

# I can't see you



Emma Laybourn

# **I Can't See You**

**Emma Laybourn**

Copyright © Emma Laybourn 2013

This is a free ebook from  
[www.megamousebooks.com](http://www.megamousebooks.com)

## **Table of Contents**

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

## Chapter One

### OPTICAL ILLUSIONS

wrote Miss Lewis on the whiteboard.  
Underneath it she added with a flourish,

**Make the person disappear!**  
**You may only use a pencil.**

Oliver immediately began waving his pencil round like a wand, until the teacher gave him a stern look.

“Oliver and Reece, get on,” she said.

Reece thought this was unfair. He *was* getting on. He was already busy drawing on his photocopied sheet of paper.

The sheet had a face printed on it. All over the classroom, groups of children were scribbling with their pencils on their own, similar sheets. They weren’t allowed to draw *on* the faces, only round them. There was a lot of rubbing out and muffled grumbling, especially from Oliver.

“This is stupid,” he complained. “You can’t draw an optical illusion with a pencil. You need a computer.”

“No, you don’t,” said Reece, eager to impress him. “I know how.”

This was the first time he had sat with Oliver’s group; although ever since he started at this school a month ago, he’d been wondering how to join it.

Oliver’s table was cool. It was as cool as a fridge full of iced coffee. As cool as a skating-rink with champions gliding casually round it, hands behind their backs.

The four boys at Oliver’s table were all on the football team. They had sharp haircuts and told witty jokes about the other children in the class. They ruled the roost in the playground.

When one of them went off sick, Reece asked the teacher if he could take his place. So now he was sitting where he’d longed to be, with Oliver, Kai and Joel: the cool crowd.

And he was determined to shine. To impress them. To show them that he had the right to be there.

The classroom filled with muttering and rustling as everyone struggled to make an optical illusion. Abby had already given up and turned her sheet into a paper plane, which she aimed at Maya.

“Stop that!” ordered Miss Lewis. “This is not an aerodrome.”

“It’s not a plane,” said Abby. “It’s a poison dart.”

Oliver drew, rubbed out, drew, rubbed out again. He looked fed up. Reece reached over and took Oliver’s sheet of paper off him.

“Hey,” said Oliver.

“You’re not doing it right,” said Reece. “Do it like this.” He began to draw swirly lines around the face.

“So what’s that meant to be?”

“It’s like camouflage,” said Reece. “The face gets harder to pick out.”

“No, it doesn’t,” said Oliver.

“It does,” insisted Reece.

Miss Lewis, overhearing, turned to see. “Well done, Reece!” she said. “You’ve got the right idea.” Reece glowed.

“It’s not that great,” said Oliver as Miss Lewis zoomed off again to scold Abby.

“You can still see the face,” said Joel. “It’s not invisible at all.”

“It’s rubbish,” grumbled Kai.

“But look, it’s starting to disappear!” protested Reece. “You just have to draw more lines, like this, you see?”

“You’re a right know-it-all, aren’t you?” said Oliver. “Why don’t *you* just disappear?”

“Hey, he did!” said Joel. “I can’t see him.”

“He’s invisible,” said Kai.

Oliver began to smile for the first time that morning. “You’re right. He must be an optical illusion.”

“Look,” said Reece, “I’m only showing you—”

“What’s that?” Oliver cupped a hand around his ear. “I can’t hear you.”

“Hear who?” said Joel. “There’s nobody there.”

Reece bent his head over the sheet and drew determinedly. He knew how to make it work. He would show the others. They leant back in their chairs and watched.

“Excellent,” said Miss Lewis when she came round to their table again. She held his sheet up for the class to see.

“Excellent,” murmured Oliver.

“He’s a genius,” breathed Joel.

“Who is?” said Kai. And they all sniggered.

Miss Lewis looked at the clock. “Playtime,” she announced. “Leave your sheets neatly on your tables. Put all the pencils in the pots, not in Maya’s hair, please, Abby. Because of their good work, Oliver’s group may go out first.”

“Win!” said Joel beneath his breath.

And surely that win was worth something, thought Reece as he hurried out behind the other three. Surely that was worth a game of football.

“Can I play on your team today?” he asked.

Oliver looked around, up and down, from side to side: everywhere but at Reece. “Who’s that talking? I can’t see.”

“It’s me! I’m here!” said Reece urgently. “I don’t mind going in goal.”

“That wouldn’t work,” said Oliver. “I can’t see you. Whoever you are.”

“Can’t have an invisible goalie,” said Kai.

“That’d be useless,” said Joel. “Though come to think of it, you are anyway.”

“Hang on.” Oliver twirled the football in his hands, thinking, until he seemed to change his mind. “Yeah, all right, then. You can play.”

“Thanks!”

“You don’t have to go in goal,” said Oliver. “Midfield. Just watch out we don’t trip over you.” He nudged the others.

That nudge should have warned Reece; but it didn’t. It took a while for him to understand that he was still invisible.

When more children joined the game, Oliver passed the word on to them. And nobody passed the ball to Reece. Not once.

His team ignored him. No matter how loud he yelled or how vigorously he waved, he might as well have not been there at all.

“Who’s that shouting?” asked Oliver. He shielded his eyes and peered around. “I can’t see anyone!”

Joel put a hand to his ear. “Did I hear someone call?”

“Can’t have,” said Kai. “There’s no-one there.”

As for the other team, they took it up enthusiastically: after all, it was helping them to win.

So they decided that they couldn’t see Reece either. They barged into him, over him and through him like reckless dodgem drivers.

“Watch out! I can’t see you,” yelled Cody, as he ran across his legs and scythed him to the ground.

“Ouch! That was a foul!” protested Reece, struggling painfully to his feet.

“Oops, I just tackled the invisible man,” shouted Cody.

Reece hobbled to the sidelines.

“Prats,” said Seth who was standing there with Adam. “Come and play with us instead.”

Reece shook his head. Seth was a nerd. Adam was fat. They played weird and complicated games that involved pretending to be dolphins. They swooped and dived around the playground beeping, as if they were six. They were not cool.

His ankle was hurting really badly. He limped over to the doorway and sat down on the step to rub it.

“Those boys are *so* childish,” sighed Maya nearby with her gang of girls. “They are *such* idiots.” She rolled her eyes.

“Yeah,” said Reece, thinking, Great. So everyone’s been watching me get hacked to pieces and humiliated.

“You have to just ignore them, Reece.”

“Yeah,” said Reece again; but he meant No.

How could he ignore them? He wanted to *be* them. Kai and Joel were looking at him now, and pretending not to, and bursting into whoops of laughter.

Reece got up and limped into the school.

## Chapter Two

The classroom was silent. Reece mooched around it aimlessly, swinging between the empty chairs. He wasn’t meant to be here without permission from the teacher. But there was no way he was going back out into the playground to be mocked and ambushed.

He got his reading book out of his drawer, in case Miss Lewis came in, but he didn’t read. Instead, he looked at the sheet lying on his table.

His drawing *worked*. The face had nearly disappeared into its camouflage, like a leopard concealed amidst sun-dappled leaves.

Why couldn’t Oliver give him credit for that? Why couldn’t he just say Hey, that’s good? Why did he have to be so snide?

Reece picked up the pencil and shaded in a bit more, to make the illusion work even better. Miss Lewis might put it up on the wall.

