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Split By A Kiss

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Random House

Extract

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FIRST BASE

Lucky Break

I am in a cupboard, and I'm snogging the coolest and most gorgeous boy in the whole school. And it's a big school. And really, we're kissing, not snogging. In a closet, not a cupboard. They don't really have snogging or cupboards here – they would laugh and tell me those are dodgy British phrases. Except they wouldn't say 'dodgy'. That's just as dodgily British. And – quick tip – don't ever let them catch you saying 'tomato and basil' – that will have them laughing for like a year. I learned that the hard way.

But none of that is the point at all. The point is – I am kissing Jake Matthews, the coolest boy in the school! If not the entire world.

And the really amazing thing? I am seriously UNcool. Or rather, I was.

Let me tell you how it happened. Remember – if it can happen to me, it can happen to you. Not with Jake Matthews, of course – hands off! He's mine. But you'll

find someone like him. There's one in every school.

These facts about me are probably not important for the success of your kiss-the-fittest-boy-in-school plan, but here they are anyway. My name is Josephine Reilly, I live with my mum, my dad is married to an empty-headed bimbo called Kelly, I have a sweetie-pie half-sister called Lolly-Lauren, who's three, and a best friend called Hailey.

The following facts ARE important.

Your mum has to qualify for the 'brain drain'. Or your dad has to, I suppose, but that doesn't apply in my case – my dad left my brilliant mum for Kelly, so he is certifiably brainless. Anyway, my mum went for the 'brain drain', which is a cool way of saying she got a job in the USA because of her super-clever egghead status. It has nothing to do with zombies. Although, you know, zombies would be cool too, but in a different way.

Then you need to have an accent that makes everyone stop and stare at you. Most of these people should say, 'I just LOVE your accent.' Any old accent will do, don't worry. My accent is from Boringtown, Boring County, England, and it's worked well for me. I suppose you could pretend to have an exotic accent, one that isn't your real accent, but inventing things isn't always the best way to go. You'll see what I mean about that later.

And then – and this is what makes the accent thing

work – you need to move to the United States of America.

That's it. That's what it took to transform me from Lady Saddo of Boringtown High to Cool Girl on the Block, complete with snogging Jake Matthews and everything. Brainy parent, accent, USA. You're thinking it can't be that simple. Anyway, dorky ducklings don't turn into hip-'n'-happening swans, except in fairytales. In fact, seeing me now with Jake Matthews, you're seriously doubting I was ever remotely uncool.

I can see why you'd think that. So here are a few more details about the old me. Judge for yourself.

At the drop of a hat – and sometimes entirely unprovoked by any falling headgear whatsoever – I, Jo the Nerd, would quote, word-for-word, vintage episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I owned every available *Buffy* DVD box set. I was a regular in *Buffy* forums and chatrooms.

And it didn't stop there. I had a superior knowledge of straight-to-TV movies. You know the kind I mean – the ones where everyone sobs a lot and overcomes tragic problems, based on a true story. OK, I still have that knowledge and I still own those *Buffy* box sets. But now? I usually keep it to myself.

Here's more. My wardrobe used to come entirely from charity shops. That was out of no-money type necessity, not out of misdirected reverse-coolness (you know, when you are so uncool it's almost cool?). So I

often looked a mess. I really did. I'm the first to admit it.

Also, I didn't wear makeup. This wasn't because of the money thing. I could have asked for Kelly's off-casts. I could have popped into Superdrug and used theirs. But I didn't think girls should wear makeup. I thought it was 'demeaning', trying to change my face to 'mirror a state of perpetual arousal'. I read that in Mum's feminist magazine. I used to recite it to the makeupy girls at Boringtown High, the ones Hailey and I call the Delicates. It wasn't just a convenient excuse for the fact that every time I tried to wear makeup, it fell off my face into my lunch and didn't taste very nice.

Do you believe me now? Thought so. That's how uncool I was. Utterly, unashamedly uncool.

