

Prologue

No one really understood little Lola Whittook, strange, they said, funny in the head, needs looking at. But little Lola Whittook didn't mind, because she had Rae. Lola was just nine when a family moved into the bungalow after the garden, right next to the fence so Lola could just hop over whenever she wanted. She'd always wondered why nobody wanted that house, she couldn't remember anybody ever living there, she supposed they just mustn't have wanted to, it was falling apart when Rae and her Mum moved in, ramshackle really, but it wasn't anymore, it was beautiful. The two girls had met soon after, Lola had been in the garden, counting the butterflies on the buddleia; she had been there all morning, unmoving, until Rae came up to her, "What are you doing?"

She had asked, her voice soft and innocent, tinted with curiosity as with all younger children, Lola had looked up, surprised, because nobody had ever shown any interest before, and had answered,

"Counting the butterflies."

This new girl had then made her way over the low fence and sat herself down beside her, crossing her legs and beginning a daisy chain, humming a soft melody, Lola had turned away from the bush to study her, dull blue eyes fixating on the swift movements of careful fingers piercing the stems. Her head had moved ever so slightly to the left like a puppy considering its owner,

"Can you teach me?"

Positioning herself on the spring grass to mirror the second girls, she asked, her voice soft and shy but her eyes sure and hard as they locked with her companions: Rae's eyes were dark, so dark, swirling pools of the darkest brown, twinkling with something that Lola could never name and Rae would never divulge. Hands had paused on the daisy chain and a smile had replaced concentration on Rae's face at the others request, and she had agreed instantly. Lola could remember every precious second of the hour that followed, and play them again and again in her minds eye, like scenes of an outdated film, pausing and stuttering in all the best places. When the chains had been finished, Rae had taken Lola's from her and swapped it with her own, placing it on her wrist in an unspoken sign of friendship before skipping away, over the fence and out of sight.

It had taken Lola a few weeks to accept Rae as her friend, for she had never had one before; people didn't seem to like Lola, she had concluded many years ago that it didn't matter, because she didn't need others to help her anyway, loneliness had never felt like a problem to the girl - her own company was all she needed. But after Rae, she decided that maybe, just this once, she had been wrong. Rae was everything Lola wasn't, she knew how to make people laugh, when to smile and when to frown, when to tell a joke and she could tell just what everyone was feeling when Lola couldn't. It didn't matter to Lola that the children school teased her, or that the adults gave her concerned looks when they thought she wasn't looking, because Rae said it didn't matter, and so it didn't. Lola had always loved Rae's house, before it had been alone, cold and sad-looking, but Lola had helped Rae paint the walls the sunniest yellow and hang the daisy patterned curtains over the hollow windows and now it shone under the clear blue sky of early summer, the crimson roses Rae's mother had planted in the window-boxes in full bloom. And the beginning traces of ivy creeping, unnoticed, up the sun-soaked walls. Lola would visit almost every day, jumping over the fence had rapping eagerly on the door, waiting for Kristi to open the door in her favourite blue dress made of flower petals and the white apron with the tea stain too stubborn to wash away, then she would declare that it was the perfect time for ginger biscuits even though Lola had just had breakfast. On entry to the living room, Lola would be assaulted by a flying mass of tanned skin and dark hair as Rae threw herself on her friend, sometimes, Lola would feel guilty that she was Rae's only friend, because Rae was such a perfect friend that surely everyone would want her, but she had chosen Lola, maybe that was why she was so perfect, and Lola questioned whether she would be able to share her anyway. At school, nobody seemed to notice Rae, but she was always there, and she said she didn't mind. Rae would pull Lola to her bedroom and collapse on the bed, pulling her down as well, and they would laugh and laugh about nothing in particular, just because they could.

Sometimes, Lola would take Rae to her house. When she was younger, her parents had welcomed her, letting her stay for hours and even allowing them to have a sleepover once, but when Lola was bordering on twelve, her parents stopped. They told her that she had to find some proper friends, because Rae couldn't be there forever, and Lola didn't understand, because she

would be, always and forever, they just couldn't understand. Rae told her that it was okay, and didn't come over again, and Lola went to her instead, it was okay, because Rae didn't mind, so neither did she. Lola started secondary school, Rae told her she should try and make some other friends, but Lola didn't see why she should, because she had Rae and none of them could possibly be as good as she was - so Lola spent her lunchtimes in the warm expanse of library on the top floor and let her existence fade into the background of everyone else's lives. Rae would sometimes persuade her to walk around the grounds with her, when the vast fields were dotted with pale petalled daisies and the tiny suns of daffodils, the other children would shoot her confused looks over their shoulders as they stood in the makeshift goal or under the shade of the biggest oak tree, lifting eyebrows and whispering behind hands, but as she wandered with her best friend, Lola didn't really care. She and Rae talked about anything and everything, and Rae could tell the best stories, Lola could sit for hours, enraptured in a tale of brave heroines (Rae always chose girls to be the saviours) and clever assistants that solved the puzzle just in time. Sometimes, Rae would dance about, acting the part of the dragon-slayer or the cowering villain while Lola looked on, laughing at her exploits from over the top of her book. Rae longed for adventure, while Lola longed for peace, if anything happened at school, Rae would theorise for weeks, talking non-stop like a record stuck on rewind, while Lola would just try her best to remain uninvolved,

"Lola," Rae had told to her one day in the garden, "my adventure will come soon, I know it, and when it does, you'll come too, won't you?"