That would show Oliver: or it ought to. Oliver was proud enough of his own Highwayman story that Miss Lewis had put on the wall yesterday.

Reece limped over to the display and read Oliver's story. It wasn't that great. Oliver couldn't spell *murder*, and he didn't have a clue about speech marks. They were all over the place, as if someone had dowsed the paper in a bucket of tadpoles.

And his drawing of a highwayman astride a large black horse looked like Batman on a giant demented spider.

On impulse, Reece took up a pen and wrote under the picture in big letters:

### **BATMAN RIDES A SPIDER**

The capital letters were to disguise his handwriting. Probably nobody would even notice it for days, anyway; but writing it made him feel better.

It made him feel better for at least three minutes, until the class came pouring in. Oliver glanced over at the wall and noticed it immediately.

"Miss Lewis!" he cried. "Someone's written all over my story. In ink!"

Miss Lewis looked, and frowned. "How unkind," she said severely. "Abby?"

"Not me," said Abby.

"No," said Miss Lewis, looking closer. "It *is* rather neat. Did anybody see who did this?"

Nobody had. So after Miss Lewis had stuck a strip of paper over the offending caption, she told everyone to sit back down, be quiet and prepare to draw and label eyeballs.

Oliver stared hard at Reece across the table. "It was you," he growled. "Wasn't it? You trashed my story."

"I can't have," Reece retorted. "I'm not here."

"It was *you*."

"Who? Who are you talking to? I'm not here. You said so yourself."

"You think you're so clever," hissed Oliver.

Well, that was the idea. Reece wanted to show Oliver's group that he could come up with a witty answer just like they could; and that he wasn't willing to be messed around. He thought he'd managed the whole lot in one go.

"It's ruined now," said Oliver. "And my dad hasn't even seen it. I wanted to show it him on Open Day."

"Prat," snapped Joel to Reece. "What did you do that for? You know his dad's away fighting in the army. He's been away for months."

“He’ll never see it now,” said Oliver dismally.

“Dumbo,” grunted Kai.

Reece had totally forgotten about Oliver’s dad. He could have kicked himself. Yet it had been one of the things that had first impressed him about Oliver – that he had a father on the frontline in Afghanistan.

His dad’s picture had been in the local paper, in uniform, with medals. He was a hero. Reece’s dad worked shifts in a bakery, and brought home stale doughnuts. Doughnuts didn’t compare with medals.

Joel said, “Your dad’s back next month, isn’t he, Oli? Isn’t that when his tour of duty finishes?”

“Yeah, but they might send him to GCHQ,” said Oliver. He sounded depressed.

“GCHQ?” said Reece, trying to show sympathy. “That’s the spy place, isn’t it?”

“Shut up,” said Oliver between clenched teeth. “I can’t hear you. I can’t see you. You’re not there.”

Reece shut up. He got on with drawing and labelling his eyeball, hoping that if he kept quiet, by lunchtime Oliver might just decide to drop the invisibility thing.

Oliver did not drop it. In any case, Kai and Joel would not have let him. So Reece continued to be invisible for the rest of the day.

By home time, he knew they were not going to let up any time soon; not since he’d written on Oliver’s Highwayman. He’d asked for it. He had it coming.

Reece slunk out of school hoping Dad wouldn’t be waiting for him. Although Mum was at work, Dad often came to meet him after his early shift at the bakery.

But Dad was too obviously not a hero. Reece did not want him to be there today.

As soon as he walked out of school, he saw Dad with his big daft grin almost as wide as the belly stretching his faded t-shirt.

“Doughnut?” Dad held out a paper bag.

“Not now,” said Reece, walking straight past him. He wanted to move on before Dad heard the others calling him.

Dad hurried after him. “Why the long face? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. You don’t have to come and meet me. I’m old enough to walk home by myself. Hardly any of the kids in my class get met.”



Oliver and Joel didn't get met. They were walking down the other side of the road together, looking over at Reece and his Dad, and laughing. Reece felt his face grow hot, and turned away.

"I like coming to meet you," Dad said. "So how was school?"

"All right."

"What did you do at playtime?" Dad sounded anxious. Reece knew what he really meant: *Have you made any friends yet?*

"I played football," he said.

"Oh, good!" Football equalled friends, in Dad's eyes. "Did you win?"

Reece shook his head. "I hurt my ankle." As he said it, his ankle immediately started throbbing. He began to limp.

"Poor you! We'll put a cold flannel on it, as soon as we get home." Dad sounded happier now that he knew why Reece was so long-faced. A bad ankle was a good excuse.

So Reece did not say anything to him about Oliver or being invisible.

There was no point; his father wouldn't understand. He wouldn't get it. He'd just wear that worried look of his, and say, you need to tell the teacher.

As if that would help.

### Chapter Three

Reece told the teacher. At least, he asked her if he could move back off Oliver's table. He didn't know how to explain why.

"You want to go back to Abby's table?" Miss Lewis said in disbelief. That was where he'd sat before. Abby's table was a shambles; it looked like an explosion in a pencil factory.

"I'd rather just sit on my own," he said.

"Are they not being nice to you, Reece?" she asked.

Reece glanced warily over at the three boys. He didn't want to be a tell-tale, because that would make things even worse. "It's not that."

"Then give it another go. It was you who wanted to move there. I can't have everyone changing tables every five minutes."

So Reece slowly plodded back to Oliver's table. And he might as well have told tales, for all the good it did him; because he was still invisible, as far as Oliver and Kai and Joel were concerned.

He tried to pretend he didn't care. He got his head down and got on with his maths, listening to Oliver chatting with his friends.

But whenever Reece reached for the ruler or turned his page, Oliver would glance at him through half-closed eyes and say,

"Did you see something move just then?"

"Nah," said Kai. "There's no-one there."

That was bad enough. Reece knew playtime would be worse. He couldn't face going outside and being invisible in front of the whole school.

Luckily his ankle gave him an excuse. Dad had put a big elastic bandage on it; so Reece pulled faces of agony until Miss Lewis relented and told him to stay in and read a book.

"We'll stay in with you," offered Seth. "Won't we, Adam?"

"No, you won't," Miss Lewis sharply contradicted him, somewhat to Reece's relief.

So at least there were no dolphins swooping round the classroom with him; but it was boring, staying inside on his own.

Although he tried to read, he couldn't concentrate. He felt slightly sick. Eventually he replaced his book in his drawer, got his lunchbox and nibbled at a sandwich to see if that would help.

It didn't. But Mum had put a chocolate bar in there, which was some consolation. Slumped despondently against the row of pupils' drawers, Reece was about to unwrap it when he heard footsteps just outside.

Eating in the classroom was forbidden. Quickly Reece slipped the chocolate into the nearest drawer behind his back.

However, it wasn't Miss Lewis who entered, or any of the other teachers: it was Oliver and Kai.

They ignored him pointedly. Reece slid away as Kai rummaged in his drawer.

"Can't find them! I must have left them at home," he complained.

"I've got some." Oliver pulled open his own drawer. He took out a pair of football gloves; and then, more slowly, Reece's bar of chocolate.

He held it up and turned it round.

"What's this doing in my drawer?" He looked at Reece.

"Are you talking to me?" said Reece. "I thought I wasn't here."

"Who put this in my drawer?"

“How should I know?”

