

I AM
UNWORTHY

ANGELA MACK

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For all the everyday heroes that have made a difference to someone else's life, no matter how small. Thank you.

Chapter 1

Isabel

You can do this. You can do this. You can *do* this.

I leaned closer to the bathroom mirror, scrutinizing my reflection through narrowed eyes. I tilted my head left and right, checking my makeup at different angles. If you looked close enough, you could still see the puffiness under my eyes, but it was passable. I didn't usually wear much but I had barely slept the past couple of days. Well, the past week really. The bags under my eyes had been so dark that it looked like I had dirt smeared underneath them. I had probably used half my concealer just to look semi-presentable, but it was important that I felt good today. That I felt confident. I wanted today to go well. Really well. I wanted to get off to a good start. No, I *needed* to get off to a good start.

I looked down and saw that my knuckles were white

from gripping the edges of the sink so fiercely. Shit, I was nervous. I couldn't have another two years like the last couple. I could feel the panic building, clawing at my throat and restricting my oxygen. *Deep breaths, deep breaths.* I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what my perfect day would be like. I would walk through those doors with my head held high. I would have a smile on my face and look carefree. Almost happy to be there. No one would be able to ruin my good mood, because I didn't give a shit about what anyone else thought. I. Didn't. Give. A. Shit. That was my new mantra.

The last couple of years at school hadn't exactly been enjoyable. OK, they'd been hideous. I'd made the mistake of trying to do a good deed and it had come back to bite me on the arse.

I had been friends with a group of girls and honestly, I'm uncertain how I became friends with them in the first place. I never quite felt like I fit in with them. But they were nice enough and I had most of my classes with them, so I kind of fell into their friendship group. Most of them had grown up together and had been friends since primary school. My family and I had moved into the area right before I started at Gilleford Secondary School, so naturally, I hadn't bonded with them in quite the same way.

The whole group was pretty popular, not *Mean Girls* popular, but everyone knew their names and wanted to hang out with them. Ellie Sparks was the most charismatic of the bunch. She was short, a little over five feet, and very curvy. She wasn't the skinny, supermodel type you see in American high school TV shows, but she

was still beautiful. She had a round symmetrical face, big blue eyes, and long blonde hair almost to her waist. She had developed early, which the boys loved, and had a great smile. I didn't have a lot in common with her, but it was easy enough to have a superficial conversation with her.

Ellie liked to be bold and stand out from the crowd. Two years ago, she entered into a 'grunge phase,' which was unusual considering the school was dominated by chavs wearing designer labels. Ellie bucked the trend, started wearing heavy eyeliner and listening to Linkin Park and Blink 182. Obviously, everyone in the group started doing the same thing (I'm ashamed to admit that I was also a sheep) and soon she set her sights on a guy with a skinhead and several body piercings.

Jonny was unusual too in the sense that he was charming and likeable. Most of the grungers at school were grumpy, introverted and didn't mix with non-grungers. Jonny, on the other hand, could get along with almost anyone. He was tall, had well-defined arms and shoulders but wasn't overly stocky. He was attractive, for a grunger. Even with the ear stretchers, nose and lip piercings and shaved head.

I think Ellie surprised herself by how hard she fell for him. They were together for about six months, when I overheard a girl gossiping at the back of class one day. She was bragging about how intimate she and Jonny had been at a party over the weekend. And by intimate, I mean that she described in detail a certain sexual act that she had performed. She was another grunger, with black hair and dark brown eyes and pale skin. She was

the complete opposite of Ellie.

I struggled, not knowing whether I should say something or keep it to myself. Eventually the guilt I felt for *not* saying anything was too much. Before biology one day, I pulled Ellie aside in a quiet corridor and explained what I had heard. She had cried, flung her arms around me and thanked me for telling her. I had floated home that day, feeling as light as a feather. Little did I realise how pivotal that moment in my school life had been.

The next day I had come to school and strolled over to the benches where our group always sat. There were boys hanging around nearby as per usual and in fact, most of the girls in the group were coupled up. As I approached, the couples had all stopped chatting and turned to stare at me. I felt like I was a caged animal in a zoo. And that's when the bullying started.

