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Chapter One

Shopping for boys

‘Reasons I’d like to stay living at Gran’s,’ I said, as Pia and I left the heat of the August sunshine behind us and stepped through automatic doors into the air-conditioned Village area of Westfield shopping mall. ‘One: I can walk to school from there–’

‘You mean *run*. You’re always late,’ Pia interrupted, as we headed for the escalator and took in the wealth of shops stretching before us.

‘OK, run. Good point. Imagine if I lived further away.’

‘Nightmare,’ said Pia. ‘You’d never make it.’

‘Exactly. Numero two: Gran’s house is in the next street to yours.’

Pia linked her arm through mine. ‘And we need to be near each other, especially after everything you’ve been through in the last year. End of story. You ought to be allowed to stay on compassionate grounds.’

‘True. It would be cruel and heartless to separate us.’

We stepped onto the escalator and floated up under the vast pink roof from which an enormous chandelier was suspended. It looked like an explosion of raindrops, sparkling in space. The Village area of the mall is our favourite part. We call it Poshville because it’s where the seriously upmarket shops like Dior, Tiffany, Gucci and Prada are located. We like to window-shop and dream, then hang out in one of the seating areas in the middle, where someone has kindly arranged armchairs and a coffee table on a carpet next to a massive flower arrangement that looks like it cost a bomb. As we got off the escalator, I noticed today’s display was a chaotic mix of pink orchids with twigs, about four foot tall.

Pia pulled me over to look at a window display of awesome shoes with killer heels. ‘Anyway, I need you round the corner so we can still go to school together when term starts again. I need you close to borrow your make-up, to watch telly together, to have sleepovers. No. You moving is so *not* an option. Third reason?’

‘Gran’s is two streets away from Tom Robertson’s house, he who is the love of my life, and the keeper of my heart.’

‘Of course… The keeper of your heart?’

‘Yes. He keeps it in a small jar on his desk.’

Pia pulled a face. ‘Haha. Yuck. I meant, how can he be keeper of your heart when you haven’t even talked to him?’

‘Because he is The One and the fact we haven’t talked yet is a minor detail. Most of the school hasn’t met him properly yet, seeing as he only arrived at the end of last term. All the more reason for me to stay living nearby so that I can accidentally on purpose bump into him. Josh Tyler told our Charlie that Tom’s last girlfriend was a brunette, so I reckon I’m in with a chance.’

There’s a sad shortage of boy talent at our school, so when Tom arrived looking tall and lean, with moody good looks and tousled brown hair, he caused quite a stir.

‘You would be anyway: you’re the best-looking girl in our year by a long way,’ said Pia, my totally unbiased best mate.

‘I am so *not* gorgeous: my shoulders are too broad, my legs are too skinny, my boobs are growing way too fast and my hair is a nightmare unless I use hair straighteners, plus my mouth is too wide. On bad days I look like a duck - a duck with big boobs.’ I know I can look OK if I make an effort but best-looking girl in our year? Definitely not.

‘You don’t look like a duck, idiot. And your chestie bits are fine. Boys *like* girls with curves. Any other reasons for not wanting to move?’

Pia is curvy herself, though she’s smaller than me, but is totally cool with her shape and always dresses to show it off, whereas I try and hide mine in my Indie clothes and layers, much to her annoyance.

‘OK, well, Dave likes it at Gran’s.’ (Dave is my cat.)

‘Best reason of all. Cats don’t like to move and he’s been moved already once this year.’

‘I know. Too much disruption. It took him weeks to settle in. Me too. Everyone should give us a break. Both of us.’

‘When do you think you’ll find out?’ asked Pia.

‘This week, maybe even today. Dad said he’d ring if it was good news, not that it’ll be good to me.’

‘No, it’ll be totally tragic news. I hope he doesn’t get it,’ said Pia.

My dad had applied for a job as manager of some boring old apartment complex in town. If he got it, it came with a house attached - which meant my brother Charlie and me moving from Gran's house, where we'd lived since Mum died nine months ago, and in with Dad, who we hadn't lived with since my parents split up six years ago. We'd lived with Mum after their divorce, though had always seen Dad pretty regularly.

