

# CHAPTER 1

“One-handed catch.” Mrs Jones twirled round and threw the ball. “Jamie.”

Jamie Williams fumbled the catch and dropped the ball. She picked it up slowly, her curly black hair covering her embarrassment. It wasn't as if this was new to her.

“Talk about the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing,” sniggered Kelly.

“Practice makes perfect,” Mrs Jones reassured.

“Emma,” muttered Jamie, and threw the ball across the circle with just enough venom to make it difficult, and not quite enough to get into trouble. Emma anticipated the flight, stepped backwards, jumped and caught the ball as if she were holding the Olympic flame in triumph.

“Well done, Emma. Did you see, Jamie, how Emma let her instincts take over so she could be in the right place, time it right, and let the hand-eye co-ordination take over. Practice, that's all it takes.”

“Julie,” signalled Emma, and the game continued.

As Jamie opened out her sweatshirt in the changing-room, her purse dropped out of its hiding place up her sleeve and rolled along the floor. She dived for it but too late to escape notice.

“Butterfingers,” sang out Kelly, knotting her sweatshirt round her waist, where it dangled way below her school skirt. “Come on Donna – you’re all fingers and thumbs today – it must be catching.”

Again, Jamie let her hair hide her feelings, not helped by the fact that her shoe-lace had come undone. Like a bloody five-year-old, she thought gloomily, tying a double knot as Kelly walked off, arm in arm with Donna.

Outside the sports hall, Ryan was waiting for her. “Don’t tell me, I can see by your face. We’re going to be late for Science – we’d better hurry.”

“I don’t care. They’re all so stupid. I think it’s ’cos I’m left-handed that I drop things and feel a fool.”

Ryan took her arm and steered her round along the corridor. “Or you say ‘left’ and mean ‘right’, or you turn the wrong way, or you fold the paper back to front. I know. How long have we been friends?”

“You’re weird.”

“Must be. Put a sorry face on, quick.” As he walked into the classroom, he smiled ruefully at their Science teacher. “Sorry we’re late Miss, Mr Harrison asked us to take a message.”

As their group considered how to improve an electric circuit, Ryan mentioned casually, “Napoleon was left-handed. Didn’t do him any harm.”

Jamie shot a warning look at Jo and David, saying point-

edly, “Why don’t we put these batteries in the other way around.” Some things were private.

“Eureka!” Jo pointed at the second bulb, which had lit up.

“That was bath water,” Ryan told Jamie.

“What?” asked David. “I think the bulb’s working. Did we use water?”

They all looked at him in exasperation.

“Never mind,” Jamie said.



As they walked home through the back streets of Port Talbot, Jamie asked, “How did you know?”

“How did I know what?”

“About Napoleon being left-handed.”

“It’s called research.”

“Well, stop it. I don’t like being a research project.”

“Find out yourself, then.”

“It’s not like I’m disabled or something.”

“What does that mean anyway, ‘disabled’?”

“It means something’s wrong with you.”

“Well you do keep talking about being left-handed like there’s something wrong with you.”

“But that’s more like, normal-something-wrong, just sort of different.”

“So maybe that’s what disabled is to whoever’s disabled – it’s normal-different.”

“No.” Jamie thought and shook her head again. “No.” Another pause for thought. “And don’t you call me disabled. I don’t like it. Nerd.”

“How about ‘something challenged’? Like the way people say ‘vertically challenged’ instead of ‘short’, to be polite? We could call you ‘co-ordination challenged’.”

“Yeah, really slips off the tongue.”

“I know, ‘manually challenged’.”

“Get a life. Yeah, that’s you, life-challenged, socially challenged – you’ve got no friends and no one likes you.”

“You’re breaking my heart,” responded Ryan cheerfully. It wasn’t as if he didn’t understand insults. Sometimes he even considered them, briefly. Then he shook his shaggy head and continued to think. Thinking was his hobby, and had left a few would-be-tormenters confused by him being so interested in them.

Their conversation paused automatically as they walked underneath the motorway flyover, without either of them noticing the traffic roar and the dull echoes against the concrete. At the junction they halted, before Ryan turned right, to the house up the hill where he lived with his mother, and Jamie turned left.

“I bet there’s loads of famous people are left-handed – you

could try a search online,” was Ryan’s parting suggestion.

“Get a life!”

“Bet I can find hundreds...”

Jamie walked past one row of terraced houses, turned into an alley, unlatched the fourth gate along, slipped into the backyard, and then into the back porch and kitchen of her home. The good news was that her mother was home; the bad news was that so was her brother. The unmistakable sounds of her brother on vocals, and one of his friends murdering a drum kit, assaulted her ears as she passed the outbuilding still known as the coal shed, although it was years since it saw any black diamonds.

Jamie slung her bag onto a worktop in the kitchen where her mother was opening a can of beans. “How do you stick it, Mum! Can’t they go somewhere else?”

“Don’t leave your bag there – take it upstairs. And your brother says he’s going to make a fortune with his band, so I’m not going to stand in his way. He tells me it’s good to be Welsh and a pop star... like those super furry manics. Go and change out of your uniform and then I’ll show you what’s for tea.”

