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Opening extract from

Paparazzi Princess

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Chapter One

Paparazzi

'Are they *always* there, Jess?' asked Meg as we approached Number 1, Porchester Park and saw a bunch of paparazzi gathered outside.

I was walking home from school with my friends, Pia, Meg and Flo. Pretty normal. Apart from the fact that home was *the* flashiest apartment block in town.

'Not always,' I replied. 'It's usually when they've got wind of a celebrity moving in or an A-lister guest visiting one of the residents. Last week, Will Smith was in town and he came to see Alisha's dad.'

To my left, I noticed that Pia had whipped her make-up bag out of her rucksack and was busy applying brick-coloured lippie. Next to her, Flo had shaken her long blonde hair out of its ponytail. Both of them were probably hoping they'd get their photos taken. *No chance,* I thought as they struck a model-like pose – hand on hip, bottom out.

A moment later, when Pia saw that no-one was taking any notice, she crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue out. I knew she was wasting her time trying to get their attention. I wasn't even going to bother untying my hair, although it did look better loose around my shoulders. The paparazzi know who's somebody and who's nobody and four teenagers like Pia, Meg, Flo and me, in our black-and-white school uniforms and coats buttoned up against the bitter December wind, weren't going to cut it, no matter *what* pose Flo struck or daft face Pia pulled.

'*Will Smith*?' said Flo. 'Cool. Did you or Pia see him?'

Pia ran her fingers through her short dark hair to give it more height on top then checked the gathered journalists and photographers again to see if any of them had noticed her yet. They hadn't.

'No,' she said. 'We were at school. Hey, Jess, I reckon we should get in with the paparazzi and ask them to tip us off when they hear that someone fab is on their way.'

'Yeah, right, like *that's* going to happen,' I said. 'Anyway, you know we're not meant to talk to them. Come on, let's get inside. It's freezing out here.'

Pia and I live at Porchester Park. Not in the posh bit where the rich people live, but in the staff area, which is to the side. My dad's the general manager and Pia's mum runs the spa. Both jobs come with a house, though they're nothing fancy, just a bunch of new builds in a mews.

Flo gazed up at the tall apartment block and sighed. 'You guys are so lucky to live here,' she said, with a dreamy look in her big grey eyes. 'The poshest, most amazing address in London with the most glamorous people in the world in and out the door every single day.'

Number 1, Porchester Park didn't look much from the outside: a tall heap of concrete and glass with an elegant forecourt - pretty much like any five star hotel or apartment block in the city. However, I'd seen inside of some of the apartments and knew what treasures were hidden there: paintings worth millions, rare artefacts from all over the world, lavish marble interiors, gorgeous antiques from foreign palaces, designer kitchens that opened out onto vast terraces, bathrooms as big as the whole ground floor of my house, enormous dressing rooms, even a security system designed by the SAS.

Most of the apartments have breathtaking views over London and, on the top floors, it feels like you're up in the clouds. Some of the apartments are awesome, others I thought were crass - like bling city - even so, all of them cost loads of money - one resident even had a room used exclusively for their staff to wrap presents! Another has a copy of one of the paintings from the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican on their ceiling. Dad had told me that the cheapest apartment went for twenty mill and the penthouses at the top as much as ninety.

Flo was right. It *was* the poshest address in London, no doubt about it, with residents made up of international celebrities, royalty, wealthy businessmen, their families and personal staff.

'It's not how you'd imagine,' I said, 'not for Pia and me anyway. It's like living just on the edge of wonderland, isn't it, P? We know that this incredible world exists a short distance away but you have to have a magic password to get in.'

'That magic password being ker-*ching:* millions and trillions,' Pia added. 'Our ten quid pocket money isn't quite in the same league.'

'Understatement,' I said.

'It sounds like Narnia,' said Flo. 'Remember those books where the characters fall through the back of a wardrobe into a magic land?'

I laughed. 'Yeah but the people living in the wonderland here are real, not fairies.' It was typical of Flo to have thought of the Narnia books. She loved fantasy and romanticised any situation.

I had mixed feelings about the place. I'd been living at Porchester Park for a few months now and Pia had moved in a few weeks ago. My first weeks here were well mis. I'd had such great expectations of how it was going to be: how I'd be rocketed into a new life and be moving and grooving with the rich and famous. Ha ha. I'd soon found out that it wasn't like that. It was one set of rules for them and another for us, all dictated by the American director, Mr Knight. For instance: staff and family members can't use the spa, can't talk to the paparazzi, can't use the front entrance, can't keep pets. For the first time in my life, I'd felt inferior, poor and out of place. It was weird. Stuff I'd never felt before. Confused.com, that was me. I'd wanted to leave after a few weeks and

go back to my gran's, which was safe and familiar, especially when I was told that I couldn't keep my cat, Dave. That was the last straw. Luckily things changed. The lady running the spa quit and Pia's mum was offered the job and the house that went with it. Hey presto, my best mate in the world was there with me. And I did a deal with a Japanese family in one of the apartments which made it possible to keep Dave. They wanted me to look after their cats when they were away – so, in return, I'd asked that they adopt Dave on paper to keep Um Big Boss Mr Knight happy, so he wouldn't know Dave was a staff pet but he could still live with me. It felt like someone had waved a magic wand. Suddenly I didn't feel so alone. Life at Porchester Park seemed do-able.

