

CHAPTER *Four*

I steam through the corridor towards the girls' toilets. As I do so I can't help but notice that I'm passing a lot of people openly staring at me. It seems I had quite an audience inside the canteen . . . and outside it, if the volume of my rage was as high as I think it was. Pushing through the swinging door into the toilets, I surprise a group of girls clustered around the mirror, fluffing their hair and applying lip balm.

"What is the junior class president's name?" I gasp without thinking, my voice desperate and demanding. I sound like one of those people in time-traveller films who stumble around screeching, "WHAT YEAR IS THIS?"

The girls turn to stare at me, their mouths hanging open.

One of them is still frozen with her hairbrush embedded in her long, shiny hair. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and my cheeks are red, my eyes a bit wild, my hair has reached critical levels of enormous. It's . . . not great.

I clear my throat and raise a trembling hand to try and smooth down some of my curls. "Sorry," I say in a more normal voice. "Um, I was just wondering if any of you know the name of the boy who is the junior class president on student council?"

The girls continue to stare, but the one with the dark hair retrieves her hairbrush and speaks to me in a slow, soothing voice, as though I am a skittish horse.

"His name is Aaron Davis," she says, and for a second I think the mere sound of his name is going to make them all swoon.

"Everyone knows that," one of her friends puts in here. She is looking at me like I am something nasty on the bottom of her shoe.

"Right," I say, turning to grasp the sink and looking at myself in the mirror. "Aaron Davis." I turn his name over in my mouth. It's not a great

name for a nemesis, to be honest. It doesn't sound sinister enough. I'd rather he was called Evilborg Skeletrix or something like that. "Aaron Davis," I say again, making it sound as evil as possible. Over my shoulder I see the girl with dark hair mouthing the word "WOW" at her friends and they begin to edge carefully out of the room until I am left standing there alone. "I will defeat you, Aaron Davis." I make the vow to my own reflection, still imagining the terrible smirk on his face.

By the time I find myself walking home later that afternoon, the adrenaline has rubbed off and my stomach is rumbling loudly. It seems that I have gone from anonymous loner to notorious weirdo in the course of one lunch break. Wherever I go people whisper behind their hands and giggle. I'm not exactly sure what they're saying, but I think I get the gist. The scene I caused in the canteen has created quite a stir, and, whoever Aaron Davis is, he seems to have quite a following. I gnaw my lip nervously as I make my way along the street towards my house, trying to banish the image of his smug face from my thoughts.

"Something on your mind?" a voice calls as I

reach the front garden. It's Iris again, resplendent in a bobbly yellow jumper and a pair of green tasselled earrings.

"Bad day," I admit in a small voice.

Iris tips her head thoughtfully. "Any particular reason?" she asks.

"I might have accidentally decided to run for student council in a brand-new school where I don't know a single person, against a boy who seems to have his own personal fan club," I reply. When I say it all out loud like that it sounds pretty terrible. I can feel my chin wobbling as worry overwhelms me. Well, worry and hunger. My stomach makes a loud growling noise. "He ate my chocolate cake," I sniffle, sounding – even to my own ears – like a real baby.

Iris regards me coolly. "Well," she says after a moment, "you'd better come in for something to eat then."

"What?" I ask, surprised.

"Come and have a cup of tea with me if you want," Iris says. "Or don't. I don't really care either way." She shrugs carelessly, but the way she says it makes me think that she does care a little bit. Perhaps because I've been feeling so lonely myself I seem to be able to sniff it out in other people, like some sort of weird

loneliness bloodhound, and my Spidey-senses are telling me that Iris would like some company.

“I’d better just tell my dad,” I say, slowly. After all, what do I really know about the woman? She could be an axe murderer. I’m not sure that an axe murderer would wear yellow tasselly earrings and have bubblegum-pink hair, but that could be part of her axe-murderly plan to lull her victim into a false sense of security. And the fact that she’s a little old lady is irrelevant; it would be sexist AND ageist to dismiss her axe-murderer potential based on that. I’m sure old ladies could be just as good at axe murdering as anyone else if they wanted to be. I eye her with suspicion.

“All right,” Iris agrees in a very unconcerned and non-threatening voice. “You tell your dad and I’ll leave the door on the latch for you.”

I push open our front door and yell in to Dad that I’m popping next door for a cup of tea with our neighbour. He must be distracted by work because I just hear a vague noise of agreement and no further questions. Well, at least I’ve left a trail for the police, should it come to it.

