Chapter One

Even if I hadn't woken up this morning to find fourteen missed calls, seven *Where the hell are you when I need you?* texts and one tearful voice mail on my iPhone saying something *totally* terrible had happened and to get my bony butt into town, like, yesterday, as I hurry along the pavement to our Starbucks rendezvous I can immediately tell from Mia's body language she's super-stressed.

She's ahead of me, slumped into one of the silver chairs outside the coffee shop, puffing away on a ciggie in her right hand, stabbing the keys of her moby with her left thumb, a beaded flip-flopped foot jerking up and down like a frog on a hotplate. So violent is the ankle jerking, I'm seriously worried the flip-flop might fly off the end of her foot and hurtle out into the traffic, causing some startled motorist to swerve with shock and crush an innocent tourist against a waste bin.

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Not that that would worry Mia. I'd bet my birthday Mulberry Bayswater bag (silver cracked leather, cost an absolute bomb, but, as Mum said to Dad when he went ballistic over the price, you're only fourteen once) she'd pick her way through the carnage, retrieve the stray footwear and carry on with whatever she was doing before the flip-flop fiasco, unless of course said bin victim was a lush lad, and then she might try and flirt with him, even if he was injured and unconscious.

And I'm *totally* not making this up. Mia Howard is the most self-absorbed, screwed-up, flirtatious, bitchy drama queen I've ever met, which makes it well weird that she and I are supposed to be bezzies. And before you think I have something in common with this brunette bundle of bitchiness, I should point out that I didn't *choose* to be best friends with Mia: Dad told me to.

Just over a year ago, Jonathan Howard (Dad's accountant at Aspland & Stratton) confessed he was at his wits' end because his only child had been thrown out of *another* school. Yet again, Mia had committed a long list of expellable offences: smoking in a chemistry class; swigging booze from a voddy bottle in assembly; flashing her sports bra at the games mistress and asking her if she fancied girls. So Dad suggested Mia come to Park Hill, not just because it's a totally fab school with a stylish

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uniform and stunning grounds, but because they'd also managed to keep my older sister, Portia, from going *completely* off the rails, something that seemed a possibility when she'd come home aged fifteen with a stud in her nose, a ladybird permanently inked on her bum and her blonde hair dyed black and shaved to within a millimetre of her scalp. Dad tried to sue both the hairdresser and the tattoo parlour for not asking for ID, but it turned out Portia had flashed a fake card she'd made in a computer design workshop at school. Anyway, big sis is about to go into the sixth form at Park, the hole in her nose looks like a freckle, and as long as she doesn't flash her butt-bug at an interview, she's on track to go to uni to study art.

So when Dad made me promise to be friends with Mia (in exchange for a twenty-five per cent increase in my allowance), I was lumbered with showing Park Hill's newest pupil the ropes, providing her with an instant social life amongst my group of friends known as The Glossy Posse, not just because we're supposed to be teen models in the making, but because we feel studying style and grooming is just as important as studying for GCSEs.

I say lumbered, but at first it wasn't hard to be friends with Mia. I felt sorry for her when she turned up looking all anxious and vulnerable with her little pale face, long

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conker-coloured hair and wide brown eyes.

I feel sorry about lots of things: dead birds on the side of the road; old ladies who can't walk very well; a bit of chicken left uneaten on a plate as I fret that the chook has died in vain. But dead birds, old birds and cooked birds don't continually wind up other girls by flirting with their boyfriends or making snarky remarks about their looks, something Mia does all the time. It's been a pretty full-on job being friends with her, but every time I've moaned to Dad about how high-maintenance she is, he's reminded me of my promise – and the extra cash.

'You OK?' I say, touching Mia's skinny shoulder as I sit down.

I scan her face for signs of major crying-induced trauma. There's no hint of redness or puffiness around her eyes, just the usual mega-dose of black eyeliner and smudged mascara.

'Thank God you're here,' she gasps, brushing fag ash off her jeans.

'So, what's happened?' I ask. After a brisk walk, a train journey and more high-speed striding, all in heels, I'm peckish and parched. But Mia's already got a drink (a Frappuccino by the looks of it), and she's in such a tizz, it would seem rude to leave her so distressed for a biscotti and iced beverage.

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She grinds her ciggie on to the silver tabletop, slurps a slug of coffee through the straw and says gravely, 'Dom is dead.'

'Oh, Mia!' I can feel tears spring to my eyes as my stomach lurches at this shocking news. 'You poor thing!'

Everyone but Mia loathes Mia's boyfriend of eight weeks, Dominic Harper. Like my boyfriend, Oliver Simons, Dom is about to start Year 11 at Pilgrims College, but unlike Ollie, Dom thinks of himself as a total stud muffin, which is weird given that he's short, squat, has no neck and if he had a ring through his nose he'd be the spitting image of a bull. But just because he thinks he's a hit with the chicks and is challenged in the neck department, doesn't mean I want him dead.

