

CHAPTER ONE

We're talking about celebrity crushes when I see her for the first time. The tall girl in the fancy suit with the long red hair that falls, shiny and straight, down to the small of her back. She's standing a few metres from us, looking down at her phone, leaning against the sixth-form building that we're making our way towards.

'I'm just saying,' Katie insists, blonde ponytail swinging as she whirls round to stop us in our tracks, like this is the most important conversation we'll ever have. 'Every girl's got a list of female celebrities they think are fit. That doesn't make me a lesbian – it just makes me a person with eyes.'

She's looking at each of us in turn, like she's waiting for one of us to back her up, but I can't take my eyes off the fancy-suit girl. I've never seen her before, which is weird. It might be our first day as sixth-formers, but we've been going to this school for half a decade now and we know everyone in our year. And she's got to be in our year because she's wearing sixth-form clothes. Even if she does seem to have taken the 'black and white officewear' instruction a bit more

seriously than the rest of us, in our multipack Primark white shirts and black jeans.

‘That would make you a bit of a lesbian, Katie.’ Lily’s voice draws my attention back to the conversation briefly. ‘Like, one woman, *maybe*, but having a whole list is fairly high up there on the gayness scale, you know?’

Maybe she’s in the year above? But we know most of the people in upper sixth too. I’ve definitely never seen her before.

‘It’s called the Kinsey Scale, actually,’ Mel interjects, and everyone rolls their eyes except Jas, who I don’t reckon is even capable of rolling her eyes. I think all the muscles required to do it just didn’t form in her, and went instead to whichever muscles you need to smile warmly at somebody.

My eyes flick back to the suit girl. She puts her phone into her pocket and seems to shrink into herself as soon as she no longer has something to occupy her, reaching up to tuck her hair behind her ears, eyes darting across the school grounds too quickly to land on anything.

‘You’re telling me –’ Katie is in full flow – ‘that if some dead fit celebrity walked up to you right now and was like, *come to my mansion in Hollywood, and we’ll adopt a dog together*, you’d all be picky about gender?’

‘The question would be whether or not you’re *actually* attracted to them,’ Jas says, as if this is genuinely a burning question that Katie needs help with instead of just some sidenote about having celebrity girl crushes that we somehow stumbled upon. ‘Acknowledging that a celebrity is classically

gorgeous isn't necessarily gay, but if you could see yourself, like, actually *fancying* them, then you might want to give your identity some thought.'

I watch as the girl practically melts with relief as Mrs Anderson, the head of sixth form, approaches her. The girl reaches out to extend a hand, all formal and delicate, and Mrs Anderson shakes it, a little taken aback. They're saying something to each other now, but we're still too far away to hear them.

'Well, yeah, I'm *attracted* to them –' Katie rolls her eyes – 'but not in, like, a gay way.'

I snort, and she zeroes in on me.

'Was wondering how long it'd take for you to have an opinion, Lou.'

'Yeah, you're not spouting your usual fountain of shit,' Lily teases. 'You feeling okay?' Jas gives her a gentle swat about the head for that.

I shrug and start walking again. 'Depends on the celebrity.'

'Well, that's not even the point.' Katie sounds exasperated as she hurries to keep up with me. 'The point is that there are some women who are so fit they transcend gender.' I snort again, but she ignores it. 'Women are better looking than men; that's just a universal truth.'

'Nah. First of all, I've seen some of the weirdos on your celebrity crush list, so you might want to re-evaluate your concept of *universal truth*,' I point out, finally tearing my eyes away from the tall girl in the suit. 'And second, your concept of celebrity

is, like, alt-girl indie singers. If we're doing absolute fantasy scenarios, I'm defo going for, like, an Oscar-winning actress or something.'

'Calling it a fantasy *definitely* makes you a bit of a lesbian,' Lily says, wrinkling her nose.

When I look back, the girl in the suit is gone.

Katie groans. 'But see, that just proves my point.' She looks far more disgruntled than the conversation really warrants, to be honest. 'Even Lou gets it, and she's the straightest person I know. Just ask Jay Henderson,' she says, walking backwards to open the door to the sixth-form building. 'And Tom Bryson. And Ollie Wyatt. And—'

'All right!' Jas laughs, giving Katie a gentle shove through the door. 'She gets the point.'

'Yeah,' I scoff, following the others into the common room, 'the point being that I'm a massive heterosexual and a bit of a slag, apparent!— Oh, hiya, Mrs Anderson.'

The others have all stopped, too, giving little waves and awkward smiles to Mrs Anderson, who's standing right in front of us, the suit girl in tow.

'Hello, girls,' Mrs Anderson says, trepidation in her voice that suggests she definitely heard the end of that conversation. Good start to sixth form, really.

'I was hoping to find you all,' she presses on. 'We've got a new student this year, Isabel Williams here. She's just moved to Liverpool from *London*, and I was thinking you girls would be perfect to welcome her to the school.'

The way she says London is like it's some magical land, and we should all be wildly impressed.

'Eloise.' Mrs Anderson turns to me, and I try not to wince at the use of my full name. 'You two have English literature together with Ms Price this year, so I thought you in particular could be helpful to Isabel.'

'Er, yeah, sure,' I say as if sixth form isn't already going to be A Lot. As if there isn't already so much pressure to do well this year.

'Great. So, Isabel, this is Eloise Byrne, Jasmine Olowe, Melanie Powell, Lily Hyun and Katie Fletcher. These girls are inseparable, but I'm sure they'll be lovely and welcoming.'

