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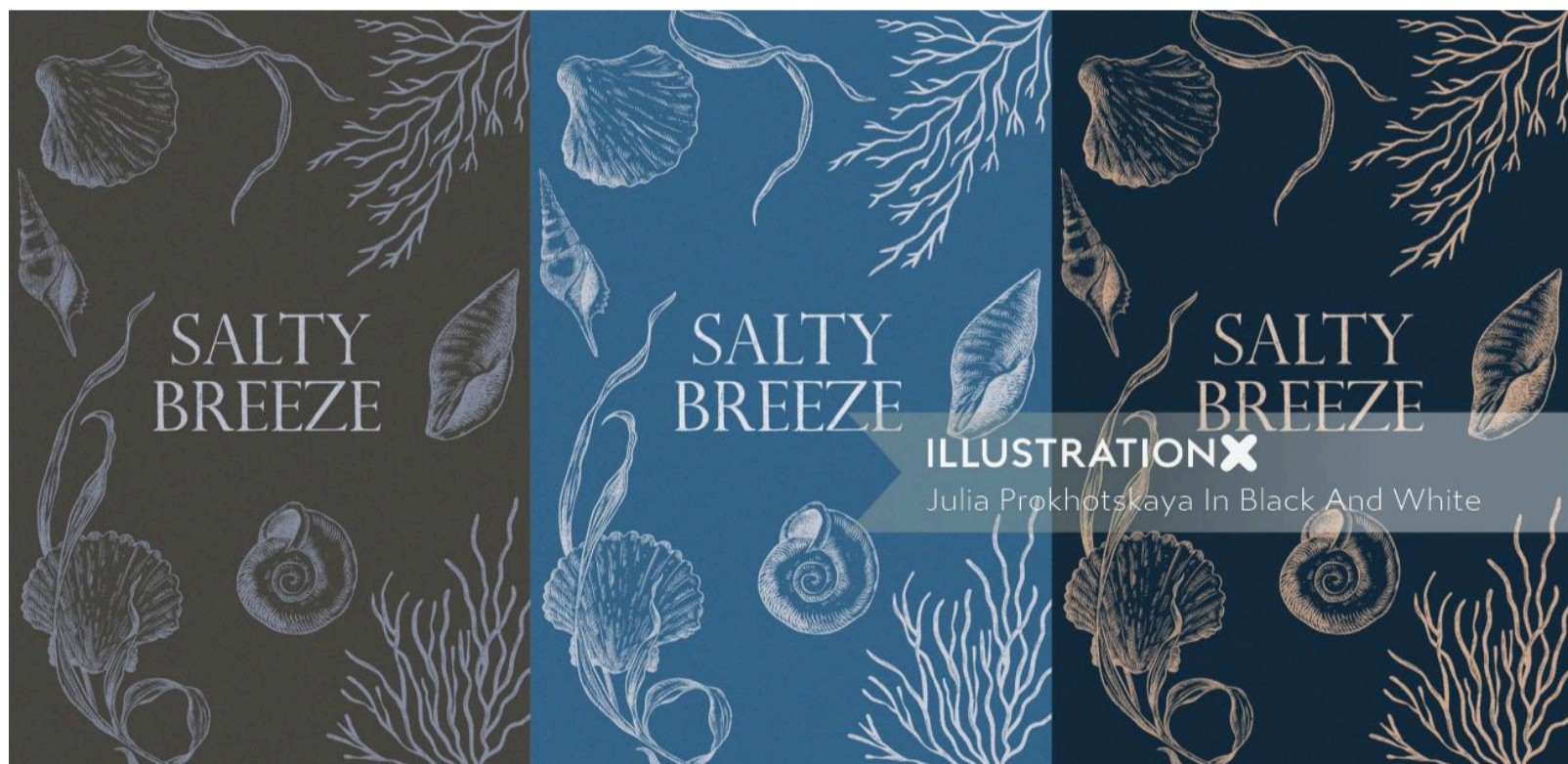
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Ending With an Exclamation Point!

FICTION BY LORI Z. SCOTT / ILLUSTRATION BY JULIA P. (ILLUSTRATION X)

"Can you believe how they parked?" Lucy gestured at a red Jeep, which effectively hogged two spaces. "I bet they don't even go to our school."

