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PROLOGUE

Have you ever thought you might have a secret best friend? One that no one else can see? *Really*, you have? Let me ask you this then—are you mad? Seriously, think about it, it *is* a bit crazy, isn't it? Having a best friend that only *you* can see. That only happens when you're four and bored with playing Barbies on your own and Ken just doesn't cut the mustard any more. But when you get to my age, (thirteen in case you are wondering), it just gets a bit too beardy-weirdy as Mum would say (about the man in the health-food shop. Yes, he has a beard and yes he is a bit weird and yes he talks about crystals and stuff). So if you ever find yourself in a tricky situation like me, with an actual virtual best friend, or to be more precise a dead best friend, don't call for the men in white coats. Because what you may be experiencing, dear reader, is not the total breakdown of your one-celled brain, but, in fact, your very own angel . . .



EMBARRASSING DISCO ANTICS

SEPTEMBER

'No one is going to turn up,' I wailed to Emily who was leaning sideways on the range cooker in the kitchen filing her nails and looking at me like I was a specimen in a Petri dish. 'It's going to be the biggest flop since chocolate radiators.'

'What on earth are you talking about, you muppet. Of course people will turn up. It's Us. We have good parties!'

She was right; every party I can remember since I had a memory, so about aged three, we've had joint spectacular birthday parties. Admittedly, they were really for the grown-ups so that they could get drunk and cry about how their babies were growing up too fast and then all

be in a hideous grump the next day complaining that the TV was too loud, or whatever. As the years went on, it was expected that we, Emily and I, would continue with the joint parties and that they would be a total laugh, for the kids and grown-ups alike. Dad used to be a DJ back in the day (now has a much more sober job in IT) and Mum is a fashion stylist, though she doesn't do it so much more now, she helps out in Marisa's shop (Marisa is Emily's mum who owns The Brown Bag, an über-cool clothes shop on the high street with a cappuccino machine in it for peeps browsing the racks). This year it was our turn to host the party and as luck would have it, the weather was a blazing Indian summer haze one week into the autumn term at school. Dad had set his decks up in the garden—he played things called vinyl! Now whoever heard of that? Old skool or what!!! iPod who? For someone who works in technology he has a funny way of keeping up with the times. 'Darling—an iPod is all very well, but real music is better when it crackles and jumps a bit and you have to actually put the needle on the record. It's a ritual.' He's a bit mad, my dad. Ritual? Just plug the iPod in and you're away.

'Aha, I've just got it,' Emily looked triumphantly at me and waved her emery board in my face nearly taking my eye out.

'Got what?'

'Why you're so bothered about the fact that no one will come.'

'Enlighten me,' I said twiddling with my gold heart-shaped pendant round my neck; Emily had a matching one. On one side it had our names engraved and on the back it said Friends Forever. We had given them to each other for this year's birthday. I loved them. So far, I had worn mine at every given opportunity (apart from at school; jewellery was banned).

'It's because Jake's going to be coming.' Whoosh, someone set my face on fire and now it was hot enough to BBQ on. Ouch! Step away from the flames, Gaby Richards.

'Nooooo! It's not because of that; I just think this year people might not come.' I wasn't even convincing myself.

'Whatever, you ain't kidding me, honey!' Emily drawled in a fake American accent. She always did the fake accent when she knew I was on a great cover up scheme. And, yes, I was a bit bothered because Jake was coming. But I didn't want to say it out loud; the minute you say stuff out loud, it's real and when it's real, that's when it can come back to haunt you. Deny, deny deny—that's my motto!

So . . . Jake. You want me to explain, huh? Okey-dokey—but he's just a *boy*. He's not really *that* important. Let's start with Emily first. Emily and I have been best friends since we were bumps at our mums' ante-natal classes. They used to go out and eat cake and then when we came along they ate even more cake (according to them to stop themselves from going mad looking after babies). Lucky for us we actually liked each other or it would have been one of those awkward friendships where you have to get on because your mums are friends. Those type of friends *suck*! Mum tried to make me like her friend Lucy's little girl, Emma, but Emma always used to poke me in the eye when Mum wasn't looking and spit in my juice or snatch toys. Oh, and her favourite ploy was to smile and say she liked me when I left and would I come again—all the while pulling faces at me as I walked out of the door. Mum and Lucy don't see each other any more and I'd be surprised if Emma has any friends at all!

Anyway, blahing on again (Emily says I could talk at the Olympics and win Gold, Silver, and Bronze as no one would come near to beating me). You think? Gosh so, yeah, Em and I are BFFs (Best Friends Forever if you are clueless and live in a cave). Emily is your basic nightmare as a best friend. She is the Pretty One. I am

the . . . now, what am I? The Chatty One with the Big Ears? Yes, but that makes me sound like I would have to be Shrek and to make up for it I have a motor mouth. The Funny One with the Big Ears? I can tell a few jokes, but to be honest, humour is not my forte. I am the One With the Glass Eye, and the Big Ears. That one is a lie of course. I am the . . . the . . . er . . . Quirky One. Yes, I like that. And as you may have guessed, I have a bit of a phobia about my ears.

