Sample Kindle Edition of Maisy May, by Naomi Kramer. Published 2010.

The Boring Bits

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My email address is nomesque@gmail.com.

Disclaimer

This book contains profanity, violence toward bagsnatchers, religious discussions which don't necessarily conclude with 'and of course the bible's always right, as is the church', moral judgments, teen sex, gay relationships, and - possibly worst of all - Australian spelling and slang. You've been warned, OK? I don't want to receive lots of complaints about the horribleness of it all in a so-called christian fiction book, or about how I clearly hate christians/gay guys/men in general (I don't), or about the horrible spelling. However, feel free to complain about other stuff. ;-)

Chapter 1: Introduction

When Mark first saw me, I made the kind of impression that good little Christian gals dream of.

“No you can't have my bloody bag, you bastard!” I yelled as I kicked a surprised bagsnatcher-wannabe in the shin, then followed it up with an elbow in his face.

“FUCK!” I screamed, as his cheekbone made direct contact with my funny bone and sent a wave of agony up my arm.

The man ran away down the street, nearly colliding with a teenage boy walking towards me. The teen made a grab for him, but he was shoved away as the snatcher kept running. The teen approached me warily.

“Uh...” he said, “it's a bit late to ask if you need any help - but are you OK?”

I nodded weakly and sat down on the side of the footpath, rubbing my elbow. Damn, that thing felt BRUISED.

He sat down nearby and just watched me, looking worried.

“I'm OK,” I said, smiling at his protectiveness, “thanks for keeping an eye on me though.”

“Can I walk you home?” he said, frowning.

“Ummm... you don't need to - I don't really want to swap a bagsnatcher for a stalker, you know. Umm, no offense.”

“Geez, what's offensive there?”

“Thanks for being willing to save me, and all.”

“Look,” he said, “You've got a bit of a wonder woman complex, you know. Why not let me pretend that I'm protecting you? Let me feel all manly and useful?”

I looked him up and down and giggled. Five foot two of skinny-arse male. Stephen Hawkins would be a better protector.

“OK,” I said, and nodded. “But if you stalk me later, I get to beat you up.”

He laughed, stuck out his hand, and shook on it.

“I'm Mark,” he said as we walked towards home.

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Oh yeah, introductions. My name's Maisy May Dickens, and yes, my mother was certifiable when she picked that name. Still is, in my opinion. But she's long off the drugs and the pills and the booze, and that makes for a far happier - if less quirky - home. So no complaints. Even if I did kind of like her better when she was high. She was a real blast sometimes, we had some awesome fun, between the blackouts. These days she's got the 'joy' thing going on, which seems to mean that if you're not feeling happy, just fake it so no one finds out. Huh. But this is supposed to be an introduction to me, not my mother. Lemme try that again.

My name's Maisy May Dickens. I'm about five foot nine inches tall, I weigh far too little through no fault of my own, and I'm a really bad Christian. I don't mean a bad-arse Christian who goes around smiting the evildoers, despite what the last scene might've implied. It's just that I've never been good at being a good little Christian girl, and some days I doubt I ever will. I swear. I yawn in church. I laugh at fart jokes. I'm loud and I dress goth and I try hard to be kind to people but too often I yell at them instead. Not exactly a poster girl for Christian Girl Monthly, huh? Oh, I forgot about my habit of just opening my mouth and letting whatever I'm thinking come out. It gets a bit painful sometimes. Like with Mark. "No thanks, I don't need a stalker." Yup, that's me, diarrhoea-mouth girl.

I live in Bathurst, New South Wales. If you've never heard of it, you're obviously not a racing fan. Biggest car race in Australia goes on here once a year, and brings a huge crowd of boozed-up revheads with it. The population of the place triples, and suddenly it's a happening place with lots of stuff to do. I love it. I love this whole town. I know it's hokey, and I should be moaning about how I want to get the hell out and live somewhere decent, but... Bathurst is OK, you know? We've got a cafe and a bookstore and artists and even a museum. Not to mention two high schools. Although it's actually one high school with two campuses which "co-operate to offer a state of the art education". Mostly they just snipe at each other and whine about unfair budget allocations. So anyhow, I'm just starting Year 9 at the Bathurst campus, the old Bathurst High - and that's what everyone but the staff call it. It consists of some old two-storey brick buildings and the occasional demountable. Kelso, on the other hand, have a brand spanking new campus and air-con that actually works. Bastards.

My church is the Anglican one near my high school, which is near where I live, too. According to Mum, that's the main reason she originally chose it. Sheer convenience. But it's a nice church. The people are - well, nice. They don't scowl at my thick eyeliner and green eyeshadow, or the fact that I dye my hair. There's a sort of live-and-let-live attitude from most people, with the occasional dragons-are-a-symbol-of-satan-and-god-will-curse-you-for-wearing-them types. No idea what I'm talking about there? Thank God and all that's good, because - damn - those people are kinda nutso. Anyway, most of the church are just plain nice, vanilla, caring folk. They make me itchy.

Except Georgie, who's kinda cool. Still pretty vanilla, but we get along. She and I have been friends since... well, I dunno. I don't remember not being friends with her. We've hung out at church events most of our lives, I think. Her mother doesn't like me much - she's one of the emo-means-devil-worship types and is pretty sure I'll descend into full-blown satanism any day now. Georgie's mum and mine don't get along too well, probably because my mother resents the attitude. And because they probably - mutually - think the other's a bad mother. So Georgie and I don't hang out much except where her mum can't complain about her being led astray - church.

I know I couldn't handle having a mother like Georgie's. I think I'd have run away and become a prostitute or something, just to get the hell out of there. I don't do vanilla or being wrapped in cotton wool. Some say this is the whole point of being Christian kids, but - geez! Even Jesus was allowed out now and then. Surely if God made me unique, I'm not supposed to turn myself into a completely boring fucking clone, right?

Crap. I'm really bad with swearing, too.

I've really messed up this intro, haven't I? I bet I've bored you, confused you and offended you all in one. What can I say? It's a talent.

Chapter 2: Stalker Boy

The Sunday after my encounter with the wannabe Clark Kent, I'm sitting in church and trying desperately not to yawn through the sermon. Blah blah blah adultery blah blah blah thoughts blah blah blah David. What's wrong, I wonder, with 'don't have sex with other people if you've promised not to, dude, it hurts people!'. Shorter, that's for sure, I could be at morning tea now. Then I catch sight of something that fixes the yawns right up. Over the other side of the church, in the very front pew, is Mark. Paying attention, and NOT yawning.

My stranger is stalking me? In *church*? Man, I thought even stalkers had more of a life than that.

After church, Mrs Catrick pulls him straight over to me and starts to introduce us. Mrs Catrick's one of the kindest old ladies I know. She bakes cakes every Sunday for morning tea, cooks dinner for us whenever Mum's sick, gives every kid a little present when they get confirmed. She's just all-round nice. Of course, she's also incredibly naïve, and I find it hard to believe that she ever did anything the slightest bit naughty. Her husband died years ago, she never had kids (I think) and she's kinda adopted the whole church as her new family.

"Don't worry, Auntie, we've already met," he says, and holds out a hand. I take it uncertainly and shake, wondering what on earth he's going to say next. Just wait, did he say *Auntie*?

“Oh, lovely!” she says, smiling happily and not picking up a hint of awkwardness, “at school, dears? Oh, no, you haven't been to school yet, have you, Mark? Mark's up from Sydney for a while,” she tells me.

“No, I met her on the street!” Mark says, smiling at Mrs Catrick and winking at me, “a man tried to steal her bag and she -”

I cough and raise my eyebrows, hoping to God he'll take a hint.

“- asked him so nicely to leave her alone that he ran away!” he finishes, smirking.

I can't help it. I laugh, and Mrs Catrick looks bemused but happy to see us getting along.

I grab us a few bikkies and slices from the morning tea spread, and we sit down on the steps of the church, away from the adults.

“Girl,” he says, “what the hell are you doing at my new church? I almost had a heart attack!”

The cheek of the loser!

“Umm... going to church? You gonna pretend *I'm* the stalker, now?”

He raises an eyebrow.

“Dude, you're not in Sydney any more - you're gonna find yourself bumping into people, ya know?”

“Hmm.”

“Fine. I'm a stalker. I found your manly twigginess so sexy that I had to have you at any cost - even going to church. Happy?”

He grins a huge grin.

“Very. Except that twiggy bit.”

“Yay you.”

“So, you're a Christian gal?”

“Uh huh - surprised?”

“Only pleasantly.”

“Really?”

“It's nice to see a bit of a rebel around here.”

Meh. Like I haven't heard that before. In all sorts of tones of voice, too.

“So…” I ask, trying to make sense of him turning up here and now, “Mrs Catrick’s your aunt?”

He nods.

“Are you visiting her for the hols?”

“Sort of,” he says and shrugs a shoulder, “For the holidays, maybe a term or two, I guess.”

“Huh. And you’re living with her because…?”

“My mum and dad are divorcing, and ducking flying crockery made it difficult to study.”

Crap. And here I am treating his life like some personal amusement.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be - they’re both arseholes. I’m happy to get out of there.”

I put a hand on his arm. That sounds rough. Mum and I have had our differences, but I've never thought of her like that. She's a pain sometimes, but I miss her every time I go away. Lame, huh? Time to change the subject or what?

“So - Mrs Catrick thrown anything at you yet?”

He snorts.

“Give her time - I think we're both still on good behaviour.”

“Wow - so there's an evil Mark under there somewhere?”

He shrugs and looks distinctly uncomfortable. Time to change the subject again, I guess. Poor guy probably steals bikkies from the pantry or some other heinous crime.

“So,” I ask, “why didn't you out me to Mrs Catrick? Burst of altruism? Christian kindness?”

“Pure self-interest,” he says, grinning, “Aunt Rosie's a bit freaked by the responsibility, I think, she's trying to make sure I don't have any bad influences. I think self-defense might count as evil in her mind.”

I sigh, which is probably not the reaction he's after.

“I am a bad influence,” I say seriously, “I'm not sure I'm such a good person for you to be hanging with, you know.”

