opening extract from
just don't make a scene, mum!

written by

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Chapter One

The Phone-in

'And that was Shiny Vinyl with "Stay With Me." Dean Laurie faded the record and grabbed a quick slurp of lukewarm coffee. 'And this is *On Your Marks*, the Saturday show that no cool teen can afford to miss.' Ye gods, he sounded clichéd today. 'And now it's Moan Line time on Hot FM – when all you teens out there tell us up here just what's bugging you this week.'

Cue jingle. 'Mo-oh-oh Moan Line, 212 090ny-aye-ine.'

Another slurp of coffee. Remember not to swallow near the mike. Someone said that made you sound like a goldfish being flushed down the loo. 'And this week we're going to have our moan about those oh-so-cringe-making times when you just want the pavement to open and swallow you up. Yes, we've all had them, haven't we? Times when we've opened our mouths and put our Skechers straight in!'

Pause. Quick wave through the glass to the studio guest, Ginny Gee, local columnist and agony aunt on the *Leehampton Echo* who was engaged in making up her face as if she was about to front *Good Morning*, not burble down a mike for fifteen minutes to the pubescent population of Leehampton.

'Or worse still, those occasions when your mum or dad make you look a real idiot in front of all your friends,' Dean carried on. 'Or when your big brother makes some cutting remark about the guy you fancy – just as he is coming into earshot? Couldn't you just die?'

Dean paused to breathe in as Clarissa, the production assistant, ushered Ginny into the studio. Ginny squeezed her not insubstantial bulk past Dean, gave him a peck on the cheek, and plonked her bottom on the one vacant chair.

'We've got Ginny Gee from the *Echo* here in the studio to help you sort out those blush-inducing, mouth-drying situations. And what's more, we'll be picking four of our callers for a great prize – more of that later. So pick up those phones and start dialling. You know the number – 2120909. And now it's Bag Handlers with "Anyone".'

Dean swivelled his chair round to face Ginny. 'Thanks for coming in, Ginny,' he said. 'Now all we have to do is sit here and hope that there are some embarrassed teens out there – there's nothing worse than a phone-in with no contributors.'

'Oh, they'll ring in all right,' said Ginny. 'Most teens seem to spend their life in a state of terminal embarrassment.'

She perused her burnt orange fingernails critically and sighed. 'And if my dear daughter is to be believed,

parents are the prime cause. Do you know, Dean dear,' she added, leaning towards him confidentially and enveloping him in a cloud of *L'Air du Temps*, 'this morning my daughter told me I shouldn't go out in this outfit. Said fuchsia and orange didn't suit my skin tone. They're so conservative, today's kids, aren't they? I do look OK, don't I, Dean?'

Wise kid, your daughter, thought Dean. 'You look triffic, Ginny my sweet,' he gushed. And then, thankfully, before he had to perjure himself any further, it was time to read the traffic news.

Outside the studio, the phones were starting to ring.

Chapter Two

Behind Closed Doors

While Ginny Gee was applying the eighth layer of Hyper Rose lipstick and hitching up her Wonderbra in preparation for the fray, several members of her prospective audience were seriously considering leaving home.

In her bedroom in Wordsworth Close, with its pop posters on the walls and collection of pottery pigs on

every available surface, Laura Turnbull was plucking her much-hated ginger eyebrows and debating whether you could have freckles surgically removed. She was supposed to be hunting for her lost history project, but then Laura rarely did what was expected of her. The entire world, she had decided, was conspiring against her. Not only was it her bad luck to have a father who had moved out to live with the Bestial Betsy and a mother who, instead of concentrating her efforts on getting Dad back, had taken up with a geek like Melvyn Crouch but, to cap it all, she had the wrong colour hair, thighs that looked terrible in stretch denim and a turned-up nose that her gran called cute and Laura called a curse. It was no wonder she didn't have a boyfriend: you had to look all sophisticated and cool, like her friend Chelsea, to attract boys.

Of course, her mum just laughed when Laura tried to point out that having her hair coloured, a wash 'n' go perm and dyed eyebrows were essentials if her social life was going to take off. Not, of course, that Mum cared at all about her daughter's social life or the fact that she missed her dad something rotten; or that she was now having to compete for his attention with Betsy's awful kids, the snotty Sonia and drippy Daryl. She didn't even care that they had had to move to this grotty semi-detached, or even that Gary Wilkes, the loud mouth of Year Nine, had seen her mum and Melvyn actually

kissing outside Tesco and taken great delight in informing the whole class that Laura's mum had got a toy boy.

