any time.

Get lost, I'd written back. *I don't believe you. Plus, I have two sisters already. Why would I want more?* It was a short letter, but to the point. I figured that was the only way to shut her up. I didn't know what she was after, but I was wary; it was a scam, it had to be.

Months later, the third letter turned up with photos of the sisters attached. I'll admit that grabbed my attention. They looked like me – or I looked like them, except for the one with almond eyes and blue-black hair tied up in anime bunches, and according to the letter she was the stepsister anyway. The others, though; they looked enough like me to stop me in my tracks.

Fair hair, blue eyes, regular features. One of them had a dreamy look about her, another had a cheeky lopsided grin, one looked sad and lost, and the eldest one looked defiant and dangerous – like she might just explode at any moment. I had seen all those expressions reflected back at



me at various times from the cracked mirror in the bathroom, and now they stared out at me, eerily, from a random batch of photographs.

Five beautiful teenage sisters – well, half-sisters, anyway – which is exactly what Maisie and Isla were too. Their dad, Rick, was a bricklayer from Manchester. I used to wish he was my dad, back when we lived there, but that was before he started drinking too much. He lost his job; Mum lost her patience. She left him and vowed she'd never fall for another man again; they were nothing but trouble.

'Not you, Jake,' she'd said at the time. 'Obviously. You're different.'

But I wasn't all that different. I was struggling at school by then, winding up the teachers, breaking rules, damaging school property. 'Nothing but trouble, that boy,' I heard one teacher say in the same despairing tone my mum had used.

I wasn't sure if it made me proud or ashamed.

We left Rick two years ago. Gran sent Mum the money for tickets and we packed our bags and took the train to London.

Mum decided to take us on a sightseeing tour of London before heading to Gran's place. It was our last taste of



freedom, she said; we trundled around the city on an open-topped bus and gawped at Nelson's Column and the Tower of London. My little sisters waved at Buckingham Palace as we rattled past, and Mum told them she could see the queen waving back out of one of the upstairs windows.

We jumped off the sightseeing bus in Chinatown. There was a big arching gate painted red and jade, and we went underneath; it was like stepping into a whole different world. The shops sold strange things we'd never seen before, like dried fish and velvet slippers, fat Buddha statues and little model cats painted red and gold with their arms in the air, which Mum said were symbols of good luck.

'Pick a restaurant,' Mum said, and Maisie and Isla pointed at the nearest one, which was called The Paper Dragon and had all these paper puppets of Chinese dragons hanging in the window. We went in and ordered egg foo yung, mushroom chop suey and spring rolls, which was what we always used to order back in Manchester when Rick wanted a takeaway.

They took a long time to arrive, though. It looked like we had picked a dud restaurant. A tidal wave of discontent



was mounting around us, cold and ominous. People were not happy. One man demanded to see the manager.

In the end the manager did appear, hot and flustered, with an apron tied over his smart suit. He carried our egg foo yung, mushroom chop suey and spring rolls on a tray.

‘Our waitress has just walked out,’ he explained, apologetic, setting the food down a little haphazardly. ‘The other one has called in sick. It’s all a bit crazy here today.’

All around us, customers were grumbling, scowling, demanding to know where their food was.

The manager shrugged. ‘I only have one pair of hands. Give me a chance!’

That’s when Mum pushed her food aside, got up and marched into the kitchen. She reappeared moments later with dinner plates balanced all along her arm and a smile a mile wide, chatting to a table of surly businessmen as she dished up their order. I don’t know what she said, but she turned their scowls to smiles all right.

Maisie, Isla and I ate our food while Mum waitressed, and the tide of gloom and anger lapping at the tables of The Paper Dragon ebbed away. We stayed at our corner table all evening, Maisie and Isla occupied with colouring



books and pens and an endless supply of complimentary ice cream. I just listened to my iPod and watched the world going by outside the restaurant window.

