

Chapter 1

‘Love is the last thing we need right now, Tessa,’
Matty said.

As the credits rolled, we were both in a drippy, hopeless kind of state, having laughed at the cheesiness of the movie for as long as we could, and then fallen for it anyway. As usual.

‘But why?’ I said loudly, sounding a bit like I was going to burst into song. ‘I want it. And you’re in love anyway. Lee is perfect for you and he’s not going to die in a sword fight.’

‘No, but . . .’

‘He’s seriously cute.’

‘Well, yeah, but . . .’

‘We spend half our time watching soppy old films and wishing our lives were like theirs and yours *is*. Without the tragedy.’

‘Augggh!’ Matty said, rolling over as if I was too much for her to take. We’d moved on to the carpet during the hero’s death scene: the sofa was too far away from the action.

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‘Sorry,’ I said, and shoved a handful of Maltesers in my mouth so I wouldn’t be tempted to interrupt for a while.

‘This year,’ she said, ‘Lee finishes his A-levels and we finish our GCSEs, which means serious work for both of us at the time it’s most important to spend time together, and at the end of the year he’ll go to university, and then two years after that maybe I will, and we have to make decisions about whether we’ll have a long distance relationship or . . . you know, something else.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘Oh?’ she said, pretending to be annoyed. ‘Is that all you’ve got?’

I was still sucking chewed-up Maltesers out of my teeth, to be honest, but I liked the way my hesitation sounded thoughtful and serious. ‘Well . . . it is going to be difficult,’ I said. I couldn’t work out whether she was properly sad or just post-movie sad, but I wanted to cheer her up either way. ‘But you’ll make it work. You’ll find ways of being together, and he’ll have long holidays. I know you’ll be OK. And speaking as someone who’s never had any problems with romance apart from *not* having any bloody romance, I’d swap with you in a second. I’m the one who just spent Valentine’s Day last week playing computer games with my little brother, whereas –

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if I remember correctly – you were out with Lee being given pink roses and a crystal bracelet.’

Matty smiled dreamily and idly played with the bracelet. ‘Loads of boys fancy you,’ she said. ‘You’re just too choosy.’

Matty is so sweet – although if I looked like her I’d probably be nice to everyone and go around loving the world too. She is insanely good-looking, with this glossy reddish-mahogany bob (the colour is, admittedly, helped out a bit by L’Oréal), perfect porcelain skin and Angelina Jolie lips. And a real chest with a real C-cup, while I struggle to fill an A. My dirty-blond hair just seems to go mousy and frazzled when I try to colour it, and my skin is *imperfect* deathbed-white, and at no point in my life has there been a time when loads of boys fancied me.

But Matty always talked as if we were both pretty. When we went to parties, she’d say things like, ‘I think we might just knock them dead tonight; I think jaws will drop when we walk in,’ although what tended to happen with me was, I only made people’s jaws drop when they yawned with boredom.

‘I’m not choosy,’ I said. ‘I’m easy.’

‘Ha ha ha ha ha!’ Matty said. Then she gave me a look, that meant something like, ‘I have made an excellent point and won the argument.’

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‘How many people have asked me out?’ I sighed.

‘Well,’ Matty said, ‘you scare them off. They think you’re beautiful and unattainable . . .’

‘Oh God, Matt, come *off it* . . .’

‘Tessa, you do give boys a hard time!’

I *sometimes* gave boys a hard time because I knew they didn’t fancy me, and by arguing with them, it was as if I was keeping a bit of self-respect. So, they might not have thought I was good-looking or sexy or fun, but I could put them straight on global warming or tell them how their super-cool trainers exploited workers in Vietnam, and kid myself that I was being clever, at least.

Well, maybe I’m being unfair to myself. What *actually* happened was, I panicked a lot. I did really try to care about what was happening in the world, and I did get frustrated that most of the people I knew never seemed to look beyond the latest designer labels and photos of celebrities with cellulite. But if I was talking to a boy I fancied and he was teasing me for not knowing about some hip band, I tried to remember how Matty would do it, the way she made arguing seem adorable and flirty, but I always ended up sounding over-serious (even though I wasn’t), as if my sense of humour had been surgically removed at birth. I think boys never realised I might be joking – Matty said they sometimes told her I was quite

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intense. But I wasn't intense! I just . . . couldn't think of *anything* to say that wasn't really boring, so I often clammed up.

'Well, all I know is, being gorgeous never put anyone off,' I said.

'But who do you want?' Matty said. 'You haven't mentioned anyone since John Cheeseman.'

