

Luisa Plaja lives in Devon with her husband and two young children. She is a huge fan of teenage chick-lit and loves reading, writing and pretending she can do things she can't, like ice skating and telling jokes.

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Also by Luisa Plaja:

Split by a Kiss
Swapped by a Kiss
Extreme Kissing



Luisa Plaja

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To Isabella and Rocco

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In memory of Rosemary Canter

PART ONE:

kiss

It's just another lunch time on the Chairs of Doom outside Mr Trench's office. I'm sort of a permanent fixture here. If the chairs weren't so wobbly, I'd probably have grown roots by now. Maybe when I finally leave school, once I've scraped GCSEs and limped through enough sixth form to make Mum (and my boffin friend Jess) happy, they'll put a plaque against the exposed bricks where my head is resting now.

Lex Murphy woz ere! it'll say. Or the posh, plaque-friendly equivalent: Alexa No-Middle-Name Murphy frequented this hallowed spot. Many a luncheon time she awaited here for Sir Trench of Foot to deliver another Life-changing Speech before she was free to find Jess at their usual bench by Ye Olde Vending Machine. And Jess had better not be talking to Gemma the Evil when Lex gets there or else . . . Lex will pretend everything's fine, as usual.

Anyway, it's no big deal. That I'm here, I mean. That Jess still talks to Gemma is a pain, but I don't really want

them to know that I care, so I kind of put up with it. They don't see each other much these days anyway. Our old loose group of friends-forever has pretty much disbanded lately. The boys are all in the sixth form now, and they've left me, Jess and Gemma behind, but that's not the only reason we've drifted apart. Jess is far too wrapped up in being a perfect pre-GCSE student, and Gemma is far too wrapped around Matt. *My Matt*. The exact same Matt that *she* told me wasn't right for me.

She swears she didn't plan on getting together with him after we broke up, but that's exactly what happened, so she can swear all she likes. Gemma Grant might still officially be my friend, as far as the outside world can see, but I know the truth. She is evil. Getting into trouble in geography over my attitude to Gemma is totally worth another lunch time outside Mr Trench's office.

I know the routine by now. In a few minutes the Trenchmeister will call me in and I'll get a big dose of Trench-like disappointment, some shaking of the Trench Head, and a few minutes of Trench Speech. Trenchie recites this speech from a script he memorized about a million years ago, and he barely even pauses while he's delivering it. He booms on about RESPECTING MY PEERS and RESPECTING MY SCHOOL and how this equals RESPECTING MYSELF, though really I don't see how what I called Gemma earlier could have

anything to do with the way I look after myself. (I do *that* very well, really, apart from the Great Home Hair Extension Disaster of last week. But I think the clumpy bald bit on top of my head might get me the sympathy vote with Trenchie and shorten today's lecture by several booms. It's an unexpected win.)

Spending part of lunch break here on a regular basis is getting a bit boring, though. I'm so glad it's nearly half term. There's not much to see at the dead end of the darkest corridor, right by the posh main entrance that we're never supposed to use unless we've had a doctor's appointment or something and we're supremely, legitimately late and have to sign in. You can't even watch the school go by from here because no one who isn't part of the species named 'Teacher' is allowed to enter the Corridor of Power. Oh, unless you're part of the species nicknamed 'Improver' and you're here for a lecture, of course.

'Improvers' are students who are either: 1) generally a bit rubbish at keeping out of trouble, 2) never actually at school, or 3) totally brainless. I seem to have been an Improver for ever, and quite honestly I think it's a bit late for me now. Chances are I'm never actually going to 'improve'. Mr Trench can try out his theories all he likes, but I seem to be firmly dis-en-Trenched. I am a *disprover*. I mostly only turn up at school to make Mum happy, and because if I wasn't here I'd have no one to hang

around with, which would be even more boring than school. I spend enough time in my own world as it is.

I shift in my chair and it squeaks horribly in protest, but it's not as bad as the chair next to it, which I know from last week is in danger of terminal collapse. I'm busy pondering whether I should bring my own non-broken chair to school, just for the purposes of sitting here – I could get one of those folding canvas ones that people take to music festivals, with a little net drinks holder in the arm – when a boy lands in the broken Chair of Doom next to me.

'If I were you,' I say helpfully, 'I wouldn't sit— Oh.'

There's a crash, and then he's in a heap on the floor, long limbs sprawling, which means I get to sneakily check him out for the two seconds before he picks himself up.

Because he's not just *any* boy. He's Drew Ashton, Jess's wicked Scottish step-cousin, who was sent to live with Jess's family at the start of this term. He's just about the only boy in the school who doesn't know the entire *Who's Who* of past dating and dumping dramas between our friends. This makes spending time with him absolutely refreshing. He's like a clean slate.

He's also a total bad boy. The official story is that he's here because he had nowhere else to live – his dad got some foreign work placement and took his mum and little brothers and sisters along, but because of

something to do with exams, Drew stayed in Scotland with his nan. Then, in the summer, his nan died, and Drew moved in with his nearest relative, Jess's stepdad.

The unofficial story, though – the one I've made up with the help of bits and pieces that Jess tries not to tell me – is that Drew has been sent to live with the Hartfords because his parents hope she'll be a good influence on him. I reckon Drew's mum looked at her little brother's new wife, noticed the perfection of his new step-child (Jess) and thought, *Right, well, your woman can sort out this one too.*

Drew could never be anything like Jess, though. Jess is glossy and groomed and studious, and Drew is . . . well, the total opposite. You can tell instantly by his hair and his stubble and his eyebrow piercing. (He's Year Twelve, so he gets to wear what he likes. And, wow, I like what he wears.) You can also tell by the way he walks, like he has no respect for anyone, let alone the inhabitants of the Corridor of Power. He's in the same year as all my other male friends, but he is nothing like any of them. He doesn't play football like Matt and Hayden and Cam, and he doesn't hang around the library like George. In fact, I almost never see him at school at all, except outside Mr Trench's office, like today.

