

KISS ME KILL ME

**By
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chapter one: be careful what you wish for

On January 1st, I made two wishes. I know it's supposed to be resolutions, but the two things I really wanted you can't exactly make happen, like you can with resolutions.

I wished to kiss Dan McAndrew. And I wished to have breasts, instead of two flat pancakes on my chest. God, how I hated it when girls would come by and flick their fingers on my back, between my shoulderblades, and laugh mockingly because there wasn't a bra fastening there, because I didn't need to wear one.

(Thinking about it, that's three wishes, really, isn't it? One kiss + two breasts = three, the magic number.)

Cut to June, nearly six months later, when I'd pretty much given up hope that I would get either of those things, *ever*. I had resigned myself to being flat-chested and unknissed for the rest of my life.

And then everything happened at once, and my life was changed. Not, I may add, for the better.

Be careful what you wish for.

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"Scarlett! Round-off, two back handsprings, back tuck! And keep it tight this time!"

I stand at the edge of the floor, bracing myself. I can do this. Ricky's halfway down, just the right place to give me a spot on the second back handspring if I need it. But if I need it, he'll shout at me afterwards.

Long and strong, Scarlett, I say to myself. Long and strong.

I'm running. Three steps to the round-off. Land and flip, jump up, jump back... my hands push the spring-loaded floor and bounce me up, feet land and I'm already jumping off my toes to the second back handspring, reaching away, reaching long... yes! No touch in the small of my back, which would be Ricky thinking I needed that tiny bit of help to arch on the second one! Land on my feet again and use the momentum to rebound up, high in the air. Spot the high bars across the room which gives me that fixed point I need to focus on for the split-second before I tuck and flip myself backwards like a ball through the air, thrown by an invisible hand. Land straight, knees not too bent, slightly

dizzy, but knowing I made it.

“Yeah!”

Across the room, Alison and Luce, my two best friends, are clapping and whooping. I beam with happiness and look at Ricky for approval.

“Better. But go a lot longer on the second back handspring,” is all he says.

That is approval, believe it or not. You don’t expect bouquets of flowers from Ricky, no matter how good you are.

And then he looks at my chest.

“Strap those things down, Scarlett, can’t you?” he adds. “They’re bouncing everywhere – they’re getting in your way when you tuck up! Jesus, where did they even *come* from?”

This is embarrassing. It’s embarrassing to have Ricky talking about my boobs.

“Get a sports bra, for God’s sake!” Ricky says, waving me away.

Like every single other girl here, I used to have a massive crush on Ricky, who’s built like a rugby player – wide shoulders, muscles bulging through his tracksuit - with thick blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a really nice smile, which you get to see, on average, once a year. Ricky’s incredible grumpiness is the reason my crush faded. And the insults he throws at us. And the fact that he’s gay. (No reason you can’t have a crush on a gay guy, of course – it just feels increasingly pointless as time goes on.)

I move to the side, giving Alison a clear run across the floor. As she starts, I walk around the edge of the gymnasium, back to where Luce is standing.

“I’m *wearing* a sports bra already,” I say. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Get one of those tops with a built-in thingy,” Luce suggests. “You know, the shelf support.”

I pull my top a little away from my body so she can see.

“I *am*,” I say hopelessly.

“Oh.”

Luce has the ideal build for gymnastics – like a wire. She’s small (you shouldn’t be over 5’5”, that would be too much of you to send spinning through the air) and has no excess fat on her entire frame. Her breasts are pretty little points under her pale blue leotard:

Luce can still wear a leotard over footless tights, because she's so lean. Most of us gave that up years ago for something a bit less cruel to our curves. She wears her hair in two twisted bunches on either side of her head – a style that's easier for gymnastics, because it keeps her hair out of her way, but makes her look even more like a little girl. Creepy old men are always giving her weird stares. But Luce is the stubbornest person I've ever met; if I suggested she change her hairstyle, she'd put plastic bobbles on her bunches and walk down the street sucking on a lollipop, just to show me.

"Maybe you should go to a sports shop and ask," she suggests.

I grimace.

"They weren't much help when I went to buy the bra," I say.

Luce looks helpless.

"I'd love to have ones like you," she says. "But I know I never will. My mum's flat as a board. The only time she had any was when she was pregnant with me, and she said she cried for weeks when they went down again."

"Better for gymnastics," I say.

"I s'pose."

"Lucy! Scarlett! Stop gossiping! Lucy, you're up!" Ricky yells.

I watch Luce precipitate herself into a blur of motion. She flies through the air, her twisted bunches spinning as she goes; in her front handsprings, she's almost perpendicular to the floor for a brief, breathtaking moment. Arms by her ears, legs almost straight out behind her. That's why we call that moment "Supergirl".

I think about what Luce said about her mum. If I had a mum, I could ask her about the sports bra thing. Maybe she would take me to the shop and talk to the snotty assistants.