This place was very different from the run-down estate we'd lived on with Rick. Nothing much ever happened there, but Chinatown was colourful and bright and loud and lively. As darkness fell the streets lit up, and it seemed like anything and everything was possible. Chinese families came and went, getting on with life; a gaggle of girls in prom dresses spilled out of a stretch limo and skittered into the restaurant across the street; a party of tourists trailed past, following a guide with his umbrella held high in the air. One stopped and took a photograph through the restaurant window, and Isla laughed, put out her tongue and waggled her fingers behind her ears.

By closing time, Mum had a new job – and the offer of a flat above The Paper Dragon.

'This must be my lucky day,' the manager kept saying. 'Alison Cooke, you have saved my skin!'

He gave us a dish with four golden-brown fortune cookies in it, the shells folded in on themselves to conceal their secret messages.



‘Ooh, fortune cookies!’ Maisie squealed. ‘Like your name, Jake!’

For as long as I could remember, my nickname had been Cookie. Rick had started it, and the kids at school carried it on. It didn’t matter which school, either; that nickname followed me around like a shadow that was stuck to my shoe.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘How cool.’

We broke the cookies open and fished out the fortunes inside.

‘The rough times are behind you now,’ Mum’s read.

‘The time is right to make new friends,’ Maisie’s said.

‘A fresh start is just round the corner,’ Isla’s insisted.

Mine just said, ‘Soon life will become more interesting.’

It wasn’t the best fortune in the world, but it turned out to be true. We moved into the flat above the restaurant that night, sleeping on the floor under borrowed blankets. The next day, Mum took out a loan so she could pay rent and a deposit for the flat to Mr Zhao, the manager and owner of The Paper Dragon, and buy some furniture. She chose a second-hand sofa bed, beanbags, a small table and a set of bunks. Maisie and Isla shared the bottom bunk and I



had the top one; Mum slept on the sofa bed.

‘It’s temporary,’ she explained. ‘We’ll get a few home comforts once I’ve managed to pay off the loan and save some of my wages, but this will do for now.’

By the time we finally went over to see Gran in Bethnal Green, we’d already been in the flat for a week and Mum was working afternoon and evening shifts in the restaurant. Maisie, Isla and I started school a few days later and that was that; a new life, as if Manchester had never existed.

The flat was damp and scabby, with peeling paint and bare MDF flooring that wobbled when you walked on it, but there were no rows here, no tiptoeing around trying not to get on Rick’s nerves. I had to babysit when Mum was working, but we bought a second-hand TV and DVD player and Gran came over some evenings and chilled out with us. I got very good at making beans on toast, mushrooms on toast, scrambled eggs on toast, and there was always leftover food from The Paper Dragon.

We scrubbed the flat from top to bottom, bought a few tins of paint to hide the dirt and mould on the walls and the woodwork, threw down a carpet offcut in the living room. I taught myself to put up shelves. And Chinatown



. . . Chinatown was epic. It was crazy, cool, full of life. I loved it.

So, yeah, when that first letter from my half-sister arrived, forwarded on from Gran's, I genuinely didn't much care. I had a life, I had a family, and that was enough. I was OK.

When the second letter turned up, something began to niggle, to tug away at my curiosity. The letters had made me question things. I'd always known Rick wasn't my dad, but I barely knew anything about my real dad, and a little part of me began to wonder.

After the third letter had arrived, I'd asked Mum to tell me about him. I wasn't about to be fobbed off with the old story that they'd both been too young, that he was scared at the idea of being a dad and decided to disappear. I wanted details.

'Why now?' she wanted to know, tired from a long shift in the restaurant.

'Why not now?' I countered, and Mum had sighed and shrugged.

'He wasn't much of a dad,' she said, frowning. 'We're better off without him.'



‘But who *was* he?’ I persisted. ‘How did you meet?’

I had the latest letter folded in my pocket. Honey, my scammer/sister told me that Mum had been a junior member of the sales team in the office where her dad, Greg Tanberry, worked. It looked like Mum had had an affair with a married man. If that were true, it was hardly surprising she’d been sketchy with the details.

