



Perfect Summer
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PERFECT SUMMER
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Prologue

They were on their fourth game of poker. The air was tense; they played in silence, speaking only when they had to.

The burly man glanced at the five cards in his hand, his expression unreadable. "I'll see you." He took a drag of his cigarette and waited.

The woman sitting next to him studied her hand of cards and sighed. "I'm folding." She placed the cards face down on the table, crossed her arms and sat back in her chair.

They both watched the bald man on the other side of the table. He looked at his cards and frowned. The burly man took another drag of his cigarette and sent a spiral of thick smoke into the air. Then a shrill ring broke through the silence, making them all jump. The burly man grabbed his nanophone and the others waited as he flicked it open. The air was electric with suspense.

"Yes," he said brusquely. He was silent as he listened, then replied, "We will leave immediately." He switched the phone off, threw his cards down and stood up. "It's on," he said, scooping up the handful of coins in the middle of the table and putting them, and the phone, in his pocket. "Let's get going."

The woman left her cards and followed him. They both hurried outside to a dark blue van. The man climbed into the driving seat, the woman sat beside him. She took a slip of paper out of her pocket and keyed an address into the E-Nav. "We'll be there in a couple of hours," she said.

"How old's this one?" the man asked.

"Three," the woman replied.

"Shouldn't be too difficult then." The man started up the van and they set off.

Chapter One

"23.8!" I whooped as the score blazed on the wall for everyone to see. So far I was the top player.

"That's great." Summer flashed me a too-bright smile. "Let's see how I do."

Tucking her long blonde hair behind her ears, she pressed the silver button on the screen. A black ball rolled out of the chute. She bounced it against the wall like an expert.

Tap, tap, tap.

The two megafit lads who'd been watching nudged each other and moved a bit closer. Tall, slim, spike-gelled hair, looks to die for, the sort of lads Summer always attracted and I didn't. But then I wasn't effortlessly beautiful with creamy skin and diamond blue eyes like she was.

"Game commence!" the automated voice announced.

Summer caught the ball as it bounced off the wall and ran with it. A holoplayer flashed in front of her and she swerved just in time. If she touched a hologram she would lose vital points. The next holoplayer took her by surprise. She didn't stop in time and a buzzer sounded as she ran right through him.

"Penalty!" the automated voice announced.

Summer grimaced. Two penalties and she'd be out. I knew she was desperate to beat my score. Summer liked to be the best at everything, and she usually was. But I always beat her at Xball. That made me feel good even though I didn't actually like the game.

Summer managed to avoid running through the other holos, although she lost a few points because she skimmed a couple of them.

"18.9!" The autovoice declared. The score flashed on the screen as Summer threw the ball through the net.

Summer shrugged her shoulders at the two watching lads then raised a perfectly-arched eyebrow at them as two girls--obviously their girlfriends--joined them. I'd seen her do that before. It was her, 'What? You're with *them* when you could be with me?' look. One of the lads flashed a rueful grin back, but Summer had already turned away.

"I'm done, Morgan," she said. "Let's go and get a smoothie."

We joined the queue at the elevator. The Holozone was always busy, especially during the school holidays. "Doors opening!" the autovoice announced as the doors of the cylinder glass elevator slid open and we all stepped in. "Doors closed. Select your destination!"

"Sky Bar everyone?" a girl asked.

A chorus of yeses affirmed the question so she selected the top button and we glided upwards past the kids playing hologames, laser sports, swimming in the jet pool or simply hanging around listening to music from the E-centres. We finally came to a smooth halt at the rooftop café. It was pretty full, but we managed to find an empty table and sat down with our smoothies--strawberry for Summer and banana for me.

"Want to stop at my house for the weekend?" Summer asked. "We're going to Roxy's."

Did I ever! Roxy's, on the top floor of the River Dome, was the best club in the whole universe. It was where all the celebs hung out. Then I remembered that the club was so exclusive that anyone not considered beautiful enough was turned away.

"Do you think I'll get in?" I asked, never doubting for a moment that Summer would.

She tilted her head and scrutinised my face. I flushed, knowing that my nose was too long and my face too round to be considered beautiful. Then she nodded. "Tamara's giving us both a makeover. By the time she's finished with us we'll look so gorgeous we'd get in anywhere. Anyway," she added with a grin. "We'll be with Leo and Tamara. They wouldn't dare turn *us* away."

