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opening extract from

Beads, Boys and Bangles

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Beads, Boys & Bangles



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Chapter 1

I've never seen Crow look so scared. And this time, she's got a point.

We're standing in Miss Teen's flagship store in Oxford Street. The shop floor is huge and shiny and practically empty. For now. The perfect shopping opportunity, you might think, but oh no. We're not shopping, we're waiting. And we're not the only ones. There's just one very large pane of glass between us and the biggest, loudest mob I've ever seen. It's been building up for hours. It can see us. It's shouting our names and it's counting down until it can reach us.

One pane of glass, that is, and a SUPERMODEL.

Svetlana Russinova is posing in the window. She's wearing one of Crow's little gold embroidered corset dresses with a flirty skirt that shows off her legs. I remember Crow designing that dress last spring.

Every now and again Svetlana looks back over her shoulder at us three girls, huddled together in the shop,

and says something helpful like, 'There's thousands of them. Really. Oxford Street is full. Are you sure they'll fit inside?'

No, frankly, we are not. We're not at all sure we'll fit even half of them inside. Or that we'll survive the process. Or, more to the point, that we'll have enough of Crow's new high-street collection to sell to them when they get here.

Andy Elat is the only person who seems even vaguely relaxed. He's the man who owns Miss Teen. He said, 'We'll do a big launch for the new collection before Christmas. Everyone's talking about it. It'll be huge. You'll love it.'

If he'd said, 'It'll be like being in the middle of a natural disaster, with sequins,' we'd have got the picture. But he didn't. So here we are.

Crow looks the most terrified, but she's got her brother Henry for comfort. She's clinging on to him for dear life. I've got my friend Jenny and I'm sort of clinging on to her, but to be honest, she's more clinging on to me.

'They look angry,' she whispers. 'Are you sure we should let them in, Mr Elat?'

'They're just excited,' Andy says calmly. 'OK, Svetlana. You'd better come down now. Thanks, love. Two minutes, lads.'

The security guards nod. They are big and scary-looking and they'll probably be OK. We are small, teenage and unarmed. I'm trying to remember why I ever got

involved with Crow. Or why I thought launching a high-street collection would be a cool idea. Or why I didn't decide to do it from A MILLION MILES AWAY.

'Three. Two. One. Open the doors, lads.'

Scream scream scream scream. And the next thing we know, they're coming straight for us.

This is it. My friend Crow is now officially a high-street designer. Stella McCartney's done it. Christopher Kane has done it. Now it's our turn.

I watch as the crowd run over us and through us and past us, anxious to get their hands on their favourite pieces before they go. Thank goodness Andy overruled me about Jenny. As Crow's official business manager (yes, really!) I had originally wanted Jenny to be the face in the window, posing in Crow's stuff and looking amazing. Jenny's red-headed and curvy and funny, and she'd be a great advert for the fact that Crow's dresses can look good on anybody. Plus Jenny was the first sort-of famous person to wear Crow's stuff in public, before there even was a label.

But Andy thought it would be better to have an internationally famous supermodel for today, rather than a slightly chubby sixteen-year-old who's been in one movie. And looking at Jenny now, in her 'vintage' (last year's) Crow prom dress, positively shaking with fright, I have to admit he had a point.

Svetlana comes back to join us. She's changed into poured-on skinny jeans and a hoodie with the hood up,

so she looks like any other tall, blonde, thin, gorgeous person and doesn't get spotted by too many people in the crowd.

'It's going well,' she says. 'They're loving it. Look!'

If by 'loving it', she means throwing pieces in the air, grabbing them in large piles, fighting over them and crying, she's right.

The petal skirts are going quickest. They're made out of soft, jewel-coloured silk that catches your eye straight away. And when you're wearing them, they wave and flutter as you walk. It's like wearing a little piece of silk sculpture that moves. The jumpers will take a bit longer to be successful because you have to try them on before you realise how incredible they are. They just look a bit lumpy on a hanger, but on a body they turn even a short, rectangular teenager like me into a sex kitten.

