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Nobody's Girl

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Chapter One

But first we have to rewind to the moment four months before I met with my destiny and came out of Wilson's to find Ayesha waiting outside. Technically she wasn't outside but a couple of doors down because no one under the age of seventy-five would want to be seen outside Wilson's.

Because I am the most boring teenager in the world, I have the world's most boring Saturday job. Wilson's is a smart double-fronted shop on the High Street that has been there since 1907. It's where clothes go to die but once they get inside its dark, funky-smelling interior, they decided to linger for a few more years. Mr Wilson, grandson of the original proprietor, didn't seem to notice that there were hardly any customers for his poly-blend floral shirtwaisters, shiny plastic macs and granny panties, or maybe he just didn't care.

Needless to say, it was a total Mum-approved Saturday job. There was zero chance of meeting any snackable boys while I wrote out cards to stick on the mannequins in the window that said cheery things like '*Perfect for Mothers' Day*' and '*Lovely in Lilac*'. Mr Wilson was all right – mostly I kept his tea levels topped up and he stayed in the back doing wordsearch puzzles. He came into the shop as I was marking down some ancient American-tan tights that

had probably disintegrated in their packets, at 1.03 precisely, and told me I could take my lunch, just like he did every Saturday.

Clutching three pound coins for Mr Wilson's coronation chicken sandwich, KitKat 'and get yourself something nice with the change', I finally got to open the door and had hardly managed to get a good few lungfuls of fresh air when I heard someone shout, 'Bea! Over here!'

Ayesha was standing outside the Cancer Research shop in a teeny, tiny little tunic, black leggings and a pair of outsized shades even though the day was overcast and grey.

I slowly walked towards her, painfully conscious of my knee-length navy-blue dress because I was forbidden from wearing trousers in the shop or anything that was even vaguely fashionable. I hoped my prim little dress was verging on sexy secretary but from the way Ayesha gave me a quick up and down, then visibly gulped, it was verging on frump.

'Let's do lunch,' she said brightly as if it wasn't the first time she'd spoken to me in six months, three weeks and five days. 'God, I can't believe you still work there. There's a well nasty red suit in the window. Looks like it's made from boiled wool.'

Ayesha had already linked her arm through mine and looked surprised when she took a step and I stayed exactly where I was.

'Actually I'm having lunch with Ruth,' I muttered, my face twisting into an apologetic grimace, though I didn't

have anything to be sorry about. With perfect timing, I saw Ruth crossing the road, her scarf ends fluttering in the breeze and a ferocious scowl on her face when she saw who I was with.

'What's she doing here?' she demanded as she drew closer so she could step right into Ayesha's personal space and force her to take two hasty steps backwards. 'Have your new friends dumped you because they realize you're a two-faced cow?'

People think Ruth is really quiet because of the whole headscarf/being a Plymouth Brethren thing, but they couldn't be more wrong. If Ruth and Ayesha were going to throw down, then I didn't fancy Ayesha's chances. I hoped it wasn't going to come to that, but there was some really hardcore glaring going on.

'Me and Bea are doing lunch,' Ayesha informed Ruth icily. 'And just because I don't hang out with you any more, doesn't mean I'm two-faced. It means that I've . . . evolved,' she finished with smug satisfaction, like Ruth and I were still playing with Barbies. 'Come on, Bea. We'll go to Planet Organic.'

'We're going to McDonald's,' Ruth bit out, upgrading her glare a few notches up the thunderous scale before she turned to me. 'You promised. You know I've been dreaming of a Big Mac all bloody week.'

'I did promise,' I said to Ayesha with a half-hearted shrug, because hey, rock, hard place, my name's Bea. 'Sorry, Ayesha, but I don't know why you're even speaking to me, let alone asking me to have lu—'

'Fine! Whatever!' Ayesha snapped. 'We'll go to McDonald's then.'

That wasn't what I'd meant at all. But even though Ruth clicked her teeth and her eyes flashed, nothing was going to come between her and a Big Mac, even if it meant she had to eat it in the company of Ayesha, who still had her arm in mine and was practically dragging me along.

As lunches go, it was pretty horrific. Ruth and Ayesha snapped and snarled at each other like two pitbulls straining at their studded body harnesses.

Ruth's parents don't let her eat anything fried or sugary because apparently being a Plymouth Brethren means not being allowed to have any kind of fun, so she kept shooting furtive glances over her shoulder as she ordered her Big Mac with extra-large fries and Coke and saw every one of the faces that Ayesha was pulling behind her back.

I thought Ayesha would just have a black coffee to show how totally sophisticated she was these days but she got exactly the same as Ruth. 'I'm so lucky I can eat what I want and never put on any weight,' she drawled with a pointed look at Ruth's size 16 hips.

I ordered a chicken salad. 'Have fries,' Ruth demanded. 'I'm going to look like a gigantic pig if I eat all this and you're having lettuce.'

'Ayesha's having fries.'

'She doesn't count; she's an unwelcome hanger-on. Mind you, she must be used to that if she's hanging out with Ruby Davies.'

'Excuse me! Standing right here, headscarf girl,' Ayesha snapped. 'And I'm part of Ruby's inner circle. Not that it's your business.'

