

PART ONE

BEFORE



Chapter One

My brain is just a bag of soup and potato waffles at the best of times.

I'm terrible at comebacks. Until I get home and replay everything in the shower. Then I come up with something absolutely brilliant, that would crumble empires, subvert black holes, and make passersby stop and bow to me in their amazement.

But at the time, I just melt into gormlessness.

There's a squelchy silence.

A steady stream of sweat is running from my neck all the way down into my pants, because Janis-and-Ella – resident ingrown pubic hairs – have decided to ruin my life again.

I made the textbook error of asking Michelle Baguma for a pen, because Nev didn't have a spare. Michelle, a normal person with an abnormal number of pens, went to give me said pen, before Ella cut in with, 'Are you sure you don't want *scissors*, Mel?' and Janis did a very crude and alarmingly inaccurate scissoring gesture and made the whole thing very uncomfortable.

The excessive sweating is not helped by the fact that it's thirty degrees outside, which is exactly seven degrees warmer than my feeble body can handle. Unfortunately, a few days ago the fan in our classroom made a cartoon cough and spluttered out.

It's January, by the way.

In Wiltshire.

Which is fine.

It hasn't rained in over a year. I'm not worried about it, though. Knowing England, it's probably just storing up all the rain for a sun-free thirty-five years or something. Right now, I'm much more bothered by the Raging Homophobe Problem.

I've been the only out lesbian in our school, and quite possibly the surrounding thousand miles, since Year Eight. Janis and Ella have always been determined to make it a problem, even though it's *2031*, and no one else cares. They watch me like hawks, and if I so much as look at a girl, they dig their scaly talons in and shred me to pieces.

Ella and I actually used to be best friends in primary school, if you'd believe it.

Once upon a time, she was chicken nuggets and friendship bracelets and dinosaurs in the garden. We did literally everything together, including a borderline obsessive amount of 'kissing practice' at sleepovers.

When we got to secondary school, she was already

gorgeous and had snuggled all the way up Janis's arse. But I met Nev that summer, and they have a certain way of eclipsing other people's bullshit, so I didn't think too much about it.

Sometimes, I consider yelling to the whole school that Ella's a giant, filthy hypocrite, and a gobby kisser to boot. But I don't think anyone would believe that Ella 'Hates the Gays' Garcia ever snogged a girl.

Especially not if that girl was me.

I look at the clock. Just five more sweaty, toxic minutes and we can get out of here to breathe real oxygen.

And see Sasha. My best friend. The future mother of my children.

Probably.

(Hopefully.)

Nev nudges their shoulder into me. They're wearing a heavily jewelled, sky-blue silk saree today, just to come to triple psychology. Which could be seen as a *little* extra, but then Nev isn't exactly known for flying under the radar.

'Just another year, Mel,' they murmur. 'Then we can move to Bristol or something.'

Nev and I sort of fell together as the only obvious queers in our school, and have been plotting our escape from the Capital of Clean-Shirt Heteronormativity ever since.

I smile. 'Anywhere but here.'

‘Anywhere but here. As long as you’re not the only lesbian. I can’t bear to watch you pine after straight girls anymore.’ Nev’s cheek dimples and I give them a small shove.

‘It’s just the one straight girl, actually.’

The bell goes and we’re out of our seats in less than three seconds.

We meet Sasha at the school gates. She’s wearing a crop top and a pair of high-waisted denim shorts that hug her full figure and make my heart twitch. She bounds over on her tiny little legs, pulling me into a hug and immediately recoiling when she touches my back, and I want to throw myself under a bus.

Being in love with my best friend is such an exhausting cliché.

‘Mel, how are you so sweaty?’ Sasha rubs her palms on her shorts and laughs and I feel like my stomach might fall out.

‘The fan’s broken, and Janis and Ella were, you know, *themselves*,’ says Nev.

‘They seem nice! You guys are always so quick to judge.’

‘Honestly, Sash, they’re like if Miss Trunchbull had a two-headed baby with Regina George and capitalism,’ I say.

Sasha rolls her eyes at Nev.