In photos of my mum, she has breasts. That's what gave me hope that I would eventually get mine too. They appeared practically overnight. I pretty much woke up and there they were. It feels weird sleeping on my tummy now. I can feel them underneath me, like two airbags. And when I walk around, everyone stares at them. Plum pointed them out the first day I was brave enough to walk into school in a t-shirt that wasn't huge and baggy.

"Oh my God, look at Scarlett's boobs! She looks like a porn star! Scarlett sweetie, you might want to take that Wonderbra off, it's just a little *desperate* looking, don't you think?"

That garnered a chorus of laughter from her entourage, of course. It's more than their

life's worth not to laugh when Plum makes a sarky comment. (NB: CLAUDIA – 'SARKY' IS UK USAGE, SO IS IDIOMATIC, BUT CHANGE TO 'SNARKY' IF YOU REALLY HAVE TO...)

"Scarlett, stop daydreaming! Same again but better! I want really clean landings from you!" Ricky shouts.

One great thing about gymnastics: it is what it is. You land your back tuck somersault or you feel Ricky grabbing the back of your t-shirt, helping you rotate, bringing you safely to ground again. You work on things and you improve. Nothing changes in gymnastics: the rules are always the same. Stay tight, keep your hollow shape, go long, don't lose your nerve.

Sometimes I wish the rest of my life was like that, with a set of clear rules that, if I follow them, will keep me safe: sometimes I'm scared of things changing. Right now, it feels as if things are happening much too fast for me. I was so desperate to get my period. I was really late getting it – sixteen! That's so late! - and now I have it, I really don't like it that much. I get the munchies the week before, and that makes me put on weight, which Ricky always notices. And when he comments on it, I get much more emotional than I used to. My hips are getting wider, which isn't good for gymnastics either.

And then there's boys. A year ago, I didn't think about boys at all. St. Tabby's is an all-girls school: we don't meet any boys here. And I don't seem to meet any of them the rest of the time. Of course, there are millions of boys in London. But I hang out with Luce and Alison. Neither of them have older brothers who might bring friends round, and we don't do stuff like go clubbing or to parties.

We meet up at Luce's or Alison's and watch videos, or listen to music. Mostly Alison's, because her parents did up the basement for her, with comfy old sofas, a TV and DVD, and even a fridge so we can keep our drinks cold. It's like my home away from home, Alison's basement. (Hah. That's assuming I have a home to begin with, which I honestly don't.)

Or we go to the cinema, or to cafes, places sixteen-year-olds can hang out without spending tons of money. But we have gymnastics practice three times a week, and once on Saturday afternoons, and you get quite knackered after that. In the summer we like to go swimming in the Serpentine, a sort of lake in Hyde Park. They have a sunbathing area. And we get ice-cream.

God, we are the most boring girls in the history of the world.

Alison's mum, who's lovely, says we'll have all the time in the world for parties when we're older and at uni. She makes us popcorn (no butter, we're all careful because of Ricky) and gets in lots of low-fat yogurt ice-cream for us (ditto). But the last few months, I've been getting restless. It feels like there's more out there. A whole world to explore. And here I am, sitting on the sidelines with my two best friends, eating low-fat yogurt

and watching *Bring It On* or *Stick It* for the umpteenth time. I know there's more to life than doing gymnastics... or sitting around watching girls in Hollywood movies doing gymnastics.

Which brings me back to boys, doesn't it?

I think about them a lot. More than Alison and Luce do, I know. It used to be just giggling about the latest boy-band singer, who we fell in love with on sight and had forgotten all about six months later, by which time we'd been madly in love with three or four other pretty-faced, snarling, skinny lead singers with messy haircuts. But now I think about real boys, not ones who are safely behind glass on the TV screen.

I say "boys", but what I really mean is Dan McAndrew.

And when I think about him, I feel like I'm blushing inside.

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We have gymnastics practice after school, so it's six-thirty when we spill out from the school gates, a happy, giggling threesome. Jumping, bouncing on trampolines, throwing yourself through the air – it gives you a lot of energy. Alison, Luce and I have been training together for five years now, and that bonds you really tightly. We've seen each other through a ton of ups and downs. Floods of tears. Frustration when you keep falling on your bum. Losing at competitions. Ricky's criticisms. Feeling fat – that's me and Alison, as obviously Luce doesn't exactly have a problem in that area. (Being fat is a really, really big deal in gymnastics. They make you feel obsessed with it. If a girl puts on a few pounds, she has a weight problem. Seriously.)

Alison is bitching about her mum and her dad, who've booked a family holiday for them this August that she doesn't want to go on. I'm only listening with half an ear, because Alison hasn't talked about anything but being-trapped-in-a-villa-in-Greece-with-her-boring-cousins for the last few months, it feels like, and I could recite from memory every word of her complaint.

Luce must feel the same, because she breaks into Alison's rant, saying:

"Oh look, Princess Plum's holding court again."