'If you were part of the inner circle, then you wouldn't have to go round telling people you were part of the inner circle.'

People were turning to look. The boy behind the counter had to ask me to repeat my order three times.

'Could you maybe not be so aggro with each other?' I suggested as we threaded our way through the restaurant to the one empty table, which was heaped with empty trays and Happy Meal detritus. 'We used to get on.'

Ayesha and Ruth stood and watched as I put my salad on the chair and quickly cleared the table. Then they sat down.

'We didn't all get on,' Ayesha said, carefully squeezing ketchup on to her fries. 'We ended up together because we weren't weird enough or geeky enough or popular enough to belong to any of the other groups in our year. I mean, yeah, we used to be mates, Bea, but you're really immature.'

'I am not,' I said, sneaking a fry off Ruth's tray, though she slapped my hand to try and stop me.

'Hey! Go and order your own,' she said through a mouthful of burger.

'But I'm having chips tonight,' I said. '*Pommes frites*.' It's a little nervous tic I have that I translate random words and phrases into French. Don't ask me why.

'See?' Ayesha remarked triumphantly. 'You've been doing that ever since I've known you. You're emotionally stunted or something.'

'That doesn't prove anything,' I protested. 'Just that I like saying stuff in French.'

'OK, what you doing tonight, then?' Ayesha asked with raised eyebrows.

I wished desperately that I was doing something exciting or that I had the ability to lie without stuttering and blinking rapidly. 'Well, I'm babysitting,' I admitted. 'But the grandmas can't cope with the twins when they're throwing a wobbly and Mum doesn't like to—'

'Think that you might leave the house and talk to actual real live boys because you might end up having sex with them five minutes later,' Ayesha finished for me. 'And anyway who would you go out with? Ruth probably has Bible study, Polly will be polishing her tack and Lydia will be hanging out with her Polish friends who don't go to our school. So you'll be staying in and making up silly stories in your head about boys you've never even spoken to because you're not a normal seventeen-year-old.'

'That's not fair,' I said dully, pushing my salad away because suddenly I wasn't very hungry.

'You've turned into such a bitch,' Ruth said, patting my hand. 'And I can't help it if I was born into some freaky religious sect.'

'I'm not being a bitch, I'm just telling it like it is.'

I wondered again, for the eleventy millionth time if Ayesha and I would still be friends if she hadn't suddenly got pretty last summer and moved up the social ladder.

I'd never had a boyfriend so I didn't know what being dumped by one would be like. But I imagined it was

something like the way Ayesha had treated me when she decided that I wasn't good enough to be her friend any more. We'd sat next to each other every day all the way through primary school and secondary school. Then one day, she was sitting in the back row with Ruby Davies, going to lunch with Ruby, walking home from school with Ruby. When she was with me, she'd pick fights and holes in everything I said and did and wore. She stopped calling me, stopped emailing me, blocked me on Google Chat, but it was only after I heard that she'd got off with Jack that we finally had it out.

I knew that I had no real claim on Jack, he was just a beautiful boy that I had an outsize crush on; but Ayesha knew how I felt about him. She knew how red I got when I saw him across the road and would always nudge me to make sure I'd seen him sauntering along the Broadway, his gold hair glinting in the sun. Knew how I lived off the memory of him serving me in Burger King for weeks.

In fact, Ayesha had totally enabled my crush on Jack. Before she'd got cool, we'd spend hours inventing these long, detailed fantasies about me going out with Jack and her going out with his friend, Col. And when I say detailed, I mean we would describe our outfits and what we'd order from the menu when they took us to Pizza Express on a double date and what it felt like to hold their hands as we walked up to Ally Pally to see the stars.

So when I heard that Ayesha had been seen with her tongue down Jack's throat and his hand up her skirt, it hit me hard. It took a long time to confront Ayesha about it –

because I don't do confrontations and she was avoiding me even more than usual. When I finally did find her after staking out the cloakroom, she'd stood there with her arms folded and a bored look on her face as I read her the riot act. Actually the riot act had consisted of me whimpering, 'How could you? With Jack? Why would you do that when you know how I felt about him?'

Ayesha didn't say anything until I'd got so swept up in my 'How could yous?' that I started to cry. Then she'd given me this look that wasn't so much unkind as pitying. 'You're so wet, you're practically dripping,' she'd said coolly. 'You make up all this stupid shit and because you have no life, you actually start believing it's true. Well, it's not and Jack was never your boyfriend and he was a crap snog anyway.'

'Why would you say that to me?' I'd implored her. 'Why are you being like this? You're meant to be my best friend.'

'For fuck's sake, Bea, when are you going to get it into your thick head that I'm not your friend any more?' Ayesha had all but howled. 'You act like a twelve-year-old; a really boring twelve-year-old with the same boring hair you had when you were twelve – and I can't stand it!'

It had been the single worst moment of my life to date. The pain just ripped right through me so it was all I could do to catch my breath. Ayesha and I had been friends since nursery school and the fourteen years we'd spent with our lives entwined meant nothing to her. Wasn't worth fighting for, wasn't worth saving, because I'd stopped being her friend and had turned into an embarrassment.

