

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

At the age of eight, I badly wanted to be Julie Andrews. Specifically, I wanted to be Julie-Andrews-as-Mary-Poppins; beautiful, taking no nonsense from anyone. She could do magic, but it was always in such a nonchalant way (whoops! I've just pulled the contents of an entire room out of my carpet bag!) She knew she was 'practically perfect in every way'; *I* was anything but.

I never succeeded in becoming Julie Andrews. In any case, I eventually went off the idea of being her, and wanted instead to be someone else – probably a Charlie's Angel. I suppose it won't be long before people will literally be able to try out 'being' their favourite celebrity for a day, a week, a year, using some sort of computer programme...there's a story in there somewhere.

This is not that story. It is a different story (dare I say it, an even more exciting one!) that takes place at just around that time. In other words, very soon...

## Prologue

'You think long and hard enough about a problem, there's always an answer,' Dad had said. 'Like, way back when people thought, wouldn't it be amazing to go to the moon? Well, they figured out a way to do it, didn't they?'

'But aren't lots of other people thinking long and hard about the same problems as you, and *not* finding the answer?' Rorie remembered asking.

Dad shrugged. 'The way I work is different. I get a *hunch* about something, like a glimpse of a butterfly, and I have to follow it – I just *have* to, I'd go crazy if I didn't—'

'And some people think you're crazy if you *do*,' Mum remarked.

Dad nodded furiously. 'Oh yes. And sometimes you can't see the butterfly for a while, and you search and search. Then, *pop!* there it is again. And this time you're closer, and can see it more clearly...'

'Do people think *you're* crazy, Dad?'

'*Some* people...'

This conversation frequently replayed itself in Rorie's mind; she found it comforting to think that any problem – any problem at all – had a solution, and resolved to believe it, no matter what. And now that Mum and Dad had gone missing – the biggest problem imaginable – she was in great need of the comfort that belief gave her.

## Chapter One Welcome to Fashionworld

There was just clear, white space in all directions. All around them, brightly coloured 3D blocks hung suspended in the air, rotating slowly. Then the blocks began to spin faster and faster, until they flew together and merged, forming the huge head of an elegant woman in a fancy hat. Her eyes were closed to start with, then they opened. 'Welcome to Fashionworld,' she said in a soft voice that gently reverberated around them.

Next, the woman's head dissolved into a massive red handbag, the size of a small house. It up-ended itself, then turned so that its opening was facing them. It unfastened itself, then opened up concertina-style, to reveal four sections. Suspended in each section was an oversized version of an object that you might find in a handbag; a packet of gum, a mobile phone, a lipstick, and a ticket.

Elsie ran up to the giant chewing gum pack; on it was the word, 'Tribes'. 'Hey, what do you think goes on in here?'

'Let's find out,' said Rorie. She touched the gum packet, and they found themselves in a city street at night. A street sign read "choose your tribe"; beneath it indicated the way to places like 'Bohemian Lane' and 'The Cemetery'. On one side of the street, a couple pulled up in a 1950's style pink Cadillac outside a café where people were jiving to the jukebox. Across the street was a much darker, grungier looking dive, where people milled around with spiky Mohawk haircuts and clothing held together with safety pins.

'Oh, I get it,' said Rorie. 'This is where you try out belonging to different tribes, like rockers over there, and punks over there. If you follow those signs, they lead you to other tribes.'

'Ooh, can I be a cyber gipsy?' cried Elsie.

Rorie smiled. 'I guess.' She studied the street sign. 'That's probably...somewhere between 'The Space Station' and 'Bohemian Lane'. Off you go; I'm going to check out 'Harajuku Street'.

Elsie trotted off eagerly. Rorie made her way to Harajuku Street; immediately she found herself clad in the frills and furbelows of the 'gothloli' tribe, blending in with the others around her – who, of course, were not real. She passed her hand right through the middle of a nearby girl, just because she could. She skipped along and twirled around; the theatrical outfit made her feel wonderfully exotic, and sophisticated beyond her twelve years. How nice it was to be transformed in such a frivolous way, for no particular reason – particularly after some of the other changes she'd been through lately. Ever since a certain incident, clothing could sometimes have a very peculiar effect on Rorie...