Don't worry, I haven't changed completely. Jo the Nerd's still in there somewhere. But my Josie the Cool side has popped up for a party – a party for two in a cluttered closet. And I'm partying with – sorry, KISSING – Jake Matthews.

My partywear includes makeup now. And I think my party partner is wearing a lot of my lipstick too.

The old me might have said Jake Matthews was as 'demeaning' to girls as makeup. He's one of those boys who's so drop-dead gorgeous that he's never had to try – you know, he clicks his fingers and girls literally come running to him. Of course, the old me would not have

experienced any finger-clicking action from any Jake Matthews types in the first place.

Here's more about how exactly it happened.

So Mum tells me she's been offered a job in the USA. She sits awkwardly on the edge of my bed and fiddles with the wooden beads on her necklace, and first of all she says, 'Boston,' so I say, 'In Lincolnshire?' and I can't believe it when she says, 'No, in Massachusetts.' And I wonder how I'll ever be able to spell that. Is there a rhyme for spelling it? Or am I thinking of Mississippi?

Mum tells me it's a great opportunity for her. She does technical stuff with computers and not a lot of people know the stuff she knows. So she was head-hunted. (There go those zombies again!) And she's been offered a job. In the USA. I already said that, didn't I? But it's such a big deal.

It would probably be temporary, about a year, and I don't have to go with her. Although she is allowed to get a visa for me. And I've just done my Big Bad GCSE exams, so it's OK to go now. It could be like a year out before A levels. The A levels I've chosen are pretty dull anyway – history, English, geography – compared with the things I've heard I can study in the USA, where it's all Psych 101 here and Advanced Trig there, and even plain old maths sounds more exciting without the 's'.

Or I can stay here and live with Dad and Kelly. Mum has discussed it with Dad, although she'd miss me so much. I can even have my own room at Dad's instead

of having to share with Lolly, like I do when I visit now. I can go to Boringtown Sixth Form College with Hailey.

Mum goes on about how sorry she is to do this to me. In fact, the visa application isn't in yet, it might get denied, maybe she should turn the job down anyway? She would hate to ruin my life. She remembers what it was like to be fifteen and have your life turned upside down. She never quite forgave Grandpa for leaving Grandma in an exam year.

I have to contain myself. I can't seem too keen. It might make Mum suspicious about why exactly I want to go. It might put her off taking me with her.

But really?! Swapping my life in Britain, where I couldn't be much lower in the social pecking order, where I have no boyfriend and I hate school and there's nothing to do in Boringtown where I live? Where I've been thought of as weird and geeky since I was five years old and told everyone on my first day at school that I was related to Batman? (They still sometimes call me 'Batgirl' now. And, no, they're not laughing WITH me, either.)

I worry that they're going to tease me in America though, for being British. It could even be worse than the bat thing.

'Am I going to get called a Limey?' I ask Mum, because I remember studying that in history last year – about British sailors in the nineteenth century sucking

limes to stop scurvy, or something, and the Americans using 'Limey' as an insult to Brits.

But Mum just laughs and tells me, 'Nobody uses that term any more, Jo-Jo, don't worry. Just be yourself. They're going to love you.'

But what about the people who love me now? I wonder. Will I miss Dad and his sleep-inducing words of ultra-sensible wisdom? Will I miss Lolly's gooey kisses? I know I won't miss anything about Kelly, so that's no problem. But will my best mate Hailey forget me in a year? Will she get a boyfriend before me, one I haven't vetted and approved?

Mum reminds me that there's always email and phones. And visits. It's not as if I'm going to the other end of the world. I can e-vet Hailey's potential boyfriends. Lolly can blow sticky kisses into the phone, with the hidden benefit that it would upset Kelly and cause a phone-disinfecting crisis in the house of the second Mrs Reilly.

Anyway, I know Hailey wouldn't hesitate if she was offered a chance like this, so I shouldn't feel guilty. I know it because she puts on an American accent all the time, and pretends to be an 'aaah-some' extra from an American TV movie. She totally fancies American actors in general, and Boston is at least in the same continent as the one most of them hang out in.

