

Camden Town Tales



Stuck On Me

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Hi!

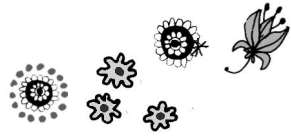
Camden Town is one of the most colourful places in the world, with a unique mix of styles and cultures. Come here and you'll see emos and cyberpunks, rockabillies, mods and indie kids . . . the list goes on and on. It truly is a place where you can dress outlandishly, and nobody blinks an eye.

But when you're a teenager, even in Camden, it can be difficult to accept the way you look, especially if you don't have conventionally 'beautiful' features or a model figure. When I was younger I hated my big nose and frizzy hair and longed for straight, glossy locks and petite features, like the girls I considered to be pretty (and the ones I thought the boys liked). It took me many years – and lots of experiments with hair products – to learn how to make the best of my looks and, finally, to accept myself.

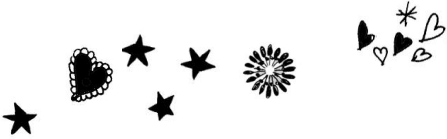
In *Stuck on Me*, Sky faces similar thoughts, but is helped by her best friends Rosie and Vix. I hope that you'll enjoy the ride and, if you're not entirely happy with the way you look, that reading this book will also help you to like yourself a little more too.

Love,

Hilary



Prologue



W

e're at the Dublin Castle on Camden Parkway, a venue where every band you've ever heard of – and loads you haven't – has played. It's absolutely heaving. You can hardly hear the music over the chatter and the clinking of beer glasses. Nobody has asked our ages yet. If we keep our heads down, don't try to buy drinks and blend into the crowd, nobody will take any notice of us. People always say that I look older than fourteen; Rosie too. Even Vix can get away with it when she dresses up and puts on eyeliner, like tonight. We're not planning to stay too long, anyway. Just a quick look around, to see if he's there, and then out again. If he is . . . well, I haven't even imagined what will happen then.

We push past the bar towards the back, where the bands perform. There's a group of old-timers on stage, guys in their fifties who look like they've been gigging for years. They're playing some vintage blues music, which I recognise from Mum's CDs. I quite like it, although I'd never admit that to her.

I take Rosie's and Vix's arms and steer them through the crowd, so that we can get a better view of the stage. I look from left to right, checking each musician off my list: pony-tailed singer and guitarist – not him; black bassist – not him; bald, lanky drummer – not him.

Then I see the harmonica player and my knees buckle.

'Oh my God. Oh my God,' I whisper, aware that nobody can hear me. I feel sick, my legs are like jelly. I cling on to my friends' arms for support.

Vix grasps my hand and squeezes my fingers tight. 'What, Sky?' she asks, concerned. 'What is it? Are you OK?'

I realise I'm shaking. 'The guy with the harmonica,' I shout into her ear, my voice thin and squeaky. 'Look. Over there.'

He's standing to the side of the stage, wearing baggy, faded jeans and a shirt that could do with ironing, the buttons straining at his belly. His hair is thinner than I remember but still dark and wavy, although there are traces of grey in his chin stubble. He looks tired, ill and bloated, and it makes me feel sad, even though I swore I'd never care about him again.

'Are you sure?' mouths Rosie.

'It's him,' I stutter. 'We've found him. Look at his profile, when he turns. It's exactly the same as mine, isn't it?'

'Really? Wow!' Rosie starts to walk forward to get a better view,

*but I drag her back, into the darkness. I don't want him to notice me.
Not yet.*

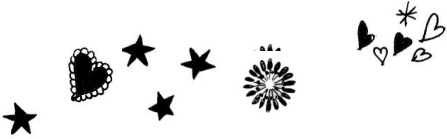
*I have no doubt that it's him. Looking at his face is like looking
at an older, more weathered, male version of me.*

*I guess it's true what they say. If you want to find something – or
someone – all you have to do is follow your nose . . .*

A cluster of decorative floral icons in the top right corner, including a sunburst, several daisies, and a butterfly.

Chapter 1

The Pinocchio Complex



‘So, do you like my new dress?’ asks Rosie, striding and twirling around her bedroom as if she’s on the catwalk at London Fashion Week, while Vix and I gaze up at her from her bed. ‘Very retro-chic, don’t you think?’