'That's terrible,' I sympathize. 'When?'

'Last night.' She flips open a white and gold packet of Marlboro Lights and shakes a cigarette on to the table. 'We had a row, he stormed off, and *that's* when it happened.'

Both Mia's legs start pumping up and down as she tries to light the white stick. Her hands are shaking so much I'm concerned the flame from her lighter will miss the end of the ciggie and set fire to her long fringe, requiring me to extinguish the flames with Frappuccino.

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All sorts of Dom death scenarios are running through my mind: Murder? Overdose? A Spanish matador roaming the streets and mistaking him for an escaped bull, driving a stake through his heart?

'How?' I say, gently touching Mia's arm. 'Unless you don't want to talk about it.'

'Of course I want to talk about it,' she snaps, pulling her arm away and finally lighting the cigarette. 'Why do you think I called you?'

'Soz,' I say, remembering that I'd read in a magazine that people react to death in different ways, and that anger is the third stage of grief, although Mia seems to have got through the shock and denial stage pretty quickly. 'What happened?'

'It started with Cameron Diaz, moved on to you and ended up with Two Ton Jess,' Mia growls.

'Me?' I squeak. I have no idea what possible connection there can be between Dom pegging it, a glossy blonde Hollywood star with legendary lengthy legs, yours truly (long legs, long blonde hair but hardly in the same league as Cam) and Jessica Fawcett, the chubby girl with bright red hair and humungous thighs who rides my pony, Polly, partly because for the last four months all my free time has been spent with Ollie, but mainly because I've lost my nerve when it comes to sitting on top of a

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quivering beast who farts constantly. 'What's Dom got to do with me?'

Mia takes another slurp of her Frappuccino and sighs as if I should instantly solve this strange leg-themed triangle.

'We went to the flicks last night and before the film came on there was this trailer for some stupid rom-com thing with the Diaz bitch. Dom said he really fancied her, as in, shaggable fancied.'

'So?' I shrug, thinking that a squat-necked fifteen-year-old schoolboy like Dom wouldn't even feature as a blip on glam Cam's radar.

'He wants to shag a woman old enough to be his mother!' Mia shrieks so loudly that some of the other morning caffeine-slurpers and smokers turn round and give us dirty looks.

The pavement tables are buzzing with foreign tourists and the queue is snaking back through the door, but presumably even if you are German, Japanese or from Outer Mongolia, you recognize using the words *shag* and *mother* in the same sentence is pretty shocking.

'And then he says, all right, if you want me to choose someone I'd shag nearer my own age, your mate Daisy Davenport would do nicely. She's babelicious.'

I can feel the skimmed milk from my breakfast wild

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berry organic muesli curdle in my stomach at the thought that Dominic Harper has even considered me in that way, and make a mental note *never* to let Mia bring Dom round if we're planning to use the pool and I'm wearing a bikini.

'So, we had this mega row about whether you were sexier than me. You won. I pelted him with popcorn and the manager asked us to leave. Dom stormed off and left me and then snogged that freckled freak that hangs around the stables. Only this time she was hanging around the kebab shop in Copperfield Street, stuffing her chubby chops with a doner and chips.'

Jessica Fawcett goes to Bensham High, a huge mixed comprehensive school in town, but Mia knows her because, although she's not keen on horses, she once had the hots for a stable lad who worked at Pegasus, the place where I keep Polly, until said stable lad made it clear he fancied the horses more than her, at which point Mia told him he was a pervy dwarf who smelt of horse dung and would never find a girlfriend who didn't neigh and wear a saddle.

'And Jessica killed him?' Perhaps I'm becoming dehydrated and hallucinating as, even for Mia, this tale of snogging, slaying and low-rent food seems to have become mega complicated.

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'Killed who?' Mia asks.

'Dom,' I remind her. 'You said Dom's dead.'

'Dom's not dead.' Mia screws her face up and looks at me as if I'm nuts. 'Unless the shock of snogging that lump of lard has killed him. The slug rang me afterwards to fess up, only cos some Park girls saw him and didn't buy his excuse that the chubber was having an asthma attack and he was trying to give her oxygen. He said it was just a revenge snog, meant nothing and has put him off the taste of kebabs for life.'

'I thought you meant *dead* dead,' I say, wondering if now that I know Dom isn't dead I could get a drink.

'Oh, Daisy, you're so literal,' Mia says airily. 'Do you think I'd be this unhappy if Dom was in a box with brass handles? I'd be thrilled! The slime ball has stuck his tongue down that chubber's throat, a throat greasy with sliced lamb and chip fat, and expects us to carry on going out as if nothing has happened!'

