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Chapter One

New arrival

'I wonder who it is,' I said to Pia, as we stood huddled in our coats and scarves round the back of Number 1, Porchester Park and watched a ton of gilt furniture being carried to the lift inside. We'd just returned from school and when we saw the trucks, we thought we go round and have a nose about instead of heading straight home. It was a cold February afternoon and a new resident was moving in. All very hush hush. I'd tried to get it out of Dad. He'd know exactly who it was, seeing as he was general manager of the place but, as usual, when it came to the residents, he was giving nothing away.

'They've got exotic taste, that's for sure,' said Pia, as the removal men carried a velvet leopard print chaise longue past while other men struggled by with a giant marble pillar. 'Footballer's Wives meets Hollywood. Very *Hello* magazine. You must have *some* idea, Jess.'

I shook my head. 'Nada. Honest. I'm not sure that Dad trusts me not to blab to someone I shouldn't.'

'Text Alisha. She might know.'

'Good idea,' I said. I got out my phone and sent a message. Alisha is the daughter of Afro-American actor, Jefferson Lewis. She lives in one of the penthouse suites at the top of Porchester Park and is our mate.

She replied instantly: Come up. She's home schooled so is often longing for a bit of company around this time of day.

'Did your dad tell you anything?' asked Pia as we made our way back to the staff area then headed into the resident's part, where we stood for a moment to let the security camera scan our irises before the door opened to let us through. The type of people who live here are hot on security, so the whole system was designed by the SAS - bullet-proof windows and all.

‘You know what Dad’s like. I just overheard the end of a conversation and he was saying we could expect the paparazzi to be camped outside for a while when she arrives.’

‘Ah. So we know the new resident is a she!’ said Pia

‘That’s true. No doubt we’ll find out who soon enough.’

We crossed the marble floored reception and gave Grace at the desk a wave. She nodded back. She never questioned where we were going anymore. Everyone who worked at Number 1 knew that Pia and I were friends with Alisha. As Pia pressed the lift button, I had a look at the flower display on the centre table today. Tall white orchids. Very elegant and, as always, the air smelt perfumed from the Jo Malone wild fig and cassis candles that were constantly burning there.

The lift doors swished opened to let us into the mirrored interior. Pia grimaced at her reflection as we stepped inside and pressed the button for the penthouse suite.

‘I look so pale,’ she said. ‘I think I’ll get a spray tan.’

‘Me too. Whiter than white,’ I said. It wasn’t surprising. The temperature outside was below zero and had been for some days. It had even snowed yesterday, though it hadn’t stayed on the ground.

I pulled out my plait so my hair was loose and Pia applied some berry lip-gloss. We always feel we need to make an effort when we go up to the Lewises. It’s so glamorous up there: the family, the apartment, the air. I’m not kidding, even the air smells expensive. I find it hard sometimes, the ‘us and them’ situation, upstairs-downstairs. The type of people who live in the apartments are seriously rich. They have to be as the apartments start at nineteen million pounds and go up to a hundred and fifty. I live with my dad, my brother Charlie and my cat Dave in one of the five mews houses for staff, which are sited round the back. They’re nothing special. Modern houses, clean and light with Ikea furniture. Pia lives in one of them too - her mum runs the spa at Porchester Park. We’ve made the most of our rooms, mine’s turquoise and deep lavender and Pia’s is done in Indian colours: bright pink, orange and red, but they’re nothing compared to the apartments upstairs where they don’t have art prints framed on the wall, they have

original paintings by grand masters and the decorators' bills alone could buy our mews house about ten times over. Our lifestyles are so different. Like Pia and I get fifteen quid pocket money a week, while Alisha has three credit cards and permission to spend. She dresses in Tommy Hilfiger and Prada, while Pia and I can barely afford Topshop. Alisha has her curly shoulder length hair blow-dried to a shiny gloss every day. Pia and I sometimes have to cut each other's hair because we're so broke. We travel on the bus, Alisha goes by limo. We get on, though. We do. Even though she's from a rich family, mates are very important to her. Just some days it gets to me - the A-lister lifestyle and all that goes with it seems way out of my league and my life so ordinary in comparison.

'What's up?' asked Pia.

'Nothing. Why?'

'You've got that look on your face, like you're worried about something.'

'No. OK, yes. OK, I don't know.'

Pia laughed. 'So that's clear, then.'

