

To James, Tom and Niamh

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# CHAPTER 1

“Seriously, how much of this is going to be actual event planning?” asked Aden. He stretched his arms so his rowing club T-shirt rose up to display a few centimetres of his muscular stomach, and yawned. “I can stay awake if gossip’s on the table.”

Hollie put her feet on the coffee table in front of us. Her trainers were new, and I could just make out the tops of her socks, yellow with pink moustaches. We loved not having to wear school shoes and school uniform now we were in the sixth form, although Hollie had been playing fast and loose with the uniform rules for years. “The fact is, we do have to plan the next event.” She moved her feet so she could admire the trainers from a different angle. “Come

on, one event down, four more to go. Then we can slap ‘charity committee’ on our CVs and personal statements and we’re good.”

The five of us were occupying the prime spot in the café: the two sagging sofas next to the large window which overlooked the school gates, so we could see who was coming and going. We were a gang – me, Stan, Aden and Hollie – and we did everything together. It was as a unit that we had put ourselves forward for the charity committee because it would look good for uni applications. And Jada had wriggled in too, of course.

Our enthusiasm for running charity events was waning after the initial excitement of our first event, an orange-themed day where sixth formers had to pay to come in orange clothing, enter a Terry’s Chocolate Orange raffle (featuring all available varieties, including the weird white chocolate one), guess the number of shreds in a jar of marmalade and buy muffins with orange icing, made by my brother, Harry, who thought he was the next Paul Hollywood.

“As long as I don’t have to count marmalade shreds again,” said Stan. He looked flimsy compared to Aden. He had brown shiny hair nearly to his shoulders and a face which didn’t give much away unless you knew him as well as I did. He wore his customary black jeans and his favourite black hoodie. Footwear by Nike with pale grey socks; he had a few colourful pairs but he saved those for big days, and today was as ordinary as they came.

“We need to decide the next event by the end of today,”

said Jada, tucking a strand of her black hair behind her yellow bandana. She sounded decisive and sure of herself, and I marvelled again at how she’d managed to inveigle her way into our little group which had been so tight since Year Seven. Stan and me, and Hollie and Aden. Two best friends from primary school who’d met another couple of best friends at secondary school and decided we could all be best mates together. And now, one outsider.

Jada had only joined the sixth form in September. Her mum had wanted to move to the area to be closer to her family and had persuaded Jada she’d get better A-levels at Markham High than her former school. She was in the same English literature class as Hollie. Hollie was the charismatic one, the one everyone gravitated towards because of her energy and sense of fun – and Jada Simmonds had been no exception. The two of them had hit it off. When Hollie had signed us up for the charity committee, she had put Jada’s name down too.

“Why her?” I had asked.

“She’s keen,” Hollie had said. “Jada’s super-ambitious, wants all the right stuff on her personal statement. Also, she’s really nice. It’ll be fun having her.”

I hadn’t been so sure. Aden and Stan hadn’t seemed bothered so I’d kept quiet.

“Whose idea was it to do this committee anyway?” moaned Aden. He squished his cheek up to his eye and went deliberately cross-eyed, one of his signature looks. He let go and it bounced back to his standard-handsome face.

“It’s very time consuming. We spent weeks planning that ridiculous orange event. Is it worth all this effort just so we’ve got something to put on our personal statements? I’m not even sure I want to go to uni.” He looked at his hands, then held them up. “Did I show you my blisters from this morning’s training? Man, they hurt.”

Hollie raised an eyebrow at him. The other thing about Hollie was she was gorgeous. Her hair was so blonde it was almost white, and her eyes were green-blue. “Would you have rather been on the environment committee?” she asked sweetly. “With all the hassle from that new try-hard geography teacher? At least nobody gets too involved with us. We’re free to come up with our own fresh, innovative ideas.” She looked eagerly at the rest of us, as though hoping we’d come up with a fresh, innovative idea – but the truth was we’d peaked early with orange-themed day.

I opened a bag of crisps and offered them round. Prawn cocktail. Stan was the only person who took one, which I could have predicted. We shared a love for prawn cocktail crisps, even though neither of us was remotely interested in eating an actual prawn. “Bake sale it is, then,” I said. “Harry will make a load of cakes, and Stan’s mum can pick us up some doughnuts on the way home from work, can’t she?”

