

## **Things I Wish I'd Known**

### **Deleted Chapter**

**Saturday, 19 October 1985**

The doorbell rang downstairs. I looked at my watch, seven thirty on the dot. I sighed deeply as I gazed at the piles of discarded clothes strewn across my bedroom. I'd been up there for hours and still hadn't found anything decent to wear. I made my way forlornly down the stairs and opened the front door.

'How do I look?' I asked Frankie as she stepped into the hall. She eyed me up and down for several seconds, a frown on her face.

'Actually you look about thirteen. But don't worry, pyjamas do that to people. I'm sure once you get dressed you'll be fine.'

I looked down dejectedly at my new grey two-piece leisure suit, which had the slogan 'Cool Teen' emblazoned on its pockets. I had innocently taken this as a reliable sign that it was therefore cool. Having discovered the error of my ways, I couldn't bring myself to admit to Frankie that I had been intending to wear my so-called 'pyjamas' to Grant's party.

I went upstairs to change, exasperated at my inability to keep my wardrobe up-to-date. Frankie had once explained to me that fashion was like a bus, it was constantly moving and you had to get on and off at the right point. I felt like the first bus had sailed right past me, and I was still waiting for another one to come along, two years later. Whereas Frankie, strutting around in her Madonna-style crop top and miniskirt, didn't even have to try. The bus never went without her.

‘Better?’ I asked, as I ran back downstairs a few minutes later in my jeans and a tea-bag tank top.

‘Er, yeah,’ said Frankie. She didn’t sound convinced. ‘D’ya have to wear that thing in your gob, though?’ I felt the metal bar of my brace with my tongue, well aware of how hideous it looked.

‘I don’t have any choice, do I?’

‘You could take it out and put it in a glass of water or something. That’s what my gran does with her false teeth.’

I hadn’t expected Frankie to compliment me on my fine taste in stainless steel, but I had hoped for a degree of sympathy from her.

‘Look, I don’t like wearing it either, you know. It bloody hurts. Just think yourself lucky you haven’t got one.’

Frankie backed down, as she appeared to give thanks for having been blessed with perfect teeth (not to mention perfect hair and perfect skin).

‘So, how did you swing this one with your mum?’ I asked as we walked down the street, me expertly dodging the dog turds on the grass verges, which, like everything else in Potters Bar, were deposited in neat rows of regulation size and colour, and Frankie click-clicking her way along the narrow pavement beside me in her high heels.

‘It was no big deal,’ Frankie said, shrugging her shoulders. ‘Now I’m at college, I can do what I like.’

I knew that wasn’t true. Frankie was just trying to sound grown-up. She’d only been at college a week and already she was acting like she was nineteen or something. She’d even started calling the canteen a ‘refectory’.

‘I bet she doesn’t know it’s a boy’s party we’re going to,’ I said.

‘So what? It wouldn’t have made any difference. She’s gonna have to let me grow up sometime.’

We walked on silently for a bit, wishing my mum would let me grow up too. And that my body would do its bit by growing in and out in all the right places instead of stubbornly sticking to its stick shape.

‘What are they like, then? The other people on your course.’

‘They’re a right laugh. There’s this girl Tara. She’s got a boyfriend who’s twenty-three. Honestly, you wouldn’t believe some of the stuff she gets up to with him.’

I waited for Frankie to fill me in but she didn’t. I hated still being at school. And not having an exotic name like Tara.

The party was in full-swing when we arrived. At least, I presumed it was, although not having been to a grown-up party before I couldn’t be too sure what was actually supposed to be happening.

‘Awright,’ said Grant, whose sixteenth birthday we were supposed to be celebrating. He was looking at Frankie. He didn’t say anything to me. I was right, he’d obviously only invited me because he fancied my best mate.

I looked around at the other people in the hallway. Most of them from my year at school, some from the sixth form and a few I didn’t recognise. I stood awkwardly having no idea what to do or how to behave. We’d only been there a minute when one of the girls I didn’t recognise came up to Frankie and gave her a hug.

‘Hey, I didn’t know you were coming,’ she said.

‘Hi, Tara. I’ve only come ’cos me mate knows Grant.’

Frankie turned and nodded towards me. 'This is Claire.'

