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opening extract from

Swimming Against the Tide

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Chapter One

I'm outside Burger King, leaning against the window, stressing over whether I can get away with having my belly button pierced without Mum finding out, but if I did, what are my chances of it going wrong and ending up with gross green pus pouring from my gut, which is what happened to Sorrel, though she went to a dodgy place with a parrot in the window which has now closed down, when over the noise of Eastwood Circle Retail Park I hear, 'Hiya Electra!'

It's the unmistakable squawk of The Queen of Sleaze, Claudia Barnes. She's tottering towards me, chest puffed out, shoulders jerked back and her bleached-blonde hair ironed straight and rigid with hairspray. Ambling behind her are Natalie Price and Tamara Lennox-Hill. They're so busy comparing the length of their nails they don't seem to notice they're continually barging into annoyed shoppers

struggling to cope with bags and sobbing children.

Bummer! Now that Claudia's seen me it's too late to bolt into Burger King, dive under a table, and crouch amongst the stray chips and dropped chicken nuggets until they've gone, or at least until Lucy and Sorrel arrive. On their own, Nat, Tam and even Claudia are OK, but when they're hunting in packs, you really need your own bezzie back-up as protection from agreeing to throw dodgy parties or pretending you've done things which you haven't, usually with boys, but sometimes with alcohol and *always* with dire consequences. But it's too late to escape, they're nearly level with me and there's *still* no sign of Luce and Sorrel.

'You a Billy No Mates this arvo?' Claudia asks, poking me in the chest with one of her French-manicured nails.

'Ow, Claudia!' She's practically punctured my left boob, though as I've got a mismatched boob situation going on at the mo, a bit of deflation on the left side might help even it up with the right one.

Not only has my boob been assaulted, I'm totally miffed that Claudia could even *think* I might be the sort of saddo who spends the last Friday of the long summer holiday hanging around shopping centres on her own, even if that's exactly what I've been doing for the last couple of hours.

'As if!' I say sharply.

'So, what you up to?' Claudia continues to interrogate me.

I pretend to scan the horizon looking for the girls, but really I'm trying to avoid looking directly at Claudia's chest. This is almost impossible as what with wearing heels and being taller than me, her boobs are practically bobbing in my face. This isn't because she has Mighty Mammaries, but because as well as the boobs-out-shoulders-back thing, I know for a fact she stuffs chicken fillets in her bra, which is why me, Luce and Sorrel secretly call her Tits Out. I rub my sore boob and then realize with horror it probably looks as if I'm feeling myself up, so I go to ram my hand in my jeans pocket but miss, and stick a mitt down my front which must look even worse. 'I'm meeting the girls here for lunch and then . . .' I leave what I hope is a dramatic pause, '. . . and then I'm going to get my passport photie taken. We're going abroad at half-term.'

I casually toss this info into the conversation and wait for Tits Out to ask which bit of the planet I'm off to. I might pretend the Brown family are going on a package tour to Mars via the moon, just to wind her up.

Instead of cross-examining me on my travel plans, Claudia elbows Tam in the ribs.

'Tam's got some fab news, haven't you, Tam?' she says. 'Go on, spill.'

Tammy Two-Names grins.

'You've had your braces taken off?' I ask.

'Yah, but not that,' she drawls, running a pink tongue over her bare straight teeth. 'I'm like, not going back to QB after all. I'll be back at Burke's on Monday.'

The qualifications to get into Queen Beatrice's College for Girls are that you need to be brainy, bitchy and snotty-nosed, but most of all, your parents need to be loaded. Tam qualified on all counts until the end of the first term of Year 9 when her dad's brain went into meltdown and he totally freaked out in the loos at work. He lost his mind, his job and with it his mega-school-fees-salary, so now that the Lennox-Hills are strapped for cash, her older brother Rupe is still at boarding school but Tam is at my school, Flora Burke's Community School, where the only entry qualification you need is a pulse.

'Sorry, Tam, you must be gutted,' I say, knowing however much she pretends to be a Burke, she'd much rather be a Queen Bee.

Tammy tosses her long dark hair and gives the sort of half-snort half-donkey-bray laugh posh girls excel at. 'S'OK. I do miss the uniform though. Burke's is minging.'

