

ONE

‘Like to dance with your old dad, Gem?’ asked Dad happily, planting a kiss on my cheek. I smiled unenthusiastically. I wanted to be happy too, but it just wasn’t possible. Life for me would never be the same again, now the whole charade was over and I had Shelley as a stepmother!

It was the worst day of my life and I wanted it to be over, but the Reception had only just started and, as Chief Bridesmaid, I had to act like my world hadn’t fallen apart. I almost wished I’d gone with Tyrone who’d sneaked off to the playing fields behind the social club for a game of footie with his mates. No one missed him, not even his mum Jackie, Shelley’s sister, which wasn’t surprising considering she was totally smashed. Her mascara was running down her face and her blue hat sat at a funny angle on her head. She didn’t seem to know what day it was, never mind if she had a son or not.

‘No thanks, Dad.’ I would rather have played footie than watch him drool over Shelley; I could have imagined the ball was her head! ‘I’ll sit this one out.’

‘You OK, Gemma, love? You seem a bit quiet.’

‘I’m just tired, I suppose.’

‘Well, we were all up early this morning and it’s a big responsibility, being Chief Bridesmaid.’

My heart gave a jolt as Dad turned and waved to his new wife. He had just made the biggest mistake of his life and it was too late to do anything about it. Both our lives were ruined. No going back now!

I turned away, choking back the tears. How could he? Mum hadn’t been dead a year and Shelley Dixon was now officially Shelley Sutherland, my stepmother! I’d lost him to that slag! We hardly ever went to the cemetery together since she came on the scene. I went on my own. And there were no pictures of Mum in the house because Shelley had got rid of them all – except in my room! No, I wouldn’t cry, not in front of everyone and especially not in front of *her*! Besides, I didn’t want my face to go all blotchy.

Shelley, swaying drunkenly, waved back before taking another swig of Champagne. She looked like an overweight fairy, the sequins on her strapless bodice sparkling in the lights of the dance hall and the long, satin skirt swishing as she boogied to a rock track with her dad. Shelley wasn’t exactly what you might call perfection in the figure department. She was fat and wore her clothes at least two sizes too small. I was sorry for her really. She was the wrong side of thirty-five and desperately trying to stay young, what with her bleached hair and thick make-up. But it was like my Gran always said: you couldn’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. Still, Shelley kept trying, a bit too hard. I was waiting for her boobs to wobble out any minute, and the image put me off my slice of wedding cake!

I blew a kiss to Gran, Dad’s mum. She had come to the wedding under protest with her mate Barbara and they were sitting at the other end of the room, sipping their drinks and baring their teeth at Shelley. Gran blew a kiss back. I was glad I had her on my side.

My stepsister Portia, eight years old and a miniature edition of Shelley, bounded past like a baby elephant with her friend Annabelle and two small cousins. Dad’s laugh boomed out.

‘You’ve had your work cut out, Gem, keeping them in order! God, they’re making for the cake now! I’d better stop them before they have the whole lot on the floor!’

He ran off, calling to Portia to keep away from the buffet table.

I escaped to the sanctuary of the Ladies, glad to find it empty, and studied myself in the mirror. God, I looked like a prawn! The dress was coral pink with a square neckline and puffed sleeves and didn't go with my pale skin, blue eyes and mousy brown hair, but Shelley had insisted on pink for the bridesmaids because it happened to be *her* favourite colour. I wasn't all that keen on the white roses in my hair, either, and the French plait was too tight. I snatched at the ribbon and shook my hair loose, scratching my scalp with relief. The ribbon and the roses fell to the floor and I kicked them away.

I needed fresh air! I wanted to get away from this place, to run, to let off steam. Maybe Tyrone would let me join in his game of footie. I could sneak out through the fire exit. No one would see me.

I opened the toilet door and Portia ran straight into me.

'Watch it!' I snapped.

I didn't like Portia, either. She was an obnoxious piece of work and a spoilt brat. We hated one another and she always brought out the worst in me.

She stuck out her tongue. I put my hand on her face and pushed her away. She fell back against the wall and started wailing.

'I'll tell my Mum and Daddy Dave!' she shouted. She always called Dad 'Daddy Dave'. It really got up my nose.

'Tell them! Little cow! I lose a lovely little sister and what do I get instead?' Bitter tears threatened again, but I sniffed them back. I didn't want to think about poor Katie, who had died in the car crash with Mum. 'An ugly little bleeder like you! OW!'

She booted me hard on the ankle.

'I'll break your neck!' I screamed, but she had already escaped back to the dance hall. I let her go. I couldn't be bothered going after her and anyway, it wasn't the best time to get my revenge. Too many witnesses!

'You'll keep!' I murmured, rubbing my throbbing ankle.

