



Touchstone

By Lorraine Orman

Sample Chapter - Chapter 1

Crashing

It's true that bad things come in threes. It happened to me. I survived the first two bad things by turning myself into a snail, curling tightly inside my shell. I tried not to think about anything at all – snails don't think, do they?

But then the third catastrophe happened. This time the snail trick didn't work. I felt as if someone had stepped on me. Deliberately.

I was on my way home from school. James Blunt was crooning through my earplugs, which meant I wasn't thinking about anything. His music always soothes the voices in my head.

Paul's van was parked in the driveway. What's going on? Paul's always out renovating houses at this time of day. I switched off my tranquilliser music and peered through the side

window of the van. It was jammed with bulging black plastic rubbish bags. They looked obscene, like innards.

When I spotted a barbell on the floor of the van, a cold weight settled in my stomach. Paul must be moving out.

Paul was my mother's latest partner, boyfriend, lover, toyboy, whatever you want to call him. Foolishly, I'd allowed myself to believe he was permanent. He'd lasted a whole year, twice as long as any of the others.

He was the builder Mum had hired to do a series of renovations on our old villa. At the end of the job he just sort of stayed on. He's a straight up and down guy, what you see is what you get. He likes hefting beams, cracking jokes, and working out. He's a few years younger than Mum and excellent eye candy, according to my friend Mandy. Sorry, ex-friend.

Paul was sitting on the sofa in the lounge, arms folded, staring at the floor. He's a big guy, as muscular as the blokes in the hardware shop ads, but today he looked like he'd shrunk.

"Hey, Paul," I said.

He looked up and tried to grin but it didn't work. "Skye. I couldn't go without saying goodbye. Hi and 'bye. How's that for poetry?"

"You're moving out?"

"Eden gave me my marching orders," he said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "She's a cow. She's got this awful disease called anti-commitment. Can you . . . maybe we could keep in touch? Meet up for coffee or something?"

He twitched an eyebrow. "Skye, you know I don't drink coffee."

"Sorry. Green tea, then? Juice?"

He shook his head and stood up. "Your mother made it pretty clear she doesn't want to see me again. Reckon that includes you, too."

The weight in my stomach got a whole lot heavier. "I'll miss you," I blurted.

"Same here." He held out his arms and I walked into them. He was the only one of my mother's boyfriends I'd been able to hug without feeling icky. All those muscles made me feel safe. He must have just had a shower because he smelled of Mum's organic rose soap.

I stepped back. "Where are you going?"

He shrugged. "One of my mates has a spare room in his flat. I'll be okay."

"I won't be," I mumbled.

He brushed the fringe out of my eyes. “Don’t let her muck you around, Skye,” he said. “Stand up to her. Be staunch. I got through to her because I made her laugh. Well, I did till yesterday.”

“It’s not you,” I said. “I’ve seen this before. She’s all starry-eyed at the beginning but when the guy gets too serious, she does a U-turn.”

“Yeah. Well, maybe asking her to marry me was a bit of a no-no.”

“I guess.”

Paul moved to the door. “Goodbye, Skye.” His eyes were shiny and his chin was trembling. “It was great knowing you. You’re a good kid.”

“Can I text you?” I asked. “Just to say wassup? Please?”

“Okay,” he said. “You’ve got my number - but don’t tell your mother.”

Then he was gone. I listened as the van started up, growled its way down the driveway, and revved out onto the road.

In the space of two months I’d lost three important people. The first to go was my running buddy, Alison. Her family moved to the other side of the city and I ended up pounding the streets with only James Blunt for company.

I’d been running three times a week with Alison for two years. She was the perfect companion. She didn’t talk, didn’t interrupt my hibernation process. She just ran, efficiently and silently, at my shoulder. She went to a different school, but we’d run into each other on the street (literally) and started meeting up and running together almost without discussing it.

The next person to go was my best friend, Mandy. Well, she didn’t really go anywhere. She just faded away when she fell in love with Damien. It was a match made in heaven because they’re both Beautiful People. I always felt I should be strewing rose petals in front of them. They started spending all their free time joined at the hip, which meant Mandy had no time left over for me. I tried hard not to be jealous - but I was.

Mandy’s big romance also meant I lost my surrogate family. My real family. Mandy and I have been friends since we began primary school on the same day. Mandy has two happily married parents, a hunky older brother called Dan (I’ve never told Mandy I think he’s hunky), a pesky younger brother nicknamed Stinky, and an overweight Labrador dog called Smudge who likes washing faces. The ideal urban family, in other words.