Leo and Tamara, Summer's parents, liked Summer and her nine-year-old brother, Kyle, to call them by their names, not Mum and Dad. They were mega-cool and mega-rich. Leo was a top surgeon at the exclusive Fernbrook Clinic, and Tamara was a beauty consultant to the celebs. They were about the same age as my parents but appeared years younger thanks to their numerous tummy tucks, face lifts and body restructuring--courtesy of Leo's best friend, Dale Wyckham, who was reputed to be the best Physical Perfection surgeon in the entire world.

"That'll be brill!" I told her.

Apart from the fact that I was dying to go to Roxy's, I loved staying at Summer's house. It was a detached four-storey river pad and she had the whole top floor to herself. Kyle had the third floor, her parents the second, and they all shared the bottom floor. They each even had a massive, luxury bathroom. Her parents' top-of-the-range cars, a black Nepha for her dad and a silver Pino for her mum, were parked underneath the house. The river pads were on stilts because of the floods so both the Nepha and Pino were waterproof and could float on water.

Our terraced three-storey was nowhere near as posh, with the kitchen and lounge downstairs, Mum and Dad's bedroom, Josh's bedroom and the bathroom on the second floor and my bedroom, Dad's study and the storeroom on the top floor.

"I'll have to go home and pick up some stuff first," I added. I checked the time on my squib. "Shall we go after we've finished these?"

I wanted to get my clothes and be out of the house before Dad got home because I knew he'd be annoyed that I was staying over at Summer's house again. He said it was because Mum needed me to help with Josh, but I think it was because Summer's

parents, with their big house and posh cars, made him feel a bit...inadequate. Like he wasn't good enough. I sort of understood how he felt.

Summer was a brilliant friend but I couldn't help being an itchy bit jealous of her. She was beautiful, rich and even had her own brand new top-of-the-range pink eco-bug while I had to travel around on commcab or speedrail. Honestly when luck was dealt out, Summer got a whole bucket load while I think I was somewhere at the back of the queue.

As we turned onto my street. I saw a black Ministry car outside our house and immediately tensed. "Looks like you've had another visit," Summer said, glancing at me.

The front door opened, two dark-suited Ministry Officials came out, and strode down the path to the waiting car. I caught a brief glimpse of Mum at the door before it closed and my heart went out to her as I thought of the grilling she must have just had.

"I hate them." I clenched my fists. "Why can't they leave us alone?"

"Try not to worry, they're just doing their job. They can't *make* you put Josh in a RLC," Summer reminded me.

"Not yet," I chewed my lip. "But what if they make a new law?"

The Ministry were always making laws 'for the good of the people'. We lived in constant fear of having Josh taken from us and placed in a Residential Learning Centre.

I saw Mum was upset as soon as we walked in, but she managed a weak smile. "Hello girls. Had a good time?"

"We saw those Ministry guys leaving," I told her. "Were they harassing you about Josh again?"

Mum nodded in reply to my question. "And I've told them what I always tell them, Josh stays with us."

Just then Josh toddled in, clutching a bucket of bricks, Bobo, his favourite little teddy, perched on the top. "Play Maw," he said, coming over to me. Maw was his pet name for me. He was only three and couldn't pronounce Morgan yet. He squatted on the floor by my feet, took the blue teddy out, tucked it under his arm and then tipped his puzzle blocks out of his bucket.

I picked up a block with my right hand, hid it behind my back, then swapped it to my left hand. "Which hand is it in, Joshie?"

Josh giggled as he clenched his chubby little hand into a fist and pointed to my left hand. It was his broad, flat hands and short fingers that had told the doctors something was wrong with him. That and his slanted eyes. Typical signs of Down's syndrome.

We'd all been so thrilled when Mum discovered she was having Josh. She and Dad had wanted another baby ever since they'd had me, and I'd longed for a baby sister or brother for years. But it never happened. Then Mum discovered she was pregnant. She'd thought she had gone through the menopause. By the time she found

out she was too far gone to have the usual tests to make sure the baby was normal. But none of us worried about that. We wanted a total surprise so Mum wouldn't even let the doctors tell her the baby's sex. Then Josh was born and our bubble of happiness burst.