"Lying bitch."

"Sneaky little shit."

"She just wanted him for herself..."

Apparently, Ellie had confronted Jonny and he had denied the whole thing. For good measure, he had told her that I was often flirting with him behind her back and he thought I was trying to split them up on purpose. Even though it was obviously, completely untrue, the whole group had turned on me in an instant. The boys ignored me from then on out, as if I didn't exist. The girls, however, were vicious. They made up rumours about my sex life (which was non-existent), shouted out disgusting and embarrassing things in the middle of classes (I still cringed when I thought back to the shouts

of “Isabel has a fishy fanny” part-way through English class) and went out of their way to be spiteful. Ellie was the ring-leader, but it seemed like there was no end to the amount of girls that would happily join in on her taunts.

The teachers were useless, pretending they didn't hear the vulgar shouts. I tried so hard to tune it all out, ignoring them and praying they'd get bored after enough time. I even started wearing one headphone during classes, listening to music to block out the background noise, but still being able to hear my teachers. After a couple of unrelenting weeks, I gave up on that tactic and put both my headphones in. I slumped down at the back of class, turning my music up as loud as it could go before the teachers would notice. I didn't care that I was missing out on what was being taught. I just didn't want to hear them anymore.

I had always had reasonably good grades, but my As and Bs soon started dropping to Cs and Ds. Some weeks were so unbearably humiliating that I began faking illnesses and skipping lessons. I prayed to a God that I didn't believe in that they would stop sooner or later. Surely, someone else would unwittingly stumble into their firing line? I was a terrible human being really, hoping that some other poor soul would swap places with me and bear the brunt of their bullying. But I'd take all the bad karma in the world if it meant they would stop. They didn't though. Two years later and I was still cowering in the school bathroom before classes.

I opened my eyes and glared. I was sure the mirror was going to shatter under the force of my stare. I gritted

my teeth, grinding them from side to side. It wasn't going to be like that anymore. This was the first day of sixth form and it was going to be completely different. I didn't give a shit, remember? I was a new person with new confidence and nothing bothered me. It was all like water off a duck's back. Yep, that was me. Couldn't care less what anyone thought. And besides, I wouldn't be alone anymore and the bullies wouldn't be here anyway.

My reflection shrugged nonchalantly in the mirror as I tried to get into character. If I acted like I didn't care, eventually it would be true. Right? I pulled my shoulders back and strode confidently from the bathroom. I wouldn't waste any more time hiding in there, no siree. It was like I had tunnel vision. I was going to get to that sixth form common room and I was going to get there without incident. But even if someone did shout something at me, it wouldn't matter. I. Didn't. Give. A. Shit. I just hoped that no one noticed the tremble in my legs, the beads of sweat gathering at my brow, or that I was practically running. Kind of ruined the self-assured facade I was going for, really.

I hesitated for a split second before I pushed open the double doors of the common room in front of me. I scanned the room. *Please be here, please be here.* My persona started to falter even more as each second ticked by that I couldn't see them. I was about to turn and bolt when I caught someone waving at me out of the corner of my eye. My smile slipped back into place as I relaxed, sauntering over as if I wasn't the most terrified person in the world and about to have a

meltdown.

“Hey Izzy. Didn’t think we’d abandoned you, did ya?” Sophie smiled as I sat down.

“And even if we had, it wouldn’t have mattered. Right?” Jess winked.

“Because I don’t give a shit!” The three of us chorused together, making me laugh. Jess had been the one to come up with that particular chant, encouraging me to use it every time I felt even slightly anxious.

I had befriended Jess and Sophie over the summer break. They both lived in Woodley End too, a little village on the very outskirts of Gilleford, Suffolk. Originally a small, lazy village set in the middle of rolling hills and vast farmland, a couple of developers had purchased some of the arable terrain about ten years ago. New build housing estates had started popping up all over ever since. My house was at the start of one of these estates, down a quiet street with a forest at the end of it. I absolutely loved where we lived and this increased even more when the bullying started; few people from school lived anywhere near us. It was a good twenty-minute bus journey from central Gilleford, where most other students lived. At least I’d had a reprieve at weekends and didn’t have to worry much about bumping into anyone.