We look across the road, to the park opposite our school. There, sitting on the stone steps leading up to the fountain in the center, is Plum Saybourne, the reigning princess of our school, St Tabitha's.

We dump our schoolbags on the bench outside the school gates. Alison's dad is due to pick us up and give us a lift back to Alison's, where we're going to hang out. For all her bitching about her family, Alison doesn't realize how lucky she is: they're really close. They take it for granted that Alison and her friends will come back to their house after

school – watch TV, raid the kitchen, listen to music. Luce is an only, but she's got a mum and dad who dote on her and give her anything she wants.

I'm the only one who doesn't have any of that. I have to get it at second-hand, tag onto my friends' lives. I wish I had something to give in return, but I don't.

Behind us is St. Tabby's, made of red brick trimmed with great swirls and curls of white stucco that looks from a distance like that nasty hard icing they put on old-fashioned cakes, the kind that little kids snap off and eat to get a sugar rush. It's very imposing. The first time you walk down the street and realize that this is your future school, you're over-awed and impressed at the same time. St. Tabby's looks like exactly what it is: important and expensive. It's one of the top three private schools for girls in London, and it's the one with the poshest location. Just inside the main entrance, in the big echoing marble corridor, is a series of mahogany paneling on which is etched, in gold letters, the names of all the St. Tabby's students who got into Oxford and Cambridge, the two snobbiest universities in England. Parents cough up a lot of money to send their girls to St. Tabby's because they think they'll get the best education going, and because they want them to make friends with girls from the richest, smartest, most socially-connected families.

Only... it's not as easy to make friends with girls like that as parents think. Take this geography, for example (a subject every single St. Tabby's girl dropped like a hot potato as soon as they could. Geography is Not Sexy). Here we are at Point A – the bench outside St. Tabby's, waiting for Alison's dad's Volvo to pick us up. Now look at Point B. Point B, of course, is the fountain in the small, but perfectly-groomed park across the street. St. Tabby's is in the heart of Chelsea, one of the prettiest, most expensive, most exclusive areas in London – naturally, the park is as lovingly tended as Plum Saybourne's manicured nails.

From Point A to Point B is a one-minute walk. Cross the road, go up the path, and you're there. But the distance, socially, is unmeasurable. Plum's court are everything that's cool. They're St. Tabby's Smart Set, the ones who originate the fashions that all the other girls copy. They may not be the prettiest, but they convince everyone else that they are, and that's what matters.

"I like Nadia's skirt," Luce comments.

"Nadia's thin at the moment," Alison says.

"A bit too thin," I contribute.

We both know we're saying this because we feel fat. And we both know that we're not fat, unless you interpret the word 'fat' to mean 'has a sensible layer of flesh protecting her skin from getting sliced into ribbons by her bones'. But I'm still looking at Nadia, who isn't drop-dead gorgeous, and I do see how she makes the best of herself: the makeup, the hair, the sexy, trendy little outfit that emphasizes her good points and conceals the

weaker ones. That's true of all the girls clustered round the fountain: they present themselves so well, like packages wrapped in bright shiny paper, tied up with inviting, satin bows, sprigs of flowers carefully slipped under the ribbon.

I can't help glancing at Alison, with her messy carrot ponytail, bare shiny face, and unplucked bushy red eyebrows. She's wearing a baggy sweatshirt, faded from hundreds of washings, and equally baggy sweatsuit trousers, the kind with white stripes down the side that rustle when she moves. She's a total tomboy. And then there's Luce, tiny, waiflike Luce, with her bunches that make her look barely thirteen. And me. My tracksuit trousers don't rustle, but I know they're hanging off my bum; they're so old by now that the material's all stretched. My hair's pinned back behind my ears in two tight rolls so it won't get in the way when I'm jumping and somersaulting. Not exactly sophisticated.

If we were packages, we'd be wrapped in brown paper, very battered at the corners, tied up with fraying string.

I don't think this contrast has ever hit me quite in the same way before.

"Look, there's that new girl," Alison says. "The German one."

"Sophia Von and Zu Unpronounceable," I say.

We all giggle.

"She's in Latin with me," Luce says. "Miss Hall tried to say it three times before she got it right."

"She's a countess," Alison says. "And she's rich. No wonder they snapped her up."

Being rich and titled pretty much gives you a passport to Princess Plum's inner circle.

"I heard that in Europe, if you're a count, all your children are counts and countesses," I observe. "So there are tons of them."

"Is that the same for princes and princesses?" Luce asks.

"I think so."

"Nadia's something," Alison says. "I mean, her family are posh."

"But they got chucked out, so maybe that doesn't count," Luce says.

"Yes, it does," Alison insists. "You still keep the title."

Nadia and her family had to leave Persia ages ago, when there was a revolution. It's

called Iran now. They kept all their money, though. Enough to easily make Nadia part of the inner circle.

