

**MEAT  
MARKET**

**JUNO DAWSON**

Quercus

- OK, it's filming.
- What am I supposed to say?
- Well, why did you want to make this film?
- It's time, I think.
- Why now?
- I dunno. A lot of people have a lot of opinions about me. About who they think I am. About what happened. It's time to tell my side of the story.
- Cool.
- God. Where do I begin?
- Just start at the beginning.
- Erm . . .
- Take your time. There's no rush.
- 'Once upon a time, I was born . . .'
- OK, maybe not the *actual* beginning.
- I feel dumb.
- You're doing great, I promise. Go on . . .
- I guess . . . I guess it started that day at the theme park.
- So start there.

## SCOUT

Why are men such trash?

I'm pretty sure we're being followed. I take another look over my shoulder, and, yes, sir, he's still there. What a creep. I first noticed him when we come out the loos and he's been lurking behind us all the way towards Stealth. Gross. Like, we're blatantly on a school trip. Fuck is wrong with you? Skanky bastards, honestly.

My phone vibrates in my back pocket. It's Ferd. They've gone to Swarm instead of Stealth.

'They've gone to get in the queue for Swarm,' I tell Laurel. The others went on ahead of us while we went to the loo. Laurel has a bladder the size of a pea, I swear.

Laurel nods. 'OK . . .'

We change paths at Tidal Wave – giving it a wide berth so we don't get soaked – and Laurel continues to babble on and on. I flick another look over my shoulder, pretending to play with my hair.

What the actual fuck? The lurker has changed route too.

OK. Little worried now.

' . . . I mean,' I try to focus on what Laurel's saying, 'why does she have to be so obvious? Like, I get it, she's seeing Harrison now, but the way she's always touching his hair and rubbing

herself against him like a dog in heat. Has she never heard of dignity?’

I peek again. He’s still following us. Shit. He looks about thirty. Not old enough to be my father, but not far off. We turn down the path that leads right to the queue entrance. It’s supposed to look like an alien invasion: there’s a burning ambulance, police sirens and a charred phone box. It’s pretty cool but . . .

‘Jana, are you listening to—?’

‘OK,’ I interrupt, pressing myself to her hip, ‘do *not* look back, but I think we’re being followed.’

‘What?’ Of course, the first thing she does is turn right around.

‘Laurel!’

She turns back. ‘Which one? The hipster guy?’

‘Yes,’ I hiss. ‘Swear he’s been right behind us since we come out the loo.’

‘Really? Ew! What a freak.’ This time, Laurel pretends to swish her waist-length hair off her face and sneaks another look. ‘OMG, Jana, he’s coming over.’

‘What?’

‘Hi there! Excuse me!’ he shouts.

What fresh hell? ‘Keep walking,’ I say. Sometimes builders or whatever shout crap at us from off scaffolding and stuff, but I’ve never been actively followed before. Scary. You’d think you’d be safe at Thorpe-fucking-Park, right?

‘Sorry to bother you, can I just have a minute?’

‘Let’s see what he wants. Maybe you dropped something.’

‘Laurel, no . . .’

But it's too late. He strides right up to us. 'Crikey, you walk fast . . . I've been trying to catch up with you.' He talks directly to me. 'Hi, my name's Tom Carney and I'm . . .'

Swarm pelts by overhead and whatever he says is drowned out by the screams of the people on the ride. Ribbons of hair fly across my face. 'What?' I shout.

'I asked how old you are.'

Laurel grimaces. 'Too young for you, you skank.'

The man, Tom, smiles and slips a hand in his rucksack. He produces a business card and holds it in front of my face.

## PRESTIGE MODELS

Tom Carney  
Head of Scouting

I blink. The ride soars by again and all I hear are screams while his lips silently move. 'Sorry, what?'

'I said, have you ever done any modelling?' he repeats. He don't *look* like a paedo, although I figure only very unsuccessful ones do. He looks like a gay Shoreditch hipster: beanie hat, plastic glasses, lumberjack shirt and ginger beard. Bet he's got a fold-out bike.