‘Love it,’ says Vix, without hesitation.

I stare at Rosie, trying to find something positive to say about her latest Stables Market find. The dress is ancient (from the seventies), smells like mothballs and has a horrible orange flower pattern on it. It doesn’t even fit her properly. There’s only one word for it: rank.

‘Um . . .’ I begin. I want to lie, I really do. I don’t want to hurt Rosie’s feelings. ‘Um . . .’

Lying would be the kind thing to do, wouldn't it? Rosie doesn't want to know what I think; she just wants admiration. But, unfortunately, I just have to tell the truth. 'Um, sorry, but I don't really like it,' I say, finally. 'If I'm honest, it's a bit big for you. And it looks like it needs a good wash. You've got much nicer dresses.'

Vix's mouth falls open in shock. 'Sky, what's got into you?'

Rosie looks at me, hurt. 'Blunt much?' She glances down at her dress, grimaces and starts to remove it. She'll probably never wear it out now. I feel bad.

'I'm sorry, Rosie,' I say. 'I'm not being nasty. But I really *can't* lie to you.'

I can lie, obviously – I'm quite capable of it and I've done it in the past, usually just to be kind – but, as of today, I've decided that from now on, I mustn't. I'm far too superstitious and it's much too risky. Why? Because if I ever do lie again, there's the tiniest chance that the story Mum read to me as a child will come true. My nose might start growing, Pinocchio-stylee. And that, frankly, would be a disaster on a world-ending scale.

I'm not exaggerating. My nose already casts its own shadow. A few more centimetres and it could block out the sun.

'Don't be stupid, you don't have a big nose,' says Rosie, when I explain this to her, by way of an apology for being rude about her dress. 'It's a normal-sized nose.'

I roll my eyes. 'Normal-sized for an anteater, maybe.'



‘Oh Sky, don’t be so down on yourself,’ says Vix. ‘I never even noticed your nose until you pointed it out. I always notice your pretty eyes, or your hair. There’s nothing wrong with your nose.’

They’re both lying, of course. Lying to make me feel better. But it’s easy for them; they don’t have to worry about the consequences. Vix has a tiny, doll-sized nose and Rosie has a perfectly proportioned, sharp little nose that fits the rest of her features. Mine looks like it’s been stuck on me like Mr Potato Head’s. I really must have told a hell of a lot of lies in a previous life to deserve my hooter. Or maybe I *was* an anteater in a previous life.

‘Absolute nonsense,’ said Mum, when I once suggested this explanation. ‘You were definitely an Egyptian princess. I can see it in your aura.’

My mum believes in all that stuff: reincarnation, karma, chanting mantras and recycling compost. That’s why she took me and my sisters on a retreat in Goa recently. And why she persuaded me to have my nose pierced while we were there. Most mums would have tried to talk their fourteen-year-old daughter out of it. Not my mum. She encouraged it, and then she had hers done too. And now we’ve both got little red, sparkly jewels to the side of our right nostrils. Big mistake. My nose stud is like a neon sign, proclaiming: Big Nose Right Here.

Rosie and Vix disagree, of course. They think my nose stud looks cool.

‘I wish I could get one done, but Mum would kill me,’ says Rosie, stroking her neat little nostril. ‘She’d go on about hygiene and hepatitis and sharing needles. I’m not even allowed to get my ears pierced until I’m sixteen.’

‘You don’t know how lucky you are,’ I say. ‘Mum had my ears pierced when I was a baby. I didn’t get a choice. My baby photos look like an advert for Claire’s Accessories.’

‘If you hate it that much, take it out,’ says Vix, always practical. ‘You’ll probably have to for school, anyway. But I think it suits you.’

‘I tried that,’ I tell her, ‘but it just leaves a slightly scabby hole, which looks even worse.’

‘It’ll heal over. And in the meantime, there’s always concealer.’

‘Hmm. That’s true. I wonder if I can conceal my whole nose?’

Vix slaps me playfully on the arm. ‘There is nothing wrong with your nose. Believe me. You’re gorgeous.’

‘Yeah, and you need glasses.’

