



**Girlfriend** *fiction*

SHE'S  
WITH  
THE  
BAND

GEORGIA CLARK



ALLEN & UNWIN



**Soundtrack:** 'Diss', Catcall

**Mood:** Moody

Life never starts when you think it will. When I turned fifteen, I figured I'd be tossed the keys to the city, make out with a hottie, and have a modest parade thrown in my honour. But all that happened was that I got out of doing the washing up.

My dad's life didn't really start until about six years ago when he painted this huge, ridiculously ugly portrait of yours truly, won a big international art prize, stopped being Dad and started being 'world-renowned artist Sal Mannix', and suddenly became *the* person to say you met at parties.

The day we moved to Sydney was supposed to be the start of the new Mia Mannix – confident, charming, taller. But so far, it sucked.

Gaolbreak from my one-trick-pony town buried deep in the Snowy Mountains had finally begun pre-dawn. Clutching a thermos of hot tea, Dad and I drove silently up the main drag, cloaked in darkness – a movie set for the most boring film I'd *never* have to sit through again. Years of whingeing *will* pay off – don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

As the sun started to colour the landscape, anticipation clenched my belly like a slinky. Sin-city, here I come! There was only one thing missing: Cherry.

Fast-forward a few hours and the heat hit me like a prizefighter when I scrambled out of the car at the truckstop Dad

had decided on for lunch. Soggy chips and a salad sandwich that'd had its glory days, a revival, published a tell-all autobiography and *still* refused to die.

As I picked disinterestedly at it in our corner booth, I noticed Dad's lips were moving. Shrugging, I gestured to my headphones.

He leaned over and hit pause on my iPod. 'Perhaps we could have lunch without the racket, pet.'

'But this is my 'Lunch at a Truckstop' playlist. If I don't get through it now, it'll throw my whole afternoon schedule off.' I tossed him a sugar-sweet smile.

He eyed me, squeezing tomato sauce over his smelly sausage roll. 'Speaking of schedules . . .'

'Ooh, that's an exciting way to start a sentence . . .'

'I trust you're aware Silver Street High is going to be much more demanding than you're used to. You're won't have as much time for making playlists and reading *ENM*.'

I cocked an eyebrow at him. 'It's *NME*, Mr Dark Ages.'

He cleared his throat. 'How much did you get for Cherry?'

A pang hit me as I flashed on the ecstatic farm dude taking my baby from me. We'd been apart one week now, and it was hurting like a country and western megamix.

'Seven hundred and fifty dollars.'

He looked surprised. 'But it was second-hand.'

'She's a vintage Fender Stratocaster, Dad!' I exclaimed. 'That's a really good guitar!'

'Well, you'll need that money for art supplies, pet. They can really add up.' He took my hand. 'You won't regret this honey. I think you'll find the way art speaks to the soul a welcome change from all that yelling.'

My smile was paper-thin. 'Can't wait.'



It was late afternoon by the time we rolled into the driveway of our new postal: 15 Somerset Drive. An over-lipsticked real estate agent waved us in, gawking at me as I stumbled, stuffed with Snickers and legs aching, from the car.

‘You must be Mia! I recognise you from your Dad’s painting!’

She was one of those unflappable ‘professional mum’ types that advertisers use to sell chicken sauces and sunscreen. I’m vego, and burn faster than you can say ‘melanoma’.

She flourished the house keys like a lucky door prize. ‘Let me show you around!’

Ocean views a-go-go, and everything’s made of grey glass and sparkling. Our pad was cookie-cutter new, empty (duh Mia) and soulless. Dad and I trailed the agent as she rabbitied on about breezy, sun-drenched interiors and African quartzite floors.

‘We are all so excited to welcome a great artist to the neighbourhood,’ the agent enthused as we entered the stainless steel kitchen. The shiny surfaces reflected the three of us like funny mirrors at the circus. ‘A real honour. It’s strange though . . .’ she paused to consider Dad with sharp thoughtfulness, ‘you don’t look famous, do you?’

I snorted laughter. Dad’s a dead ringer for an unassuming high school cleaner. At his last exhibition opening, a misinformed floor manager had him inspecting broken piping for ten minutes. My outburst was enough to make me the focus of her award-winning conversation skills.

‘So, Mia. You must be so excited about starting at Silver Street tomorrow. Such a good school. Have you thought

about what sort of extracurricular activities you'll be involved with?

'Do you mean, like . . . homework?'

She laughed, exposing teeth the colour of liquid paper. 'I mean the Musical Society, Chess Club, Student Council, Social Committee . . .'

'Social Committee?' I shook my head, bewildered. 'I'm not joining a stupid Social Committee.'

Professional Mum stared at me with knives in her eyes, her voice dropping to a hoarse scary-serious whisper. 'The Social Committee is the backbone of the school. Without it, we'd have nothing.' She grabbed my shoulders, eyes boring into me freakily. '*Nothing!*'

The sound of a car approaching cut short the moment of total weirdness, catapulting Professional Mum back into character. 'That'll be the previous owners, the Ermans. Their daughter is a dance major at Silver Street! Come say hi!'