Peering at her friend through the strands of long grass, Lola smiled softly, her eyes unreadable, "Of course."

Rae had looked delighted, Lola had rolled onto her back, smiling at the blanket of sky above, she never expected that there would come a time when she might regret her answer.

Chapter 1

"Could we have Lola Whittook, please?"

Came a voice from the doorway during her maths lesson, Lola looked up, a woman was leaning into the room, holding the doorframe, her voice was falsely sweet as if someone had sprinkled it with sherbet without her consent, and Lola immediately disliked it. Glancing back at Rae, she stood up, Rae winked at her and Lola held back a grin as she followed the mousy woman down the corridor, they had perfected this trick in year six. It wasn't uncommon for teachers to stop her in empty hallways, or drag her into offices decorated with timetables and notes reminding the occupant to buy sellotape, (Rae's timetable was dog-eared and ripped on the right corner, decorated with tiny flowers, drawn with Lola's best fountain pen, Lola's was pressed flat and as white as it had been when she received it, untouched, unbent, unwanted) to ask her if she was alright, if she needed any help with anything. Lola had always found this very distasteful and rather bothering when she was late for PE - her least favourite lesson, though Rae enjoyed it, so she put up with it, but then again, Rae enjoyed everything - Rae said it was because they were worried about her, which Lola disliked even more, because there was absolutely no need to be. But Lola had always preferred it if Rae came with her, and getting her acmes to these 'chats' was surprisingly easy, the teachers never noticed if she hid behind an open door, or crouched next to a wide bookcase, Rae said it was because she was secretly a member of MI6, Lola was pretty sure she was joking about that though. High-heeled feet tapped, muffled, on the carpeted floor of the maths hallway and brogue clad footsteps followed suit, and, unbeknownst to the heeled occupant, a second pair of black pumps with a bow on each toe, crept in sync behind them. They rounded a corner and passed the display of Alex Strandby playing football, climbed 32 stairs until they came to a small room on the second floor, one that Lola had never been in before, the high-heeled woman opened the door and gestured for her to go in, before following herself, Rae slipped in as the door swung shut, the edge coming close to trapping her dark hair or the hem or the school skirt she was constantly fiddling with.

They passed a large window overlooking the grounds, swamped in mud due to last night's heavy rainfall and classrooms filled with student staring blankly ahead as a teacher stood at the front droning on about metaphors or algebra. St. Mathews Unisex Secondary School, was, in the words of most of its students, nothing special. It had a football pitch and a large field where the students would mill around during breaks, eating apples or swapping chocolate bars. The library was on the top floor, the cafeteria on the bottom and there were exactly one hundred and thirty-four stairs between the two, three corners and six hallways. The students were taught

mathematics, English and science, in short, it was a school like any other, Rae was always complaining,

“It’s so dull here, Lola. Nothing ever happens, don’t you wish it would?”

The girl would say as she sat in the library, hanging her head over the back of her chair to gaze at her friend, who would sit behind her, flicking through a book about the theory of electric currents, “Not really,” she would reply, looking up to stare back, “School’s aren’t meant to be venues for excitement, Rae, no matter how much you want them to be.”

Huffing, Rae would sit up again, notice the group of Year 7 girls hidden behind the bookshelf, watching her friend with wide eyes, she would stick her tongue out, the girls wouldn’t even blink, so she would roll her eyes, Lola would snap her book shut, and they would leave.

So it was hardly a surprise that the room inside wasn’t any different to any of the other offices Lola had been introduced to, the mousy woman sat in the rotating chair behind the desk that seemed to have been scrubbed within an inch of its life, as smooth and shiny as a mirror, the whole place had an uncomfortably clean feeling that gave Lola the urge to wash her hands. Rae tiptoed into the room and found a spot behind a filing cabinet just near the doorway, the woman was completely oblivious to her presence, and winked at her, Lola sniggered behind her hand. Perching on the allocated chair, Lola looked up at the woman, scrutinising her carefully, she still didn’t like her; her face was pinched and sour, her eyes peeking out from deep-set sockets, rust-coloured and unsympathetic, her hair was swept sideways away from her face and held up by some kind of clip at the back. Lola had never liked hair accessories, they pulled and tugged and were a complete waste of time, so she often just left her hair to tumble down her back, and, occasionally, over her face. Rae pulled her wild locks back into a ponytail or twin plaits, sometimes she would plait Lola’s for her, but Lola nearly always took them out again, hating feeling cool air on her sensitive roots and scalp and the thudding as the two thick braids collided with her back. This lady was wearing a white shirt, undone slightly at the top, and no tie, Rae had never liked ties, she said they made her feel like she was being strangled, Lola didn’t mind them, the sensation ever so slightly calming as it secured her collar into place, a black skirt ran down the high-heeled woman’s legs and disappeared under the table, Lola knew it reached just below her knees, like her own. Skirts were acceptable when necessary, but legged bottoms were much more practical, Lola thought, skirts could get in the way or caught on things, and Lola had an aversion to ones shorter than the knee. Rae wore skirts more often than Lola did, and dresses too, floaty ones that blew in the wind, Lola thought Rae looked very nice in the palest blues and Rae said Lola looked nicest in red, but Lola didn’t really pay that much attention to her appearance, unless they were going to school because it’s always best to look smart if you are, and then your colour preference didn’t matter, because your outfit was chosen for you. That said, some students liked to alter theirs, not that Lola saw why, the teachers would just correct it if you were to come without your tie, or wearing a too-short skirt, Lola thought this was a good thing, though others may disagree, it was just the way of things.

