

Title: Not your ordinary mystery

Soundtrack link: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLN\\_fw87-uzcRFgd4Zn6sgU6ox9n52veh](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLN_fw87-uzcRFgd4Zn6sgU6ox9n52veh)

Copy:

You've all read a mystery story in your life, right? They're always the same: unnaturally talented kid decides to solve a mystery for no reason whatsoever, solving it when not even the police can. Perfectly placed clues so they can figure it out from a strand of hair or an item of clothing.

It didn't happen that way with me.

In these stories, only one person dies, one person goes missing.

But what do you do when an entire city vanishes into thin air?

\*

Peace. I relish in it as I browse the library, occasionally picking a book to place on the pile of ones I'll borrow. There are lots there already. That's normal - everyone has a book-borrowing problem, right? It's not just me who buys too many books a year, who has to go on a book-buying ban multiple times a *month*...just me?

It's quieter than usual. There's usually a few more bookworms here. Huh. I pull out my headphones and phone, pressing on a playlist at random. Loud, unapologetic rock. Perfect.

With difficulty, I pick up my books and stumble downstairs. No one's there. I shrug off the unease prickling on my skin and scan the books out, shoving them in my rucksack once that's done. I walk outside.

And stop.

Everything's a mess: cars halted in the middle of the road; litter rolling gently along the pavement; there's no one around.

*What's going on?*

Heart racing, I follow the winding street, ignoring the fear settling in my bones. I'm an introvert - should I care that no one's about? Why do I keep glancing over my shoulder? Why is my heart threatening to explode from my chest? Why do I want to go home and hide?

My footsteps echo. My breathing's too fast.

"Hey!"

I tug out my headphones. My hair slaps me in the face as I whirl around, but hope rekindles inside me. *I'm not alone.*

But...*oh.*

The lone girl standing there, bright-red lips curved in a smile, dark hair immaculate. Great. Just great. Everyone's missing, apart from me, the Introvert, and Bea Williams, the most popular kid in the school.

Wonderful.

"Stella! I came out to see where everyone was! It's so, like, creepy!"

"Er..."

"Have you seen anyone else? It's *so* empty, like - where's everyone gone? I saw you, and I was like *thank goodness* I'm not alone, but it's just us..." she trails off. I force a smile through gritted teeth and look away.

We never talk - I don't intend to start. I just want to head home and hide. Someone else can sort this mess out. Mysteries are fine in books, they keep you on the edge of your seat. In reality? They're awful.

I'm going to go home and pretend nothing's happened, that the whole city has decided to play a prank on the Introvert and the Popular. *Hilarious.*

A scrap of paper pirouettes through the air. It lands at my feet; I pick it up to give myself something to do.

There's messy writing on it - I have to squint to make out the words. Don't people *learn* how to write neatly anymore?

**They're coming. They're coming to get us. Please help!**

OK... Not creepy at all. Totally fine. Now about that plan to go home...

I glance to the bottom of the paper.

My heart practically stops.

There's an address.

*My address.*

Before I'm conscious of what I'm doing, I set off down the street in the direction of my house. Wind buffets my face like a forcefield stopping me from passing; I push through and end up at my house with a sigh. I'm home.

I don't feel any safer as I slip the key into the lock and push open the door. There aren't any lights on; it's almost pitch black. I illuminate the room quickly to banish my fears of someone lurking in the shadows. *They're coming. They're coming to get us.*

Now that I can see properly, I realise that the house isn't how I left it this morning. Chairs are upturned, books flung off the shelf, cupboards emptied.

"What happened here?"

I start.

"Seriously, Bea?" I yell. My introvertedness vanishes, terror taking over. She followed me here. Amazing.

Calming my roaring heart, I tread further into the room. Someone's been here. Someone that wasn't me; someone that wasn't Mum.

So who?

Who is the mysterious 'they' from the scrawled note?

A book is open on the table. I go over to investigate, not bothering to take off my trainers. It's open on an illustration taking up most of the page. There's handwritten notes too.

"Book defacers," I mutter furiously, and start to read.

*They will pay for what happened. All of them. They will pay. They will pay. THEY WILL PAY!!!!*

Someone out for revenge. That's nice. Does that mean I *won't* be hiding in my room, snuggled beneath a blanket and reading?

"What does that *mean* though?" Bea makes me jump *a third time* as she appears behind me, breathing excitedly. "Why would someone write that in a children's book? Why would someone write that at all?"

Squinting, I realise she's right. It *is* a children's book. A picture book. And the illustration is showing...a dragon?

Wait.

My hands tremble as I rip through the rest of the pages until I reach the front. *Dearest Stella*, it reads, *this is to remind you that anything is possible. No one can tell you differently. Love, Mum.*

What does that have to do with-

Another handwritten note underneath, one I know wasn't there before:

**They're coming. They want revenge. I made a mistake - I can't undo it. What should I do?**

It's in Mum's handwriting. Now I'm scared. Really scared.

What is going on????

There's a knock at the door.

Maybe Mum's back? Maybe this is all just an elaborate dream?

Bea answers.

A voice floats on the air to meet my ears, haunting and melodic.

"Your time is up, Stella Clarkson."