“Was it you?” demanded Oliver.

“Me? Give you chocolate?” said Reece bitterly. He was furious that now Oliver had his bar of chocolate, on top of everything else. “I wouldn’t give you a mouldy sprout.”

“Hey, it’s probably one of the girls who fancies you,” said Kai to Oliver. “Come on! We’re missing the game.”

Oliver still looked bewildered, but he took the chocolate and ran out.

Reece felt like ripping the Highwayman right off the wall. It just wasn’t fair. He spent the rest of playtime fuming about the unfairness of it.

But at least the matter had one saving grace: it meant that it was the girls who copped for all Kai’s jokes that afternoon, not *him*. Although he still had to sit at their table and be invisible, Kai and Joel were more interested in solving the new mystery of Who Fancied Oliver.

“Was it you, Ruby? Hey, Lucy? Do you like Oliver? Maya, was it you?” persisted Kai.

“In your dreams,” said Maya haughtily.

But Kai wouldn’t give up.

“Lauren? Samara? Did you give Oliver a bar of chocolate?”

“No way!”

“Perhaps it was Abby,” murmured Joel.

Kai snorted with laughter, and called across the classroom. “Hey, Abby! You want to go out with Oliver?”

Abby looked up. She was small and scruffy, as if she was practising to be a scarecrow. “I might,” she said.

“Woo-hoo!” jeered Kai.

“Is Oliver any good at ping-pong?” demanded Abby.

“Ping-pong?” said Oliver.

“Archery? Scuba diving? Forget it, then. Kate might go out with you, though.”

Her friend Kate blushed and shook her head.

Joel pounced. “Kate! It was Kate.”

“It wasn’t,” said Kate, almost too quietly to hear.

“Leave it,” said Oliver. He was uncomfortable, and Reece was glad.

“I reckon it was Kate. She’s the third prettiest in the class,” said Joel approvingly. Reece thought that grading girls was an ignorant thing to do, and that anyway Kate was the prettiest, although she was also as wet as a soggy sponge.

“Leave it,” repeated Oliver, sounding tense. “It wasn’t Kate.”

“You know who it was, then? Who was it, Oli?”

Oliver just shook his head. Reece, invisible and ignored across the table, knew that Oliver was baffled.

Good. Let him be baffled. Reece liked to see him baffled.

And he began to plot how to baffle Oliver some more.

## Chapter Four

“Reece? We’re writing a newsletter for the open day. Do you want to come and help us?” Maya was using her persuasive voice, the one as smooth and sweet as honey, that she normally used on Miss Lewis.

“Why me?” said Reece.

“Because you’re good at English. And you’re good in a team,” said Maya.

Joel laughed.

“I don’t know,” said Reece. He didn’t understand why she was asking him.

Maya turned to Oliver. “Will you help us too, Oli? I’d like to run an article on your dad, about life on the frontline.”

So that was it; she was peacemaking, thought Reece, trying to get them to work together. Maya loved to organise people.

“No,” said Oliver shortly.

“But—”

“My dad wants to be private.”

“But he had his picture in the paper,” objected Maya.

“Yeah, well, that was enough for him. He won’t want to be in a school newsletter.”

“At least you could ask him, next time you talk!”

Oliver shook his head decidedly. “He’ll say no.”

Maya rolled her eyes and turned back to Reece.

“No,” said Reece. “Thanks, but no. So if that’s what’s stopping Oliver from helping you, he doesn’t need to worry. He won’t need to work with me.”

He thought this might make him sound self-sacrificing and heroic, but Oliver just said, “Who?” and Maya said “Honestly!” and tossed her head, exasperated.

Reece knew that Maya had offered him a lifeline. All the same, he didn’t want to take it. Maybe she was trying to be kind, but it was a rather imperious form of kindness.

Maya scared him slightly. She always listened intently to Miss Lewis and worked hard, but she was not a nerd like Seth. She was clever and confident, accustomed to laying down the law. Not many people dared to disagree with her.

Certainly none of the group she roped in to write her newsletter were likely to risk doing so. And Maya persuaded Miss Lewis – as only she could – that they were responsible enough to stay in the classroom during playtimes to work on it.

“We won’t be any trouble,” she told Miss Lewis. “You can trust us.”

“I can trust you,” repeated Miss Lewis, as if Maya had done a Jedi mind trick on her.

Maya turned in triumph to Reece. “So you might as well join us, Reece. You’ll be staying in anyway, if your ankle’s still bad.”

It wasn’t. None the less, Reece had persuaded his Dad to re-wrap the bandage round it last night, and had pretended so much pain that Dad had offered him a warm bath and a blueberry muffin. How was a muffin supposed to help a twisted ankle?

“His ankle’s fine,” said Kai. “He’s just a wimp.”

“Who’s a wimp?” retorted Reece. “You can’t see me. Or had you forgotten? You’ve got the memory of a goldfish, that’s your trouble. Five seconds round the bowl and ooh, where am I?”

“Oh, stop it,” said Maya. “You can suit yourself.”

So Reece stayed in alongside, but not with, the newsletter group. It had one great advantage. It provided Reece with cover in his campaign to baffle Oliver.

For he had come to school that morning armed with baffling gifts.

Toffees. Bubble-gum. Football stickers. A pencil sharpener disguised as a revolving skull, because Oliver had admired one like it. Nobody could possibly accuse him of doing anything wrong. All he was doing was giving nice things to Oliver.

All of these things were small enough to post into Oliver’s drawer without even needing to open it. He could slip them in unnoticed as he walked past.

And with Maya's group in the classroom, he was never alone. He always had an alibi. Alibis didn't come any more assertive than Maya.

So when, after playtime, Oliver opened first his drawer, and then his mouth, and then held up the pack of stickers to say, bewildered, "Who put *this* here?" – Reece was last in the line of possible suspects.

Everyone denied all knowledge, including him. Maya swore that nobody had opened Oliver's drawer while she'd been in the room and why on earth would *she* want to give him football stickers?

"I don't even like football," she said.

"That's not the point," said Oliver.

"Then what is the point?"

The point was that Oliver liked football. And bubble-gum and novelty pencil-sharpeners. Reece knew Oliver did not suspect him of being the giver, because after all, why would Reece give him something nice? Anyone could have done it when the class barged in after playtime in a jostling crowd.

"Someone wants to be your girlfriend!" insisted Joel, sniggering. Oliver glanced around at all the girls as if trying to work it out.

But now all the girls were being careful not to be too nice to Oliver in case he thought they were The One; because then there would be no let-up in the jokes and sniggers. So they would hardly even look at him.

In consequence, Oliver was so baffled by the gifts that nobody would admit to giving him, that Reece, while acting bored and sulky, was highly gratified.

He had chosen well. Yet he could choose still better, and baffle Oliver some more.

He'd been saving up his pocket money for the holiday; but he could always get some holiday spends off Dad. Dad was soft like that.

So on Saturday Reece emptied his moneybox shaped like a turtle and got the bus over to the parade of shops on the other side of town, where he would meet nobody he knew.

There he spent a surprisingly pleasant hour choosing baffling gifts for Oliver. It was almost as enjoyable as picking them for himself.

He chose carefully. A four-colour pen. A stunt yoyo. A mouth-organ that played in tune. He even shelled out for a cute red Tamagotchi which looked like a cross between a strawberry and a meerkat.

