



HITLER AND OTHER MINOR PROBLEMS



Our town is as white as a winter postcard snow scene, and I'm not talking about the weather. You'd think it wouldn't be possible in this day and age to find a place so empty of dark faces, but except for a handful of Asians it's just whites everywhere you look. That's why it wasn't surprising Ebony's arrival stirred things up. Changed things, even.



I couldn't help staring at her, the first few weeks of school. Ebony was that kind of person anyway— you'd have stared no matter what colour she was. She sat to the left and slightly in front of me in history, her bushy hair splaying out over the desk of the person behind her. She was tall and thin, but not quite as dark as her name suggested. She seemed to be making tiny movements all the time. You had the feeling she might jump up

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all of a sudden and yell something.

Lou Davis sat behind Ebony, and her air space was being invaded by the black girl's hair. That day Miss Willbeck was droning on about some war or other, and I knew I'd better listen because this was the Big Year, the Year that would Decide Our Future, etc. etc., which we'd been hearing from parents and teachers for ages until we were either bored to tears or scared out of our tiny minds. Still, we had a good eight months before exams hit, so I figured I could waste a day or two staring at a black girl.

Except now it was Lou I was staring at. She was a petite girl with carefully shaped and sprayed hair in a fake shade of intense auburn. As I watched she casually removed a bottle of white correcting fluid from her pencil case. More than once I'd been on the receiving end of Lou's anger, expressed by flicking white blobs all over her victim. She belonged to a gang, the kind you didn't want to cross if you could help it.

Ebony tossed her head, and the back of her hair bounced up and down like a bundle of little snakes, right in Lou's face. Lou unscrewed the lid of the bottle. I wondered if Lou would go for the black girl's hair or just for the bright blue blazer. It would be easier to get that white stuff out of hair than off a school blazer.

"Star Smith!"

I nearly jumped out of my skin. "Yes, Miss?"

"I asked you a question, Star. What were some factors that contributed to the rise of Hitler after World War I? I'm sure you covered it last year; this is only review."

"Yes, Miss." I thought furiously and dredged up a couple of points from the bottom of my memory slush pit.

"Very good. Can anyone add to that?"

Miss Willbeck turned towards the other side of the room. I suspected that she saw Lou take out the bottle and was choosing to ignore it. A lot of teachers were like that with

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Lou. She could get away with all kinds of things, like obvious make-up and bright nail varnish in spite of school rules, when the rest of us would be told off.

I kept my face turned towards the teacher but with my left eye I saw exactly what Lou was doing. She gave a tiny shrug like maybe she thought it was beneath her even to bother with this black creature, then she started painting over her long silver nails with the white fluid.

I thought it was dumb to paint over the silver with white, but then I saw she was drawing some kind of pattern on each nail.

It wasn't until she got to her thumb that I could see she was decorating each nail with two angular "s" letters crossing one another. A swastika. I had a feeling Lou wasn't painting swastikas on her nails just because we were about to study World War II.