“First glimpse of his chest they’d be reaching for the sickie bags. You working tonight?”

“You know I am – I told you what shifts I’m on.” Jamie’s mother worked around the corner at the supermarket. It

proudly advertised its 24 hours opening and, as far as Jamie could work out, that's what her mother worked – 24 hours a day. No way was she going to be like that: she was going to get good qualifications, get a great job, be rich and never have children or do housework for anyone.

“I forget.”

“You'd forget your head if it wasn't screwed on.”

“That's 'cos I'm left-handed.”

“No, it isn't, it's because you don't listen.”

Jamie stomped upstairs with her bag, trying to shut out the attempts at harmony quavering from the coal shed. “I might only be in school but I'd buy you lots of jewels – if I could.” Her bedroom looked out onto the yard and a flash of colour attracted her attention.

Some girl was waggling across the yard in stacked heels, which pointed up towards a leather jacket above an inch of a red skirt. The familiar, pale, cat-face of Kelly Griffiths glanced up at the window, caught her watching, and smirked.

Kelly pretended to drop her purse, mimed being upset, threw the purse high in the air like a cheerleader, span round and caught it. With a little flip-kick, she disappeared into the coal shed. What was that little animal up to? Jamie slammed the window down on her brother's lyrics. In vain.

“We could hang around for hours and I'd buy you lots of flowers – if I could.” Three voices blended in the “If I

could”, before Jamie stuffed cotton wool in her ears.

Harmonies? Don't make her laugh. They would be hanging around for hours singing about the flowers, she thought gloomily, as she dutifully went downstairs to get instructions for making tea for herself, Gareth and her Dad, who would be home from the steelworks.

How Jamie was supposed to remember who was working when, she had no idea, what with both parents on shifts. Dad on days and Mum on nights was supposed to be good for looking after her and Gareth – Jamie had heard them telling people that – but to Jamie it felt like living in a bus station where buses came and went all the time, and you just caught one when you could. She'd tried explaining it to Ryan but she could tell he just thought she was lucky having a brother and two parents, and so much going on.

“Take the cotton wool out of your ears,” her mother was mouthing at her.

“What? I can't hear you.” Jamie grinned when her mother gave her a play-clout. As she looked at a saucepan full of some brownish muck, Jamie was calculating her chance of a long session online. With her mother at work, her brother howling in the coal shed with his friends, and her father not due home for two hours, she could get an hour without anyone knowing, and then she would claim she had homework to do on the computer so she could carry on after tea.

The computer was in Gareth's bedroom, and, as he was older, their parents always gave him first shot at using it, for his homework. As if! Jamie had seen him up to some of his 'homework' but hers were typical parents – too stupid to know the difference between Science homework and him downloading song lyrics from a webzine. Ryan had made her curious, and she wondered if there really was any stuff out there about being left-handed.

“You might as well keep the cotton wool in!” Her mother was looking at her strangely and Jamie realised that she had taken sticks of dried spaghetti out of the packet, carefully putting one on top of the other to make a pile, and was now trying to remove a stick without bringing the pile down. She scooped all the spaghetti up, and crammed it back into the plastic bag, which tore and broke open, spilling its contents onto the floor.

“You're so clumsy!” Jamie's Mum was looking at her watch, flustered.

Jamie crimsoned. Seemed to be the word for the day, didn't it.

She would start a list of great people who were left-handed and the first name would be Jamie Williams, the second would be Napoleon, the third would be...Who would the third be? She had no idea whether there was anyone left-handed – apart from Napoleon, and, of course, herself in



the future – who had ever done anything in the world. The sooner she got rid of her mother, the sooner she could get online.

“I’ll do it. I’m fine. You get off to work.” Jamie gave what she hoped was a reassuringly mature smile. It did the job and her mother left for work.

Jamie quickly checked through what she’d have to cook. Thank goodness it was pasta for tea. Jamie’s left hand had many enemies and, along with scissors and can openers, she hated the potato peeler. All of them were created for right-handers, and had the cutting edge in the wrong place for Jamie. Having experimented with holding the potato peeler upside down, and using it with her right hand, which could never quite grasp the angle, she had given up. She always used a knife, which was less sensitive about angle, but which she also had to use with her right hand and which carved great chunks off the potato, earning her another telling-off if her mother saw her.

She took the stairs two at a time, barged into Gareth’s bedroom, flung his school trousers, sweatshirt and last week’s underpants off the chair onto the unmade bed, and switched on the computer. Angrily, she rearranged the desk so that the mouse was moved to the left side of the keyboard.

In reality, she was probably better at using the mouse with her right hand because she couldn’t usually be bothered

changing it over, especially in school, so she had hardly ever clicked left-handed. Today, however, she wanted to make a point.

‘Left-handed people,’ she keyed into the open search box and then as an afterthought added ‘important’, thought again and added ‘intelligent good-looking world leaders’.

“Fetch!” she told the computer as she hit *Return*.