Drew is clearly a Type Two Improver, or 'Non-Attender', as Mr Trench sometimes calls the guys who

spend school hours down the arcade. They get pulled into his office the minute they show their faces at school. (No wonder they rarely turn up. Teachers really need to think that one through.) It's not so bad when you're a sixth-former and you're actually allowed to escape sometimes, but if you miss certain parts of the school day, then it's still frowned on, and Mr Trench does love a good frown.

Oops, I've been staring at Drew for ages. He's put the broken chair back, ready for someone else to sit on – that's the kind of rebel he is – and he's staring right back at me. Correction: he's staring at the signs of hair-extension disaster on top of my head.

'You OK?' he asks me.

I think he means the bald patch but I choose to ignore it. I pull at my hair and make sure my ears are covered. 'You're the one who just got friendly with the ground,' I remind him. 'Are *you* OK?'

He brushes himself off, shrugs a bit and grins at me. Then he tells me that he's most displeased that he has to visit Mr Trench today. Course, he says it a whole lot ruder than that, and it makes a passing teacher glare at us and tut. We catch each other's eye after that and stifle laughs.

Drew might be the opposite of Jess but he's also so far away in personality from someone like Matt that sometimes I'm amazed I like him so much. Not that Matt

doesn't swear, but he sort of restricts it to his male friends, and I think he, Cam and Hayden would die if they thought a teacher had overheard them. Plus those boys are generally a bit rubbish at talking to girls. Gemma and I have both been out with Cam and Hayden, but back when we were so young that it was all about holding hands for five minutes and then dumping them. (And actually, I think I dated and dumped them both before she did.) Matt was different. Matt was this year and Matt broke my heart, even if all my friends think it was the other way round.

Except Gemma, of course. And she seems to have brought out a side of Matt that I never knew existed. He's turned into a devoted boyfriend-type, glued to Gemma's side. I have no idea what they talk about.

Drew, on the other hand, is a total free spirit. He doesn't really hang around with anyone, or go out with anyone, and it's such a contrast to my usual crowd. It's always a highlight for me when he joins me in the Corridor of Power. He has these amazingly expressive eyebrows, and we've had some good chats out here about nothing much – mostly stuff that Drew remembers about going to Jess's mum's wedding to his uncle four years ago. He actually met me that day – I was giggling with Gemma for most of the time, on a bit of a sugar high – but I don't think he remembers me and my eleven-year-old dorkiness, which is probably a good

thing. He remembers lots of other people, though, and we've had laughs about Jess's mad extended family, which is now even more extended and even madder – except for the fact that it includes supercool Drew.

Today he doesn't mention Jess or her family. He just waggles those eyebrows, gives me another grin and asks, 'So what are you in for this time? Been giving poisoned apples to teachers again?'

I made that up a couple of weeks ago when he asked me why I was here. I like thinking up ridiculous crimes that make Drew laugh. But today his eyebrows have made my mind go blank, so I opt for the boring truth.

'I had a fight with another girl in the middle of geography.'

The eyebrows display intrigue. 'A punch-up or a wee bit of verbal?'

I love the way the words curl round his mouth. I mentioned this casually to Jess once and she said it's just the way all Scottish people talk, but I'm not so sure. I think Drew has really interesting lips. I also love the way he doesn't say 'Mee-OW!' or make sexist comments about cat-fights, or do anything remotely feline at all. Normal boys would totally get their cat on, given a chance like this. They did it in geography earlier, which is why Ms Cosgrove called me 'disruptive'. It's so unfair. That lot should be in trouble, not me. My remark was private, and I didn't even think it was all that loud,

not until the mewling boys broadcast it. Ms Cosgrove, our Geography teacher, is supposed to be a feminist. She should know better than to blame a *girl*, even if I might technically have started it.

‘Just words . . .’ I think about it. ‘Unfortunately.’ It’s sometimes tempting, but I could never do anything physically violent.

Drew nods seriously. He probably *would* – goes with the bad-boy territory. There are rumours that he has a string of ASBOs and everything, even though Jess claims that’s not true. ‘He *wishes*,’ she says, allowing herself a good eye-roll.

Drew balances himself on the slightly-less-broken Chair of Doom on the other side of me. ‘Well, I bet she deserved it,’ he says. He looks at me expectantly.

‘Gemma definitely deserved it,’ I reply. I don’t want to tell him why. I mean, I suppose Jess might talk about her friends at home, so he could have heard things about Gemma. He might even know that Gemma’s boyfriend is my ex. But Jess says she barely sees ‘that delinquent’ – i.e. Drew – so probably not.

His eyebrows definitely say: *Tell me more.*

I’m not exactly sure why I don’t want to tell him. Maybe it would feel weird to talk about my ex-boyfriend, and how miffed I am (to put it mildly) that Gemma is going out with him. But *why* would it feel weird? It’s true that I’m trying to keep these feelings a

secret from my friends, because our group's falling apart enough as it is. But Drew barely talks to any of them – not even his cousin Jess. (Or *especially* not his cousin Jess.)

And it can't be because I fancy Drew. Because I don't – not really. He's not like Matt. I appreciate Drew's gorgeousness and the lovely way he talks to me, but as a distant bystander, you know. The way people admire pictures of fit filmstars at premieres. I don't go hot and cold when I see him, like I do when I see Matt. Matt's always surrounded by people (and now by Gemma), always the centre of attention. He's Mr Popular, everyone's friend. Drew's always on his own, if he's here at all. I think most people are a bit scared of him.

I'm not scared of Drew, but maybe I'm a bit freaked out by the way he doesn't seem to care what anyone thinks of him.

One thing's for sure: Drew is not Matt.