He laughs.

“Girl,” he says, “at my last church, I found out that half of my goody-goody mates were really on speed and pot and other stuff. And most of them were having sex with boyfriends and girlfriends their parents didn't even know about. If you can't top that, you're not even close to a bad influence.”

I goggle at him.

“Drugs? Christian kids? Fuck! I mean - oh crap, see what I mean?”

We look at each other and laugh. Sometimes life is *too* ridiculous.

“So,” he asks, raising an eyebrow, “where's the happening joint?”

“What, for drugs and sex, or just hanging out?”

He starts laughing almost hysterically, while I look on, waiting for him to get over what was really a pretty lame joke. Geez, you'd think he'd been stuck in a monastery.

“Well, there's the beach...” I say, when he's over the worst of it.

He bites his lip - hard, I'm guessing, from the look of pain momentarily on his face.

“I'm 400k inland, and there's a beach? Geez, and I thought the drug scene was intense in Sydney!”

“Come on, city boy.”

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I take him down to the river beach. It's a sandy, man-made beach on a curve of the river, built by locals when the council closed the public swimming pool right at the start of summer one year. There's an aquatic centre now in town, but the beach is free and I like it better - greener, less chemical stink.

“I know it's lame,” I say, “But... it's my favourite spot. I come down here and watch the birds, and... chill, you know?”

“I like it!” he says, and lies down on the grass. “I need a straw hat, and I'll feel just like Huckleberry Finn!”

God help us. Huck Finn? Who does that make me, Tom bloody Sawyer?

Chapter 3: Back to School

So there are books and exercise books and pens and pencils and crap to buy for the new school year. Cos, like, what loser would be seen with last year's scungy pens and pencils? Me, some years. The joys of being in a single-income family, huh?

This year is a good year, at least. Mum can afford all the basics and a few extras - although I'm not too interested in the shiny new lunchbox or pencilcase she suggests. I guess parents get a little confused about just how old their kids are sometimes.

“Can we save it for acrylics?” I ask patiently.

“What, nails?” she asks, frowning.

“NO - paint, Mum! What would I do with fake nails? Paint my hotrod to match them?”

She snorts.

“No car, love!”

“I know! So, can we get me some acrylics, and a canvas or two?”

She sighs, and I know she's going to give in. Anything's better than tarty makeup and my own car, looks like. I'll have to remember that tactic.

We head to the art shop for my supplies, and then I'm happy as a pig in mud. I'd love to have bought everything else in the store - oils and beautiful brushes and crayons and CLAY - but I'll happily settle for what I've got right now. It almost makes up for going back to school.

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“No, you can't have your hem any higher!”

“But it's stupid! It's below my knees!”

“Better than looking like a teen tramp, love, showing your arse like some of your classmates.”

“Teen - Mum, I look like a teen HOBO!”

“Don't be silly”

“I'm not! People will laugh at me - again!”

“You're a good little Christian girl, and you look it. Deal, love.”

“Mum!”

She looks at me, and I remember that look from when I was little. It's the shut-up-or-I-wallop look. She wouldn't hit me now... I think. But I shut up anyway.

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First day back at school, and I'm half-wishing I could be out on holidays again. Funny, huh? I love books. I love learning stuff. I don't love school. Sometimes it's OK - but some of the crap they go on with... argh!

Treating everyone like cons who have to be locked up and controlled and never allowed to make sane decisions, except what to have for lunch. And we've all gotta look exactly the same, like little clones in our poxy uniforms. Mum's already lectured me about taking out my piercing and ditching the makeup on weekdays... like I can't remember what the deal's been the rest of my life.

I'm in Year 9 this year. Blah blah responsibility blah blah still treat you like crud.

Maths is first, and I walk in thinking that this should be simple enough. Me and mathematics get along just fine. But the teacher's Mrs Hunter, and she and I *don't*. I don't know why, except that she likes everyone to do what they're told and learn without thinking - and that's something I'm not good at. I'm always asking the wrong question or saying the wrong thing or, God help me, learning too fast. Which is my problem today - we get out our textbooks and get to work without a bit of the usual 'hi, welcome to whatever, blah blah blah' that usually happens for the first class of the year. Nope, we get right to work on a revision type test of all the stuff we did last year, and I finish pretty fast - well duh, it's simple enough stuff, and it's not like I've been gone for *years*.

“Maisy!”

I look up from my doodling.

“Get back to work!”

“I'm finished.”

“Then go back and do it properly!”

“Umm... I checked it, seems OK.”

“Don't answer back!”

“But -”

“What did I just say?”

Uh huh. See what I mean? This is gonna be a *crap* year, I can tell already. But I get through the class, and Mrs Hunter gives us a stack of homework, everyone groans, and she yells and tells us to get out. Righteo then.

History's next, and even though I picked this elective, I'm not really looking forward to it, you know? History can be interesting or boring as batshit, and if Maths is anything to go by this year, I should be betting on the batshit.

“Hey, Mais, you taking History too?” comes a voice from behind me.

I turn around to see Rachel - who's kind of a friend and kind of not. Confused? Can't say I blame you, it confused me at first too. See, we were friends in primary school... not quite best friends, but we went over to each others' houses and invited each other to sleepovers and stuff. Then we both hit high school, and... it was like she got a whole new set of priorities. Suddenly she was one of the cool gang, always talking about music and clothes and boys. Me? I was the weird poor kid with the secondhand clothes and uncool hobbies. So we drifted apart, but we talk now and then. I think she's trying to be charitable, and doesn't get that I don't care about not being popular. Whatevz.

“Yeah, History and Art - you?”

“Music's my other one. Piano and all that.”

Rachel's been taking piano lessons since she was like, 3. She's really good. Not that she makes a big deal of it at school, it's too geeky for her image or something.

“Cool.”

She shrugs.

When we get to the next classroom, I get the first pleasant surprise of the day. Mr Mowbray is teaching. Yes! He's old, but he always turns boring into an interesting story. I settle into my seat and think, *maybe this year won't be so bad after all*.

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“WHO,” asks Georgie in a loud whisper, “did you go off with last Sunday?”

“That was Mark,” I say, grinning, “we met a couple weeks ago and kinda hit it off, you know?”

She raises an eyebrow.

“Not like *that*! Geez! What do you think I am?”

She shrugs and looks a bit ashamed of herself.

“Mum saw you go off with him,” she says, “Said you were setting a bad example, behaving like that.”

“Huh? Making a friend is a bad example?”

“No, going off in public with *a boy* is a bad example, Maisy.”

Oh, great. Now I'm not just satanism girl, I'm slut woman too.

“We just talked. What the heck's wrong with that?”

“It looks bad!”

I'm about to follow this bizarre train of thought a bit further, but music starts playing in the church to herald the beginning of the service, and we hurry in. Georgie runs off to join her mother, who glares at me, and I see Mum waving at me over the other side of the church. She's sitting next to Mrs Catrick and Mark. They both turn and smile at me as I edge into the pew and sit down, and after Georgie's mum I'm ready to just bathe in the love.

****

The next week of school seems a lot easier now I know what to expect. Maths first thing on a Monday morning is a killer, but at least I know the day'll always improve from then on. And I have Art on Friday afternoons, which ends the week on a beautifully mellow note. Especially since we have a special project - to pick a classic painting of any style and do a copy. I'm thinking Monet. I have other favourites, but I've always wanted to try a real Impressionist painting, a big one. They take ages, which is why I never have... but now I have the perfect opportunity.

Mark's at the same school - Year 10, though, one above me, so we don't see each other as much as I expected. So school goes on much the same way as it always has for me - classes, occasional chats with friendly acquaintances, lunchtimes spent with a good book and a can of coke. Yeah, friends have never been a big deal for me at school. I get along with almost everyone, but I don't have much in common with most people. They know that, and they kinda just avoid me. Except Lisa, the class 'ZOMG I'm so bitching' girl. She's dumb, she talks a lot, she flirts with anything remotely male, and she can't stand

people who don't bow down and worship her. I don't, so I'm Evil Bitch Queen From Hell every now and then. Guess you can tell it doesn't really bother me much. She's like a mozzie without a stinger - annoying but harmless if you ignore her. Besides, there's always someone around to socialise with if I'm feeling lonely, even when Lisa's on a rampage. I think most people secretly hate her.

I kinda wish Georgie were around, but she goes to Kelso. Probably a good thing though, because there's an excellent chance we'd kill each other if we spent too much time together. Once we spent a week in the same dorm on a church youth camp, and I nearly *did* throttle her. She spent most of the time crying because she missed her mum. Umm, lame? And darn, did the crying get on my nerves.

At least now I've got something else to do at lunchtimes - if I can convince Mr Graham to let me use the Art room during lunch. Bet I can.

Chapter 4: Revheads

“Hey, Gav - 'sup?” I say to a headless body sticking out from under a Nissan hatchback.

Gav's a mechanic. He's two years older than me, in year 11. Tall, blonde and gangly. And kinda ugly, to be honest. Everything's too big, nose, ears, eyebrows. Give him a bigger face and... heck, he'd just have a big head then. His dad owns the Holden dealership in town, and Gav loves cars. Like, 'lucky he never has a girlfriend cos she'd get horribly jealous', kinda loves. A perfectly restored classic car has him sighing, moaning and full of dopey smiles. His dad, on the other hand, likes a brand-new expensive car with air-con, and doesn't get the fascination with 'those heaps of old junk'. Bloody Philistine.

Gav and I got talking once at a car show, and we've been mates ever since. He took me along to the unofficial revhead meetup on a vacant block in town, introduced me around, and I've been even more addicted to cars ever since. Bathurst really is THE place to be a revhead, you know? It's like country music and Tamworth.

“Maisy, dude!” he pulls himself out from underneath the hatchback and grins at me.

“Don't you have a pit for that sort of thing?” I ask, copying his father.

He laughs.

“Just checking out the oil situation - looks like a boring old leak. Wish this woman would stop scraping the front of the car on her driveway,” he shakes his head, almost admiringly. “Gal's got talent!”

