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WHITE  
TOWER

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CATHRYN CONSTABLE  
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## CHAPTER ONE



Closing her fingers carefully around the small box in her blazer pocket, Livy craned her neck to see through the jam of bodies all shoving forward to climb onto the bus. She panicked as she saw the boy's black spiky hair disappear up the stairs to the upper deck. She had to get on this bus.

The driver looked straight ahead, uncaring. He pressed the button to close the doors. Livy pushed forward.

She was on.

The doors closed behind her and the bus lurched. Livy reached into her backpack for her bus pass. Once she had stuck it on the reader, she realized that she wouldn't be able to put it away without using both hands. She clamped it between her teeth because she didn't want to let go of that box in her pocket. This was the present—a tiny blue glass heart that she had promised her best

friend Mahalia would be handed to the boy with the spiky hair—and a promise was a promise, however difficult it was to keep.

On the upper deck, Livy swung her backpack down, dropped her gym bag, and sank onto the seat. She took her bus pass out of her mouth and slipped it into her blazer pocket. The boy was sitting with his friends at the back of the bus. She took a deep breath to calm her nerves—how was she going to do this? She looked out at the clouds for help. They looked as solid as whole cities suspended above her but only made her feel more light-headed. She would focus on letting this be a normal day, she decided. After all, what could be more normal than today?

She had gotten up when the alarm went off, as she had promised that she would: no stomachache. She had managed a whole mouthful of breakfast and gone to school. OK, school had felt a bit weird after so long, but everyone was very kind and she had sat next to Megan in math and Ciara in Spanish. That had felt wrong because she had only ever sat next to Mahalia. But she had gotten through it and here she was, going home on the bus, and the boy Mahalia was crazy about was sitting somewhere behind her. Just like normal.

Her bare knees in her summer skirt rubbed up against the seat in front of her. She wished she had worn pants

but hadn't been able to find them after so many weeks off from school.

"Just a normal day," she told herself. "And tomorrow will be another normal day. And nothing much will happen. It will just be normal. Because normal is good. We like normal."

The bus's brakes screeched. She glanced over her shoulder. In the seats behind her, the boys began a round of knuckle bumping, trading friendly insults in some form of Londonish that Livy couldn't understand. Jeering laughter broke out as the boy with black spiky hair pushed his way out of the group and sauntered up the aisle toward her.

Livy took a deep breath and took the box out of her pocket.

"Excuse me?" She leaned forward.

The boy looked down at her, surprised. There was some wild whistling from his friends behind them and Livy swallowed, her throat dry. Her mind was a blank. What was she supposed to say? She thrust the tiny box wrapped in its sparkly paper at the boy's chest.

"A friend asked me to give you this," she croaked awkwardly.

"Yeah? Who's your friend?"

"You spoke to her a few times on the bus," Livy burbled.

"Is she pretty?"

Livy blushed. “She’s very pretty. Long brown hair and really big eyes.”

The bus stopped; Livy only had a few more seconds.

“Mahalia,” Livy blurted out. “My friend is called Mahalia.”

The boy took the package, held it to his ear, and shook it. “Nah,” he said. “I don’t know no one called Malia.”

Livy took in his blazer with torn pockets, pants slung dangerously low, and his short, fat tie. His hair looked as if it had actually been glued into those strange stiff spikes. He gave her a brief shrug and headed off down the stairs.

Livy sat back in her seat. The emptiness of the day without Mahalia presented itself to her. And now this boy, who had been the focus of Mahalia’s thoughts and dreams for so long, said that he didn’t remember her. Couldn’t even get her name right.

“Excuse me.” A voice from over her shoulder.

She turned, surprised.

A slightly older boy, with curly brown hair and gray eyes, was smiling at her from the seat behind. She noticed he was wearing a pale gray blazer that did not belong to any of the local schools. On the pocket was a discreet crest of an embroidered tower. Temple College, Livy realized. The one by the river, the oldest school in London. That was where the rich children went to school; rich and clever. So what was he doing on this bus?