Stan, who was glugging on a bottle of water, gave a thumbs up.

“It’ll be zero effort and pure profit for us,” I said.

“If not for our parents,” said Stan, indicating to me he’d like another crisp.

“I’ll make bags of popcorn,” said Jada. It was nice of her to offer but we didn’t really need anything extra.

“Amazing!” said Hollie.

“What d’you think’s most popular – sweet or salty?” Jada asked.

“Marmite flavour. Go on – do it!” said Hollie, laughing. “Wait. No. We want to make money, don’t we?”

“I’ll do some of each,” said Jada, but Hollie was already on her feet, yelling across the café for everyone in the room to vote on whether they preferred salt or sweet popcorn, counting hands energetically. Jada watched her, grinning. They were similar in some ways, Hollie and Jada – wanting to be involved in things, leaping in with both feet, but Hollie did it with a lighter touch. Jada always struck me as just plain irritating, thinking she knew best.

“Classic Hollie,” said Aden admiringly.

“Anyone want to play *Gartic?*” asked Stan hopefully, waving his phone at the rest of us.

“We’re not done with the meeting,” said Jada firmly and Stan lowered his arm extra slowly.

“Not sure we’ve got anything left to discuss about the bake sale, though?” said Aden mildly. He liked Jada all right, I reckoned, but he was always going to be more loyal to Stan. “I need to fit in a quick nap before class. Last night’s rowing training’s taken it out of me.”

“Let’s wait for Hollie,” said Jada, folding her arms. “There might be other things to discuss.”

I rolled my eyes at Stan and made a point of asking him

about our fortress in *Colony Survival*. “Had a chance to check out the alien damage from last night?”

“Nope. Let’s check after school,” he said.

I nodded. Stan and I were into gaming, Aden was into sport, specifically rowing these days, and Hollie was into being popular and fun. Still, it worked.

Hollie headed back, flushed and smiling, with her tally of popcorn votes. “FYI, more people prefer sweet popcorn but we could always” – she paused and checked we were all listening, especially Aden who was peeling a banana – “make it a popcorn lucky dip. You might get salty, you might get sweet, you might get *Marmite*. Up the stakes? What d’you reckon?”

“Hilarious,” said Aden. “Let’s do it.”

“Nah,” said Jada. “You can’t prank people when it comes to food.”

“Hmm,” said Hollie. “Maybe you’re right.”

Jada knew how to handle Hollie, I’d give her that.

Aden pulled a face. “Yeah, Hollie, remember that time you took the white filling out of Stan’s Oreo cookie and replaced it with toothpaste?”

Jada let her jaw drop. “Get out!”

“It was funny,” said Aden. “Very Hollie.”

“But Stan hasn’t eaten an Oreo since,” said Hollie, turning to him. “Sorry about that.” Stan rolled his eyes in response, and she leaned back.

“Didn’t you convince Hollie that a raisin in her porridge was a mouse dropping after that, Stan?” reminded Aden.

“Oh, yes!” said Hollie good-naturedly. “I totally fell for that – for maybe twenty seconds.”

“Earth to Stanley?” I said as Stan was looking out of the window vacantly. “The mouse dropping in the porridge incident?”

Stan blinked and was back in the room. “You completely dissected that raisin, Hol,” he said.

“So, moving on,” said Hollie. “We’re agreed on the bake sale for the next event? I’ll go to the sixth form office and get it put on the event calendar. Hmm. Bit of a walk actually. I’ll email.”

She got her phone out, and Jada laughed. “Why walk when you can email?”

Hollie smiled at Jada, and I felt the quick hot flicker of something in my chest that wasn’t indigestion. It was jealousy.

I let the conversation move on without me, thinking about the online fortress Stan and I had made and how we needed to make more food to feed our guards.

Jada was talking about a girl she fancied, someone in her previous school, which was miles away. It was – clearly – never going to happen. Then Hollie began talking about Liam Henderson, whom she’d been fixated on for months. I exchanged a bored look with Stan. Liam was a predictable crush for Hollie – too predictable. Boring. The most unobtainable boy in Markham. He didn’t go to our school, he went to Markham’s private school, Ivy Green, which made him that bit more mysterious, and he was the year

above us. He also was the closest thing Markham had to a celebrity, because he played tennis at a near-professional level – he had a world ranking – and was unquestionably fit in both senses of the word: tall and broad shouldered, with wavy brown hair he held back with a band when he was on court.