Mum's death changed everything – we not only lost her, we lost our home too. We couldn't stay where we were without an adult and although staying with my Aunt Maddie was suggested, she lives with her boyfriend in a one bed flat and didn't really want us there cramping her style (or lack of it lately.) Nor did she want to have to move into our old house to look after us, even though Mum was her older sister. Luckily, Gran came forward like a shot with the offer to stay with her, because Dad wasn't in any position to have us descend on him either. He managed a tres posho hotel in Mayfair and lived in. He's never needed a normal house with a kitchen because everything is always laid on wherever he's worked. And there was definitely no room for two tall teenagers at that hotel. Charlie's five foot eleven and I'm five nine, so there was no tucking us away in a linen cupboard.

Anyway, I like it at Gran's. I feel settled there. OK, so it isn't totally ideal. Charlie has to sleep on a pull-out sofa in the living room, and my bed is in the room that Gran used to use as her painting studio, but we get by. Dave likes it there too. Gran lives on a quiet tree-lined street, so not much traffic for him to dodge.

Since Mum died, Dad had been looking at all sorts of options so that Charlie and I could live with him permanently. He'd even explored the idea of moving out to the countryside so we could be together, but then this job came up. General Manager of an apartment block in Knightsbridge, which comes with a three-bedroom house. 'Might be perfect,' said Dad. *Might not be*, I thought. It feels like too much has been happening too fast lately. Too much change. Like my world's been turned upside-down. Some days I don't know what's hit me. One day I was happy. Mum was alive. I had my own room. I felt safe. Normal. No worries. Next day, I found out that she had cancer and I couldn't take anything for granted any more.

Being at Gran's has allowed me to catch my breath a little, plus Gran gets how I feel. Granddad died a few years back and now her eldest daughter had gone too, so she

knows just how it feels to lose the people you love. Sometimes a song will come on the radio and her eyes mist over or someone will say something to me that reminds me of Mum and I'll choke up. Gran and I just give each other a hug at times like that. We know that there's nothing we can say to bring them back. We hug a lot. So, no, I really don't want Dad to get this new job on top of everything else. I want to stay put.

Pia and I cruised down the line of shops, like we did most days in the summer holidays, stopping occasionally to look in a window. We'd been saving for ages for this particular trip and we both had twenty five quid in our pockets and permission to spend. Bliss. I wanted to get a top to wear for an event we'd been notified was going to happen soon after we got back to school. It's to raise funds to build a new library. A bunch of us had been invited along as representatives: a few mega brains from science and languages, prefects, a few of us from sports. I'm our school's best swimmer which is why I got invited. Pia is ace at drama and singing so she's in, and word has it that as Tom is a top football player - he's already on the school team - he'll probably be there too.

'This money-raising thing might be my best chance to meet Tom,' I said, as I peered at the price of a pair of silver sneakers. 'OK, me and every other girl there… which is why I have to dress to get him to notice me. That first impression is the one that lasts. It'll be the perfect place. I'll ask someone on our team to do the honours and introduce us. I can see it all in my head. I will be wearing something fabulous, looking graceful, elegant and sophisticated. Someone will say, 'Oh, Tom, have you met Jess? She's our best hope for junior swimming champion, don't you know?' I'll smile modestly. He'll look into my eyes. I'll look into his. There'll be a moment of magic and he will be mine. I can't wait. I'll say something witty, then leave.'

'I think you should ignore him, act like you haven't even noticed him,' said Pia. 'I read somewhere that in the art of flirting, a girl must always leave them wanting more.'

'Maybe. He is pretty cool, isn't he?'

'So outcool him. Boys like him have girls falling at their feet all the time, so you need to seem unavailable, glacial even. Be, like, whatever, I am so not interested. Boys like him like the chase, a challenge; what they can't have, not what they can.'

‘You’re so right, P. Anyway, he might fancy *you*,’ I said. He might, too. Boys always seem to like Pia. Not just because she’s pretty – which she is in a tomboy cheeky cherub kind of way, with short layered dark hair, big hazel eyes, great cheekbones and a wide mouth which is always smiling - no, boys like her because she is FUN.

‘Nah. He looks arrogant, like he’s so good-looking and he knows he could have anyone as his girlfriend.’

‘Which is why I want to make him remember *me*,’ I said. ‘We’re about the same height, which is good. I know because I stood behind him in the lunch queue just before we broke up for summer. He was holding an egg-and-cress sandwich.’

‘Ah. Is that why you switched from your usual cheese-and-tomato?’

‘Yes. It’ll be our thing,’ I said. ‘If he sees me eating it, he’ll think we have something in common.’

Pia pulled a face. ‘Egg and cress? Egg and *cress*? Like, how uncool is that?’