“Ah, some people just got it!”

“That include you? Hey! Dude! Wanna come check out Baby?”

Baby's his latest... well, baby. Just bought, and I was figuring if I visited now, he might even let me under the hood - before he turns her into pristine go-there-and-die material. He leads me indoors, and suspended over the pit is a huge old Falcon sedan, looking pretty damn crappy. There are even a couple of bullet holes in a back door, rusted up something shocking.

“Wow - a Ford? What does Daddy think?” I say, laughing. If you're not from around here, you might not know that country Aussies are firmly split into two passionate camps - Holden lovers and Ford lovers. Bringing a Ford into a Holden dealership's kinda like taking a dog to a cat show, except worse. Gav is an odd one in the car world - he doesn't really care about make, he cares about the machine. I tend to agree with him, but I can't help loving the old Fords. Mum's influence, I guess. Whenever we had a car when I was a kid, it was a Ford.

“Daddy thinks my latest pile of junk is the worst yet,” he says, grinning. “Coming into the pit? If you're a good girl, I'll let you change her oil...”

I jump down fast, before he can change his mind. The next hour is spent handing him spanners and rags and solvent, but then he hands me the stuff and lets me drain the oil and refill it up top. Heaven.

Out on the street, later, I look down at my clothes. Streaks of oil and dirt all down the front of my uniform. Ooh, Mum is *not* gonna be impressed. Oh well. Go home, head straight to the laundry, dump the clothes in the washing machine on a lonnnnng cycle. If I play it right, I might even get points for doing my own laundry.

****

“Maisy...?”

“Yeah Mum? I'm home!”

“Where you been?”

“Smoking joints, shooting up, getting laid...”

“MAISY! Not funny!” she yells, walking out of the kitchen. She's got a smile on her face that she's doing her damnedest to hide.

I grin at her, not feeling a bit repentant.

“What the heck happened to you?”

Oh. Damn. Forgot the plan to run to the laundry and clean up.

“Umm, stopped in at Gav's, he let me change the oil his new car!”

She sighs and looks at the ceiling.

“Maisy, do you have chores to do?”

I nod meekly.

“Well, now you've got one more - laundry! I want to see those clothes as good as new, girl.”

Oh noz! Punished with exactly what I'd planned to do anyway. Life is so unfair.

****

“Pretty!”

I jump and - thank God - only just avoid adding a brush stroke across the canvas.

“Mark! Moron, you scared the life outta me!”

He pouts.

“Sorry!”

I sigh. He didn't mean to be an idiot, did he?

“Surprising me while I'm painting is a dangerous business, boy - I was in concentration mode.”

“Yeah, I get that *now*,” he says, losing the pout a bit.

“Did you want something?”

He looks like I just stabbed him in the heart.

“Dude, you're not supposed to be in here.”

“You're in here,” he says.

“I have permission, ya goit - and if you're caught in here, I'll lose that!”

Chapter 5: Emo Boy

Mark and I are standing in my bedroom in front of the mirror, door open to avoid offending my mum's delicate sensibilities. It's the day before the main disco of the year, and - OK, lame time again? A disco's kinda a big deal in Bathurst. Our social life doesn't get many boosts. The theme, oddly, is Halloween - odd because it's almost March. Maybe someone's trying to compensate for our reversed seasons.

I frown at Mark. He looks the epitome of your good Christian boy - jeans and inoffensive bland department-store t-shirt. Neat, short hair. No makeup. What he needs for a Halloween theme is a walk on the dark side of life, I reckon. Isn't that what it's all about? Or have all those American movies led me astray? Then inspiration hits.

"Emo!" I say, grinning, "You would be *beautiful* as an emo boy!"

He grimaces.

"No offense, Mais... but I don't think it's really my thing, ya know?"

"That's the whole point, dude - it's Halloween, not the prom."

He sighs, and I take that for acceptance of the plan.

"You're a bit shorter than me," I say, looking at him critically, "But ya know, I think this might fit, it's stretchy," I throw a top at him.

"Girl's clothes?" he says, looking dubious.

"Uh huh... it's what all the cool guys are wearing!"

"It's black MESH!" he protests.

"Hey, are you a good boy, or are you an Emo boy?" I tease.

He rolls his eyes and peels off his daggy t-shirt. Suddenly he doesn't look so scrawny. Where the heck did those muscles come from?

"PHWOAR!" I say, since I'm already checking out the sculpted chest. "You are RIPPED! Why didn't you tell me you were so hot?"

"I'm a humble guy," he says, grinning but turning bright red.

"That," I say, "is going to look ten times as hot as I thought! Except you'll be struggling to keep the other chicks off!"

"Eurgh! God," he says, shuddering, "no offense, Mais, but most of the chicks at your school are feral."

I laugh. Some of the girls at our school do get a bit bogany at times, and subtle's not really their forte. To be fair, though, the footballers wouldn't really notice that a chick liked them unless she was sitting on their lap and gyrating slowly. Flicking your hair and sending smouldering glances just doesn't do it round here. But Mark's a city boy, and the whole subtle-as-a-brick-across-the-back-of-the-head thing seems to freak him out a bit.

Black mesh shirt, tight black jeans and a bandana, and Mark is looking HOT.

"These things are ridiculous," he whines, pulling at the crotch of the jeans.

“Oh, man up!” I say, laughing.

He blushes, but straightens up and at least attempts to look dignified.

“Better - come over tomorrow after school, we'll do the makeup then, k?”

“Makeup?”

Geeeeez! Is emo out of fashion in Sydney, or something?

****

Next afternoon, he turns up and submits bravely to the makeup, only screaming when I accidentally poke the eyeliner in his eye.

“Cripes, boy, stop *moving*!”

“Stop poking me in the eye!”

I sigh, irritated and amused in spite of myself.

“You running a torture chamber up here, hon?” Mum asks, poking her head round the door.

“Yep. Thought it was less dangerous than sleeping with them, Mum.”

She laughs and retreats while Mark blushes. Again. Geez, big sophisticated city boy, huh?

I finally get Mark ready, and have a chance to slip into *my* outfit. There's not much of it, and the makeup's not meant to be at all subtle or classy, so it doesn't take long.

“You're going in *that*?” he asks, eyebrows raised.

“Uh huh - cute, isn't it?”

He sticks a finger down his throat and makes puking noises.

“Huh - you don't approve?”

“You look like Teen Fashion Whore!”

“Damn, I should've thought to get that on a bling necklace, that'd be perfect!”

I look at my reflection. Tight, sequiny pink crop top and a white skirt, the short flouncy type that's in fashion at the moment. Hair up and curled and hairsprayed to within a millimetre of its life. Bright pink lipstick, two circles of bright pink blush on my cheeks. Bright blue eyeshadow. Heels to die for - literally, I suspect. Stupid things will break my ankle if I try to dance in them.

He snorts.

“Lighten up, dude - it's a costume, remember?”

****

We walk into the school gym, and it's... well, not transformed, just dark and flashing with cheap lighting effects and the prerequisite mirror ball. They're playing a Britney Spears song.

“Holy crap, Britney? I can't do this!” I say in Mark's ear.

He grabs my arm and pulls me further in.

“I get to look like the cover of BDSM Monthly, you can deal with Britney!” he yells.

“FINE!”

He wanders off to find drinks, and I sit down and look at the action. Everyone's dancing unenthusiastically, and it looks like Mark and I might be the only ones to've actually made an effort with costumes.

“Maisy!”

Rachel waves and walks over, then flops into a seat next to me.

“You look gorgeous, girl, but I think the cheeks are a bit overdone... love the top, though, does wonders for your tits.”

Holy crap. She didn't get the whole 'costume' thing, did she?

“Thanks, Rach, you look great.”

She's dressed almost identically to me, but with better makeup. Mustn't laugh.

Rachel looks at something behind me, and her eyes widen.

“Who the hell is THAT?” she asks.

I turn around to see Mark returning with two cans of drink. He sits down, hands me one, and waves at Rachel. Rachel smooths her hair with one hand and waves back with the other, grinning.

“Oh - Rach, this is Mark, he's new here... Mark, Rachel.”

Apart from the crappy music, it turns out to be an OK disco. Plenty of drinks and food options on offer. And since hardly anyone's put an effort into outfits, Mark wins a second prize for weirdest outfit. I don't win a thing - I guess they didn't see the irony. But Mark's kinda stoked by the prize, and finds himself the centre of attention in a group of younger girls who clearly think he's *hot*. I leave him enjoying the attention, and find myself another drink.

****

Next morning, I’m lying in bed trying to decide whether breakfast is worth getting up for. There's a knock on my bedroom door, which I assume is Mum. Maybe with breakfast? Or am I living in fantasy land?

“Come in,” I yell lazily.

Mark’s standing outside in the hall, grey-faced. His eyeliner is smeared and streaked down his cheeks.

“Aunt Rose didn’t like my outfit,” he says, and tries to smile.

Holy crap. What the heck's happened?

I bundle him in, sit on my bed, and get him to lie down with his head on my lap.

“Tell me all about it,” I say, stroking his hair.

“Umm… devil worship, satanic, evil, stupid, bad influence, stay away from that girl…”

“Mrs Catrick said that?”

“Uh huh - I dunno, it all freaked her out something chronic, Mais, she went ballistic.”

“The makeup?”

He shrugs, looking morose.

“Dunno, kiddo - but she's still mad. You haven't seen me, if anyone asks.”

Wow. I never would've expected nice little Mrs Catrick to go nuts over something this lame. What's up *her* butt?

****

“WHAT?”

“Mark's grounded for going to an evil anti-Christian disco dressed as a Satan-worshipper.”

Mum's completely gobsmacked.

“I don't understand - she's seen you wearing that stuff a hundred times! She's always lovely to you!”

I don't get it either. But I do suddenly get a sneaking suspicion.

“Maybe she's been trying to convert the poor little satanist girl with kindness and cookies?”

Mum sighs as if the idea isn't as far out as I hope it is.

“I'll go talk with her, love, see if I can settle her down, OK?”