It wasn't really a waste of his money. He had a go on the mouth-organ, and tried out all the yoyo stunts, before he took the baffling gifts to school and slipped them, one each day, into Oliver's drawer.

And with each baffling gift, he saw Oliver's face caught between pleasure and incomprehension. He saw how Oliver hesitated before pulling his drawer open, not knowing what he'd find. Each gift bothered him more and more.

Oliver tried to talk to Miss Lewis about them. Reece, watching from the corner of his eye, could see how Oliver stumbled and stammered over his words. The teacher's answer rang out clearly.

"I'm not quite sure what you're complaining about, Oliver." Turning to the class, she held up the yoyo. "This was in Oliver's drawer. Does anybody know who it belongs to?"

"I'll have it if he doesn't want it," offered Cody.

"But nobody's claiming it? Then you may as well keep it, Oliver. Just don't play with it in class."

She gave the yoyo back to Oliver, who took it as gingerly as if it was a hand grenade. He did not attempt to ask Miss Lewis again.

By Thursday, Oliver was setting spies. Kai lounged against the classroom door at playtime, spying on the newsletter group, until Maya went to fetch a teacher to shoo him out.

Then Joel kept peering in through the window.

"Go away!" cried Maya, jumping up to bang on the glass. Joel crossed his eyes and mouthed rude words, making Lucy shriek and run for a teacher again. And while everyone's attention was on them, into Oliver's drawer slid the Tamagotchi, quite unseen.

The Tamagotchi made Oliver gasp.

He really liked the Tamagotchi; and he didn't want to like it. He turned it over and over in his hands. He would have loved it, Reece could tell – if he only knew where it had come from.

The Tamagotchi was the best baffling gift so far, precisely because Oliver loved it so. Reece wasn't sure how he could top that, certainly not without spending a lot of money that he didn't have.

But now he had power over Oliver. He had caught him like a helpless fish on a hook, and he didn't want to let him go.

It was time for the next step.

## Chapter Five

What should the next step be? Reece mulled it over.

He could own up to the baffling gifts, and watch Oliver squirm as he realised that the giver was the very boy he'd been rudely ignoring. Oliver might realize his mistake and humbly ask to be his friend.

On the other hand, he might not. And Kai and Joel certainly wouldn't. They would tease Reece without mercy.

Reece could take the opposite approach. Having lulled Oliver into the expectation of delightful gifts, he could now suddenly shock him with a dead rat.

But this was problematic too. Quite apart from the difficulties of getting hold of a dead rat, if Oliver found one in his drawer all fingers would immediately point at Reece: because everyone knew that he and Oliver were enemies.

And then nobody would believe he'd given Oliver the chocolate and the pen and the Tamagotchi and everything else, and all his previous bafflements would have been wasted.

Reece thought of just dropping the whole thing. Now that his ankle was obviously better, he had no excuse to stay in at playtimes and post gifts. He started hanging around with Seth and Adam, despite his misgivings. While this involved a certain amount of beeping, it was better than being on his own.

But in class he was still stuck with Oliver, Kai and Joel. Miss Lewis would not let him change tables.

She did not hear the taunts of "I can't see you. You're not there." They said it quietly; but they still said it. And every time they said it, Reece felt his insides shrink and tighten up as if there was a miniature black hole inside his stomach, sucking up all joy and gladness.

So his Next Step was still undecided when Miss Lewis announced a surprise Spelling Test.

Reece was not afraid of spelling tests. But from the expression on his face, Oliver was. When Miss Lewis moved them all around the classroom so that they could not copy, Reece was close enough to Oliver to see his fear.

"These are all spellings that you should know from your homework," said Miss Lewis, and began to announce the list of words slowly and clearly like an actor. At the same time, she strode around the classroom marking books and commenting on who had learnt their spellings properly.



“Well done, Maya,” she said, moved on and paused at Oliver’s side. She looked at his book.

“What. On. Earth,” she began, and everyone turned round to gaze at Oliver. He was going red.

What happened next was an accident. Reece didn’t mean to do it.

He had just been playing with his pencil when it flew out of his hand, somersaulting like an acrobat, and hit Abby on the back of the neck: which meant that Abby screamed like a mad banshee and turned round to kick Cody who was sitting just behind her.

“For goodness sake!” Miss Lewis cried, exasperated, as she marched over to them. In sorting out the argument that followed, she forgot all about Oliver and his spelling.

But Reece did not. Watching Oliver’s face, he saw relief there.

Then Reece knew how to continue baffling Oliver. He could still give him presents – but of a different sort.

At first, he just watched Oliver carefully to see what he might need. He learnt to watch him without looking at him; and saw that Oliver liked to get things right, and tried to cover up when they were wrong.

Oliver got more things wrong than Reece would have expected. He had thought that Oliver was clever.

But now he saw that Oliver copied off Joel in maths, and Joel let him. He saw that Oliver, while pretending to despise the star chart, twice picked up a star that had fallen on the floor and stuck it surreptitiously next to his name.

The stars were for effort. Oliver did not put in a great deal of effort. He spent a lot of time staring blankly at the wall, and got told off. He did not listen to Miss Lewis’s instructions, and had to ask Kai and Joel what he was supposed to do.

And then he didn’t do it properly, and got told off again. He forgot to do his homework, and got told off some more.

Yet Reece saw that Oliver hated being told off. It made him as miserable as a scolded puppy.

Oliver hadn’t been that forgetful at the start of term. Miss Lewis commented on it.

“I shall have to have a word with your parents, Oliver, if you don’t buck up your ideas,” she said.

Oliver did not answer. He looked down at the table, tense and tired, as if he had things on his mind. Reece was pretty sure he knew what those things were. A Tamagotchi, for one.

Next morning, when he saw Oliver peer at the homework tray and pull an anguished face, Reece was prepared.

For their homework, Miss Lewis had asked them all to write a story about a river journey. Reece had written two. One, by hand, for himself: and one, printed off on the computer and with Oliver's name at the top, just in case Oliver forgot. Now he dropped both in the homework tray.

The story he'd written for Oliver was quite good, apart from the random speech marks and some carefully dodgy spelling. Reece had even put in an ox-bow lake to please Miss Lewis.

"Can I bring my story in tomorrow, Miss?" muttered Oliver, shame-faced. "I forgot."

"What are you talking about, Oliver? I've got yours here." She shook the sheaf of papers at him.

Now Oliver was really baffled. And when Miss Lewis handed them back out, Reece, across the table, read upside-down the words in green ink on the sheet she gave to Oliver:

*Very nice work, Oliver. I liked your description of an ox-bow lake! This is a big improvement.*

"But, Miss..." said Oliver. His voice tailed away.

"Lovely descriptive writing, Oliver. I'm giving you a star for effort."

Reece did not get a star: his sheet just said, *Good Work*. But he felt as satisfied as if he'd won a dozen stars himself.

"Hey, Oliver?" said Maya, in her wheedling voice. "You really should be in our newsletter group. I wish you'd write us an article about your dad. You could do it better than anybody else."

Oliver shook his head.

Reece, however, made a resolution. If he could fool Miss Lewis, why shouldn't he fool Maya?

He started work on the article that evening.

It wasn't hard to find the facts about Oliver's father. Sitting at the computer in his dining room, he looked up the story from the local paper online.

