

## CHAPTER ONE

Alex

Going to boarding school was like spinning into outer space, into utter darkness and cold. I'd hardly ever been outside Westerford, let alone a hundred and fifty miles into the dreary countryside with one sodden green field after another, cows lying down, overgrown hedgerows. It didn't help that it was completely my choice to go. My father was driving, my mother beside him in the front seat. The neighbors were looking after Gillian. She was too little to understand what was happening but I had cried when I said goodbye to her and Gillian held tight to me, weeping too.

In the car we were all silent. I stared out of the rain-smearred windows and tried to summon a shred of courage. But I couldn't even locate my anger, the rage that had made me insist on finding a new school. My legs felt cramped and useless inside my new school uniform trousers. My arms wandered like underwater creatures. What on earth made me think I could cope with being away from my home, my family, my town, everything I'd ever known?

"Next turn on the left," said my mother quietly. She was reading the directions from the letter in her lap. I peered into

the green gloom and saw a huge open gate, very fancy, and a long gravel driveway with oak trees on each side. I felt sick.

“Cor blimey,” said my father in a sarcastic voice. Ahead of us was a grand house like one of those stately homes where tourists wallow in a fantasy of riches and aristocracy, as my dad would say. Some of those houses even had a lord and lady still in residence. You wouldn’t catch my father visiting a stately home, nor my mother.

We pulled up in front of a massive front door. Beside the steps was a ramp.

They got me into my wheelchair and in we went. My first glimpse of my home for the next four years. Inside it didn’t look so grand. They’d fixed everything up so that boys in wheelchairs or using crutches could get around. No carpets. Not many doors. A sign pointing to a lift to the upstairs. The furniture was faded and scuffed.

I went into a bit of a daze. Grown ups appeared and shook my parents’ hands, and mine. A middle-aged woman in a nurse’s uniform took us up in the lift to the dormitory where I was to sleep. Four beds. I didn’t like the idea of sharing a bedroom, let alone with three other boys. Of course I’d known that this is what you did at boarding school, but it was different, actually seeing those beds. My mother had brought my red quilt and she laid it over my new bed. She stowed my stuff away in the dresser drawers. On top of the dresser she put a photo of the four of us at Saunton Sands with the sea behind us. She held up the one of Michele but I shook my head and she put it in a drawer.

My father and I watched her as though mesmerized. We were all very quiet. Shocked, I think, now that we were actually here.

The matron waited in the doorway. “Come and meet the other boys,” she said. We followed her back down to the ground

floor and along a wide hallway. “The common room,” she said, gesturing to an open doorway. This was the biggest shock of all. I saw a big wood-paneled room full of boys who looked like me, more or less. Some looked worse, some looked better, but they were all cripples, spastics, handicapped, whatever you want to call them. Callipers, crutches, walkers, wheelchairs all over the place. It was like looking in a fun-house mirror, seeing yourself multiplied and distorted. That was how it seemed to me in that moment, anyway. When I got to know them they all seemed quite different from each other and from me.

Some of the boys looked up and nodded hello, then went on with their board games or books or watching the TV. I gave a small wave back to the ones who’d looked at me. I didn’t try to say anything, since they probably wouldn’t have understood. That was a big task ahead of me, getting everyone used to my weird speech.

It occurred to me that I’d have to get used to theirs.

I said goodbye to my parents at the front door. My mother and I were both trying not to cry. We’d been together every single day for fourteen years. They’d never wanted to send me away, even when everyone else thought they should. I made a massive effort to summon a smile. “I’ll write to you soon,” I said, trying to sound confident. My mother kissed me once more and they were gone.

There were a hundred of us at Nails. We were all in the same boat, all of us deviants from the norm, all of us weird, in need of help. And now cut off from the normal world our families lived in. I didn’t find it easy to get used to this new reality. I missed my family dreadfully. And Michele. On the other hand, it was an enormous relief to be with others like me. We

had our own little universe, we did things our way. There were no Adams. No one had to feel self-conscious or odd, because we all had handicaps. Crippled was normal. We were all OK in our minds, just slow in our talking and our writing, and hampered by bodies that didn't work the way they were supposed to.

