

BOY  
LIKE  
ME

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# Chapter 1

They say ignorance is bliss.

And right at this moment\*, *this ignorant kid was blissfully happy and blissfully unaware that in just twelve hours' time something would happen, the first domino would fall, leading to his safe little world being blown wide apart.*

In narrative structure, that's what we call a *hook*. But let's leave that dangling and focus back in on the present.

Location: my cul-de-sac in the town of Market Wickby, Lincolnshire—*welcome to the middle of nowhere; if you do die of boredom, please try not to cause a scene.*

Our hero: me. I've always hated writing myself into stories in a way that feels autobiographical, mainly because it would lead to awkward conversations with my mother. So, we'll call our guy Jamie Hampton, OK? Sixteen. "An intelligent and sensitive boy." (Not my words—my school report—although I wouldn't disagree.) Average height, slim build, and (according to my mom) handsome.

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\* 8:00 a.m. on a sunny Monday in May 1994. Hi there—yes, we're using footnotes in this one.

I've never liked thinking about my appearance—besides, attractiveness is more than just the physical, as I was soon to discover. (That was a callback to the hook just to tease you, but come on, focus on me for now.) I was a bit too bright to be seen as cool, a bit too popular to be accepted by the nerds—very much in the middle of the social pecking order, and that was an OK place to be—accepted enough that I got invited to most of the parties (even if I wasn't top of anyone's list) but never having to worry about the A-listers never liking me, because I wasn't part of their group anyway. Only one problem: Being in the middle wasn't really what Cambridge was looking for in their applicants, so I had my heart set on making more of a splash. Little did I know quite how much of one I would make by the end of summer semester. Nice bit of foreshadowing for you there. I hope you enjoy all the literary devices in this opening chapter.

What else?

Oh, and dressed in my new rugby shirt—more on that shortly.

Action: I'm walking down the pavement on my way to school. I'm smiling. A bounce in my step. A bit *too* happy for a normal sixteen-year-old. I probably should have been more tortured, more into Camus and Nietzsche, but, I don't know, maybe I've always had unnaturally high serotonin levels.

Soundtrack: "What's Up" by 4 Non Blondes—chiefly because that's what my clock radio was playing when it woke me up, and I couldn't get it out of my head.

Honestly, life was pretty good.

Bryan Adams liked to sing about the summer of '69, but I'd never understood why 1969 was so special (although Mom seemed to think it was, or Bryan Adams was, or I don't know). In any case,

it felt like the summer of '94 was going to be *our* moment.\* The one we would look back on. By “we” I’m only talking about the junior year at Market Wickby High School, but right then, we were all that mattered. I suppose everyone is the center of their own universe, aren’t they? I didn’t have any idea what it was like being on the cusp of seventeen and living in London, or Manchester, or New York, or Berlin. I only knew this, and this was rural and quiet, with a main street that was dead by five, a local economy that was tanking thanks to the closure of the fat stock market, and a bucketload of old-fashioned attitudes. But that was where we were, and this was us, and somehow it still felt exciting, and it still felt like change. I had a plan, you see. To make a splash, to maybe help get me elected as class president even, and, more than that, to show this town the new generation was going places, we were doing things, and the old ways weren’t our ways.

Anticipation fizzed through my veins on the way to school that day. Me half wondering whether I could capture it and write the lyrics to my own Bryan Adams–style song. But how to do it? And how to be better than (or at least equal to) Bryan Adams anyway? And actually, when you account for my complete lack of musical ability, maybe just sticking to writing stories and scripts would be the best bet?

Was something in the air that day, or was I just in a staggeringly good mood? Was it my new rugby shirt? I was feeling pretty pleased

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\* Ahh, the arrogance of youth! 1969 was a hugely significant year—not only was there the moon landing, but also, on June 28, 1969, the Stonewall Inn in New York City was raided, which led to riots and, in many ways, was the catalyst of the modern LGBTQ rights movement. By contrast, 1994 turned out to be a bit of a disappointment.