The woman was looking at her, face scrunched up analytically, and it occurred to Lola that she had probably been staring at her for a bit too long now. She coughed and blinked a few times, this seemed to assure the older occupant of the room that she was listening, because she crossed her arms in a business-like way and opened her mouth to speak, Lola shot a furtive glance at her hidden friend, who gave her the thumbs up to begin stage two of the meeting-with-a-teacher escape plan. They’d altered this course of actions quite a few times over the last three years, but this seemed to be the most effective that didn’t involve breaking any school rules: it relied on Lola’s uncanny ability to get distracted very easily. This trick had first been pointed out to her in Year 6 when Mrs. Blake had told her that she could ‘talk the leg of a horse’, and Lola had decided to try and prove her right - Rae agreed that Lola could get distracted by pretty much anything, and that she had an amazing knack for averting other people’s attention to things they didn’t necessarily want to pay attention to. And so just as the woman began the first syllable of what was surely a well-rehearsed pity sequence, Lola began to ‘babble’, “Oh, look, you can see the football pitch from here,” she exclaimed, peering out of the window as if just noticing the view, “you can’t see it from any of my classrooms. I’ve never really liked football, what do you think of it? It’s dreadfully boring, don’t you think?” Rae was muffling laughter at the adults’ bewildered expression, Lola had discovered her ability to ‘babble’ (that was what Rae liked to call it) when she had successfully managed to avert her Spanish teacher’s attention from the lesson he was teaching to his last holiday in The Canary Islands, and now she had mastered it to the highest ability, because adults really were so easy to

confuse to the point of exasperation which usually led to whatever conversation they were having coming to an abrupt and premature end.

“Sport isn’t really my speciality,” Lola continued, letting her eyes glide over the room and swinging her legs back and forth, toes skimming the once blue, now worn and dirty, carpet in seeming idleness, “I prefer academic things, you know? How about you?” She didn’t give the woman time to answer, but instead moved on immediately, pausing only for breath, “Are you a teacher? Or do you work in an office? I don’t think I would like to work in an office, but dull for me.”

This time, she stopped abruptly and fixed the woman with her best innocent-question-asking look and tilting her head slightly as if expecting an answer, the woman stuttered,

“I-um-I- well you see..”

She was scrabbling to regain possession of the conversation, but Lola had her nails in it now, and she won’t about to let go, she interrupted her inconsistent mumblings with yet more unrelated nonsense, spurring whatever topic her brain landed on first,

“I wonder if it will rain later, I’m walking home and I’ve forgotten my umbrella..ah well, I’m sure it’ll be fine, I don’t live too far away, you see.”

The woman was now opening and shutting her mouth in a surprisingly realistic impersonation of a bored goldfish, quite different from the image she had displayed only minutes before when fishing Lola out of maths, half-formed words and sentences were flung from her loose lips but Lola just raised her volume slightly, drowning out anything she said, Rae was in silent fits of laughter, just visible from behind the filing cabinet. Lola allowed an uncomfortable silence to settle in the room, helping it along by shifting in her seat and appearing to wait for the woman to say something, she did eventually, coughing in attempt to dispel the silence that had descended around her. That was a weakness in adults, Lola had discovered, they hated thinking they had created the uncomfortable atmosphere, and she found it incredibly easy to give off the impression that they had. Rae still laughed when they reminisced about the first time they had successfully reduced an adult to a stuttering mess, it had been an infuriatingly talkative woman at a bus stop who Lola had silenced by discussing the flying patterns of the nearby blackbirds and the colour of the plastic bench they had been perched on, Rae would twist her face to mirror the expression they had left her with when they bordered the bus and then fall about laughing at the memory.

Lola was still staring expectantly at her latest victim who was quickly turning redder and redder at her lack of response, when she did manage to articulate a reply, she surprised Lola by not dismissing her immediately as many did, the last person who had persisted had later been so eager to remove Lola from their office that they had almost thrown her bodily from the room, “Yes, er, Miss. Whittook, I have a colleague..”

She began to explain, Lola hummed in response, knowing that it would make her loose her train of thought, which it did, and she stuttered again, grasping at the straws that were all that was left of her previous eloquence, Lola saw Rae double over in giggles out of the corner of her eye, she did so much enjoy making her laugh, Rae made her laugh more times a day than Lola did her in a month, but when Lola saw Rae collapse in hysterics it sent a warm, bubbly feeling right through her chest, it was something she had begun to yearn after in recent times. But she couldn’t dawdle on that, the woman was talking again, so she turned her attention back to her,

“My employer, would, yes, would very much like to meet you, miss.”

She forced out haltingly, her pursed lips making it difficult to get a coherent sentence out into the room still thick with embarrassment, the statement took Lola by surprise and Rae sat up a bit straighter, no doubt imagining that this ‘employer’ was some kind of evil genius from one of her spy stories. Lola wondered why anyone would be interested in meeting her, she was quite ordinary, dull really, but then again, a level intrigue surfaced inside her, who *would* be interested?