So would I swap being Batgirl for the life I've seen on so many telly programmes and films? A life filled

'I won't do that.'

'No, you'll stay at home by your luxury swimming pool, eyeing up bare-chested pool boys.' She smirks.

I've been kind of imagining the same thing myself. 'Oh, Hailey. Can't you get in my suitcase?' I sniff.

'Just go. You'll love it. Send me a lifeguard.' She gives a little wave, turns away and runs down the street, her new cross-trainers adding extra spring to her speed. I can't believe I won't see her again for months. I clutch the photo and sniffle for ages.

When Dad and little Lolly-Lauren come round to say goodbye later that day, I cry properly. I start the moment they walk in, and by the final goodbye I'm in floods.

'Bye bye, Lolly-Lol,' I manage through my tears. I squeeze her tight, making salt-water stains on her perfect miniature designer T-shirt. Kelly looks at me like I'm doing it on purpose.

'Bye bye, Jo-Jo-Jelly.' Lolly squirms out of my grip, climbs onto the sofa and launches off it. 'See my jump!'

'That's a great jump.' I sob.

I soak Dad's shoulder too as he puts his arms around me stiffly and says, 'Remember to check the exchange rates regularly – the dollar's not as weak as you might think. And brush your teeth at least twice a day.'

I sobbingly promise to do both those things. Then I give Kelly a peck on the cheek. That dries my tears up at last.

Dad tells me he'll come and visit before Christmas, which is only a couple of months away. But it might as well be years. Lolly will have done a term of pre-school by then. She'll be noticeably bigger and older. She might even be able to pronounce her real name.

Kelly says she's looking forward to shopping in New York. I don't tell her that I don't think she can pop on a bus from Boston to Madison Avenue for the day. It's not a good time to have another row with Dad about respecting Kelly.

Mum appears at the end of the big goodbyes. She waves slightly at Dad and says, 'We'll see you before Christmas as arranged. Excuse me, I've got lots of packing to do.'

I think how great it will be for Mum to get away. I touch Hailey's photo in my pocket, surrounded by the half-melted sweets Lolly just gave me to eat on the 'hairy-plane'.

I'll miss them, but I can't wait to go.

Stepping up to the Plate

In a minute we'll get to the juice – the Jake Matthews stuff. Hold on though. There are a couple more details you need to know first.

I'm in a suburb of Boston called Milltown, Mass. – and I can spell 'Mass.', no problem – USA.

It's nothing like the America I expected and I might have to sue some film producers. I've heard that's the

thing to do, here in the States. Practically no one lives in high-rise apartments, and I'm not living on the 51st floor like Hailey said I would. Just as well I didn't pack my telescope. (It's a joke! I'm not that geeky! My telescope is broken. Joke again! I don't have a telescope.) (Any more.)

We're living in a large wooden-slatty building where each floor is a flat (OK, an apartment). It's called a three-family, and we're the family in the middle. Our place has the best shower I've ever seen in my life, but everything else is broken and even the doors don't close properly. It's more of a power shower than an apartment, really. It took Mum and me two panicky days of high-life hotel-living to find it. Mum did the panicking, I did the high-life bit. Ooh, they had the nicest doughnuts at that hotel!

Mum spent so much on deposits and fees and doughnuts that we had to sleep on the floor for three nights before she could transfer money from England to rent a bed. And we had to buy lots of house stuff from the Walnut Street Thrift Store, which is huge, and so much funkier than it sounds. And I mean 'funky' in a good way, not in the American smelly-cheese sense. I even bought myself some new clothes for school there.

Speaking of which, let me tell you about my first day at high school.

So. It's only a couple of days since our plane landed (on my birthday – I got an extra five hours of it this

year!) and I'm still wide awake at four a.m., sore from sleeping on the hard floor, and sixteen years old! Getting to school on time is no problem. This is much more like what I imagined when Mum first told me I'd been enrolled as an American high school junior.