with it. I'd noticed a few of the guys wearing rugby shirts—even the ones who didn't play rugby—and it gave them a kind of, well . . . *rugged* quality that I quite liked. Up until today, I'd been a shirt with a vest sort of boy. Fashionable, possibly, but also . . . time for a change? Maybe a vest felt a bit shoulder-length hair, leather satchel, scarf and poetry, you know? I'd stared at myself in the mirror that morning and been *pleased*. Not *delighted*, but certainly not *disappointed*. The cut of the rugby shirt made me look slightly bulkier somehow, and combined with sand-colored chinos and sneakers, and my hair mussed up with some Black & White hair pomade, I actually looked like . . . well, I looked pretty much like most of the other guys. Mission accomplished because it's nice to fit in. I'd even turned my back to the mirror, then spun around, to take myself by surprise, as it were, to see what a "first impression" might look like. Not bad. And that had definitely put me in a good mood.

Even so, what I was feeling felt *bigger*. I just couldn't place it.

I was first in to the junior common room, which I liked, and which was why I always left for school by 8:00 a.m. I'd successfully campaigned for the funds to buy a tea kettle for our exclusive little corner of the school, but the finances didn't extend to a fridge (so no milk, just powdered Coffee-Mate) and an attempt to introduce communal tea and coffee supplies was taken advantage of to the point of it being impractical. So now I stored my own jar of Nescafé, sugar, and Coffee-Mate in my locker—but to avoid letting half of my class use my supplies, it was necessary to get in early and make it before anyone else arrived.

(Note to editor: Does that piece of selfishness make me an unlikable protagonist? To be discussed.)

Close-up\*: a perfect cup of coffee. Rich. Smooth. No one would know it tastes like shit because of the Coffee-Mate.

Enter: Dan—ambling in.

Soundtrack: “Young at Heart” by The Bluebells. It’s suddenly playing out of the common room radio. (I didn’t even notice the radio was on until then.)

I liked Dan. Or rather, I felt like I *would* like him. I didn’t actually know him beyond a nod of vague acknowledgment in the hallways. He’d transferred to the junior class from another school last September, and, I don’t know, he just seemed like someone I would get along with. I couldn’t explain it. I just got this *sense* that we would click and be best friends . . . so naturally, I’d never spoken to him. Maybe that was because I was so sure we could be great friends that I didn’t want to mess up our first introduction, and so I was overthinking it, or maybe I’d just never found what felt like the right moment. He was quite . . . *dinky* as boys go. Small, slim, dark hair—he looked a bit younger than sixteen or seventeen, with a very friendly, open face and a playful sort of grin that told me we’d have hilarious late-night conversations and share witty, sarcastic asides throughout the day. That was all projection. He might have been dumb as shit for all I knew.

But it was weird because I also had this overwhelming urge to

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\* Now the cynics among you might think the only reason I’m formatting some of this like a screenplay is my crude attempt to show it’ll be ideal for a ten-part Netflix adaptation. But, actually, I’ve always seen a lot of my life like a movie. Maybe I’m just detached and observing it, rather than living it. Or maybe I’m just a narcissist. Either way, it’s definitely not because I hope to be showered in cash. However, I wouldn’t complain, and any TV producers reading this can contact my agent via my website.

protect him. Isn't that weird? I wasn't imagining I would take a bullet for him or anything. It was more in a nurturing sort of way. A friendly cuddle if he was feeling stressed about essay deadlines was more what I had in mind. I had no idea why. Maybe it was because he was quite small, but isn't that what friends ultimately do? They're *there* for one another. They help one another. I wanted a friend like that. One that felt extra special somehow. I had Beth, but I would never cuddle Beth, and I didn't suppose Beth would cuddle me. But I also wouldn't want her to. That just didn't feel right. Whereas, weirdly, a cuddle with Dan . . . *did*. I couldn't explain it.

Dan nodded at me.

Despite being the only other person in the room, I felt pleased he'd noticed me.

I nodded back.

He flopped down on one of the soft chairs covered in offensively orange fabric that I suppose someone, somewhere, must have decided was the sort of color "youths" like, pulled out a Sega Game Gear, and started playing.

I noticed his legs were apart.

I subtly uncrossed mine and copied him.

He was engrossed in his game—this jolly, fairground-style music came out of the console.

I bit the bullet. (Something *was* in the air, you see?! Or maybe I was just feeling extra confident in my swanky new shirt.)

"What are you playing?" I asked.