Drew's still waiting for me to reply, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He tips his head back so that I can't see his gorgeous mouth any more, but I can see his body leaning dangerously back in the rickety chair with his arms behind his head. I wonder if he knows how hot that makes him look.

The way a film star on a red carpet might look hot, I mean. From a distance.

Drew straightens up, looking right at me. 'I said,

what did she do?' He doesn't seem annoyed that I totally missed his question because I was gazing at his body. (Though he can't have known that's what I was doing. I hope.)

I don't have to think of a suitable reply because the door beside us opens and Mr Trench appears in all his tweedy, teacherly glory.

'Andrew Ashton and Alexa Murphy!' he bales, even though we're the only people here and there is seriously no need. No one in the world could have any trouble catching Mr Trench's words. 'Step this way, please!'

'Both of us?' I ask, startled, not looking at Drew. 'Together?'

'Yes. Together. Come ON, I haven't got all DAY!' Mr Trench booms. 'I'm asking you to step into my office, not hold hands and dance a jig!'

'Shame,' I think Drew mumbles as we walk in, which gives me a delicious kind of feeling that I like slightly too much, considering.

Though he probably means it's a shame he has to spend his lunch break going into Trenchie's den with his step-cousin's dorky mate. Or maybe he's secretly into dancing jigs.

So we go in and, within minutes, Trenchie has boomed his ultra-cruel and unusual punishment at us.

And it is the *worst* idea ever.

* * *

'It is the *best* idea ever!' George enthuses a few hours later, going so far as to drop his Nintendo DS on his *Lord of the Rings* duvet cover in excitement.

George Richards is probably the main boy in my life right now, if you can call him a boy. I mean, he's definitely male, and he's in the year above me at school, so still technically a 'boy', possibly even bordering on a 'man'. But he's not like a proper boy (or borderline man). He's not the kind you can lust after. He's a friend. In fact, he's probably my *best* friend right now, what with Jess being in love with her schoolwork and Gemma being in love with my Matt.

George's status as my best friend is a bit worrying, though, for a couple of reasons. The biggest one is that his dad and my mum went out together for a while when we were younger. They fell out big-time, and now my mum assures me that their relationship is 'civilized' and they can 'converse like adults'. But I haven't seen any evidence of it myself, and anyway I'm not sure I've ever heard Mum converse with anybody like an adult. She's a nurse and she treats everyone the same – like a slightly exasperating patient who needs sorting out as quickly and efficiently as possible. She especially does that with me, even now, four years after I had my big scary brush with an illness called meningitis. I ended up in hospital for a while, and since then I sometimes think

she actually does see me as a patient and not her daughter.

Anyway, George and his dad moved in next door a few years before all that. George's dad met my mum and they bonded over tea, biscuits and a love of moaning about single parenthood. For a while George's dad and my mum became sort-of-a-couple. Now, of course, they are very-much-not-a-couple. This means that George and I were briefly sort-of-brother-and-sister, and now we probably shouldn't get on any more, out of loyalty to our parents. But we do, and it can be awkward, especially because George and his dad live so close, and Mum doesn't exactly approve of me spending time with them. I've learned an important life lesson out of this: don't ever go out with anyone you can't escape from easily when it all goes wrong. This also applies to seeing people from school, obviously: e.g. Matt. Ouch.

Jess would never, ever date anyone from school, not if he was the last guy on earth – not because of the potential post-breakup trauma, but because she says all the boys at school, even the ones in the sixth form, are 'incredibly immature'. She's not completely wrong about that, but still. This is Worry Number Two: George is madly in love with Jess, and has been for years. So the guy who's now probably my best friend (George) fancies the girl who all the world thinks is my best friend (Jess), who would never look twice at him in a

million years. I can't pretend this is not occasionally a problem.

The final reason it's worrying that George is my best friend is because he's, well, a really strange person. And I mean that kindly, I swear. I love him like a brother. But like a slightly embarrassing brother that you might take a few steps away from and cringe a bit if someone really cool saw you together in public.

Basically, apart from his fascination with computer games and consoles, and his love of films about elves and orcs, George was born into the wrong era. I think he would be the first to agree with this statement, so I'm not being mean. He dresses like some kind of Victorian gentleman – all proper trousers and ironed shirts and blazers and stuff – and he talks like an old person. This isn't so bad at school, although George always looks like he's still wearing uniform despite being in the sixth form, and he's a bit too polite to teachers. But he looks and talks the same on Saturdays and Sundays, which is unlikely to attract Jess. Or any girl, ever.

'I'm delighted that you'll be on the same course as me and Jess,' he says in his proper way, which is so far from cool that it practically sizzles.

I give him a stern look. 'You make it sound like you and Jess are going *together*.'

'In my dreams,' George sighs. 'In my dreams, Lex, we are.'

I really don't want to know about George's dreams. 'Anyway, I haven't agreed to go yet,' I tell him. I explain that Mr Trench suggested the Digital Media (aka film-making) course as a punishment. Though Trenchie called it an 'opportunity' and went on and on about the 'level playing field of the visual arts' and how it would present 'the right kind of environment for students like you two' – meaning me and Drew. Apparently it would 'enable' us, and help us to 'fulfil our potential'. Or something. So much for Trenchie insisting that the school didn't believe in giving any student 'special treatment', which is what he told my mum when I came back to school after my meningitis scare and I'd missed a ton of school stuff that I've never really caught up on. My regular meetings with Mr Trench seem pretty *special*, even though the word that gets used in our school, at least at my age, is 'transitional'.

Anyway, whichever way Trencharoonny dresses it up, it's obvious that he's really giving me an elaborate form of detention, seeing as it will rob me of my entire half-term holiday and deprive me of any chance of a lie-in for five whole days. I think it has to be a government bid to keep Improvers off the streets, as Mr Trench went on and on about how perfect it was for me and Drew. Then he told us to 'strongly consider it', in a tone of voice that suggested we had no choice. But I bet Drew won't turn up. It's essentially just another thing for a Non-Attender not to attend.