Abandoning pretence, Lola leaned forward, enraptured, Rae had been, and remained, the only person who had taken the slightest interest in her and now, out of the blue, a mysterious stranger wanted to meet her. For Lola, it seemed a very inviting idea,

“Why?” She inquired, aware that his could all be some kind of cruel joke, you can never tell with adults, or with most people actually, only Rae could be trusted to always tell the truth, she had learnt that a long time ago, “Why would they want to meet me?”

The visiting woman, no longer under Lola’s strange kind of pressure, seemed to deflate slightly in relief, letting out a long, calming breath and tugging her face back into a pristine expression with what looked to be slight difficulty,

“They have, heard about you, from others, and they-

But before she could complete her first articulate sentence in at least five minutes, a suddenly very suspicious Lola pounced on her words,

“Heard about me? Heard about me where? From who?”

The woman audibly gulped as the now calm atmosphere she had craved throughout the entire duration of her meeting with this unusual child toppled like the unstable walls of poorly-manufactured shed. Lola looked on, anger burning behind her eyes, as she waited for a response, “I-I, I am not sure.”

The woman answered, Lola, far from impressed, huffed in disbelief, desperately trying to steer the conversation back into safer waters, the lady added in haste,

“Honestly, Miss, I cannot tell you why. I am simply to tell you, nothing more.”

Lola raised an eyebrow but slowly settled back down into the chair, realising with well-concealed embarrassment that she had left out of it in her anger, and questioned, her tone still sharp,

“When does your employer suppose we meet?”

“Whenever is convenient for you.”

She was answered quickly with a statement almost certainly rehearsed, Lola gritted her teeth, she hated being predictable, Rae was the only person she allowed to be in on her train of thought, nobody else was permitted to know what she would say or do, it simply wasn't right - but this just increased Lola's growing curiosity over the 'employer', she glanced at her friend, who was listening raptly and widened her eyes, silently pressing her to accept,

“Alright,” she surrendered, “Does this 'employer' have any ideas?”

She was quickly filled in on the details which she agreed to almost instantly, she was very rarely busy and Rae (who was the only factor that may rule out any time slots) was willing to sacrifice pretty much anything to come with her, and permitted to leave, which she did, her head buzzing with curiosity, intrigue and, maybe Rae was rubbing off on her, excitement.

For the rest of the day, Rae would talk of nothing else. Possible identities, jobs and descriptions of this 'employer' were spurted at Lola in all directions and she dodged them all for the rest of the school day, it was only when they had returned to Rae's house (it hadn't rained, Lola was glad) and collapsed onto the rough carpet of the living room that Lola allowed herself to entertain the idea of this mysterious figure and her impending meeting with them. Rae said that they must be very powerful and very secret because they sent a messenger to inform her and didn't come in themselves, Lola agreed that the theory was probably accurate, but privately thought that Rae was referring too much to crime novels for any of her other ideas to hit even remotely close to home. Lola thought they were probably just a more cautious upgrade to the usual worrying-adult, they probably just wanted to create a sense of privacy before they hammered Lola with statements about friends and loneliness that meant nothing but inconvenience for both contributing parties - not that Lola ever contributed much to the discussions. She would probably get there, sit down in an office, and be lectured about the importance of begin social and all that nonsense, Lola could never understand why none of the adults around her seemed to class Rae in the same group they did other children, but then again, adults rarely made any sense. Adults only saw the world as just that, adults, Lola had often entertained the possibility that children were just as much of a mystery to them as they were to children, which was completely illogical because they must have been children at some point. She knew she was most probably a difficult child to understand anyway, never mind if you happened to be an adult, but they really should try harder to see things as children instead of simply assuming that they knew best and charging headlong in the wrong direction, it really was irksome.

There was only one adult Lola had ever met that completely shocked the system, and that was Kristi, Rae's mother. Tanned skin and an accent that hinted at time spent in Spain where Rae's father lived usually occupied the small kitchen inside the bungalow, making cups of tea and rummaging around in the cupboard for the last few pieces of millionaires shortbread to put on ceramics decorated with blue lily-flowers; her hair was the same shade of brown as her daughters, so dark it was black and so frizzed it could have been charged with static electricity. Lola wouldn't say that either of them had an afro, for the hair lay flat after vigorous brushing, but it was bordering on it, the individual hairs were indistinguishable and the mass that sat on Kristi's shoulders was thick and sprung, a mound of hair. Rae's was slightly longer, Lola measured it to just below her shoulder blades, but it had the same uncontrollable tendencies, Rae was constantly lagging about what a pain not was but Lola loved it, her own hair being thin and flyaway, coloured like wet sand. Kristi was as close to perfect as an adult could be, Lola couldn't remember a conversation where she hadn't laughed at least once, or a second in which she

hadn't been smiling and Lola loved it. But Kristi was the exception, Lola knew that, there was no chance that this unknown 'employer' could be like was, but that didn't stop her from being curious - what would they be like? It was pointless to fantasise, Lola knew, that was Rae's job, but Lola wondered if, maybe, this time it would be different.