The tee-shirts are a surprising success. They're just tee-shirts, after all. Although admittedly, Crow spent weeks and weeks getting the shape exactly right so they'd make anyone look curvy and lovely. That's the thing when your best friends are a beanpole, an hourglass and a midget. You learn to cut cleverly so the pattern will flatter everybody. Crow makes it look easy, but it isn't.

They've got crystal embroidery that glitters under the shop lights. Crow's best known for making couture dresses for famous actresses to wear – as you do when you're nearly fourteen – and the red-carpet stuff is usually scattered with Swarovski crystals, so the tee-shirts

are, too. It's December and I think there are going to be a lot of crystal tee-shirts and petal skirts at Christmas parties this year.

The factories have been busy making this stuff for weeks. I was horrified when I saw it all arrive. Boxes and boxes and boxes of it, from India and the Philippines. I couldn't imagine how we could possibly sell it all and now I'm wondering if they've made enough.

I look around for Crow to see how she's getting on, but she's disappeared. Uh oh. I nod to Jenny and we form a search party. Eventually we find her taking refuge in the shoe section at the top of the sweeping stairs, which is totally empty apart from her and her brother.

Henry is, as usual, reading a book. He seems to have got THE HOTTEST SHOP IN LONDON mixed up with a public library, but Crow looks happy to tuck herself under one of his arms and sit quietly. Strange to think that a couple of years ago, he'd have been in Uganda, holding a machine gun, instead of sitting here, holding his sister and a poetry anthology. Not that he wanted to do the whole machine gun thing. He's much more comfortable with his book.

He smiles at Crow and her wide eyes flicker uncertainly back. It seems mean to make her go back into the maelstrom downstairs. After all, there's not much she can do right now. It's not as if she can work a cash till or anything.

Recently she's grown a lot. She's as tall as me now (which I suppose isn't saying much, even if it feels a lot to me), but she's all arms and legs, and she reminds me of pictures of baby colts struggling to stay upright on their long limbs, which is maybe why I feel this need to look after her. That and her dreamy brown eyes and slender fingers, which suggest that she's a fragile, delicate creature. Although I suspect that really she's tough as Doc Marten boots.

'Fifteen minutes,' I say, pointing at my watch and then pointing towards the lifts to the offices above us. Henry sees me and nods. He knows the schedule.

Jenny and I take a deep breath and prepare to dive back down into the human tsunami.

'By the way, what's happened to Edie?' she asks.

Good question. Edie is our other best friend and a total super-genius, who was supposed to be here an hour ago. I'm about to reply, when my phone goes. This is a surprise. I forgot to charge it last night and I thought the battery was dead. Edie's name is on the screen.

'Nonie? I'm on my way. But they've hacked my website. They're saying I'm a liar and it's all about Crow. They're saying . . .'

Well, I don't know what they're saying because my phone battery chooses this moment to die for good. It cuts Edie off and the screen goes dark, just to make a point.

Across the hordes of over-excited shoppers, Andy Elat

catches a glimpse of my face and obviously doesn't like what he sees.

'Everything OK, Nonie?' he mouths.

'Fine,' I mouth back, with a thumbs-up sign for extra reassurance.

I'm used to lying to grown-ups. It's a habit I've got into. It simplifies things.



Chapter 2

Normally on a Wednesday our schedule would be assembly, double history, break, English Lit. But today it's launch, interview, party. Then massive homework sesh, then train to Paris.

I'd like to pretend it's always parties and publicity, but it's not. We needed special permission to miss our GCSE classes for the Miss Teen events, then more special permission to go to Paris. And that's for a funeral tomorrow, so it doesn't really count.