Her friend Maya made a face. "I don't see any other openings close to the gym. We'll have to park down the street and walk. We'll probably miss the tipoff."

From the backseat, Gina chimed in. "Ugh. That's so annoying. I hate people who think they own the road. Someone cut me off yesterday, and I wanted to scream."

"There's a spot." Maya pointed to a narrow space between two pickup trucks. "Squeeze in there."

Lucy squinted. "That's tight. We might have to crawl out the windows."

"You can totally make it." Gina leaned forward, blocking Lucy's rearview mirror with her face. "It's either that or a half-mile hike."

"Fine." Lucy tightened her grip on the wheel. "But my door better not get dinged." "Door dings. The worst." Gina slapped Maya's headrest. "You know what else is annoying? Going to buy one thing at the store and having to wait behind someone with a cart full of groceries. Yesterday, this lady whipped into the line I was heading for. Like she couldn't wait two seconds for me to buy my single tube of mascara."

"Yes! That!" Maya said.

After Lucy shut off the engine, she realized her door barely opened. She waited for Gina and Maya to scramble free from the vehicle and then crawled over the center console to exit through the passenger side. Even then, she got a dark streak on her backside from scraping past the metal frame as she sucked in her gut.

"I am offended by the human race in general," she said, dusting off her backside. "But in particular by owners of oversized trucks."

"L-u-u-cy! Wait up!" Lucy turned in the direction of the

faraway call, without purposely zeroing in on the curly-haired girl waving at the opposite end of the parking lot.

Maya raised a brow. "And who is this?"

"Jemma." Lucy rubbed grime off her fingertips. "She's new. She's in my math class."

"And do we like her?" Gina asked.

Lucy shrugged. "Maybe. . . . I don't know her very well."

"Then we don't have to wait." Maya took three quick steps toward the entrance.

Lucy felt Gina grab her arm. She wondered if Lucy was dragging her after Maya so she wouldn't be tempted to wave back.

"Pretend you didn't see her," Gina advised. "I hate waiting for someone when it makes me late."

"Right?" Maya said.

Lucy supposed they were right. There was no sense in everyone being late. A Bible verse about loving your neighbor floated into her mind, but she ignored it. Still, she felt bad for Jemma and then annoyed that she felt that way.

By the time the three got to the gym, Lucy was attuned to every little irritation. The noise (not to mention the body odor) from the crowded bleachers. A sticky spot on the floor from someone spilling a soda. The long line for concessions, boosted by the harsh smell of buttered popcorn in the air.

Everything.

And then, just like Lucy had done with her car in a parking space, Jemma squeezed into a nonexistent spot next to Lucy. Except here, with the packed-in crowd preventing movement, there was no dodging the girl.

"Lucy, hi," Jemma offered a wide smile. "I saw you in the parking lot earlier, but you must've missed me." "Yeah," Lucy tried to ignore the

prick of guilt for lying—but failed. "The lot was full."

"I know. I parked three blocks away and walked. But I got my steps in. Yay!" Jemma wiggled, which apparently afforded her more space on the bleachers since now only 90% of her body pressed against Lucy. "I almost caught up, but you guys are quick! Who are your friends?"

Gina leaned away from Jemma, seemingly engrossed in the game. Maya leaned back and folded her arms, a strong signal she wasn't interested in meeting the new girl.

Lucy introduced them anyway.

"Hi," Jemma said to each and received the slightest of nods. She continued, "I loved the way y'all strode to the gym with that don't-mess-with-me attitude. Hope that rubs off on the players. Go Raiders!"

Jemma stayed by Lucy and her friends

through the whole game, cheering and chatting just enough to take the edge off Lucy's irritation and exchange phone numbers. Even Gina and Maya relaxed enough to acknowledge some of Jemma's comments.

Still, the day ended with a loss, a clog of cars exiting the venue and homework waiting for Lucy after she dropped off her friends. All she wanted to do was crawl under the covers with her headphones and listen to music. But homework.

If only she had someone in the class to help her solve problems—like the square root of 11,234. Why was everything in her life always spiraling downward?

Lord, please give me the strength to get my work done.