George is looking at me, all shocked.

'Yeah, I probably won't go.' I enjoy forming those words.

'But . . .' George never understands how I can get into trouble at school. He has never been told off in his life. Come to think of it, that's one thing he actually has in common with Jess. 'But, Lex, doesn't Mr Trench mean that you *have* to go?'

Yes, probably. 'No. I think he just needs to tell the local authority he's made an effort to get some Improvers on the course to balance out the boffins like you and Jess.'

'Jess is very intelligent,' George says dreamily. 'And beautiful too.' He snaps out of it and adds quickly, 'And so are you, Lex.'

I roll my eyes. Jess is the main reason George is on the course, even though he does love film. He loves Jess more, though. She was the first person to sign up, because she goes to a Gifted and Talented group run by Mr Trench, and apparently he told her that a course like that would help her 'look well-rounded' on her CV and she could 'still do GCSE work in the evenings'. She's forever quoting Mr Trench as if he's some kind of celebrity life coach instead of just an extremely annoying teacher. And ever since the start of this school year, Jess has been totally single-minded about her Future with a capital F. She even gave up her dance classes, which used to be her favourite thing in the world, because she said the

after-school lessons clashed with her homework schedule, and Lady Gaga routines weren't really helpful for her Future. I don't really understand Jess any more.

Then Matt signed up for the film course because it's what he does – he's always been a total joiner. This meant Cam and Hayden signed up too, because they're Matt's sidekicks, and Gemma had to follow, because she can't take a breath without Matt these days. After that, I had no choice, even though out of all our gang I'm probably the most interested in film. There is no way I could stand a week of Matt and Gemma all over each other.

Not that any of my friends will even miss me.

'It would be wonderful to have you there,' George says.

Except faithful George.

'In a different environment like that, it could be my chance with Jess,' he adds. 'You can put in a good word for me.'

Not necessarily faithful to *me*, though. 'I've put in thousands of excellent words for you ever since we were six and you made me propose to her for you with that ready-salted Hula Hoop ring,' I remind him.

'It was cheese and onion,' he corrects me wistfully. 'And I still can't believe she jilted me at the playground altar. She'll learn the error of her ways, though, sooner or later—'

Or never. 'George, listen, I'm not doing it. I'm not wasting my half-term cooped up in a classroom with Mr Trench, with you mooning over Jess.' *And with Gemma drooling over Matt*, I don't add.

'It won't be a waste! It'll be excellent! You know you'll love it. It's so *you!*'

My mobile does a wild vibration dance from somewhere inside my school bag and I reach in to extract it. I came straight here after school, like I usually do when Mum is on lates at work. George's dad, Martin, works from home on some computer thing and he doesn't often surface from his basement office. When he does, he's usually quite nice to me, despite the fact that he and my mum aren't exactly speaking. Martin is OK, really, for a dumped almost-stepdad.

I press buttons on my phone while George keeps wheedling. I look at him as he says, 'Promise me you'll go, O great Ah-LEX-ah, O Gracious One, O wondrous patchy-headed beauty and person who *isn't* rude for reading text messages while I'm talking to you . . .'

I turn back to the message. It's from Jess. It says: Drew def on film course! Disaster!

With George definitely still pleading in the background, I text back: No way will he turn up! I talked about this with Jess earlier. She agreed that Drew wouldn't go, and she sounded pretty relieved about it too.

She replies quickly: Has 2! Mum will make him!
But glad ur going. xx.

Well, this is good. I mean, it would be good if I cared about Drew being there, and if I was going myself. Jess's mum isn't someone you say no to. Jess's mum is Sarah Hartford, who works a lot with the hospital that my mum and Gemma's mum are nurses at. All three of our mums have been work colleagues for years. Sarah Hartford isn't a nurse, though. She runs some care homes for elderly people, ones with big links to the hospital, which is why she deals with Mum a lot – something Mum isn't very happy about. Jess's mum is apparently really fierce about getting the best for her charges. Mum says that no one disagrees with Sarah Hartford. Ever. She has this highly scary way about her.

If Jess's mum makes Drew go to the course, then maybe he really *will* be there. The course isn't school-based – it's off in some forest and you can't get there by bus, so she'll have to drive him, and there aren't exactly any arcades or whatever for him to bunk off to nearby.

'So will you go?' George says, ending his speech.

I think I might give it a go, given this new development. 'Probably not.'

George's face falls. Teasing George is always fun. I reckon this is what having a brother is all about, really.

But he is never down for long. He jumps up and grabs one of his laptops. He has about four, thanks to his dad's

job, and he's named them all after his favourite film characters.

'What about if I let you try out Dad's latest game? It's exclusive, you know. I have it here, on Gollum.' He taps the laptop lid gently.

I try not to look too interested. Martin always gets these really cool computer games way before you can buy them – in fact, most of them never seem to make it to the shops at all. They're imports from exotic faraway places, and George's dad is supposed to test them out for the UK market. I think, more often than not, the games totally fail his tests, which is why no one else gets to see them. They're Improvers, like me and Drew, and about as doomed.

Anyway, Martin spends his days trying to break the games so he can report back about how rubbish they are, and sometimes he asks George to help, which means I occasionally get to have a go too.

George smiles at Gollum the Laptop. 'Go on, Lex. It's a good game. It's a bit like those *Sims* games you were addicted to when you were twelve.'

'I wasn't addicted,' I tell him. I remember my cast of cartoon characters who all got busy dating each other and falling out and stuff. Like real life, without the heartache. 'My *Sims* just had more exciting lives than my real friends, that's all.' This is absolutely untrue, because my real friends were all busy dating each

other and falling out and stuff, even then. And even me.