This was true even though I worked every Saturday at a florist in town, *Buttercups*. It was amongst a little parade of shops near the high street, but teenagers don’t tend to visit florists. Most of the kids I knew didn’t work at all and wouldn’t be awake any earlier than 10 a.m. on a Saturday. This meant that even my bus journey into

work was mostly uneventful. Occasionally I'd come across someone whilst waiting at the bus stop to go home, but even if someone did screech obscenities at me, it didn't bother me as much. I would soon be home and away from them.

Don't get me wrong, my parents were financially stable and always gave me money when I asked for it. But they had wanted me to learn the value of money early on. I had started working at the florist a little over a year ago when I turned sixteen and was pleasantly surprised by how independent I felt. It was only minimum wage, but that was a fair bit of money for someone who didn't have any friends to go out with. Still, if I wanted to buy a new book or some new clothes, I could make most of the purchases myself without asking my parents for money. It was very self-gratifying. In fact, it felt like the only positive thing in my life. I always counted down the days of the week until Saturday.

One afternoon, two girls had walked into the florist. I recognized them and knew that they attended my school. I had seen them around and they had never said anything untoward to me, but I felt the familiar pang of anxiety swirl through my stomach. You never knew when someone would have the sudden urge to be unkind.

The shop owner, a gentle middle-aged lady called Mary, was currently in the back room checking a delivery. She would be out there for at least another ten minutes, making sure the delivery driver was being careful with the flowers and ensuring all the stock had

arrived. I knew I was going to have to serve them. There was no chance of me hiding in the back room. I plastered on my fake 'customer smile,' took a deep breath, and asked how I could help.

"Hey. It's Isabel, right?" the brunette asked. She was short, pale with freckles and had mousy brown hair. She was pretty in a very natural way, despite the layers of makeup she had caked on. I nodded at her.

"I'm Jess and this is Sophie," she said, gesturing to the girl next to her. Sophie was a similar height but where Jess was skinny, Sophie had a very athletic build. She was probably the same dress size as Jess (they were both easily an eight) but her arms were toned and she had shapely legs. Her long, blonde hair was wavy and thick and she was very tanned, as if she spent a long time outside in the sun. Sophie smiled and I could feel relief begin to creep up on me, albeit reluctantly. They seemed harmless enough. I hoped.

"It's my mum's birthday today and we're having some family and friends over. I wanna surprise her with a bunch of flowers, around twenty quid please," Jess said. I was grateful to be able to turn away and break eye contact. I appraised our flower display, plucking a selection of my favourite seasonal blossoms. I soon had a bright bunch ready, filled with yellow gerbera daisies, yellow roses and a couple of sunflowers. She paid, smiled her thanks and both girls turned to leave. Jess hesitated as she reached the door, turning back to me. My heart leapt into my throat, certain she was about to fling out a parting snide comment.

"Are you doing anything tonight?" she asked

instead. I shook my head, wary of where this was going.

“Would you like to come? To my mum’s birthday get-together, I mean? You only live a few streets over from me and my dad keeps telling me ‘the more the merrier.’ So you should come, if you want to...?” Was this a trick? Why was she asking me? Would there be other girls from school going and she only wanted to lure me over for some more humiliation? I could hear my pulse roaring in my ears.

“I’m the only other person from school going. The rest are Jess’s mum’s friends or close family. But it should still be cool,” Sophie chimed in, as if reading my mind. To this day, I’m not sure what made Jess ask me and I have no idea what possessed me to agree, but it was the start of a great friendship between the three of us. We were inseparable all summer after that. My parents were so relieved when my disposition improved. I had never confided in them what was happening at school, so my drop in grades and mood swings had confused them. They suspected something was going on when I stopped socializing and buried myself in books. I was doing anything I could to escape reality. My mum often tried to coax it out of me, but I knew she wouldn’t understand. The bullying was never physical and I thought I would sound weak that I couldn’t handle some name-calling. I also didn’t want her intervening in any way. She was fiercely protective of me, both my parents were as I was their only child, but they would only make things worse.