As if in response, her phone buzzed. A message from Jemma:

Thanks for introducing me to your friends. I had a lot of fun at the game. That makes tackling tonight's math homework so much easier! 😊

Hi! Sorry for an excuse to procrastinate, Lucy messaged back.

Easier? Not! I'm just starting the homework. It's gonna be a long night for me. 😩

I can help! Let's FaceTime! Teamwork makes the dream work!! 🙌

Lucy cringed at the outdated quote and the way-too-many exclamation points. Still, this could save her from a late night.

Yes, please. 🙏

Seconds later, Jemma was there digitally, talking Lucy through the problems while peppering Lucy with math jokes, such as,



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"The last time I had an argument with a 90-degree triangle, I lost. It ends up, the triangle was right."

Jemma was so upbeat that it was hard not to laugh. The bubbles of frustration still clinging to Lucy after the disastrous basketball game slowly dissolved. Completing the last equation, Lucy glanced at the clock. She could still snag a decent night's sleep.

"Thanks for your help, Jemma."

"No problem! I mean, yes, we had lots of problems, but the problems were not a problem!" Jemma radiated amusement. "Blah! Tongue not working! But that's OK!"

Lucy said, "Every sentence out of your mouth ends with an exclamation point. How do you do it?"

"I keep a verse taped to the visor in my car and read it every day. It reminds me that happiness is contagious."

"What verse?" Lucy rubbed her eyes.

"It's Proverbs 16:24," Jemma said.

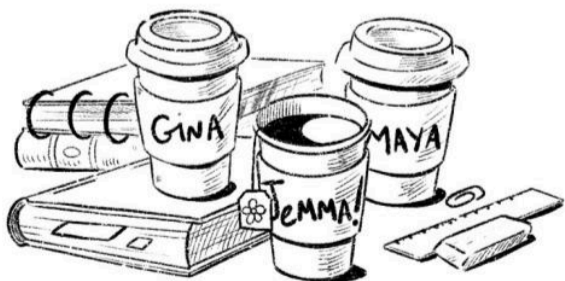
"'Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.' It reminds me to be kind to others and also kind to myself."

Lucy tapped her pencil against her cheek. With all the gossip and complaining in the world, she could see how she might need some honeycomb in her life. "Give me an example."

"Sure. Moving here." Jemma sighed. "I left behind my winning volleyball team. My best friends. My home. At the game today, instead of focusing on missing all that, I reminded myself that I got to make new friends. Like you."

Not completely comfortable with the idea, heat filled Lucy's cheeks. "Thanks. I might try your method. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Yay!" Jemma said. "Good night."



Six a.m. Friday morning came like a slap in the face. But Jemma's idea of honeycomb words came immediately to Lucy's mind. The aroma of something earthy with a subtle hint of hazelnut flavored the air. Instead of groaning and pulling a pillow over her head, Lucy said a quick prayer of thanks for the warm coffee waiting for her in the kitchen. The thought helped her climb out of bed, grateful it was Friday. And that new approach to her morning even made her feel good.

So good that on the way out the door, she stopped to give her mom a hug. At first, her mom stiffened, as if surprised. Then she squeezed back hard enough to make Lucy laugh.

"You just made this morning the best one all week," her mom said.

Lucy smiled.

On the drive to school, Lucy contemplated her coffee in the cup holder. *Why not share the caffeine love? Would others respond the same way Mom had?*

She stopped by the coffee shop and picked up two lattes and an herbal tea. Before the first period bell rang, she dispersed two of the liquid treasures to Gina and Maya. The way their faces lit up told Lucy she'd made a good choice.

Gina raised her cup in a salute. "I needed this. What's the occasion?"

"Who cares?" Maya took a large swig and then gave a contented sigh. "Thanks."

The coffee surprise was meant to cheer up her friends, but it also made Lucy feel good.

"I could get used to this," Maya said, taking another sip.

"I could too," Lucy said.

From the doorway of her classroom, Lucy watched Gina and Maya travel the length of the hallway.

Thank you, God, Lucy said in a thought prayer. *One more drink to deliver.* She cradled the hot tea and strolled into her math class. *And I'm definitely delivering it with an exclamation point!*

Lori Z. Scott loves the power of words. Check out the powerful words in *Offsides*, her award-winning YA book.