Chapter 6: Clichés

Another Sunday, and another sermon that I try not to yawn through. Damn, I *try* to pay attention to the things, I really do, it's just that they never seem to make much sense, or the minister goes on and on with something that could be said in a few sentences. Can't we ever do something *interesting*?

On the bright side, there's always morning tea. Christians might be kinda boring, but they bake kick-arse snacks. I browse the table with a paper plate, grabbing a few bits and pieces.

“Lo, stranger!”

It's Mark. Hallelujah! I start to say something, but he shushes me, grabs my arm and pulls me off around the corner of the church.

“Aunt Rose has me on a pretty tight leash, but there's a crisis with the morning tea roster, so I scampered,” he says, grinning.

“Darn, so she's *that* upset still? You really need to sneak around like this?”

He sighs and nods.

“She says she'll send me home if I play up, so I'm trying to be good,” he says, grimacing, “but Mais, I'm going nuts!”

“Mum said she'd have a talk with her, try to calm her down a bit,” I say, and throw an arm around his shoulders, “buck up, OK? It'll be alright.”

He sighs.

“I don't want to go back to Sydney, Mais...”

“Then toughen up, k? You can do this! And hey, why don't we meet up at lunchtime? I'd only go to the library otherwise.”

“You are *such* a geek.”

“Oh, fine, go play with all your other friends then, huh?”

He laughs and gives me a quick hug.

“Better go, my keeper might be after me by now!”

He runs in the opposite direction to the crowd eating morning tea, and after a second of confusion I get what he's doing - appearing from a different spot so it doesn't look as though we snuck off together. Not bad... almost like he has experience in sneaking around.

“What *is* it with you two?”

I jump.

“God, Georgie, you scared the crap out of me!”

She raises an eyebrow, and I know it's at the terrible use of the word 'crap'. Because good girls don't swear, even a little bit. Ever.

“You're sneaking around with him again?” she asks, “Mais, do you have a crush on him or something?”

Huh?

I shake my head.

“No, we're just friends!” I say, kinda lamely, because I realise halfway through saying it that she and I are supposed to be friends, too. Except I get along a lot better with Mark.

“But you hardly know him!” she says, frowning, “and besides, Mum says -”

God help me, I can't cope with more of her mother's opinions.

“GEORGIE! We're just friends, ok? We clicked. We're similar personalities. That's all. Now will you stop imagining me having sex out back after church, already? Geez!”

She sniffs, obviously offended, and stalks off. Fine, whatever. She's a prize pain in the arse when she gets judgmental. She'll probably turn out just like her mother. And with that thought, I'm wondering for the fiftieth time why she and I are friends in the first place. We spend most of our time disliking each other lately.

****

The next weekend, I wake up to a gorgeous Saturday morning. The sun's shining, there's about three clouds in the sky, and the predicted high is **25 degrees**. This is a perfect day to ditch homework and chores, and head for the beach. I grab a couple of Mum's muffins from the kitchen, write her a note to tell her where I've gone, and skip out before she wakes up. Next stop, Mark's place.

Since Mrs Catrick's still on an 'anti-Satan' crusade, I find myself resorting to the cliché, a handful of gravel thrown at Mark's window. A few seconds later, a bed-headed Mark looks out the window at me, laughing. And a few minutes later, he's running out of the house and grabbing me for a quick hug before we run down the street together.

Later, we lie on the grass by the water, side by side.

“You know,” he says, looking at the clouds, “sometimes I wish I'd been born a chick?”

I raise myself on an elbow and look at him.

“Really??” I ask, feeling skeptical, “I've never heard a guy say that before!”

He snorts. “It's not like I want a sex change - I just... wish I had the freedom that girls do.”

“You feeling OK, bud? Freedom? Ever heard of pregnancy? Periods? Churches telling us to wear long skirts and obey our husbands even if they beat us?”

Mark laughs and finally looks at me. “Yeah, point, Dexter,” he says, “but seriously - if you walk out of the house wearing men's clothes, what will people say?”

I shrug, although I'm starting to see where this is going.

“Nothing?”

“'Xactly. But Mrs Catrick sees me wearing makeup and freaks big time, yeah?”

“Uh huh.”

“Now, if I walk out of the house wearing a pink shirt and express an interest in fashion - what do people say?”

“'Are you sure you're not gay?'”

“Uh huh - if I'm not a blokey bloke, then I'm secretly not a bloke at all.”

I frown.

“Yeah, OK, point taken I think - you're saying girls can act blokey and no one really cares, but if a guy acts like a chick, he's gay, let's keep him away from the kids?”

He sighs.

“Yup - it's kinda depressing. Especially because I'm a minister's kid, and minister's kids aren't allowed to make people wonder about stuff like that, they have to conform to the world without - umm - conforming!”

“Sounds confusing.”

“Tell me about it!”

I stay silent, staring at the sky, trying to imagine what it would be like to be so constrained by expectations. No one's ever really told me I had to fit a mold to be acceptable. Well, a couple have, actually, but Mum told them to bugger off. What if it was Mum telling me I couldn't act like me?

Chapter 7: Theology

Mark and I talk about a lot of things. Life, death, heaven, hell, God... stuff I've never really talked about with anyone before. Some of it I've touched on with Mum, but she's kinda simple in her beliefs about a lot of this stuff. You live 'til you die, then you go to heaven or hell, depending on whether you've accepted Jesus into your heart. Uh huh, sure, but details? Nah, Mum's never been interested in the details.

“You know one of the shittiest things about churches?” Mark asks me one day.

“Sermons are too long?”

He chuckles, then mock-frowns at me.

“No, smart-arse! Seriously...”

I nod, to let him know I'm prepared to go into serious mode.

“Gay people. Nobody wants them - not really.”

“You think?”

“Yup, happens all the time - someone comes out as gay, and their church tells them to get the hell out.”

“Isn't that if they're sinning, though?”

“Like what? Dating people of the same sex? Oooh, horrible!”

I frown. I don't get it. It almost sounds like he's saying that someone who's gay and dating isn't doing a single thing wrong.

“But - it's a sin, right? The bible says men shouldn't have sex with other men, so...”

“So it's OK to kick someone out?”

“Well...”

“Or just have everyone in the church start avoiding them like the plague because they came out?”

OK, that doesn't sound like it'd be a right thing to do. But...

“Well, church people get funny around sin, right?”

He just grunts.

“You seem pretty mad about this?”

Mark shrugs and sits up. He grabs a blade of grass and plays with it like it's the most intriguing thing since the Rubik's cube.

“I think I might be gay, Mais... I just... I don't know, right? And say I am, and I come out - my family disowns me, Aunt Rosie goes even more ballistic and chucks me out, no-one in this church takes me in cos I might corrupt the whole house...”

He trails off and bites his lip.

Farrrrk.

I'm frozen, I don't know what the hell to do. Do I tell him it'd be OK, people would stand by him? Or is that encouraging sin or something? I feel like a piece of elastic pulled between God and Mark, and I'm about to break. Selfish, huh?

I look up at Mark, and he's watching me, looking sad. He's seen everything I've just thought on my face, and he looks like I've failed a test. Suddenly I'm just feeling like crap. I don't know what to say, I can't make anything better for him, I don't even know what to think.

****

Bet you think I'm horrible, huh? But let me point out that I'm gonna love him no matter what. I haven't known Mark for long, but we clicked the instant we met. I'm closer to him than anyone I've known for years. But you've got to understand what's at stake here. Society doesn't care if you're gay or not, or at least it pretends not to. The church, on the other hand, says that it does, and that God does, and if you're gay and you seek out a same-sex relationship, you're going to hell. The Old Testament says God hates homosexuality. The New Testament says homosexuality is bad.

That means that if my best friend is gay, he might just go to hell.

I don't want him to go to hell.

****

“Do you think God hates gays?” I ask as Mark and I sit at my and mum's kitchen table, trying to study and failing miserably.

Mark frowns.

“Do you think God hates injustice?”

It's my turn to frown. I don't get the connection, but I guess I might as well play along.

“Huh - that's in the bible somewhere, yeah?”

Mark nods.

“I'm a minister's kid. I know that thing back to front. Injustice, hatred... those things are all through the bible,” he says, looking up at me. “Gay sex? Hardly at all. Hear any ministers in the news speaking out for social justice?”

“Ummm... once? Something about supporting welfare reforms?”

He nods. Huh. I think I see where he's going with this. It's like, God's continually talking about caring about people, looking after others, and the church just keeps rabbiting on about evil gay guys and everyone having far too much sex. But - I don't think he's right. Or is he?

“So... you think God cares more about the other stuff than who I'm having sex with? Or not?”

He shrugs.

“I don't know. It just seems weird that he'd tell people so much about love and looking after others, complete strangers even - and then hate people for doing something that does no harm. You know?”

“HIV?”

“Condoms?”

I frown. I've got nothing. I know I believe being gay is bad, but for the life of me I can't think why right now.

****

A knock on my bedroom door.

“Come in!” I yell, putting my bible down.

“Oh, this has to be a setup,” Mum says, laughing at me, “what were you really reading? Kama Sutra? Cosmo? Satanic verses?”

I snort.

“For once,” I say, trying to sound dignified, “I was actually reading this thing!” I frown as I remember why I'm reading it.

“Honey... is there something in particular you're trying to work out?”

I sigh. Well, she always says she's up for any discussion, right? Now's as good a time as any to test the theory.

“Is being gay wrong?”

She sits on the bed and sighs.

“Wow, and I was only going to ask what you want for breakfast! No, being gay's not wrong. Having sex with someone of the same sex is wrong.”

“Why?”

“Because God says so - and because it's dirty, and can cause STDs.”

“But so can hetero sex!”

“Not if you're monogamous.”

“What about if you're gay and monogamous?”

She shakes her head.

“Doesn't happen, love, or at least very rarely - that scene's usually sex sex sex, with anyone anywhere. I should know, I saw a lot in my wild years.”

I frown.

“But if it was?”

“Well, it's still not what God made us for - one partner of the opposite sex, to help us understand the opposite sex and so we can procreate, like he wants.”