I wish I *could* believe Vix and Rosie. But the evidence that they’re wrong is everywhere I look: in reflections, in photographs, in the shadows on my bedroom wall at night that make me look so witch-like in silhouette that I frighten myself. Every morning, when I stare in the mirror, my nose appears to have grown longer and beakier, as if it’s making a bid for freedom from my face. I know I’ve been going through what Mum calls a growth spurt, with my arms and

legs and torso lengthening and even the shape of my face becoming leaner and less squishy. But my nose? It's sprinting ahead of the rest of my features. The scariest thing is, I don't know where the finish line is.

My nose even gets in the way when I kiss my boyfriend, Rich. I can't remember it being a problem in the past but now, every time we go in for a snog, our noses bash into each other, and we end up doing this stupid dance with our heads until we find a better position, by which time we don't feel much like kissing any more. Rich doesn't have a big nose, so it must be my fault.

'When did your nose start bothering you so much?' asks Rosie, coming to sit beside me on the bed. She's taken off the vile orange dress and put her jeans and T-shirt back on. 'You never used to have a problem with it.'

'When it started growing out of proportion to the rest of my face,' I say. 'I'm surprised I haven't felt growing pains.'

Rosie laughs. 'What *are* you on about, Sky? You look the same as you always have. Just not like a little kid any more.'

'Yeah, your face has got character,' says Vix.

'Thanks.' I bristle. She means it as a compliment, but I know what 'character' means: it's another word for ugly. Girls with *characterful* faces never get to play the love interest in movies; they're always the sisters or best friends.

I want to change the subject now. Rosie and Vix are both staring at my face so intently that I'm beginning to feel uncomfortable.

‘Forget it,’ I say. ‘It’s not important. Let’s watch a DVD or something.’

‘Sure thing,’ says Rosie. ‘Just don’t worry about it, OK?’

‘Course not,’ I promise, discreetly crossing my fingers. ‘I won’t mention it ever again.’

But as I say this, I’m sure I can feel a little tickle in the tip of my nose, as it extends by yet another millimetre.



Chapter 2

Thirty Metres Off The Ground



Rich and I have been together for ages, longer than any other couple I know. We're coming up to our six-month anniversary. That's serious. 'Too serious,' Mum says. She thinks I should be 'playing the field' but what does she know? She hasn't had a proper boyfriend since Dad left. I'm pretty sure I love Rich and he told me he loves me too, although he hasn't said it for a while (if I think about it). And (if I think about it harder), he's never said it first. I'd rather not think about that, though, because it makes me miserable. It's bad enough that I've hardly seen him this summer, although that's not really his fault – I was in Goa for weeks and we couldn't talk or message each other very often. If my mum weren't so dippy, I

might wonder if she planned the holiday just to split us up.

I really missed Rich while I was away. I thought about him all the time and I didn't even check out anybody else. Although, to be fair, I didn't meet many guys who didn't have long, white beards. And long, curly toenails. Rich says he missed me too but . . . I don't know. Something seems different now. I've been back for nearly a fortnight and we've only met up alone twice, for a couple of hours, and once it was just so I could help him buy some new trainers. At the beginning, he'd come round all the time, to talk and listen to music and stuff in my bedroom, but lately he seems to want us to go out with his mates instead.

Just like today. I've rung Rich because we have a vague arrangement to spend the day together, doing something fun, before school starts tomorrow. And, if I'm honest, I'd also like to ask him if everything is all right between us. And if he thinks that my nose has grown since I went to Goa. And if that's why he seems to be avoiding me.

'Hey, Rich,' I say, when he finally picks up. 'Are you coming round, then?'

'I can't,' he says, without even seeming to think about it. 'I'm with my mates.'

'Oh, right. It's just that I thought you said we'd see each other today. I'd like to see you. I want to talk . . .'

I shouldn't have said that. I swear I can hear him bristle. 'What about?'

'Um . . .' What I really want to say is 'About *us*' but I know



that will sound serious and make him freak out. And I can't say, 'About my nose' either, because that sounds ridiculous. 'Nothing special. Just stuff.'

'What stuff?' His voice becomes a whisper, as if he doesn't want his mates to hear. 'You're not going all weird on me, are you?'

'No, of course not.'

'Right, well, I was going to text you anyway,' he says, louder again. 'I thought we could all go out together. To the bank holiday fair.'

'Oh. I guess. I kind of thought we could have a day for just the two of us.'

'Yeah, but we can do that any time. Why don't you ask Rosie and Vix if they want to come too?'