When I make my way through Iris’s front door, the house is not what I expected. I don’t really know

what I did expect exactly, but perhaps – given Iris’s rather eccentric appearance, and the messy state of her front garden – I was anticipating something like a scene from that TV show where people are trapped in their homes by mountains of their own junk. Instead of being full of piles of junk, however, the house is cool and calm. A huge painting hangs in the light, airy hallway. It is a messy riot of different colours, and when I look at it, it makes me feel more cheerful.

“Hellooooo,” I call, tiptoeing further into the hallway.

“In here,” Iris’s voice drifts through, and I follow the sound into the kitchen, at the back of the house. The walls in here are painted a bright, hot pink and at first it takes my breath away a bit, and then I realize it’s actually warm and cosy and the feeling of happiness increases. It looks less and less likely that Iris is an axe-wielding murderer.

“Sit down.” Iris gestures to a seat at a long kitchen table. She is tottering around the kitchen now, gathering tea things together and (I am very pleased to see) pulling a large packet of custard creams out of her cupboard. Her movements are slow and trembly, and she is even smaller than I first thought, her body slightly stooped.

“WANT A SCRATCH?” a loud, gravelly voice shouts, causing me to jump about two metres out of my seat.

Maybe the murdering ideas aren't so far-fetched after all.

“Be quiet, Lennon!” Iris snaps. “We've got a guest.”

I turn slowly to look behind me and see a large birdcage where a grey parrot is perched on a stand, eyeing me suspiciously.

“STUPID MOON HEAD!” the bird croaks.

“I don't think he likes me,” I say nervously, and glumness seeps through my whole body. Even birds are being very open about how much they hate me now. What chance do I have with humans?

Iris cackles, handing me my mug of tea. “Don't take it personally. He's a very rude bird. That's why we get on so well.” Iris hobbles over and hands Lennon a nut, which he takes very gently with what I can't help but notice are rather sharp-looking talons. Lennon



dips his head politely and gives a loud wolf whistle before tucking into his treat.

“Now,” Iris says, dropping into the seat across from me with an audible sigh of relief, “what was all that about running for student council?”

“Oh, it's nothing really,” I say, and then, when Iris remains quiet, I fill her in on the scene in the canteen. To be honest it's quite nice to have someone to talk to about it.

“Sounds like that boy needed taking down a peg,” Iris says finally.

“HOPELESS LOSER!” Lennon chimes in.

“Well, yes,” I agree, “but it was still a silly thing to do. I don't even know how the whole thing works. How can I hope to win over the entire school when I can't even seem to make one single friend?”

Iris fixes me with a beady stare. “That sounds like an awful lot of feeling sorry for yourself to me.”

“Well, I suppose I *am* feeling pretty sorry for myself,” I admit. “I'm normally a very positive person, but moving school has been a lot harder than I thought it would be. I don't know what I was thinking. . . I guess I'll have to back out, and hope everyone forgets all about it.” I can feel tears gathering behind my eyes and I stare down at the

table, trying to push them back.

“It sounds to me like throwing yourself into a big project could be just what you need,” Iris says then. “After all, there must be an election, and some rules for you to follow. You seem a clever enough girl.” She makes a sort of snorting sound here as though she’s not completely sure about this but has decided to give me the benefit of the doubt. “I’m sure you could work it out. Then you just take it one step at a time.”

I sit up a bit at that, nodding slowly. I *do* like a big project. Just think of the highlighters. . . I’ve had my eye on some new ones in pastel shades. The first little twinkling of excitement fizzes inside me. I think Iris must see it because she gives me a small smile. “Sounds like this school could use a girl with a bit of vision,” she says. “Is that you, though?”

“Oh, I’ve got vision,” I reply firmly. “Sometimes I feel like I’ve got too much of it.” The tingling feeling is growing inside me. After all, it’s not hopeless, is it? I’ve got six weeks to win over my fellow students, and that’s loads of time. Just think about all the good things I could achieve. Like doing away with lunch passes for the privileged few, and setting up more clubs and activities so that people don’t have to eat their lunch alone. And that’s just the tip of the

iceberg. This could be the first step on my path to prime minister. One day I’ll be chatting with Hillary Rodham Clinton (who will be remarkably well-preserved for her age) and I’ll say to her, “Of course, Hillary, it all began with a little school election. Who’d have thought then that I would become the youngest British prime minister in history?” and Hillary will laugh and pour me another cup of coffee (which I will be very used to by then) and offer to write the introduction to my new book about leadership.

“Where have you gone?” Iris’s voice breaks into my daydream. “You’re looking all glazed over.”

“Just thinking about being prime minister,” I say.

“Well, you’d better win *this* election first,” Iris sniffs. “Still, we could do with a decent prime minister. I’d vote for you.”

“Would you?” I ask, and I can feel a huge grin spreading across my face.

“I would,” Iris says shortly. “So you’d better get on with it.”