I could never keep anything hidden from Pia, partly because I'm one of those unlucky people who doesn't seem able to disguise what I'm feeling - everything shows on my face - but Pia can also read me. We've been friends so long we can finish each other's sentences and often know what the other is thinking.

'Is it JJ?' Pia asked. 'Or Alexei, or Tom?"

The boys in my life.

JJ is Alisha's older, well fit, handsome, lovely brother. A hunky mcdunky. I used to think I was in with a chance with him but lately I'm not sure. As I've got to know him and the whole Lewis family better, I've had more chances to observe him and I can see that he's charming to everyone. We swim together two nights a week in the spa and I'd been hoping that something might happen but when we've done our lengths, he leaves me to go and shower upstairs. Probably a good thing because wet hair dripping down my back is *not* my best look.

Alexei is new to Porchester Park. His family moved in a few weeks ago. He's heart-stoppingly beautiful, blond and perfect. He's cool, too. He wants to meet people his own age so asked me if I could introduce him to my friends. I'm not sure how I feel about him yet. Starstruck, mainly, as he really is gorgeous and although he's not a star, he has the charisma of one. I've spoken to him a few times and, like JJ, he's very charming and polite. I'm not sure he's the One for me, though, as I don't get the same rush when he looks into my eyes as I do when JJ does, but I've not ruled him out because sometimes love grows.

And, lastly, Tom. He's in the sixth form and is the school babe magnet. He's about as opposite as you could get in looks to JJ, who always looks neat, like he's just stepped out of a shower, his hair short, his dress style casual but preppy smart. Tom's look is dishevelled with unkempt longish hair like he's just rolled out of bed - and he dresses like he's picked his clothes up off the floor - but he's sexy as hell. He could have anyone he wanted and he knows it, he loves to flirt and doesn't do commitment. After a few close encounters of the snogging kind, he's doing my head in. Lately, due to my confidence collapse (only a quarter of which I'd confessed to Pia, in case I got a lecture), I felt it was never going to happen with him. It seems to be going that way with everyone I like. I'm sure it's because I'm ordinary, ordinary, ordinary, bland, bland, bland, boring, boring. I even bore *myself* some days.

'I guess,' I replied. 'I mean, look at me, Pia. Why would boys like JJ or Alexei even give me a second chance?'

'Because you're fun to hang out with and you're stunning.'

I glanced at my reflection as the lift reached the Lewises floor. I saw a tall girl with chestnut-brown hair and blue eyes. Average build, average looks. Ordinary. *Not* stunning.

'No, I'm not. You're the pretty one.'

Pia slapped me lightly on the arm. 'You're so down on yourself. Stop it!'

‘Bleurgh,’ I groaned and pulled my tongue out at myself as we stepped out of the lift.

Pia missed the self doubt gene when they were handing out personalities, whereas I got a double helping. She always gives me a telling off if I’m negative about myself but I’m right about one thing, she *is* the pretty one – small, curvy, with dark hair and a face that’s full of life and mischief. She has a great sense of style too – a bit vintage with strong colours and big accessories that I’d never wear – like the huge amber fly ring she’s wearing today. All my friends have their own style: Flo is willowy and tall, a romantic dreamer who dresses in soft pastels and floaty clothes, like a Pre-Raphaelite princess and Meg always wears great tailored clothes with a military slant. I’m the ordinary one. I dress in jeans and T-shirts - all perfectly acceptable but I don’t have my own look that stands out from the crowd like they all do.

Alisha was waiting for us when we got up to the penthouse. She looked fabulous in perfect fitting jeans, a red top and red Converse. Even she had her own look, although her clothes weren’t that different from mine, they just fitted better and were in the best fabrics - cashmere or silk - so looked expensive.

‘Hey peeps,’ she said, as she closed the door behind us.

‘Hey peeps,’ we replied in fake American accents. She laughed and led us towards the kitchen where their housekeeper, Marguerite, was preparing mango smoothies. She knew they were our favourite. I settled myself on a stool at the black granite breakfast bar. The Lewises kitchen is as big as the ground floor of our house with an amazing view of Hyde Park through floor to ceiling windows. Everything in there is scaled up: a huge American fridge with a range of fresh juices from cranberry to elderflower, a cooker big enough to cook for an army on, a long glass dining table that could seat twelve and sofas round a coffee table with an enormous TV screen in the wall at the far end. The first time I saw it, I was awestruck, but now I feel quite at home. I like the whole apartment. No doubt the décor is all mega expensive but it’s homely too and there’s always something yummy-smelling baking. I’ve seen a few of the other apartments at Porchester Park and some of them have an unlived-in feel, all cold marble

and empty gleaming surfaces, but the Lewis style is chic and comfy, with cushions, books, artefacts, big abstract paintings and rugs everywhere.

