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Opening extract from

Alex As Well

Written by

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THERE ARE MOMENTS in life where something happens and it changes everything forever. You make one decision, and after that you can't go back. It doesn't even have to be a big thing.

Five days ago I stopped taking my medication. I think it might be one of those decisions. How do you know? Maybe if I just start taking it again everything will go back to the way it was? I don't think so.

Five days later I'm in a shopping centre. I'm not going to tell you which one in particular. Just imagine an ordinary shopping centre that stretches out long in both directions, cinched by a four-storey car park.

I slouch into Myer. Unmedicated. I stop in the make-up section, rifling through the nail polishes on special. Alex is with me. The other Alex. I am Alex as well. We are the two Alexes. I guess that's confusing for a lot of people. Sometimes it's confusing for me too.

The girl at the Clinique counter lounges against the display, chewing gum. 'You want a makeover?' she asks. I double-

take. Yes, she's talking to me. She's all smooth. Smooth hair, smooth face, smooth clothes. This is what you would look like if you had literally been through the wringer.

'Don't worry, you don't have to buy nothing.' She smiles somewhere behind the mask of her face. I'd like to be all even the way she is.

I hesitate, because five days ago I would have thrust my hands in my pockets and scooted out of there. Instead, I steal across the floor and into the seat she has spun around for me. There's a little mirror on the counter, but it's not facing me. Through it I can see outside the door.

There is a scrolling sign in reverse:

Crockett and Carsell – Conveyancing, Wills, Succession Law

There's pop music playing. It's the Black Eyed Peas. The shoppers are bopping.

'Close your eyes,' she tells me.

The Clinique girl sets to work. She smells sweet and powdery like gardenias and floor polish. She's dabbing things on my face, finger-painting. With my eyes closed I can't tell where she is going to touch next. Her gum-breath blows on my cheeks and neck, giving me goose pimples.

'Cold, lovey?' she asks.

'I haven't had a makeover before,' I confess. I've always wanted to. But I have walked past these counters feeling like a trespasser. As if there was a sign:

PROPER GIRLS ONLY.

But it's more than that. I am all goosepimply and jittery. If I had a tail I would be swishing it.

There's a little tiny brush over my eyelids. I try not to

scrunch them.

'Look up,' she instructs.

She's putting mascara on.

'Can I tidy up your eyebrows a bit?' she asks me.

'Sure,' I say, not realising that she means she wants to tear my hairs out one by one.

My eyes water. I might be crying.

My dad left us last night. I think so, anyway. Last night I kinda thought maybe he just went out, but he didn't come back.

You know how they say to kids, *oh, it's not because of you*. Well, it is one hundred per cent because of me.

'There.' She turns the mirror towards me. 'You're naturally beautiful, but you don't have to be naturally beautiful. That's a lot of pressure. You can even out your skin tones and highlight your best bits. You don't have to go overboard. It's like airbrushing in real life.'

It's not thick make-up like a drag queen, which was what I was expecting. It's not aggressive and dark, like when I do it myself. She's made my eyelids pink and shimmery, and my lips are glossy. I press them together. It feels oily, sticky and tingly.

'It's plumping,' she explains.

You're telling me, says Alex.

I can see his face in the mirror too, a shadow in the background.

He's humming along with will.i.am.

Then the Clinique girl shifts the mirror slightly. There's a guy sitting on one of the couches outside the door. He's

about twenty. He looks bored. He's probably waiting for his girlfriend. He's brooding and carefully tousled like the vampire guy. The Clinique girl smiles at me and licks her chops. 'Luscious,' she observes.

'Mmm,' I say, smiling back, pretending to appreciate him too. Alex rolls his eyes.

'You could do something a bit more feminine with your hair. Maybe wear something with a waist. Not that I'm telling you what to do or nothing, it's just that you probably don't realise how pretty you are.'

The Clinique girl lays out the different products she has used on my face on the counter, and I buy the gloss, the mineral powder and the shimmery pink eye shadow. It's expensive, but my parents have always been quite generous with pocket money.

'You have really great bones,' she tells me, handing me my receipt.

One great bone, says Alex.

I snort because it's not a great bone, is it, Alex? No, it's just a teeny, weeny little noodle, you loser.

'Believe in you. Don't be a before picture,' she tells me, as I'm walking away.

'OK,' I say, smiling. 'Thanks.'

I bet she says that to everyone.

In the girls' toilet I braid my fringe across the front the way the girls are all doing it these days. I push my hoodie back and now I am a girlie girl. I stand there looking at my new face. I like this face. It's *my* face. I spend so much time looking at Alex's face – *his* face.

I haven't done this before. I've wanted to since as long as I can remember.

The door opens and my heart beats fast for a second. Sprung. But the woman just walks straight past and into the cubicle behind me. She doesn't even look at me.

Are you OK? I ask Alex.

He shrugs. Wanna buy something with a waist?

We go into the Miss section. A new song starts, Miley this time.

When I walk I swing my hips a little bit. Lazy. Swishing my tail. I run my fingers over the clothing. I slide the plastic coat hangers over the metal racks, digging the screech sound they make. That's the shopping sound.

I find a peasant top that laces up at the front, a halter top, a cute V-necked T-shirt with a butterfly appliquéd on the front and a short skirt. I take them into the changing room. I pull the skirt over my hips, and I try twirling it back and forth in front of the mirror. It's full and short and if I twirl fast enough Alex can see my underwear in the mirror.

I try the halter top on, but I have nothing to fill it. I try the peasant top instead, and I undo the lace,and fluff it out so there is the suggestion that there could be breasts there.

Then I look at Alex and I can tell what he is going to do next.

Don't you dare, I say to him, but he already has his hands down his pants. He is looking at me being a girlie girl in the mirror. He is glaring at the suggestion of where breasts could be. He is imagining big ones. He is staring at shimmery pink eyelids, but mostly it's the lip gloss that does it for him.

I hate it when he does this. It's so gross. It's a real boy thing to do. I say, you are breathing too loud.

He says, shut up.

I say, I found out my dad left this morning. Don't you think it's a little bit insensitive?

He looks at me and sees a hot chick – a smooth Clinique girl. I look at him and see a chimpanzee tugging on his little noodle.

His face has gone red. He says shut up and let me finish. So I pout a little, with the lip gloss on, so he can finish quicker and we can get out of here before the stink of him makes me throw up.