I've always known tomorrow was going to be a bit tricky, but I've been really looking forward to today. Instead, I've got a knot in my stomach that isn't going to go away. On top of the whole crowd thing, Edie sounded really panicked on the phone. And Edie isn't the panicking kind. If there was an earthquake, Edie would be the one organising people and finding blankets and shelter. Something really horrible must have happened to her website to make her so upset.

When I say website, I don't mean Edie's got a page on MySpace or Facebook. I mean her very own WEBSITE. With its own internet address and logo and everything. She uses it to talk about all her do-gooding projects, her plans to go to Harvard and save the world, what we're all up to at school (featuring my latest outfits and, for extra laughs, what my mother said on the subject) and also what's happening with Crow.

Loads of people look at it. Literally thousands every week. There are the ones who want to know about how ex-child soldiers from Uganda, like Henry, are getting on, and the ones who want to know if Crow's doing her famous petal skirts as part of the new collection for Miss Teen. Guess which types of pages get the most views.

I can't imagine anyone calling Edie a liar. In fact, NOT lying is her biggest problem. There are times when you really hope she'll tell a little white one ('That coat looks great on you, Nonie'; 'That new haircut really suits you'; 'I'm surprised you got such low marks in your geography exam last year'), but she doesn't. She tells it like it is, every time. Whoever's done whatever it is to her website has got the wrong girl.

In front of me, two Miss Teen customers are fighting each other for an emerald-green petal skirt – the last in its size. It's only half an hour since the launch started and the cash tills are already besieged. In less than two years,

Crow's gone from being a little Ugandan refugee with reading difficulties to a cross between Vivienne Westwood and the Olsen twins. The Jewels collection is going to be massive and you can see the pound signs in Andy Elat's happy, crinkly eyes.

Finally, as the racks are being stripped of clothes, I spot Edie near the doors, looking flustered. She's wearing her tee-shirt embroidered with pink crystals saying 'Less Fashion More Compassion', which is our catch phrase. Two pounds from every tee-shirt goes to help children in Africa who've lost their parents to war and AIDS. Guess who had *that* idea. Edie also thought up giving a discount to people who brought reusable bags today.

The tee-shirt makes her look unusually fashion-conscious. Normally, Edie thinks 'special occasion' means a nice pleated skirt and a co-ordinated top, with possibly a jumper slung over her shoulders. EW-EW EW. Even knowing me for most of her life hasn't made much of a difference, and if you ever see me with a jumper slung over my shoulders you can just kill me.

I smile and give her my quizzical look. The noise of people shopping around us is pretty deafening ('Have you got this in a size 14?' 'Can I have another bag?' 'That was MINE!' Beep beep beep from the cash tills), so talking is hard.

She comes over and gives me a hug.

'Oh Nonie!'

Tears start cascading down her cheeks.

'They said that I'm a fake and a hypocrite. On every page. They said that Crow's collection was made by sweatshops and people mustn't buy it and I'm just pretending to support good causes when really I'm just a . . . a . . . a . . .'

She sobs into my shoulder some more.

'A what?'

'A *slave-driver*!'

I goggle. Slave-driver? Edie is the type of girl who goes round picking up litter after people AND PUTTING IT IN THE RECYCLING. (If it's appropriate. She checks.) This is weird.

'Who *are* they?'

'This group called "No Kidding"', she hiccups. 'They're an ethical campaign group, based in California. They've put pictures on my site to look like graffiti. They say young children were used in India to sew the collection. And they've got this thing against me. They say I just want to be famous and I'm using Crow to get rich.'

Apart from that, they sound really nice. Not. In fact, the only good news is the bit about them being based in California. Otherwise, they'd be outside with placards, shouting.

I give Edie an extra hug. She manages to stop the tears from flowing and attempts a brave smile.

'Sorry I'm late. I've been on the phone to my hosting

service for ages, getting them to take the site down till I can sort it out,' she says.

Even when she's hot and flustered and positively tearful, Edie still can't help sounding like an internet whizz kid.