He didn't look up. "Sonic."

I nodded, not that I knew the game, and not that he could see anyway—he was intensely focused on the screen, thumbs flitting



over the controls, biting his tongue between his teeth in concentration, which was a little bit sweet and made me smile.

That oddly tender moment rudely interrupted by:

Beth ENTERS, looking like shit, dark brown shoulder-length hair still wet from her shower, baggy, oversized black sweater that comes down to her mid-thigh, black leggings and battered Reeboks, with an air of chaos around her.

“You’re looking *way* too happy for a Monday morning,” she said, throwing her bag down and collapsing onto the chair next to me, before coughing and blowing her nose.

I tried to subtly edge away from her.

“I was at a party last night; I’m not *ill*.” She eyed my coffee. “Ended a bit late.” She was still looking at my coffee. “Probably something to do with the four pints of cider I drank.” She picked my coffee up and took a sip while I tried not to look offended, upset, or otherwise left out that there had been a party my best friend had gone to, and I hadn’t been invited.

“Needs more sugar,” she said, putting the cup back down. “And don’t do your jilted-friend face, Jamie. It was a Young Farmers Event.”

“Sorry, I’ve obviously missed the moment when you started growing crops and milking cows.”

“My cousin’s a farmer. You know that. He invited me.”

“And your dad was fine with this?”

“Obviously not.” Beth cleared her throat. “I may have been vague with the details and suggested it was less of a party and just some of ‘the girls’ getting together.”

We cut away here to the fearsome image of Beth’s father—a

tyrant: strict, traditional, full of hatred and venom, and also the local priest. We see him preaching hellfire and damnation, informing his audience they are full of sin and destined for hell.

Cut to: the audience—a group of terrified elementary school children he’s giving an assembly for. Some are in tears.

Back to the present.

Because of her dad’s job, Beth was pretty much universally known as “the daughter of the local priest” in the same way Adam Henson was “the son of Doctor Henson,” Rob West was “the son of Sir Jeremy West MP,” and I was . . . just me because no one in my family was anyone remarkable or interesting . . . *yet*.<sup>\*</sup> Anyway, that was why, when Beth first started talking to me, I was highly suspicious and assumed she was trying to convert me; it only later materialized that Beth was, in fact, a massive atheist. Unless, that was, she was playing an extraordinarily long con on me, and her plan all along was to trick me and entrap me into the cult. But if that was the case, honestly, hats off to her—I’d probably have gone along with it just as a show of respect for all the effort. Reverend Clayton didn’t seem to mind me going round to their house, but we weren’t allowed in her bedroom, in case—and these were his actual words—“I couldn’t control my manly urges.” Honestly, hearing that, I’d never felt so sex repulsed in my life. Maybe that was the point.

Beth ripped open a Spira bar<sup>†</sup>, dunked it in the coffee, bit into the chocolate, then took another swig of the drink. She shook her head. “Why isn’t there more sugar in this?”

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\* You can’t get enough of my foreshadowing, can you? You bloody love it.

† Seriously, Cadbury’s—just bring them back already. Everyone loved them.

“Because it isn’t your coffee.”

She stopped chewing and met my eyes. “Oh, shit, sorry, Jamie. My head’s a bit all over the place.”

I rolled my eyes.

She glanced at the coffee again. “Shall I just keep it now, or what? You know, *germs*?”

“Have it,” I said.

A slightly devious smile played on her lips. “Thanks.”

“Good night, huh?” Dan was looking up from his Game Gear. “I’ve never seen anyone do ‘The Time Warp,’ ‘YMCA,’ and ‘Vogue’ quite like you!”

(Definite flashback to Beth doing this, in the TV show version of this story, her eyes focused, face serious, movements erratic and wild, while onlookers clap and cheer her on, reveling in her humiliation.)

Beth shook her head and groaned, and Dan chuckled.

“You went too?” I said. “Are you a farmer as well?”

“Dad is,” Dan replied. “*Pigs*.”

I nodded. “Well . . . We love bacon over here.”

That made him laugh enough for him to throw his Game Gear back in his backpack and come join us. “We’ve never really met, have we? I’m Dan,” he said.

“Jamie,” I replied.

And that feels like a good moment to smash cut into the opening credits.