'Actually it's Cannon, not Erman. I'm not keeping my husband's name,' corrected the woman who shook Dad's hand. Make-up covered eyes with dark circles, and I recognised her from TV: a newsreader, I think. She looked me up and down carefully. I knew what she was thinking: *That girl from the painting is significantly uglier in real life.*

Everyone started signing official-looking forms as cicadas filled up the flat silence with their shrill salute to the oppressive heat. Sweat ran down my temples and I felt light-headed, sick. Social Committees? New friends? I had been so focussed on getting out of the Snowy that I hadn't really processed the fact that I was about to start at a strange school as a short, friendless nobody. The prospect felt like having to step onstage halfway through a musical you know nothing about and try to keep up.

I wanted to retreat to a bedroom I no longer had and mess round with a guitar I no longer owned. I wanted to be anywhere but here. And then, from the corner of my eye, movement. A flash of blonde hair followed by a pair of long legs emerging from the car's passenger side. The scratch of a match cued the poison smell of cig smoke.

While the rest of us had instinctively moved into the shade, the blonde slouched against the front of the house in the painfully blazing sun, letting it beat down, and burn – *bring it on*. Clad in a ripped denim mini and stained red heels, she kicked a stray stone. Mrs Cannon's dark circles had just gotten darker.

'If you want your allowance cut again this week, Lexie . . .'

Mrs Cannon warned.

The girl sucked back insolently, and I realised I was staring. I looked quickly to the ocean – flat, distant, endless.

'This is Mia Mannix,' she continued, as if nothing was wrong. 'She'll be in your grade at school. Why don't you come say hello?' It was a request shot through with a plea.

Sighing slowly, the blonde click-clacked over, pushing sunglasses back to reveal messily mascaraed blue eyes flashing with a thousand secrets. I tried not to look scared. A smile flickered across lips smeared with blood-red gloss. When she spoke, her voice crunched sexy like the grey gravel underfoot.

'Just so you know – girl to girl – the black hole of sexual inexperience look isn't working for you.'

I blinked, confused.

Dad said, 'Oh.'

'Car. Now.' Mrs Cannon went red and fumbly. 'Mia, I'm so sorry, it's been a difficult move . . .'

Hasty awkward apologies continued as I shrugged off

Dad's attempt at a protective arm, my throat constricting. In the car the blonde sat low and stared straight ahead, arms crossed, the sunglasses mask revealing nothing. Well, at least I wasn't just Sal Mannix's daughter here. I was a black hole of sexual inexperience.



The great thing about being publicly humiliated is that people let you do whatever you like for the rest of the day, so I skulked downtown in search of a large, blunt weapon that'd fit in my school satchel. My list of things that Seemed Like A Good Idea At The Time (piercing my ears with a safety pin, practising making out with a pillow *without* locking my bedroom door et cetera) had a new top entry: moving to Sydney.

Catching a glimpse of myself in a shopfront window, I pulled a face at what made Lexie's lips curl. The girls here were tall, tan and stacked. I am short, slim and skim-milk pale: a vampire girl in Cons. Jet-black hair, which refuses to colour or curl, hanging in green eyes – not emerald, but not olive either. I always secretly fancied that Winona Ryder would play me in a movie, until my bratsville cousin told me it'd more likely be one of those hairless cats in a witch's wig. I told him he was adopted.

Rows of leafy outdoor cafes spilt over with botoxed ladies killing time before important fake-tan appointments. A lightly sweating couple in matching gym-wear jogged by, almost bowling me over without so much as a backward glance. A chihuahua gave me a death stare.

Maybe I really was made for tiny cold towns draped in fog and the smell of home-cooked food. Sydney was intense and intimidating, like a beauty queen on a bender.

I was just about to jump ship when I stumbled across a life raft: Shaky's.

**Soundtrack:** 'Seek Me', The Grates

**Mood:** Cautiously optimistic

'Band names these days are all about death and dying,' I'm saying, pacing the length of the poster-covered counter. 'The Kills, Death from Above 1979, The Fiery Furnaces . . .'

'The Killers, Death Cab for Cutie.' Mick, the wizened ex-rocker type who ran the place, poured me another black coffee.

'Die! Die! Die!' I grinned.

'Dead Disco, Dead Dead Girls . . .'

'You certainly seem to have all the answers, Mr Bond,' I drawled, tossing a stray stress ball in the air and catching it.

'I certainly do, Miss Money Penny.' Upstairs an old phone started bleating. 'Watch the counter, kid. I gotta answer that'.

I tossed him the ball.