I squealed. 'Don't!'

'But you *loved* John Cheeseman!' Matty said, wickedly.

'I was in a very different "place" . . .'

'Ooh, John Cheeseman is sooo sexy,' Matty said, getting into her impression of me. 'What can I do to get John Cheeseman?'

One year before, a new boy came to our school called John Cheeseman. He was a blond and I liked blond boys, he wore glasses and I liked boys with glasses, and he seemed shy and quiet. I talked to Matty about him and she sort of got us together at a party with a bit of not very subtle hinting, and he turned out to be a) obsessed with playing Dungeons and Dragons, b) convinced he would be the youngest ever Conservative prime minister, and c) – this is the one that really mattered – the kind of boy who licks not just your tonsils when he snogs you but most of your face, up to and including your nose and

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down to your neck. John Cheeseman had also – the final insult! – not wanted to ‘see’ me after our incredibly wet snog, and spent the next week hiding behind corners when he spotted me. In a moment of incredibly out of character sassiness, and because he was one of the few people at school who was definitely less cool than me, I finally followed him round a corner and said – loudly – ‘Stop running, John Cheeseman, no one is coming to get you.’ For a week this was kind of a school catchphrase, which was half funny and half drop-dead embarrassing.

John Cheeseman was also the last boy I had snogged. And sort of the first. I half-heartedly fancied the same people I’d half-heartedly fancied for years, but nothing was ever going to happen with them, and I wasn’t sure I really wanted it to. I wanted someone else. Someone different.

‘It’s too late with all the boys we know,’ I said. ‘They know me now. I can’t pretend I’m sexy and fun.’

‘It’s not pretending!’ Matty said, ‘You are!’

‘Not to *boys!*’ I protested. ‘I’m weird and serious. I need someone a bit geeky like me. Someone who reads newspapers rather than *FHM*.’

‘Oh lord,’ Matty said wearily. ‘No boy our age gives a toss about newspapers.’

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‘Well, they should.’

‘No, I tell a lie, John *Cheeseman* was *very* political . . .’

‘I’m warning you, Matty . . .’ I said, trying to sound serious but giggling.

‘Look, the point is, first you find a boy and then you change him, but make sure you start with a cute one.’

‘I don’t want to change someone,’ I said. ‘Is it so much to ask for him to come ready-made?’

‘Too. Choosy,’ Matty whispered.

‘Well, look,’ I said, trying to get off the subject of my love life, ‘You haven’t changed Lee, have you?’

‘Lee?’ Matty said. ‘The ultimate playa? I’ve tamed him.’

‘As if anyone would look at another girl when he’s got you.’

Matty looked sad for a moment. ‘He looks at other girls plenty,’ she said quietly. ‘He talks about them too, more than I’d like.’

‘Oh, boys are crap,’ I said quickly. I was suddenly sad too, and ashamed of myself for not asking her enough about how things were going with Lee. I’d always assumed Matty could deal with anything.

‘But Tessa, that’s the point,’ she said, brightening up again, because she liked giving me advice. ‘Boys *are* crap. Don’t wait for ever for someone who you think ticks

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every box – just give one a chance. Forget all this politically aware rubbish; find someone who makes you laugh, and make a move.’

‘If only,’ I said.

‘And you have to admit, you have your shallow side,’ Matty said, casually plaiting her hair so that it looked accidentally gorgeous.

I opened my mouth to protest.

‘Don’t even try! You love sparkly tops and boy bands and sitcom romances. What if you meet this bloke and he won’t consider you because he’s holding out for someone who only watches BBC2?’

‘Um . . . persuade him he can change me?’ I said. ‘OK, OK, you’re right.’

‘I’m an expert in this field,’ Matty said. ‘I’ve done my research.’

I rolled my eyes, and took the next DVD out of its case: *Love Story*.

Chapter 2

‘Oh my God, can I see that?’ I said, snatching the local paper out of my dad’s hands. He sat there with his hands in the same position and said, ‘Do you know, I could have sworn I was holding something.’

‘Sorry, Dad,’ I said. ‘But it’s important! You know there’ve been plans to build a supermarket over Cadeby Wood? Well they’re *doing* it, and . . .’

‘Ah, Cadeby Wood,’ my dad said. ‘How many careless young venturers have been lost in its unfathomable depths?’

‘Yeah, OK,’ I said. ‘But it’s going to be even less of a wood soon.’

