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For my father

Chapter One



Sunday night, my bedroom, in despair

'Girls! I got an article published! In the *Herald*!' Alex stopped shrieking and shaking the newspaper to do a Christina Aguilera bump and jive in the doorway. 'Me, me, me! Famous at last!'

'Hardly,' drawled Carrie. 'Alex, get in here and focus on our friend. We three depart in' – she stopped to consult her watch, her head flopping back on my bed – 'twenty minutes, leaving Tallulah thoroughly in the dwang.'

'Up the stormy creek,' murmured Tam, checking for split ends in her long brown hair.

'Without a paddle,' ended Alex, no longer jubilant. She dropped her arms and folded the *Hambledon Herald* carefully before kicking my bedroom door shut. 'Okay, so what do we have?'

What we have is me, Tallulah Bird (aka Lula, Lu, Tatty, T-Bird (yes, like the car, *groan*), sometimes even Tatty Lula) in a frikking *desperate* state. I'm fifteen years and 360 days old.

AND

UNKISSED.

Why?

Because I'm jinxed. Well, everyone at my school – Hambledon Girls' High – thinks I am. Which means everyone at Hambledon Boys' High too, and that's the *real* problem.

Proof?

1. Bliddy Stan Pavorovich, my year-eight dance partner, getting rushed to A&E with food poisoning. Even before the dancing began! We'd just walked in the door!
2. Dr McCabe being called out when Robert Blugle zipped his bits into his jeans after an afternoon of innocent sunbathing with me at the uni pool.
3. Simon Smethy getting gum in his hair at the cinema on our first date. That bubblegum stuck so deep his whole head had to be shaved. It took him six months to convince the girls of Hambledon High that he wasn't a total thug.

So. Just a few incidents . . . Not worth a mention in my opinion, but with a witchy grandma . . . well, people jump to conclusions they shouldn't.

I focused on the now. My three best friends were staring at me with kindly pity in their eyes: Alex with her long

dark hair, matching eyes and restless energy. Carrie with all the calm in the world, her brown eyes and elegantly cut chestnut hair. Tam with long tawny tresses, hazel eyes and a skin so porcelain it seemed she'd never seen the light of day, which pretty much summed up her other-worldliness.

'How did it *get* to this?' I wailed.

'Definitely Simon Smethy and the gum incident,' replied Alex promptly. 'He started the jinx rumour for real.'

'You're forgetting Cam Sharp-Jones getting that weird migraine every time he saw you. That was the clincher,' said Tam, giving me an understanding little pat on the arm.

'Stop!' I pleaded.

'Yeah, but the real nail in the coffin was Gianni Caruso ice skating at the pond over half term,' said Alex, throwing a handful of peanuts in her mouth. 'Mwhanuthin thinth,' she finished.

Tam stared at me. 'Gianni Caruso was with *you* that day?'

'Come on, Tam,' said Carrie. 'You know this.'

'I do not know this! He was what, like, your *date*?'

I flared my nostrils and narrowed my eyes ever so slightly. 'All these,' I said in a low voice, 'are coincidences. *Coincidences*, people.'

I saw my friends exchange glances and felt a sense of unease prickle up in goosebumps all over my body.

'Look, Lula,' said Tam gently, breaking the awkward silence, 'even if there is no jinx you've got to kiss someone

to *prove* there isn't. You need a List of Candidates. Without a kiss before your birthday this Saturday, you're doomed. You'd have to go looking for strangers. And even then they wouldn't necessarily help, because a stranger is not going to spread the word that you're a safe smoocher – that's if they *survived* the experience . . .' She trailed off after fierce squinty glances from Alex and Carrie, but she'd said enough.

'Today is gone – that means Saturday is five days away. Frikly *frik*,' I groaned, dropping my head back in my hands. 'Frikking frikly FRIK!'

'It sucks,' agreed Alex, 'but . . .' She went a little blank, and her eyes glazed while she hunted for a bright side. A silver lining. A possibility that a normal teenage life for her friend was not totally down the toilet. Her eyes lit up. 'Tam is an *excellent* list-maker!'

'I am!' said Tam with fake confidence. She began writing really fast in her lyrics book. 'We'll help you beat this jinx, Lula.'

I shook my head sadly. 'The jinx, the rumour – whatever – has got too big.' I suddenly felt bad-mood lines creasing my forehead. My eyes narrowed. 'Simon Smethy and his big mouth . . .'

'Don't go thinking revenge, Tatty Lula,' warned Alex, wagging a finger at me and trying to get a look at Tam's list. 'There's no time for that. You need to be remembering my flirting tips, stocking up on breath mints, raiding Darcy's

cupboard for cool clothes in preparation. Focus, girl.'

'But it's the holidays! Everyone's left Hambledon,' I bleated. (This is what comes of living in a town consisting of a university and a bunch of boarding schools.) 'There's no one left to kiss!'

'There will be, but don't lower your standards,' warned Carrie, her dark eyes serious. 'There's got to be a gorgeous local we've all overlooked.'