Record stores are to music junkies what all-you-can-eat buffets are to sumo wrestlers: a spiritual home. A hand-painted sign in dribbly red paint named this one Shaky's. And it was a good'un. Cardboard boxes of records rubbed shoulders with crates of CDs in the dingy clutter. On the shelves, Mick's favourite albums boasted lovingly written accolades slapped on their covers in a fine spidery print: *Delicate acoustic whimsy designed to break your heart in two and mend it by morning*, or *More dangerous than a hot-blooded cowboy finding his best friend's boxers under his tequila-soaked bed*.

Posters advertising upcoming gigs covered every bit of available wall space, while the front counter groaned under stacks of free street press and flyers.

In one corner, an open door revealed exciting things like mic stands and pools of cable: supplies for the rehearsal space upstairs.

Glancing at the rehearsal roster above the ancient cash register, I traced my finger down to the band in next: The Alaska Family. ‘So, The Alaska Family, huh?’ I called after Mick. ‘Cute if slightly vacant 18-year-old trust-fund babies who mistook the invention of MySpace as an invitation to deliver their clichéd message of waa-waa teen angst?’

‘You’ve heard of us.’

I spun around and gasped. Rock-and-roll perfection was right behind me. Everything about him – hair, clothes, body – was tousled, dark and loose. But it wasn’t the guitar case and lead singer trappings that made hot hot heat rush up through my body. It was the gaze that met mine confidently – and didn’t look away.

I stared back. Boys in the Snowy had buck teeth and farming aspirations. I had never seen someone so good-looking in real life. I half expected him to bust out a slogan for aftershave.

Instead, he smiled slowly, and reached out towards me. For a second I lost all logic and thought he was gonna pull me in for a pash . . . but instead his hand brushed the button badges on my dress that declared my devotion to The Shins and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. I didn’t know what to do, so I just raised my eyebrows.

‘Nice badges. Haven’t seen you in here before.’

‘I just moved. Fifteen Somerset Drive.’ Could he tell my knees were shaking?

‘Lexie’s old place? You’re the artist’s daughter?’

For once, the art freak-show thing didn’t annoy me. Not when you can impress a crazily cute guy in under five minutes.

'I'm Mia.'

'Mia. Good to know there's fresh blood in town.' He shook my hand. His fingers were so warm and strong, I almost forgot to let go. 'I'm Justin. What school you at?'

'Silver Street High. Year Eleven.'

'I'm at Prince's College, Year Twelve, but my little sisters are in your year at Silver Street. Stacey and Sissy,' he grinned. 'They're official pains in the ass as siblings, but they seem to party a lot.'

'Sure,' I said coolly, as if 'partying' was something I'd ordinarily be doing right now.

'Mr Jackson! Heads up.' Mick tossed a key over the counter.

'Thanks, Mick.' Justin winked at me and tapped his case. 'Someone told me it's, like, a long way to the top, so I'd better start climbing. See you round.'

'Sure,' I nodded, smiled, and then weirdly nodded again, watching Justin disappear up the stairs at the back of the shop. When I turned back to Mick he was looking at me with that painful 'knowing look' people use when they really don't know anything at all.



‘Dad! *Dad!*’

His voice drifted up to my room, ‘Downstairs, pet.’ Then, as a wondered afterthought, ‘We have a downstairs now . . .’

I leapt down the cream carpet stairs two at a time, bed-hair pulling off a just-electrocuted look nicely as I barrelled into the sun-drenched kitchen with the African quartzite floors.

‘Where are my clothes?’ Me, breathless.

‘What, honey?’ Him, clueless, elbow-deep in packing paper.

‘Clothes, noun, plural: garments that cover the body.’

‘Aren’t they in your room in the box marked *clothes*?’

‘That’s winter stuff. Unless you want me to start at a new school this morning looking like I’m disguising a hideous skin disease . . . I need the box marked *Summer*.’

A connection sparked in Dad’s eyes like a firework. ‘Oh. Ooohh.’ Then for good measure, ‘Oh dear.’

‘*Noooo*,’ I breathed in an agonised whisper.

‘Those boxes are still . . .’

‘*Nooo* . . .’

‘. . . in transit.’ He waved a finger at me warningly. ‘Now, don’t overreact Mia.’

‘Overreact?’ I backed against the glass doors: a bunny in headlights. ‘Overreact!’

‘They’ll be here tomorrow . . .’

‘This is the worst possible thing that could happen to me!’ My voice rose in sheer panic. ‘What am I going to do?’

‘Wear what you wore yesterday.’

I slumped down, head in hands. ‘It’s all in the wash.’

‘You can wear my clothes.’

I looked up slowly and stared at him with dead eyes. ‘Kill me now, Dad. Just kill me now.’

**Soundtrack:** ‘It Ain’t Funny How We Don’t Talk Anymore’, You Am I

**Mood:** Montage

In the brochures that arrived one foggy day last September (along with the acceptance letter Dad actually framed – gag), the school looked sunny, modern and full of an eclectic mix of dedicated over-achievers.

As I tried not to get in the way of boys on skateboards, and girls trying to catch the eyes of boys on skateboards, the school looked sunny, modern and full of an eclectic mix of dedicated over-achievers. I guess honesty is the best policy.

