



BIRTHDAY SURPRISE

I breezed through the school gates, but stopped when Dad called me back. He was leaning out the car window.

‘After school, we have a surprise for your birthday,’ he said. ‘So hurry home!’ Then he sped off before I could ask any questions. He was in a rush, as usual.

A surprise? With my family, you can never be sure whether that’s a good thing or not.

As I walked through the gates again, I was too distracted thinking about this to keep a look out for Jodie, which was a **huge** mistake. She rushed over and pushed a large, wrapped present into my arms.

‘Happy birthday, Jakob’ she breathed into my ear.

Jodie is in the year below me at school and she is

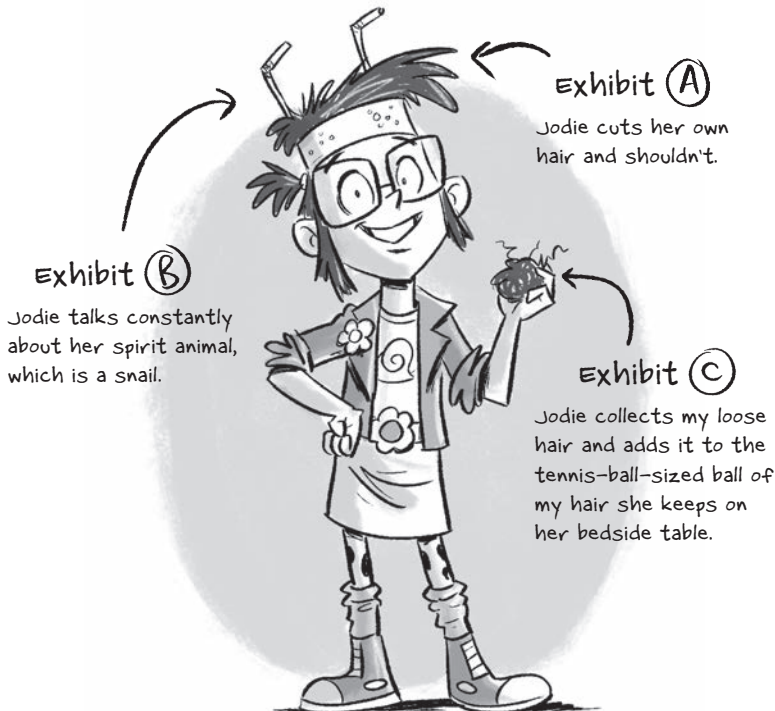
obsessed with me. I know this for a fact, because roughly once a month she gives me a new drawing she's done of me, always with the words '*I'm obsessed with you*' written somewhere on it. Our mothers are best friends, so I'm forced to see a lot of her outside of school.

'Well, aren't you going to open it?' she asked.

'Jodie, you know about my rule.'

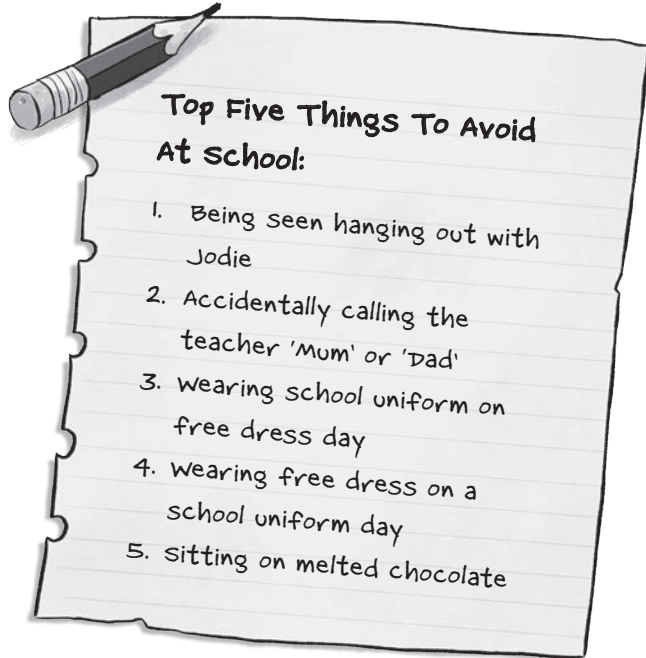
'No talking to you at school, blah, blah. It's a stupid rule. Open it.'

This rule might sound harsh, but Jodie is, well, odd.



I rest my case.

Being friends with Jodie publicly would be social death. It's right at the top of my list of things to avoid at school.



I guided Jodie to the edge of the playground, where we were less likely to be noticed together. Then, to get rid of her, I ripped off a corner of wrapping paper and peered in. Jodie had given me a glittery photo frame and inside it was a picture of the two of us on our wedding

day. Obviously we weren't legally married, but when we were little, our mums had thought it would be cute to dress us up and pretend we were getting married.

It wasn't cute.

It wasn't cute then. And it certainly wasn't cute now.

I scanned the school grounds, making sure we hadn't been seen.

'No, you've got to open it properly,' Jodie said. She reached over and tore off the rest of the paper.