It told him the regiment that Oliver's dad was in, so then he looked that up as well, and discovered that they were no longer fighting in Afghanistan but back in England.

He didn't think Oliver's dad was back at home yet, though. From what he'd overheard, Oliver hadn't seen him lately. Maybe he'd been posted somewhere else.

“What’s that you’re doing, son?”

The soft, husky voice was his own dad’s. It was one of Mum’s evenings for working in the supermarket.

“It’s homework,” said Reece shortly. He wished Dad wouldn’t call him *son*. He had a name. And he wished Dad wouldn’t peer over his shoulder at the screen like that.

“About the army?”

“It’s for a newsletter.”

“Oh. Want an éclair?”

“No, Dad.”

Dad shuffled around a bit behind him. “Everything all right at school, son?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I was just wondering. You seem a bit... distracted.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re happy there, are you? How’s that lad Seth you’ve made friends with? You want to invite him home sometime?”

“Maybe.” Reece wasn’t thinking about Seth. He was thinking about Oliver. He gazed intently at the screen, wishing Dad would get off his case and go away.

Eventually, Dad did. And Reece wrote his article, or rather, Oliver’s. On the internet, he found quite a lot about life on the frontline in Afghanistan: the stifling heat, the tedium, the jokes, the constant need to be alert.

All this went into his article. Reece thought hard about how it would feel to have a dad away and fighting in the army.

A mixture of pride and fear, he thought. Wishing he wasn’t in the army, yet being sort of glad that he was. More than anything, just wanting him to get safely home.

Finally, he decided on a heading.

*My father is a hero...*

Reece sighed. If only. But who would want to read an article about a bakery shift supervisor? *My father is a zero.*

He put the thought away and switched on the printer.

## Chapter Six

After considering different ways to get the article to Maya, he settled for the easiest.

Which was simply to drop it on the floor in the book corner when nobody was looking and wait for someone else to find it, five minutes later. It was folded in half with MAYA written on the outside. When Kate picked it up she handed it straight over.

“Brilliant,” said Maya. “Thanks, Oliver. I’m glad you changed your mind.”

“What about?”

She waved it at him. “This thing about your dad. Just what I wanted.”

“What thing? Let me see that.”

As Oliver read, Reece watched his face, reflected in the window. Oliver was incredulous, and dismayed. Reece understood the incredulity; but not the dismay. There was nothing nasty in the article – quite the opposite. If anything, he’d gone a bit over the top about how wonderful Oliver’s father was.

“What’s wrong?” said Maya. “I think it’s really good. Especially that bit about how it feels when you watch the news.”

“But I didn’t...” Oliver stopped and drew a deep breath. “I didn’t write this,” he muttered.

Maya looked sceptical. “Then who did? Your invisible twin? Or have you got a fan club?”

“What?”

Maya rolled her eyes. “It’s a bit late to change your mind about it now. I’m going to use it anyway.”

“But you can’t!”

“Why not?”

“It’s not by me!”

“Then I’ll put it in the third person,” Maya said impatiently. “I’ll put *Oliver feels proud yet anxious* instead of *I feel proud yet anxious*.”

Mission accomplished, Reece thought. Oliver looked as if his insides were tied in a tight, immovable knot. Invisible twin! That was a good one.

Well, the invisible twin wasn’t done with Oliver yet.

He was still watching Oliver, and learning. He knew about the chewing gum Oliver had stuck under the art table. He knew about the school scissors that he'd hoarded in his drawer, decent scissors always being in short supply.

He knew that Oliver was secretly rather fond of his little sister Chloe, who was five and longed for a pet hamster. He knew that Oliver was reading up on Hamsters and Small Pets in the school library and had considered buying Jack's hamster cage.

He knew that Oliver was vain about his hair, and while unafraid of worms, was not keen on moths. He knew there was a mobile phone hidden in the depths of Oliver's rucksack – although mobiles were forbidden in school – and that Oliver sometimes checked it when he thought that he was unobserved.

But Oliver was never unobserved. Reece felt as if he was growing a thousand extra eyes all round his head, like the bees' eyes with their myriad lenses which Miss Lewis had taught them about. He saw everything.

In maths, he noticed Oliver copying off Joel again. Joel was too quick for him; finishing the row of sums, he turned the page.

“Hang on. Wait for me!” hissed Oliver.

“You'll catch up,” Joel said carelessly. He wouldn't turn the page back. He was getting a bit impatient of Oliver's constant copying these days.

Oliver looked across at Reece's book instead. Reece curled his hand around it like a shield.

Oliver looked at Kai's. Kai let him copy, but Kai was worse at maths than Oliver was. Reece saw the mistakes growing on his page.

And a whole page of copied wrong answers, he knew, was much more obvious to a teacher's eye than a page of copied right ones. Kai and Oliver had twelve identical wrong answers. Miss Lewis would hit the roof.

“Lunchtime,” said Miss Lewis. “Put your books on the pile for marking.”

Reece glanced around. In the flurry to go for lunch, nobody was paying him any attention. So he swapped his book for Oliver's on the pile and sat down again with Oliver's book open in front of him.

“Nearly finished,” he told Kate who was collecting pencils. It only took him half a minute to correct ten of the twelve wrong answers and slide the book back into the middle of the pile.

That would be a nice surprise for Oliver, he thought. Or a surprise, certainly. Reece looked forward to seeing his confusion when the book got handed back.

After lunch, however, it was not the maths books that got handed round, but sheets of thin white card.

“We’re making invitations for your parents to the Open Day,” announced Miss Lewis, “in your best handwriting. Who needs two cards? Cody, Florence, Abby, Paula, Courtney, Jack, I know about. Anybody else?”

What she meant was: whose parents are divorced? Or separated, or just living somewhere else? The numbers changed all the time, and Miss Lewis was not always kept informed.

Max put his hand up and waved it, reluctantly.

“I only need one now,” said Cody blithely. “My dad’s done a runner to Northampton.”

“Give your second card to Oliver,” advised Miss Lewis. “I know his father’s still away. Or is he back in England now, Oliver?”

Oliver paused. “He’s back in England now,” he muttered.

“That’s excellent! It must be nice to have him home again.”

“He’s at GCHQ,” said Joel. “Isn’t that right, Oliver?”

“Um...yeah.”

“Busy man!” Miss Lewis said. “Do you think he’ll make it to the Open Day, then, Oliver?”

“Dunno,” said Oliver, almost inaudibly. “He’s. He’s pretty tied up right now.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” said Miss Lewis, and she changed the subject.

But Reece was instantly alert. He sensed that Oliver was worried. Something was up.

The question was, what?

## Chapter Seven

“How did that essay go?” asked Reece’s dad.

“Essay?”

“The thing about the army.”

“Oh. That wasn’t an *essay*. That was an *article*.”

Dad waited. He said after a while, “You put a lot of work into it.”

“Yeah.”

“I read it after you’d finished, son.”

“You what?”

“You left it open on the computer. I saved it for you. Thought you might need it.”

“Dad! That was private!” protested Reece, frantically racking his brains to think if he’d used Oliver’s name, or his father’s, anywhere. He didn’t think he had.

“I thought it was very good,” said Dad. “You’ve got a way with words. Don’t know where you get it from. Not me, that’s for sure.”

Reece shrugged.

“Was it about a real person?” asked Dad.