'Seriously?' Laurel says. '*Jana?*'

I ignore the tone in her voice. Shade. 'No,' I mumble. I hate my voice when I'm nervous; it goes so deep. I sound like a giant man. Hagrid realness.

‘Have you been approached by an agency before?’

‘No.’ Man voice. Is he for real? A modelling agency? Hold up, is this a porn thing? Cos literally *no one* wants to see my flat arse in porn.

‘Wow. That surprises me,’ Tom Carney says. ‘How old did you say you were?’

‘I’m sixteen,’ I say. It’s a scorching, factor-fifty day in June. My thighs are sticky in denim cut-offs, and I’m wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and filthy Converse that ain’t been white for a long time. We’ve just finished our exams and school has brought us to Thorpe Park as a treat. The air is creamy with Hawaiian Tropic, candyfloss and hot dogs, mustard and ketchup.

‘Don’t tell him that,’ Laurel says, tugging on my hand. ‘He might be a paedo. We should find a teacher.’

‘You’re absolutely right to be wary – there are fake scouts out there – but I swear this is legit. Prestige is one of London’s best model management agencies. You can call the office or visit the website. What’s your name?’

I know nothing about fashion and stuff, but I’ve heard of Prestige. They represent Clara Keys. We love Clara Keys. She’s our homegirl. ‘I’m Jana. Jana Novak.’

‘That’s cute. Where are you from?’

‘Battersea.’ My name always solicits *that* question. ‘But my parents are Serbian.’

‘Awesome. Do you know how tall you are?’

Too bloody tall. ‘I dunno,’ I say with a shrug. ‘Maybe five-eleven?’ I hope. I don’t want to be six-foot tall. I always hunch just in case.

Another train car of screamers flies over. 'Listen,' Tom says, 'take my card – the number is on the back. No pressure but, if you want, talk to your parents and we'll arrange a proper meeting at the office.'

Laurel sort of steps between us. 'Are you for real, mate?'

'Hundred per cent. This is my job.' He smiles and his teeth are like little Monopoly houses – too perfectly square to be real. 'I know, right? I go to festivals and theme parks or anywhere where there are lots of teenagers to find new faces.'

'Cool job,' Laurel says, eyes wide. 'What about me? Do you think I could be a model?'

Oh, Laurel, hon, no. Awks. Playing along, Tom steps back to get a look at her. Laurel is *much* prettier than me. She's got a little button nose and allergic-reaction lips that boys seem to bust a nut for. 'What's your name?'

'I'm Laurel Ross.'

'Well, Laurel, you're definitely a very pretty girl. But how tall are you?'

'Five-five.' Her voice drops. 'But taller in heels!'

He smiles sympathetically. 'To be honest, we wouldn't consider anyone shorter than five-eight.'

'Kate Moss is five-seven . . .'

Tom smiles. 'Kate Moss is Kate Moss.'

'Oh. OK.'

'But, Jana, I'd really love for you to give us a call. Seriously.'

Laurel's face changes. Her mouth hangs open and she frantically texts someone. I look to Tom. I shake my head. 'Me? You sure?'



He grins. 'Jana, frankly I'm *amazed* you haven't been scouted before today. Get your parents to give me a call, yeah? Enjoy the rest of your day. Wear sunscreen.' He walks away and gets sucked into a mass of Spanish tourists and I wonder if the whole thing was a weird hallucination. Country air, man.

'Oh my god, Jana! Did that actually just happen?' I guess if Laurel saw it too, it must have. She hops from foot to foot like she needs another pee. 'Quick! We have to go find Sabah and the others!'

I shrug. I look at the glossy little card in my hand. My thumb traces the embossed letters. It feels *expensive* somehow, and I think about that chocolatey bastard Charlie and his golden ticket.

- That was it. That was the BIG MOMENT.
- Why was it so big?
- Because . . . everything changed.
- For better or worse?
  
- Jana?
- Better. To begin with.