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Cinnamon Girl 

Expecting To Fly

PICCADILLY PRESS * LONDON

Chapter 1

New Year



‘Who’s going to go first?’ I asked.

I was sitting in the kitchen at my aunt’s house with Leela, Zahrah and Brook and we were huddled around the Aga, drinking banana smoothies and writing our New Year’s resolutions.

Brook held up her sheet of paper. It was blank. ‘I don’t make resolutions. What’s the point? I only break them after a few days and then feel like I’ve failed and who wants to start the year on a downer?’

‘That’s a cop-out. It’s good to identify your goals,’ said Zahrah. ‘Then you have something to aim for. Goals, resolutions – same thing. It’s good to have a plan.’

Leela laughed. 'Oo get you, Miss Stricty Pants. I reckon you will be Prime Minister one day, Zah. So what are yours, then? Number one: take over the world. Number two: make everyone start work an hour earlier. Number three: no more weekends or holidays.' She did a mock salute.

Zahrah ignored her and glanced at her list. 'Make a study plan. Choose subjects for Sixth Form.' She looked up and poked her tongue out at Leela. 'And maybe I will go for Prime Minister. Why not? If Barack Obama can be President of America, I could be Prime Minister here in the UK.'

'Boring,' groaned Brook. 'What about you, India Jane?'

I looked at my paper. 1) *Go steady with Joe.* 2) *Exercise more.* 3) *Not eat so many chocs so I can get into the jeans I got for Christmas.* 4) *Let Tyler know that I want to be friends, not boyfriend and girlfriend.* I hesitated. *A bit lightweight compared to Zahrah's,* I thought. Even though we had serious exams soon, I hadn't considered putting anything remotely connected with school. I covered my list with my hand so that the others couldn't read what I'd written. 'Um. Be happy. I think that's going to be my New Year resolution.'

'Good one,' said Brook. 'But what *makes* you happy? What do you want to happen this year?'

'Which brings us back to goals,' said Zahrah, causing Brook to sigh wearily.

'Joe makes me happy,' I said. 'When he came over before Christmas, I felt that he was beginning to give in to what's between us.'

‘Falling under your spell,’ said Brook and she got up and began to dance, writhe and sing some mad song. ‘*Witch-ee women, you got the devil in your eye-ee eyes.*’

Leela picked up Brook’s glass and swished around the bit of smoothie that was left. ‘Hmm. Is this what is meant by going bananas? Clearly they have a funny effect on you.’

‘Yeah, I wouldn’t put *Enter for Britain’s Got Talent* on your list of goals,’ said Zahrah with a laugh.

Brook sat down and stuck her bottom lip out.

‘I would totally love it if Joe stopped resisting the commitment thing and we could be a proper couple – as in dates and phone calls and not going out with anybody else,’ I said.

‘So that would be you and Zahrah with proper boyfriends,’ said Leela. ‘That leaves Brook and I as singletons. Maybe we should put that on our list. *Get boyfriend.*’

‘You can’t put that down like it’s on a shopping list. Like – *buy shampoo, get boyfriend,*’ said Zahrah.

‘Why not?’ asked Brook. ‘You’re the one who said we should have goals.’

‘Not that kind of goal,’ said Zahrah. ‘I meant where do you want to go? Who do you want to be?’

‘Where do I want to go? On a date. Who do I want to be? Someone’s girlfriend. Oh chill, Zahrah,’ said Brook. ‘We’re back at school tomorrow. Let’s think about that sort of thing then.’

‘Just because you don’t know what you want to do,’ said Zahrah.

‘Actually I do. I want to be very very rich,’ said Brook.

‘You already are,’ said Leela.

‘We’re not über-rich,’ said Brook. ‘I want to be very *very* rich.’

‘Doesn’t always happen like that. Snap your fingers, you’re rich. Snap them again and you have a boyfriend. Get real, girl,’ said Zahrah. ‘Your head’s in a cloud, as usual.’

‘I have plans,’ said Brook. ‘Dreams. I could do design, maybe. I may write. I may marry a rich man.’