I nodded. ‘No, others may have hearts and roses, we will have egg and cress. Don’t ever let it be said that I don’t know what’s what when it comes to romance.’

Pia cracked up. It’s one of the things I like about her. She laughs at my rubbish jokes. ‘I despair,’ she said.

After half an hour of looking around, I spotted a silver top that looked the biz in a boutique window. The shop was on the edge of Poshville and there were posters all over the window announcing that everything was fifty per cent off in the summer sale. Everything MUST go. Knock down prices. *Excellent.*

We were about to walk in when I saw a girl about my age with her mum. They were chatting away, arms linked. I immediately got a lump in my throat. Shopping with Mum was one of the things I missed most. It was our girl-time together, a bit of window shopping, then she’d always buy me something, even when we were broke - like a pretty hair clip from Claire’s or Accessorise, or a lippie from the Body Shop, then it was hot chocolates at the nearest café, then home. She was great to shop with. She knew all there was to know about fashion because, before she got too ill, she worked as a personal shopper for Selfridges and, before that, for an on-line website which specialised in trend forecasting in fashion. She went to all the shows during Fashion Week and we always

had all the most current glossy magazines at home: *Vogue, In-Style, Harpers Bazaar, Marie Claire, Grazia*. I loved going through the pages showing the latest designer collections with her, as she used to let me help her pick out what to get for her clients.

Sometimes it hurt so much that she'd gone, I didn't know what to do with myself. I couldn't handle the pain, it was like a bottomless hole that had opened up inside me and was going to pull me into it. And there was nothing I could take for it, no ointment to rub in, no tablet to swallow. Charlie, on one of the few occasions that he'd spoken to me about Mum's death, said that he always tries to think of something else to get through times like that. He makes himself do some kind of activity to take his mind off what he's feeling, like he'll accelerate into anything that will distract him. Lately I've been trying to do that too.

Don't dwell, move on, I told myself as I took a deep breath and pulled Pia into the shop.

A stick-thin assistant glanced up, did a quick flick up and down taking in our jeans and Converse sneakers (mine coral, Pia's grey patchwork) then raised an eyebrow, as if to say, *Are you sure you should be in here?*

I wasn't going to let her intimidate me. Whenever I went shopping with Mum, she'd say, 'Always remember, *we're* the customers.'

I pointed at the mannequin wearing my top in the window. 'How much is that top?' I asked. 'Is it in the sale?'

'The silver one?'

I nodded.

'You're in luck. It is,' she said, with the hint of a smile.

Fifty per cent off, I thought. *Great. Can't cost much, then.* And Tom will be *bound* to notice me if I'm wearing it. It'll look perfect with my black jeans. All the mags say silver is a good colour for girls with chestnut brown hair and blue eyes like mine. Cornflower blue, Mum always use to say. *Tom, baby, prepare to be smitten*, I thought.

The assistant fetched the top from the window. There was no price tag. 'Does madam want to try it on?'

I nodded. Another magazine tip. You can never tell the cut of anything until you've got it on. I followed Miss Prissy Knickers assistant to the changing room and Pia

came in with me. There was a blonde girl about our age going into the one next-door to ours. She was loaded down with outfits to try on. I drew the curtain of our changing room and pulled on the silver top.

'Looks fabulous,' declared Pia. 'Hair loose down your back, bit of lippie and Tom bites the dust.'

We high fived each other, then I got changed and took the top to the till.

'That'll be two hundred and fifty pounds,' said the assistant.

'I… wha…' I spluttered.

'Two hundred and fifty pounds,' she repeated, looking bored.

'I thought you said it was in the sale.'

'It is. It *was* five hundred.'

I could see that the assistant was enjoying my discomfort. *OK,* I thought. *Two can play at this game*. 'What do you think, Pia?' I said. 'Only two hundred and fifty. It *is* lovely. Shall I get two?'

Pia got what I was up to straight away. 'Yes. Maybe. Do you have it in any other colours?' she asked the assistant.

The assistant opened and closed her mouth like a fish. 'I… yes… In the back. In black.'

'Great,' I said. 'I don't have enough cash on me for both but I'll go to the cash machine. See you in ten minutes.'

I made myself stand tall and walked out of the shop with Pia close behind.

'Jess Hall,' said Pia. 'That was a big fat fib.'

'No, it wasn't. I *didn't* have enough cash on me, that was the truth.'

Pia laughed. Behind her, I could see that the girl who had been trying things on in the next-door changing room, had taken her items to the till, about five of them from what I could see, and the assistant had begun packing them in tissue and dinky carrier bags. 'Must be nice to have that kind of dosh to spend,' I said.