We're all staring over at the fountain now, and the group sitting on its steps. They're all as glossy as show ponies. Polished. Their legs and hair and nails shine, reflecting the early-evening light. No pretence now between the three of us that we wouldn't give anything to be sitting there with them, laughing at their jokes. Being part of the group that gathers by the fountain most evenings, hanging out with the handsomest, richest boys from St Peter's, just down the road, is the absolute ideal of every girl at St. Tabby's.

"Plum couldn't even do one front handspring," says Luce.

"It'd mess up her hair," I chime in.

But we keep on staring wistfully, projecting ourselves in our imagination over there, sitting on the steps, looking as shiny and sleek as them – well, as some of them. Even in our imagination, none of us can compete with Plum.

"Is Nadia waving at us?" Luce says.

We turn round to see if Nadia's actually signaling to a girl behind us. But there's no one there.

"It does sort of look as if she's waving at us," says Alison, doing her best to sound bland and cool. But I know Alison so well that I can tell how excited she truly is. Her voice is actually wobbling with eagerness.

"Nah," Luce says. "She can't be."

Even Luce, the most unflappable one of our threesome, the most poised and quiet and self-composed of all of us, is getting – well, flapped by this. She's shifting from side to side restlessly, as if she's about to take off and start running across the street to the Promised Land where the Golden People sit and laugh as if they didn't have a care in the world.

Nadia is definitely waving. And there's no one else around but us: all the after-school activities have finished by now. The caretaker is coming over to lock up the gates. And somehow I don't think she's signaling at him.

"What should we *do*?" Alison says, her voice pitching higher with the strain. "Should we go over there?"

"No!" I say at once. "Think how awful it would be if it was a mistake!"

The picture of us doing the Walk Of Shame back from the Promised Land, rejected,

mocked, with Plum's laughter ringing bell-like in our ears, is so horribly vivid in all of our minds that we gulp in unison.

"Oh look – " Alison's practically squealing now – "she's standing up! "

Nadia is indeed on her feet. She smooths down her short skirt, shakes back her lush mane of blue-black hair (what I wouldn't give to be Persian) and adjusts her designer sunglasses, pushing them slightly back on her head. Her heels have got to be three inches high, and she wavers slightly on them for a moment before she catches her balance. Then she starts to pick her way down the stairs. She was sitting almost at the top – a sign of high favour. Plum gets to sit on the edge of the fountain, but then, Plum is the princess, and that's her throne.

Plum leans forward and says something to Nadia, something emphatic, by the way she's waving her hands around. Nadia nods, equally emphatically. She's at the bottom of the steps now... she's on the path... she's walking straight towards us...

"Oh my God, what do you think she wants?"

Alison is definitely squealing. There's no other way to describe it.

"Shut *up*, Alison!" Luce hisses. "Be cool!"

"Yeah," I say cynically. "They're probably just going to take the piss out of us. Nadia'll say something nasty, we'll react and then they'll all burst out laughing."

That's such a strong possibility that even Alison gets a grip on herself and calms down a bit. We take deep breaths, getting strong, trying to brace ourselves against the inevitable piece of bitchiness that's going to be directed our way.

Because being noticed by Plum and her entourage is rarely, if ever, a good thing. In fact, it usually means tears before bedtime for the poor girl who gets singled out. One nasty comment from Plum, amplified a thousand times by her hangers-on, can burn through you like acid thrown on your face. Earlier this year, Plum pretended to mistake Luce for a third-former trespassing in the sixth-form area, much to the amusement of Plum's posse. Of course, Plum's elaborate apologies were even more offensive than the original comment – salt in the wounds. I know Luce cried herself to sleep that night and many nights afterwards.

Nadia's crossed the road now, her tanned legs so thin even her upper thighs don't brush against each other as she walks. Three steps and she'll be bang in front of us.

I swallow. Even the air has gone strangely quiet. It's like the showdown in old cowboy films, where the men squint into each other's eyes for an intimidating moment before diving their hands down for their guns.

“Hey,” Nadia says, looking straight at me. Nadia isn’t really pretty, but she wears a ton of make-up, like an Indian girl in Bollywood films. Foundation, lots of eyeshadow, black eyeliner, and pale, golden-glossy lips (it’s Miss Dior gloss. I know because Nadia’s always reapplying it in class). It’s very intimidating, this degree of grooming and – obviously - gloss. My hair is damp from gym, my mascara is probably all sweated off: I must look like a bag lady by comparison.

I can’t breathe. I just know some awful comment about my boobs is coming my way. She’s going to say that Plum asked her to ask me where I got a hammock big enough to swing them in, or something.

“Scarlett? We were just wondering...”

Nadia says ‘we’ to save face, but all four of us know it’s Plum who was wondering.

“...if you wanted to come over and hang out? We might all go for a coffee later, or something.”

I can’t speak.