“World overpopulation, and God still wants us to procreate?”

She shrugs. “Bringing life into this world is an amazing thing, Maisy honey. It's a chance to change the future long after you're dead.

“But -”

“Honey? I'm sorry. I'm starving. Can we continue this over breakfast, at least?”

****

“Mum?”

“Yeah, honey?”

“Have you actually read what the bible says about being gay?”

She nods, distracted by cooking a pancake.

“Leviticus,” she says eventually.

“Yup! Along with commandments to avoid tattoos and women's jeans and ESPECIALLY -” I pause for dramatic effect, “using two substances to make your clothing. Like linen and wool, or polyester and cotton! Checked your wardrobe recently?”

She looks up at me and smiles ruefully.

“They're old, superseded commands, love,”

“Isn't the commandment against gay sex the same, then?”

“Nope, honey - Paul reiterated that one.”

“But Jesus didn't, did he?”

“We don't have a record of everything Jesus said.”

“But if it wasn't important enough to write down...”

She sighs.

“I don't know, honey. I think you want this to be OK, for whatever reason, that you're willing to question what the church teaches - I think you need to be careful that you're doing this in the right spirit. A rebellious spirit will always find a reason to rebel, you know?”

Well, damned if that doesn't shut me right up.

****

“You know,” I say to Mark a couple days later, “there's one way to find out if you're gay or not.”

He lifts his head and looks at me quizzically.

“We could try having sex... that'd tell you, right? Or tell me, maybe. One of us would be bound to know, wouldn't we? That's how it always seems to work in books and on TV - a guy tries sex with a woman and someone just knows?”

He frowns.

“Ummm... that's a hell of a proposition, Maisy...”

“I know. But not knowing's killing me, so it's gotta be worse for you - am I right? And hey, if you're not gay then worst case scenario, we get married, right? Then all's forgiven?”

“Gawd - talk about trial by fire, girl!”

He sits and thinks for a few minutes.

“No. No bloody way. I'm not going to use you like that, Maisy - you deserve better.”

“But -”

“Shut up. Just -” he shuts his mouth on whatever he was going to say, grabs his bag and strides off, looking majorly pissed.

I just sit there, feeling stupid.

****

Later, I sit at home stirring a hot chocolate, wondering why the hell I opened my mouth.

“Hi, wanna have sex? Don't worry, if people find out I'll marry you!” I mutter sarcastically. He must have thought I was nuts. And stalkery. Is he ever going to want to talk to me, let alone stay friends? I drain the mug, then beat my head gently on the table. My mother, of course, picks this moment to get home.

“Honey, everything OK?”

I sigh.

“Just offended my best friend,” I say, and manage a half-smile.

“What happened, Maisy love?”

Oh God. There is no way I could ever explain that conversation to Mum in a way that wouldn't get me grounded until she dies.

I just shake my head, and she comes over to give me a quick hug from behind.

“A good friend will forgive you, honey, no matter what, if you're truly sorry, OK?”

I hope she's right.

Meh. Sitting around feeling sorry for myself really isn't helping things. I get up, grab my bag, and head to Voracious. Voracious is a cafe and new-and-secondhand bookshop on the main drag. I love the cute name and the cheap coffee and the owner who treats me like an adult. None of that “are you sure your mum wants you reading that?” idiocy. Plus, John gives me discounts because I help him shelve new deliveries. And lets me read without demanding I pay up first.

Tonight there are no new deliveries waiting out the back, but there are a shedload of coffee customers at the tables out front. So I head to the back of the shop, to the Sci Fi section and my favourite couch.

“Maisy!” John yells from the front, “Some McCaffreys came in!”

Woohoo! If there's one thing that can make me forget my own crippling stupidity, it's the mistress of sci fi. I head to the correct shelf and start browsing. Two I've read, a new Petaybee novel, and - a Pern book that's far from new, but I haven't read. YES! So I grab the Pern book, curl up on the deserted couch, and leave my crappy life behind for a couple of hours.

****

The morning after, I sit at the kitchen table staring at my cereal and wishing I could start the weekend over again. Maybe I can convince Mum I'm too sick for school?

I'm in the middle of dragging a spoonful into my mouth when I hear a tap on the kitchen window. I look up - it's Mark, and he's grinning at me and beckoning me outside.

"A minute!" I mouth at him.

I bolt my brekkie, run to my bedroom, chuck on a clean uniform, and race down the hall and outside.

"Geez, took you long enough!" he says, smiling. "Come on, let's get walking!"

"Walk all the way?"

He shrugs.

"We've got time…"

"Does this mean you forgive me for that crap yesterday?" I ask, tentatively because I don't want to get yelled at, but I've gotta know.

He frowns, and my heart sinks. I was meant to pretend it never happened, I guess.

"I'm sorry," he says, and puts an arm around my shoulders, "it was stupid, I shouldn't have yelled at you, OK? It's all so screwy, my head's messed up, and I yelled at you instead of getting myself sorted. Except…" he frowns and looks down at the footpath, "I don't know if I'll ever get this sorted, it's too big and messy."

"You're apologising? I'm confused." I say, smirking because it looks like we're cool again. Once the smart-arse comment's out of my mouth, I realise that he was probably trying to talk about this sexuality stuff again - and I'm kinda glad I stuffed it up. I don't know what I can say or do to make this better for him, and it's really frustrating. Lame, right? Some friend I am. But I just can't deal. It's too much.

"Fine. We're both morons. Happy?" he says and pokes his tongue out at me. Thank God, he's gone with the joking.

"You are such a child."

"Are not."

****

Rachel comes up to me after maths and walks beside me to the caf, surprisingly quiet for her. Usually she'd be talking at me from the moment she laid eyes on me. Not that I'm anyone special, she talks at almost anyone. It's like any thought that enters her head *has* to be shared with the world.

"Hey, are you and Mark together?" she asks, finally.

I laugh. Darn, of all the days to get a question like that.

“Nah, we’re just friends,” I tell her.

“Oh. OK.” she says, and wanders off without bothering to tell me why she’s interested.

Huh. Looks like Mark's got someone interested.

Chapter 8: Sexpert

Friday nights are Youth Group night. I guess the idea is to keep us out of trouble in the crazy drug-fuelled nightlife of Bathurst. Uh huh. Let's not even try analysing that one. Usually, it's kinda fun, if hokey. Like, we'll play silly party games or watch a movie or have a coffee night or something.

Tonight, though, it's Sex Talk Night, where they bring in an 'expert' to 'chat' to us about God's plan for our sex lives. I bite my lip and sigh quietly, but a few of the other kids just groan loudly and start making off-colour jokes. Oh well, whatever gets 'em through, I guess.

The 'expert' - what makes someone a sex expert, I wonder? Do they have sex in front of a panel of judges? Do previous partners write recommendations? Is it just me, or does the whole Christian ethic on sex make it *really* hard to gain 'expert' status and still be a good Christian? Huh. Anyhow, the guy stands up and introduces himself. He shows us a book called I Kissed Dating Goodbye. Uh huh. Well, a Christian book about sex for teens, that's gotta be good, right?

The night wears on, and I'm torn between curiosity and confusion. Where the hell do these people come *up* with this stuff? Or am I just a naïve virgin? I'm an oven, he's a microwave? I'll be happiest in marriage if my first kiss is on my *wedding day*? This is sounding like a sex talk from the 50s. Any time now he's going to explain that women need to fulfil a man's needs to keep him - oh, Lord, he actually DID just say that.

I give up and walk out during the question and answer time, which is far too close to being like a Police Academy movie. Funny, but in a really stupid way that makes you want to cry. Half the kids are asking deliberately-stupid questions for the 'fun' of it, the other half are asking scarily sincere questions about stuff my mum taught me when I was in primary school. Don't Christian schools believe in Sex Ed or something?

****

“Why avoid sex before marriage?” I ask.

“Because God wants us to have sex only with people we're married to?” Mark answers, yawning.

“And we get this from?”

“Don't commit adultery. See, I'm a minister's kid, I know these things.”

“What's adultery?”

“Sex with a married person not your spouse.”

“Am I the only one who sees a flaw in that logic?” I demand, sitting up.

“Oi!” protests Mark. His head had been resting on my stomach.

Mark sits up too, and looks hard at me.

“What's with the sudden fascination with sex?” he asks.

“I'm a teen,” I say, getting embarrassed because - I just realised - I'm talking about sex with a boy. “Aren't I supposed to be thinking about it?”

“Not if you're a good little Christian girl, apparently.”

“But good little Christian boys can't help it?”

“Exactly.”

I look around for something to throw, but I've got nothing. I settle for thumping the grass next to me.

“It's just - I never really thought much about what we learn at church, you know? Just accepted what they told me cos it seemed to make sense. And then you start talking about 'what if I was gay' and stuff, and they do a youth group session like last night's which is full of - of crap! - and suddenly I can't see the sense anymore. It's all stupid!”

Mark sighs.

“Yeah, it is.” he says, and flops back down onto his back.

“Thanks a bunch, mate. No wisdom? No bible verses?”

“Nup. I got nothing.”

“Great!”

Mark grins suddenly.

“Hey, this whole sex preoccupation isn't because of a new thang, is it?”

“What?”

“You don't have a crush on some tower of studliness at school? At church?”

I laugh. The guys I know at school play footy, wear their school trousers as far down their bums as they dare, and act like undiluted arsehole. The guys at church are - prissy. Good. Cotton-wooled half to death. They wince if I say 'shit' and God only knows what they'd do if they'd seen me scaring off a bagsnatcher that day I met Mark. They'd probably make the sign of the cross whenever they saw me and pray for me lots. Actually, for all I know they already do. Goody.

“That's crazy talk!”

Mark snorts.

“Nah - it's just - no-one really does it for me yet, that's all.”

“Mmm - I feel your pain.”

“You do? Cos I know you sure float someone's boat!”

Mark rolls his eyes and sighs theatrically.

“It's hard being a sex god!”

I can't help it. I burst into laughter, and every time I look at his pouting face I laugh harder.