According to said brochures, Silver Street High was established to offer ‘a university preparatory education to students planning for, or already pursuing, careers in performing arts or entertainment’. The ‘already pursuing’ part meant I recognised the girl whose locker was next to mine as Charlie Whitfield – a hot new actress who starred in a TV drama called *Cyber Rats*, where a motley crew of underground computer hackers fight evil in a dystopian cyberpunk future. Charlie’s face pouted from the covers of countless chick magazines and I didn’t even know which ones were cool.

As I struggled to make sense of my map, wacky boys with drumsticks loped past willowy girls stretching flawless

figures poured into leotards. I was trying not to stare, but to act like the other kids did, 'This is my life, this is normal'.

Summoning every last ounce of courage, I gingerly tapped Charlie on the shoulder.

'Hey, um, I'm new and kinda lost. Can you show me where the ...'

She whipped around, covering the phone with her hand. 'It's my manager,' she mouthed.

I scuttled away like a beetle in bad clothes.



'And then he was like, "Well, if you're not hanging with Richy, can I take you out for sangria?"'

'Like, what's sangria?'

'I think it's Mexican.'

'Um, excuse me?' I butted in. Two beautiful heads swished my way: a cherry redhead in a 'Bring The Noise' tight tee, and a Lucy Lui-esque girl in a cute plaid twin-set, who I recognised from some rather racy yoghurt ads.

'Um, can you tell me where the art rooms are? I'm new.' The girls let their eyes trail over me in disbelief as I attempted a look of nonchalant easy-breeze — *Yes, I am a teenage girl dressed like a 45-year-old man on welfare, but I don't have a problem with that.*

'What are you majoring in?' the red-head asked finally.

'Wait, let's guess,' interrupted Ms Yoplait. 'Hmmm . . . Too gawky for dance . . .'

'Too shy for acting,' continued Red, nodding. 'Music or Visual Arts. That outfit says Vis Arts.'

'Uh, yeah.' Perfect. I was officially a fashion disaster turned walking cliché.

'Wait a sec,' Red frowned in recognition. 'Are you Misha Mantle?'

‘Mia Mannix.’

‘That’s what I meant.’ She pointed a shiny pink nail at me. ‘You’re, like, the daughter of some super-famous painter. My brother told me about you!’

‘Justin is such a hottie,’ Yoplait drawled. ‘Don’t you guys end up making out when you’re wasted?’

‘Ewwww, Gillian!’ shrieked Red, laughing. ‘Don’t listen to her, Mia, she’s an idiot. My bro is so not cute, right?’

The guy would make Greek gods look plain. ‘Um, I . . . don’t know.’

‘Articulate much?’ smirked Yoplait, holding up some shiny strands of hair for inspection. ‘I gotta ditch these split-ties before ID photos. Peace, you guys.’ She sauntered off.

Red turned to me and smiled. ‘I’m Stacey. C’mon. I’ll show you where to go. Gillian’s a dance major. She toured as an understudy with the Australian Dance Company last summer, and performed twice. That might sound like no big, but it totally is. Plus she’s in a performance group I’m in – the Star Sisters. We’re major.’

I nodded. ‘Are you a dance student too?’

Stacey struck a pose. ‘Acting, darling. I’m totally destined for silver screen success. Once I said, “Sure, that’d be great” on *Home and Away*. I was making this chick’s boyfriend jealous.’

‘That wouldn’t be a stretch.’

She whirled around to face a buff, buzz-cut boy; basketball player’s body covered by a *Save Water, Drink Beer* T-shirt.

‘Can I help you, Carl?’ Stacey’s voice dripped scary sarcasm.

‘C’mon Sissy, don’t be ridiculous,’ he smiled disarmingly. ‘Meet me at the beach after school. The Milky Bars are on me.’

‘Gee whiz, that’d be swell, but a) wrong twin, jerk, and b) sloppy seconds aren’t *her* style.’ Stacey glared poisonously

at the doopy-looking Carl. ‘Here’re the art rooms, Mia. I’ll see you later.’

In a haughty whirl of cherry red, she was gone.



‘Okay, people! Listening caps on, motor mouths off! That means you Michael, Sarah!’

The teacher – a tall bespectacled British man in a coat and bow tie, glared in mock anger until the room settled. The large light-filled space resembled Dad’s old studio: artworks-in-progress covered the walls, as did tins of paint oozing their insides and buckets of paintbrushes in varying states of decay. Books on technique and the ‘way of the artist’ were propped up against life-model mannequins and stacks of different sized canvases. Organised art chaos. Thankfully my weird old-man get-up didn’t look completely fish-out-of-water compared to the experimental-art nerds filing in to find their seats.

‘Right. For those new faces, I’m Mr Rochester – more commonly known as . . .’ He waved for the class to answer.

‘Rocho!’ the class called, as if barracking at the footy.