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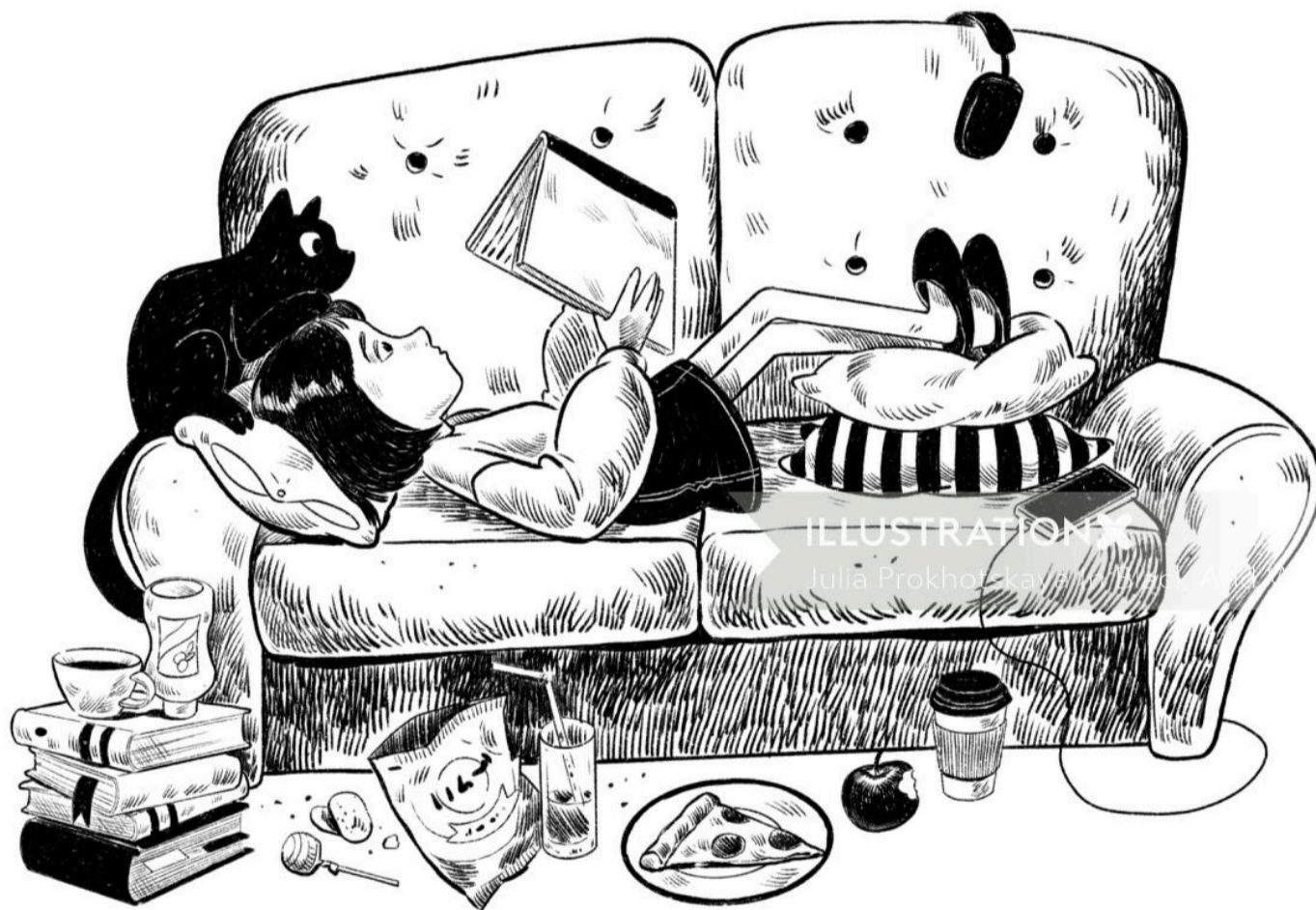
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'You Made Me Lie'

FICTION BY MARIANNE HERING
ILLUSTRATIONS BY JULIA PROKHOTSKAYA



When someone uses your whole first name instead of your nickname, you know you're busted.

"Genevieve?"

This was the second time in less than 24 hours I'd heard it. Last night it was my parents spitting out my name as if they'd eaten something toxic. This time it was my neighbor and best friend, Lili. Her angry voice carried across the high school parking lot.