Sipping warm tea and listening to Rae chatter excitedly that this was it, their adventure together, Lola smiled to herself, even if they were just like all the others, this meeting would be a welcome change to perfunctory life as she knew it, and seeing Rae so full of bubbling energy was so amazing that Lola decided that, even if this adult was just like all the others, she would try and enjoy it, for her friend. Rae was gesturing widely with her arms, her cup laying forgotten in the danger zone beside her, bound to get knocked over as she waved her hands around in a strange dance imagining everything and anything that Lola could not, soon, it had become one of her stories, only with them as the heroines, and Lola closed her eyes, warmth seeping from the hot drink into her hands, and allowed herself to be blown away into the deepest recesses of Rae's imagination, the soothing voice of the girl beside her lulling any unsure thoughts to barely audible whispers that she could tuck away for a moment less enjoyable than this one because right now, they didn't matter.

Lola spent the majority of the days (and occasionally nights - though her parents frowned on this) leading up to her introductory meeting at Rae's house, she had informed her parents about the meeting with this 'employer' and they had seemed surprisingly accepting of the fact. Usually, when Lola did something without their prior consent they were... less than impressed, but they both just smiled at her and nodded, Lola decided not to ponder on the uncharacteristic behaviour, they were adults and it was probably insignificant. She also began to search for a reason as to why she, of all the students at St. Mathews who were probably much more compliant, had been chosen for this meeting - if not for the usual reasons. Searching through her school records and recent marks in various tests gave her little information, she was neither the smartest, nor the least so, in any of her classes, she wasn't on the school council and she'd never even touched any kind of award for anything education-related, in short, she was perfectly ordinary - by her standards anyway. And so that left the question. Rae proposed the idea that she ask someone, or attempt to contact the mousy-haired woman but Lola refused, why would they know anything? And if they did, why would they tell Lola? No other students had mentioned anything, and that was a good indicator that they knew nothing, nothing was to be left unsaid in the minds of chattering secondary school goers, and it was boarding on impossible that something as unusual as this wouldn't have been spread over the school overnight, conclusion, it was Lola they wanted to meet, and Lola alone, but why?

Swirling through her head at all hours of the day, the question refused to give Lola any space to think, Rae was clearly also fixated on the idea, and verbalised her confusion loudly and constantly, it would be irritating, but it was Rae, so it wasn't. Two days before the secluded meeting Lola had yet to come to any kind of conclusion that wasn't that this 'employer' was yet another pestiferous grown-up sticking their nose in where it didn't belong, Rae was no further forward and most of her theories seemed to orbit around the idea that this person was some kind of criminal mastermind which, if she was honest with herself, Lola was sure even Rae didn't believe. Rae was coming with her, it wasn't up for argument, and Lola had no desire to disagree, she couldn't remember the last time she had done something without Rae, in fact she hadn't, Rae had always been there, since that day by the bush with the butterflies. One day on and Lola had decided that maybe it was best to consider other things, Rae had no doubt that if she climbed into the back of whatever vehicle they picked her friend up in, they wouldn't notice; Lola was less sure, and decided that it would be better for Rae to try and sneak in somehow, she had to be sure her friend wouldn't get caught and taken away because she wasn't sure she would be able to attend the event she had prepared herself for so meticulously if she wasn't accompanied. If Rae was caught, Lola would just refuse to meet the 'employer' and that would be that, Rae had argued briefly, aware of how curious Lola (and she) were to discover the identity of this person, but Lola flat out refused to meet them without Rae, so the agreement was made, together, or not at all.

Chapter 2

On the day of the meeting, Lola discovered that she scrubbing herself fiercely in the shower, soap suds from shampooed hair dripping down her back, and wasn't entirely sure why. That morning she had picked out her best black dress and laid it carefully on her bed, smoothing out any creases, then, as if on autopilot, made her way to the shower where she now stood, hands paused in rising conditioner from her hair, dumbstruck by her own actions. What was she doing? As the sluggish pearls of conditioner traced her cheek and fell with a soft *plunk* onto the cold tiles burning her feet, she slowly resumed showering, this time with her head buzzing at millions of miles and hour: it was obvious. She was preparing, making an effort, presenting herself, so why did it feel so strange? Lola closed her eyes and lent against the cool tiles of the the shower and sighed, she had never felt nervous about meeting an adult before, she'd never worn her best dress without prompt from her mother, she wondered what about this meeting made it feel so important, significant, life changing even, she hadn't even met them yet! Stepping out of the shower having rid her body of white leech-like bubbles she wrapped herself in a towel that had been through the washing machine just too many times so it was coarse and stiff and began to pull at brush through her hair, the action was therapeutic and calmed her panic-ridden mind and slowed her heart that was surely pulsating at a rate unhealthy in the long term.