After a while she decided to check in on Elsie, but got waylaid in the spooky night-time darkness of The Cemetery, where Goths mingled with Emos and Psychobillies. She hurried on through, not comfortable with all the blackness that enveloped her. Emerging at last into the bright sunshine of Carnival Street, she found herself in turquoise hotpants and a bright pink afro wig. She bobbed along with the rest of the virtual revellers until she came to Bohemian Lane, a dirt track alongside a field, where smiling people wafted

around in flowing robes. In the middle of the field was a spacecraft painted with flowers; Rorie headed for this, and found Elsie, tiny among her much older-looking companions, dressed in the typical cyber gypsy jumble of mismatched recycled items.

‘OK, I’m done with the Tribes,’ said Rorie, now clad in a similar outfit. ‘Let’s find out what else there is.’

Elsie pouted. ‘But I wanna stay here with these dudes!’

Rorie laughed. ‘Don’t be daft, Else; these ‘dudes’ are not real. Come on; don’t you want to see what’s in the other sections?’

Elsie considered this. ‘OK.’

Together they explored the Celebrity Paperdoll section of the Giant Virtual Handbag. Elsie was ecstatic: a vast hall filled with virtual 3D models of stars, each with a wide range of outfits she could dress them in. Heaven for a fashion-obsessed seven-year-old. While she flitted from one model to another, kitting them out in her favourite outfits, Rorie amused herself with dressing Roma Carlton, the celebute she loved to hate, in the silliest, most unflattering outfits possible.

Elsie was so bowled over by the ‘lipstick’ section, she was practically in tears; this was where she got to design and ‘make’ her own fantasy garments. She created an outrageous jewel-encrusted princess dress; Rorie, on the other hand, spent the whole time customising a pair of slants. Five years older than Elsie, dressing up for her was less about being a princess than just being Rorie Silk – whoever that was.

Then everything around them gradually dissolved, breaking up into millions of pixels and scattering in all directions.

‘OK, time’s up!’ came Nolita’s voice from somewhere. ‘But don’t get up yet; you’ll fall over.’

‘O-oh! I wanna go back!’ wailed Elsie, as the black glass hood slid up and away from her head. Both she and Rorie were half-reclined in large white circular armchairs, which had pockets for their hands and feet.

Blinking as her eyes adjusted to the dimly lit room, Rorie understood how Elsie felt. It wasn’t that she cared about Fashionworld particularly; it was just that it was far and away the easiest place to forget all her troubles...

Standing over them was Nolita. Today her cherry-red hair was in a short, sleek bob, and she was wearing a close-fitting cream coloured all-in-one suit with matching cream patent leather boots. She gave Elsie a diamond-sparkled grin and ruffled her hair. ‘Never mind, hon; you can go back real soon,’ she said in her punchy, upbeat New York accent. ‘That was quite long enough for the first time. How do you feel?’

*Well, I’m in the real world again,* Rorie wanted to say. *The one where my Mum and Dad are still missing. How do you think I feel?* But instead she just said, ‘Weird. Kind of like I just got off an escalator, only times a hundred.’

‘No, it’s like rolling down a hill, then standing up,’ added Elsie.

Nolita chuckled. ‘Well, when you’re ready, we’ll continue the tour of the house.’

And what a house! To think that not even three weeks ago, Uncle Harris had been showing her and Elsie around Poker Bute Hall, the boarding school where he was headmaster. Two weeks’ boarding at that awful place, with its ‘one correct way’ and its sinister ‘Perfects’ in charge, had felt like an eternity. It was now nineteen days since the event that had prompted it all: the disappearance of Mum and Dad. And now here they were, being shown round yet another new home. But this one was worlds away from

Poker Bute Hall; it was as if their lives were plain line drawings that had just been coloured in with fluorescent gel pens.