I ran across the car park towards the playing fields. By the time I got there it had started to rain. There weren't many people about, just a few jogging and walking dogs. I could see Tyrone with his three mates running round the footie pitch. Tyrone had taken off his jacket and wrapped his tie round his head, and his shirt was hanging out of his trousers. His mates tried but failed to get the ball from him as he dribbled it through their legs.

I paused at the touchline and watched with reluctant admiration. No wonder Tyrone was in the First Eleven. He was the tallest and most athletic of the four, and could easily outrun them. He wasn't bad looking, either, with his dark skin and chocolate brown eyes. He was also a complete git!

He struck the ball easily between the goalposts and celebrated by outstretching his arms and running with his shirt over his head. His mate, a big chunky lad, went to get the ball. Tyrone's head appeared and he shouted to him.

'Fancy practising penalties, Daz?'

'OK!'

Tyrone ran to the goal. Daz placed the ball on the penalty spot, stepped back a few paces and kicked – but slipped and fell on his bum with a *plop!* I sniggered. The ball rolled pathetically towards Tyrone.

'Crap!' he jeered. 'God, Daz, you get worse! There's no way they'll select you for the team if you keep playing like that!'

'Oh, bog off, will you, Ty.' Daz got to his feet with a scowl. 'I only slipped. Chuck us the ball back and I'll have another go.'

'No, it's my turn now,' said another lad, elbowing him out of the way. He was short and skinny with a spotty face. 'I'll show you how it should be done!'

They started fighting. Tyrone dropped the ball and ran over with his other mate to break them up. The ball rolled towards me and I picked it up, juggling it from one hand to the other. Memories of my old team at Woodgate Comp flashed through my mind and depression set in again. That was another reason why I hated Shelley. She'd made Dad buy a house on the other

side of the city so Portia could stay on at her primary school, meaning I had to change schools when the new term started in September. Not only did it muck up my GCSE options it meant I couldn't play footie any more because Naylor'sfield didn't let girls play football!

'Oy, you! Tinkerbell!' Tyrone came towards me with a menacing look on his face. 'Give us that ball back!'

He snatched it out of my hands.

'Don't you think you'd better get back to the fancy dress party before you're missed?'

His mates guffawed.

'I bet I can put a penalty past you, no problem,' I said furiously.

'You what?'

'I said...'

'I heard what you said.' Tyrone put his face in mine. 'But I don't think everyone in the park did. Do you want to repeat it?'

I did, and was met with four pairs of hostile eyes.

'Come on, then,' said Tyrone, 'let's see what you're made of. Golden Balls!'

He chucked the ball at me and I clasped it to my chest. It was muddy and stained the bodice of my dress. He went to the goal and started dancing from one foot to the other.

'You should make a cracking shot in them fancy shoes,' he remarked. 'Watch your heels don't sink in the mud, darlin!'

'This should be good!' laughed the spotty one.

'Ah, shut it, Tommo, I bet she can take a better penalty than you!' said Daz.

'Anyone can take a penalty better than Tommo!' jeered the fourth lad.

'Yeah, even you, eh, Zack!' shouted Tyrone. 'Hello? Golden Balls?'

I was concentrating on the ball, trying to psych myself up for a great penalty kick. It had to be one of my best to wipe that smile off Tyrone Collins' face! The rain was getting heavier and my hair was sticking to my face. I brushed it out of my eyes so my view of the ball wasn't obscured.

'I'm drowning here!' cried Tyrone. 'Get a move on, will yer!'

Taking a deep breath, I took a few steps back, hitched up my skirt and ran forward. The ball shot like a bullet from my foot, sending sprays of mud all over my dress, arms and face, and whizzed high over Tyrone's head.

He twisted about wildly. 'Where'd it go?'

'There it is!' shouted Daz.

Their eyes followed the ball as it bounced towards the road.

'It's OK, Ty,' said Tommo quickly. 'She put it over the bar.'

'I did not!' I snapped. 'It was a clean shot, right between the posts!'

'That's right, it was,' said Daz. 'You just didn't see it, Ty!' He turned to me. 'The best kick I've seen in ages! Where did you learn to shoot penalties like that?'

'Girls team,' I replied smugly.

Tyrone, clearly furious I'd put the ball past him, was red in the face. 'What girls team? There are no girls footie teams round here!'

'The club you play at has one,' said Daz.

'That doesn't count! They're just a lot of daft women messing about. They can't actually play.'

'I told you ages ago I played for my old school,' I said. 'Woodgate Comp. I was striker for the Under Fourteens.'

Tyrone snorted. 'Oh, yeah, that's right. I remember you said you went there. They have all those rubbishy sports, like cross country running and potholing! I couldn't believe it when you said they let girls play footie!'