‘Right, very good,’ continued Rocho, with a dry smile. ‘And this year I’ll be using the phrases: “I don’t know art . . .”’

‘. . . But I know what I pass,’ the class chorused.

‘And, “Rome wasn’t built in a day . . .”’

‘. . . But they didn’t try hard enough.’

‘Exactly. Now, that’s a little about me, the rest I’m sure you can Google, like everyone else does.’

‘When he was at art school he sold a painting of two dogs doing it,’ whispered the girl next to me. ‘We found it last year on eBay.’

Shocked, I choked on unplanned laughter.

‘Excellent!’ boomed Rocho. ‘Our first new student has just volunteered to introduce herself.’

They say most people fear public speaking more than death. I fear public speaking more than waking up during open-heart surgery, finding out your boyfriend is really your brother AND accidentally vomiting on someone important, combined. Twenty sets of eyeballs watched me shuffle past to stand up the front.

‘Hi, um, I’m Mia. Mia Mannix. I moved here yesterday with my dad . . .’ A few kids nudged each other. ‘And, um, it’s really . . . hot here.’

‘Duh,’ someone muttered, and the class snickered.

Embarrassment burnt through me like bushfire, and I glanced at Rocho in a panic. He nodded for me to continue. I took a deep breath, desperate not to fail whatever personality test this was supposed to be.

‘Look, you wanna ask about my dad, right? I don’t really like talking about him ’cause it’s weird, but if I were you and you were me, I guess I’d be curious. So, um, you guys can ask me anything you like now, but that’s it for the rest of the year. Deal?’

The class looked at each other in confusion.

‘Seriously.’ Please let this pay off. ‘Fire away.’

Nothing. Eyes darted sideways, trying to suss which way to play this. Still nothing . . . My forehead prickled with stress-sweat. *C’mon* . . . Then, finally, a long-haired boy up the back raised his hand.

‘Where does he paint?’

‘At our old place he made a big cattle shed into a studio, but here he’s going to convert the guest wing of the house.’

Another hand. ‘Does he paint all the time?’

‘If he’s working on something new or has a deadline for

something, he'll work all day and all night – and only sleep three or four hours. But sometimes he'll just spend the day reading and watching TV.'

'What does he watch?'

'The news, stuff on SBS,' I frowned. 'Oh, he loves those *Chaser* guys. He actually uses the word "scallywags" to describe them.'

The class laughed. Hands waved in the air as questions started flying from every corner.

'Is it true he's dating that actress, Radha Mitchell?'

I laughed. 'No, they were just photographed together at an opening.'

'So he's single?'

'Sarah!' Rocho quickly reprimanded the cheeky strawberry-blonde.

'No, it's cool,' I countered. 'Yeah, he is. I think he dug the real estate agent who sold us our house though. He said she was "very nice and welcoming", which I reckon is Dad-speak for "a total babe".'

'All right, go Sal!' yelled Sarah, and everyone laughed.

'Settle down, monkeys.' Rochester hopped off his desk. 'Mia's been very accommodating in entertaining your tiny, curious minds, but we stand at the brink of a new school year . . .'

'Just one more question, Rocho,' everyone called out. 'C'mon!'

'All right, all right. Miss Mia – last question please.'

I locked eyes with a lanky boy in black-rimmed glasses. 'Yeah?'

He cleared his throat. 'So, if you have kids, are you gonna paint their portraits or just stick to photographs like the rest of the world?'

I blushed and stared down at my sneakers. ‘Um . . .’

He laughed nervously. ‘Hey, I was kidding . . .’

‘I didn’t ask to have my portrait painted,’ I found myself snapping. ‘My dad’s an artist, it’s what they do.’

‘Seriously, it was a joke . . .’

‘Right, thank you, Mia,’ Rochester threw the boy a bemused look. ‘On that note, the school year begins . . .’

As I slid back into my seat, I snuck another look at the glasses boy. He could tell I was watching him, but he didn’t look back. Weirdo, I decided. Mean, freaky weirdo.



Students swarmed like honeybees in designer threads to find a spot in the shade for our very first lunch. Don’t let me sit on my own, I pleaded silently. Surely someone would wave me over, take pity on the new girl in the funny clothes.

Someone? Anyone . . . ?

Cursing my cowardly nature, I was just about to duck into the loos to hang with my friend Suds the Soap Dispenser, when I spotted a flash of red. Stacey! I fought the urge to scream her name with relief, and instead plonked down next to her and dug an apple out of my bag.

‘How was your first class?’ I spoke through a mouthful of juicy Granny Smith. ‘Vis Arts wasn’t bad. This semester is all “traditional skills and disciplines”. Easy. Kinda boring though. I had to do Vis Arts to get Dad to agree to move to Sydney, but exactly how life-changing is still life, y’know?’

Stacey peered suspiciously over her sunglasses at me.

‘What?’ I asked. ‘Do I have paint on my face?’

‘Are you high?’