Rainbow glitter **EXPLODED** from the package, forming a sparkly cloud of glitter particles that settled on every possible surface of my body. Jodie squealed with satisfaction. Kids were certainly looking our way now.

Jodie giggled. 'Aren't glitter bombs the best?'





I buried the framed photo in a bin, before dashing off to the toilets, where I scrubbed at my skin with wet paper towel. I shook myself so hard that I gave myself a headache. But the glitter still clung to me as though I was coated in superglue.

The school bell rang and I had no choice but to line up with my class. No-one noticed at first and I allowed myself a glimmer of hope that I might have passed unnoticed . . . but then my actual glimmer attracted Cristiano's attention.

'How's it going, Sparkles?' he asked, slapping me on the back. Glitter puffed into the air like dust. Cristiano laughed so hard that spit flew in my face.

It only takes one person.

The laughter started as a giggle. The giggle gained momentum and was soon a **roar**. Fingers were pointed. My skin was already red from scrubbing at it, but now the red deepened to full-on maroon.

This was, however, not the first time I'd been laughed

at by a group of students. It was not even the *largest* crowd I've had laugh at me. When I first started school, my parents had, unfortunately, encouraged me to enter the end-of-year talent quest. The memory of it still makes me sick—let's just say it ended badly and I will carry the **CRUSHING SHAME** with me for all eternity.

So I ignored the most recent laughter and focused instead on Mrs Mirto, the Principal, as she stood in front of us at assembly, trying to quieten everyone down.

Finally, after all the announcements, she asked into the microphone, 'Any birthdays today?'

I held my breath and said nothing. I could feel Jodie's eyes on me from the adjacent class's line, and I flashed her a warning glance. If the school realised it was my birthday, I'd have to stand out the front while everyone sang at me. If the talent quest fiasco had taught me anything in life, it was to avoid attention at all costs. If no-one notices you, no-one can laugh at you.

Of course, that's particularly difficult when you've become a walking disco ball.

'Off to class then. Have a wonderful day,' Mrs Mirto said.

I breathed out, my whole body crumpling with relief.

We have French first thing on Fridays, and our French teacher, Madam Chetalier, was waiting at the head of our line, ready to take us to class. She took one look at me and clasped her hands together.

‘Ooh, la, la, Jakob!’ she said in her thick French accent. ‘*Vous êtes magnifique!*’

The rest of the class laughed and repeated her. ‘Ooh, la la!’ they sang over and over again as we walked to our classroom.

I tried to ignore it, concentrating instead on the surprise waiting for me at home. What would it be? A robotics kit?

A puppy? A piano? A robotic, piano-playing puppy?



Leon skipped ahead in line to walk beside me. Unlike the others, he wasn't laughing, but he did shake his head.

I'm assuming you have a good explanation

for this,' he said under his breath.

I nodded. 'Jodie.'

'Say no more.' Leon is the only person I'd told about my Jodie problem. 'Happy birthday, by the way,' he added. Leon was also one of the few people who knew it was my birthday.

I rarely saw Leon outside of class, because his lunch breaks were crammed with things like chess club, coding club, and choir. We both get picked on a lot—Leon reckons it's tall poppy syndrome, whatever that means—but while he deals by over-achieving, I prefer trying to go unnoticed.

We reached class and set about getting our French workbooks out of the tub. Once I had mine, Cristiano put his arm around my shoulder and guided me over to my desk.

'Seriously, buddy, you've got to give me your beautician's name. You've got this glow about you.' He laughed and ducked away to give a couple of boys high fives.

'Just ignore him, he's not worth it,' Leon whispered,

plonking himself down in the seat behind me. I smiled thinly. Leon was right, yet not a day went by that I didn't dream of being Cristiano.



Mum was waiting at the gates after school to walk me home. The sun was intense, making me glimmer even more.

‘Jakob, you look festive,’ Mum said. ‘Back in my day, they just gave you a birthday badge to wear.’ She took out a tissue and blew her nose, a **thunderous** activity that had all the other parents looking our way.

‘Mum!’

‘I can’t help it—I’ve got man flu.’

I don’t know how many times I’ve told Mum that man flu is not only a made-up thing, it’s also not something she, as a woman, can get. But she insists it’s a new, more extreme strand of the flu.

‘Dad said there’s a surprise for my birthday. What is it?’ I asked.

Mum scrunched up her tissue and shoved it deep in her pocket. ‘Oh yes, you’ll love this. He’s been given a voucher from work for that new Italian restaurant that’s opened and he’s taking us out for dinner tonight.’

I grimaced.

Mum sighed. ‘Darling, we never go out, as you well know. So try and enjoy this—it’s going to be great.’

Where possible, I avoid hanging out with my parents outside of our house. They have a habit of **EMBARRASSING THEMSELVES** in public. They do it in private as well, but at least there are no witnesses at home.

Mum fished out her tissue and **honked** on her nose again. Some nearby parents jumped in fright, the way people do when a car backfires.

‘You’re too sick to go out,’ I said.

‘Nonsense. I’ll take some cold and flu tablets and I’ll be fine! Jodie and her mum are coming too. Isn’t that nice?’

I groaned. Things were going from bad to worse.