'OK, sure,' I say, even though I haven't planned to see my friends today. I told them I'd be seeing Rich for a romantic afternoon, and if I tell them it's turned into a group thing now they'll start nagging me again about how Rich isn't treating me right. Still, it's better than staying in on my own. I know Rosie is meeting her brand new boyfriend Laurie, but she can drag him along if she wants. Vix doesn't like Rich's mates, although she'll be sweet and friendly to their faces. If I'm honest, I don't much like them either. They're loud and lairy, and they make Rich act the same way.

'Cool. See you at Camden Road at three, then?'

'Yeah,' I say. I take a deep breath. 'Love you.'

But he's already gone.



★ ★ ★

A few hours later, I'm standing outside Camden Road railway station with Vix, waiting for Rich to show up. Rosie has decided not to come; she said she wants to get to know Laurie better first before she brings him out in public. I'm starting to think that I should have just told Rich that I'd see him tonight instead. There's a fair at Hampstead Heath every bank holiday and I always seem to end up going along with friends, even though I never enjoy myself much. I don't like the crowds, or the rides which make me feel dizzy and sick and mess up my hair. The only thing I do like are the dodgems. And the candy floss. I've never told anyone that before; you're supposed to love fairs, aren't you, especially if you're a teen? That's why they're called 'fun' fairs. Yeah, sure. About as fun as doing your maths homework, but hanging upside down by your legs, thirty metres off the ground.

'Hey,' says Rich, rolling up with three of his most annoying mates in tow. I only know one of them: Luke, a guy from school, who still looks like he's about eight and acts like it too. Rich gives me a peck on the cheek, which is almost, but not quite, as passionate as the one I gave my mum when I left the flat. However, it still inspires Luke to make loud squelching noises and to rub his hands up and down his chest like he's having the steamiest snog ever.

Vix rolls her eyes at me. I know she's thinking, What on earth do you want a boyfriend for?

'Let's go,' I say, embarrassed. I grasp Vix's arm and we walk

ahead of the boys, through the ticket barrier and up the stairs to the platform. We can hear them behind us, jostling each other and throwing bits of paper at our backs. Rich is never like this when he's on his own with me. It's weird: the moment his mates show up he starts behaving like he's a monkey in a cage at London Zoo.

Hampstead Heath isn't far from Camden, just a few stops on the Overground line, but it's a world apart. It's much more chichi than Camden – full of delis and duck ponds and posh people. It's also incredibly green, like the countryside, which you wouldn't expect to find in London. There's acres of woodland, with every tree, flower, bird and butterfly you can imagine. Mum used to take us here for walks and nature trails when we were little. She picked mushrooms here too, until she accidentally poisoned us all with a stir-fry and decided she'd be wiser to buy them from the Wholefoods shop on Parkway instead.

The walk from the station to the fair, which has been set up at the start of the Heath, only takes a few minutes. As we draw closer, we can hear an eerie mix of sounds – strains of music, laughter and distant screams. The pavement is littered with hotdog cartons and empty Coke cans, which Rich and his mates kick back and forth like footballs. Rich still hasn't said more than two words to me; it's like I'm invisible.

'Do I look all right?' I whisper to Vix. I've made a big effort with my make-up today and I'm wearing my most flattering skinny jeans.

‘You look great!’ she says. ‘Gorgeous.’

‘Thanks.’ I force a smile. I don’t feel much better, though, because she’s not the person I want to hear it from.

The fair is coming into view now, appearing like a field of giant, brightly coloured skeletons against the trees. We enter and walk around for a while, viewing the rides with their flashing lights, the shooting games that no one ever wins, and the stalls selling sweets and food.

‘So what are we going on first?’ asks Rich. ‘Shall we start big? Or build up to it?’

‘What about that one?’ says one of his mates, pointing up at the sky.

‘Yeah, good one!’ says Rich. ‘I’m game.’

We’ve stopped beside the scariest, meanest-looking ride in the whole fair. It’s called the Looping Screamer and it’s one of those rollercoasters that not only goes incredibly high and incredibly fast, but also corkscrews around, propelling you upside down. I look up at it and my knees buckle. ‘Um . . . I’m not sure I want to go on that,’ I say, hanging back.