So, triple medal winner in blahing on and still no nearer to knowing who Jake is. With Emily being Emily, the Pretty One, I don't stand any chance of bagging a second look from most boys in our class. Or do I? And really, are there any worth getting a second look from? Most boys are, in my humble opinion, wooden like Pinocchio. So dull dull dull. And Real Boys only exist in the years above or on the telly.

After the summer hols some of the boys had their strings cut, according to Emily, i.e. turned into Real Boys. And one of those previous Pinocchios had been Jake. It's amazing what a bit of sunshine, ten centimetres, and a trendy haircut can do for a puppet. Why, Jake, you are a Real Boy! And that's when it hit me, that maybe I liked him. Noooooo! I prided myself on *never* liking anyone that might be vaguely attainable. So pop

stars, older boys, and even (don't repeat this) someone from a children's TV programme when I was younger!

And after noticing Jake was a Real Boy, Emily saw that I couldn't even look at him and invited him and Robbie (his best friend and total admirer of Emily) to our birthday party without even asking me. We usually only have girls. 'It's about time we branched out, Gabs. We've been at Heathside a year now, it's not baby school. Boys are part of our lives whether you like it or not.' Why???????? I liked it when it was all Pinocchios and liking people you couldn't have. Why did we have to go up a gear? The two boys asked if they could bring friends, so of course I said no and Em said yes. 'They need to have friends, Gabs. Boys are like dogs—they travel in packs and if they feel out of their comfort zone, they're boring. They need playmates, or we'll have to babysit them and I'm not doing that at our party.' Fair point, I suppose.

'Next you'll be saying you invited Alexandra Bennett!'

'Oh dear, I have, would that be so terrible?'

'Argh! You're impossible, I can't bear her, she'll walk round the house with her coolometer measuring how trendy my house is and then only manage to give a compliment about anything when it's really meant as

an insult, and then walk off smiling like she's queen bee. Noooooooo!'

Emily was laughing now. 'Of course I haven't invited her, you muppet, she's a total cow. Calm down and put your eyes back in—they're all bulgy and mad!'

As you guessed, Alexandra Bennett drives me mad. I can't bear insults in disguise—it's so confusing! If you want to be horrible, just be horrible, don't pretend to be nice and then stick the knife in. She is the year trendsetter and possessor of all-round knowledge on what's hot and what's not, her and her pack of mates (Kool Aids as we call them). Handy with free-flying fake niceness. Yuck!

So, here we are and no one has turned up and I am pacing the floor while Mum and Marisa knock back the wine and empty nachos into stylish ceramic bowls and scrape posh dips into ramekins so it all looks just so. That's the trouble with having mums who are into fashion; every event is like a magazine shoot!

Fast forward to an hour later and the house is heaving, the russet autumn garden is getting trampled by everyone and Dad is on the decks doing embarrassing hands-in-the air moves to some old tunes only the grown-ups know. 'Dad, can you ditch the rave music—can we have Abba?' so he digs around and produces it. All the girls from school hit the floor (or should I say

chewed-up lawn) while the boys lurk on the patio trying not to stare at Emily and failing, cos she looks so cool in her little baby-blue jumpsuit showing off her tanned legs and tossing her mane of golden hair. If she wasn't my best friend I would hate her!

It was weird having boys at the party—I wasn't sure I liked it. And I disliked it even more when something very unGaby-like happened. Dad changed the tune to some dodgy old disco track, and Emily dragged Robbie up from the side of the garden where he was catching flies with his open gob looking at her, and so the first boy was on the dance floor. Robbie kept signalling like a madman to Jake with his head, jerking to the side—it was about to fall off. Jake went so red I thought his ears might start to smoke. I turned to Rosie, one of our other friends, and was about to see if she wanted to come up and dance, but she was stuffing a rather large piece of quiche into her mouth, so I turned back and Jake was standing right in front of me zapping my personal space. I jumped back and knocked into one of the mums, who spilt red wine all down her white hippie blouse thing and bashed rice salad into my hair. Brilliant. 'Sorry, really sorry,' I whimpered. She looked like she wanted to punch me one in the face, but because it was my party and I was a child, she couldn't!

'That's fine, it was an accident.' Yeah, right and you will be kicking a stone in a second pretending it's my head.

I had wine in my hair stuck to oily grains of brown rice and slimy red onion. A piece of feta cheese slid down my cheek. 'Do you want to dance?' Jake stammered. It was dripping down my neck. Hang on—what did he say?

'What?' I barked.

'Do you want to dance?' Some of the mums were nudging each other and pulling 'Bless him' faces. Oh, the shame.

'No, I've got wine and cheese in my hair.' Nice, good come-back, except you do want to dance with him.

Rosie heard him. 'I'll come. Wait a sec while I finish my quiche,' and she charmingly wolfed down the last bit and grabbed Jake's hand and dragged him into the midst of gyrating girls. How to dazzle a boy into liking you, telling him you have a cheese and wine cocktail in your hair while turning him down at a disco. Gaby, you know all the tricks . . .