‘Huh?’

‘Are. You. High.’

'Oh, um, no thanks. I don't really do drugs. I mean, it's fine if you want to but . . .'

'Why are you talking to me?'

I choked on apple. 'What?'

'You're disconcerting.' She frowned delicately. 'You can leave now.'

'Okay,' I whispered. 'I'm sorry. I thought . . .'

'Don't think.' A smile as frosty as a strawberry slushie. 'Just leave.'

Hands shaking, I scooped up my satchel, ready to bail. But straightening up, I saw: 'Stacey?' Reality dawned.

'Hey, chick.' She blew me a kiss. 'I see you've met the less attractive Jackson. Yo, Sissy, you'll never guess who wants to hang out with *you* . . .'

Over sushi and sparkling mineral water, the Carl situation took front and centre. The facts as they stand: 1) Sissy and Carl used to have a thing. 2) While Sissy was away on a 'totally random' modelling shoot, Carl had a thing with someone else. 3) Sissy and Carl no longer have a thing.

Stacey spent approximately thirty-five minutes denouncing Carl as everything from 'an airhead with no licence' to 'a double-timing low-life who has more in common with a compost heap than the human race'.

Sissy responded to this by sighing and muttering 'chill out' and 'he just wants to *hang*' as Stacey started listing all the novelty T-shirts she'd seen him in that 'both sucked AND blew'. Sissy sat practically immobile, an ice statue in shades, moving only to shoot me steely glances, which said 'Who are you?' and 'Why are you here?' and 'Is that outfit ironic or just plain stupid?'

Just as Stacey remembered a T-shirt which read *FBI: Female Body Inspector*, the hacky sack group of kids had been kicking

around arched high over their heads, coming to land neatly in Sissy's Caesar salad.

'Keep an eye on your balls, kid,' she snarled to the skittish skinny boy who came to collect it. 'You'll lose them'.

'Sorry.' He backed away sheepishly.

'You should be,' she muttered. 'I can't eat this now.'

'Get something tasty from the cafeteria,' Stacey offered, sucking red-rope liquorice provocatively.

'These damn heels give me blisters.' Sissy slipped them off, wincing. 'Can you go for me?'

'Oh, it'd be an honour, Your Majesty.' She bowed, smirking (a family trait).

'Mia,' the ice statue fixed her gaze on me, 'would you mind?'

Something passed between the twins.

'Um, okay.'

'Oh, isn't she a sweetheart?' Sissy cooed. 'Garden Salad – nix the dressing. Pay you back *mañana*.'



GARDEN SALAD NOT AVAILABLE.

Alarm bells stared to ring – literally, from a car outside – and then stopped.

But the offending sign still stared me in the face. Tuna and Greek Salads were nestled happily in their see-through plastic beds, stacked high next to Garden Salad's empty row. I rubbed my forehead, feeling a lettuce-related headache seep through the back of my skull.

'Tough call, huh? Tuna or Greek.' The glasses-wearing art-class boy had appeared at my elbow. 'Need a hand deciding?'

'What, should I paint their pictures?' My words were tart. 'Thanks, I can handle this.'

He flicked me an amused smile and began commentating into an imaginary microphone. 'Folks, tonight's match is proving to be a doozy. In the red corner we have Greek Salad: the sharp salty goodness of olive and feta cheese calmed by robust sweet tomato. And in the blue corner, Tuna Salad: chunks of flavoursome sea life, enveloped in naughty-but-nice mayonnaise. The gloves are off in the battle of healthy lunch options at Silver Street High.'

'I said I didn't need your help,' I said sharply, refusing to be amused.

Unperturbed, he shoved the microphone in my face. 'Mia Mannix, from your position ringside tell the folks at home who you think will take the crown.'

'I... I don't know.' I imagined Sissy's cold disapproval of either choice, eyes flashing like a pirate's cutlass catching the moonlight before claiming a life. 'I need a Garden one!'

'Mia, the words "it's only salad" are flashing above you in large neon letters.'

'You don't understand!' I wailed. 'If I buy the wrong one...'

'Okay, okay!' Hands waved to quell my outburst. 'Look, I bought a Garden Salad yesterday and only had a few bites 'cause it lacked charisma and charm. Let's buy a Greek Salad, fill out my Garden Salad, and ta-da! One Super Salad Solution.'

I couldn't help but crack a smile. Boy Wonder dipped his head in the direction of some stairs. I found myself falling in step beside him.

He walked with the deliberate quickness of a cat on a kill. Sneaking a glance at his face, I got the distinct impression of self-assured intelligence, a million thoughts jostling under the

surface. His eyes darted to take in the content of every poster pinned to the noticeboards and the details of every person we passed. It felt as if we were on a spy mission.

‘Here we are.’ He stopped, stuck a key in a door covered with faded stickers, and peered at me through narrowed eyes. ‘Can you keep a secret?’

‘No complaints so far.’ Okay, so I’d never had anyone to keep secrets for, but that sounded cooler.