Hollie had recently seen him interviewed on a sports channel saying he was single and didn't have time for a girlfriend, but "if the right person came along" he might make room in his life for them. Hollie had forced me to watch the interview several times. I'd thought his slight American accent sounded fake, but Hollie said it was legit, a result of several tennis camps in the States.

Hollie turned to me now. "Amy, can't you persuade your boyfriend to big me up to Liam?" she said. "Introduce us?"

This was new. "What? How?" I frowned. "I'm not sure Dom even knows Liam. He never mentions him."

"They go to the same school, for god's sake," said Hollie, stretching. "All I need is an introduction and I'll take it from there. We'd get on so well."

"Dom's in our year," I said. "He doesn't hang out with the Year Thirteens."

"Some friend you are! And, Aden, you see him at the Canbury Club all the time and you've done nothing about it," said Hollie. "You've repeatedly failed me."

Aden laughed loudly. His family were wealthy enough that they could easily have sent him and his older brother

to Ivy Green, but they'd failed the entrance exams, a fact neither was remotely fazed by. He was happy enough to hang out at the exclusive Canbury Club, though, with its excellent sports facilities. "Nice try, Hollie. I'm not going to fanboy over Liam Henderson, even for you. Anyway, I play football and golf there, never tennis. I hardly ever see him."

"Fine." Hollie pointed to Stan. "What about you? Why haven't *you* helped facilitate this? Liam lives on your frigging road, Stan!"

"Up the other end," said Stan, as if "the other end" was a different part of town, which it kind of was – the houses were much fancier further along his road. "Anyway, you don't even like tennis, Hollie. Name the last time you watched it. You and Liam Henderson wouldn't have anything in common."

Hollie was affronted. "I don't *watch* tennis, but I like the *concept* of it."

"What's the *concept* of tennis?" asked Jada, with her wry smile.

"Glad you asked," said Hollie, her eyes sparkling. "Tennis is a wholesome sport and it's associated with strawberries. There's lots to like about it. Liam is a particularly good example of a tennis player. Tall, strong, good teeth."

"Right," said Jada, laughing now.

"Have you never seen his Instagram?" said Hollie. "You are missing a treat."

The bell went and I got to my feet. Jada had done an image search of Liam Henderson online. She tilted her head, considering him in his tennis whites. “I wouldn’t have thought he was your type.”

Hollie, who was swamped in the enormous sofa, held out her hand to me and I heaved her up with a practised manoeuvre. “He’s very much my type,” she said. “Look at that one from the summer…” And she and Jada went off to their Eng lit class, Hollie pointing out her favourite photo of Liam. I knew which one it was – Liam with both feet off the court, doing a slam dunk, or whatever the tennis term was for bringing his racquet down on the ball with maximum force.

“Look at the guy in the front row!” I called. Hollie had showed it to me on the first day of sixth form and we’d cracked up at the man’s expression of horrified surprise as the sandwich he was about to take a bite out of fell apart.

Neither of them heard me.

Stan and I had psychology together next period. It started with a discussion of the reading we’d been set for homework, and when that was over and some worksheets were being handed round the room, a kid from way down the school came into the classroom with a note.

“Stan and Amy,” called our teacher after reading it. “Mr Ferris says you’re to go to reception. Make sure you catch up on work missed, please.”

I looked at Stan in confusion.

“Who’s Mr Ferris?” muttered Stan.

“The new try-hard geography teacher who’s running the environment committee,” I said, not that that explained anything. Neither of us did geography or knew anything about the committee. The small student was waiting for us to go downstairs, smiling now that we were on our feet, as if we were a gift he was going to present to Mr Ferris.

“What’s this about?” asked Stan when we’d left the classroom, walking to the staircase that would take us directly down to the reception area.

“The Big Tidy Up,” said the student, as if it was obvious. “It’s this afternoon.”

“The what?” said Stan.