Still, none of that mattered now. Sixth form was a fresh start. As Jess and Sophie chatted about the latest

series on Netflix that they were binge watching, I coolly glanced around. The three of us were grouped together near the entrance doors, our plastic chairs pulled together. My gaze flitted across the faces of the other students in the room, being careful not to make eye contact. I didn't want to draw attention to myself.

"She's not here, Iz. I already told you. I even double-checked Facebook this morning in case there were any last-minute changes. But there weren't." Jess had a glimmer of pity in her eyes as she reassured me, yet again, that Ellie wouldn't be here.

I had deleted my Facebook account last year when Ellie and her friends had started up cyber-bullying. It clearly wasn't good enough to just do it face to face. Jess knew how nervous I was about coming back, so had kept tabs on everyone. She happily informed me every time someone posted an excited update, confirming that they were doing something other than attending Gilleford Sixth Form after summer. Crucially, Ellie was not returning this year as she had chosen an apprenticeship in hairdressing instead.

Jess and Sophie had never witnessed Ellie's cruelty towards me. Gilleford Secondary School had hundreds of kids attending, so it wasn't surprising that we hadn't had any classes together previously, or seen each other in the canteen at lunchtime. However, everyone had heard of Isabel Johnson, the jealous, lanky girl who tried to steal Ellie Sparks' boyfriend, and who deserved everything she got.

But this year I was going to be Isabel Johnson, the girl who, yep you guessed it, didn't give a shit.

Chapter 2

Joshua

“Fuck off and stare at someone else or I’ll rip your fucking head off.”

I watched the skinny, little runt duck his head and run off, desperate to escape my wrath. I looked around and glared at the other students in the corridor, daring them to continue staring. I smirked when I saw them all avert their eyes and scurry away or busy themselves. I knew why they were looking at me. I had a black eye, a busted lip and my eyebrow was split open. I was always getting into fights and to be fair, most of the students and teachers didn’t bat an eyelid anymore. But it was the beginning of a new year and the new students always stared. Until they learned the hard way that I didn’t like being gawked at.

The good thing about now being in sixth form was

that I didn't have to wear that godawful uniform. We were told to dress smart and that was it. For the first time, I wasn't tugging at my tie and loosening my top button to breathe. I was kind of stretching the definition of 'smart' though, choosing to wear black jeans, a black polo top and some black trainers. I wasn't going to waste money buying poncey trousers or shirts. They didn't fit me properly half the time anyway. The trousers were always too tight in the leg, and the shirts too tight across the chest or arms. I was pretty muscly for a seventeen-year-old, with thick thighs, broad shoulders and decent sized biceps. I worked out a lot. I had to be able to defend myself.

I had fifteen minutes before classes were due to start, so I strolled towards the sixth form common room. It was at the very back of Gilleford Secondary School, in a separate demountable building and away from the younger students. Although Gilleford Sixth Form was part of the same campus, the sixth formers had their own designated areas. Apparently, we were morphing into adults now, so we were allowed the illusion of superiority; we didn't have to mingle with the uniform dwellers.

The common room was a large, white, square block of a building. Single storey, with small square windows evenly spread out along all sides. It was nothing particularly inspiring. It was like they wanted to spend as little money as possible, so constructed the most basic building they could. There was a ramp to the left, winding up towards the central double doors, with steps on the right for a more direct route. Not in any

hurry, I ambled up the ramp, letting my fingertips trail along the steel railing that ran alongside it. I caught glimpses of students as I passed the windows. They were sitting in groups and gossiping, no doubt exchanging stories about all the thrilling things they had been up to over the summer. Most of them looked happy to be back. Excited even. I couldn't care less. I was just biding my time until I was eighteen and old enough to be legally considered an adult. Adults could make their own decisions without being judged. Adults didn't have to answer to anyone.

I pushed open the doors and gave the equally dull and unimpressive interior a once-over. It was one open room with some navy-blue lockers lining the front wall. There were random clusters of furniture spread throughout, with mismatched chairs, sofas and tables. It was like a dumping ground for unwanted furniture. The floor was dark grey carpet, with sporadic thread-bare patches and colourful stains that I didn't look too closely at. It was dimly lit, as if the person who designed the space knew that they wouldn't want you scrutinizing the room too much.