I turned and stood in the middle of the drop-off line. She came straight toward me, her blond hair pitched forward against the wind. She had the posture and intensity of a horse about to sting. That was bad. Her brown hair turned into a full-on red, giving her a fish-mouth grin. That was worse.

"Well, I managed a weak smile as she came nearer. I would have to offer an apology soon, but it stuck in my throat like too much chunky peanut butter. The fence wasn't all my fault.

Suddenly, a Mack Tronca turned down the U-shaped driveway and sped up. I grabbed the sleeve of Lili's puffer jacket and hauled her to the sidewalk. Her binder—covered in calligraphy—swished Bible verses—flew out of her arms and slid across the cement.

The driver—a sophomore—slammed the door for a good five seconds.

After Lili picked up her binder, I hugged her, so glad I hadn't watched her get fattened.

I opened my mouth to apologize for last night, but other words flew out unbidden, like soda pop from a shaken can. "Why didn't you tell me you were going to the store to get ice cream?"

It's not that I'm a control freak, but Lili usually teased me about everything, except using the bathroom and sneezing popping pingles. Did she have to be at the check-out counter at the exact same time my mom had gone to buy groceries? Mom always grocery-shopped on Thursdays. If Lili had teased me that evening, I might have been able to avoid the disaster.

She looked me straight in the eyes. "Oh, why did you tell your parents you would be at my house?"

"I had to tell them something," I said. "Otherwise I couldn't have gone to a movie with Max. And I know you wouldn't cover for me, so I kept it a secret."

There, I'd said it. My nose was partially her fault for always acting like an angel. But she didn't even pick up on the implication.

"Maxine Maxine? Oh, isn't he Lili's boyfriend?"

I shook my head, and memories of the previous evening seemed to shake loose too.



The drive to halfway was just packed with wiggly kids and their parents. Max and I went so far away from Lili and her friend Castille. But I watched them disappear into the darkened corridor that led to the theater waiting. The sign above the entrance said Snow White.

That's our movie too, I thought. But Max wouldn't go out with me for the first time in a movie he knew he was going to see. It must be a coincidence. After all, it is opening night, and all the Disney fans will be here.

Once we were inside the theater, I moved Max to a couple of seats at the front, where he could watch the movie and not the back of Lili's pretty head. Yes, Max and I had to crane our necks at a 45-degree angle to see the wicked queen and the dwarves, but it was worth it.

He even joked, "Oh, go to Lili's Crafts as we don't have to sit so close to the screen next time."

After the credits rolled, I made sure we left the theater before Lili and Castille. Then I took hold of Max's hand—it felt so good and right to mine—and pulled him away from the other kids from our school who were hanging out in the lobby while they waited for the second show.

"Yes, Oh," Max said. "There's Aaron and Jeremy. I want to—"

"I gotta go home fast, remember? My parents think I'm at Lili's."

"What did you do?"

Lili asked.

"They introduced me to Julia Prokhotskaya."

Exact details. "They gave the usual lecture. No phone, no laptop. No car." I sighed.

I didn't share the visuals. The veins in Dad's nose were bright red, and his voice cracked as if a peach pit had lodged in his Adam's apple. Mom had looked as if she'd been kicked in the stomach.

I said, "Even though I explained everything calmly and rationally, they just couldn't see it was their fault that I had to lie."

Lili tilted her head to the side. Her long silver earring swung like a pendulum. "Their fault?"

"You know they won't let me date till I'm 17. They said I wasn't a good enough judge of character. And if I wanted to be treated like an adult, I had to act like one."

The five-minute bell rang, and we headed toward the building.

"Fact," I announced. "If parents are too strict, there's no other choice but rebellion."

Lili shook her head. "The Bible says that's not the way relationships work."

I smirked. "No, that's the only way they work. I need to assert myself and follow my own path."

As I walked up the steps, with massive numbers of students making past us, I didn't see Max and wanted to see Lili's reaction.

Lili turned toward me, her earring swinging to attract this time. "I lose my phone privileges too."

"Why? You didn't do anything except buy ice cream."

Lili shrugged. "Unintended consequences. Your parents called my parents. And my parents thought I was lying about not knowing that you lied."