“It was just a story.”

“I thought it was for a newsletter.”

Reece realised that Dad might see the newsletter on Open Day. “Well, it was sort of about somebody else, because he didn’t want to write it himself.”

“I hope he liked it.”

“He should have,” said Reece shortly.

“Didn’t he, then?”

“He’s worried about his dad,” Reece blurted out. He didn’t know why.

“Well, that’s understandable.”

“No, his dad’s back in England now. He’s not fighting any more. But he’s still worried about him.”

Reece’s father was silent for a moment. Then he said, “War can change people. They can get injured, obviously.”

Reece hadn’t even thought about that. Obvious, though, wasn’t it? His mouth fell open slightly as images of blood and bandages swept through his head. But surely Oliver would have told his friends if his father had got injured?

Meanwhile Dad went on,

“Sometimes war can do things to people that you can’t see. Living through war can affect the way people think. The way they feel. They see some dreadful things happen. It can cause something called post-traumatic stress.”

Reece hadn’t thought of that either. But he had heard of it. It meant crazy.

“I’m not saying anything like that has happened to your friend’s father.”

“He’s not my—” Reece shut up, just in time. Dad didn’t notice; he was looking serious.

“And you might not want to ask him,” he went on. “It must be a difficult time for him. So the best thing is just be thoughtful, okay? Be supportive. Be there for him if he needs you.”

Reece felt like pulling a sick-making face, but decided this would not be a good idea.

“Sure,” he said.

“Good lad.” Dad’s big hand rested on his shoulder. “I knew something was bugging you. It’s nice that you care so much about your friends.”

If only you knew, thought Reece. But Dad knew nothing.

Reece felt a wave of unexpected anger rush through him. *Why* did Dad know nothing? Why couldn’t he spot that Reece was being tormented? Why didn’t he understand what it was like? Why couldn’t he just stop harping on about him making friends?

Dad didn’t have a clue, that was the trouble. He had no idea what really went on at school.

“Spag bol for tea?” Dad asked.

“Yeah, sure.”

“You going to come and help me make it?”

Reece hesitated. If he went and chopped onions for Dad, he’d only end up being interrogated about Seth and Adam, and would he like them to come over? He didn’t need it.

“I’ve got homework.” He pulled his spelling book out of his rucksack.

But he didn’t do his spellings. Dad had given him a few ideas to think about. And the more he thought about them, the likelier it seemed.

*Crazy...*



## Chapter Eight

“How’s GCHQ?” he asked Oliver the next day. From the wary way that Oliver glanced up at him he knew that he was on to something. He guessed what the answer would be even before Oliver muttered:

“He’s not there any more. They’ve moved him somewhere else. But it’s secret. He’s not allowed to tell us.”

“He’s okay, though, is he?” said Reece. He was just being thoughtful and supportive, like his Dad had said.

“What do you care?”

“Hey,” said Joel. “Who? We can’t see him, remember? He’s not there.”

“Oh, give it a rest,” said Oliver, and he walked away. Reece didn’t know who he was talking to.

In one way, it didn’t matter any more. Because Ben – the fourth boy at the table – came back to school that morning, minus his appendix, and Reece finally got moved to another table where he sat with Adam, Seth and Cody. Cody was a pain and Seth was a bit weird, but Adam wasn’t bad.

And because Ben, pale and good-natured, didn’t understand the whole business of Not Seeing Reece, it got dropped over the next day or two.

But Reece was still watching Oliver.

It was a habit that he couldn’t stop. He was interested: he wanted to know what Oliver was thinking.

He saw that Oliver liked Ben the best of all his friends, and although that shouldn’t have surprised him, it did make him feel a little clenched inside. He wished that Oliver could have liked him, Reece, better. It was too late now.

No matter how he watched and listened, though, he could not learn Oliver’s secret. Nobody could. Not even Ben. When Ben asked, “So where’s your Dad now, Oli?” he got the same reply as Reece had: it was a secret.

Reece could guess that secret. A hospital. A funny farm. A loony bin. Wherever it was, in Oliver’s eyes it was not good; that much was clear. He glanced again at Oliver.

“Pay attention, Reece!” Miss Lewis snapped. “You’re dreaming. It’s no wonder you haven’t finished yet. Whereas Oliver’s maths has improved a good deal in the last few days. Well done, Oliver.”

Oliver smiled faintly, pleased though baffled; and Reece had to stay in the classroom while the others went into dinner, in order to finish his maths.

“I’ll wait for you,” said Adam.

“No, it’s okay,” said Reece. He wanted Adam to go away.

“I don’t mind waiting.”

“I won’t be long.” He bent over his book until eventually Adam left.

Once Reece was alone, it only took him two minutes to finish his sums. It took him another two to leaf through Oliver’s book, again, and pull a face at Oliver’s answers. Oliver had been copying off Ben today.

Reece corrected most of the wrong answers before replacing the book. Then he went off to the cloakroom.

There he paused, lunchbox in hand. Oliver’s rucksack dangled temptingly from its peg, half-open. There was nobody around.

Reece did not give himself time to think properly about it. He just did it. He plunged his hand into Oliver’s rucksack, feeling for the mobile phone.

After all, hadn’t Dad read his private work on the computer? This was nearly the same thing. And he *needed to know*.

His fingers met Oliver’s mobile. He pulled it out, switched it on and checked for texts.

Sure enough, there were two from Oliver’s dad. The first said:

*Will get there for yr open day promise give you a ring Thurs Dad X*

and the second said:

*Tell who you like. Im not ashamed of it.*

With no X.

Reece checked the outbox. Nothing there. So Oliver hadn’t replied to his dad, or had deleted his replies.

He switched the phone off and dropped it back into the rucksack. As he turned to leave the cloakroom, he caught sight of his face in the mirror.

What made Oliver so determined not to see him?

He studied himself in the mirror, not something he did often. It was not a kindly face that looked out at him: it was too sharp and speculative.

But Reece *was* being kind. He was doing Oliver all these favours; he’d given him all those gifts. Like some benevolent classroom god, he was solving Oliver’s problems for him, invisibly.

And for as long as Oliver kept ignoring him, he’d keep being an invisible god. He’d keep pulling Oliver’s strings.

“Reece? Did you finish your maths?”

He whirled away from the mirror. “Yes, Miss Lewis.”

“I meant what I said this morning, Reece. You’re spending too much time dreaming. What are you doing in here?”

“Um. I thought I had a nosebleed. But I haven’t.”

She paused. "Is anything bothering you?"

"No." Only Oliver's dad. His brain began to tick over. According to the texts, Oliver's dad would be at the Open Day. *I'm not ashamed*. Ashamed of what? Of being a mental case?

But Oliver was ashamed, that much was clear. He shouldn't be, thought Reece. It wasn't his dad's fault, was it? Even if he was a loony, he was a soldier, with medals; he was a hero. Oliver should be aware of that.

"Are you sure?"

"What?" said Reece. "Oh, yes, thanks."

Miss Lewis sighed. "All right, then. Off you go to dinner."

## Chapter Nine

Open Day was fast approaching. Maya's newsletter was finished, and circulated round the class.

Reece read it. It was not at all what he had expected.

"You can't write that!" he protested, horrified.

"Write what?" asked Maya sleekly.

"All that about the army! Saying they shouldn't really be there fighting, and listing all the things they've done wrong. All this about war crimes!"