But Alison, unfortunately, can.

“Well, my dad’s supposed to pick us up,” she blurts out. “But I could ring him and tell him not to come.”

Nadia looks at Alison like she’s dandruff on her shoulder.

“No, not *you*,” she says. “God.” She rolls her eyes in incredulity that Alison could even think for a moment that she might get an invitation to the Promised Land. “*Scarlett*,” she says. “I was asking Scarlett.”

Luce and Alison look at me. Their expressions are identical: a near-even blend of disbelief, jealousy and insistence that I turn Nadia down, defend the honour of our threesome. All for one and one for all is what they want. What they should have.

And instead I hear myself saying:

“Well, I suppose I could, just for a bit... “

“Great!” Nadia says, sounding genuinely pleased.

I don’t believe any of this is happening. It can’t be me who’s bending to the bench to pick up my bag; who’s managing to avoid making eye contact with Luce and Alison, because I know the fury and betrayal I’ll see if I catch their eyes; who’s turning to Nadia, throwing a casual “See you tomorrow” over my shoulder at the girls, still not looking at them; ignoring their deafening silence; and crossing the road, walking side by side with

Nadia Farouk, Plum's number-one sidekick, heading for the fountain.

But it is me. It's me who's betraying my friends, selling them out, leaving them behind the second something more glossy and shiny beckons to me. Ninety-nine percent of me is fizzing like a sherbet with excitement at this possibility that the golden doors are really opening to me, that I can at last be part of the world I've always wanted to join.

And the last one percent is saying: Someone who would do this deserves everything she gets.

No prizes for guessing who was right.

chapter two: the princess fantasy

Every little girl has a princess fantasy. Even if it's only a fleeting moment here and there, watching a Disney film, or picking up a Princess Barbie. Even if it makes you feel awkward and wrong, because you'd really rather be climbing trees and throwing balls while wearing the kind of tomboy clothing that would make Princess Barbie faint in horror.

You can't grow up as a girl without having princesses rammed down your throat to some extent. They come with all the best adjectives. Beautiful. Perfect. Worshipped. A princess is the kind of girl who doesn't need to *do* anything to get noticed, apart from walk into a room looking drop-dead gorgeous.

Alison, Luce and I all love those films where the ugly gawky girl in glasses gets told that she's really a princess, a fairy godmother spinning in to transform her magically (ie, without plastic surgery) into a knockout beauty in contact lenses (maybe colored ones). I think we all used to go to sleep at night cherishing that fantasy. But then harsh reality kicked in. For me it was at about 14, when I realized that I wasn't the princess in my life story.

Someone else was.

I expect every school has a reigning superstar, the ideal to which every other girl aspires. You'd think, at St. Tabby's, that would have been the burgeoning supermodel, a girl called Cecily, about ten feet tall, weighing about 110 pounds, with blonde hair to her waist and eyes as blue as Wedgwood china. Cecily was so beautiful she could come into school with a stinking cold, eyes red-rimmed, nose swollen, wearing jeans and a big sweater, and still look more beautiful than everyone else there put together. But Cecily was too shy to say a word to anyone, which put her out of the princess stakes.

Because princesses need to rule. They need a court to command. And for that, they need to be able to give orders and keep discipline in the ranks. And there's no one better at ruling a court than Plum Saybourne.

I've reached the foot of the fountain steps. The sun is in front of me, shining straight into my eyes, dazzling me. Typical of Plum to seat herself with her back to it, providing herself with a golden halo. Nadia is behind me, and as I pause, not knowing where to sit, she says impatiently:

"Go on, then!"

But I don't know which step I should be sitting on, how high to climb... it sounds ridiculous, but I know if I get it wrong I could be in trouble.

"Scarlett!" drawls Plum, flicking back her hair. "Nice of you to join us! You know everybody, right?"

It's like she owns the park. I have to admire her blatant sense of entitlement. Must be nice to be that self-confident.

"Well, sit down!" she says, gesturing to a step below her.

Nadia's come up the steps behind me. She tugs down her hem and sits down carefully, making sure she's got enough skirt material in front of her to at least cover her knickers. Her skirt's so short she can't even cross her legs. I sit down next to her – it seems a safe choice, considering it was Nadia who invited me – feeling like a frump in the tracksuit bottoms I pulled on over my gym shorts. I never worry about what I look like after gymnastics, because I'm just going home, or back to Alison or Luce's, to have a shower. Now my thighs look all bulky because of the two layers of material I'm wearing, particularly sitting next to Nadia, with her skinny, naturally pale-brown legs.

"So, Scarlett," Plum drawls. "You've certainly developed overnight, haven't you?"

All the girls laugh sycophantically. That's how it works. Plum rules with an iron fist in an iron glove.

There doesn't seem to be much of an answer to that, so I don't say anything. Plum, apparently, isn't expecting a response, because she ploughs right ahead with her next comment.