Laura's life was in ruins and nobody cared. Hot FM couldn't tell her anything new about embarrassment. But, as befitted one who intended to win the Man Booker prize before she was twenty-one, she had just been struck by a rather brilliant idea.

Meanwhile, over on Billing Hill, in her new peach and apple green bedroom with its Laura Ashley bed cushions and fluffy rugs, Jemma Farrant was listening to the radio and pressing her thumb as hard as she could on to her front teeth. Jemma hated her teeth – she thought the two front ones stuck out because she had sucked her thumb a lot when she was little. (Actually she still did during thunderstorms, French homework and long car journeys when no one was looking.) Jemma hated quite a lot of things at the moment: her stubbornly straight, sludge-coloured hair which her mother still wanted her to wear in boring pigtails or a pathetic plait; having to leave Sussex and come to Leehampton where she didn't know anyone and had to start a new school in the middle of the term; and worst of all, having a wardrobe full of the sort of clothes better suited to an unimaginative nine-year-old than a teenager. The trouble was that her mother, who pottered around in awful cord skirts and thick, coloured tights and headscarves, and who only

wore make-up for Dad's hospital dinner dances or weddings and funerals, seemed to be dedicating her life to preventing her daughter from getting one.

If only Gran were here – she might sort Mum out; Jemma kept plucking up the courage to say something decisive but always chickened out. She hated rows and her mum was inclined to get really huffy if anyone argued. Whereas Gran was pretty cool for someone in their seventies. She lived in a state of perpetual chaos in a tiny mews cottage just off Brighton seafront with a tortoise named Maud and a mynah bird called Claw. Gran said life was for the living and told people to go for it and have a ball, grasp the nettle and give it a whirl. So why couldn't Mum, who was her only daughter, be like her? She resolved to write to Gran and ask her to come and stay.

This week Jemma had finally received an invitation to go somewhere really cool and her mother had said no because she didn't know the neighbourhood. Whose fault was that? Had Jemma wanted to move? Had Jemma wanted her father to get this stupid job in this poxy hospital in this grotty town? Her mum knew she found it hard making friends but her dad wanted this job – 'the next rung on the medical ladder' he called it – and that was that. But who was suffering for it? Jemma. And did her mother care? No way. She was too busy fussing over the twins and the pest Samuel and making sure that Jemma had a good hot breakfast inside her and clean

socks on, to worry about her emotional and psychological traumas. If only her mother would read the back pages in her magazines she might realise that her daughter was at a critical stage in her development. But all Mum read were the recipes and instructions on how to make frilly pelmets and valances. And her father didn't care, because he was too busy cutting people open and yanking bits out to worry whether Jemma was being torn apart with emotional angst. Neither of her parents had a clue about her problems. Jemma wondered whether she qualified as a deprived child. She thought it was highly likely.

In the house next door to Jemma's, Jon Joseph was trying to use the music of Shiny Vinyl on his new mini iPod which his parents and grandparents had clubbed together to get him to blot out the strident tones of his father, who was dividing his time equally between packing his golf bag and holding forth about his only son's shortcomings.

All this had come about just because he wanted to go to The Stomping Ground tonight. His dad had started his nagging over the cornflakes and carried on non-stop through boiled eggs, toast and two cups of coffee. It was the usual stuff – what a pity it was he didn't put the same amount of effort into his studies as he did into his social life, how the world didn't owe him a living and how he didn't know he was born. OK, Jon admitted his grades

hadn't been too brilliant in the last lot of tests, but then, what was the point of continuing to slog his guts out to do something he didn't have his heart in? And no one else's parents went mental just because their kid closed the textbook for the odd hour – although according to Dad, 'You don't get to the top by finding excuses to stop working.'

Dad was good at sounding off but not so good at listening. He had great ideas about Jon going to university and studying law and winning prizes. Only no one bothered to check what Jon wanted. He kept hearing about all the sacrifices they had made to send him to Bellborough Court instead of what his father called 'the grotty comprehensive'. He had never asked to go there. He hadn't asked for an hour's journey every day just so that his blustering father could boast at the golf club that his lad went to private school. He wished his dad would let up a bit and realise that there was more to life than good grades. Well, he was going to the club tonight, no matter what. And that was that.