'Well, wait till you see this, then.' George fires up a game and the splash screen reads: *Life, Love, Looks*. It says it's by a company called 'Mystic Inc.', which sounds intriguing too.

'Life, Love, Looks? Is that the name of the game?'

George shakes his head. 'No, they're just the three main settings. The game doesn't have an established name yet. Dad says they want to call it *Pygmalsions*.'

'Pig-what?'

'Pygmalion is an ancient story about changing people and making them be what you want them to be. This sculptor fell in love with the statue he created. Dad thinks the title's a bit long to get past Quality Assurance, though. I suggested just *Pygmas* for short.' He taps at the keyboard. 'This is all way too girlie for me, of course. I'm just trying to help Dad.'

I give him a look.

'Oh, all right, I'm thoroughly enjoying it. You can make new avatars – your Pygmas, as I call them, like Sims – from scratch, though. I have two so far—' He clams up. 'Er, oh.'

I'm suspicious. 'Let's see, then.'

George half closes the laptop lid. 'No. Never mind. I forgot I—'

'George. Show me.'

He shakes his head, looking about ten years younger

– around the age he was when he wanted to propose to Jess in the playground with a Hula Hoop.

Now I'm dying to see this game – and find out why George doesn't want me to see it.

'I've changed my mind,' he says.

I think quickly. 'If you let me see, I'll go on the course.'

He looks up. 'Really?'

Well, Mum's going to make me go anyway. Apart from anything else, she doesn't like me hanging around at home alone all day in the school holidays while she's at work. She's probably already arranging for one of her busybody friends to drop in and do random checks on me – or maybe even Martin if she's absolutely desperate. Or else she's finding one of those special activity clubs she always wants me to go to.

Besides, Mr Trench said he would speak to her about it. He's obviously already spoken to Drew's step-aunt, so . . . 'Yeah. Really.'

'OK, then.' George bites his lip. 'Just a sec, though.' He tilts the lid open again and twists the laptop away from me, quickly tapping some keys. Then he lets me see it at last.

The screen is filled with a cartoon image of a girl. She's tall with long, dark, perfectly straight hair. She has a heart-shaped face and a beauty spot on her left cheek. She is absolutely a cartoon version of someone we know

well. Besides, the name at the top of the window is a total giveaway.

'You made an avatar to look like Jess?'

'It's a Pygma.'

I snort. Jess is no pig-anything, even in cartoon form.

'Um, yeah, it's supposed to be Jess,' George admits.

I look again. 'It's pretty good, actually. So who's the other one? You said you made two.'

'Promise not to laugh?'

I shrug.

He hesitates for so long that I reach over and click the tile in the corner next to cartoon-Jess. Jess disappears and a cartoon of a boy pops up. He looks film star-ish, a bit like a very young George Clooney, only with more striking eyes. And at the top of the screen it says: GEORGE.

I guffaw.

'Hey! You promised not to laugh!'

'No I didn't. Oh my God, George, is that supposed to be *you*?' I dramatically wipe away invisible tears of laughter. 'It is, isn't it? Ha ha ha!'

'Shut up!' George looks hurt, but he starts laughing too. 'Look, it's supposed to be *based* on me. But actually, everything about it is exactly like me, anyway.' He sniffs. 'I spent ages on it.'

I squint at it, and realize he could be right. Maybe George is quite good-looking, when viewed as a cartoonish avatar. But still . . .

'Ha! If it's *exactly* like you, then why has it got such blue eyes? Your eyes are brown!'

George's dark eyes look hunted. 'I might have entered that wrongly.'

He doesn't fool me for a second. 'You mean you might have remembered that conversation Jess had with us in biology last month! When she said she found men with blue eyes attractive!' We were talking about genetics at the time, and George was nearly falling off his chair at the thrill of hearing Jess discussing anything like that. Though if she does, she always says 'men' and not 'boys'.

'Perhaps. Yes,' George admits.

I laugh. 'Oh, *George*.'

'It's only a game!'

Still laughing, I click on the **SETTINGS** button to the right and look at the list it brings up. The *Looks* menu has lots of sub-lists with things like hair colour, face shape, body shape and distinguishing marks – and also eye colour, which George has set to 'deep blue'. Then I look at the *Life* setting, which has a single slider for 'attitude and outlook', going from 'positive' to 'negative'. George's is set about halfway.

But *Love* is the one that makes me stop laughing and look closer. There are thumbnail images showing the Pygmas, and a drop-down list where you can link them to each other, with tick-boxes labelled **KISS**, **DATE** and

LOVE. They're the kind of boxes where you can tick more than one, but George hasn't selected any of them. I check Jess's settings and those are blank too. Strange, considering George would probably stop at nothing to get together with Jess, even in a virtual world.

'So do you change the Pygmas' settings if you want them to fall in love? Virtually, I mean?'

'Yes, that's how it's supposed to work. You can choose which Pygmas will 'kiss', 'date' and 'love' each other.' George seems very serious about it. 'I think they're supposed to end up with virtual weddings and everything. Well, if you have the right add-ons. We only have the really basic module and—'

I interrupt him. 'So why haven't you selected yourself in Jess's *Love* settings?'

George avoids my eyes. 'It ... wouldn't be right. Would it?'

'But you changed your eye colour because of what she said.'

'Hmm.' He shifts shiftily.

'George, did you delete your ticks in Jess's *Love* settings just before you showed me this? Did you have Jess set to date you, or kiss you?'

He looks cornered. Then he says, 'Maybe. I might have tried it earlier. But anyway, nothing seems to actually happen in the game, and I've left it for ages. I asked Dad, but he says that's why he'd already decided

the game is a no-go. It doesn't work.' He sighs. 'But I can't help thinking that even the Pygma version of me can't get Jess to notice him.'

'Oh, George.' I despair of him. I also understand how he feels. It's like once you feel like that about someone, it's really difficult to switch it off. Like my feelings for Matt. I know I actually went out with Matt, but George has had a thing about Jess for ever and she's barely noticed him. I bet it hurts just as much.