A dreamy sigh comes from my left.

'But *we've* got Buff. *He's* worth changing schools for.'

Despite the fact that she's standing next to me, I'd completely forgotten Natalie was there. The gormless expression she always wears coupled with the fact that she rarely says anything interesting makes her blend into the background, something Nat hopes the greasy yellow make-up she trowels on will do for her zits. Sadly for poor Nat, it just makes her face look as if it's smeared with butter. Unlike Tits Out who would probably be thrilled with her nickname, Natalie would be crushed if she knew me and the girls call her Butterface behind her back.

We all melt at the thought of our lush geography teacher, Jon 'Buff' Butler. It's going to be an anxious few days before we start back at school after the long summer break, as until we get our new timetable we won't know whether Buff or Miss Rogers, aka The Hamster, is going to take GCSE geography.

I'll be well gutted if it's The Hamster, who's blonde, small and anxious, and looks as if she's stuffed her cheeks with food. She tried to teach us geography for the first term of Year 9 before Buff came and rescued us, but she was completely unable to control the class. Once, Pinhead, Gibbo and Spud tied Frazer Burns, aka Razor Burns, aka Freak Boy, to his seat by taping his ankles to his chair legs with packing tape. She either *really* didn't

notice or pretended not to, but it wasn't until FB tried to stand up and fell over, pulling the chair with him, that she said anything, and that was only, 'Do you need some scissors?'

Anyway, if I don't have Buff as my teacher, it won't just be academic eye candy I'll miss. By staring at Buff's peachy butt as he writes on the board I've obviously absorbed *some* info, as according to my school report geography is *officially* my best subject. If I end up Buff-less I'm going to plead with Mum that I *have* to have private tuition with him after school, which would be fantastico as he might see me in a whole new light. A teenage temptress rather than a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl in a *deeply* unflattering green tartan kilt and thick black sausage-skin tights.

'Going anywhere interesting?' Tits Out interrupts my delicious daydream of one-on-one tuition with Buff, just at the point where he's telling me he can't wait to take me on a field course.

Three sets of eyes are fixed on me, their mascara-drenched eyelashes quivering like spiders having an epileptic fit.

'You like, said you were going away,' Tam prompts.

'Oh, yeah. We're going to America at half-term.'

I try to say this casually, as if our family going abroad is nothing out of the ordinary. In reality, other than a day

trip to France as a toddler yonks ago when apparently I was sick in my pram the whole way there *and* back, in fourteen years I've never left the UK, which is why when Mum announced her half-term holiday plan yesterday evening I became hysterically excited and danced around the kitchen chanting, 'We're – Off – To The US of A!' over and over again, pretending to be a cheerleader, but with two long-handled pan scrubbers rather than glittery pompoms.

Claudia raises one of her overplucked eyebrows. 'God, have you never been? I've been *loads* of times.'

Damn her! I wish I *had* said we're jetting to Mars as even Miss Been There Done That couldn't have pretended to be a teenage astronaut.

I'm mega-miffed that Claudia has already been to America, though I don't know why I should be surprised. Claudia Barnes has always done *everything* before me.

Her parents split up before mine.

She was the first girl in my year to wear a bra.

She began to bring in no-shower-period-notes when she was *eleven*.

She's *way* ahead of me in the snogging stakes, though as I have had only one disastrous smothered-in-spit snog with a Frog exchange student called Didier Deville, that's not a hard record to beat.

I've never had a hickey and she's had *loads*; not that I want one, but I haven't even had the chance to get one. She seems to have badges of slaggery on show all the time. And despite the fact that her dark eyebrows don't match her peroxide-yellow hair, she sports fake boobs, ridiculously long white-tipped nails and carries around unopened packets of Marlboro Lights and condoms in her bag, boys *love* her.

Or perhaps that's *why* they love her. They assume she's either been there and done *that*, or wouldn't mind going there and doing *that*, whereas I haven't been there and I certainly haven't done *that*, but then even the most freaky boys don't usually say to their friends, 'Cor! I really fancy that wide-faced, mousy-haired girl with the lopsided baps,' do they? I might share the name of an ancient Greek goddess or a glamour model, but in the looks department I'm *so* not a Greek girl or a video vixen.