"Let's all be careful not to bump into Scarlett from behind!" she says. "She'll fall right on her face! What are those, Scarlett, 34Ds?"

God, this is embarrassing. The truth is that I'm a bit confused about how to measure them. I was going to ask Luce and Alison to come along with me to one of those big department stores where the saleswoman does it for you... but I can't think about Luce and Alison now, it makes me feel too guilty.

"Venetia'd kill to have 34Ds, wouldn't you, Venetia?" Plum says.

“Oh *God* yes,” says Venetia, quite unembarrassed.

Venetia is a super-posh girl, flat-chested, mousy-haired, freckled in all the wrong places, with a bum as wide as the Channel. But she’s got the absolute confidence that comes from her family’s having owned most of the North of England since Queen Elizabeth came to the throne – that’s Elizabeth 1, of course.

“I’d bloody love it,” Venetia’s saying wistfully. “Did you see that picture of me in *Tatler* at Ross’ 18th birthday do? I looked like a boy in a frock! I showed it to Mummy and told her I was *dying* to have a boob job, but Mummy says I have to wait till I’m 18 and get my trust fund. She won’t pay for it herself, the cow.”

“God, considering how much surgery your mum’s had, that’s a bit rich,” Plum comments.

“I *know*,” Venetia sighs. “So unfair.”

Plum talks about plastic surgery with the airy carelessness of someone who doesn’t remotely need it – or certainly not for decades to come. As befits a princess, she’s naturally gorgeous, though she certainly maintains herself well. She has long, shiny hair the color of autumn leaves (ie, brunette with lots of expensive coppery highlights), slightly slanty green eyes (contacts, I swear) and blusher-tinged cheekbones high enough to give her a haughty expression.

“I must say, Scarlett, you look a bit pink and sweaty,” Plum comments.

“I just came from gymnastics,” I say defensively.

“*Much* too energetic for me,” Plum says. “I get tired just walking on the treadmill, don’t I?”

There’s a general murmur of assent.

“Can someone lend Scarlett some lip gloss, or something?” Plum asks. “I mean, she’s looking a bit too *fresh-faced*, don’t we think?”

This is classic Plum, ending almost every sentence with a question that you’re not really meant to respond to – out loud, anyway. A girl sitting below me holds up a tube of Lancome lipgloss. Someone else hands me a slim, handbag-sized spray of Elizabeth Arden Sunflowers. Mumbling thank-yous, I duly smear my lips with gloss, and spritz myself with the perfume, which is, much to my relief, light and not at all cloying.

I hand the gloss and perfume back to their owners. Just as I’m sitting back up again, a rustle runs through the group, as if we were a pile of autumn leaves lifted by the wind. Lips are bitten, cheeks are pinched, and shoulders are straightened. Suddenly, everyone’s on full alert.

Plum's flicking her hair and swinging her legs as if she's signaling with them. And in a way, she is. She dips her head a fraction to look over the top of her designer sunglasses. The other girls are trying so hard not to turn their heads that they look frozen in place, like a whole series of statues; Plum's the only one who's moving.

I can't help it: I'm curious. I turn my head to look.

Oh God. I'm such an idiot. I was so swept away by the flattery of being invited to join Plum's coterie that I forgot briefly about one of the main reasons that entry to this group is so prestigious: it comes with access to the sixth-form of the neighbouring boys' school.

But only the most eligible boys. The richest, the poshest, the best-looking. Five or six of them are coming up to the fountain right now, slouching, their hair artfully messed-up and hanging over their faces. They're doing their best to look as casual as possible, as if they couldn't care less about hanging out with this group of girls. But I can tell how keen they are to see us by the very fact that they're looking so exaggeratedly laid-back, almost as if they barely notice us sitting round the fountain till they're standing right in front of it.

I look at them all, and my heart sinks. Because he's not here.

"Hey, Plum," the leader says.

"Oh, hi, Ross," Plum says equally lightly, playing along with the game of fancy-seeing-you-here.

"What's up?"

"Nothing much," Plum answers. "We thought we might get a coffee later or something."

"Cool."

This must be Ross, of the 18th birthday celebration that was considered socially important enough to be photographed for *Tatler*, the snobbiest glossy mag for posh people in the country. I'm convinced now that Plum's invited me here to play some really cruel joke on me. I fit in with this smart set about as well as a troll would at a princess-only slumber party.

The boys arrange themselves around the fountain, most of them leaning against it. Ross pulls out a pack of cigarettes, which is a cue for all the smokers present to light up themselves. Lighters click, matches snap, little flames shoot up. Everyone takes their first drag and then breathes out in unison. I look at Ross while everyone's distracted. He's in the middle of a nasty acne outbreak, but he looks so cool, so unfazed by his bright red itchy-looking spots that he almost carries them off. Posh people really do care

less about what the rest of the world thinks. Maybe I can learn the secret of that from them. That's what I want most in the world: to lose my self-consciousness, to ooze this kind of confidence.