'Well, it was just a kiss,' I say, thinking how devastated I'd be if Ollie went near anyone else but me.

And then suddenly I panic that with hundreds of miles and several weeks between us, Oll might be doing what Dom has done with Jess, but with someone munching a Cornish pasty rather than a kebab.

He's surfing in Cornwall at the moment, staying at his

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family's holiday cottage in Perranporth with his cousins, Lucian and Persephone. I was a bit miffed I wasn't invited too, but Ollie knows I'm scared of swimming unless it's in our heated pool, and even then I freak if some monster bug starts thrashing around in the water next to me and I'm not near the side to grab the edge and clamber out.

Our family holiday was a tense two weeks in a luxury villa in Tuscany when school broke up. Mum was upset she still looked bloated in a bikini despite rigorous dieting and a course of colonics; Portia stayed in bed under protest at being made to come when my older brother Aston was allowed to stay at home; Dad came back early because of a business emergency; and I pined for Ollie, fretting that we'd be apart for four weeks as he went away for a fortnight on the day we flew back.

'Daisy, are you listening to me?' Mia kicks me on the shin. 'Why choose *her* for a revenge snog?' Her whole body is vibrating with anger. 'I'd rather I'd turned Dom gay that have him touch that fugly cow. He said he made the first move, but then she was all over him like a rash and he couldn't escape. *That's* why I want you to sack her.'

'Sack who?'

'The ginger nut!' Mia sounds exasperated that I'm

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losing the plot. 'Tell her she's too much of a lardy-arse to ride Polly.'

My fingers start to clench into a fist, so I sit on my hands and clamp my thighs tightly over them.

Now, in the street, with Mia already in a tailspin isn't the time to reveal my true colours, to let the world know I'm not the person they think I am.

Everyone thinks I'm really nice and kind and thoughtful, the sort of girl who on seeing a spider in the bath would carefully rescue it using a glass and a magazine, whispering, 'Come here, incy wincey little spider,' whilst coaxing it to freedom, rather than the sort of hard-hearted cow who would slam a bottle of shampoo on its leg-sprouting body and rinse it down the plughole shouting, 'Die, insect! Die!'

Mostly I am nice and kind and thoughtful and scream for Dad to rescue creepy-crawlies, but at times like these I fantasize about Mia being a black arachnid scuttling around my white roll-top bath before gleefully extinguishing her with a bottle of John Frieda Sheer Blonde conditioner.

But violence with toiletries is only a delicious fantasy and is never going to happen, because I have a shameful confession to make. People *think* I'm confident and glossy, the sort of It girl who has it all, but underneath

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the naturally perky boobs, butter-coloured locks and Tuscany tan, I'm a quivering wreck of a worrying jellyfish.

Yes, my name is Daisy Davenport and I am a teenage wimp.

I don't mean I slink along with my eyes glued to the pavement watching out for ankle-wrenching potholes, or blush and stammer if someone looks in my direction. I'm not shy; I *love* talking to people, going to parties, having fun, but I've never managed the art of being assertive, of standing up for myself and saying what I *really* think, just in case it upsets someone or starts World War Three. In fact, you could say I'm just a girl who can't say *No*, which is why I'm relieved that Ollie hasn't put me in a position where I really should say *No*, though I'm starting to worry about what I'm going to say and do when his hand wanders to where I'd really rather it didn't.

I know that I need to sort myself out, I really do; I'm just too scared to do it.

Every so often I pop into WHSmith and pull out a book called *Assertiveness NOW! From Wimp to Wonderful* by Wanda-May Rubin. According to the photo and the blurb on the back of the book, as well as having scarily assertive hair that sticks up in a spiky blonde V sign,

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Ms Rubin is America's premier life coach who has: *Changed the lives of film stars, international businessmen and homemakers*, though it doesn't mention anything about schoolgirls who find it difficult to stand up for themselves and are worrying about what to do if their boyfriend tries it on.

Ms Rubin predicts that unless I learn to say what I think (in a calm and assertive way, of course), I'll either become Daisy the Doormat and be picked on, Daisy the Diseased (high blood pressure, heart problems, lots of stinking colds and crappy skin due to stress) or Daisy the Destroyer, one of those people you read about who are mouse-quiet and then walk into their nearest Burger King and start brandishing a gun, just because the kid behind the counter gave them a Double Whopper with a gherkin when the order had clearly been: *No pickles*.