Once the drinks were in front of us, the housekeeper made herself scarce and we could talk.

‘So, what’s new, guys?’ Alisha asked. ‘What’s the goss from school?’

Pia shrugged. ‘Same ole from the teachers: Boring. Boring. Important year. Exams. Work harder. Tons of homework. Yada yada yada.’

‘Any sign of Tom?’ asked Alisha.

I shook my head. ‘I see him around but he’s keeping himself distant.’

‘Ah, the dance,’ said Alisha.

‘What dance?’

‘You show you’re interested in a boy, he steps back. You cool off like you don’t care, he steps forward.’

‘Sounds about right. Time to dance backwards.’ I got off the stool and did a backwards moonwalk and almost fell over the coffee table. Alisha and Pia laughed. ‘Seriously, though, I think that if I’m to be in with a chance with any boy I like then I need to do something to stand out from the crowd.’

Pia drained her drink. ‘You do stand out,’ she said. Ever my champion. ‘Doesn’t she, Alisha?’

Alisha looked doubtful.

‘See, even Alisha agrees with me,’ I said.

‘No, I don’t,’ said Alisha, ‘but I see where you’re coming from. You’re good-looking, yeah, but sometimes that’s not enough for a boy.’

‘Make ‘em laugh, that’s what I say,’ said Pia.

‘Yeah but *with* you, not at you,’ I said.

‘Basically it’s chemistry, I reckon,’ said Alisha. ‘The spark’s either there or not.’

I’m not so sure. There’s a spark there with Tom. Definitely. I know he’s felt it too. He just doesn’t want a relationship. I’ve felt a spark with JJ too but, so far, he’s made no move to take it further. And Alexei’s hard to read. There’s not exactly a spark with him but he’s the one who seems the most interested and acts like he wants to see more of me. Thing is, he always asks about my friends and says how he’d like to meet them. I’m not sure if I’m just a ticket to meet other girls and that’s why he’s being nice. I know from Alisha that it can be hard for the teen residents at Porchester Park to meet people. Like her and JJ, so many of them are home-schooled they don’t get the school interaction that Pia and I do. So, there they are. JJ. Tom. Alexei. Three high flyers in their own ways. And then there’s me. Jess Hall. An ordinary teen. A school girl and swimming champion, but that doesn’t exactly make me hot. I often ask myself why I can’t fall for one of the ordinary boys at school, maybe one of my classmates or a boy in the next year up. They’re not out of my league. I’ve seen a few of them checking me out, like Adrian Neilson in year eleven. Why can’t I fall for him? Because he smells of stale socks and old cheese, that’s why. No. My love arrow seems to be aiming high and I need to do something to raise myself out of the realms of the average.

‘And, anyway, I thought you liked my brother,’ said Alisha.

‘I do but—’

‘Hey, Alisha, do you know who’s moving in yet?’ asked Pia, as she finished her drink. I think she sensed we were getting into a sensitive area, because with JJ being so close to Alisha, I hadn’t told her the full story about how I really felt – not that I was totally clear about it myself!

‘I do,’ Alisha replied.

‘And?’

Alisha grinned. ‘Guess.’

Pia sighed impatiently. ‘I don’t know. The Queen. Madonna. Posh Spice. It’s Posh, isn’t it?’

Alisha looked at me. ‘You want to guess?’

‘Er… a woman?’

Alisha nodded.

‘An actress?’

‘Maybe. I think she’s done a bit of acting as well as other things.’

‘Oh just *tell* us, Alisha,’ said Pia. ‘Stop doing the X-factor judge act on us.’

‘OK. She arrives this evening. And it’s… Tanisha.’

‘No way! Tanisha! Tanisha as in *the* Tanisha?’ I gasped.

Alisha nodded. ‘Tanisha.’

Ohmigod! Only the biggest best most famous awesome stunning pop diva in the entire world. I loved her. I loved her music. I’d had posters of her on my wall when I lived at Gran’s. And she was coming to live at Porchester Park! I might get to see her going in and out. I might even get to meet her. Suddenly it didn’t matter about JJ or Tom or Alexei. I was going to be living in close proximity to one of my all-time idols.