I'm ashamed to admit that all I thought of at the time was what the other kids would say about me having a RAD brother. I hated the name myself but that's what children like Josh were called, it was derived from the Recorded Abnormality Details form that doctors and midwives had to fill in every time a baby was born with disabilities. The Ministry kept track of the children and tried to talk their parents into having them shut away into one of their Residential Learning Centres, out of sight from the general public.

Mum and Dad refused point blank to put Josh in a RLC. He belonged with his family, they said, and that was that. And Josh was so adorable, so placid and good-humoured, that I soon grew to love him.

But the Ministry wouldn't leave us alone. Every couple of months they paid Mum and Dad a visit, grilled them about Josh's progress and tried to persuade them that he would be better off in a RLC.

"Maw," Josh said, pointing to my left arm again.

"Good boy!" I took my left hand from behind my back and gave him the block back, then bent down and kissed him on the cheek. "Maw and Summer going upstairs now, Joshie."

Josh crumbled his bottom lip and was about to protest when his favourite jingle came on the E-screen. He gave an excited squeal and looked up to watch the big screen on the wall.

"Be perfectly lovely," a white dove sang as it fluttered across the screen. *"Be perfectly happy."* It was joined by another white dove and they sang in chorus. *"Have the body and life you deserve. Contact Perfectly Lovely on 011-6483 for advice on how to get a Physical Perfection grant."* The two doves then flew off together singing, *"Be perfectly lovely, be perfectly happy..."* until they disappeared from sight.

"Wuvlee. Appee!" Josh rocked his head from side to side as he tried to sing along with the birds.

"That advert!" Mum shook her head.

It was one of the trillions of adverts for body enhancement that flashed across the E-screen every day since the Ministry had decided everyone over sixteen qualified for a grant towards physical perfection surgery. I couldn't wait for my sixteenth birthday in a couple of months so I could have my nose straightened and my face sculptured. Summer had already had hers done, privately of course--no PP grant for her--and she looked amazing. Mum hated the ad because she said everyone was too obsessed with having perfect looks. But Josh loved the catchy tune and the two cute little birds. The irony that he didn't have, and never could have, perfect looks was lost on him.

Summer and I hurried upstairs while Josh was busy watching TV. Summer plonked herself down on my bed while I got my things ready.

“Want some music?” I asked, pressing the silver button on the comm-panel. The latest hit from Krescendo, our favourite band, blasted out and a hologram of them playing beamed onto the wall.

Then I pressed the green-button, my wardrobe doors glided open, and a rail of clothes slid out. I glanced over at Summer, feeling awkward as always, that my room was so small and my wardrobe so sparse. Summer’s wardrobe was a huge walk-in affair full of designer clothes. Luckily, she was sprawled out watching Krescendo so I quickly grabbed the clothes I needed for the weekend and shoved them in my rucksack. Thank goodness I’d found an immaculate emerald green *Maliko* dress at the recycle store the other week. That would be perfect for Roxy’s. I knew Summer would let me borrow her clothes but felt better if I wore something of my own.

I took out the dress and zipped it into a fresh-pack to keep it crease-free. I glanced at the image screen on my bedroom wall and grimaced. My make up needed renewing and some strands of my chestnut hair were escaping from the ponytail I’d swept it into. I swiftly fixed it and applied more make up. I didn’t want to turn up at Summer’s looking a mess.

“Ready.” I pressed the buttons on the CP again to close my wardrobe doors, and switched off the music.

“Have a nice weekend,” Mum said as we popped in to say goodbye. She looked so pale, with dark circles under her eyes. I could tell the visit from the Ministry had upset her and hesitated for a moment wondering if I should stay. But Dad was due home soon and I so looked forward to the weekend. I loved going to Summer’s house and being spoilt for a bit. It was like living in another world.

“Thanks, we will.” I leaned over and tousled Josh’s chestnut curls. “Bye, Josh.”

“Play, Maw.” He scrambled up.

“Maw going out now. I’ll play with you when I come back.”

He puckered his face as if he was going to cry, but Mum took his hand. “Come on, Josh, let’s pick some tomatoes for tea.”

Every one had a vegetable patch, compost and water butt by order of the Ministry as part of the Planet Protection Programme. I hated gardening but Josh loved helping Mum water the plants with the rainwater collected in the butt, and picking the vegetables. Summer’s parents had a gardener, of course.

Mum led Josh out into the garden while we went out the front door. I had no idea how much I was going to regret not playing with Josh one more time. Or not kissing him goodbye.