They shrug. ‘They are the worst, to be fair.’

We always head down to Sasha’s house at lunchtime,

because she lives about five minutes from school, and her mum is the Queen of Snacks. Sasha links her arm through mine, and I try to keep my brain from slipping into fantasies.

I fail, of course.

I think about her inviting me and Nev over for a sleepover, but Nev can't make it, so Sasha starts running her fingers through my hair and leaning in to kiss me and realising that it should feel so wrong but it feels so right and she loves me and we'll talk at length about our future dog and our sweet little flat in the city and we'll get matching tattoos and Mum will walk me down the aisle and Sasha will be wearing the most beautiful white dress and she'll be glowing the way she always does and maybe we're even going to have a baby and the whole time she'll let me touch her boobs and . . .

'Mel? Did you see the news?' Sasha has that *you haven't been listening to me, have you?* face.

I look at Nev for clues, who just grins and raises their perfect eyebrows at me. I give them my best *you're an asshole* glare. 'Um. No. What news?'

'Apparently it's snowing in Australia. In *January*. It's like the planet has turned upside down.' Sasha's eyebrows are scrunched so closely together that she looks like an adorable angry little Stalin.

'I wonder if anyone's knitting jumpers for the kangaroos.'

'Mel, this is serious!' Sasha gives my arm a little thump.

'Sorry, I know. It's just too much to think about.'

‘We haven’t discussed *war* in a while. Any takers?’ Nev does that half-mouth smile that makes it obvious why they’re so popular with boys.

Most of Sasha’s street is Victorian terraced houses with crumbling facades. Then there’s Sasha’s ultra-modern, violently white, detached mega-house, that looks like it was dropped there by mistake.

Sasha scrambles up onto the immaculate granite counter-tops, made from freshly erupted vegan lava or something, and opens all the cupboards.

‘How have they already eaten all the crisps? Mum literally sent us a food order yesterday!’ She wriggles down off the counter with her arms full of biscuits.

She’s referring to her seven-year-old twin brothers, Sam and Paddy, who are registered terrorists. Paddy is short for Paddington and his middle name is genuinely *Bear*, because apparently when people get rich, they get stupid. I wouldn’t be surprised if Sam was short for Samsung.

Their mum orders in a tonne of food that doesn’t require cooking because she’s always working. I’m not sure exactly what she does, but she wears a blazer and a frown and goes for business trips in Italy, taking the twins’ young and chiselled father with her. She makes enough money for this house to do lots of random sexy things automatically, like turn off taps and hobs and dim the lights.

The greatest feat of technology in my house is a wooden spoon.

Because her mother is always busy, Sasha is basically Sam and Paddy's mum. Which definitely doesn't make me think about what a wonderful mother she would be to our perfect adopted children, Tegan, Sara and La Roux, who we will raise genderless and encourage to engage in extra-curricular activities.

'To be fair, you need to find a better hiding spot than the top shelf of the cupboard.' Nev pulls out a Greek salad arranged into lettuce, tomatoes, feta, cucumber, olives and dressing in different sections in a Tupperware box. They catch my pointed look. 'Hey, it goes soggy otherwise.'

I take a bite out of my cheese-on-cheese-on-white-bread sandwich and chew with my mouth open at them.

Sasha drops her biscuit mountain onto the breakfast bar and sits down. She bites her lip as she scrolls through her phone. 'Another species of bee has just been declared extinct! That's four this month alone!'

I sigh pointedly, picking up the extra fork Nev put on the table and stabbing at a bit of their feta. They started putting out extra cutlery a few years ago because they do *not* appreciate it when I shove my 'flaky eczema hands' in their lunch. For an only child so anal about Tupperware box compartments, Nev is surprisingly generous when it comes to food.

I spike a bit of tomato on my fork and watch Sasha who looks like she's about to fall into her phone.

Honestly. If I wasn't so hopelessly devoted to those little worry lines, I would get really flubbing sick of her 'World is Ending' talk.

It's just a really hot January.

Life is basically normal.

It's fine.