I settled in, bit by bit. After a while I felt a kind of freedom that I hadn't had before. Not that I wanted to live like that forever, separated from ordinary people. But for now it was all right.

"Get a good night's sleep," said Tony one evening, a year or so after I'd come to Nails. I was fifteen by then. We were heading for bed after the usual listless hour in front of the telly in the common room, everyone sprawled around trying to enjoy themselves but feeling too tired for fun. Lugging our bodies around, on crutches or in wheelchairs, was exhausting. Tony had been one of my roommates since I'd arrived. He wasn't Michele, but we'd become friends, more or less, starting when we realized we were both Monty Python connoisseurs. We couldn't do the voices or the silly walks but I could make him remember a skit with the tiniest bit of a gesture or a face and he'd fall about laughing. It made me feel witty. Tony was in a wheelchair too. We understood each other's speech pretty well.

"Why?" I said. I meant about the good night's sleep.

Tony grinned. Spit pooled at the corner of his mouth and spilled down his chin. He dabbed at it awkwardly. "The hoity-toity girls are coming tomorrow."

I didn't know what he was talking about. But the next day, after lunch, they lined us up in the corridor and dried our faces and sponged the worst of the food stains off our striped school

ties and made sure our shoelaces weren't dangling. Then they brought us all back to the dining hall. It was all cleaned up, with vases of flowers on the tables.

"Visitors!" said Miss Kimble. "You boys are very lucky. Do behave yourselves, now."

The door opened and the headmaster came in with a group of girls. Normals, not cripples. About twenty of them. They were wearing school uniforms but they looked like movie stars to me. Half of them were blond. Healthy as could be.

"What the hell?" I whispered to Tony.

He leaned over to me as best he could. "They're from Shelby." I waited for more information. "Fancy-arse girls' school, in the next village."

I was still in the dark. "Well, what are they doing here?"

Tony snickered. "They're supposed to learn how to rub shoulders with the less fortunate. That's us."

"Welcome to Tuffnall's Home for Handicapped Boys," announced Mr. Donahue. I shrank in my wheelchair. It was like being on the High Street with my mum again, bracing myself for the stares, the insults. Wishing I could hide but being stuck out in view like a headless carcass in the butcher shop.

Miss Kimble brought two of the girls over to me and Tony. She introduced us, her voice fluorescently bright. "Tony and Alex. May I introduce Annabel and Sarah."

"How do you do?" said one of them. Her voice was like the Queen saying her Christmas message, which my family found very entertaining. "Mah husband and Ah..." my mother would mimic. The girl started to offer her hand then withdrew it, her glance skittering off our curled-in paws. "This is my first time visiting your school. It's awfully nice of you to have us." She looked beseechingly at Miss Kimble, who'd stepped back a bit.

I felt sorry for the girl. For all she knew we were total morons who couldn't understand a thing she was saying. Unfortunately, I couldn't help her. She wouldn't get what I was saying. I tried to smile, with my disobedient mouth.

"Um..." she tried again. "I say, do you have riding and things like that at your school? We ride almost every afternoon, don't we, Sarah? Some of us keep our ponies on the grounds." Her cheeks were crimson. She knew she was talking rubbish. She shot a desperate look at her friend, who was as mute as me and Tony. "I say... awfully nice to meet you both." She grasped her friend's arm firmly and walked away. Tony and I chuckled as though we felt superior and relaxed. Inside I felt like crap, in a way that hardly ever happened any more. Like dried-up dog turd. Why did they let these girls come here? We were much better off by ourselves.

"Let's have some music!" cried Miss Kimble. She didn't wait for encouragement but turned and fumbled with the record player. I wasn't sure if this would make things worse or better. Worse, probably. We would just have to endure this jollity until the girls had rubbed enough shoulders, and then they would leave and we would go back to being our abnormal selves. The music piped up—a corny rock and roll song. Miss Kimble no doubt was proud of herself for choosing something on the pop charts instead of Frank Sinatra. One of the girls must have been especially bold or brave, because she grabbed the hands of a boy who looked a bit closer to normal than the rest of us. She coaxed him into an awkward dance, the two of them shuffling from foot to foot, grinning like idiots. "Come on, Philippa!" she called to her friend. Philippa looked around and pulled another boy out onto the floor. It was Robert from the sixth form, his face bright red under his freckles.