I spotted Alex giving Carrie that blank *are you out of your mind?* look.

'What?' said Carrie.

'Our friend is about to be sweet sixteen and never been kissed,' hissed Alex. '*There are no standards!*'

'Here's The List,' said Tam, hastily tearing a page from her lyrics book. 'These guys all live here. All aged twelve to twenty.'

'Twelve?' I squeaked. '*Twelve?*'

'Let me edit that,' said Carrie. She snatched The List from Tam, who whipped it back and shoved it in my face.

'Carrie,' said Tam sternly. (Tam is never stern.) 'If Tallulah Bird does not bag a man by the seventeenth of April it'll totally validate the jinx rumour and she'll be' – she blinked rapidly – 'a*looone*. Till the end of her days.'

Chapter Two



Monday 12 April, too long till lunchtime. The girls have gone and left me 'working' at my holiday job

So here I am, a day later, sitting on the icy library floor puzzling over a very short list of who I could assault in a non-commital French-kissing kind of way.

LULA'S LAST CHANCES (*thanks, Tam*)

1. **Fat Angus** (*says it all*)
2. **Billy Diggle** (*ah, the twelve-year-old*)
3. **Bludgeon** (*Fat Angus's brother, not much better*)
4. **Gianni Caruso** (*victim of the ice-skating incident. What was Tam thinking? Was he likely to forget that two months ago I sliced his fingers off with my skates?*)
5. **Vadin Shariff** (*tends only to speak to girls in burkas*)
6. **Olaf Söderberg** (*no way he is younger than twenty! The guy has a* GREY *goatee!*)
7. **Arnold Trenchard** (*the best option, surely? And, let's face it, convenient cos he works at the library with me. Does he make my heart pound? He does not.*)

Splat splat splat.

Footsteps. Big feet in flip flops, by the sound of it. Wouldn't do to be caught skiving. Calling on my extensive special-forces training (i.e. watching more boxed sets of *24* and *The Wire* with Mum than was good for a healthy mind), I sat up soundlessly and peered through the book stacks.

Arnold Trenchard. Man of the moment.

Here he comes.

You can see him now, can't you? Just by me saying his name you've got the right picture of him in your head. Masses of curly red hair, glasses, tall but all slouched over. Bad clothes. *Such* bad clothes. Way too cold for flip flops.

Arnold was at the very bottom of Tam's list. For alphabetical reasons, but still.

The bottom.

'Tallulah? Where are you?'

I slumped down again. Sigh. 'Here, Arns. In the six hundreds.'

Shuffle, shuffle. He appeared round a book stack, but still couldn't see me.

Sigh again. 'Down here, Arnold.'

'Oh. What are you doing on the floor?'

'Contemplating my navel.'

'Oh. Hn. Have you seen Sophie Wenger anywhere? Mike wants her to go to the archives room for him.'

'Sophie Wenger? That crazy goth girl? What, she's

working here now? That's just *great*.' My mood grew dark. Sophie was as goody a two shoes as you could get with all those tattoos. She would rat me out for navel-gazing for sure. My leisure time during work hours could well be a thing of the past.

'She may have a pierced tongue, but she's unexpectedly normal,' said Arns, leaning against a book stack and flexing his toes.

'Don't be fooled,' I said ominously.

'Well, she's keeping out of our way, working for Mike. He's back from lunch, by the way. Wants to know if you've finished the photocopying.'

'Bliddy Stinky Mike. No, I have *not* finished the frikking photocopying!'

'Geez. Take a chill pill!' Arnold looked a little afraid. I could tell by the way his feet were suddenly motionless. Hmm. Nice feet, actually.

I glanced at The List then back up at Arnold, thinking, before shoving the paper into my jeans pocket and smiling sweetly.

'What do you want?' asked Arnold suspiciously.

Uh-oh, I thought.

'Would you help me, Arnold?' I batted my eyelashes, just once – for subtlety. 'With the photocopying?'

He shook his head sadly and said, 'You're out of your mind,' before shambling off again.

All things considered, I like Arnold. He is so uncool that popular people see him as kind of edgy in his individuality. Personally, I liked the way he didn't take crap from anyone. Including me. And he had hairless toes. Huh. It could be that Arnold *was* a good candidate for a kiss. He was my age, for one, and scientifically nerdy enough to pooh-pooh curses . . .

Curses!

Fffff!

Just five days till the dreaded birthday, all of them working at the library – that *had* to be enough time to seduce Arnold Trenchard. And enough time to forget about the boy I'd been in love with since I was six years old.

My mind beginning to tick, I hauled myself to my feet and tried not to breathe too deeply. These ageing books are full of microbes. Lung-damaging little mites that keep my mum coughing till the wee hours. As head honcho of the historical research section of this university library, it's lucky she loves her job. Like, she gets excited about local farmers who die and leave all their diaries to the library . . .

'Elias Brownfield kept a diary for sixty years!' she squeaked, when I found her in the back office a little later. 'Noted the rainfall every day! What an amazing meteorological record! Hmm? Isn't that incredible?'