‘We worked together,’ Mum told me vaguely. ‘A long time ago. He was my boss. I thought it was serious; he clearly didn’t. There’s no sense in raking all this up again, Jake.’

‘What was his name?’ I asked.

She hadn’t wanted to tell me. She stalled and blustered and tried to wriggle out of it, but I said that this was my dad we were talking about, that I had a right to know.

‘His name was Greg,’ she admitted then. ‘Greg Tanberry.’

I wondered if everything else in those letters might be true too.

You might be my sister, I wrote back that time. But you won’t want a brother like me, trust me.

The fourth letter came with a train ticket that was valid for a month and an invitation to come and stay at Tanglewood House.



Let me know when you are planning to arrive, Honey had written. I still haven't told the others about you, but they're going to be so amazed to meet you, I promise!

Don't hold your breath, I'd written back.

I used a drawing pin to skewer the train ticket to the wall, just above my fortune cookie prediction: 'Soon life will become more interesting.'

I didn't realize then just how true those words would be.





2

I try very hard to forget that fourth letter. OK, so finding out about my dad could be cool – I won't say I'm not curious about him. I'm only human. I have questions. Do I look like him? Act like him? Does he have a fast car and a jet-set lifestyle?

I like to imagine he does, if only to liven up the grim reality of life in the flat above The Paper Dragon. Before the letters, I barely gave my real dad a thought; now I am intrigued. Does he ever think about me? Maybe not, and if he does he probably doesn't imagine me on my knees in a bathroom where the walls are flecked with mould and the flooring has an ominous crack that squeaks whenever I lean on it, washing my favourite jeans in the bath with washing-up liquid.

14



It's not a regular hobby of mine, but our washing machine broke six months ago and today we don't have cash for the launderette, and I happen to want my jeans for tomorrow. I am meeting my friends, Harry and Mitch, to see if we can get into a gig for a band called The Thrash Penguins. Harry's big brother is in it, so he might be able to convince the doorman to sneak us on to the guest list, and Harry says there will be loads of cool girls there.

I swish the jeans around again. There's a big soy-sauce stain on one leg from yesterday's shift at The Paper Dragon, where a wodge of leftover chicken noodles spilled all over me as I was stacking the dishwasher. I am working part-time there, because it's the summer holidays and I want to earn some cash. Mr Zhao is grumpy and doesn't pay much, but it's something.

The soy-sauce stain is stubborn, and I have to use the nail brush and loads of washing-up liquid just to get it to fade a little bit. Once the jeans are looking better, I make the most of the soapy water by dumping the entire contents of the laundry basket into the bath and churning up the water to swirl everything around. The bath is filled with white foam and bubbles, with the occasional stripy sock drifting by.



‘Cookie!’ my littlest sister Isla yells from the living room. ‘Maisie’s being mean to me!’

‘I’m not!’ Maisie shouts back. ‘It’s Isla. She’s got my library book and she won’t give it back!’

It is typical of my sisters to embark on World War Three when I am up to my armpits in soapy water. They have a knack for knowing when you’ve taken your eye off the ball. Suddenly an unearthly roar erupts and Isla is howling and Maisie is yelling, and I sigh and abandon the bathtub-washing. Babysitting my little sisters is a full-time job; they tend to go stir-crazy stuck in the flat, but I’m working in half an hour and it’s too late to take them out now, even if I wanted to. Mum is working a long shift from midday to seven, but Gran will be here soon to keep an eye on the girls while I’m working.

‘*Cook-eee!*’ Maisie shrieks. ‘Do something!’

I stomp into the living room. Isla hurls her arms round my waist, sobbing, while Maisie holds up the disputed library book, which looks like it has been through a small explosion. Torn and crumpled pages are scattered about the living room.

‘Isla, no!’ I scold. ‘Library books are special – you can’t just rip them up when you get upset!’