"Cigarette?" asks a boy standing next to me.

"Uh, no, thanks," I say.

"Don't smoke?"

I shake my head.

"Very sensible. Isn't any good for you, is it?"

"Well, I do gymnastics," I say. "I mean, I don't want to run out of breath halfway through a routine."

"Gotcha," he says. "You mind?"

He gestures to the step I'm sitting on. I nod a bit shyly, and he sits down next to me.

"I'm Simon," he says.

"Scarlett."

He's not bad-looking, but there's nothing distinctive about him, apart maybe from his bright pink cheeks. He has fair hair, brushed forward, and he's maybe a little overweight, though it quite suits him. His mouth is very red, with puffy lips, in that way that happens sometimes with people with really fair skin and blond hair.

"I think I've seen you around St. Tabby's," he says. "Don't you hang out over there some afternoons?"

He gestures to the bench where I was waiting today with Alison and Luce. Automatically, my eyes follow his hand, and I see with a great deal of relief that Alison's dad must have come to pick her and Luce up; there's no one there.

"Yeah," I say. "I'm there sometimes with, um, friends from gymnastics."

I have a bit of trouble saying the word 'friends', out of guilt, but Simon doesn't notice.

"Oh yeah," he says. "You all look so healthy."

I laugh.

"That's a polite way to put it! Plum just made me put on some lip gloss because I looked

all sweaty.”

Saying this, I get a little flush of pleasure; it was nice of Plum to try to help me look pretty, even if she was probably only doing it so I would fit in better with her group. But if she didn’t think I would fit in, why did she invite me over?

I ponder this, confused.

Simon clears his throat.

“Hmm, well, I wouldn’t think you needed that,” he says. “I mean, you’re very pretty already, you don’t need anything else.”

I feel myself blushing, and am thankful that there’s a buzz of conversation now, so that probably no one heard him. I really don’t hang out with boys that much; I’m not used to this kind of thing, and I don’t know what to say in return. “Thank you” sounds much too prissy.

Still, Plum must have sensed that Simon just paid me a compliment.

“Is Simon flirting with you, Scarlett?” she says, leaning down. “You’ve got to watch him, you know, he’s terribly naughty.”

Now it’s Simon who’s blushing; he’s so pink already that he goes bright red.

“Still, he’s a great catch!” Plum adds, winking at me, which just completes my and Simon’s embarrassment. Neither of us can look at each other. I stare at my feet. Simon looks straight ahead, dragging so hard on his cigarette that it looks as if he’s going to drain it down in a couple of seconds.

“Hey, everyone, what’s up?”

It’s a new voice, calling from further down the path. I register that its owner must be pretty confident to announce his arrival that clearly, and curiosity makes me turn to look.

I gulp so hard my throat hurts. I actually think I’m going to choke. My eyes water, and I start to cough. Simon thinks it’s because of the smoke from his cigarette, and instantly stubs it out on the stone, apologising profusely.

But I barely hear what he’s saying. When I’ve got my breath back, I realize that my heart is pounding so hard I can’t hear anything over the racket it’s making.

This, more than anything else, is the reason I was so eager to jump at Plum’s invitation. *This* is what I’ve been staring at longingly from that enormous distance that separates the bench outside school from the Promised Land here at the fountain. *This*, the opportunity to be so close to the hottest boy I’ve ever seen, close enough now to reach

out and touch him, now that he's coming up the steps. I sit on my hands, so I won't be tempted to do that very thing.

"Hi, Dan," says Simon.

And Dan McAndrew, gorgeous Dan McAndrew, so close that I really could touch him, jumps the last two steps, swings himself up onto the lip of the fountain so easily that you'd never know what prime, protected real estate it is, and actually dares to put out one hand and ruffle Plum's hair.

"Having fun, Plum?" he asks cheerfully. "Si, all right, mate!"

He leans over to grab Simon's hand and do one of those funny twisting handshakes that boys seem to consider so essential. I always thought his eyes were grey, but now I realize that they're just as much green as grey, the color of a lake in winter, and so thickly fringed with dark lashes that it almost looks as if he's wearing mascara. His dark-brown hair is falling forward in a silky wash over his forehead. I long to reach up and push it back.

Dan McAndrew is six feet tall, with wide shoulders and long legs. He's on the school cricket, rugby, football, and tennis teams. He plays violin in the school orchestra, and he's on the debating team. He's as handsome as the lead singer in a boy band. He's always got a ton of friends hanging round with him.

Plum is rearranging her hair, smoothing it out with her fingers, frowning crossly at Dan for having messed it up. She shifts along the stone lip of the fountain, turning her back pointedly on him, facing Ross instead.

"God," she mutters, "he's such an *oaf* sometimes..."