The girl – Isabel – offers a tense smile as Mrs Anderson leaves her standing awkwardly with us, clutching a pile of papers: timetables and maps and term calendars by the looks of things.

'Nice to meet you,' says Jas, beaming. Isabel just grimaces back. Jas, social butterfly that she is, barely misses a beat. 'Mrs Anderson insists on calling everyone by their full names, but you can call me Jas, and Mel can't stand being called Melanie, and Lou thinks Eloise makes her sound like the heroine in a period drama.'

'Yeah, and not in the sexy *Bridgerton* kind of way, either,' I explain, 'but in, like, a *never see another person naked until you marry your cousin, have sex once, have a child, then grow old alone on the secluded moors* kind of way.'

She winces while I'm speaking. Like actually winces. I know I have a bad habit of not knowing when to shut up, but isn't it

polite to at least *pretend* not to have second-hand embarrassment about it?

‘We’ve actually got English lit first lesson,’ I say to her, rocking back on my heels after the silence has stretched out a bit too long. ‘I can show you around before if you want?’

She looks at me like I’ve just threatened to murder her entire family or something. Her eyes go wide and her lips form such a tight line they basically disappear. But she nods, albeit tersely, and I wave her onwards before turning back to my friends.

‘Anyone got a free third lesson?’

‘Me,’ Lily and Mel say in unison.

‘Fab, see youse in here then? And, everyone else – caff at lunch?’

They all nod, and I shepherd the new girl further into the sixth-form building.

‘I like your hair,’ she blurts out suddenly as we turn a corner away from everyone else. And for a second I barely even register the compliment, I’m so distracted by her accent.

I remember when Lily started going out with this lad from Southport. Massive posho, went to that all-boys’ grammar school and lived in one of those big white-bricked houses that he was always throwing parties in. We mocked him – and her, by association – mercilessly for months, for being a wool. Every time he opened his mouth, he’d say something that sounded so unbearably posh, and we’d just lose it. But this girl is on a different level entirely. I kind of didn’t really think people actually spoke like that in real life.

‘Oh, thanks,’ is all I say, tugging at the ends of my hair. ‘It defo wasn’t supposed to look like this,’ I add with a nervous laugh because, well, when have I ever known when to stop talking? ‘I dyed it blue at the end of last year because the teachers were too busy trying to make sure we all got our GCSEs to actually crack down on the no-crazy-hair-colours rule, and I forgot to keep up with it this summer so the roots grew out, and then I got it cut short, and it kinda worked.’

I run my hands through the hair in question, like I might be able to feel the place where the natural dark brown melds into turquoise round the tips of my ears, the ends, splintered from the copious amounts of bleach I used, just brushing my jawline.

‘This is the sixth-form building, by the way. Not much to show. We’ve basically just walked round the whole thing. This is the study area; that bit we were just in is like a common-room-lounge type of situation. Just don’t go upstairs – that’s where the nuns live.’

She looks at me like she’s not sure if she should laugh.

‘Not a joke,’ I say, smiling a little at her expression. ‘That’s actually where they live. There’s only, like, three left, and they’re all retired from teaching. But y’know –’ I shrug – ‘can’t exactly kick ’em out.’

She does laugh then, just a bit, a surprised little hiccup that makes her press her fingertips to her mouth like she might be able to hide that it had happened in the first place. I suppress a grin of my own while I check the time on my phone.

‘Lessons are all in the main school building, though. I’ll show you the way to English now, and then we can figure out the rest after?’

She just nods, and we head back outside, cutting over the grass to the main building, and I start to feel antsy and nervous again in the silence that settles.

‘*Sooo*, London?’ I ask as we weave through the hallways.

She just nods, which – fair enough. It’s not like it was an intelligent question or anything.

‘Whereabouts?’ I ask as if I know anywhere in London apart from the Monopoly squares. ‘These are the big loos, by the way. There’s a few more single ones around, but there’s never a queue for these.’

‘Hampstead,’ she says, her voice tight.

‘Oh, nice.’ I have no idea if it’s nice. But, based on her suit and her accent and her general *everything*, it’s probably safe to assume it is.

‘Yeah, it was.’

Squeaking of shoes against the wooden floors. Distant footsteps of a few early birds down the hall. Tumbleweed somewhere probably.

‘That’s the office through there, but you’ve probably already been there for enrolment stuff. You don’t seem thrilled about leaving. Why’d you move?’

‘My mum’s office is setting up a new headquarters in Liverpool. My brother goes to university up here, so Mum volunteered to relocate. I didn’t really get a say in the matter.’

I hadn't thought it possible, but her voice gets even tighter then, dripping with resentment, like I personally forced her to move here.

'Oh. Cool that you get to stay near your brother, though. You two close?'

'Yes, very.'

'Neat.' I actually say that. *Neat*. 'Er, this is us. Ms Price's classroom. We're a bit early, but we can go in now, since it's the first lesson of the day.'

She just nods and takes a seat in the back corner of the classroom, next to the window. I park myself in the desk beside her, drumming my fingers on the surface, the sound feeling deafening in the silence.

All right, cool. So we're done, I guess. Because she's staring intently out of the window, turned so far away from me that it almost looks uncomfortable for her to be sitting like that. Which I'm obviously not going to take to heart or anything. It's fine. It's not like I'm *incapable* of sitting in silence or anything.