TULIP TAYLOR

To Anne Mainwaring and Sarah Mainwaring-Parr
Thank you for your love and support over the years…
…and for helping me survive that camping holiday.

TULIP TAYLOR

ANNA MAINWARING



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CHAPTER ONE

Word: Blunder (noun or verb)

I'm sitting at my desk, staring into the webcam with my heart racing. 'So, there you go. As you can see, it takes a bit of time and effort, and a helping hand…' here I nod to Anjali who waves manically for the camera '…but I hope you think the end look is worth it. Bye, guys, and see you soon for some more amazing looks.' I lean forward and stop recording. Then, and only then, do I relax my smile. 'Cut. And chill.' I stand up, stretch and throw myself back on my bed, narrowly avoiding Kate and my menagerie of soft toys. 'That was intense.'

Kate finally looks up from her book. 'Oi, you've made me lose my page. Intense? That's a bit over…'

Anjali tuts as she wipes down the make-up brushes. 'Don't listen to her, Tulip. She just doesn't get it.'

I sit up, my heart still getting back to normal after the last twenty minutes of adrenaline. 'Not many other vloggers do that, you know. They spend ages editing videos to get them perfect. I just…'

'*We* just,' Anjali interrupts, letting down her hair so that when she goes home her parents don't see either her undercut or the fact that she's dyed a huge section of her hair purple.

'*We* just created magic in twenty minutes. Live. Mistakes and all.'

I can see that Kate's still not impressed. 'But it's just…'

Leaning over, I put a finger to her lips. 'Don't say those words. Kate, you are better than this. Thousands of people just watched me commune with my art. So don't you go and ruin the moment by saying "but it's just make-up".'

'Well, I think you look awesome,' Anjali says, and looking in a mirror I agree. My boring, bland face has been transformed into a mask of glitter, flowers and gems. A perfect festival look. If only I had any hope of going to a festival or anything else so exciting. My next social engagement is double maths.

'How many views so far?' I ask Anjali.

'Hundreds. Look at all your likes.'

I watch the number under my post move up and up and up. Every one of them means that someone has taken the time to like my work. To like me. It feels like a little hug, giving me a warm glow.

'Great. At least that will keep Mum happy. She starts hassling me if my reach doesn't increase. She's obsessed with my metadata.' Mum is a bit – zealous – that's a good word and I do love my words. She keeps a spreadsheet to track how popular I am on all my social-media sites.

Kate peers at me over her book. 'Don't take this the wrong way but your mum is a bit weird.'

'I totally agree. Any ideas on how to change her will be gratefully received. But she never listens to me and, to be honest, I like doing the videos, so I don't mind. It's cool.'

Kate thinks about what I'm saying. 'I know but…'

Anjali, whose phone has just vibrated, interrupts us with a gasp and then a very loud squeal. 'Lads. Lads. Lads.'

Kate and I share a glance. What news has our gossip queen heard?

'What is it this time?' I start playing with the make-up removal bottle though I can't bear to take it off just yet. 'Has Simon Brodie realised that he's been dumped? Surely he'll realise that Lorna hasn't spoken to him for a month soon.'

'No, oh no, this is so much better than that.' Anjali leans back, squinting at her phone.

By now, Anjali has got what she wants. Both Kate and me are gazing at her, desperate to find out the latest news.

'Well?' I say. 'Come on. Spit it out, or do I need to use force to get you to talk?' I grab the nearest thing to hand, my huge dictionary that always takes pride of place next to my bed.

Kate bats it away. 'Put it down, you'll knock someone out with that thing. I mean I love a good read, but you are way too obsessed with that book. Can't you read something with – you know – a story?'

I put down the dictionary gently and dust down its cover. 'Don't listen to her,' I whisper to it. 'I wouldn't really throw you at Anjali. You might get hurt.'

Anjali and Kate are now staring at me. 'Am I doing it again?' I ask.

'If by "it" you mean talking to inanimate objects, then yes,' Kate says. 'But…'

I grab Mr Snowy and throw him at her instead. She squeals

which is a bit of an overreaction to being hit with a fifteen-year-old soft toy.

'Will you both stop!' Anjali is now on her feet and squawking. She shoves her phone under my face. 'This is more important. *This* is starting at our school tomorrow.'

Kate and I scrabble to get the phone. I, of course, win.

'Show me! What is it? I want to see.' Kate sounds just like one of the twins now. I forgive them normally, given that they are five.

I keep staring at the screen as Kate finally gets a look. 'Oh, now he is pretty. He is really pretty. He is so boy band. Who is he?'

Loving the fact that she has now got our full attention, Anjali starts to explain. 'Okay so you know Precious – her mum works in the school office?'

'Yes, of course we do. We've been friends with her since Year Three.'

'Okay, Precious' mum told her that there's this new boy starting tomorrow. At our school. And this is him.'