‘It’s a *stupid* book!’ she protests.

‘It’s a broken one now,’ I point out, peeling her arms from round me. ‘How would you like it if Maisie did that to your books?’

Isla scowls. ‘I hate her,’ she says in a small, trembly voice.

‘Well, I hate *her*,’ Maisie counters. ‘She is so annoying! I was reading quietly, and now look what she’s done!’

‘I just wanted her to *play* with me!’ Isla sobs.

I sigh. Sometimes I think I might go for a career in world politics, because it seriously cannot be much tougher than keeping the peace between these two.

‘Nobody hates anybody,’ I say, rolling my eyes. ‘C’mon, both of you, wipe those eyes. How about I make some cheese on toast and put the *Frozen* DVD on? Now; are you going to say sorry to Maisie and pick up all this paper?’

Isla mutters a grudging apology and starts picking up the torn pages. I smooth one or two of them out to see if I can do a repair job with Sellotape, but there are too many big chunks missing. Anyone trying to read this particular copy of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* will have to invent most of the story as they go along.

We sit down together to eat cheese on toast, and my



phone bleeps with a message from Gran to say that one of the underground lines has been closed and she's running half an hour or so late.

No worries, I text back.

I'm due at work in five minutes, but if I leave the girls watching that *Frozen* DVD they're likely to be spellbound for hours. I've just put the film into the player when I hear a squawk of joy from the bathroom; Isla, washing the crumbs from her fingers, has discovered the bath full of washing. Within minutes, she is dumping in two mangled Barbies and the rest of the washing-up liquid.

'What's all that?' Maisie wants to know. 'What were you trying to do?'

'The washing,' I say. 'No cash for the launderette.'

'It's like something from a cartoon,' she observes, as we watch Isla splashing gleefully. 'Bubbles everywhere!'

'Let her play for a bit,' I say. 'Watch her, and when she gets bored tell her that the *Frozen* DVD is all set to play – you just have to press the button. Gran will be here any minute, OK?'

'OK,' Maisie agrees.

'Cool. Gotta run; will you be all right?'



Isla reaches over to her sister and dabs a blob of foam on to her nose, and the uneasy truce melts into giggles at last, and I slip away quietly while the two of them are flicking bubbles around. The bathroom will probably be a mess by the time Gran arrives, but at least it will be clean – and she can wring out my jeans and hang them over the bath to dry.

I run down the stairs and round to the restaurant. The kitchen is hot and steamy; Chang and Liu, the cooks, work at the speed of light, knives flashing, woks sizzling, pans bubbling, chatting the whole time.

I wave at them and grab a clean apron, glancing through the swing doors at the restaurant. It's busy, as always, and Mum looks across and smiles at me. She is dressed in her work uniform, a black silk cheongsam dress with a mandarin collar and gold embroidered dragons and vines; as I watch, she sets down dishes of dessert on one of the central tables, chatting easily. Mum has totally turned things round for The Paper Dragon; Mr Zhao is always telling her she's his lucky charm, but sometimes lately when I look at her she seems tired, even a little sad.

She works too hard, too many shifts; it's taken her two



years to pay off that loan and get us out of debt, but we're still pretty skint. Life for Mum isn't easy, I know.

'Come on, Cookie,' Mr Zhao says briskly, bustling into the kitchen to pick up two dishes of wonton soup. 'Stop dreaming; start working!'

I load the dishwasher, switch it on and turn my attention to the big pans and woks in the sink. Mum comes in carrying a trayful of dirty dishes; she dumps them down and moves on to the service area to pick up four plates of chow mein.

'Jake?' she says. 'Any chance you can lend a hand out front for a minute? Mr Zhao is taking a phone call from the wholesaler and table six needs to be cleared.'

'I'm on it,' I say, straightening my apron and picking up a tray.

Table six is the central, circular table Mum was serving when I first arrived. The businessmen and women are chilled and mellow and happy now, chatting easily and sipping jasmine tea or glasses of wine. I put down my tray and begin to clear the dishes away, polite and smiling, but a little nervous.