The school's a big, factory-style building that everybody round here calls The Mill, although I've no idea why because it looks nothing like a mill, unless, uh, the mill happened to look exactly like a large school. But anyway. The Mill is the focus of Milltown. It's also just round the corner (or block) from our apartment in downtown Milltown, so I don't get to catch any yellow buses there in the morning. In fact, even though Hailey went on about the US and its car culture, so far I've walked everywhere here.

Mum's sad because I don't get a chance to shout, 'Bye, Mum, the SCHOOL bus is here!' which we'd been rehearsing back in England. I wouldn't have been able to do it anyway, because Mum has to leave really early for her swanky new workplace, Brain Drain, Inc. They also don't really believe in holidays for staff there, and after the Great Apartment Hunt she can't get any more time off work. So I have to walk to The Mill by myself.

But that's OK. That part is easy.

Then I stand in the shadow of the huge red-brick building and think, Now what?

There are groups of kids chatting and laughing, and

they look pretty normal, really. I mean, take away a bright J. Crew sweater or two and add a scruffy Boringtown High navy-blue school jumper or two, make the scary-thug types slightly less mean-looking and more bored-looking, and these are pretty much the same kids. I think.

I see a girl with amazing sleek black hair that covers half her face. Most of her clothes are black too, and her bright red lipstick practically glows on her face in contrast. She's leaning against a pillar, lost in a book. I edge close and see it is called *A Teen Girl's Guide to Witchcraft.* Something about the way she pulls at her hair while she reads sort of reminds me of Hailey. What do I have to lose?

I open my mouth and speak before I can change my mind.

'Excuse me, could you please direct me to Principal Harwood's office?'

Oh, great start, Jo. Could I sound any more British? I have no idea why that came out in my poshest telephone voice. I've made the Queen sound like a total chav in comparison.

The witchy girl glances behind her at a boy with wild, just-out-of-bed hair. Next to him is a tall black girl who looks and stands like a catwalk model. I didn't realize the witchy girl wasn't on her own.

'First floor, turn left,' the supermodel says. 'Are you a transfer?'

The others stare at me. I think my accent has left them speechless. I nod my reply so as not to expose them to it again. I know from watching *Buffy* that I'm being asked if I'm from another school, not whether I'm an iron-on picture for a T-shirt.

As I walk away, I hear one of them say something that sounds like, 'Too cute,' and then lots of laughter, but I'm not sure who said it or whether it's about me. Or whether it's good or bad.

Ten minutes and lots of stairs later, because the first floor actually turns out to mean the ground floor around here, I find the office.

Principal Harwood's assistant gives me my timetable, only he calls it a schedule, and makes me choose some options, only he calls them electives. I choose lots of maths-related subjects because I want to say 'math' as much as possible. Then he tells me that based on my British school report I am an honour student (Hailey would call it 'girly swot') and pairs me up with another honour student, a girl who is all scrubbed and sensible. The clean girl shepherds me around all morning, babbling about 'school spirit'. I start to think we might be friends, if I can work out what she's talking about, but then she shows me to a huge room at lunch time and disappears with a quick 'See ya.'

I'm on my own! I know absolutely no one and I AM absolutely no one. I'm terrified.

That's when I see sleek-black-hair girl again. She's definitely on her own this time, but still wrapped up in the witchcraft book. Must be a good book. Maybe she'll let me borrow it some time. She's the first person in The Mill I spoke to. She's practically my best friend here.

'Excuse me,' I say. 'Do you mind if I sit with you?'

This time, the girl doesn't even look up. She speaks in a flat, casual voice. 'Get lost,' she says, and she follows it with a string of similar-sounding things, including lots of swearing, some that I don't understand. I think it might be Spanish. Definitely rude though. And then she adds, 'Limey.'

Huh! I thought no one was supposed to use that term any more. Trust me to pick the one person in the whole of the US of A who still says it.

Anyway! It isn't my fault I'm new, is it? And pardon me for speaking! I don't say either of those things, because as comebacks go, they're pretty rubbish. And while I stand there trying to think of something witty and cutting to say, I see this gang of perfect girls. They're slick, they're stylish, and they're heading for ME!