Zahrah rolled her eyes. ‘And you probably will with your family connections.’

My mates couldn’t be more different on the dosh scale. Brook’s parents are separated but both are wealthy. Brook has always had what she wanted, being an only child between London and New York with no money spared. She lives with her mum in an elegant flat near here in Holland Park; it has tall windows, huge rooms and loads of light.

Zahrah’s background is totally the opposite. Her dad’s English, her mum is Ethiopian and they live in a terraced house in Queen’s Park, about a quarter of the size of Brook’s home and they have little money to spare.

Leela’s parents are English-born Indian, both pharmacists so they are OK for money, and she is one of three with an elder brother and sister.

I have three brothers (two are my real brothers, Lewis and Dylan, and Ethan is my step-brother from Dad’s first marriage). We aren’t rich and we aren’t poor. We live with my Aunt Sarah and

my cousin Kate in their fabbie-dabbie five-storey house in Holland Park. We could have been better off, but my mum and dad spent all the money they had inherited travelling the world. They're a pair of old hippies really. Luckily, my aunt invested her money wisely and now is loaded and was able to help out when Mum and Dad ran out of money and had nowhere to live. We have lived in five different countries (in the Caribbean, Italy, India, Morocco and Ireland) and I always felt I was making friends and then, just as things got comfy, I had to say goodbye, like to my best friend Erin when we left Ireland to come to London last year. To be able to stay in one place for a while has been bliss and a half and to have this bunch of mates is a dream come true. I hope Dad doesn't get it into his head to move again – to go organic farming in some remote part of Scotland or to run a painting course in Tuscany – that's just the sort of thing he thinks about from time to time. He is so restless, but both he and Mum are working at the moment and seem settled for the time being, which is great because I get to hang out with Brook, Leela and Zahrah.

The money thing rarely comes up as a problem – only sometimes, like when Brook wants to go and see a movie and the rest of us can't afford it. It's never a biggie though. We get a DVD to watch instead. Everybody's happy.

We all look very different too. I've been thinking of doing some kind of art piece featuring the four of us. Last term, the project was a self-portrait and this term we are supposed to expand the theme. I have been thinking about friends' portraits. I have an idea.

I want to call the project *Shades*. I will start with a photo of us all in profile then maybe move on to painting portraits.

I can see the first images in my mind's eye. A photo in colour and then again in black and white. It will go from Zahrah, who has the darkest skin, to Leela with her coffee-coloured skin. I will be next with my olive skin and lastly Brook with her porcelain-white complexion. I reckon I could get a whole term's work out of the different aspects of our looks. Shades of skin. Shades of hair. Textures, too. Zahrah's hair is coarse and wiry. She has it plaited in cornrows. Leela's is like silk, straight, shiny and long down her back. Mine is shoulder-length now, cut in layers, a coppery chestnut with a slight wave which I blow-dry out and Brook's is straight and so dark, it has a blue gloss in some lights. We're all brunettes yes, but the colour shines differently whether we're in the sun or in false light indoors. I was looking forward to working on the project. I'd hopefully get our different personalities in too, but I hadn't worked out how to show that in pictures yet – maybe by the way we dress. Sensible Zahrah in her jeans and T-shirts, Brook the dreamer in her pastel colours and flowers, Leela the sweetheart in her favourite pinks and me, the . . . the . . . don't know what. The Gemini. The sign of the twins, a split personality. Some days dressed in boho layers and ethnic jewellery (nicked from Mum or Aunt Sarah), some days a tomboy in jeans, Converse sneakers and boys' shirts (nicked from Lewis or Dad).

'OK, so what about you, Zahrah?' asked Brook. 'What do you want to be really?'

‘Lawyer, I think. I want to make a difference. I want to be independent, that’s for sure.’

‘And you, Leela? You’re being very quiet,’ Brook said.

Leela shrugged. ‘Big decision. Maybe medicine. I don’t think I want to work as a pharmacist like Mum and Dad. Like you Zahrah, I’d like to make a difference. Maybe go abroad, help in a poorer country.’