'And why shouldn't we play footie?' I demanded. 'I've just proved I can put a penalty past you and you're supposed to be good enough for the First Eleven!'

'Oh, come off it, love, it was a fluke,' said Tommo. 'He wasn't ready, that's all.'

I didn't like the look of Tommo. He reminded me of an oversized rat. 'For your information, mate, I was top scorer in our team,' I told him haughtily.

'So? Bet you didn't get any fixtures.'

'That's where you're wrong, see! We won the Northern Girls Schools Cup two seasons in a row. Naylor'sfield's rubbish, not letting girls play footie!'

'Are you coming to Naylor'sfield, then?' asked Daz.

'In September.' I couldn't hide the dismay in my voice.

'We go there. We're in Year Eleven.'

'I'll be in Year Ten. I'm glad. Means I won't see much of Tyrone!'

'You're right,' said Tyrone coldly, 'you won't be playing footie. Naylor'sfield has more sense than to let girls play! You'll only be allowed to play netball, hockey and gym.'

I sniffed. I didn't want to be reminded about that. I was also getting very cold and wet, and I wanted to get back to the house and sink into a hot bath. I also wanted the bog.

'I'm going now. 'Scuse me!'

I pushed my way past Tyrone, caught my foot on something and tripped, landing face down in the mud.

'Nice one, Ty!' roared Tommo.

'Aw, hey, Ty,' said Daz, 'there was no need for that.'

He held out his hand and helped me to my feet.

'Yeah, thanks, Ty,' I said crossly. I examined my dress; it was no longer pink but muddy brown. 'I owe you one.'

Tyrone sniggered. 'Come on.' He snatched the ball from Zack. 'Let's get out of here. It's chucking it down and we're getting soaked.' He winked at me. 'See you at school, Golden Balls!'

I stuck out my tongue. 'See you on the pitch, Twinkletoes!'

Tyrone swaggered away, followed by the faithful Tommo and Zack, but Daz held back.

'You OK?' he asked.

I smiled gratefully. Daz hadn't been the first in the queue when looks were given out. His ears stuck out a bit and his nose was small and stubby, but he seemed nice enough.

'Yeah. Ta.' I pointed my thumb at Tyrone. 'He's a big headed git, he is! Dead full of himself!'

'Oh, he's all right. He's a good mate.'

'Who does he think he is, slagging me off for playing footie? I'm as good as he is any day!'

'It's because he's in the First Eleven,' said Daz. 'He thinks he's as good as the whole of the England team put together, but he only got into the squad by the skin of his teeth; the lad they really wanted had an accident and was out for months.'

'So he's only second best!'

'Well, he can score goals. I mean he must be good to be in the squad, mustn't he? Me on the other hand...'

Daz sighed. 'I haven't managed to get selected yet. I keep trying, though, and Ty's helping. He's been making me train virtually all summer because there's a trial coming up in October, so I've got my fingers crossed.'

'Good luck,' I said sincerely.

'Ta! Shame you're only a girl, you'd have no trouble getting in.'

I sniffed again and said nothing.

'Anyway, my name's Darren Bennett. Daz to my mates. What's yours? Ty never introduced us.'

'Gemma. Gemma Sutherland.'

'Oh, come on, Daz,' called Tyrone from the gate. 'We're going for a burger.'

'All right!' Daz smiled back at me. 'Well, see you at school, Gemma. Ta-ra for now.'

'Bye.'

I watched him go, thinking I'd like to see a lot of more of him because he was the first friendly person I'd met since I'd moved. But he was also Tyrone's mate. It wasn't much in his favour!

I ran all the way home, thinking of an excuse I could give Dad for leaving the Reception early. I could just say I'd felt sick. It was nearly the truth, anyway; I was sick of Shelley and her horrible family. Tyrone would grass me up, but there would be no chance for Dad to have a go at me straightaway, at least not for another week; he was going straight to the airport for his honeymoon and Gran was going to look after Portia and me.

When I reached the house I realised I'd left my bag at the Reception, and it had my door key in it! I stood helplessly on the doorstep wondering what to do next when suddenly the door flew open. Dad, still dressed in his wedding suit, his tie undone, glared at me angrily.

'Where the hell have you been?'

His eyes ran over my dress. In the background I could hear Portia complaining loudly and Shelley mollycoddling her in her whining, little-girl voice.

'Look at the state of you!' Dad was saying. 'What have you been doing?'

I wasn't listening. I was too busy feeling my skin crawl, telling myself I couldn't do it! I just couldn't live with Shelley as my stepmother! I'd kill myself first!

'Either she goes or I do,' I muttered as Dad pulled me into the hall.