Cadeby Wood had been a big, dense wood when I was really tiny. Matty and I used to collect little branches there and make them into witches’ broomsticks at Hallowe’en, and there were bluebells in the spring and wild strawberries in the summer, and Matty’s first boyfriend, Jim Fisk, had carved ‘James Lvs Matilda’ on a tree with a craft-knife and cut his hand doing it. But as we

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grew bigger, the wood got smaller: in the last five or six years, housing estates had started to eat away at it on all sides. Now it was just a quite big patch of trees and rocks between two estates, but everyone still called it the Wood, even though, like now in the winter, you could see through to the other side of it and no one who walked in a straight line for more than ten minutes could get lost in it. But there were still rabbits, and woodpeckers and I'd seen foxes there, and it still upset me that a supermarket was going to destroy the last bits of it that were still hanging on, just to open their millionth branch when there were plenty of other supermarkets in the area. Another real thing would be lost to another ugly man-made clone building, but they'd tell you it was about providing more choice.

'It *is* bad news,' my mum said, looking over my shoulder at the paper. 'There'll be queues of cars coming in and out of the car park right into the evening. This is a residential area. That's such a dangerous idea. There are children playing in the street, cats . . .'

'The bad news is, no more vaguely illegal bonfires,' my brother Jack said.

'Have you and your stupid friend Hoxton been starting fires again?' Mum asked.

'I'm kidding,' Jack replied, looking shifty.

'If you come in with a burned-black coat again, I'm

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not buying you a new one,' she said, glaring at him.

'The good news is,' Jack went on, 'supermarkets mean only one thing: *skate park!*'

'Oh no . . .' Mum said.

'I can't believe you're pleased about this,' I said. I loved my brother, but he was shallower than a saucer of water.

'Hey, I'm not pleased about it,' Jack said. 'I'm just one of those people who always sees the positive side.' He blew his nose really loudly.

'I'm so depressed,' I said. 'It's an area of outstanding natural beauty.'

The rest of my family exchanged looks, as if I was out of my tree. 'Oh, you lot just don't know how to look at things!'

'So go and join the protest,' Jack said. 'There's a tree-hugging party there on Saturday. Chain yourself to a trunk.'

'I think it was a *newspaper* . . .' my dad said, holding up his hands in the same position again. 'Yes, I think I was holding a *newspaper*.'

'Sorry,' I said, giving it back. 'Here.'

Instant Message with Matty Prentiss

<mattyjp@spectraweb.com>

5.17 p.m.

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tessataylor: can you believe neelson's supermarket is really being built over cadeby wood?

mattyjp: um . . . what a shame?

tessataylor: v v v v depressed about it. they will kill the foxes and animals that live there, you know - with BULLDOZERS.

mattyjp: that so-called wood is so tiny now anyway. there're no foxes there any more. look, it is sad but they'll do World Exclusive Mara Uris make-up range if it opens there. it is v cheap and lovely. bought it in big branch in Manchester once.

tessataylor: can't believe you're not more upset. what time are you eating? come and meet me there for a min, have another look at your love tree, feel nostalgic for your youth, then angry.

mattyjp: ha! love tree. If u had john cheeseman tree u would be the first on the bulldozer.

tessataylor: i would not turn my nose up at a tree carved in my honour and leave it to be cut down.

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mattyjp: mum says tea nearly ready, also have to do physics homework now because EastEnders wedding is tonight followed by documentary about breast reduction. and it's FREEZING out there!

tessataylor: so wear a hat. five minutes, oh go on please? want to talk. also just so bored, need to get out of house.

mattyjp: OK see u outside mine, soon.

tessataylor: thanks, you're a star.

'You want me to come here *again*?' Matty said, retying her scarf around her neck. It was cold and getting dark, and we were both wearing woolly hats, except she looked adorable in hers and I looked silly in hats.

'Yeah, Saturday, I mean tomorrow, there's like an official protest thing.'

'Well, just bring me back something to sign.'

'Don't you want to go?' I said. 'Here -' I showed her the notice, which was tacked to an oak tree.

'Where *is* the James Lvs Matilda tree, anyway?' Matty said. 'It's been ages since I saw it.'

I walked her through, knowing the exact place because it was near to a really interesting white, dead skeleton tree that I loved. Jim's carving was really faint

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and the 'a' at the end of Matilda was badly cut, because Jim had realised he was bleeding too much to take his time but really wanted to finish.

Jim was actually still nuts about Matty, but he pretended he just wanted to be her friend now. Secretly, I had always liked Jim more than Lee, and even fancied him a bit, but I knew he'd always fancy Matty and I'd only ever be his second choice.