He's looking so sad that I say, 'Look, put it back how it was, if it makes you happy. I don't know why you're bothering to hide it from me, anyway. I *know* you!'

He hangs his head a bit. 'I'm not going to. It really wouldn't be right. Besides, you'll call me pathetic.'

Well, yeah. Of course I will. Though now I'm starting to recognize that I'm just like him. 'Listen, we should make some other girl-Pygmas for Pygma-you to love, to take your mind off Jess.'

'I don't want any other Pygmas – er, girls.'

'George,' I say, 'it's only a game.'

But he's really making me think. I don't want anyone else either! I think I've been sort of trying to talk myself into fancying Drew, almost as a distraction. And OK, Drew is gorgeous, but he's not Matt. Matt is the sporty guy with the easy smile who charms every girl in the school, and even some of the teachers. Matt is effortlessly friendly, and when I was going out with him,

everything felt smoother for me too. It's like his laid-back attitude rubbed off on me. Never mind what Gemma said – I should never have broken up with him. She was obviously only trying to put me off him so that she could have him for herself anyway.

Yes, looking at Drew from afar is fun, but it's Matt I want.

If only he wanted me back.

George switches off his laptop, all forlorn, and I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the darkened screen, my expression identical to his.

Oh, we are *both* pathetic!

I stand up. 'Forget them. I mean, *her*. Forget Jess, George. Let's go out.'

I send a quick text to tell Mum I'm studying with Jess and I'll be home late – a white lie I've been telling quite a lot lately, since it means full approval and no questions asked. Then I drag George on the bus to the Bijou, a tiny cinema where we are regulars. It's the kind of place that shouldn't exist any more – in fact, it was derelict until a couple of years ago when this ancient and lovely local film buff called Mike inherited tons of money and poured it all into his dream of owning what he calls 'an independent picture house'. It only has one screen and not really all that many seats, but Mike prides himself on having all the latest technology and loads of subtitled screenings and stuff, and on showing all his favourite

culty films. He doesn't seem to care that the place is always practically empty, and spends half his time in the little cinema café (which he calls his 'front room') talking to me and George about how he's 'living the dream' and 'supporting the community through film'.

I know that today the Bijou has a special early showing of one of George's favourite *Lord of the Rings* films, and I think he needs it. At least it replaces his thoughts of Jess with three hours of pure orc-fighting by long-haired men with pointy ears.

I think about Matt the whole time, and how I should never have let Gemma talk me into finishing with him.

As I suspected, Mum gets one phone call from Mr Trench and lays down the law.

'You're going, Lex, and that's final.'

'No way, Mum. I'm not,' I bleat, but my heart's not really in it. I'm starting to think that I *should* go. Maybe, in a different setting, I can start talking to Matt again. Maybe we can sort things out. I can tell him I'm sorry, and that I should never have broken up with him. I could even tell him the truth – that Gemma caused the breakup in the first place, that she was obviously trying to split us up in order to go out with him herself. I'm not sure how he'd take that, though. He might just think I'm trying to stir up trouble between him and Gemma. He

might decide that I'm the evil one. But I'd still like the chance to try.

In any case, I go through the motions of a protest campaign with Mum, but then she threatens some special activity week that I *definitely* want to avoid – this one is actually at Mum's hospital and I seriously can't think of anything *worse*. So by the start of the half-term holidays I know I'm definitely going on the film course.

The afternoon before it starts, I'm even a tiny bit excited. I mean, it's film-making, not maths, even if it *is* being taught by Mr Trench. I've always been into films. I'm named after a film character, after all. Mum was watching the dinosaur movie *Jurassic Park* when she went into labour, and she thought it was funny that the child characters had the same surname as us, so she gave me the same first name as the 'clever blonde girl, Lex Murphy'. And she ended up with me: the Improver bald-patch girl, Lex Murphy. It says 'Alexa' on my birth certificate, though, because my nan thought it was a more sensible name and talked Mum into it. But I've always been Lex, except when I'm in trouble.

I'm suddenly weirdly looking forward to this course. I rearrange my hair and practise a little Best Director Oscar acceptance speech in front of the mirror. When I catch myself thanking Trenchie and blubbing, I decide enough is enough and go and join Mum in front of the telly. She doesn't even seem to notice I'm there, she's so

engrossed in some reality TV repeat about cosmetic surgery, in which Miss Boobless-And-Proud is confronting Shameless Implant Girl and getting very heated about something I can't make out. I head for the door, shouting to Mum that I'm going to Jess's. But I go to George's instead and Martin answers the door. It's the first time I've seen him out of his office for ages.

'Lex – hello! George says you've been helping out with the bug-testing on one of my games. *Pygmaliions?*'

'Yeah, that's right,' I say, though I'd more or less forgotten about the game until now.

'Well, thanks. There are fundamental problems with that one, but George seems determined to keep testing it until it expires at the end of the week. I think he's on it right now. Go on up.'

It's true. George is at his laptop, tapping away intently, when I appear in his doorway.

I say hi, and he jumps a bit and looks up guiltily. 'Wouldn't it be polite to knock?'

'Hi, Lex, good to see you!' I prompt him in a silly voice. Then I add, 'Why would I knock? We're practically brother and sister.'

He frowns. 'No we're not. Not at *all*. Anyway, I'm sure sisters ought to knock on their brothers' bedroom doors.'

'I'm sure they, er, ought to not. Or "ought not to", or whatever.' I can't keep up with this Victorian language.

'So why are you acting all secretive all of a sudden? Are you perving over cartoon Jess again?'

'Maybe.' He catches himself. 'I mean, no. Not perving. Just, you know . . .'

'Yeah, I know. Perving. Budge up.' I shuffle onto the edge of his chair, which is a snug fit for the two of us, even though I'm quite small. George looks uncomfortable.