So, as well as worrying about not having much confidence and whether Ollie's going to put me in a difficult position, I've now got the added angst of possibly turning into a manky-skinned murderer who'll be bullied in jail, on top of my usual worries about global warming and whether someone from al-Qaeda is going to suicide-bomb the changing rooms of Topshop when I'm trying on a Kate Moss-designed dress. And I know all this is mad, because really, if I could just get greenhouse gases

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and terrorists out of my mind, I've got nothing to worry about. Courtesy of Dad's luxury-car dealership business we're minted: we live in a fabulous house, I own more accessories than Harvey Nichols, I'm seeing totally gorge rugby captain Ollie and, unlike some teenagers, I never get spots.

But *still* I worry.

About *everything*.

From my snatched browsing I'm sure I'd find *Assertiveness NOW!* useful. The problem is, I daren't buy it in case Krystina, our Polish housekeeper, comes across it when she's tidying my knicker drawer and shows it to Mum, who'd give me the third degree over why I was reading it and thought that I needed it. So it's still in Smith's, hidden between two copies of *West Ham: The Glory Year*, somewhere no one would think to look for it.

As well as chanting one of Wanda-May's Magic Mantras, which she guarantees will give instant results – *I am wonderful! I am amazing! I can become President of the United States!* (she's on dodgy ground with the Trade Descriptions Act if she thinks anyone can instantly become prez just by saying it over and over again) – she recommends writing a diary in a calm but assertive way.

But this gives me another problem.

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I daren't.

I'm worried I'd write down all my innermost angst, be run over by a Tesco Home Delivery van on the way home from netball practice, and then Mum would find my diary once I was sparko under a white sheet on a cold metal table in the hospital morgue and, from reading all the stuff I've written, think I hate her. Which I don't – it would just seem that way because Wanda-May had told me to write assertively about all the things and people that bug me, and sometimes my family comes top of that list.

Right now, though, Mia has the number-one slot.

'Belinda Trotter at the stables lets Jess ride her, not me,' I point out feebly. 'And it would be mean. Jess loves Polly.'

'You're not going to do it?' Mia looks murderous. 'For me?'

The last time I saw her looking so angry was when I got the part of Dorothy in the school's production of *The Wizard of Oz*. Mia was furious to be cast as a munchkin, so I persuaded Miss Aplin, our drama teacher, that I'd make a rubbish Dorothy. My plan spectacularly backfired as Miss A kept Mia as a munchkin but made me play the tin man, and I fainted on stage from getting too hot in the costume.

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I can feel my body tighten up and I start to freak that this is the Gherkin Moment Wanda-May has predicted, and that I'm about to go mental with Mia's Frappuccino and start stuffing ice up her nose.

Time to defuse the situation for both our sakes.

'Oh, Mia!' I force a false-sounding laugh out of my mouth. 'You and Dom will soon be back together. You'll see.'

'I don't want him back,' Mia snorts. 'I want revenge. Tell Jessica Fawcett she's so fat, if she gets on Polly's back she'll break it.'

'I don't think *that's* very likely,' I say, still keeping with the light-hearted tactic, but removing my hands from their thigh-clamp as they've started to fizz with pins and needles. 'She's got a butt as big as a house!'

A girl in the queue next to me turns round. The most striking thing about her isn't her poured-into-deep-dyed-denim bum, which in truth *is* practically the width of the pavement, but the cloud of orangey-yellow hair piled on top of her head. She looks as if she's wearing a very ripe pumpkin.

'What are *you* gawping at?' Mia sneers at the girl who's watching us with cool, flinty eyes. 'What's her problem?' Mia asks me. 'Other than being a total chubber.'

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The girl continues to stare at us as the queue shuffles forward.

'My friend says you have a huge arse!' Mia calls out.

'Mia!' I shriek, giggling. 'You know I was talking about Polly's butt!'

'But she does, doesn't she?' Mia shrugs. 'Makes pony girl look almost anorexic. And check out the back fat. It's flowing over her bra strap!'

This is Mia at her most bitchy, and I'm ashamed to say that I keep laughing, more out of embarrassment than because Mia is being funny. Also the girl *is* huge, not fat, just all over big. Russian Olympic shot-putter-on-illegal-steroids big.

Pumpkin Head doesn't say or do anything, she just keeps watching us. And now Mia has pointed out the back-fat situation, I can't help but stare at the rolls of skin circling her torso.

'Foreign,' Mia decides. 'Probably doesn't speak a word of English or she'd deck us. God, I'd die if I was as big as her. I mean honestly, I'd rather be dead than be fat. Maybe where she comes from they like girls with fatitude. Over here she's just a continental chubby chav!'

Mia does a wildly accurate and hysterically funny impression of the girl by puffing her cheeks out and pretending to be Michelin Man, and then both of us

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collapse in fits of giggles as the queue moves again.

Pumpkin Head moves forward with the queue, but then turns, catches my eye, draws her right index finger across her throat and mouths, 'You're dead.'

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