She turned toward her classroom, and about 25 steps later, I realized I'd never said I was sorry.

After school I had to stay in the library and wait for my dad to pick me up. Not my favorite way to spend a Friday afternoon. Plus, the weekend would be dreary. I was low-key sad that Max wasn't there with me. But I wasn't worried he'd be with Lili because he said he'd be at work, meeting clients at the local coffee shop.

I finished my math homework fifteen minutes and jammed the book into my backpack. Then I looked out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the horseshoe-shaped driveway. Would Dad lecture me again when I got in the car? If he did, I was ready for it. ☹️

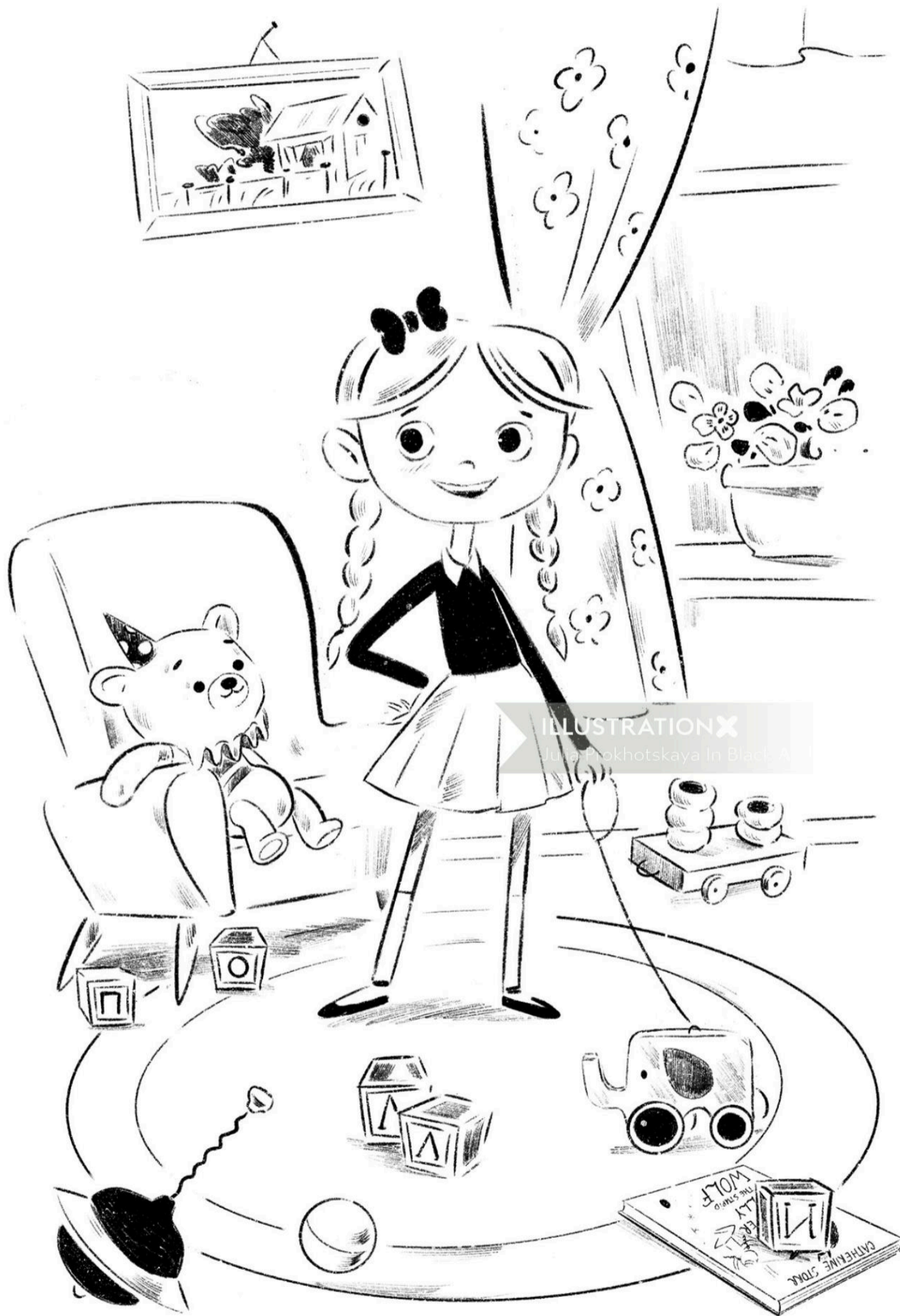
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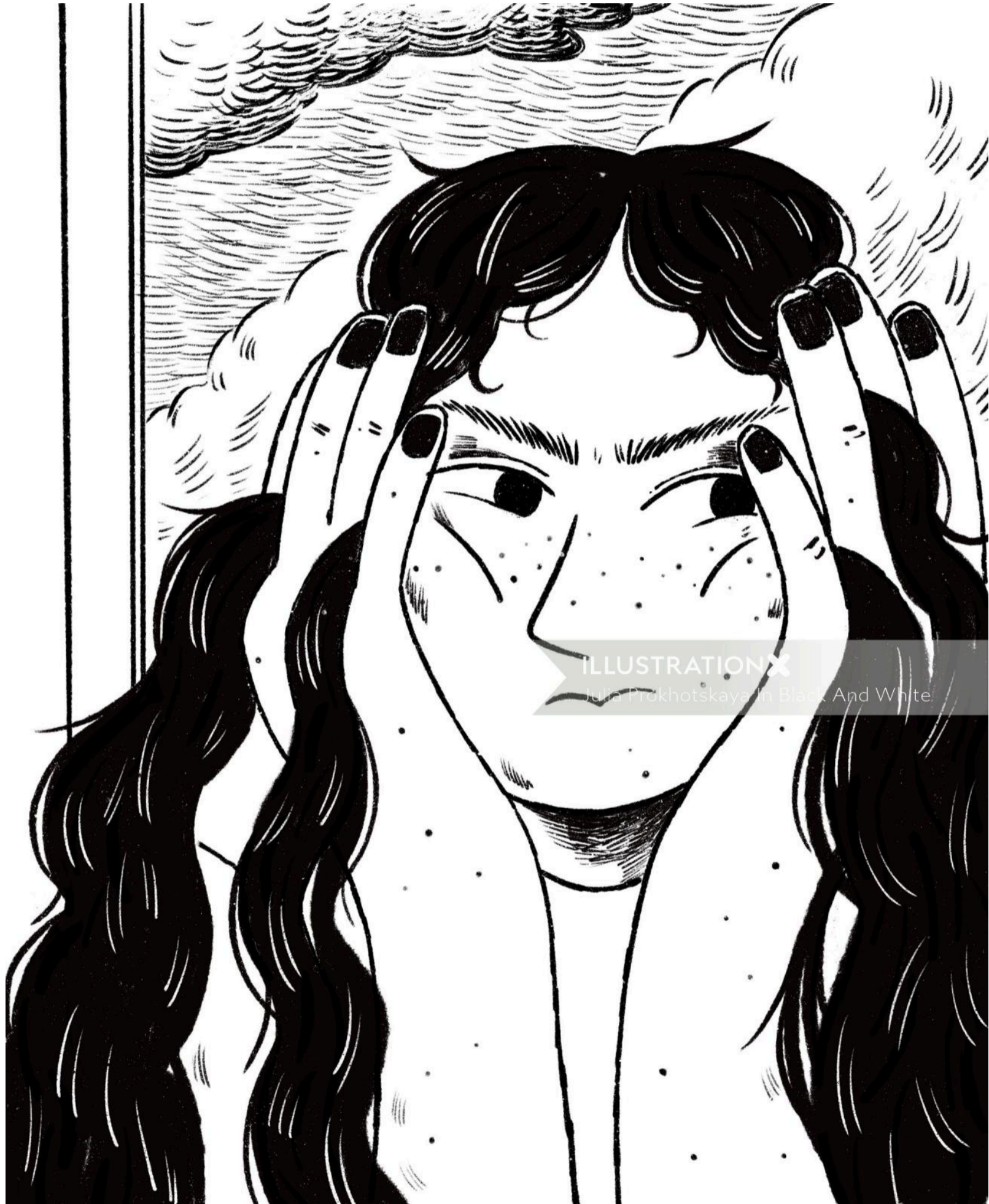
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