Mr Zhao doesn't like me to be out front too much. I am



too young, too clueless, not smart enough. If I do need to help out, he prefers me to be invisible. I can see him at the back of the restaurant, chatting on his mobile, his eagle eyes watching me as I gather up the used napkins.

As I lean across to rescue an abandoned teaspoon, a drop of liquid plops on to the tablecloth. I frown, pick up a napkin and dab it away, but as I reach over another drop of water lands right in front of me.

‘What’s that, mate?’ one of the businessmen asks.

‘I don’t know . . .’

A third drop of water lands in the centre of the table, and in unison we all look upwards to where the drips are coming from.

The ceiling above us is stained dark, bulging down towards us horribly. It looks all wrong, terrifying somehow, like the time I broke my wrist when I was eight and one of the bones poked out under the skin in a very alarming way. As we watch, the ceiling seems to shudder. It quivers, and there’s a collective intake of breath from those gathered round the table.

‘Doesn’t look right, that,’ one of the men comments, which may well be the understatement of the year.



And then the bulging ceiling collapses, and a torrent of lukewarm water gushes down on to the table, drenching the diners, drenching me, smashing and soaking everything. People are screaming and swearing and yelling, leaping up, jumping back, asking what the heck is going on. The table is covered with soaked and splintered wood, mushy plaster and flakes of paint, scattered artfully among the knives and forks and overturned teacups. And then, as quickly as it began, the waterfall slows to a dribble.

I can see Mr Zhao at the back of the restaurant, his mouth agape, the mobile phone dropping from his hand. I can see Mum, frozen in time, her face a mask of horror as she surveys the carnage.

The last thing to fall from the gaping hole in the ceiling is a pair of waterlogged jeans, complete with a very faint soy-sauce stain on one leg.

Kill me now.





3

A silence falls, heavy and ominous, and after the silence comes uproar. Mr Zhao loses it big style. His face is a kind of mottled purple and his voice is like the bellow of an angry bull.

‘What have you done?’ he roars. ‘What. Have. You. *Done?*’

I am not sure that he actually requires an answer, but staying silent has never been my strong point.

‘I was washing stuff in the bath,’ I say, picking up the soaking jeans and trying for a smile. ‘There was a soy-sauce stain on my Levis —’

‘Washing stuff in the bath?’ Mr Zhao echoes. ‘The *bath?* What’s wrong with a washing machine, or the sink? What’s wrong with switching the taps off? What’s wrong with *you*, Jake Cooke?’



There are quite a few things wrong with me according to my school teachers, an inability to keep my mouth shut being one of them, but in the heat of the moment I somehow forget this.

‘Chill,’ I say brightly. ‘Look at it this way, you won’t have to mop the floor for a while.’

I can see Mum covering her face with one hand, distraught. I know that look. I’ve seen it too many times, and too late I realize that my cheap joke has made things worse.

‘You think this is *funny*?’ Mr Zhao bellows. ‘Your stupid trick has destroyed my restaurant, my livelihood – and you think it’s one big *joke*? Get out of my sight before I do something I’ll regret!’

I take a step backwards, my trainers squelching as I go, but the customers block my escape, and they’re angry now as well.

‘How can it be the kid’s fault?’ one dripping diner demands. ‘Your ceiling just fell down! I’ve got a good mind to call the environmental health.’

‘I’ll be sending you a bill for my jacket,’ another tells Mr Zhao. ‘This is disgraceful!’



Mr Zhao switches tone. ‘I’m so, so sorry,’ he pleads, trying to usher the drenched customers out. ‘I can assure you I will personally honour any dry-cleaning bills, and I am deeply sorry for the inconvenience. Your next meal is free, of course, on the house. Please do come back . . .’

But the customers are leaving, not just those who got wet but the others too, shaking their heads and pursing their lips, abandoning their food to take sneaky photos of the chaos with their mobiles.

