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Opening extract from

Chocolate Box Girls: Cherry Crush

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1

There are some things I will miss about Clyde Academy . . . things like macaroni cheese and chips, and syrup pudding with custard, and staring at the back of Ryan Clegg's neck in art class. There are also things I will not miss, like maths tests and school stew, and Kirsty McRae. I won't miss Kirsty McRae at all . . . she and her friends drive me crazy.

They have it all . . . perfect hair with fancy highlights and perfect school uniform, the cool kind that comes from TopShop on Buchanan Street. They get good grades, they're popular, the teachers like them, the boys love them.

Everybody else just wants to BE like them . . . except for me. I am not like Kirsty McRae, not one little bit. I do not have perfect hair, my uniform is second hand and

there's a slightly sticky stain on the skirt where I dropped my toast and jam this morning. I don't get good grades, mainly because I do my homework on the bus to school, and teachers don't like me, except for my English teacher, who says I have a very vivid imagination.

I am not totally sure if she means that as a compliment.

I just cannot see the attraction of a girl like Kirsty.

She isn't even nice. When I was seven, I invited her to our flat for tea and she complained that she didn't like bacon butties and asked why our goldfish had a dog's name. I didn't know that Rover was a dog's name, back then. I guess it was Dad's idea of a joke.

Kirsty asked me where my mum was, and I said I didn't have one.

'Don't be silly,' she had insisted. 'Everybody has a mum. Who cooks your tea? Who does the washing and irons your clothes?'

'Dad, of course!'

Well, he didn't iron them, exactly. He just shook things out and laughed and said that a few creases never hurt anyone.

'Are they divorced?' she asked in a whisper. 'Did she run away or something?'

'Of course not!'

Kirsty narrowed her eyes. 'Are you adopted?' she asked. 'Because you don't look anything like your dad! You look . . . I dunno, Chinese, or Japanese, or something.'

'I'm Scottish!' I protested. 'Just like Dad!'

'I don't think he's your dad at all,' she said, and when she saw my eyes brim with tears, she started to smile. When I went back to school on Monday, Kirsty had told everyone I was adopted, and that my dad swept the floor on the production line at the McBean's Chocolate Factory.

He did, sometimes, but still, she said it in a very mean way.

I will not miss Kirsty McRae.

Right on cue, Kirsty flounces into the dinner hall with her little gaggle of friends. They push their way to the front of the queue, then saunter over to the table where I am sitting alone with my macaroni cheese and chips, without even noticing I'm there. They flop down beside me with their plates of salad, flicking their hair and retouching their lipgloss and chattering about boys and dates and nail varnish.



'Hey,' Kirsty says. 'Sorcha, I dare you to chuck a chip at Miss Jardine! Go on, I dare you!'

Sorcha grabs a chip off my plate and flings it through the air. It lands briefly on the head teacher's tweed-suited shoulder and then drops to the ground. Miss Jardine looks round, frowning, and her gaze fixes on me, my forkful of chips and macaroni frozen in mid-air. Her eyes narrow accusingly, but she has no proof and turns back to her dinner. Kirsty collapses into giggles, and I shoot her a frosty look.

'What are you looking at?' she scowls.

'Nothing,' I say, but my mouth twitches into a smile. Kirsty is exactly that . . . nothing.

'Why are you smirking? You are such a freak, Cherry Costello!' Her eyes flicker over me as though I am something small and slimy she has discovered stuck to her lettuce leaf, and for once I dare to meet her gaze. I tilt my chin and smile, and Kirsty's face contorts with fury.

She turns to her friends. 'Hey, did you know Cherry's mum thought she was such a loser that she ditched her and ran off to live on the other side of the world? What does that feel like, Cherry? To know your own mum couldn't be bothered to stick around?'

'You don't know anything about my mum,' I say quietly.

Kirsty laughs. 'Oh yes, I do, Cherry,' she says. 'We were at primary school together, weren't we? Your mum's a film star, isn't she? In Hollywood? That's what you told me in Primary Five. Or maybe she's a fashion designer, living in New York. That was the story when we were in Primary Six. Let's see, what else was there? A model, a singer, a ballet dancer . . . in Tokyo, Sydney, Outer Mongolia. I swear, Cherry Costello, you are such a LIAR!'

Kirsty laughs, and I hate her then, I really, really hate her.

'Leave it, Kirsty,' Cara says, but Kirsty has never known when to leave things. She'd rather poke at them with a sharp stick until they bleed.

'Your mum isn't an actress, is she, Cherry?' Kirsty says spitefully, and the others, even Sorcha and Cara, giggle.

'No,' I whisper, my cheeks burning.

'She isn't a fashion designer either, or a model, or a ballet dancer, is she?'

'No . . .'

It seems to me that the whole dinner hall has gone quiet.

They want to hear what Kirsty has to say. They want to see me crumble.

'They were just stories you made up, Cherry, to make yourself seem more interesting,' Kirsty says. 'Isn't that right? Only it didn't work, because you're not interesting, not one bit. And neither is your mum.'

There's a pain in my chest, the hot, bitter ache of shame. I search around for something to say, a clever quip, a comeback. Nothing. I have used all of my dreams, my fantasies, already, and Kirsty has labelled them as lies. Well, maybe they were, even though a part of me believed them at the time.

'Your mum is probably just a waste of space, like you,' Kirsty says nastily.

I push my chair back roughly, and stand. My legs are wobbly, and my hands shake as I pick up my plate. I should just take my dinner and walk away, to a different table in the furthest corner of the dinner hall, where Kirsty and her crew cannot hurt me.

That's what I should do.

Then again, perhaps it's time I showed Kirsty McRae exactly what I think of her. After all, I have nothing left to lose.

I lift my plate of macaroni cheese and chips and tip it over Kirsty McRae's head, watching the cheesy gloop drip down through her perfectly highlighted hair. Chips roll down her white shirtsleeves, leaving greasy trails, and ketchup spatters her creamy skin like blood.

'Oh. My. God,' Sorcha says.

And, slowly at first, hesitantly, the whole, entire dinner hall begins to clap and cheer.