I was beginning to feel inadequate. I had no idea what I wanted to do or be, never mind do anything so worthy-sounding. I hadn’t given much thought to the future – to goals or careers. In the last few years, my family had moved around so much that my main concern had been settling in one place, and that goal had only been achieved so recently that I was still enjoying it too much to think about what was next.

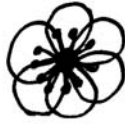
My phone beeped that I had a message. I picked it up from the table and glanced at the screen.

Cn U meet me? Have smthng I wnt to say. Joe X

Joe X? I thought. *Hmm. Interesting. X? What does he mean by that?* He’d never signed himself *Joe X* before. Always Joe. Just Joe. No X. I felt my mind go into overdrive. What could he want? Whenever we’d got close before, he’d backed off big time or given me the ‘I don’t do commitment’ speech, sometimes before getting involved with some older pretty girl so that I got the message – he didn’t do commitment with *me*. So what now? I felt my stomach turn over. I so hoped that I wasn’t going to get dumped before anything had even got started.

Chapter 2

Love Is in the Air



Joe asked me to meet him in Starbucks on the High Road. Curiously, it was where I had first seen him when I came to live in London in the summer. He had been sitting in the window looking über-cool and handsome and I had put my shades on so that he wouldn't notice me looking at him, then I had snapped a photo of him to send to my mate Erin in Ireland. She had made me promise to send pics of the local talent. As I approached the café this time, there he was again, in exactly the same place and looking every bit as cute, though his hair was shorter now – it had been on his shoulders back then. I remembered thinking what great bone structure he had and how he looked thoughtful, like he'd be interesting to talk to and

he is. *Funny how life turns out*, I thought as I went in to join him. *Almost eight months later and he's so familiar to me now*. I felt my stomach tighten as he looked up, saw me and smiled. He'd had the same effect on me since day one. I melt inside and feel light-headed. I so hoped he wasn't going to give me the 'let's be friends' line. I'd heard that first after we'd got close in the autumn term – he'd backed off big time and given me a speech about not wanting to get involved with someone whose aunt was a friend of his mother in case it didn't work out and I got hurt blah de blah. *What now?* I asked myself. *Maybe I should come out with the 'I don't want to do commitment' line first in order to save face.*

Joe got up from the couch and leaned in to kiss me on the cheek at the moment I sat down. His lips skimmed the top of my head as I slid into my seat. 'Oops, sorry, hello,' I said and bobbed up to kiss him on the cheek, but he leaned down again at the same time and my head banged into his chin. 'Er, oops again,' I said.

Joe laughed. 'Smooth, Ruspoli.'

'That's me,' I said, as I flopped back on to the couch. 'Silver-tongued, smooth as a . . . smooth as a . . .'

'Baby's bottom?'

'Not the words I was looking for. Smooth as a —'

'Smoothie?'

'Smooth thing. Person. Type who doesn't bang heads, teeth —'

I didn't finish the sentence, because Joe leaned over, put his

hand firmly on the back of my neck, pulled me to him and kissed me. Properly. On the mouth. Whoa. In front of everyone. Fab. Any body part that hadn't melted before, now turned to mush. I was a mush smoothie. When we drew back to catch our breath, he grinned. 'Third time lucky.'

'Oomf,' I replied. I could always be relied on for scintillating conversation when Joe turned the charm on.

He didn't appear to notice that I had turned into a puddle. He pointed at the counter in the middle of the café. 'Drink?'

'Muh. Chocolate milkshake,' I said and groped in my pocket to find my purse.

'My treat,' said Joe and set off for the counter.