Mum appears at my shoulder, white with shock. ‘Mr Zhao, listen –’ she begins, but our boss is way too angry for that.

‘Listen?’ he snarls. ‘*Listen?* No, *you* will listen to me, Alison Cooke. I should have known you were trouble the moment I set eyes on you – you and those good-for-nothing kids of yours. You’ve ruined me; ruined me! Get out of my sight!’

I lie awake all night on the top bunk, running through everything in my head until I think it will drive me mad. Why didn’t I take the plug out, empty the bath before I left? Why didn’t I wait for Gran, call down and say I’d be



late for my shift? Why did I even care about those stupid jeans in the first place?

Last night Harry texted to call off our big night out anyway – his brother told him that the venue has a very strict over-18s admission code, and no amount of fake ID would convince them that the three of us are that old. So, yeah, all for nothing.

It turns out that Maisie and Isla had decided to tidy up the bathroom before Gran arrived. Maisie was rinsing my jeans when a pound coin dropped out of the pocket; the two of them dived for it, rescued it and abandoned the bath and the still-running taps to run down to the corner shop for a packet of Jammie Dodgers. On the way back they bumped into Gran, who took them to the park for a go on the swings. The three of them arrived back at the flat roughly ten minutes after the floor caved in. Sweet.

See, whichever way you look at it, it was my fault. I filled the bath and assumed that a heap of soapy bubbles and a *Frozen* DVD would do instead of a babysitter, even though I knew Gran was delayed. I even, somehow, left a pound coin in my jeans pocket; that was what sealed my fate.

Maybe Maisie was the one who switched the taps on,



but she was only trying to help. I shouldn't have left her in charge of Isla, especially not beside a bathtub full of water.

I fall asleep sometime after 5 a.m. and end up sleeping in; by the time I surface again, it's almost midday and I can hear voices in the living room.

I creep to the door and press my ear against it, and there is the sound of my little sisters bickering gently in front of the TV and the much more alarming sound of Mum arguing with Mr Zhao.

'You must not use the bathroom,' he is saying. 'No, no, no. I have covered the hole in the floor with a sheet of hardboard, but I cannot take responsibility for how safe it is. Keep the kids out of there. It's a pity you didn't do that yesterday!'

'Mr Zhao, we have apologized over and over,' Mum replies. 'What more do you want, blood? And how do you expect me to keep the kids out of the bathroom? We have to wash!'

Mr Zhao mutters something about this not being a problem we'll have to put up with for much longer, and I groan. It doesn't sound as if he has forgiven us yet for yesterday's bathroom tsunami. He mentions something about the



restaurant being closed until the repairs can be made, about how it could be wise to move out sooner rather than later.

A cold wave of panic washes over me. Moving out? What does he mean?

I press my ear to the door again.

‘Let’s face it,’ Mr Zhao is saying. ‘This flat is in no fit state for anyone to live in. It’s a disaster zone; a health hazard!’

I grit my teeth. The flat may be a disaster zone, but it’s also our home. Though probably not for much longer.

‘Give me a little bit of time,’ Mum is saying. ‘I’ll need to talk to the kids, explain what’s happening and we’ll need a few days to pack.’

I peer through the crack in the door and see Mr Zhao standing with his arms folded, his face like stone. This is his usual look, to be fair.

‘Of course, of course,’ Mr Zhao says gruffly. ‘It’s not as though I will be throwing you out on the streets, is it?’

‘We’ll move out a week on Saturday,’ Mum says, her shoulders drooping. ‘I’m sorry that it had to end like this.’

‘Me too,’ Mr Zhao says. ‘Me too, Alison Cooke.’

I bite down on my sleeve to stop myself from yelling



abuse at our ex-landlord; I guess I have landed us all in enough trouble already. I didn't think that things could actually get any worse, but, as usual, I was wrong.

It looks like we are being evicted.

It's an all-time low, even for me.