'Hold on! That's not Jess.' I peer at the screen. It's a skinny girl who looks like an elf with medium-length brown hair. And . . . a clumpy bald patch! Oh my God! 'That's me! Well, me crossed with that girl-elf from *Lord of the Rings*.' I turn to face him.

'You said I should try some other girls.'

'Ugh! George! I didn't mean *me*! That truly *is* pervy! You've made me look like one of your elf crushes.'

'You do look a bit like Arwen Evenstar,' he says nerdishly. 'In real life, I mean. And I do *not* have elf crushes. Though you should say "elven" crushes, and Arwen is actually only half elven.'

'*Whatever!* Oh my God! You haven't attempted to make cartoon-me fall in love with cartoon-you or anything, have you?' This is way too freaky.

'No, of course not,' George says defensively.

'Well, phew.' I nudge him. 'That's all right, then.' He's looking hurt, so I add, 'Hey, as long as you're doing this, why don't we make a few more Pygmas? We could do

them for everyone who's supposed to be on the film course. Make them all fall in love with each other and mix things up a bit. Could be a laugh.'

George gives me a knowing look. 'You mean you want to add Drew?'

Oh. No, I was thinking that I wanted to add Matt. But George doesn't know how I feel about Matt. He thinks I'm after Drew, probably because that's what I keep telling him. It's all part of my plan to convince myself, I think. Well, at least it seems to have worked on George. Also, George actually *likes* Drew – he even called him a 'decent fellow' once because Drew held a door open for him, or something like that. In the unlikely event that George and Jess ever actually got together, George liking Drew would be a total problem in their relationship. I've already had to make George swear that he won't tell Jess that I (supposedly) fancy Drew, because I know she'd be furious with me – even if it isn't true.

'I want to add *everyone* from the course,' I say. 'Then they can all have virtual love-ins and adventures on your computer while we're stuck out in the forest.'

George smirks at me. 'I bet you're secretly looking forward to getting lost in the woods with Drew.'

No, I'm secretly looking forward to getting lost in the woods with *Matt*.

'Just shut up and show me how it works, George Clooney Junior.'

So George makes avatars – or Pygmas – for the girls he knows are on the course. He starts with Liana and Teagan, also known as Lia and Tia and, even more commonly, as the Flirt Twins. They're two girls in my year who are kind of like Jess in the brainiac stakes and yet still manage to squeeze in tons of boy craziness in their spare time. They're not actual twins – Liana's dad is Ghanaian and Teagan's family is Irish, for a start – but when Lia joined our school in Year Eight, she and Tia bonded instantly over having rhyming nicknames, and they got even more inseparable when they discovered that they had the same birthday. It's 14 February – yes, Valentine's Day, no joke. Now the Flirt Twins go everywhere together, double-dating their way through the hottest boys in school. They've been out with Hayden and Cam too, and also Matt, though it was a long time ago and didn't last long.

'I like Tia's hair,' George says as he selects 'auburn' from the 'hair colour' settings.

I smile. 'There you go, then. Why don't you ask her out?' Though I wonder whether even Tia would say yes. She and Lia are all about image, really, and George is not exactly on their radar.

He looks alarmed. 'I merely said I liked her hair, Lex.' He quickly puts the finishing touches to the Tia avatar, clicks *NEW* and types *Gemma*.

'Suit yourself,' I mumble, half dreading the creation of

a Pygma Gemma. I hope he doesn't say anything nice about her; I couldn't stand it. I've never talked to George about what happened with her, but sometimes I wonder if he's noticed that we're not very friendly any more. Gemma and I used to be pretty close, and now I barely talk to her, except to make remarks like the one in geography. None of my other friends were in that lesson, but it might have got back to them via the cat-boys. I don't want to think about it.

I bite my lip until George finishes fiddling with Pygma Gemma's blonde mop – he's made her look really pretty, which is accurate, unfortunately. When Gemma and I both decided we fancied our friend Matt, I never thought I'd be the one who actually got together with him.

First, I mean. Ugh.

I relax a bit when George clicks on `CREATE` and types *Kathryn*.

'Who?' I ask.

He clicks on her profile and pauses. 'She was new this year. Year Ten. I don't know much about her, except that she's on the course.'

News to me. 'How do you even know *that*?'

'I saw it on the sign-up sheet – "Kathryn Ellison" – and she told me who she was yesterday in the lunch queue.' He frowns. 'Then she ran away.' He closes the *Looks* window. 'That's all I know, really. I'll have to fill in the rest when I get more details.'

'More details?' I peer at the screen. 'So, what, you're going to go up to this girl and randomly ask for her date of birth?' I put on a cheesy chat-up voice. '*Heyyy, new girl, what's your siiign?*' I click my fingers. '*I need to know for the settings of my entirely non-pervy cartoon-dating software.*'

George makes a face. 'Forget it. It's not important. I'll leave it blank.'

As soon as he's saved the incomplete Kathryn profile, I announce, 'My turn! Time for some *boys!*'

George moves away and I take the controls. I slowly add Drew, in all his bad-boy hotness. Then I add Hayden and Cam, who are average-looking and fancied by quite a few girls, though Hayden has pretty bad skin and Cam hates his hair colour, aka carrot-top. I give Hayden nice clear skin and lighten Cam's hair so it's closer to blonde. If they knew, I think they'd thank me for that.

Lastly I add Matt, who might not be as gorgeous as Drew on paper (well, on screen), but there's just something about him in real life that makes everyone like him. He's like an advert for sportswear or something – pumped and fit, all upbeat attitude and friendly smiles. I open the *Life* settings and move the 'attitude and outlook' slider to the far left for 'positive'. Matt always looks on the bright side of everything. Even when I dumped him, he only showed signs of being upset for

about five seconds. Though he did have Gemma waiting in the wings. Grr.