'Money can't buy you style,' said Pia, but I knew she was only trying to make me feel better, because she added in a flat zombie voice. 'We-are-not-slaves-to-fashion.'

'Oh yes, we are!' I said. I whipped my jacket off and put it on back to front. I put my arms out straight in front of me, a la zombie and began to stagger towards the shop

next door. ‘Must-have-new-clothes. Must-have-new-clo-othes,’ I droned. Pia did the same with her jacket, putting her arms out in front of her and following me, doing a stiff shuffling walk as she went.

‘Hey, Hall,’ said a male voice behind us. I turned to see that it was Roy Mason from the lower sixth. Tom’s classmate. He was with Josh Tyler and they were looking at us as if we were completely mad. I did a quick glance around. Luckily no sign of Tom. Phew. I so didn’t want him to see me acting like an idiot. Doing the zombie shuffle is *not* a pulling technique I’d recommend. It was OK that Roy and Josh had seen me. Neither of them were on my boy wish list. Roy was blond, and nice enough looking, but he smelt like stale biscuits, and Josh was dark and stocky and way too touchy feelie - like he was always desperate for a grope.

I did my best snooty impersonation and looked down my nose at them. ‘Queen of the zombies, actually,’ I said. ‘Kneel and obey.’

Josh and Roy both stuck their arms out and started to do the zombie walk towards us. Josh even began dribbling. Eew. Typical. Boys always take it too far.

Josh lumbered over to me. ‘Undead need warm flesh,’ he said, in a stupid droolie voice. ‘Give me your arm.’ He bent over to bite my arm while sticking his nose a little too near to my chest.

‘In your dreams, Tyler,’ I said and shoved him off. Unfortunately, I caught him off balance and he staggered towards Roy, lost his footing, toppled over and landed with a thud just at the moment that Tom, my love, keeper of my heart, stepped off the escalator. His hair was windswept and he had on a black jacket and jeans and looked every inch the teen movie star. He saw Josh fall, glanced at me and raced over. ‘You alright, mate?’ he asked Josh, who looked embarrassed and scrambled quickly to his feet.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ he said. ‘I was just telling Jess here that I didn’t fancy her. Some girls just can’t take rejection.’

‘As *if,*’ I said. ‘You are *so* not my type.’ I turned to Tom. It was the first time I’d seen him close up and now I saw that he had beautiful jade coloured eyes with thick lashes and a gorgeous mouth with a plump bottom lip. I had to drag my eyes away from it. ‘I didn’t mean to shove him. We were being zombies. I’m Jess, by the way.’ My fantasy meeting with him flashed through my mind. *What was it I was going to say to*

him? Oh yeah. 'I'm the school's best swimmer,' I blurted. *Oh noooo*, I thought as soon as the words were out of my mouth, *What have I said? I'm an idiot. Best swimmer! He'll think I'm a show-off… And what was I doing? Being a zombie. He'll think I'm mad. And Josh falling over! Tom will think I'm a bully…*

Pia made a nervous tittering sound and linked her arm through mine to pull me away. She'd sensed disaster with a capital D.

Tom looked at me as if I'd just escaped from a mental hospital. He clapped Josh on the shoulder and led him away with Roy, who was sniggering. As they walked off, without looking round, Josh lifted his right arm and stuck the middle finger of his hand up.

'Same to you,' I called and made a rude gesture back. Sadly it was Tom who turned round and saw it, not Josh. He gave me a filthy look.

'Oops,' I said and grinned like an idiot, then waved. *Waved!* What was I thinking?

Tom shook his head like he couldn't believe anyone as awful as me could possibly exist.

'Well, um… at least you've spoken to Tom now,' said Pia, as the boys disappeared round the corner.

'Yeah. Big introduction. So much for making a good first impression. I finally get to meet the coolest boy in school and he sees me acting as one of the undead. I was wearing my jacket back to front, for heaven's sake. Oh *God!* Talk about dressed to impress. Not. That couldn't have gone worse if I'd planned it.'

Pia squeezed my arm. 'Well, you did say you wanted him to notice you and um… well, he did. And um… he will surely see that you're different.' She giggled. 'He's not going to forget you in a hurry.'

'No. I will probably appear in his nightmares eating warm flesh and crunching on eyeballs. Oh hell. Can this day get any worse?' My phone rang.

I glanced at the screen. Dad.