'Hmm.' Matty laughed softly. 'I bet Jim would die if he knew this was still here.'

'Jim knows it's still here,' I said.

'I don't know – he moved ten miles away. I shouldn't think he visits the wood much any more.'

'Well, maybe.'

'Jim's sweet. I should tease him about it.'

I had no idea how Matty had the confidence to laugh at the idea of anyone fancying her, as if it wasn't a really big deal. Poor Jim. He'd love it, though; he loved it when Matty showed him *any* interest.

'Yikes, scary boy!' I said, jumping when I saw a tall kid with long shaggy hair and an army-green coat approaching us. 'It's OK – there are two of us,' I said, my heartbeat still quite fast.

'Tessa, we don't have to be scared of boys – we're women now,' Matty said.

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‘Well *you* are,’ I said, thinking of her chest.

‘What’s up, girls?’ the boy said, coming closer. ‘Saying goodbye to the trees while you still have a chance?’

‘Mm,’ Matty said, and I just made a little squeaky noise. He smiled and slowed down as if he might stop and talk, but then he carried on walking past us.

‘What was that noise I made?’ I said, cringing. The boy had his hands in his pockets and walked with a bit of a sexy sway. He didn’t look back at us.

‘You’re so easily scared,’ Matty said.

‘I think he goes to our school, doesn’t he?’

‘Yes,’ Matty said.

‘He’s got a weird name,’ I said. ‘It’s like Shaggy or Catman or something . . .’

‘Wolfie.’

‘Or Griff . . . oh yeah, Wolfie. Do you know him?’

‘He was a friend of Mudassar,’ Matty said. Mudassar was another of Matty’s exes. They broke up, because she thought he might be expecting her to go further – you know, *further* further, because he was older than she was. It happened a while ago, though. ‘Remember he had that friend who got suspended for letting the goat out?’

‘Yes! He’s the friend! Um . . . *is* he the friend?’

‘Yeah, the Head told him that the goat could have

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been killed, because it got as far as the road and it could have caused a car crash.'

'Well, it is pretty stupid to put a goat in danger just for laughs,' I said. But Wolfie hadn't looked like such a 'bad boy'-type; I'd liked his smile, and his long swingy hair. I hated the way loads of boys at school had their hair cropped almost bald.

'OK, look, I've gotta go. But are you coming to town with me and Lee tomorrow? I'm sorry we won't be having a proper girly shop . . .' She looked at me a little apologetically, and I was actually a little hurt, but I didn't want to tell her – I didn't want her to feel bad. More often than not, now, Lee would come along to the things Matty and I had made our sort of routines. But I guiltily remembered that I'd been trying to make Matty change her plans anyway.

'Well, there's that Cadeby Wood demo thing, remember?' I said, gesturing a bit sheepishly back at one of the signs fastened to a tree.

'Oh, you're kidding,' Matty said. 'You want to spend *all* Saturday with a bunch of hippies shouting that hamburgers are more addictive than heroin, and supermarkets are the enemy of the people? What for? They're still going to build it.'

'I thought when you saw how pretty it was tonight . . . and there's your tree . . .'

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'Ex-tree.'

'It's still a tree,' I said.

'God, no,' Matty said. 'You're nuts. I have a new CD to buy and I finally have some money, and I need a top for Georgia's birthday party.'

I looked at my fingers.

'Sorry,' Matty said, then she paused and looked at me more intensely. 'Listen, are you just put off because Lee's going? I can tell him not to come. I just said I'd help him buy a new jacket.'

'No, honestly!' I said. 'I just thought this was important.'

Matty looked relieved. 'Oh, you're nuts,' she said. 'Give us a call about it in the morning. God, it's six-thirty already, I've gotta go.'

We walked back to the road together, and Matty legged it towards her house, and I sort of lingered and looked back at the wood. I felt a bit tearful, because it was like too many things were changing all at once. Matty was bringing boys on our Saturday shopping trips, the places I'd known as a kid were being destroyed. I felt sort of scared, too, as if everything was going too fast and soon I'd have to start making big decisions about life and I wasn't ready.

But as I walked home alone, I didn't want to let my

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mind go where I knew I'd start to worry myself, like thinking about GCSEs and A-levels and university and jobs and . . . stop! Instead of that, I tried to remember what I knew about Wolfie the goat boy, and whether it was because I hadn't met anyone new for a while, or maybe because trying to bring up hazy memories always feels nice, like seeing an old film you haven't seen for years, for some reason it made me smile.