"Why not? It's true. It's only fair to show the other side."

"But, but I didn't know you were going to write *that*, when I—"

"When you what?" demanded Maya.

Reece gaped at her dumbly.

"And where's my trophy?" put in Abby. "I can't find anything about my trophy."

"Back page," said Maya dismissively. "At the bottom."

"Plungedogs," said Abby.

"But what will Oliver think?" cried Reece. "What will his Dad think, when he reads it? You might as well say his Dad's a criminal!"

"I have not said anything like that at all," replied Maya in a huff, and she snatched the newsletter off him and carried it away.

When Oliver picked up the newsletter, Reece watched him anxiously.

But Oliver shrugged and put it down again. He did not seem to care what Maya had written.

In fact, he didn't seem to care about the Open Day at all, although everyone else was busy frantically finishing off pieces of work to go on display, and helping Miss Lewis clothe the classroom walls with paintings, pie charts, graphs, and yards of Best Italic Handwriting.

The Open Day was actually a Friday afternoon. All parents were invited, and grandparents.

"My grandma can't come," said Seth. It seemed to really worry him.

"You can borrow mine," said Adam. "She'll like that." Reece had begun to notice that Adam looked after Seth. He tried to make Seth happy, even if it meant beeping all through playtime.

"Are yours coming?" Adam asked Reece.

"Just my Mum and Dad. My grandparents live too far away."

"Do you want to borrow my Nana, too?"

"No, that's okay." Reece wasn't that excited about seeing his parents at the Open Day. After all, there wasn't much new to show them.

They already knew that Reece was clever. They knew what his drawings and his writing looked like; and they knew that although he was good at English, he couldn't sing, and would be miming through the juniors' concert.

On the other hand, Reece *was* interested in seeing Oliver's mum and dad. He wondered if his dad would wear his soldier's uniform and his medals. He had never seen Oliver's parents before.

The Open Day arrived. The school doors were thrown open to the eager crowd outside. It was practically a stampede.

Reece's Mum and Dad had come early, as Mum would have to leave early too, to go to work.

"But I can stay right to the end," said Dad.

"You don't have to," pleaded Reece.

"No, that's all right. I brought some doughnuts. Fresh ones!" Dad flourished a crumpled paper bag.

"What for?"

"I thought you might like to give them to your friends."

Reece hid the doughnuts in his drawer. Then he stood around impatiently as Dad insisted on inspecting every picture, pie chart, graph and yard of Best Italic Handwriting.

To be fair, it wasn't just his own dad. The room was crammed with parents all going Oooh! in proud, admiring tones, like a field full of delighted cows.

Dad pounced on a copy of the newsletter. "Hey, here's that article you wrote! It looks good, doesn't it? Front page and everything! I hope your friend was pleased with it."

"Sure," said Reece. "Come over here and see my river diagram." He hastily pulled Dad away before Oliver came in.

Which he did, five minutes later, with his parents behind him. Reece studied them intently.

Although he wasn't wearing his uniform or his medals, Oliver's dad looked just as soldierly as in his picture in the paper. He was tall, tough and handsome. Oliver's mum held one of his hands and little Chloe clasped the other, like a portrait of a perfect happy family. The resemblance between Oliver and his dad was obvious.

Except for one difference. They were all laughing except for Oliver. Oliver looked as if he had a headache and a toothache and a stomach ache all rolled into one.

Oliver's mum read his highwayman story and did the Oohing thing. Meanwhile Oliver's dad picked up a copy of the newsletter and carefully read the article about himself.

When he looked up, he was grinning. "Flattering!" he said to Oliver.

Oliver said nothing. His dad put a hand on his shoulder. "Oli, I'm really touched by that."

Oliver still said nothing. After a few seconds he moved away.

Reece wondered if he'd been right about Oliver's dad. Could he be crazy? He looked okay. If he had been ill, he was back to normal now. There was certainly nothing about him for Oliver to be ashamed of.

So why was Oliver being so cold with him? Maybe they'd had an argument. Because something was badly wrong.

Puzzled, Reece kept glancing over at Oliver, trying to work out what was going on. After weeks of watching Oliver, he'd got attuned to him; he'd learnt to tell what Oliver was thinking. But now he couldn't.

Miss Lewis clapped her hands and everyone stopped talking.

"Please could I ask all parents to make their way to the hall for the junior concert," she announced.

The parents were herded out. The children lined up by the door. Reece got in the line just behind Oliver. He didn't think Oliver even noticed he was there.

For Oliver seemed to be sleepwalking. He stumbled twice on the way down the corridor. In the hall, he had to be shuffled into position by Miss Lewis. The music started, but he failed to sing.

Reece was miming for all he was worth, but his mind was on Oliver. He could see from the corner of his eye that Oliver wasn't miming. He wasn't even pretending to sing. He just stood there like a statue through all four songs. It must have been quite obvious to the audience.

At last, to loud applause, the children began to troop out of the hall again. Reece stared at the back of Oliver's head, trying to read his mind.

Although they were supposed to march straight back to the classrooms, this proved impossible. They were waylaid by a mass of proud parents who got in the way. Reece could see his own dad, wearing his big, daft smile, trying to push through the crowd towards him. Oliver's dad pushed through more powerfully, and reached Oliver.

"Why weren't you singing?" he asked.

Oliver said nothing. He didn't even look at his dad.

"Why weren't you singing?" said his dad again.

Oliver still said nothing. Reece saw his shoulders hunch.

"I want an answer!" said his dad.

And then the answer came bursting out of Oliver.

"Why do you think?" he shouted. "Because you've come with *her* instead of Mum!"

"Hey," said his dad. "This doesn't mean that I don't love you. We're still a family."

"*No, we're not,*" said Oliver. His voice was high and strange.

"Oli, I know you're feeling a little strange about it all just now—"

"Stop telling me what I'm feeling!"

"Look, I'm still your dad."

"Not any more," cried Oliver. "You don't exist! I can't see you! You're not my dad. You're *nothing*. You're not there!"

And he pushed wildly through the crowd, ran off down the corridor, and disappeared.

## Chapter Ten

Oliver's father tried to follow him; but the crowd was thick, and he couldn't push through.

"What was all that about?" asked Seth, trapped behind Reece.

Reece could not answer. He felt thunderstruck, and dumb.

"That's not his mum who came," said Abby, further back. "His dad's got a girlfriend. So has my dad, but I told her not to turn up here or I'd glue her handbags to the ceiling."

"Don't you like her?" Cody asked.

"She's all right," said Abby. "But I like Mum better."

Reece stared at Oliver's dad, who was running his hands through his hair and craning his head to look for Oliver.

Oliver had disappeared. His father stood there, stuck, not knowing where to go.

Suddenly, though, Reece knew. He slipped out of the line, wriggled through the queuing children and hurried down the corridor.

He ran past the empty classrooms and the cloakrooms all the way to the deserted library. The door was slightly open: he crept in.

There, next to the shelf of Hamsters and Small Pets, sat Oliver.

His head was down on the table, hidden by his arms. His sobs were loud and anguished in the silent room.

Reece stood there for a moment. He did not know what to do. He wished he could give Oliver something that would help; a happy family wrapped up in a box, perhaps, and tied with ribbon. Something to stop the wrenching sobs, and make Oliver look up and smile.