All through primary and intermediate school I lived part-time with Mandy’s family. Her mum and dad invited me to the beach, the zoo, the movies. For years I slept over at Mandy’s house at least once a week.

Mandy's mum said I was their peacekeeper. Everyone, especially the boys, behaved better when I was around. I think it was just that I kept Mandy from scratching her brothers' eyes out. But once Damien appeared on the scene and the fairytale romance blossomed, my invitations became few and far between.

Now Paul was gone too. I liked having him round because he never played games with people's heads. If he didn't approve of what was going on, he said so. He was a good influence on Mum. When he was making her laugh, she stopped tearing strips off me.

I sat in the warm spot on the sofa that Paul had just vacated, listening to the house. Empty houses vibrate with a low hum, almost below hearing level. I guess it's the noise of appliances doing their thing – but to me it's always been the sound of aloneness. This time I could hear it loud and clear.

Eventually I got up and went to my room, where I found Isis sleeping on my bed. She's an Abyssinian, feline version. She's beautiful, elegant, and super-intelligent. I love her heaps – but I love her more than she loves me, if you know what I mean. She studied me, gauged my state of misery, and jumped off the bed. “Some friend you are,” I said to her skinny tail as it flicked through the door.

I sat down at the computer and logged on to my Facebook profile. Mandy and I had set up our pages together six months ago. I went for the highest level of privacy. The idea of strangers reading my personal details made my skin crawl. As a result mine is probably the least visited page on Facebook. I have only ten Friends, and they're all from my class. Nobody ever leaves me a message.

I stared at my Facebook photo. Mandy snapped it last year. I was standing on a wooden bridge at Piha, wearing a short T-shirt over my togs. I was ducking my head, trying to hide behind the ragged bob haircut that was meant to make me seem edgy and intriguing. My legs looked as thin as twigs. A decent puff of wind would blow me off the bridge and into the swamp.

I couldn't stop looking at the girl in the photo. I stared for so long that I forgot the face was mine. Who is that girl? What a loser. She's so ordinary, so dull, there should be a hole where her head is. I put my thumb over the face on the computer screen. That's better.

I decided to do it properly. I mucked around until the photo of me was gone. Then I substituted a picture of Barbie. An empty plastic shell.

I transferred over to Mandy's profile. She has over one hundred Friends. Her photo file is packed with pictures, including dozens of photos of her and Damien taken at the school ball. I skimmed through them, remembering.

When Damien made up his mind to invite Mandy to the ball, he had to get in ahead of two of his mates who'd both let slip they were thinking about inviting her. It was like one of those glitzy reality shows – Get the Girl!

At the crack of dawn one Sunday morning Damien knocked on Mandy's front door, waking up the whole family. He'd cycled five kilometres to her place in his sexy Lycra cycling gear. Mandy said she couldn't take her eyes off the bulges. I think she meant his muscles.

Of course she said yes to his invitation, even though she was wearing yellow pyjamas with bees on them and still had sleep in the corners of her eyes. I knew this because I had been sleeping over at her place that night and I was spying on the two of them from the top of the stairs.

On the way to the ball, six weeks later, Damien gave her a posy of yellow roses with a tiny artificial bee hidden inside. It was totally romantic.

I gazed at the single photo of Mandy and me taken at the ball. Mandy looked ravishing in a strapless gold mini-dress. Her blonde hair was piled on top of her head with cute ringlets framing her face. She went in and out in all the right places.

You know how it is with two friends, there's always one who's prettier, smarter, sexier. The one who catches everybody's eye, the one who'll give anything a go. That's Mandy.

I've always been the other one, the offsider. The skinny one who blushes and gets all tongue-tied. Boys glance at me for half a second before their attention zooms back to the main act.

In the photo I was wearing a baby-blue satin sheath with a silver belt that looked fine when I tried it on in the shop. Standing beside Mandy at the ball, I looked like an anorexic twelve year old. I'd washed and blow-dried my hair but it hung round my face like a torn brown curtain.

My name is Skye Saunders so my initials are SS. I know that stands for Hitler's Schultz Staffen but it also stands for smart and sassy, which is what I am on the inside. And for shy and subservient, which is what I am on the outside. And for sullen and spoilt (sometimes even stupid) which is what my mother often calls me.

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