At least I hadn't made even more of a fool of myself by

begging Ayesha to rethink my role in her life. I'd just walked out of the cloakroom without a word and we hadn't exchanged so much as a friendly glance since. But now here I was with Ayesha in Maccy D's when I should have just told her to take a hike as soon I saw her outside Wilson's. Maybe even thrown in a few swears.

'I don't make up silly stories,' I informed Ayesha haughtily. 'It's called having a rich inner life.'

'It's the only life you've got,' Ayesha said mockingly. 'Christ! Get angry with me! Call me out for being a heinous bitch but don't just sit there with your lip wobbling, Bea.'

It took every ounce of strength I possessed to will my mouth to stay still. 'We've already established that you don't like me so why did you suddenly think it was a good idea to meet for lunch?'

Ayesha shrugged one of her elegant, careless shrugs that was designed to make her long black hair ripple under the fluorescent lights and her breasts gave this amazing shimmy that made the harried dad at the next table turn to stare. 'I do like you,' she insisted. 'But you drive me mad. You're so . . . so . . . what's the word?'

I waited with anticipation to hear this wondrous word that summed up everything that was wrong with me.

'Passive,' Ruth piped up. 'You just go with the flow, even if the flow isn't the direction you want to go in.'

Ayesha nodded and it was funny (funny peculiar, not funny ha ha) that the two of them could only get on when they were putting me down.

I stood up and looked at a spot somewhere above their heads. 'I have to go now,' I said in a voice that I hoped resonated with quiet dignity. 'I have to get Mr Wilson a sandwich and maybe down some bottles of cider before I get back to work. Would that be age-appropriate enough for you?'

'You've can't even do a snappy putdown,' Ayesha sighed. 'Look, I'll see you Monday, unless you're free tomorrow. There's this club that starts at three in Camden.'

'I can't,' I muttered. 'I'm going to Pilates with my grandma.'

There was nothing either of them could say that would make me feel any worse. Because I didn't have a life, I was boring. Everything about me was boring. I even had the world's most boring bra size, 34B. But the thing was that I didn't want to do what other girls my age did, which was get drunk, get off with boys and get in trouble with their parents. I mean, what was the point? All you ended up with was a hangover, lovebites and no allowance.

Feeling weighed down by the halo above my head, which was practically glowing with goodness, I tried to walk out of Maccy D's with my head up.

Later that night, as I ignored the whimpers coming from the baby monitor (Alfie always grouses himself to sleep) and forced myself to eat my steak really rare like a proper French person, Ayesha's words echoed around my head.

I was at home on a Saturday night because I had nothing

else to do and even if the offers had come flying in and there were a steady stream of boys wanting to mark my dance card, my mum would never let me leave the house. Not without a chastity belt and a 9.30 p.m. curfew.

I had to face facts; I sucked at being a teenager.

Having to confront my extreme suckitude and how I was so very made of fail put a damper on the rest of the weekend. On Sundays I go to Pilates with Grandma Minor, then we go to Grandma Major's house for Sunday lunch, like we always do. She's Grandma Minor's mum. Before James and the twins arrived, we were a very girly clan.

'You come from a family of strong women,' Grandma Major always says, because she drove an ambulance during the Second World War and Grandma Minor was a student activist in the Sixties and marched to ban the bomb. And Mum still managed to get a degree with me in tow so I guess she qualifies. I'm still waiting for my strong-woman gene to kick in.

'It's not like you to have such a gloomy expression on your face,' Grandma Minor said as I morosely peeled potatoes like the good girl I was. 'What's the matter?'

'Nothing,' I said, because how could I tell her that I wasn't meant to be helping with lunch but doing cool Sunday afternoon things like going round Camden Market or looking for vintage dresses at jumble sales or watching subtitled foreign films at independent cinemas or drinking black coffee and reading dog-eared Penguin paperbacks in small cafés that sold home-made cakes, and generally

hanging out with arty, interesting people with really good hair and eclectic outfits who would never waste their Sundays topping and tailing Brussels sprouts, which I moved on to once I finished the potatoes.

'Oh, darling, don't be a sulky teenager,' Grandma Minor drawled, sharing an amused glance with Grandma Major, who was directing the proceedings from her spot at the kitchen table. 'It's so predictable. We expect more from you.'

'I'm not!' I protested. 'I just feel like, I don't know, I'm not living up to my full potential.'

'Plenty of time for that,' Grandma Major decreed. 'You should enjoy being young while you can. No responsibility, no pressure, no expectations.'

She had to be kidding me. I slanted my gaze through the serving hatch to the living room where Mum was playing with the twins and probably thinking up new ways to load me up with responsibility, pressure and expectations. She'd already told the grandmas that she was going to have an interview with my headmistress about my Oxbridge entry. Though she didn't need to bother as it was going to be a very short interview.

'Hey, I get my fair share of pressure,' I said feelingly, but they both laughed.

Then Grandma Major got down her copy of *The Art of French Cooking* and asked me if I felt up to tackling a chocolate mousse, or *pot au chocolat*, and as diversions went that one was a winner.