George, who went to get biscuits when he realized I was going to take ages designing the boys, comes back in and taps me on the shoulder. ‘That looks nothing like Matt.’

‘Well, how did you know it was him, then?’ I retort, even though it does say *Matt* at the top. I still feel indignant about him saying that, though.

‘Well, OK, it looks a *bit* like Matt, but . . . enhanced.’ George’s eyes move from the avatar to me and back a few times, and then he exclaims, ‘Oh my goodness, Lex! Please don’t tell me you’re still in love with Matt?’ He knocks the biscuit plate over in alarm.

I catch the biscuits and don’t tell him that, or anything else, which doesn’t stop him going on.

‘But he’s— What about Gemma? What about *Drew*?’

I don’t say anything. George does enough talking for both of us.

‘I know you and Gemma have been strange with each other lately, but I thought it was just the weirdness of her going out with your ex. Anyway, I wasn’t worried about it because I didn’t think you really cared. Because I thought you were completely over Matt. *You* finished with *him*! And I thought you liked Drew now. You’re always talking about him! Have you been lying to me all this time?’

‘Of course not!’ I lie. Well, with a reaction like that, I’m hardly going to tell him the truth, am I? I pick up one of the biscuits and bite into it. The deliciousness of Martin’s baking affects my brain because before I can stop myself, I’ve added, ‘He’s just so . . . you know.’

George shakes his head like he really doesn’t know.

‘He’s Matt. Everyone thinks Matt is great,’ I explain, though surely I don’t have to.

George blinks. ‘Not everyone.’

Oh. Admittedly, George and Matt have never got on brilliantly, despite being friends, but they’re so different that I wouldn’t expect them to. I always thought George generally liked Matt, though. Because, as I said, everyone does. And also because . . .

‘You never told me you didn’t like Matt!’

‘That’s because you were crazy about him, Lex, and then you went out with him,’ George says. ‘I’m not completely insensitive, you know. And then, you know . . . well, he’s with Gemma now, and she’s our friend too.’

I make what I hope is a non-committal sound.

George throws up his arms. ‘I’m shocked. I truly can’t believe you still carry a torch for Matthew Henderson!’

‘I do *what*? What does that even *mean*?’

‘It means, Lex, that I don’t approve.’

I’m so indignant that I crush part of my biscuit, and George reaches over to brush crumbs frantically off Gollum’s keyboard. I frown at his hand. ‘Oh? Says the

boy who's aiming for virtual marriage to an avatar?"

It's his turn to be affronted. 'I am not! I cleared that setting and I didn't put it back! How could you say that?' Then he gives a dry laugh and stares again at my digitally enhanced Matt avatar. 'Maybe we're as bad as each other.'

'No we're not.' I wolf down the rest of my biscuit in one triumphant crunch. 'Because I am *over* Matt, no matter what you think. If you think I've made the virtual Matt too perfect' – that's because he *is* – 'that's because I haven't finished yet.' I take the controls and mess about with the *Looks* settings until Matt looks more ordinary, and then I open the *Life* settings and move the slider over to 'negative', just for good measure. There. Not so perfect now.

'Better?' I swivel triumphantly in the chair.

George doesn't look convinced.

To avoid facing his lack of conviction, I get busy filling in Matt's 'advanced profile'. It's the screen beyond the main settings, the one that George left blank for Kathryn earlier. You're supposed to enter extra details like date and place of birth, plus additional settings about siblings and pets which are greyed-out and must be intended for the add-ons that George mentioned. I have a go at entering Matt's birthday – a date I remember better than most, seeing as it's the day we first got together using the classic Birthday Kiss technique. (I

used it, not him. I seized my chance on his sixteenth. He didn't complain.) I'm typing 23/01 for 23 January, but it keeps being rejected.

'Oh, another bug,' George says, still watching me. 'I'll write it down for Dad, in case he doesn't already have it listed. Though the whole game's pretty much failed anyway.'

'No, hang on.' I remember something, and I try 01/23 instead. 'It's just the wrong way round. It's the American way. Didn't you notice before?'

'I didn't really bother with that bit.' George reaches over and opens his own avatar, navigating to the advanced page, entering his birth date the wrong way round and clicking SAVE AND ACTIVATE. 'Yes, I think you're right. I'll check with the others.'

We fill in advanced profiles for the other Pygmats, though we still have blank boxes for both Drew and Kathryn, the mysterious Year Ten stranger, seeing as they're newbies at our school and they've missed out on the years when everyone learns far too much about everyone else. Pretty soon, we have a complete Pygma set representing every student on Mr Trench's film course.

I contemplate our collection of tiles. 'Now what? Surely it's time to make Jess fall in love with you?'

George sighs. 'It's so tempting.'

'How about if some *other* girls go after Pygma

George?’ I suggest. ‘Then at least Pygma Jess would notice. She might get jealous and decide you’re the Pygma of her dreams.’

George laughs as he shakes his head.

‘Never mind,’ I say. ‘Let’s leave the *Love* settings for today.’ It’s not like I could change Matt’s in front of George, even if there was any point in making Matt’s avatar fall in love with mine. ‘Anyway, your avatar has blue eyes,’ I remind him. ‘The rest should follow, right?’

George just offers me another biscuit and helps himself to two, staring pensively at his *Lord of the Rings* figurine collection as he munches.

I tinker with my own profile for a bit, wondering about giving myself the long hair I’ve always wanted, or at least covering up the authentic bald patch George so carefully gave me.

Or I could have a curvier body, so that I can look more like Gemma and less like half an elf. Yes, I like that idea.

I quickly nudge my body-shape settings up a notch when I’m sure George isn’t looking, and switch off Gollum the Laptop before he notices.

I think about how great it would be if you could change yourself so easily in real life. And other people too.

The next morning, the first day of the film course, I’m late reaching George’s house. It takes me ages to get