

## Phoenix High 2

by Juliet Robinson

I grin at Nina, and smooth imagined wrinkles on the dress. I look like a princess and shockingly this doesn't make me cringe with a sense of fraud. It is like somehow the dress has transformed me, lent me some of its brilliance.

Nina smiles back at me. She's wearing a beautifully cut vintage suit that she found on a clearance rail at the front of the store, she looks effortlessly dashing.

'Look at us!' she says, threading her arm through mine. For a moment we stare at our reflections, and it's like looking at future promise. We seem so grand, so grown up and dare I say it beautiful.

There's a tapping at the door and Arun calls through, 'You decent yet?'

'Go away!' I squeak, not wanting him to see me in the dress.

He laughs, 'I wasn't going to come in!'

'We'll be out soon,' Nina tells him.

I want Arun to see me in this dress for the first time at the spring dance, I want my hair to be perfect, my makeup just so, I want him to see a different me.

'We look alright,' I say smiling at my reflection. Nina raises a knowing eyebrow at me, and the twisted bubbles in my stomach that are my feelings for Arun squirm. Does she know?

We snap a quick picture then exit the changing room. The dress is 120\$ which is a whole lot more than I can afford. I text the picture of Nina and me to mum captioned – *pleeeeeeeeeaaassseeee*.

Then we head to Stranger Fiction, Nina's stepfather's bookshop, where we never have to pay for coffee. Arun is already there, he's seated at a table, surrounded by piles of books, and a steaming cup of coffee. I steal glances at him as we order our drinks, his white hair is brushing his brow and I imagine what it would be like to push it behind his ear. Nina gives me a look, some TIEFLINGS can read minds, but she can't, least not that I know, but I blush all the same.

My phone pings, its mum, she's transferred the money for the dress, but she needs to collect me earlier than planned. I clap my hands together, dance on the spot, then without an explanation I dash from Stranger Fiction and back to Glad Rags. Things are going my way!

Dress procured I send a group message to Nina and Arun, letting them know mum came to collect me earlier.

Grinning, I head for the car park. I can't see mum's car, but I do see Mr. Colwyn, who has his back to me, and he is chatting animatedly with someone who is laughing at what he's saying. I am about to back away; I never did get round to handing in my poetry piece and I really don't feel like being chewed out. But before I can retreat, Mr. Colwyn moves, leaning forward and it looks like he's about to kiss the person he's talking to. Mr. Colwyn, you sly dog, I think as I reach for my phone, snap it out and start filming. I don't really know why I do this; I think vaguely that Nina might find it funny, Mr. Colwyn kissing someone in the mall car park. But then, I see who he's with, and my phone tumbles from my hand. Mum.

I quickly snatch up my phone and turn to flee, but in my hurry my hooves clatter and I accidentally trip into a parked car and its viper alarm goes mental, hissing and spitting venom.

'Aster?'

I turn and force a smile on my face, 'Hi mum.'

She's flushed, cheeks all pink, and Mr. Colwyn is now a cool five feet from her.

'You ready?' mum asks, 'Did you get the dress.'

The dress, the Glad Rags bag is dangling limply from my hand. 'Yeah, I did.'

I now see that mum and Mr. Colwyn were standing next to her car. Without a glance at either of them I clamber into the passenger seat and slam the door. Mum hovers, outside the car talking to Mr. Colwyn, I tune out what they are saying.

I should be angry, but I'm numb. And that just confuses me even more.

My phone pings again.

Arun - I'll collect you at 1800 tomorrow. Can't go to the dance on our own. Date?

I read his message again and then mum climbs into the car, 'Mr Colwyn says you didn't hand in your poetry assignment.'

I'm blindsided, I expected her to get into the car with a flurry of excuses, not this.

'I don't know if you can go to the dance if you're letting your schoolwork slide.'

'Poetry! I can't think about that right now. If I do, I will go crazy. I'll think about that tomorrow or after you explain to me what the hells I saw just now! And I think Arun just asked me out!'