Rich walks over to me. For a moment I think he’s going to give me a hug, but he doesn’t. ‘Don’t be a wuss, Sky,’ he says, impatiently.

‘I’m not . . . I just don’t really like rides that make you go upside down like that. Can’t we go on the dodgems instead?’

‘Nah, we’ll do that later. Come on, it’ll be fun. Everyone’s waiting.’

He’s right – the others have joined the queue already.

Rich's mates are full of bravado; Luke is making clucking noises at me.

'Can't I wait for you here? I'll get us some drinks.'

'Don't be such a killjoy!'

'OK,' I say reluctantly, giving in. I wish I could be stronger, but I want to please Rich and I don't want everyone to think I'm a scaredy cat; they'll tease me for the rest of the day.

'Right, so you'll ride with Vix, then,' says Rich.

'Oh . . .' I want to say, 'I'd rather sit with you so I can hold your hand,' but that makes me sound even more of a wuss.

'OK, then.'

I walk over to Vix and take her arm again.

'You all right?' she asks.

I nod.

When we reach the front of the queue, the ride moves around to meet us. We climb into our seats and the bar automatically comes down over our laps, trapping us. It's too late to change my mind now. I turn to face Vix. 'I might grab your hand,' I warn.

She smiles at me, reassuringly. 'Fine, as long as you don't throw up on me!'

Vix loves rides: the higher and faster the better. She's a real speed demon. You'd never think it to look at her. She seems so calm and quiet and sensible.

There's a mechanical groaning noise and the ride begins to move. It's deceptively slow at first, and I think, maybe, I can handle this. But then we start to pick up speed and my fear

takes over. The people around me begin to scream, like they're being massacred in the most horrific way. I don't scream. I just screw up my eyes and clench my teeth and cling onto the bar in front of me praying that it won't spring open and fling me across the Heath to my death. The ride seems to go on for ever, lurching this way and that, throwing me sideways against the metal of my seat and bruising my thighs. I can feel the wind whipping against my face, and my hair blowing out in all directions. My stomach feels like it's in motion, rolling around my insides and trying to find an exit. This is truly horrible. I want it to stop. Please make it stop! I want to get off!

Hours and hours seem to pass and then we're slowing down again. There's a juddering noise and, my eyes still closed, I realise we've come to a standstill. The bar lifts from my lap and, gingerly, I open my eyes. The world is still spinning. When I try to climb out of my seat, I lose my balance and have to sit back down again.

'That was cool, wasn't it?!' says Vix, helping me out. Her cheeks are flushed and she's grinning, like she's had the best time ever.

'It was OK,' I manage to say. 'Could have been worse. I'm glad it's over.' I glance around for Rich. He's standing by the entrance, looking rather pale. Luke is being sick. The others are laughing at him. I laugh too, on the inside.

'So what's next?' asks Rich.

'Dodgems!' I shout, before anyone else can suggest another ride that's not firmly rooted to the ground. I've noticed that

another of Rich's mates has been evilly eyeing up the Twister.

'Cool,' says Vix. 'Let's get a car each.'

'Fine by me.' I'm planning to ram Rich's car really hard to punish him for making me get on that rollercoaster.

I do a pretty good job, although I almost give myself whiplash in the process. In fact, I have so much fun that I insist we have another go. I think I like the dodgems so much because we don't have a car at home. You don't really need one in Camden – the public transport's so good, and you can walk through Regent's Park into the centre of London in half an hour. But Mum wouldn't drive, even if we lived in the countryside. She'd probably make us travel by horse and cart. She says cars are evil polluters, which are destroying the environment. I can't wait until I'm seventeen and can learn to drive myself.

The next couple of hours are, surprisingly, quite enjoyable. I manage to avoid going on any more of the really scary rides by volunteering to fetch drinks and hotdogs for everyone and slipping off to find a toilet at opportune moments. One of Rich's mates, a guy called Robbie, takes a shine to Vix and keeps trying to sit next to her. She's not interested at all. I can't blame her – he's got bum fluff and, ironically, no bum (which is very clear because his trousers keep slipping halfway down his thighs). Every time I walk behind him, all I can think about is hitching them up for him. I'm so lucky to have Rich: he's cute and stylish and funny. I just know that if I get to spend any proper time alone with him, things will go back to the way they were before I went to Goa.