A car pulled up outside St. Mathews at exactly one o'clock, Lola stood outside having changed from her uniform into the dress and debating with herself whether it was a good idea or not, the skirt blew in cruel breeze and brushed the backs of her knees rather disconcertingly. The car looked... surprisingly normal, Rae had speculated a dark limousine with blacked out windows and a chauffeur wearing dark sunglasses, but it was the mousy-haired woman who stepped out of the drivers seat, in what seemed to be the exactly the same clothing as last time - Lola suppressed an eye roll, she really did not care for this woman. The car itself was white and bore slight resemblance to a truck: high set and giving off a looming aura, Lola meandered towards it, pushing her skirt down as she did so as the wind seemed determined to blow it up, and greeted the lady. Neither of them smiled. The woman got immediately back into the car and Lola slipped herself into the passenger seat, it was leather and cold against her bare legs: she found herself really regretting the dress. Knowing that Rae was no doubt either in the back seat, crouched down just out of sight in the footwell or crushed uncomfortably in the boot, she kept her eyes facing directly out of the arching window ahead, not wanting to risk catching her eye in the wing mirror and giving her away by trusting into inexplicable giggles.

Driving quickly lost its initial appeal, the journey was long and uneventful, the view from Lola's window consisting of flat fields stretching into the horizon and the occasional tree, the road was deserted, ghostly, for who would be travelling at this time on a weekday, no, everyone was holed up in their stuffy offices and schools accounting for the lack of traffic. Rae and Lola always found that the passing cars were the perfect way to distract oneself from the drabness of sitting in a moving vehicle for an unprecedented amount of time - but now there wasn't even the unsuspecting faces of passersby to analyse or car number plates to make stories from. Lola smiled to herself, Rae was amazing at that game, she could make tales of adventure and daring from the three letters of a random van on the motorway, then talk for hours while Lola listened, enthralled. Lola shut her eyes, trying to imagine her friends voice talking of sea monsters and knights set out on dangerous quests, but to no avail, she continued to stare out of the window with a nearly inaudible sigh, she just couldn't do the things Rae could, not matter how many books she peered through in search of answers, ideas, anything, she could never compare to Rae, but Lola didn't mind, because Rae didn't belittle her, condone her or insult her, she just let it be and that was good enough for the two of them. Imperfect or perfect harmony? Lola pondered, she wondered what Rae was thinking, whether she was telling herself stories or imagining the identity of the 'employer', a tiny part of Lola, a part she had buried a long time ago, was just the tiniest bit proud, the 'employer' wanted to meet her, *her*, little Lola Whittook that the villagers talked about around tables while they sipped tea, not Rae. But then again, she counted, nobody ever seemed to choose Rae, too blind to see her resounding goodness, her amazing imagination, and the fact that she had saved a little girl all those years ago.

When the car eventually did pull up, it was in a disappointingly ordinary looking car park, scuffed tarmac and fading lumps of white marker greeted Lola's feet as she opened the door with some degree of difficulty and more fell than stepped out of the raised side of the pale automobile. She

looked up: in front of her lay a small building, perhaps two floored, it didn't look like a school, or any kind of registered institution, Lola tilted her head slightly, trying to make sense of it. What was its purpose? It must have one, or she wouldn't be here, surely she wasn't going to meet this 'employer' in their own house? What would they do? Discuss whatever they had come to discuss over the kitchen table, offering each other the teapot? Lola allowed herself a smile at the image, then something hit her, how was Rae going to get inside? She paused in her following of the mousy-haired woman, who turned around and lifted an exasperated eyebrow, swallowing in anticipation, Lola forced her legs (which were suddenly feeling rather unsteady) to move forward, the woman glanced at the car suspiciously, but clearly decided that Lola's sudden interest in it was unimportant, resumed her clip-clopping marching towards the blue door that marked the entrance to her employers workplace - or whatever it was, Lola still hadn't decided.

She hesitated in the doorway, glancing around the room inside, it was largely shrouded in the poor lighting of a typical cloudy day, and lingering seemed to irritate her escort, so she stepped into the room, feeling the door swing shut behind her with a muffled shout. Flicking the lights on, the mousy-haired woman continued through the room and down a corridor, disappearing through a door in an adjacent wall. With the lights on, Lola examined her surroundings; it looked... like someone lived there. A cup of something long forgotten sat on the glossed and shiny coffee table, its dark wood strangely inviting and mirroring that of the bookshelves to Lola's immediate left, absently she let her finger bounce over the spines, their coarse texture familiar under her touch. When examined more closely, the books were hardback and well-read, old, some of them with yellowing pages, and dulled colours melding together on the shelves and their gold lettering depicting information on things Lola had never heard of as well as some she had personally enjoyed, or disliked. There was a small kitchen across from the large window, Lola could see the work surface reflected in the scenery of thick woodland outside, if she had opened the cupboards, she would have found them fully stocked, and if she had glanced at the cooker top she would have perhaps identified a stew resting there, or the full kettle to its left below the cupboard where the house's occupant kept the teabags and coffee granules, but when Lola's gaze moved from the view pictured in the window, it was to rest on the person who had just emerged from the corridor, the mousy-haired woman trotting behind.

He was a man, taller than Lola's father, almost as high-reaching as her PE teacher, out of the corner of her eye Lola spotted the top of Rae's head peeking over the top of the granite and felt her confidence soar before refocusing on the man who had now moved further into the room, vaguely aware of the woman passing her and leaving through the not-quite-closed door, away and removed from the equation. The 'employer' was wearing a lab coat, Lola recognised it to match the one she wore in the labs at St. Mathews, though his was pristine and the creases that seemed to live in Lola's own had been pressed out, it was unbuttoned. Aware that she was staring, Lola shifted slightly in her position by the bookcase, one hand still resting on the faded purple cover of one of the volumes it cradled, when the man spoke, his voice was soft and hesitant,

"Do you want to sit down?"