"Fuck, you look like shit, mate. Who did you piss off this time?" My one and only pal scrunched up his nose as he looked at my face. Ollie Boon was a fucking funny guy. He was quick-witted with a fucked-up sense of humour that always seemed to get him into trouble. He, like me, got into plenty of fights. He was always goading people and winding them up, knowing exactly what to say to get a rise out of them. He loved it and got a kick out of pissing people off. The bigger the reaction

they gave him, the bigger he smiled.

Ollie was quite short for a bloke at about five foot eight inches, considerably shorter than my six foot two frame. But he could still hold his own. He was a quick motherfucker with an impressive right-hook. Together we had taken on people older and bigger and still managed to come out on top. He always had my back and I always had his.

“Who don’t I piss off, mate? You know me, I irritate the fuck out of people just by breathing,” I shrugged.

“Big Mike then?” Ollie asked me, giving me a knowing look. Big Mike was the one guy I could never beat in a fight. It wasn’t for lack of trying, trust me. But he wasn’t called Big Mike for nothing. I shrugged again, not wanting to talk about it.

“I tell you what, I am loving the whole ‘no uniform’ thing. Look at Lucy over there, her tits look amazing,” Ollie said. He gestured towards a petite brunette wearing a very tight, low-cut white blouse. She was sitting with around ten other students at the far back right of the common room. I shook my head at him, laughing. Ollie knew not to push me to talk about something I didn’t want to and was always good at changing the subject. More often than not, changing the subject always involved talking about girls.

Lucy clearly heard Ollie’s remark, he hadn’t exactly whispered it, as she turned and gave him the middle finger. Ollie blew her a kiss, causing her to frown, flick her hair over her shoulder and turn back to her conversation. Some other students had obviously overheard their exchange, glancing at us and smirking

or rolling their eyes. They were used to Ollie's antics and loud opinions.

Whilst looking our way, I saw a few of them notice my face, their eyes widening. Most turned away pretty quickly, a few others shook their heads in disgust. I was used to being judged. Most people thought I started fights on purpose and that I enjoyed making trouble. And they were right most of the time. Big Mike had been particularly aggressive this last time though and I had a banging headache. Normally he avoided hitting me anywhere that would be visible to other people. Didn't want to get into trouble, I 'spose. For whatever reason, I had annoyed him enough for him to forgo his usual rule.

I spied an empty wooden bench, the kind that you would usually expect to see outside in a park, and made my way over to it. I dumped my black backpack on top, unzipping it and starting to rifle through it. I always kept a pack of paracetamol in there. Ollie followed me over, sitting on the tabletop and letting his feet rest on the part you would usually sit on.

"What A Levels did you sign up to?" he asked, watching me rifle through my bag.

"P.E., business studies and art," I replied. I had picked the easiest subjects I could. I wasn't planning on using them for any kind of career. I didn't kid myself. I knew I wasn't going to university and I wouldn't have some highly paid, hotshot job waiting for me afterwards. I wouldn't have even bothered coming back to sixth form if I didn't have to, but someone would notice if I wasn't continuing my education in any way at all. I couldn't afford to draw attention to myself like that.

I knew Ollie was going to sixth form and if I was going to be stuck in education, might as well be with my mate. Unlike me, Ollie was intelligent and had big plans for going to university and escaping this shithole town.

Back in the early days of secondary school, our teachers had been surprised that Ollie was so clever. It wasn't typical for a boy from our neighbourhood with a penchant for violence to actually have half a brain. But no matter how many lessons he skipped or how often he ended up in detention, he usually achieved As. Especially maths. He was a whizz kid when it came to numbers. He had signed up for A Levels as soon as possible, whereas I had only applied last week. I had somehow convinced the Head to allow me to come back on short notice and with my mediocre GCSE grades.

"What about you?" I asked, finally locating the pack of painkillers.

"Maths, business studies and..."