“You don't think I'm sexy?” he asks, semi-seriously.

I get myself under control by biting my tongue 'til the pain stops me laughing.

“You're sexy dressed emo, if that helps? But hey, half my class are drooling over you after that disco, isn't

that enough?”

“Really? Who?”

“I think your latest conquest is Rachel...”

“Oh God... she's like a mouth on legs!” he wails.

“Poor boy,” I mock, sniggering.

Chapter 9: Dad

I think there's somethin' crazy goin on in your head behind your eyes...

“Hey Mum - some of this old stuff aint too bad, ya know...”

“Oh, Lord, what are you listening to now, child?”

“Umm... Baby Animals? Cute and fluffy, huh?”

She snorts and wanders off. I put the headphones on and keep ripping her CDs to mp3.

“You know,” she says over dinner, “we thought some of that stuff was Satanic when I was younger - Alice Cooper, Meatloaf, Poison... I never could let go of their CDs, though, when I joined the church. Not that anyone really cares too much any more. Funny, huh? God, you should have heard the uproar when we found out George Michael was gay...”

I laugh.

“No one picked up that George Michael might be gay? With those video clips?”

“What can I say, we were innocents - even Boy George was a surprise.”

I laugh so hard I actually do almost fall off my chair.

“So, did Alice Cooper really bite the heads off chickens and stuff?” I say when I've calmed down.

“Nah, that was Ozzy Osbourne,” she says, grinning, “but Alice was rumoured to sacrifice goats backstage...”

“Goats? Backstage? Seriously?”

“Well, the rumours sounded intriguing... and damn did I want to get backstage and find out!”

I collapse into giggles.

“Hey, he's not my bio-father, is he?” I ask.

She looks round-eyed at me.

“Are you asking if I slept with Alice Cooper?”

“What, can he do the Virgin Impregnation thing? Isn't that God's domain?”

She laughs and shakes her head.

“No, I didn't sleep with Alice, OK? Or Ozzy Osbourne. Your dad's more likely to be Kurt Cobain.”

It's my turn to look shocked.

“NO! I didn't sleep with him either! Crikey, girl, what DO you tell your friends about me? 'My mum's shagged every man-slut in Sydney'?”

“Nup.”

“Thank God.”

“Just all the rock stars.”

“You - brat! You don't, do you?”

I raise an eyebrow and slooowly edge into the lounge, grinning, while she stands with hands on hips, looking mostly-joking-about-being-angry. As I flop down into a chair, I hear plates clanging in the sink. Hrmm.

****

I don't really miss having a dad, you know? Although sometimes I'd love to know what he was like, what he did in his spare time - because maybe it'd help me understand me. But then I look around me at all the confused, clueless kids with two parents, and I figure maybe it wouldn't help a whole lot.

It's just - Mum and I are different, right? Different personalities, different reactions to the same things. Sometimes I really don't get her. And sometimes it'd be nice to be able to say, “oh, I'm like Dad in that” instead of “I don't know why I do that” or “maybe I'm just a freak”.

Enough of the pity party. I'm just upset because church is just giving me the willies lately. Like I told Mark, this all seemed to make sense once. Now I see stupid things everywhere, and I don't get it. Is it me, is it the church, is it the religion? Is the bible full of crap, or is someone just really crap at explaining this stuff?

Sex is the thing that opened the floodgates of what-the-hell. The church is huge on being 'good' when it comes to sex. None outside marriage. None with same-sex partners. Not that we hear many sermons about it, except at youth group. But this guy got kicked out a couple of months ago for sleeping with someone else's wife, and they got caught (obviously). So sex is clearly an important priority for the church, right? Except if you actually read the bible, Jesus never really mentioned sex, he talked about love for each other and sticking to your word and not being judgmental. And hello - when's the last time YOU saw someone get kicked out of church for breaking promises or being an unloving git? Hell, those sort often seem to become elders.

I don't see why it's all such a big deal. Why does everyone get so heated up about an orgasm now and then? I don't want to talk to Mum about it anymore. She doesn't understand, and she seems to think I'm just looking for a justification to sleep around. Why does this all have to be so hard?

I'm wondering if I should be praying about this stuff. That's supposed to be the first port of call in case of confusion, right? But how the heck do I ask God, “Hey, Lord, what's the deal with sex and homosexuality and hey, what are your priorities? Do you really care about this stuff?” Uh huh. It's kinda lacking in reverence or something, hey?

Chapter 10: A Bit of Alright

Mark and I walk down toward the beach, hand in hand. It's the weekend before school goes out for the Easter holidays, and we should be floating on a cloud of anticipation of the freedom. But Mark's not coming to the party. He's quieter than usual, and it's bleeding obvious that something's bugging him. I let him be, figuring silence is easier for him than trying to be sociable. When we get near the water, he throws himself down onto the sand and sighs heavily.

“Want to talk about it?” I ask.

“I went on a date last week,” he says.

Umm. This isn't sounding end-of-the-worldish. I thought a relative died, or he's going back to Sydney, or something.

“Who with?”

“Rachel,” he says, and sighs again.

So much for the 'oh yuck, not her!' factor, I think. Weird that he didn't tell me about it 'til now though. Heck, maybe the poor guy's feeling desperate.

“It didn't go well?” is all I say.

“Bored me to tears and pissed me off... then told me I was a shite date and she only invited me out because she felt sorry for me.”

I snort, amused in spite of his misery.

“Dude, she's been after you for weeks, that was not a pity date!”

He shrugs.

“I'm short, I'm weird-looking... what hope do I really have?” he asks, looking up.

“Are you kidding?”

“Nope.”

Right. Sure, he's not Mr Popular, but if I had as many boys drooling over me as he's had girls, I wouldn't exactly be angsting about how ugly I was.

“You know,” I say slowly, “I happen to think you're a bit of alright...”

Mark frowns slightly and stares at me.

I sigh. Well, I'd meant to mention it eventually. If I'm going to screw up the friendship, it might as well be when he needs to feel better about himself, right?

“You look nice, you're the person I like best out of everyone I've ever met, and you smell good. I like you. I wouldn't mind kissing you in the slightest...”

He's silent. Well, that's a bad sign.

“Don't you like being friends?” he eventually asks, looking utterly confused.

“Why would that stop us being friends?” I ask.

“I don't know, it just - it does, doesn't it?”

I shrug.

“I love you. I can imagine hating you for a while if things went screwy... but I can't imagine ever not being your friend.” I say quietly.

Nothing.

No “I think you're kinda hot too”.

No “Get lost, I'm trying to angst”.

I might as well have said, “I think Beyonce's new clip is kinda cute”.

He lapses into silence, and stares at the sand for an hour. I leave, and get the briefest of waves and a slow “Bye”. It takes all my self-control to not grab him by the shoulders and shake a decent response out of him - or kick him in the nads.

Now I'm sitting at home angsting about making an idiot out of myself - again. Geez, will I ever learn? He's clearly not - really, really not - interested. He's probably trying to work out what to do with the lovestruck piece of patheticness that's me. Now that I've offered to shag him, then told him I love him. Moron. Idiot.

I have *got* to get out of the house and do something vaguely useful. Or entertaining. Anything.

****

The vacant block next to the servo is filled with cars and people. But these aren't just cars - these are beasts. Part performance machine, part artwork, they're things of beauty, and I love them. It's the local informal revhead convention, held once a month or whenever someone can be arsed setting it up. And I didn't even know it was on, just figured it's Thursday and it was worth a cruise past to check.

“MAISY! Dude! Where ya been?” Gav yells from the side of his Baby. She's still looking shoddy on the outside, but the hood's up and I can see she's had a complete internal makeover.

“Gav! School, exams, you know how it is, yeah?”

“Mazza!” a guy with dreads and tattooed arms waves from the centre of a clump of people. “Check out the new engine!”

I make my way over, stepping carefully in the stirred-up mud. Lochie is leaning on his Falcon 500. The hood is up, and the engine is huge and gleaming.

“Wicked! That's a Barra Turbo,” I say. “You been robbing banks again, mate?”

“Ain't she gorgeous?” he says, grinning.

I stroke a hand over the heart of the beast, smiling. It's gorgeous, alright. Damn, I can't wait 'til I'm old enough to get a license and a proper job.

****

“Maisy?”

I'm at school and I'm hurrying to maths class. Mrs Hunter gets ridiculously upset if anyone's late. But there's a hand on my shoulder, and I know exactly who it is. Timing, much?

“I'm late already, later?”

“I -”

“Hey,” I say, and turn around and give Mark a quick hug, “I've gotta go. But we'll talk later, k?”

“Umm, k.”

I'm just late enough that Mrs Hunter is about to close the door as I slide into the classroom and sit down at a desk. She glowers at me but doesn't say a word. Phew - caught her on a good day, I guess. Or maybe the holidays are having a cheering effect on her. That'd be a miracle and a half.

80 minutes of dead-boring algebra later, it's lunchtime and I'm detention-free. I head straight for the caf, buy a salad sandwich and a coke, and head for my lunch spot outside. Mark's sitting on the grass looking depressed, which is kinda his default look at the moment. Oh joys. I could do with some more depression. Not.

“Hey, you!” I say.

“Hey,” he says. His shoulders are slumped and he doesn't look up.

“So, what's up?” I ask, wondering if he's finally going to get around to talking about 'the confession', or whether he's going to pretend it never happened.

“I - ummm...”

I sigh and bite my tongue. Don't prompt him. Don't strangle him.

“I think you're a bit of alright too,” he says in a rush.

That was what was so difficult to say? That's what he was looking depressed about? Huh?

“Thanks,” I say.

Silence.

“So...” I say.

“Huh?”

“So does that mean anything for us two, or do we just go on ignoring it?”

He shrugs, and looks back at the ground. Oh, fer crying out loud. This is getting pathetic.

“Anyone'd think I'd turned into Rachel or something,” I say, letting some of the irritation I'm feeling creep into my voice.

He looks up and smiles.

“I just - don't know what to do now,” he says, spreading his hands and looking helpless.

“You could try kissing me sometime,” I say.