‘Excellent.’

The door swung open to reveal a windowless room crammed with junk of all shapes and sizes: mad scientist’s lab meets burgled op-shop. Stuffed red parakeets regarded me from a swinging wooden cage, while a mound of expressionless mannequins lay disinterestedly in a heap. Stacks of ancient magazines were piled haphazardly on top of the computers in the corner, threatening to topple with the faintest breeze. Old movie posters were Blu-tacked clumsily to the wall – swooning French lovers frozen in infatuation and impassioned martial-arts men sworn to bloody revenge.

A whiteboard with dates and deadlines scribbled on it seemed to be the only thing representing any kind of order.

‘Welcome to my office.’ The boy hastily swiped some empty takeaway containers into an overflowing bin. ‘Actually, it’s the school newspaper’s office but given it’s a one-man-show, I claim it as my own. Emil Allen, editor extraordinaire.’

I gestured to the picture that hung above his desk: a large, black-and-white photograph of two naked women, both covered in paint, one dragging the other across a big canvas in front of an audience of well-dressed onlookers. ‘Jugs out for art. Is this the secret that gets you through the day?’

He glanced at the picture, unsure if I was impressed or offended.

‘That’s Yves Klein. French guy. Used to make artworks by using, ah, human paintbrushes.’ He shot me a furrowed-brow look. ‘I thought you’d be into artists like him. I mean, your dad . . .’

‘. . . Uses stock-standard, totally inanimate paintbrushes,’ I quipped. ‘So where’s this secret?’

He whistled. ‘Libby! We have company.’

A tiny brown puppy emerged from a pile of cushions, yawning.

‘Omigod, a puppy!’ I squealed. She tumbled over to Emil, yapping until he scooped her up. ‘Shhh,’ he reprimanded her gently. ‘Stealth-like, remember? We’re in enemy territory.’ She sneezed and looked up at Emil in surprise. ‘I found her a few days ago in a cardboard box. I think someone was trying to get rid of her.’

‘Wow, that’s a real lose-faith-in-humanity moment.’ Warm little licks covered my hand. ‘She’s so cute.’

‘Hold her. I’ll fix you that salad.’

She settled into my arms, pillow-soft and puppy-fat.

‘So, who ya buying lunch for?’ he asked. ‘Hot date?’

‘Sissy Jackson.’ Whose brother is the hottest date in the world, I added silently.

‘Really?’ He glanced over at me in surprise.

‘What?’

‘Nothing . . .’

‘C’mon, what?’

‘Nothing!’

‘Don’t make me hurt zee puppy,’ I busted out my best Russian bad guy accent.

‘It’s just . . . those girls have more agendas than the UN.’ He sealed the made-over salad and slid it into a paper bag.

I rolled my eyes. ‘Lemme guess – the popular girls are the bitchiest? I’ve seen that movie. But they’re the only people who’ve actually talked to me.’

He raised his eyebrows at me. His eyes were the same colour as mine – green. Not emerald, but not olive either.

‘Okay, okay,’ I conceded. ‘*You’re* talking to me too.’

‘Plus, their “band” sucks in a mind-blowingly awful way. When I think about their last few shows . . .’ he shuddered. ‘Let’s just say my therapist thinks I still have a long way to go. Anyway, you’d better get going.’

He grinned as he pulled open the heavy door for me. ‘If Sissy gets upset, she sheds her human skin and starts eating babies.’

The end-of-lunch, beginning-of-assembly bell was ringing as I raced back to double trouble.

‘Sorry, I got talking to Emil someone-or-other,’ I apologised, offering Sissy the salad. ‘You guys know him?’

‘No,’ Sissy muttered, opening the bag sceptically.

‘Yes, we do,’ exclaimed Stacey. ‘He interviewed us last year for the school paper – that story about twins having ESP.’

‘Oh yeah.’ Sissy addressed with me with authority. ‘He tested us and it turns out we have it. ESP. Extra Special Privilege. I guess it just goes with being a twin,’ she shrugged, sniffing. ‘Mia, you smell weird. Like a dog.’

The girls dissolved into giggles as we were instructed to make our way to the quadrangle for assembly.

As the headmistress, Mrs Kapranos, an elegant if intimidating woman in her fifties, rambled on about welcoming us all to another exciting school year, Yoplait (Gillian) squeezed down next to us, receiving a disapproving glare from Mr Rochester. Her apologetic smile morphed into a snarl as soon as he turned his back.

'I heard they asked Nicole Moretti to be Head Girl for our year,' Gillian murmured to Stacey. 'After You Know Who got busted.'

Stacey nodded, glancing nervously at her twin, who was absorbed in writing a text.

'They kicked, ah, You Know Who off Social Committee too,' Stacey whispered back. 'I haven't seen her all day . . .'

'It's cool, guys.' Sissy snapped her phone shut, her voice bright and hard. 'You can say her name in front of me.' She raised her voice defiantly. 'Lexie: the cow who screwed my boyfriend!'