"Ah fuck..." I interrupted him. "Fucking packet is empty." I massaged my forehead, cursing myself for not thinking to put a new pack in my bag after using the last one up. I didn't think I'd make it through the whole day without some kind of pain relief.

"You got any paracetamol or ibuprofen on you?" I asked Ollie, even though I knew what the answer would be.

"You know I'm not a pussy like you, I never need that crap," Ollie grinned at me. *Cheeky shit.* I growled, frustrated with myself. I really did not fancy going to classes with the pain throbbing through my head right now. I contemplated skipping my first class to go to the

shop down the road from school. I worked there part-time and Tracy, the assistant manager and Ollie's mum, would likely give me a couple of boxes for free. I could get there and back in twenty minutes, so I wouldn't miss much.

"Here, I've got some." I heard a chair scrape back as a girl balanced her chair on its back legs. She stretched over towards me, holding out a box of paracetamol. She and her friends were sitting in a selection of random chairs not far from where Ollie and I were sitting. I hadn't paid them any attention when I walked over and they hadn't seemed to notice us either. Now though, her friends had both stopped talking, waiting to see how I would react. I didn't exactly have a reputation for being friendly and often snapped at people for no reason. The girl sitting next to her was shocked, her eyes so wide I thought they might pop out of their sockets.

"Well, do you want some?" the girl said, shaking the box at me when I didn't respond straight away. I looked at her and she gave me a small smile. *Isabel Johnson*. Her name flicked into my brain. We had been at the same school for years, but I had never been in any classes with her. I'm pretty sure this was the first time she'd ever spoken to me, even though I knew she worked in the florist next door to the shop I worked in. I'd seen her enter the florist early every Saturday morning as I walked to work. She had never once made any effort to even look at me, let alone say hello. She seemed rather stuck up, if I'm honest. I had no interest in talking to her. We had absolutely zero in common and I knew she came from a well-off part of town. That didn't mean I

couldn't admire her from a distance though.

She had long reddish-brown hair that was dead straight, falling to the middle of her back. She was slim but not skinny. Her tits were probably a B or C cup. She peered up at me now, her bright green eyes staring at me expectantly. She was pretty stunning really. But it fucked me off that she had always acted as if I was invisible and now all of a sudden, she wanted to chat? Yeah, alright. She could do one.

The bell rang, signifying five minutes until classes started. Everyone around us started standing up and grabbing their things, including Isabel's friends. I still hadn't given her an answer and her friends called her name, turning towards the door to go. She let her chair fall back down flat on the ground with a thump and stood up. *Woah, she's tall for a girl.* I hadn't noticed before, but she was only a few inches shorter than me. I could appreciate her figure even more now up close too. Her long legs were squeezed into black skinny jeans and she wore a plain black, long-sleeved t-shirt. Her outfit was nothing special, but on her, it looked great. Effortless. She clearly wasn't particularly bothered about dressing smartly either.

Isabel opened the box of painkillers, took a packet out and slid it across the bench to me.

"You look like you need these more than me," she smiled again, bending down to pick up her belongings. I scowled at her and her smile slipped a little. She placed the now half-empty box back in her black leather handbag and slung it over her shoulder. I watched as she walked out the doors of the common room, joining

her friends that were hovering outside.

“Why the fuck didn’t you say something to her, you arsehole? Someone was actually being nice to you for a change and you looked at her as if she was a piece of shit.” Ollie punched me in the shoulder, shaking his head at me. I shrugged again.

“Just playing the part, dickhead. Can’t have people thinking I’m suddenly a nice guy,” I replied. I snatched the paracetamol Isabel left behind, popping three in my mouth. I swallowed them down dry, grateful that I didn’t have to walk to the shop after all.

“You’re a knob. Come on, I don’t want to be late for my first maths lesson.” Ollie jumped off the table, making the nearby windows shudder as he thumped down. This ‘building’ really was a cheap pile of shit.

“And you’re such a nerd. *I don’t want to be late for maths,*” I mimicked in a high-pitched voice. Ollie grinned at me as he skipped towards the exit. He was an oddball. I smiled to myself as I followed him. Despite having a shitty summer and an even shittier weekend, I found my mood improving. Besides, it was better being here than being stuck at home.