'We're going to Miami and then on to New York to visit my Aunty Vicky and cousin Madison,' I say. 'They've got an *enormous* penthouse apartment in Manhattan.'

I wait for Claudia to reel off a list of relatives she has in America, probably even claiming the Statue of Liberty is modelled on one of her family.

'I've been to Miami and New York and loads of other Yank cities too,' she warbles. 'LA, San Fran. Florida . . .'

'Florida is the state in which Miami is a city,' I say, mega-impressed that I've managed to pick up a bit of world knowledge and have corrected Tits Out's geography. It's Buff and his bum again! Geography by osmosis. Just think what I could achieve with private tuition!

'Duh! I know that!' Claudia rolls her eyes. 'I was *going* to say, Florida was great. We went to SeaWorld a couple of years ago and I got soaking wet when Shamu the killer whale swam past. My T-shirt and shorts went *completely* see through. You could see *everything*!'

Any smugness I was feeling over knowing more about geography than Claudia has been completely destroyed and replaced by a rather disturbing image of her wet and semi-naked being circled by a monster whale.

'My passport is like, *totally* chocka with stamps,' Tammy drawls. 'I've been like, *everywhere*.'

'I've been to the Isle of Wight,' Butterface chips in. 'Or was it the Isle of Man?'

Tammy snorts with laughter and I notice that without her oral ironmongery she's actually quite pretty in a horsey type of way, which is gutting as it means even *she's* more likely to get a boyfriend than me.

It's hopeless. I don't even have a *hint* of romance in my life.

I thought Luce might be some use, partly because she's

so gorge I reckoned on getting some *Befriend the Ugly Friend* action, but mainly because she has two older brothers, Michael, who's totally off the radar as he's already in his second year at uni in London, and James, who's in Year 11 at King William's School for Boys, a temple of tasty testosterone and the private school of choice for the hunk of Mediterranean manhood known as Javier Antonio Garcia, aka Jags, or, as I prefer to think of him, The Spanish Lurve God. Jags was actually born in Slough rather than Spain, but The Slough Lurve God doesn't sound exotic enough to match his dark hair, olive skin and *gorgeous* long eyelashes. I am *totally* in love with him and we are destined to be together for ever, but unfortunately he's too busy being cool and gorge and sporty to notice me. I've pulled his jeans down, flashed my bum at him and even fallen at his feet, all by mistake obviously, but despite that, and even with the Lucy–James connection, Jags *completely* blanks me. To him I'm just a friend of James Malone's kid sister, and James is too busy snogging gormy zit-riddled slap-heavy Nat to put in a good word for me with Jags.

At least Sorrel isn't likely to get a boyfriend. She brands anyone with a Y chromosome a lying two-faced cheat like her dad, which is a bit harsh as Desmond Callender didn't lie about a woman like my dad, he lied to Sorrel's *Meat-*

is-Murder mum about scoffing a bacon sarnie. Whatever the lie, the end result's the same. We don't have our dads at home. Mine's living above a dentist's and has a new witchy girlfriend, and Sorrel's is on a beach in Barbados stuffing himself with curried goat.

My moby bleeps.

'Change of plan,' I say, scanning the text from Sorrel. 'I'm meeting the girls at Macky D's instead.'

'I could murder a McDonald's,' Tammy says. 'I'm like, always so starving I might have a worm.'

This throws me into a blind panic. The thought of them coming with me, not Tam's suspected parasitic infection. I haven't seen Luce for two weeks as she only got back from her French hols yesterday and there's masses of goss to catch up on. And although I've seen Sorrel nearly every day during the holidays, apart from the bit at the beginning when we had a row and she stopped speaking to me, if Tammy Two-Names is there Sorrel will just scowl and the atmos will stink and I won't be able to pump Luce for info about whether James has said what Jags has been up to over the summer, and whether Jags has mentioned me, even a tiny bit.

'Can't we go later?' Butterface whines. 'I wanna buy some new shoes.'

'Yeah, let's get the trotters first,' Claudia agrees. 'And then we can munch.'

I could hug Nat with relief, but decide against it to avoid smearing her thick yellow make-up on my clean white top.