The student repeated, “The Big Tidy Up campaign.” He ran ahead down the stairs and said, “Here they are, sir,” and we saw a group of maybe ten or twelve students from different year groups, each wearing a yellow hi-vis vest over their uniforms. There were no other sixth formers.

“Hello, you two,” said Mr Ferris, who was in pink hi-vis. “Nice to see some older students are keen to participate. Leave your bags in that trolley and grab a hi-vis.”

“Why?” asked Stan.

“Litter picking round the school grounds. Did you forget?” said Mr Ferris. He was young and eager, with wavy, bushy hair. “Thanks for signing up.” He flashed a clipboard at us, and I saw our names on it.

Ah. “Hollie’s handwriting.” I rolled my eyes at Stan and we shook our heads and laughed.

“Someone put our names down for a joke, sir,” Stan explained.

“Oh,” said Mr Ferris. He looked crushed. Then he brightened. “Still, now you’re here, grab a jacket!” Stan and I looked at each other and Mr Ferris continued. “It’ll be fun! You’ll have a blast!”

Stan shook his head in amused resignation. “Oh, well, at least it’s not raining. Come on, Amy.”

We left our bags in the trolley, put on hi-vis jackets and trooped outside as a group, then Mr Ferris directed us to different areas in pairs. Stan and I took our black rubbish sack and made our way to the food shack. Stan grabbed a banana skin first and pretended to almost drop it on my head before dumping it in the bag. Two empty drinks cans and a Crunchie bar wrapper later, we heard a banging noise. I looked round and saw Hollie and Jada at the window of an English classroom, waving with huge grins on their faces. I wondered if Hollie hadn’t come up with this prank on her own – had Jada helped her? Or had it been Jada’s idea?

I lifted my grabber up and jabbed it in Hollie’s direction, as menacingly as I could. Then Stan and I had a mock fight, duelling with our grabbers, until Mr Ferris shouted, “You two! Give that a rest. You’re supposed to be role models.”

The other yellow-jacketed people were racing to pick up litter. There was probably some reward for the pair who returned with the most rubbish. Like a singular merit.

More people were looking out of windows, smirking at us. Hollie had obviously gathered a crowd.

“How about you move on to the PE kit, guys,” called Mr Ferris. He gestured at a tree near the food shack where a black Adidas drawstring bag had been chucked over a branch. A bird dropping glistened next to the logo.

“I’m not sure I can take any more of this fun,” I said.

Stan was looking at the PE kit. “How are we going to get that down?” He leaped up, swinging the grabber, and was rewarded with a shower of leaves. I could see people at the windows laughing.

“Let me have a go,” I said. I jumped, hoping to dislodge the bag with my grabber, only I accidentally let go and sent it flying further into the tree.

Stan suddenly broke into giggles, then proper laughter. He had to lean forward he was laughing so much. It actually made me really happy – he’d been a little distracted over the last couple of weeks, as if something was bothering him, although he swore nothing was.

“Glad this amuses you,” I said.

“Amy,” called Mr Ferris, “go to the premises office and ask for a stepladder.”

“A ladder.” I tutted. “He could have mentioned that earlier.”

“We’re going to get that PE kit, whatever it takes,” said Stan in a movie voiceover growl.

The only stepladder available was heavy and we were sweating by the time we’d carried it to the tree. When Stan

finally got his hands on the PE kit and my grabber, me holding the stepladder steady underneath, we could hear sarcastic cheers from various classrooms.

“I’m going to kill Hollie,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Don’t worry, Ames,” said Stan. “We’ll find a good way to get her back. Something she’ll never see coming.”

## CHAPTER 2

Stan and I went back to mine after school. I slammed the front door hard behind us, my back hurting from holding the stepladder steady on the bumpy tarmac. After that we’d had to fish leaves and something so gross I didn’t want to imagine what it was out of a drain.

“I need a tea and a sit down,” I said, sounding like my granddad.

“Your face when Mr Ferris said we should join the *next* Big Tidy Up was unforgettable,” said Stan. “Like an angry zombie.” He stood in my hallway and dropped his jaw and made his eyes go starey.

“Accurate,” I said. “At least I didn’t tell him I’d be there, like you did. You wuss.”