Lola stepped over to the sofa and sat down, right on the edge so she could leap up at a moment's notice if the whim arose. The man shed his lab coat in silence, folding it in half and draping it over the back of the armchair that now sat in the centre of her view, its white material seemed to disappear into the chair of the same colour; the whole room selected this colour, blue cushions that tickled Lola's back one of the only colours in the pale room. There wasn't much white in Lola's house, or in Rae's either, Lola's mother said that it was too easy to stain and was 'hard on the eyes' anyway, Kristi's opinion was that it wasn't 'homely' enough, but now that Lola looked around and saw the white sofa and chair, the whitewashed walls and the shining white floor she thought it was a nice colour choice, neutral and soothing.

Her attention was quickly drawn back to the 'employer' who made his way across the room and lowered himself into the lone armchair, the sunlight catching the lenses of his black-rimmed glasses as it shone through the window, he was surprisingly graceful for someone so lanky, his legs spindly like that of a spider looked ever so slightly out of proportion as he crossed them, knee over knee and rested his arms on the armrests. He was aware that his guest was studying him carefully and allowed her to, sitting completely still while her eyes flicked from the long sleeved shirt and tie he had now revealed by taking off his coat to his crop of light, reddish hair

that sat, shaved to stubs on each side but reaching a length that betrayed the tight-packed curls on the top, when she had finished, he began by saying,

“I’m probably not what you were expecting, am I?”

Lola smiled, allowing herself to relax a bit, and agreed with his statement,

“Not really, I thought you’d be older.”

He raised an eyebrow over the rim of his glasses and widened his smile slightly,

“Oh?”

Lola was now even more curious than she was before, it was true, she had expected him to be older, this man couldn’t be more than twenty five at most, his eyes were green behind the lenses of his spectacles, he looked a little bit awkward sat there in front of her, she thought he looked like the sort of person who should always be moving, positioned stationary in the armchair he seemed out of place.

Maybe a bit more eagerly than would be considered polite, Lola asked him,

“So, what’s your name then? I’m assuming that you know mine, since you asked me to come here.”

The man’s face was peppered with freckles, Lola had never had freckles, her skin remained stubbornly pale and unmarked no matter how long she lay on the bench in the garden in the searing heat of the summer, that is, unless it went shiny red and sore. The ‘employer’ told her, “I’m Dr. Thomas.”

Instantly suspicious, Lola tensed, her hands curling to grip her knees tightly,

“Doctor? I don’t need a Doctor.”

Dr. Thomas wasn’t smiling in the irritatingly sure way that most adults did at this point in the conversation, his face remained analytic and carefully neutral as he answered,

“You don’t,” something about the lack of expression on his face reassured Lola and she felt inclined to believe him, so listened when he continued, “I just wanted to talk to you.”

Lola was intrigued, why would this man - who lived alone, in the middle of nowhere - call her all the way out here just to *talk* to her?

“What do you want to talk to me about?”

She directed the question at him, but it was more of a verbal thought than a genuine question, so she was surprised when he answered, even if it was vague and unsatisfactory,

“A few different things.”

While Lola pondered he leant forward and picked up the cup of something that Lola had noticed when she came in, he raised it to his lips and grimaced when the cold liquid crawled unpleasantly down his throat and quickly returned the mug to the table, pushing it away from him slightly, Lola found herself smiling slightly at his reaction. Dr. Thomas seemed to be different to the other adults that had wanted to talk to her, if anything, he was completely relaxed and quite comfortable with the arrangement, especially if he was drinking hour-old coffee as he waited for her to talk.

“So, anything in particular you want to talk about?”

She found herself asking, gaze flicking up from the cup to the Doctor, who had scrunched up his face in disgust and was darting his tongue around in his mouth to rid it of stale caffeine,

“Well,” he coughed and rubbed his mouth with the back of his hand and a quiet giggle escaped Lola in a sudden lapse of self-control, she looked slightly taken aback by the sound and that she had emitted it, “I would like to meet this friend of yours.”

Rae? He wanted to meet Rae? Her gaze flicked over to the worktop she knew her friend to be crouched behind and he was quick to latch onto this scrap of input,

“Ah, I thought she might be here.”

At Lola’s terrified expression, the left side of his mouth twitched upwards slightly in a resigned, lopsided smile, and assured her that he didn’t mind that a girl had snuck into the boot of his car, remained undetected for a journey of around twenty five minutes, then hidden behind his kitchen counter to eavesdrop on a private conversation, Lola blushed faintly but called over to Rae, “Just come out, Rae, he knows you’re there.”

The dark haired girl side-stepped out into plain view, looking down at her feet in embarrassment, Dr. Thomas was looking at a point just above her right ear, and Lola frowned, but her thoughts were interrupted when he asked Rae to join her on the sofa, following her progress to the furniture, his eyes seemingly lagging behind her slightly and never quite focusing on her figure.

Rae perched herself on the sofa to mirror Lola, close enough that Lola could feel the warmth of her body seep into her own, and Dr. Thomas looked at them both in turn - well, he looked at Lola,

his eyes connected with the empty bit of air to Rae's right. Lola furrowed her brow, but didn't voice her observation, instead she introduced her friend,
"This is Rae."