I've seen this crowd before in countless films. The popular crowd, who stride down the high-school corridors in slow motion so their glossy hair flies around making pretty patterns as they walk. I almost smile at them because they look so familiar. But then I

remember that they never hair-swish in the direction of new-girl nerds unless it's bad news.

Uh-oh. Why have they stopped in front of me?

'Hi, I'm Chelsea,' says the lead girl, blonde and beautiful, smiling sweetly, 'and this is Kristy, and Chris, and the others.' Kristy and Chris stand one on either side of her. I don't know which is which. They remind me of Cinderella's Ugly Stepsisters, caked in makeup and attitude. Their clothes match Chelsea's, as if they decided together what they'd wear today. 'The others' consists of a goofy-looking girl, hanging back slightly, and another ordinary-looking girl.

I try to get some insults ready, just in case. I can't be a pushover on my first day. I'm not quite sure how to be anything else though. This is exhausting.

Chelsea rests her hand sincerely on my arm and whispers loudly, 'I know you're new and all, but I can't believe you talked to Rachel Glassman!' She tosses her perfect blonde hair in the direction of sleek-black-hair girl.

'Bite me,' says Rachel calmly. She still hasn't looked up from her book.

Chelsea narrows her eyes, but it's lost on Rachel.

Still holding onto my arm, Chelsea marches me away from Rachel, which I'm almost sad about. She was rude, but I think witches are far less scary than style princesses. Chelsea's making me nervous just by standing next to me.

But, hey, new beginnings! I want to reinvent myself, don't I? It's time for a whole new me. How hard can it be?

Then the questions start. I don't have much time to think. It's worse than any GCSE exam ever!

UGLY SISTER 1: Are you a junior? We're juniors.

ME: Yeah, I—

UGLY SISTER 2: What's your name?

ME: Uh, Josephine Reilly – my friends call me Jo, but, er—

CHELSEA: So, Josie, where are you from? You have the coolest accent.

ME: Er, England, it's—

GOOFY GIRL: England! Cool! Hey, my cousin Brad lives in London – do you know him?

UG SIS 1: Duh, Tori, I swear, you do NOT have a brain. So, Josie, why'd you come here?

ME: Um, er, it was my mum's job – she works near Route 128—

GOOFY GIRL, MUST BE TORI: Hey, do you know Prince Charles? Dad would be psyched! Or Prince Harry? He's so almost hot.

ME: Er, no.

ORDINARY GIRL: Tori! Duh! Josie, do you have a boyfriend?

UG SIS 1: We've all got boyfriends except Ana. I'm with Carl and Chris is with Anthony, Chelsea's with Bryce and Tori's with Greg. But Ana is SO getting

asked out by Jonny Wells soon, it's totally obvious.

ME: Er.

ORDINARY GIRL, MUST BE ANA: Shut up, Kristy. Oh, I wish.

UG SIS 1, MUST BE KRISTY: You shut up, you totally ARE. She totally is, isn't she, Chris?

UG SIS 2, MUST BE CHRIS: So what's his name?

ANA: Yeah, what's his name, your British boyfriend?

ME: Um, um, Prince. No, um, William.

KRISTY: Huh?

TORI: She said William. Oh, he sounds hot. Is he missing you? I bet he is. Is he visiting soon?

CHELSEA: Come on, girls, it's time to eat. Come with us, Josie, we'll show you the only cool place to sit. Chris, get me an apple, would you?

UG SIS 2, OR RATHER, CHRIS: Sure, Chelsea. What kind of apple would you like? Should I wax and polish it for you?

OK, Chris doesn't say that last sentence. But she wants to, I swear.

So that's my first conversation with the coolest group of junior girls at The Mill. Not too bad, if you ignore the fact that I just invented myself an English boyfriend called William. See, I can do this! I can be one of them.

I sit with the it-girls at lunch, fitting right in. At least, I think I am.

And at the end of lunch Chelsea says, 'So, Josie, you going to Tori's party on Sunday night? Chris, tell her.'