That was impossible, though. His baffling gifts now seemed a mean and petty trick. They had not solved Oliver's problems: they'd just given him more to worry about when he already had too much.

Even the corrected sums had not been kind. It would have been more helpful if he'd shown Oliver how to get them right... Only Oliver would not have let him.

He could think of nothing that would comfort Oliver. Oliver would not want comfort from him anyway. Oliver would not want him there at all.

So after a moment Reece crept away again, leaving the dreadful sobs behind, and very quietly closed the library door.

He walked back slowly through the school. He was trying to imagine what it felt like: as if your house turned inside out, he thought, and maybe upside down as well, and left you clinging to the walls. At least Dad was not likely to do *that*.

When he walked past Chloe's classroom he spotted Oliver's dad, who was admiring wobbly clay dinosaurs with Chloe and his girlfriend. He looked as sick as a dog.

Reece paused. What would Oliver want? Probably not his father, not right now.

So he trudged on, and eventually made his way to his own class, where his dad was chatting with Adam's parents.

Dad grinned at Reece. "Great concert, son! Mum's had to go to work, but she said to tell you she enjoyed it."

"Have you seen Miss Lewis?" asked Reece.

"She was in here a moment ago. Are you okay? Is there something wrong?"

"I'm fine," said Reece. He was glad that Dad had noticed, though; and that Dad had asked how he was feeling, instead of telling him.

"I'd better just go and find her," he added, for he thought he ought to let Miss Lewis know that Oliver was sobbing in the library. That wasn't tale-telling. It was too important.

But before he could go and hunt for her, Oliver came back in.

His eyes were a bit red and his face very pale; other than that, he looked almost normal. He went into the art area and stood fiddling with the brushes.

Nobody took any notice of him, apart from Reece. Reece's dad and Adam's mother were busy exchanging compliments about each other's children.

"Lovely pie chart," said Reece's dad.

"Beautiful diagram," said Adam's mum.

Reece's dad flushed with pleasure. "I really don't know where he gets his brains from! He wrote this article about a soldier's life, you know. Researched it all himself and everything."

And he picked up the newsletter and pointed to the article, to show her.

Oliver saw him. Oliver heard him. Oliver looked at Reece with wide, red eyes.

Reece could have sworn he felt his heart leap up into his mouth. Something certainly did, and lodged itself in a nervous lump in his throat. He swallowed.



But Oliver said nothing. He just stared at Reece, as if seeing him properly for the first time.

While Reece's dad was talking to the other parents about High Schools, Oliver walked over. Reece wondered if he might be going to punch him.

Oliver said hoarsely, "You wrote that. Why?"

Reece ran through several possible answers in his head. *Because I thought you'd like it. Because I admired your dad. Because I want to be a journalist...*

All of these were partly true. But none of them was the real reason.

Reece cleared his throat, and said, "To baffle you."

"To what?"

"To baffle you. Because you said you couldn't see me."

If Oliver had been well baffled before, he was triply baffled now.

"I gave you the presents," said Reece.

Oliver went very still. He was working it out. "The chocolate?"

"I gave you the chocolate by accident. But that started it off. I gave you all the other stuff to baffle you."

"The yoyo?"

"Yes."

"The pens? The mini joke book? The dragon in a box?"

Reece nodded.

Oliver thought about this. He looked exhausted: drained, as if he'd struggled through a storm. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the Tamagotchi.

"You gave me this?" he said.

"Yes."

"Do you want it back?"

Reece took it and held it in his palm. It was looking healthy. He knew Oliver had liked the Tamagotchi best of all the gifts, so he said, "I killed my last one. You'd better keep it."

Oliver replaced it in his pocket. "All that maths," he said. "You did that?"

"Yep."

"The magnetic puzzle."

"That too."

"The river story."

"Mine."

"The liquorice allsorts."

"The what?" Reece was startled. "No, that wasn't me."

"Who was it, then?"

“I don’t know. Somebody must fancy you.”

They stared at each other, and inexplicably, began to laugh. Even as he laughed, Reece thought, this is weird. And Oliver’s laughter was almost crying.

“Is this another of your friends, Reece?” It was Dad. “I’ve already met Adam, Seth and Maya,” he said gladly. “Who’s this?”

“This is Oliver,” said Reece reluctantly.

“Pleased to meet you, Oliver.” Dad put out his hand. Oliver shook it and did not reply. Instead he asked Reece,

“What I said. Was it that bad?”

Reece thought of saying No.

No, it was nothing, it didn’t matter a bit, I didn’t mind.

“You know it was,” he said.

Oliver bit his lip, and looked down.

“Yeah. I suppose I’d better go and find my father,” he muttered, though he did not move.

“He was in Year One not long ago.”

Oliver nodded, and stayed where he was. He began to fiddle with the brushes again.

Dad moved away. “What was all that about?” he asked Reece quietly.

“Nothing,” said Reece. “Well, it was something, but it’s over.”

“You’re not going to tell me, are you? I wish you’d let me know what’s going on sometimes, Reece. I’m not a mind-reader.”

“Sorry.”

“Would you like Adam to come back for tea?”

“Okay,” said Reece.

Dad smiled again, happy because he thought that Reece was making friends. Well, Reece supposed he was. Adam looked happy too.

Maybe Adam liked him. He’d never really thought about it. He’d not paid much attention. Maybe he should start paying attention to Adam instead of Oliver.

“We’d better be going, then,” said Dad. “Got your rucksack? What happened to those doughnuts?”

“They’re in my drawer.” Reece had forgotten them. Now he retrieved the crumpled bag of doughnuts and offered one to Adam. Then, on impulse, he walked back over to the art area and held out the bag to Oliver.

“Doughnut?”

Oliver looked at him.

“It’s all right,” said Reece, “they’re fresh. They aren’t always. My dad works in a bakery, so we get a lot of leftovers.”

Oliver took a doughnut. “Thanks.”

Reece hesitated, testing things to say. He settled for, “I’ll see you Monday.”

“See you Monday.” Oliver’s answer was almost inaudible.

When Reece went back, Dad asked, “Would you like to invite that other lad, Oliver, home too?”

Reece shook his head. “Maybe another time.” It was not impossible, after all.

“Let’s go, then.”

They made their way out of the classroom. Reece glanced back at Oliver, sadly eating his doughnut. As Reece watched, he pulled the Tamagotchi out and began to press its buttons, feeding it.

In the corridor, they passed Oliver’s father, who looked lost.

“Oliver’s in Room Five, down that way,” Reece told him before walking on.

As they left the school, he took Dad’s arm. Dad looked round at him, surprised, but pleased.

Dad was so easy to surprise. He baffled Dad, he thought, non-stop, every day, without even trying.

Dad was easy to please, too. All he needed was a hand, a smile, a kind word now and then. Maybe that was all that anybody needed.

So he smiled at Dad.

“I’m glad you came,” he said.

## **The End**

You can find more free stories at Emma Laybourn’s website, [Megamouse Books](http://Megamouse Books).

One, *The Trophy Trap*, is about Abby, who is also in *I Can’t See You*.

Abby has won a table tennis trophy with her older brother Liam.

When Liam is allowed to keep the trophy, Abby is determined to steal it back.

But chaos follows...

This book and many others are free at [www.megamousebooks.com](http://www.megamousebooks.com).