I look at him again. He looks older than us, shinier. Deep brown eyes, so dark they could be black. Brown hair with a hint of gold that falls in just the right way. Cheekbones you could cut yourself on. Lips that curve in a way that makes me jealous. How can any human be so naturally gorgeous? I mean it would take me ages and lots of very careful contouring to create that cheek effect. I can't stop looking at him; my fingers wander towards the screen to brush his virtual cheek.

'Tulip. Tulip. Back off.'

'What?'

'You were drooling. Not cool.'

Anjali takes the phone back and actually checks for saliva.

'Sorry. But he is lovely.'

Anjali looks at me with scorn. 'He's more than lovely. He's tabasco sauce hot and then some jalapeno on top of that.'

Kate peeks too. 'I agree. I think he's lush. What do you think, Tulip? You must have a better word than lovely.'

I stare again and think hard. 'I'd say he was pulchritudinous.'

They both roll their eyes at that.

'I'm not even going to ask,' Anjali says. 'Kate, you shouldn't encourage her. She's not normal. Anyway, there's more,' she continues. 'His name is Harvey McManus.'

Kate grimaces. 'Harvey's a cute name but McManus is a bit of a mouthful.' She lies down on the bed and goes back to her book.

'Hang on,' I say. 'Isn't that the name of that guy who's opened an outdoor centre up in the hills?'

'Yes,' says Anjali, 'you are correct. You get all the bonus points in this round. His father is Hugh McManus.'

'Yuk.' Kate sits up. 'Isn't he the guy from TV that makes people drink their own wee? I'd rather die.'

'I'm with you, sister,' I agree. 'Yes, he does a kind of show, doesn't he, where he dumps people in the wild and they have to fend for themselves.'

'That's the man,' Anjali says. 'TV star. Wilderness expert. And his son is coming to our school.'

There's silence. I'm pretty sure that all three of us have the same image in our minds – our shabby, grey school, always

shrouded in cloud, and at least a hundred miles from anything interesting.

We all turn to each other and say at the same time. 'But why?'

Just as we are about to dissect the most interesting thing that has happened since Amy Dutton bit Tyler Leach to prove that she was really, truly a vampire, Kate suddenly says, 'Is the record button supposed to still be on red?'

I flap a hand at her. 'I turned it off. It's not red.'

'Tulip…'

'What?'

'It's definitely red. I know what the colour red looks like and this is red. I think you're still recording.'

Finally, I turn away from the image of Harvey on Anjali's phone. 'Look, I know what I'm doing. I've done this hundreds of times. I turned it…'

The screen of the computer shows us talking. The webcamera's light is on. It's red. I'd go so far to say that it's vermillion. So, we're still live.

As I squeal, launching myself across the room to turn the camera off, a word comes to mind. A pretty rude one. So much for me knowing what I'm doing… Stupid, stupid Tulip.



Hector: Yo bruv. Nervous for your first day with the savages? Bro. Bro. Don't go cold on me. I know I'm the favourite son, but you don't need to be so salty about it.

Harvey: Stop talking like you're a road man. You sound ridiculous.

Hector: Whatevs. You need to know the right slang, man. That's how they'll all be talking. Or grunting. Everyone back at school is dying to hear about it. Especially the girls. I want the lowdown on the chavviest girl you can find. You know the type. Thick. Eyebrows like slugs. All that ridiculous make-up.

Harvey: I'm not going there to socialise. I'll just do the hours and then get out as quickly as possible.

Hector: That's your plan? No human interaction? You do know that you're weird and you let the family name down? McManuses need to be Alphas, not zeroes. Anyway, it would be a waste of an opportunity to study the lower orders in their natural habitat. You'll never rub shoulders with the like of this lot again. Unless you disappoint Dad for a second time.

Harvey: You do know that it was my choice to go there. Not that I'm intending to hang out with them much, but they might be alright.

Hector: HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA-HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

YOU ARE IN HICKSVILLE. CHAVLAND. They will tear you to pieces unless you show then that you are a superior being (though obviously not as superior as me as I am the chosen son). The girls will fall at your feet. Just project confidence and bring them to order. Then collect the spoils of war.

Harvey: It's just a school. With kids my age in it. Stop making such a big deal.

Hector: Harvey. Listen to your big bro. Do I ever get bullied? Do I get hot girls? Do I ever show weakness? Do I get what I want? Does Dad love me more than you? If you want to survive in Chavland, then you need to do one thing.

Harvey: What's that?

Hector: Kill shy, nice Harvey with the puppy dog eyes who gets nervous around people. Be More Hector and you will carry all in your path. Think about it. Maybe things didn't work out for you at our school because you were always in my shadow. I mean no one can compete with Hector McManus. I was named for a Greek god after all, whereas you were named after Grandmama's favourite brand of sherry. So, repeat after me: Be. More. Hector. You know it's true. Laugh at them and then they'll know that you are superior.

Harvey?

…

Harvey?

…

Loser. You won't last one day unless you do what I'm telling you. Be. More. Hector.