There's a stunned silence. This is obviously a very big deal. Chris looks impressed. Kristy looks disgusted. Ana looks surprised. Tori looks not remotely annoyed that Chelsea is inviting people to her party.

'Tori's parents do this thing when they have parties,' Chris starts dutifully. 'We get to use the whole basement and they keep out of the way.'

Tori nods. It's like, even though it's at her house, the party doesn't have that much to do with her. Maybe she's just a useful source of party venue.

'And all the hot guys are going to be there,' Chris adds.

'Even Jake Matthews, and he's not dating anyone right now,' Kristy says.

'Yeah, but you are,' says Chelsea. 'And anyway, Josie doesn't even know who that is.'

Kristy glares at me. I pull my shoulders in, making myself smaller. If only I could make my hair blonder and my clothes mall-ier. I wish I was more like them.

'Josie, Jake Matthews is the coolest, hottest boy at The Mill.' Kristy's face softens and she sighs, the acid look leaving her face at the mere mention of this guy's hotness.

He must be something special. I can't wait to see him.

Chelsea yawns, though I thought she looked kind of

dreamy at the mention of Jake Matthews too. 'So anyway, be there, Josie. Come on, I'm getting out of here.'

She stands up, swishes that hair again and strides away smartly, with Kristy and Chris falling into step, one on either side of her. Ana and Tori scurry behind and I'm not quite sure what to do with myself, until Tori hurries back and says, 'Come on, Josie.'

My brain races with thoughts like: Help! Nothing to wear! They'll realize I'm not cool! Save me!

And Tori does. She says, 'Want to come over later? I could do you a makeover like you wouldn't believe! I can lend you clothes too.'

I like Tori.

That afternoon I go home with Tori. Her house is very different from my 'three-family'. There's room for about five families in her house, but only hers live there.

'Quick, let's go to my room,' she says as we walk into a hallway the size of my whole apartment. The walls and high surfaces are covered with framed photos. I expect to see baby photos of Tori, but instead there's mostly one familiar, older face. It's the Queen – in at least ten different single-coloured outfits, posing with a serious half-smile. There's a portrait hanging further up the wall. It takes me a second before I recognize it's a painting of Prince Charles and Camilla, wearing green wellies and standing by a horse.

Tori twitches. 'It's upstairs,' she says, leaping

towards a grand staircase that wouldn't look out of place in Buckingham Palace.

'Honey, did the ceramic Corgis from eBay arrive yet?' a male voice booms from somewhere to the left of us.

'Upstairs!' Tori ushers me desperately, but it's too late. A door opens and a man in a tweed jacket smiles broadly at us.

'Ah, Victoria. I thought you were your mother. How was school? Who's your friend? She looks a bit different than the usual starved fashion victims you bring home.'

'Da-aaad,' Tori whines.

'I'm Jo – Josie,' I say. I'm not quite sure what my name is any more. Then, maybe because Tori's dad is staring at me as if I've just said something amazing, I feel compelled to add, 'I'm from England.'

Tori looks horrified. 'No,' she murmurs.

'Oh my! You're British! Oh my! Splendid! Do you say "splendid"? You really must. It's a marvellous word. You do say "marvellous"? Oh, my, Tori, why didn't you tell me you have a British friend? This is marvellous, splendid, ahhh, spiffing? Spiffing news.'

Poor Tori – I've never met a more embarrassing dad in my life. My dad, who has been known to bore Hailey about taxation law, looks positively normal in comparison to Tori's cringe-machine of a parental unit.

'Da-aaaaad. Please quit it.' Tori looks miserable.

'Would Josie like to take some tea? My nephew in London says it's true that the British drink tea all the time. He couldn't answer my other questions though. Josie, maybe you could help?'

I nod, even though Tori shakes her head and looks longingly at the stairs.

'Where do the princes mostly buy their clothes?'

'Sorry?' I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this.

'Harry and Wills. Is their tailor contactable online? I'd really like to know. I want to buy my son a special suit for his eighteenth.'

'Dad. Josie and I have to study.'

'I'm really sorry. I don't know,' I mumble.