“Cripes,” muttered Tony. “Don’t come near me, that’s all I ask.” In our wheelchairs we were safe. We weren’t going to be asked to dance. We stared at the handful of gorgeous girls and defective boys and their semblance of dancing. I burned for our schoolmates, made such fools of.

The music changed to a Stevie Wonder song. A girl I hadn’t noticed appeared in front of me with her hands outstretched. She was tall, very blue eyes, very good-looking. She looked at me but didn’t seem embarrassed the way Annabel had been. “May I?” she said. I must have nodded, or at least refrained from making a “fuck off!” gesture, because next thing I knew she had grabbed the arms of my wheelchair and wheeled me out onto the floor. She moved backwards across the room, holding my eyes, smiling but not making fun, somehow I knew for sure she was not making fun. She was dancing. I was dancing too, in my wheelchair. She made it swoop and spin in time to the music. I cried out, I couldn’t help it. I put my hands on top of hers and held her wrists. They felt narrow and strong. I had never held a girl’s hands, except for Michele’s. Other people slid by in a blur of color. The girl was wearing some kind of flowery scent and it wafted past my nose. I could feel my face grow hot but it was excitement, not shame. The girl laughed with the pleasure of the backwards movement and it made me laugh too. I knew it was a creepy sound, my laugh, but she seemed to know it was a laugh anyway. We went around and around, up and down, until the song ended. I wished it would go on longer.

The girl wheeled me back to Tony. When we got there she ducked her head in sort of a bow. “Thank you very much.” She was a little out of breath. She turned to leave and Tony called out, just clearly enough for her to understand: “What’s your name, miss?”

“Dahna,” she said. Di-anna, we would have pronounced it, not being posh like her. *Dah*-ana. “What’s yours?”

“I’m Tony,” he said, making a huge effort to make the words to come out in something like their proper shape. “This is Alex.” He pointed to me.

“Thank you,” I managed, knowing miserably that to her it sounded like “Anh oo.” I didn’t want to spoil everything by trying to talk, after our dance.

The feeling of the dance stayed in my body, the next day, the next week, the week after that. For months. It reminded me of when I watched Michele riding a horse, suddenly not handicapped at all. The feeling of swooping and gliding around the floor while Stevie Wonder wailed, the girl’s blue eyes locked on mine, both of us laughing together. Being chosen by her. Me, Alex. She was a beautiful girl. It was the most beautiful moment I’d ever had in my life. The more I thought about it the more beautiful it was.

I didn’t speak about it to anyone. There was no one I could talk to. Michele was the only conceivable person and she was dead. My dance with Diana, I would say to myself. I liked to say her name the way she said it, *Dah*-ana, but silently. The memory was like a jewel that I took out of its box and looked at every now and then, holding it up to the light to see its beauty. No one knew about my treasure.

The next year they told us that the Shelby girls were coming again. I became ill with anticipation. I had no idea if Diana would come or not. I didn’t even know if she was still at the school. Maybe she’d left. I had thought she was older than me. But we were almost the same age, born in 1961, me in January,

her in July. I learned that a few years later, when I and the whole world knew everything about Diana.

I imagined seeing her again, fantasizing so vividly that I exhausted myself. I imagined her recognizing me, greeting me, dancing with me again. I practiced saying her name aloud. As the day approached I worked myself up into a state of absolute dread, equally afraid that she would not come, and that she would. What if she came and didn't remember me, and didn't dance with me again? I thought I might die if that happened.

I never found out if she came or not, because when the day finally arrived I was in the infirmary. I had three seizures during the night and I was in no state to sit upright in my wheelchair, let alone dance like a fool around the flower-decorated dining room.

I tried to ask Tony without letting him know how much it meant to me. He screwed up his face trying to remember. "Oh yeah. That tall girl that took you off dancing." I waited for him to go on. "I didn't recognize her this time. Can't be sure either way."