'Hi,' said Tara, not even bothering to look at me. They started talking about college stuff. People and places I knew nothing about. After about ten minutes I decided to get a drink, it would at least solve the problem of what to do with my hands. I edged down the narrow hallway, through a mass of bodies. Everyone looked so different out of school uniform. Older, mainly. I wondered whether I did too. But a quick glance at myself in a mirror confirmed otherwise. I still looked like I should have been at the sort of party where they play pass the parcel.

The kitchen was dark and crowded and smelt of a strange mixture of fireworks and smoky-bacon flavour Frazzles. I picked my way across the sticky lino floor, it felt like walking across a sea of chewing gum. In front of me was a bewildering array of cans of lager and plastic bottles of cider, Pepsi and ginger-beer. The Pepsi hadn't even been opened. I poured some cider into a plastic cup and was making my way back towards the door when Grant's older brother, who looked like the boy in the 'Heroin Screws You Up' adverts, barged past me, sending my cup flying.

I knew I should say something but I was too scared to open my mouth. Besides, he wasn't listening. He was too busy throwing up in the sink.

I shook my head. I was sure Andy Pailes wouldn't go to parties like this. He would go to parties where people stood around sipping wine and having discussions about the social implications of the government's failure to tackle unemployment. I was looking forward to attending parties like that.

When I got back to the hall, Frankie and Tara were nowhere to be seen. I went to the loo and checked upstairs but I still couldn't find them. After

standing in the hall for ten minutes twiddling my thumbs and trying hard not to look at anyone in particular, I made my way into the lounge, where a *Top of the Pops* album was playing at full volume. I knew it was a *Top of the Pops* album because 'You Spin Me Round', while sounding vaguely familiar, was definitely not being sung by Dead or Alive. I suspected that Grant had bought it more for the picture on the front of a woman in a skimpy leotard with her nipples showing through, than for the realistic rendition of the songs.

I stood in the corner, taking a sip of cider every few seconds and hoping no one would notice me. Kim and Debbie from my class did though. They staggered up to me, having consumed so much cider that they had presumably forgotten they didn't usually bother talking to me.

'Hiya, Claire. It's all going on upstairs, they're smoking spliffs and everything,' Kim reported.

I realised that the strange smell I'd encountered in the bathroom hadn't been a rather pungent potpourri air freshener after all.

'Yeah, I know,' I said.

'So come on, Claire, who d'ya fancy?' Debbie asked, taking the cider from me and gulping it down in one go.

'Er, no one here, really.'

'Why not? Some of them are all right. Ian Barnes is pretty horny if you ask me.'

I looked at Ian, who had a yellow lampshade on his head and was doing a bodypopping routine to 'N-n-n-nineteen'. Paul Hardcastle had a lot to answer for.

'Just not my type,' I shrugged.

‘Ooohh. Get you,’ said Kim. ‘I don’t think you can afford to be so choosy. You’ll never get off with anyone wearing that brace.’

Far from being offended, I was relieved. I hadn’t been expecting to get off with anyone anyway. At least now I had a ready-made excuse. I knew it wasn’t worth arguing with them. Explaining that I had no interest in boys my own age because I was in love with a twenty-three-year-old man was fraught with complications. They would want to know who he was and what was going on, and if I confessed that he was a footballer and that absolutely nothing had happened between us (other than him signing a kiss after his name and putting his arm around me once) they would think I was well stupid. It was far easier to pretend I wasn’t interested in the opposite sex at all.

‘I’m gonna get another drink,’ I said.

I found Frankie in the kitchen, she was on her own.

‘Where did you get to?’ I asked.

‘Oh, me and Tara went outside for a bit. Just talking and that.’

‘Where’s she gone now, then?’

‘Upstairs. Getting off with some lad from college.’

‘I thought you said she had a boyfriend?’

‘Yeah, well. That was yesterday.’

I didn’t get it. How anyone could be as fickle as that. Or why Frankie thought it was funny.

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘Let’s go and have a dance.’

It was good for a while, me and Frankie dancing in the living room. She was a good dancer, miles better than me. But I got away with it because nobody noticed me when I danced with her. I could just shuffle my

feet about a bit and do the odd wiggle of my hips in the hope that no-one would notice I didn't have any.

About midnight, Grant's collection of *Top of the Pops* albums was finally discarded in favour of a dubious-looking love songs compilation, which he insisted belonged to his older sister.