'Oh, my. I just love your accent.' Tori's dad gazes at me in admiration. 'Victoria, I must tell your mother how marvellous it is that you have a new friend. Josie, I have so many more questions. About Windsor Castle – oh, and as you know, our family name is Windsor – yes, that's right—'

'Mum's probably still in the pool. You should go talk to her there right now.'

'Splendid idea, Victoria. Farewell, Josie.'

Tori looks mortified as Mr Windsor strides away. But when I laugh, she joins in, and we giggle up to her room.

She sorts through a rail of designer clothes in her huge closet. 'I'll turn your cool British look into

a cool American one in no time, Josie,' she says.

I'm pleased she thinks I have a cool British look, so I don't correct her, but she makes me feel comfortable enough to tell her I think I need all the help I can get, and not just today, either. So Tori says she can lend me lots of clothes and shoes. We have a slight problem with sizing – at first I think Tori must wear children's clothes, her size is so small, but her clothes seem to fit me snugly. Neither of us understand the shoe sizes, but through trial and error we work out I can wear most of Tori's shoes too.

For the next hour or so I have an amazing makeover session. I admit to Tori that I eat my makeup and I've never worn heels. She says I can borrow her 'flats', and she teaches me techniques to stop me snacking on my lipstick.

I let Tori fuss over me. She straightens my hair so that it doesn't have a mind of its own any more.

Then she calls in her older brother, who is a senior at our school, to evaluate my transformation from a male point of view. Tori instructs me to change in the closet and emerge at regular intervals in different outfits for Albie to rate.

'Albie's a singer and guitarist and a total musical nerd,' she says right in front of him, with a grimace. 'But he plays hockey with Jake Matthews and he's popular with the cool juniors and seniors, so his opinion sort of counts.'

He grins.

He doesn't look like a nerd to me. He has spiky dark hair and these deep Jake Gyllenhaal eyes you can lose yourself in if you're not careful. He's pretty fit, in fact, but I won't mention that to Tori, because he's her brother and because she probably doesn't know the term 'fit' anyway.

At first I cringe about standing in front of Albie in my different 'new looks', but he talks a lot and I relax. I could listen to his warm voice saying American-boy things like, 'All RIGHT!' and 'Way to go' and 'That looks cute' all night.

Sadly for me, after a few thousand outfits, Albie looks at his watch and says, 'Sis, I have to go now.' He edges towards the door.

'You're not going to Mrs Cook's again, are you?' Tori asks. 'Can't you stay a bit longer? It's important.'

Albie jiggles the door handle. 'No, I really gotta go,' he says. 'But listen, Josie, you look great whatever you wear and whatever Tori does to your face.'

And that's the end of the assessment.

After Albie leaves, Tori tells me that he doesn't usually notice girls, even when they fall all over him begging for a date, so she passes me with an A grade just on the basis of his last comment.

So thanks to Tori, by my second day of school I'm transformed into a cool girl. With my new looks and my old accent, I've arrived.

Playing in the Big League

Remember what I said about the accent? I'm finding I can get away with saying any old rubbish because no one listens to a word I say, just the way I say it. And they love me for that.

The exception to this is Kristy. She listens to me, which is annoying.

'So tell me more about William,' she says on Wednesday in the lunchroom, looking at me intently. Something about her expression makes me wonder if she suspects I made him up, but she can't possibly. I answer all her questions as quickly as I can. Thankfully, someone in a less-than-designer outfit comes in and distracts Kristy into a flurry of 'Omigod!' and 'LOOK at HER!'

By Thursday morning, when Kristy starts the questions again, I'm thinking I'd better dump William as soon as possible. He's trouble. And anyway, I decide, we've been growing more distant. It's very sad, but long-distance relationships can easily become strained.

I spend the morning moping around a lot, and the girls take me to the toilets, only they call it the rest-room, for a lovely girly heart-to-heart. I've never been on the inside of one of these before. It's brill. The girly heart-to-heart, I mean, not the restroom. The restroom's on the disgusting side of the usual school uncleanliness scale.