I gave her a slow blink. Her small, round body seemed ready to bounce off the walls.

'Ye-es, Mum,' I said in calming tones. 'Have you seen the photocopy card?'

Mum frowned. 'Is it this one?'

'Yep.' I plucked it from her outstretched fingers. 'Thanks.'

'You left it in the machine. Mabel complained.'

I made a face, not a very nice one.

Mum sighed. 'Mike's looking for you.'

'Ew.'

'Tallulah Bird,' said Mum in her stern voice. 'Mike is a lovely man and the best chief librarian we've ever had. I wish you'd give him a break!' She put down the farmer's journals and made a tortured sound in the back of her throat. 'At least the copy card's all you've lost today. I can't find that bundle of documents on Coven's Quarter. I photocopied it last thing Friday night and now the copies *and* the originals have disappeared. You seen anything anywhere?'

'Mum,' I said in a stressy voice, 'no pressure, but those documents are Coven's Quarter's only hope of not getting bulldozed. Even then nobody's sure the council will be persuaded.' Mum ignored me, but her desk rummaging moved up a notch. 'And Alex got her first ever article published on it in the *Herald* so it's a hot topic. She wrote that we're all counting on your historical evidence. You want me to help you look?' Mum snorted and started going through the filing cabinet, slamming the drawers really hard.

I was suddenly just as stressed as she was, the seduction of Arnold Trenchard instantly insignificant.

Coven's Quarter is this weird collection of enormous rocks in the middle of the woods to the west of our town. It's known as a spot where druids, witches, that kind of crowd, have met since time began. My Grandma Bird was reputed to be the witchiest of them all and Coven's Quarter was her special place. She'd gather up there with her cronies at least once a year, always trying to get me to go along with her. We had some kind of special thing, Grandma and I; we clicked. 'Cos you're witchy, just like me,' she'd say with a wink, but nuh uh, no way. I did not need more craziness in my life. Why couldn't she pick my older sister, Darcy?

'Darcy doesn't have it,' Grandma Bird would say sadly. 'But it sizzles out of Tallulah.'

And over the years, somehow, that's how the rest of the town saw me too. Not a problem if they're looking for a cure for warts, but what boy wants a weirdy witch girlfriend? Exactly. Big problem – even though Grandma died a year ago, and I've never, ever cured a wart.

But I don't hold anything against Grandma Bird. It still hurt to think of her not being here and no way was some hairy-butt developer going to move in and mow down the place she loved most in all the world.

I bit my lip so hard I tasted iron, my eyes starting to scan piles of paper everywhere. I noticed Mum had stopped her

frantic search and was looking at me hard. 'Hey,' she said gently. 'Go get a hot drink, you muggins. Those documents are here somewhere. Harrow Construction will never build townhouses on Grandma Bird's place, okay?'

'Okay, Mum,' I said, swallowing the lump in my throat.

I hurried out of her office and bumped into Stinky Mike. Literally.

Eugh.

I don't know what he smells of, but *oh* it's horrible. When I call the man Stinky Mike it's because that's what he *is* – it's not just me being mean. Maybe I'd be nicer to him if he were nicer to me. Maybe the man just has some kind of glandular problem. Maybe he's lovely, deep down inside . . .

'Tallulah,' said Stinky Mike in his whispery voice, his little baldy head nodding violently. 'Watch where you're going.'

See that? That there? Would a nice person say that?

'Miiichael!' came another whispery voice from behind him.

A strange smile chased across his lips. 'Mabel,' he said fondly, taking off his glasses.

Mabel, the library's deputy chief and the closest living thing to a praying mantis that isn't actually green, scuttled to his side. 'Michael, I wanted to show you these records on the north-west property you asked about,' she simpered.

I tried to ignore them, crossing quickly to the casual-staff desk, which is unfortunately next to Mabel's. I wanted to check emails. As I clicked into Gmail I heard Stinky Mike laugh. It was high-pitched and unpleasant to hear. Mabel was laughing too, but in a gaspy way, and I could tell she didn't really know what was so amusing.

Though she weirds me out, I feel sorry for Mabel. Every bone of her angular frame sticks out, making knobs and lines against the thin nylon of the 1940s dresses she wears when she's not in tweed. And she has a vast range of nervous twitches, mostly to do with adjusting the gold-rimmed spectacles that slide up and down a long hooky nose. She was fiddling with them now, her rheumy pale-blue eyes flitting restlessly behind the crescent lenses.

'This is just what I was after, Mabel.' Stinky Mike smiled slowly and lifted a fat hand to her shoulder. He squeezed gently.

Ik!

Revolted, I hastily blanked the images of Stinky Mike and Tweedy Mabel from my mind and scarpered downstairs to blind myself with the copier for the rest of the afternoon. There was a desperate seduction to plan. I checked my watch.

No!

Yeech!

Twelve o'clock already!

I was down to four and a half days!

Where was Arnold Trenchard? Hurrying across the library, the memory of that one and only first love, the delectable Ben Latter, intruded for a moment, but I blocked it out. No chance of that, jinx or no jinx.