I resigned myself to being a spectator. It was like waiting to be picked for the hockey team at school, only worse. Because instead of worrying that I might be the last person to be picked, I had to contemplate the far greater humiliation of not being picked at all.

I watched with what I hoped was an expression of indifference as Ian made a beeline for Debbie, Cambo (he got the nickname after the reports about the famine in Cambodia had been on TV. People had called him Cambo for so long, I'd forgotten his proper name) accosted Kim, and Grant, who was barely able to stand, let alone dance, grabbed hold of Frankie. I wasn't sure if she would dance with him at first, she didn't look very keen. But she looked round at everyone else pairing off and let him drag her into the centre of the room.

I was still trying to convince myself that being rejected by a bunch of pubescent boys was no great shame when I noticed a sixth-former called Pete standing in front of me.

'D'ya wanna dance?' he mumbled.

I turned to look behind me but there was no one there. He was asking me. A boy was actually asking me to dance.

I didn't move at first, sure it was some joke, which would backfire on me if I appeared at all interested. Why would someone like Pete ask me to dance anyway? He was a Futurist, dressed from head to toe in black, with numerous

studded straps tied round various parts of his body and zips in places there were no need for zips. I wondered if he had some strange metal fetish and was attracted to girls wearing braces on their teeth.

‘Well?’ he said.

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘thanks.’

Pete, who smelt as if he had been sampling whatever it was that had been on offer in the bathroom, took my hand and led me to the centre of the living room. The reaction was no better than I had anticipated.

‘Oh my God, Claire’s copped-off, he must be stoned,’ Debbie called out.

‘Watch it, mate, she wears a muzzle,’ Ian chipped in.

‘Ignore them,’ said Pete, drawing me in closer to him and placing his arms firmly around my back. ‘They’re all pissed.’

I was excited at the thought of dancing with a drug-addict, so I decided to take his advice. I tried to block everyone out by concentrating on the song we were dancing to. It wasn’t easy though, as ‘Zoom’ by Fat Larry’s Band always made me think of the ice lolly of the same name.

I felt Pete’s hands settle on my bum. My only previous experience of dancing with a member of the opposite sex was doing the ‘Birdie Song’ with my Uncle Bob at a family wedding. This was a different thing altogether.

Part of me wanted to experience my first proper kiss, if for no other reason than to remove the possibility of being killed by a nuclear bomb before I’d even snogged a boy, let alone lost my virginity. But I knew I couldn’t kiss Pete. Firstly I was scared that his tongue would get caught in my brace and secondly, and more importantly, I knew it would be disloyal to Andy.

As it was, I needn't have worried. Pete didn't even attempt to kiss me. When the song finished he simply mumbled 'see ya' and disappeared back upstairs to his druggie mates in the bathroom.

I returned to the side of the room, trying not to look as self-conscious as I felt. I glanced at Frankie and Grant. She had her head against his shoulder, it looked as if she was trying to stop him kissing her. Meanwhile his hand was creeping further and further towards her bum. The second it got there, she screamed. It was a short scream and not very loud. But it was a definite scream. Grant stepped back and she slapped him around the face.

'What was that for?' he said.

'Like I have to tell you,' Frankie said.

'Fucking hell, I only put my hand on your arse, what's wrong with you?'

'I don't wanna waste my time with little pricks like you, that's what.'

Everyone was looking at them now. Grant's left cheek had gone red where she'd hit it. Both Frankie's cheeks had gone red. I'd never seen that happen before.

'Come on,' she said, turning to me. 'We're going.'

I grabbed our jackets from the hall and followed Frankie out of the house.

'Are you OK?' I asked, for once struggling to keep up with her.

'Yeah, I just needed to get out of there.'

'You were a bit over the top, weren't you?'

'He had no right to do that. They're all the fucking same.'

I looked at Frankie. It was dark but I was sure I could see a tear trickling down her face.

'Are you sure you're OK?' I said.

She nodded and carried on walking, head down.

‘Anyway, I’m surprised at you,’ she said after a few minutes. ‘Dancing with that Pete.’

‘Why?’

‘I thought you were supposed to be in love with Andy Pailles.’

‘I am.’

‘Well, you’ve got a funny way of showing it.’

Neither of us said anything else, the rest of the way. When I got home I went straight to my room and picked up the photo of Andy on my bedside table.

‘I’m sorry, it didn’t mean anything,’ I said. ‘It was just a stupid dance.’