“What, here?” he says, looking scandalised.

I laugh. OK, we're in pathetic territory for sure.

“I'm sure you can think of something,” I say.

Then I unpack my lunch, lie down on the grass and start eating. Relationship angst can wait till another day, when I'm not starving.

By the end of lunch, he's still moody and quiet, but I can't be bothered trying to cheer him up, the git. I blow him a kiss and head to History.

Chapter 11: Maestro

Ben, the youth group leader, stands at the front of the room and claps for attention.

“Right, people - our group's been asked to lead worship next month...”

Ooookay...

“What, like a morning service?” someone asks.

“Yup, the whole service - it's a special 'Celebration of Youth' week that the church is running. So -”

The room turns into a loud babble of questions, suggestions and general chatter.

“OI!”

Near-silence.

“First, how many musicians do we have? Put up your hands. Great! Now - come out the front, and write down your name, what you play, and what sort of proficiency... beginner, intermediate, advanced. K? Right... who can sing?”

Soon everyone has a job to do. I'm part of the bible-reading-choices committee, since I have zero interest in singing in front of people, don't play an instrument, and didn't feel like fighting over the song choices. Mark's worship leader, because he's the only one of us apart from Ben with experience in it.

“Worship leader, aren't you the big cheese!” I tease as we break up.

He grins.

“Just call me Maestro!”

“Oh, modest, too! Y'know, I didn't even realise you could sing, let alone do the other stuff.”

He shrugs, then grabs my hand.

“Come with me, kiddo.”

Hey, look at that. It's only taken a fortnight, but he's back to acting vaguely normal around me.

****

Mark leads me down to the beach on the river, and a couple of the girls take time out from their goss session to stare at Mark pulling me along the sand and into the trees.

“Where are we going?” I ask for the fiftieth time.

“Almost there!” he says, and pulls me between two spiky bushes.

“OW!”

Then we're through, and in a spot I never knew existed. It's completely surrounded by thick trees and tall bushes, as by the looks of it, no-one else knows about it either. No needles or used condoms, just some grass on enough flattish ground to lie down on. And a blanket, and a picnic basket.

“Hungry?” Mark says, grinning.

A picnic in a secluded spot? Maybe this boy isn't as hopeless as I thought.

****

Ham sandwiches, apples and a bottle of sparkling apple juice to share. It's not exactly gourmet fare like on the movies, but who really eats like that, right? If a guy bought me caviar and champagne, I think I'd panic. Or hate it.

Dessert is a mammoth piece of cheesecake. Mark removes a sliver with his spoon and holds it out to me. I open my mouth and he slides the spoon in, grinning as my eyes widen. It's lemon, my favourite cheesecake in the whole wide world. And that's the end of the awkwardness I was expecting once the picnic was over, because when I've finished the mouthful I lean over and kiss him, like a peck but a lot longer, and we both know what we want to be doing next.

And God, no, that's not a fade-into-black kinda moment, alright? We don't lie down and start humping like bunnies or anything. Good little Christians, remember? We just kiss, and keep kissing, and suddenly there are tongues and it's feeling really, really good.

And next thing I know, Mark's flinching and slapping himself, and there's a high-pitched whining sound near my ear. Mozzies. In droves. Well, there goes the romantic interlude.

****

“Hey, Maisy?”

“Yeah, Mum?”

“I'm going out to Mrs Smith's - can you do the vacuuming while I'm gone?”

“You pay me Aussie dollar?”

“You know, once upon a time you begged me to let you vacuum.”

“Uh huh - we're all naïve sometime, Mum.”

“Usual amount.”

“Wicked.”

I toss the magazine I was reading on my desk, grab my mp3 player and headphones, and head for the spare room. Not like I had anything interesting to do anyhow.

Ten minutes later I'm dancing the vacuum around the lounge to Fat Boy Slim on loud. I've done the actual work and I swing the nozzle around for an extra flourish - and I see Mark standing in the hall looking very, very amused.

“Shades of a young Tom Cruise, I think,” he says when I tear the headphones off.

“Bastard! Who sneaks up on a gal when she's cleaning?” I say, grinning, “be glad I wasn't in my undies!”

“Hmm...” he says, looking me up and down, “not sure I'm glad. Hey, are you home all alone?”

I get where he's going with this, and grin.

“She's at a friend's, she'll be gone for a couple of hours more, I'd say...”

He raises an eyebrow suggestively.

“Help with the cleaning first - just the hall to do?”

He makes a face.

“Do I have to?”

“You could leave...”

“Damn.”

“Just move the stuff off the floor so I have a clear run at the carpet.”

He sighs and does what he's told.

****

“You're worth the cleaning,” he whispers, nuzzling at my neck.

I snort.

“You're such a romantic!” I say with an extra serve of sarcasm.

He slides a finger lightly down my side, over my hip and down to my knee. Cripes, it feels like every single nerve on the path of that finger goes nuts. I've never had that sort of reaction to a guy before. OK, so the few experiences I have had were mostly idiots who didn't realise that I wasn't into it because I hadn't kneed them in the crotch yet, but... still, wow. I tilt my face up to his and he takes the hint to kiss me again.

“Yup, much better when you don't say anything,” I say, grinning at him.

He tickles me, which just leads to more kissing.

“Crap, Mum's due home soon for dinner,” I say eventually.

“Already?”

“Come on, let's go and do something wholesome-looking.”

****

“Maisy?”

“Yeah, Mum?”

“What's going on with you and Mark?”

I shrug.

“Don't shrug at me, love - what's going on between you?”

I sigh. Well, the sex talk had to happen eventually.

“Nothing much, Mum. We're friends, OK?”

“Just friends?”

I shrug at her again, and she frowns at me.

“We tried kissing - it didn't work so good. So yup, just friends, Mum.”

“Well, OK.”

She doesn't look happy, but I haven't given her much room to nag me about Mark - and that's all I'm really worried about.

“So -”

Oh God, MORE talk?

“- is there anyone you are interested in?” she asks.

I shrug again.

“Words, love?”

“Mum! There's no-one. It's Bathurst, they're all idiots.”

She laughs.

“Fine, I'll stop torturing you,” she says.

“THANK YOU!”

Chapter 12: Fuck Buddies

“Mum finally started asking the questions,” I say.

“What'd you say?” Mark asks, quirking an eyebrow at me.

“That we're just friends - we tried being more and it didn't work.”

“She was happy with that?”

“Kinda - I think she'd prefer I didn't touch a man 'til I'm 30 or something.”

“Hey, are we - more than friends?”

Huh. I shoulda seen this one coming.

“Does it matter?”

“I think so,” he says, looking serious, “I mean... if one of us is thinking one thing, and the other is thinking another, then... couldn't someone get hurt?”

He's making a lot of sense, but I'm antsy. I want this to be like our friendship has always been before - simple, just like jigsaw pieces fitting together. Right because we fit, not because of something we say or do.

“I - want to be friends,” I say in a rush. I know this is likely to hurt him, or hurt us, but I can't think of any tactful way to get it out. “I love you, I love kissing you, but - I don't want to do the playing at love thing, you know? I'd prefer to be friends, and be more, but leave the pressure out of it?”

He nods.

“And what if one of us falls in love? With the other, with someone else... what then?”

I sigh.

“Then... I guess we talk.”

He nods. Funny, he's not looking at all cut up. Maybe that was exactly what he was wanting to hear. And now that I think that, I feel just a little bit sick. Geez, this shit is more complicated than it should be.

“So, fuck buddies for ever?” I say, jokingly.

He looks shocked, then catches the mischievous look on my face and laughs.

“Kiddo, you never stop surprising me!”

“If I do, call an ambulance.”

****

Every time Mark and I get together and find some privacy, we've been going a little closer to the fornication that Ben keeps nattering about. I'm not sure I see the big deal, you know? It feels good, really good, and yeah, I do keep wanting more... but I can't see myself turning into some uncontrollable slut over it. Can't see myself drooling over guys from school to get it. Ew. That just gave me a mental picture

that I'll need bleach to get rid of.

Mum's at work 'til 7 most weekdays, and though I'm not supposed to have visitors, it's not like we have nosey old women neighbours who'll spy and tell Mum that I had a boy over. And she doesn't really care, as long as I don't have wild parties and leave beer bottles all over the lawn. So Mark comes over after school now and then, and we hang out at my place. Weekends we go out, to Voracious or the cafe or the beach.

One afternoon, Mark comes over not long after school's finished and lets himself in the back door. I pause Mission Impossible and stand up to kiss him.

“Ooh, movies and snuggling?” he asks suggestively.

“Not on your life, boyo - if Mum comes home unexpectedly I want more warning than 'click, shove, MAISY WHAT ARE YOU DOING YOU'RE GROUNDED!' ... thanks!”

He laughs.

“Oh, easy for you to laugh!”

He pretends to sober up.

“Come with me...”

“Awww, but it looks comfy... and you have Twisties!”

“Huh - fine, stay here. I'll be in my room.”

He follows meekly down the hall, snickering.

I close the bedroom door and he grabs me around the waist, pulls me to him and kisses me. Man, this boy can kiss. When I can be bothered coming up for air, I break away and grab his hand.

“Come lie down with me - you wanted comfy, remember?”

He pulls back a little.

“You sure?”

I shrug.

“I want comfy and close, that's all,” I say, and grin.

We lie down, side by side, and kiss again. Then his breathing gets heavier and faster, and he puts a hand on my waist, slides it up under my t-shirt and over one breast. I freeze for a moment, but he slips a finger under the bra and it grazes my nipple and OHMYGOD my skin goes tingly and it feels GOOD. Then we're kissing again and that feels even better, and he stops kissing my mouth and starts to kiss my neck and my ribs and my breasts and then he's sucking on a nipple.

“OW!”

“Sorry,” he says, and stops, looking kinda silly.

“I didn't say stop.”

“Maybe we should, though.”

“Mmm... you're probably right,” I say, pouting. I know he's right, but I want more. Now.