'*Why* can't you talk to them?' asked Meg. I noticed that she hadn't bothered to glam up for the photographers. Her attitude was - take me as I am. Lucky for her, she could get away with it. She's pretty, with a heart-shaped face and layered shoulder-length blonde hair which looks highlighted even though it isn't. She looked good whatever she wore even though she was a tomboy at heart and not into fashion and girlie stuff like the rest of us.

'Dad said I mustn't. *We* mustn't. None of the staff or their relatives can gab about what goes on. The residents want, *insist on*, privacy. They'd hate it if anyone let something slip about their lives.'

'Sometimes the paparazzi offer loads of money,' said Pia, 'just to hear about what celebs eat for breakfast or what colour their bathroom is or even what's in their rubbish. Henry told me he'd heard that one journalist regularly went through celebrities' bins looking for details of their lifestyle.'

'Ew, gross,' said Flo.

Henry lived at Porchester Park too and had recently become Pia's boyfriend, as in proper with regular dates and hanging out at each other's houses. His dad looked after the fleet of fab cars in the underground car park and they also lived in one of the staff houses. He and Pia made a cute couple. Henry's dark and stocky with a square handsome face. Pia's got dark hair too, but she's small and pretty with a wide mouth that always seems to be smiling. They look good together, plus both of them are cheeky with a mad sense of humour.

It was still early days for them, though, as it was for me with the two boys I liked. Number one being JJ, who was Jefferson Lewis's son, and number two, Tom, who was in the sixth form at my school. Tom and I had had a couple of kisses and he always flirted when he saw me so maybe it was time to take it further. Or was it? I liked JJ too. We'd only hung out a few times, no kisses yet but I sensed that he liked me. Two boys, both Hunky McDunky, and they were adding to my confused state of mind. Questions whirled around in my head. Which one? Were either of them even interested? How to read the signs they put out? Were they even signs they liked me – or just part of their natural charm? I didn't know. I'd realised recently that I was rubbish at reading boys.

They were an alien species with a language all of their own. I certainly wasn't an expert, which is why I had come up with an ingenious plan to wise up. I was going to put it to the girls later and see what they thought…

At the front of Porchester Park, I noticed that the doorman, Yoram, had clocked us. He's Israeli, an ex-soldier and not to be messed with. He's not very friendly, unlike his counterpart, Didier, who works the other shifts and is a lovely, handsome French man. Didier is ex-army too but he's *charmant* and treats me like I'm a person, not a speck of dirt to be brushed away. Yoram caught my eye, glanced over at the paparazzi, then back at me. He jerked his thumb in the direction of the staff entrance round the side then brushed an imaginary speck off his immaculate black suit. I felt he was saying that I was that speck, out of place. I got the message. Don't hang around here, move on or else. Four girls looking like they'd just escaped from St Trinian's probably didn't give the right image for the front of the apartment block, where the usual people who came and went were dressed in Chanel, Armani, Prada or some other knobby designer, and were getting in and out of limos with blacked-out windows, rarely arriving on foot.

'We'd better go inside,' I said, 'or He Who Must Be Obeyed will have us shot at dawn.'

Pia glanced over at Yoram. She gave him a cheeky grin and a thumbs-up. 'All right, Yo man?' she called. He glared back at her. 'I'll take that as a yes, then.'

She knew not to push it and linked arms with Flo and Meg, and together we trooped around to the side entrance. I took one last glance at the paparazzi. I felt sorry for them some days as they could be there for hours and on a day like this, they must be well freezing. Some of them knew my name but most days, they ignored me. Today, however, one of them, a short dark-haired woman with a square face, waved. Her name was Bridget O'Reilly. She'd tried to be all pally one evening last week when I was coming back from school. I didn't buy it. Dad had warned me that some of them might try and act like my friend in order to get secrets out of me about Porchester Park. I'd decided that I'd say hi if any of them spoke to me but I wouldn't give anything away.

As I waved back to Bridget, I noticed that there was someone at the back I hadn't seen before. A young handsome man with dark hair was standing slightly apart from the rest of the group and when he saw me looking at him, he pulled up the collar on his mac and turned away.

'Hey Pia,' I said. 'Have you seen that guy over there?'

By the time she turned to look, he'd disappeared.

'Who? Where?' she asked as she looked around.

'Oh, just a journalist I haven't seen before. Cuter than the rest,' I replied.

Hmm, curious, I thought as we reached the side gate. *He hardly looks old enough to be a journalist - maybe he's a student on work experience or maybe… a stalker or kidnapper! But if so, who's he after?*