I'm watching her, amazed that anyone could actually *complain* about being touched by Dan McAndrew, when I hear him say:

"Hi," and it takes me what feels like hours to realize that he's talking to me.

I look up and meet his eyes. Then I faint. But just for a fleeting moment. I get such a quick grasp on myself that I don't think anyone but me noticed that I actually lost consciousness the first time I met Dan's lake-green eyes.

"Hi," he repeats. "I don't think we've met, have we? I'm Dan."

It's all I can do to get any words out at all: I can barely remember my own name.

"I'm Scarlett," I manage.

"Great name," he says appreciatively. "It suits you."

“Really?”

I must be goggling at him. I’ve always felt that Scarlett was a real curse of a name. In my eyes, you either have to be a redhead, or fantastically beautiful, like Vivien Leigh in *Gone With The Wind*, to be called Scarlett.

I’m not a redhead. My hair’s medium brown, not particularly interesting. And let’s just say that we can rule out the fantastically beautiful part as well.

But Dan McAndrew is smiling at me, his grey-green eyes are sparkling. At least I can tell that he’s not setting me up for a fall, saying something nice just to see if I’ll believe him, before cutting the ground from under my feet.

Which means... which means...

Behind his shoulder I see Ross clicking at a Zippo lighter that isn’t working. He shakes it angrily, and tries again. No go.

“You try, mate,” he says, chucking it to Dan. “You’ve got the magic touch.”

“Do something, Ross!” Plum adds petulantly. “I’m *dying* for a ciggie.”

Dan shakes the Zippo, gives it one sharp tap on the fountain’s edge, and flicks the wheel. It catches.

“Thanks,” Ross says, taking it from him. “Here you go, Plum.”

He bends towards her, lighting the cigarette that she dangles at the end of her fingers, making him come into her space, do all the work. I do admire her technique. Ross lingers a little too long, staring at her beautiful profile, before he sits back again.

“Plum, you shouldn’t smoke,” Dan says, sitting up again. “And you shouldn’t either, Ross. It’s disgusting.”

“Oh, stop nagging, Dan. You’re worse than my bloody mother,” Plum snaps, not even looking at him.

“Yeah, Dan, pack it in,” Ross agrees.

Dan’s forgotten about me for the moment; his attention has been drawn elsewhere, and I have to admit, I’m almost relieved. Having Dan McAndrew look at me, *really* look at me, his face so close to mine, his lake-green eyes focusing on mine, was so intense I had trouble breathing. I’m grateful for a respite.

“Sorry about making you cough,” Simon says to me.

I don't have any problem looking at Simon, because I don't fancy him. He's pink and white, like a Battenberg cake with yellow icing on top, which is his hair. His eyelashes are so pale yellow that they practically disappear into his face. He's staring at me intently, but I can't quite remember what he's referring to.

"Oh, that's OK," I say.

He clears his throat.

"Um, are you coming to the party on Saturday?"

This is way too much for me.

"I don't know anything about it," I confess. No point pretending to be cooler than I am.

"It's at Nadia's," Simon says. "Her parents are away."

"Her parents are *always* away," says Venetia, giggling. "I'm beginning to believe you don't actually *have* any parents, Nadia!"

I sneak a glance at Nadia. She's frowning and biting her lip, so cross with Venetia that she's forgotten to care about messing up her lipgloss.

Venetia's too insensitive to notice that she's upset Nadia. She's too busy laughing at her own joke.

"When are we going to have a party at *your* house, Venetia?" Plum says with a little smile.

This must be a nasty dig, because Venetia stops laughing so suddenly it's as if Plum had flipped a switch in her back. Having dealt with Venetia, and underlined her own power in the process, Plum gives Nadia a single swift glance, which seems to encompass me, and sits back on the fountain step, looking smug.

"Yeah, come to the party, Scarlett," Nadia says. "Everyone's coming. You're not doing anything else Saturday night, are you?"

I shake my head, though it's a lie. I was supposed to be going to see a film with Luce and Alison. This is a whole series of betrayals, I realize, not just the one. I feel terrible. But I also feel incredibly excited that I've been invited to Nadia's party. I'm so confused I don't know what to think.

"Great," Simon says enthusiastically. "That means you're coming, right?"

I nod.

And then I look up at Dan, hoping that he'll be as enthusiastic as Simon. He meets my eyes and smiles at me, and my heart turns over.

Hah. Little do I know that by the end of that longed-for party, I'll be looking back and yearning for the chance to take back that nod. To rewind this entire encounter - like running a DVD backwards on fast speed, as I get up, walk backwards down the path, seemingly followed by Nadia, cross the road backwards (not too safe, that, but I don't get knocked over) reach my friends, and press STOP and then PLAY again – and change the outcome. To say to Nadia that no, thanks, I wouldn't come and hang out with them if Alison and Luce couldn't come too.

But by the time the party ends, it'll be too late.

Dan McAndrew will have died.

And it'll be me who killed him.

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