

The *Sunday Times* Bestseller

HERE'S  
Looking  
AT  
you

'I'm in awe!'  
Marian Keyes

MIHAIRI MCFARLANE



HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU

MHAIRI MCFARLANE

**AVON**  

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For Helen  
A school friend who's more like a sister

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## PROLOGUE

### Rise Park Comprehensive, East London, 1997 The last day of term

‘Ladies and gentlemen. Mr Elton John!’

Gavin Jukes, in huge pipe-cleaner spectacles and a duck costume, strode out to deafening cheers. Well, strode out as well you can in canary yellow foam feet: a jaunty waddle. He sat down at the keyboard – with some difficulty due to the padded tail – and started bashing noiselessly at a keyboard, carolling along with ‘Are You Ready For Love’.

Standing in the stage wings, Aureliana adjusted the sash on her 1970s peach polyester maternity gown with knife-pleat skirt, and touched a hand to her hair-sprayed bouffant.

She took a deep, shaky breath, inhaling that school sports hall odour of tennis shoe rubber, Impulse body spray and ripe adolescent hormones.

The leavers’ Mock Rock was a simple but wildly successful formula: dress up as a pop star, the sillier the outfit the better, and mime along to an old hit.

And thank God, the crowd loved Gavin.

According to all witless graffiti that tackled the topic of Gavin Jukes, he was ‘a massive gayer’. And yet he’d fearlessly chosen to impersonate a flamboyant homosexual singer, to this rapturous reception?

Perhaps Aureliana Alessi, the weirdo who ate whiffy lasagne in Tupperware for lunch instead of Mighty White sandwiches, might also finally be laughed with, rather than at.

It was as if school had been a pantomime, with everyone merely playing roles, and villains and heroes alike came on to take their bows together at the end.

Even Lindsay and Cara, Aureliana’s most committed antagonists, dressed in minis and platform boots as Agnetha and Anni-Frid from ABBA, had studiously left her alone today.

Their coven members were swigging contraband ‘Minkoff’ brand vodka from bottles of Happy Shopper cola and watching her with their heavily

Rimmelled eyes, but keeping their distance. Aureliana wouldn't have minded a nip of something herself.

Maybe the Mock Rock magic came from the fact that popular older kids were already like rock stars to the younger. Apart from James Fraser. He was like a rock star to *everyone*. Aureliana glanced over at him and told herself again that this would be fine because she'd be on stage with James Fraser.

*James Fraser.* The mere music of saying his name made her stomach lining dissolve.

She'd been skiving PE in the library a week ago, re-reading a *Sweet Valley High* book, when he'd approached her.

'Hi Aureliana. Aren't you meant to be in PE?'

It was the most extraordinary moment.

James Fraser, God of Rise Park, was for the first time speaking to her. *To her.*

He knew her name. Not just the 'Italian Galleon' or 'Pavagrotty' ones.

He knew her timetable?

He smiled a lazy smile. Aureliana had never seen him this close up before.

It was like meeting your idol – all those hours spent obsessing over their every detail and suddenly confronted with them in the walking, talking flesh. And what flesh. That incredible white lit-from-within skin, like a church candle flame burning low and glowing through the wax. The oil-spill shiny black hair and the purple-blue eyes.

She'd actually tried to draw him in her *Forever Friends* diary once, using felt tips. It didn't work, he ended up a ringer for Shakin' Stevens. She reverted back to the usual hearts and flowers doodles, and the legend 'AA 4 JF 4EVA'.

'Don't blame you. PE's such crap.'

Aureliana made a sort of disbelieving honk noise and nodded vigorously. Sporty James secretly hated PE too?! This was proof. They were meant to be.

'I was wondering, the Mock Rock. I thought doing Freddie Mercury and the opera singer could be funny? A duet, me and you? Fancy it?'

Aureliana nodded. He'd used the phrase 'me and you'. Fantasies had become reality. Right then he could've said *I'm planning on jumping out of that window. Doesn't look a long way down, me and you, fancy it?* and she'd have followed.

It was only in the days after that she pondered the wisdom of going on stage as one of Rise Park's most fat, foreign and bullied, next to its sex god pin-up. What if all the worst bitches crucified her for it? But, she'd reasoned she'd never see any of them again after today, and they wouldn't wreck James Fraser's big moment.

She thought James might want to rehearse but he'd never suggested it, and she didn't want to look pushy. He knew what he was doing, he always did.

Perhaps they should've conferred on wardrobe though. Aureliana thought the deal was that they went all out. She'd backcombed her hair into something approximating a soprano's coif and plastered her face with pan stick. James, from what she could see, had only drawn on a cad's pencil moustache. But then she didn't know what she expected – he was unlikely to do a frontless leotard and stick-on chest wig.

Gavin was taking his bows. Oh, God. This was it. Here goes. James ambled over to her side and she'd never felt more important or special.

The Mock Rock's MC, Mr Towers, cued the music. Dry ice gushed out with a soft hiss, and the opening bars of the 'Barcelona' track swelled.

They walked onto the stage to deafening cheers and applause. Aureliana gazed at the gallery of delighted faces, getting an exhilarating glimpse into what it was like to be James Fraser. To feel that much excitement and goodwill reflected back at the very sight of you.

She turned to him, to exchange a nervous grin of solidarity before the singing started, but James was giving her a funny smirk and backing away into the wings again.

It was a green Praline Triangle that got her first, glancing off her cheek and arcing onto the stage floor. She felt a small pain in her stomach as another missile hit its target, like a rubber band being snapped against her body. A purple one with the hazelnut sailed past her head and she ducked out of the way, only to catch a toffee penny on the chin.

And then came a hurricane of Quality Street, as the air filled with a blizzard of shiny, multi-coloured shrapnel. Mr Towers turned the music off and started shouting to try to restore order, but all in vain.

Aureliana looked over in desperation at James. He was bent nearly double with laughter. His friend Laurence had one arm slung round his best mate's head, the other arm busy with a fist-pumping triumphal gesture.

Lindsay and Cara had tears of mirth streaming down their maquillaged faces, holding on to each other for support.

It took a moment for Aureliana to accept what was happening.

That this had been planned from the start. That someone had gone to the trouble of buying dozens of those big tins of sweets and handed them round the audience. That they had been given a cue to start lobbing them, and for everyone else, this was the extra helping of mock in the grand finale.

Slowly, it dawned on her that her crush might not have been as secret as she thought. This she found even more humiliating than being at the centre of the confectionery tornado.

She could see Gavin trying to remonstrate with them all from underneath his duck bill hat.

James Fraser was clapping and he uttered a three-syllable, single word, as he looked at her, enunciating clearly. *Elephant*.

Aureliana had long ago steeled herself not to cry under pressure. Not only did she not want to give her tormentors the satisfaction, she'd figured out the less reaction you gave bullies, the faster they lost interest. She saw no reason to break that rule now and start weeping in front of a vast and hostile audience.

Unfortunately, at that moment of dignified resolve, she was hit with a Coconut Éclair in the left eye, and they both started streaming anyway.