What the heckity hoola? I thought. *What's going on?* I could see two girls, Nicky and Ruby, from my year at school over at a table at the back of the café. Joe had kissed me in public – that would soon get round seeing as he is easily in the top five boy babes in the Sixth Form. As he stood in the queue, I heard a phone ring. It was his. I clearly heard him say, 'Oh hi, Mia.' He gestured to me that he was going outside to take the call. I nodded. *Now what?* I wondered. Mia was one of his exes. Why was she phoning him? And why had he gone outside to take the call? I could see him at the bus stop outside talking. He had his back turned to me so I couldn't see his expression. Was this why he had contacted me? To tell me that he was getting back together with Mia? They had dated for a while then broke up not long after term started last year. Was she calling to check that

he was telling me to back off or something? He glanced round to see if I was watching him. I immediately looked away. *Must look busy, cool, lalalala*, I told myself and pulled out my mobile so that I had something to do. I had a bit of money left on it so I called Erin. Luckily, she was there and I quickly filled her in on the situation. As well as being my best mate, she was good at giving advice.

‘OK,’ she said. ‘Maintain cool. I have been reading a self-help book that my aunt Mary gave me for Christmas. It says we girls must be independent in order to be free. Not to fear solitude.’

I knew I could rely on Erin to talk some New Age gobbledegook to distract me. She chatted away while I watched Joe re-enter the café and take his place in the queue again. He looked over and gave me the thumbs-up. I nodded back like I was oh-so-busy with my phone call, too.

‘Call me later with all the details,’ said Erin. ‘Remember, we are free. We don’t need boys. We are independent free spirits.’

‘Free. Independent,’ I agreed, but I crossed my fingers as I said it. ‘Call you later.’ I didn’t want to be free. I wanted to be Joe’s love slave and I bet she was only saying that anyway because there was no one she fancied in Ireland at the moment. I remembered what Brook had said earlier about Joe falling under my spell. Maybe that’s what I should do. Put a spell on him, do some magic or witchcraft. *Trouble is*, I thought, *I don’t know how*. I closed my eyes and made a wish instead. *I wish I was Joe’s girlfriend. I wish I was Joe’s girlfriend. I wish I was Joe’s girlfriend.*

Hocus pocus, eeny meeny miney mo and catch a falling star. Amen.

He reappeared minutes later holding a tray with two chocolate milkshakes and a huge double-choc chip cookie.

‘Death by chocolate,’ he said as he sat down next to me.

‘Only way to go.’

‘Who were you talking to?’ he asked.

‘Oh no one. You?’

‘Mia,’ he replied. ‘I’d borrowed a pile of her art books and she needs them back. Sometimes the signal in here is weak. Yours worked, did it?’

I nodded.

‘I’m surprised. Mine never does in here – that’s why I went outside. Different networks, I guess.’

Hmm. He appeared to be on the level. No mention of getting back together with Mia. Just art books.

‘So. Ruspoli,’ Joe said, after we had drunk some of our milkshakes. ‘Down to business. I’ve been thinking. I have a proposition for you.’

‘Oh. OK, shoot,’ I said. Last year we’d worked on the same team painting scenery for the school show. Maybe he wanted me to do something like that again.

‘Me. You. How about it?’ he asked and looked right into my eyes in an intense way that made my toes curl. I got the feeling it was my turn to say something, but my brain was trying to take in what he had said and work out if there was a catch.

‘Me. You. How about what?’

He pointed at himself then at me. ‘Couple. Us. Let’s go for it. I’ve been thinking. New year, new chapter – all that bollards,’ he said, then slid down on to one knee. ‘Oh Ruspoli,’ he said in a silly high voice. ‘I cannot resist your seductive charms any longer. I give in. I am yours to do with what you like.’

I glanced over my shoulder. Nicky and Ruby were staring, taking it all in. Part of me was delighted that they’d seen, they are such gossips. This would definitely get around school. I turned back to Joe.

‘Serious?’ I asked.

He got back up on to the couch. ‘Serious. No more messing.’

Heckity hoola, I thought as I drained my glass. Heaven. Joe. Chocolate. It didn’t get any better.

‘So?’ he asked.

Be cool, be cool, I told myself. ‘I may need time to consider —’

He leaned forward and kissed me again. Mush. Chocolate mush. My brain was chocolate mush.

‘OK,’ I said or, rather, I tried to say. It came out as a squeak. But yay, New Year’s resolution number one. Sorted. Maybe Brook was right. Maybe I am witchee woman.