Over on Wellington Road, Sumitha Banerji had banished her irritating little brother from the room and was standing in front of her bedroom mirror, scooping her long black hair up on top of her head to make herself look taller, and wondering whether phoning Moan Line would shame her parents into realising that

they were stunting her development, turning her into a social outcast, and ruining her chances of ever getting to be presenter on MTV. Not only was she forbidden to cut her hair, varnish her nails or wear make-up, but her father insisted on knowing exactly where she was going, with whom, and for how long. She hadn't even bothered mentioning the teen club night this time – she knew what the answer would be. The last time she had asked to go to The Stomping Ground, her dad had said, 'That's not the sort of place that nice Bengali girls of your age go to,' and her mother had looked apologetically at Sumitha and anxiously at her husband but had not said a single word in Sumitha's defence. Her mother was a total wimp, Sumitha decided.

'If you had been brought up in Calcutta . . .' her father had continued.

'But I wasn't brought up in blimmin' Calcutta!' Sumitha had bellowed.

'I rest my case,' her father had replied. 'Your language shows what your English friends have done for your manners. The answer about the club is, and will remain, no.'

It just wasn't fair. They weren't in Calcutta. Sumitha only went there every three years for a holiday to see her grandparents. She was born in England, her friends were born in England. Why did her parents want it both ways? They came to England as students and stayed because they said the opportunities were so great. But they still

insisted on bringing her and her brother up the same way they had been brought up in India when they were kids. Her father kept saying that young girls should have long hair as a sign of decorum. But *Shriek!* magazine said that short hair made you look taller. Sumitha had given up hoping that she would ever get beyond five foot nothing and if a haircut was what it took to make her look sophisticated, then somehow she had to have one. Quite how she would face her father's inevitable wrath, she hadn't worked out yet.

A more pressing concern was tonight's event. Her father said clubs were undesirable and unnecessary. He was quite happy for her to go to drama classes and have tap and ballet lessons – good for her carriage and bearing he said in that deliberate, staid way of his – but say club to him and he went all tight-lipped and forbidding. Sumitha, for whom dancing was a way of life, couldn't understand the difference.

But this time she would beat them at their own game. Tonight they were going to a dinner dance at some posh hotel and staying overnight, and she was going to stay with Laura Turnbull. What her parents didn't know was that even now, Laura was persuading her mum to let them go to the club. And even if Mrs Turnbull phoned to ask if it was OK, Sumitha would be all right. Mum and Dad were leaving after lunch and her grandmother who was looking after her little brother, Sandeep, didn't speak

good enough English to take phone calls. Sumitha reckoned she was home and dry. So there. She turned the volume up on the radio and sang along to the charts. Her father hated pop music. Tough.

But it was over in Thorburn Crescent that feelings were running highest of all. Chelsea Gee was gazing into the Bugsy Malone mirror that her sister had brought her back from Chicago, desperately brushing her stubbornly crinkly, chestnut curls and willing a decidedly large and determined spot on her chin to disappear. She rather hoped her mother would do the same, but knew that was an idle hope. Fading into the background was not her style at all. In fact, she could win Oscars in limelight-hogging. She was a journalist and had a feature page in the *Echo* called 'Speakout'. The trouble was, she did. All the time. About love, sex, fashion (she, who wore orange mini-skirts over her forty-one-inch hips) – she just went on and on.

Right now, Chelsea was praying that none of her friends were listening to the radio. Because, to add insult to injury, it was Chelsea's mum who was about to make another exhibition of herself on Hot FM and it was Chelsea's mum – supposedly so understanding of the needs of teenagers – who had said she had to be in by ten-thirty p.m. from The Stomping Ground. So much for the person Hot FM called 'The Listening Mum with the Ear of the Young'! (I reckon that's against the Trades

Descriptions Act, thought Chelsea.) Anyone with half a brain knew that leaving The Stomping Ground before eleven-thirty p.m. was certain social death. The radio station might well say that Ginny Gee's listening figures were huge but her daughter was not impressed.

So You Remember

SATURDAY 9.30 a.m.
Dear Barry,

Can you defrost mince and rustle up a bolognese or something? Nothing elaborate please, or the kids won't eat it.

Gone to Hot FM for the phone-in - why do I do it?

By the way, it's your turn to do the fetching-kids run tonight.

I've told Chelsea she's got a ten-thirty p.m. curfew.

She's upstairs in a right old huff - apparently we're preventing her from getting a life.

Funny - I thought it was the other way round.
See you later
Gin

p.s. Can you remind Warwick to have his cholera jabs?
p.p.s. There's a good job advertised in the Guardian - I've left it open at the right page. Why don't you apply for it today?