'That is *enough*.' Rocho glared fiercely at us. 'Another word and you can continue this conversation in detention.'

Apologies were mumbled with faux-humility as we turned our attention to the front.

'A reminder: your Battle of the Band entries are due tomorrow. Quiet, please.' Mrs Kapranos waved down the whistles and yelps. 'The music staff will choose four bands from the entries submitted. Those four bands will then play in Silver Street High's official heat. The winner of the heat will play in the state final. Direct any questions to the coordinator, Mrs Prisk, after assembly'. A severe-looking woman with a cat's bum mouth nodded at us primly.

'Star Sisters are gonna *clean up*,' Stacey grinned at the others, and the three slapped hands.

'The Year 11 Head Girl has had to step down for personal reasons,' Mrs Kapranos continued. 'Therefore we've asked Nicole Moretti to take up the position. Nicole?'

Bodies rustled as necks craned.

'Nicole?' Mrs Kapranos asked into the microphone. 'I spoke to her this morning . . .'

'I'm here.'

Eyes turned to the back of the assembly to follow the assertive voice.

'No. Freakin'. Way.' said the twins in unison.

Strutting down the centre of the assembly like it was a Milan catwalk, was sex itself. Glossy chestnut-brown hair slipped and slid off tan shoulders, tickling a plunging neckline. Boobs jiggled. Hips wiggled. Boys whistled and the twins' jaws hit the floor.

The girl took her place at the microphone, letting a slow smile grow as she scanned the waiting assembly.

'What happened to netball skirts and greasy hair?' exclaimed Stacey.

'Damn, she got some wicked style.' Sissy turned to Gillian and gave her a once-over. 'Sorry, babe. Star Sister's line-up just changed.'

'What?' Gillian gawked. 'Are you for real!? I spent all summer learning those routines! Stace?'

Stacey studied her manicure intently, as Gillian's eyes burnt with girl fury.

'Hate the game, not the player,' Sissy purred.

Gillian grabbed her clutch and stormed off. Sissy sighed delicately. 'Survival of the fittest, Mia. Live and learn.'



If a warlock cast a spell on a wayward magpie, ordering it to instruct children on the ways of the written word, that'd be our English teacher, Mrs Metcalf. She was small and shrunken, her black hair pulled into a tight bun. Older than your mum, younger than your gran, she hopped about the classroom excitedly.

'This is such a waste of time,' Sissy moaned. 'Seriously,

how is learning about some dead guy's plays gonna help me score a role opposite Channing Tatum?'

'Who's Channing Tatum?' I asked.

Sissy looked at me as though I'd just offered to amuse her by eating my own head.

'*Hamlet!*' Mrs Metcalf warbled. 'Shakespeare's most famous play. A tale of bloody revenge, terrible tragedy, supernatural intervention and . . .'

The classroom door swung open, and there, with the sun streaming in behind her, stood Lexie. She was dressed in the same clothes she'd worn yesterday, but now they were crumpled, like she'd slept in them.

Nudges and glances swept through the room. Sissy stiffened.

Mrs Metcalf addressed the latecomer dryly, 'Lexie. So glad you could join us.'

Lexie slid into the last seat, a few rows over from us.

'Right,' Metcalf continued. 'I trust you've all read the play over summer.'

'*Tramp,*' Sissy coughed deftly into her hand, causing a stronger ripple to run through the class.

Lexie stared ahead, seemingly impervious as Mrs Metcalf twittered on, 'Tell me about it. Hands in the air, please.'

We shifted in our seats: inmates unwilling to squeal.

Michael from art class raised his hand. 'I subscribe to the Homer Simpson theory. That *Hamlet* was made into *Ghostbusters*. That's right, isn't it?'

We sniggered, and Metcalf frowned. 'Anyone else? Yes, Lexie?'

The girl in question stuck her chin out. 'I feel sorry for Ophelia. She's into Hamlet but he's *so* not into her.' She looked directly at Sissy, her voice soaked in scorn. 'It's like

her only worth or purpose is defined by guys. And then she drowns herself. That's so sad.'

Metcalf nodded enthusiastically, unaware of Sissy's seething. 'Very interesting observation, Lexie. Ophelia is torn between the demands of her father and the demands of Hamlet. You could say she sees her value determined by their approval. Yes, Sissy?'

'Mrs Metcalf, is it true Ophelia and Hamlet were lovers?'

'It's hinted at,' Metcalf chose her words carefully, 'but the nature of their relationship is never made clear. It's up to your interpretation.'

'Really?' replied Sissy innocently. 'I thought everyone knew she was sleeping around.'

Someone up the back laughed, quickly turning it into a cough. Sissy caught Lexie's eye. Smiling prettily, she slid her middle finger delicately across her throat and held it up in Lexie's direction. Lexie snarled back, ready for a fight.

Something was *definitely* rotten at Silver Street High . . .