****

The next day he sneaks over, I do to him what he did to me - lie him on his back, pull his t-shirt up, slide my fingers lightly over his muscled belly and chest, kiss his neck and throat and his chest. His breathing speeds up whenever I kiss his neck, and I smile. Got him, the mongrel.

****

One evening, liberally smeared with mozzie repellant, we lie in our place near the beach on the river. We eat another picnic, then push it aside to make room to lie down. We kiss and nuzzle at the other's neck and shoulders. Feeling daring, I put a hand on his stomach and instead of shoving his t-shirt aside, I move it slowly downwards, over the hip of his boardies, down the outside of his thigh. Again his breath gets faster and heavier, then he pulls my hips against his and kisses me hard, shoving his tongue into my mouth. At first it's just uncomfortable, then I realise that the hard bit pressing against me is his erection, and he's really turned on, and it's like hearing I've won the lottery, except the feeling's all in my groin. Suddenly I see how this whole thing can get dangerously addictive, and I don't care. He stops, moves away a bit. I frown and start to close the distance, but he puts a hand on my stomach and pushes gently so I roll onto my back. Then his hand worms downwards 'til it's between my legs, and only thin boardshort fabric between it and my skin. He presses gently, feeling his way around, then just strokes very gently, and I have my first orgasm.

“Holy crap, was that supposed to happen?” I say once I have my voice back.

He blushes.

“Guess so?”

We laugh.

“That was amazing.”

“Umm... thanks?”

“Can I - do the same for you? Seems unfair, otherwise.”

“Should we really be doing this?”

I shrug.

“It's done now, right? Can't hurt to reciprocate, I figure?”

He frowns.

“I can't help thinking there's a flaw in that logic,” he says, but I can tell he's not too interested in looking for the flaw.

“What do I do?” I ask, moving a hand to his hip and kissing his throat.

Just like that, his breathing changes and I know he's done arguing. I trail my fingers over his shorts to the erection, curious to actually feel one. It's hard, like muscle on someone lifting something heavy, and larger than I'd imagined. It's not completely smooth, more like slight ridges at odd angles, and one big ridge the entire length, down the front. Huh. The things you don't learn in Sex Ed, eh? There's a softer part on the end, more sensitive I'm figuring, because he draws in a quick breath as I slide a couple of fingers over it, and his eyes lose focus. I stroke up and down a couple of times, kind of like what I've seen

guys do to themselves in movies, and he stiffens and grimaces, then pushes my hand away a few seconds later.

“God, that was -”

He seems lost for words, gives up talking and just kisses me instead.

I think he liked it.

Chapter 13: Showtime

The church is transformed. Bright banners on the walls, big paper flowers on the end of every pew. The band squawks loudly to itself, the singers are singing nonsense rhymes, and Mark is stretching like a runner before a race.

“Are you planning backflips?” I ask curiously.

“Huh,” he says, looking up at me, “I never thought of that - great idea, kiddo!”

Darn, now I've done it. He's going to be the first ever worship leader to be carted out by paramedics with a blood nose and a sprained ankle. Or chucked out by an enraged congregation, one of the two.

Early worshippers trickle in, some of them gathering in one of the side areas. Pre-service prayer group, I guess. The minister wanders in, fiddles with something at the lectern and wanders out again. An elderly woman brings the silverware out to the altar.

“Oh, Maisy! Are you singing today, dear?”

Mrs Catrick walks up the aisle, beaming at me.

“No, I'm not musical - I'm just here for moral support,” I say.

“Oh, that's nice of you!” she says, nodding, “How kind - I'm sure Mark appreciates it, don't you dear?”

Mark's busy fussing with the mike and doesn't even hear her, I don't think, but she doesn't seem to care.

“Maisy, dear, I haven't seen your mother yet - how is she?”

“She's well, she's coming this morning, just a bit late. How are you, Mrs Catrick?” I ask, finally remembering the manners thing.

“Oh, wonderful - it's lovely having Mark in the house, he keeps me young!” she says, smiling. “Well, must go fix up the flowers - good luck, dear!”

The service is a resounding success, if you ignore the standard complaints about loudness and young people having bad taste in music and not appreciating blah blah blah. Little kids were actually dancing and trying to sing along, instead of being bribed with lollies to sit quietly and draw. So many people loved it that there's talk of making it a regular feature.

“You're a star!” I tease Mark as we walk away from the church, down the main street.

“Oh, yeah, I'm gonna be famous,” he says, laughing.

“Uh huh... you could be, like, the next Darlene Zschech! But hairier!”

He snorts.

I grab his hand and tug him toward the cafe.

“I want coffee... you?”

He nods and we walk in, take a table in the corner.

“Two lattes,” he says to the waiter, and the waiter wanders off.

“MARK! Mate!”

I turn toward the shout - a guy over the other side of the cafe is looking our way and waving wildly. He weaves his way through tables to get over to us, and as he does, a suspicion pops into my head. Something about that hip movement? Maybe I'm paranoid. Maybe he's a dancer.

“Andrew, hi!” Mark says when the guy's made his way over to us. “Whatcha upto?”

“Hot date!” he says and winks at Mark.

“Well, don't let us distract you!” Mark says, grinning.

“Oh, he's not here yet anyhow...” he says, pouting, but then grins happily enough and walks away, still swishing a bit.

About now, the suspicion's pretty darn strong.

“Is he... gay?” I ask Mark quietly.

“Yup.”

“Huh.”

****

“Love is about more than sex.” Mark explains.

“Of course.”

“It's about connection.”

“Right.”

“You don't sound convinced.” he says, looking at me quizzically.

“Well, the explanation's kinda hokey so far.”

“Fine. How would you explain love?”

“Knowledge.”

“Of what?”

“Another person's soul.”

He sniggers.

“And you called mine hokey!”

“Huh,” I say, frowning, “this is harder than I realised.”

****

“So where do you know that guy from the cafe from? Andrew, was it?”

“Oh, just around, I guess.”

“Just around?”

He shrugs and goes quiet. Oh, for crying out loud - what is it with men? Is he worried that having a gay friend makes him gay, or is he wondering about whether the cricket's on? They have the same facial expression for 'worried' and 'sports'. And then they wonder why women get irritated. ARGH!

****

I've been thinking about boys and girls, and the differences that we always talk about. I don't understand all these differences and how the hell they come about by hormonal differences. I'm good at maths and science AND I can communicate in words of more than two syllables - do I have a male or female brain? I love cars and I'm a darn good driver and I can reverse-park like a pro... and that makes me male without a shadow of a doubt, right? Except I have boobs and a vagina and I definitely have all the female hormones. And I like getting presents, and flowers, and I have a teddy bear collection. I'm starting to wonder if all this male/female stuff is a total load of crap.

****

“It's all rubbish,” says Mark.

“All of it?” I ask.

“Uh huh - girls are taught one thing, boys taught another, and then the people who taught them look at the results and proclaim that the differences must be inherent, because they treated them exactly the same - if you ignore giving the girls dolls, giving the boys trucks and guns, and telling the boys they're strong and tough every five minutes, while telling the girls they're pretty and have a nice dress on.”

“You sound kinda bitter.”

“I am! My dad always pushed me to do 'manly' stuff, and I only really realised it now, you know? I was always kinda miserable as a kid, and I remember feeling like a failure at everything, even when I was good at it... I think it was just because I didn't want to do a lot of it, you know? I didn't realise it was OK to not enjoy it, I guess.”

“That sounds nasty.”

“Yup.”

“Mum never really pushed me any way, I guess... just let me do what I wanted, if she thought it was safe.”

“Yeah, well, that's because you're a girl.”

“Huh?”

“Girls are allowed to be boys, it's not scary. Boys aren't allowed to act girlish, though.”

“Georgie's not allowed to do boy stuff.”

“Well, in general, though. Like, no one looks at you weird for being good at maths, right?”

“Huh. Guess so.”

“Women's lib - can't stop girls doing what they want, but boys are part of the ruling class, it's OK to repress them, you see.”

“Ummm...”

“Am I preaching again?”

“Just a bit.”

“Sorry.”

****

Once upon a time, buying condoms was hard. Pharmacists demanded wedding rings, notes from priests, all sorts of bizarre crap. But in this day and age, it's simple. That's why I'm skulking near the fresh fruit, trying to get up the courage to take a box of condoms and a tube of lubricant up to the checkout.

“Are you alright there, dear?”

Crap, it's Mrs Catrick. I hide the basket behind me and smile blandly. Maybe if she notices, I can tell her they're for my mother. No, ick.

“Hi, Mrs Catrick! How are you today?”

“Can't complain, dear, just my arthritis playing up a little,” she says, patting her hip carefully.

Umm, great.

“Well, have a good day!” I say brightly and flee, probably leaving a very confused Mrs Catrick behind me. I hope so, because the last thing I need is her understanding *exactly* what I'm doing.

And all of a sudden, in comparison, the checkout doesn't look so scary. The guy leers at me as he scans my purchases, and I scowl at him. Then I wonder if I imagined the skeezy look. God, I'm turning paranoid. What's happening to me?

****

“You bought what??” Mark almost yells.

“Condoms?”

“SHHHHHH!!”

“Whaddya mean, shh?”

“Someone might - hear!”

“You mean, the same people who were listening to us mess around?”

“There were people *listening*?”

“NO! Calm down! There's no-one here, ya mork!”

“Oh.”

“I don't see why you're freaking about this.”

“Because - it's the final frontier, isn't it? Before that, it's all grey territory, right? But sex is - it's sex! It's... freakworthy!”

“Huh?”

“You - what, you don't think so?”

“No!”

“How the hell do you get that?”

“Well... all this stuff we've been doing, right? It's all sex, it's just not - procreation, is it? And that's where the difference is - having a baby with someone, or not. Nowadays penetration and babies aren't automatically connected like they were, so the boundaries between foreplay and sex are artificial.”

“That's...”

“Logical?”

“Horribly logical. Don't you have a romantic streak anywhere?”

“Sure. Buy me flowers and I might even have sex with you!” I say, grinning.

“That's not funny!”

I thought it was.

****

End of Sample! *If you like what you've read so far, why not buy the whole thing?*

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