Twenty-four hours ago Nolita Newbuck, undisputed queen of the fashion world, didn't even know Rorie and Elsie existed; now, thanks to Elsie's typically brazen idea of stowing themselves away in one of her delivery vans, she was not only their legal guardian, but had taken Rorie on as her new Young Teen Model. How on earth did that happen? Rorie still couldn't quite believe it. She half expected all this to disappear into darkness; to find that the crazy adventure of the past day and night had itself been some sort of virtual reality game, and that at any moment she would find herself back at Poker Bute Hall, getting into trouble again. Was that possible? she wondered. Could one go from one virtual reality game into another, and then another, like those Russian dolls that stacked inside each other? The thought of it made her head hurt, the way it did any time she contemplated the universe, or infinity.

The house was scarcely less fantastic than 'Fashionworld'; the interior was like a series of bubbles, not a straight line anywhere. Some were small and windowless, cosy and cocoon-like; others were vast open spaces, their huge curved windows looking out onto the lush green gardens beyond. 'Your house is yoo-mungus!' exclaimed Elsie for about the fourth time, blinking in the daylight as they stepped from the cosy little gaming bubble into a huge living room.

Nolita smiled. 'Glad you like it! You guys didn't get really get a chance to take anything in last night, did you?'

'I don't even remember coming here at *all*,' said Elsie. 'It was like Father Christmas; I was dying to stay awake for it, but I couldn't!' She had thought Nolita's office had been the most amazing place she had ever seen; this was even more fabulous.

Rorie, on the other hand, had made sure she had her wits about her when they'd arrived; Cammy, Nolita's maid, had offered to take her backpack for her, but Rorie had refused. For all she knew, Cammy would interfere with the rather odd assortment of second-hand clothing contained in it; they might even be dispensed with in favour of better, newer things. Rorie was determined not to let go of them, no matter what, not for an instant. Nolita had glanced at her curiously 'Sentimental value,' Rorie had explained, and that had settled it. In fact, Nikki Deeds' trainers, Aunt Irmine's jacket, Leesa Simms' school cravat and Moll's necklace each had their own specific reason for being there, which had nothing to do with sentiment – far from it! She loathed all of these people – well, all except Moll. But it had everything to do with Rorie's extraordinary ability literally to *change* when she put them on. Not just physically – although the extent to which she could resemble someone was extraordinary – but in terms of ability too. It was like having magical dress-up box of tricks; the trainers gave her Nikki's prodigious athletic talent; the cravat, Leesa's technical wizardry; the necklace; Moll's talent for codebreaking...the jacket, so far, had proven useful for Aunt Irmine's ability to drive a car. And all this as a result of a freak accident involving a thunderstorm and a chameleon... This, however, was Rorie's Big Secret, as she was at pains to make clear to Elsie. 'You're not to tell *anybody*, OK?' she'd said. 'Not even Nolita.'

As they emerged into the entrance lobby, various people were coming and going, all looking very busy, either carrying equipment or talking on their Shells.

'What's going on?' asked Rorie.

‘Huh? Oh, this?’ said Nolita casually. ‘This is just everyday stuff, hon. Always lots going on...hey Mo, how’s the shoot coming along?’ she said, addressing a large man who was approaching her. She introduced Rorie and Elsie to him, and he beamed and shook hands with them vigorously. After discussing some business with Nolita, Mo moved on; the same thing happened with another person, and another, each one bubbling with enthusiasm.

Elsie was quite delirious with excitement over it all. ‘I feel like a movie star or something!’ she exclaimed.

‘Hey, you’re with me; of course you’re a star!’ quipped Nolita, who was famed not only for her influence in the world of fashion, but for having ‘discovered’ a great number of celebrities. ‘And stars need a little space to shine, don’t you think? Let’s go outside.’

From the garden, the house looked like a giant, semi-melted dollop of ice cream. Perched among the trees and hedges were a number of large, colourful sculptures, glistening in the early spring sunlight. They were bold, blobby shapes, vaguely humanoid, all female, all flamboyantly embellished. The overall effect was one of a pageant of bizarre beauties.

‘I call them my muses,’ said Nolita.

‘Wow,’ said Rorie. ‘They’re weird, but...I like them!’ Wandering among these strange creatures, she had the feeling that no one could ever be miserable in such a place.

The electronic hum of the gates opening prompted them to look up. ‘Looks like we got a visit from the police,’ said Nolita.

‘Inspector Dixon!’ cried Elsie, jumping up and down. ‘Hey, maybe they found Mum and Dad!’