Rae lifted her palm in greeting but remained silent, the Doctor nodded in her direction, then turned his attention back to Lola,

"These meetings will be, in majority, between you and me, however, I will permit Rae to come also, as long as she doesn't mind remaining quiet."

Lola nodded and Rae seemed content with the agreement, she fell backwards onto the sofa casually and mimed zipping her lips shut, Lola smiled at her, the blue cushions did look inviting, but she refused to relax entirely in this man's presence and remained strictly upright, though her hands had relaxed from where they had been fisting against her knees and now lay flat on the tops of her thighs, Dr. Thomas also sat back on his chair, his gangly frame shifting in a chair that still refused to accustom to his height, and re-crossed his legs, leaning his chin against a collection of fingers to his left, his elbow wedged and holding against the armrest, and inhaled.

The questions he asked Lola as he sat there, like a statue - observing, all seemed, to the recipient, completely irrelevant, What was her favourite colour? What subjects did she enjoy at school? What did she do in her spare time? How much time did she spend away from the house? As the quiz progressed, Lola's answers started to show a pattern: Where did she spend her free time? At Rae's house, with Rae in the garden or perhaps walking, with Rae, What did she do at school? She read in the library with Rae, wandered the corridors and chatted, with Rae, or did her homework in an empty classroom, Rae would sometimes help her. In fact, the more questions he asked, the more answers seemed to relate to activities or emotions shared with her friend and Lola shot Rae a glance while she told the man what her favourite sport was, Rae shrugged minutely and made a confused face, when Lola looked back to the Doctor, to find he had been watching the interaction carefully, she coughed uncomfortably under his inquiring stare, he seemed to snap upright, and resumed questioning about pointless events in Lola's early childhood, but the moment glued itself to the forefront of Lola's mind, clinging there and demanding further investigation.

Lola got the feeling that the questions were a kind of introduction, she suspected that they would gradually become more relevant, but she felt a strange kind of gratitude towards the man for not springing anything on her immediately, it was a welcome change to the usual where the adult would just tell her things that she already knew (albeit ignored) and ordered her to follow their advice. Dr. Thomas glanced at his watch and announced that 'Veronica' would arrive soon, to take Lola back to school, Lola relished in the discovery of the mousy-haired woman's name, it was starting to get tiresome referring to her as 'that woman' or 'the high-heeled lady' as it was both nonspecific and a rather long string of words to struggle through in casual conversation. The cup of tea the Doctor had made her was starting to cool under her palms, forgotten in the rapid-fire questions that had been shot her way for the past hour, she was surprised when he stood up and boiled the kettle, chatting to Lola as though she were an old family friend, and returned with two cups of the warm beverage instead of the single one, he hadn't brought one for Rae, but she didn't seem to mind, she had spent the majority of the meeting either sprawled out on the sofa like a cat that got the cream, or wandering around the room, examining the thick, multicoloured books littered not only on the bookshelf but in neat piles at their feet as well. Some had their pages marked with plain slips of paper, others had tabs attached to certain paragraphs, science equations and formulae that Rae glanced at and swiftly moved past, clearly having no idea what any of it meant, Rae later assured Lola that the lack of tea hadn't offended her in any way, it was of course, Lola's meeting with this man and Rae was perfectly content with observing. Veronica made her appearance and Dr. Thomas stood up simultaneously with his guest, reaching out a delicate-fingered hand to shake Lola's own, his palm and fingers were elongated and dwarfed hers, making Lola feel very small for a few, drawn out seconds, he spoke as their arms rocked, "If you would like to, I'd very much like to see you again next week."
Lola paused, mulling this over, she was delighted that he had given her the choice, adults didn't usually, they just expected, she added this to her list of 'reasons to like Dr. Thomas' as she considered, but she knew she had already decided in advance,
"I think I would like that."

Hours later, Lola and Rae lay, feet resting against the wall of Rae's bedroom and arms spread wide, fingers barely brushing, and painstakingly picked apart every second of her interaction with

the Doctor, but Lola's thought always returned to the brief second she wanted to understand so desperately. The look Dr. Thomas had given her when she had glanced at her friend who now lay next to her, it had lasted barely a second, yet Lola found herself replaying it in her head over and over again, the expression was, confusion? Interest? Or was it worry? Lola wished dearly that it was not the last option, it seemed to her that this man might be another exception to the adult rules of thumb, but pithing her was always the first step to falling into the category the rest of the general public rested in. But none of the other emotions she connected with the snapshot of his features that skimmed her memory at random made any sense, he had no reason to be confused or interested, he'd expected Rae, why would he be baffled by Lola's closeness to her? Lola shook her head to clear the confusing thoughts. Rae suggested she just ask him, but something stopped Lola from accepting the idea, whatever that moment meant, it was something much deeper than what Dr. Thomas wanted her to believe, and she didn't think he would give up the information easily. If she asked him, she risked him removing himself from her life and Lola, as much as the feeling irked her, felt that she would rather that didn't happen, she had only met this man once, but he had firmly settled himself onto the list of people Lola truly liked, and that was a feat in itself, him being an adult made it even more amazing. No, Lola would try and dig deeper on her own before she asked any probing questions, it was the safer option, and that (despite what Rae would have people believe) was nearly always the better option.