

Mad, Bad and Totally Dangerous

Susan Davis

Random House Children's Books

About the Book

It was exciting being alone with the poet, his scornful eyes brooding over me. I also knew there was something horrible, terrifying about it. Something wrong. But I couldn't remember what it was.'

Abbie, Lauren and Ruby are earning some holiday dosh at the Northgate Poetry Festival. It promises to be dull, dull, dull until they meet the ravishing Ron Lord. But then some seriously weird goings-on lead Abbie to suspect that the drop-dead-delicious poet may actually have dropped dead quite some time ago ...

Posing poets, fit photographers and a ghostly ex-girlfriend stalk the pages of this hilarious new novel from the author of *The Henry Game* and *Delilah and the Dark Stuff*.

**Mad, Bad
and Totally
Dangerous**



SUSAN DAVIS

CORGI BOOKS

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'To think,' Ringlets murmured bitterly; 'to think I loved him once.'

Ah, so Ringlets and the poet! Things were beginning to make sense. Embarrassing sense. Frankly I didn't want to know the squalid details.

'Are you all right?' I asked her. 'Would you like something to drink in the café?'

Then, as she raised her head and stared at me, I almost swooned myself. Her eyes were terrible! Black. Imploring. It was as if something else was staring out of them, something foul and ancient and unbearably sad. I blinked. It was impossible to hold the gaze of those eyes without feeling faint.

Other titles by Susan Davis and available from Corgi Books:

The Henry Game
Delilah and the Dark Stuff

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Prologue

*All present life is but an interjection,
An 'oh!' or 'ah!' of joy or misery
Or a 'ha, ha!' or 'bah!' a yawn or 'pooh!'
Of which perhaps the latter is most true.*

I really can't believe what's happening to me this summer. Things have got so bad that I, Abigail Carter, seriously suspect I might be *cursed*. You know, like, *cursed* cursed? Doomed to an eternity of abject misery type cursed? It wouldn't surprise me at all if I had an enemy somewhere. Maybe Tamsin French at our school, for instance. Maybe she never forgave me for giving her that duff palm reading back in the third year, when I told her she'd have six kids and live a life of total poverty. Maybe she is at this very moment melting down her leg wax into an Abbie doll and stabbing a large hatpin in my most vitally *vital* organs. Why not? Listen - believe me, stranger things have happened. And they've happened to me!

All right, maybe it's some kind of judgement then. Yeah, could be. I'm being punished for not giving up my occult practices, for studying the ancient art of phrenology and stuff. (That's telling your personality from the bumps on your head, in case you don't know.)

Or could it be that the gods have just got it in for me? Like they're saying: 'Hey, that Abigail Carter - she's been having it too good lately, let's give her a bit of a shake-up and see what happens!' Call me paranoid if you like, but I reckon they're all up there now, leering down from the

toxic yellowish clouds that lurk above Northgate and tittering their heads off.

Well, I've got nothing to laugh about. There I was one minute, having an 'all right' life, thank you very much, the next ...Well, let me give you the precise sequence of events as noted in my diary.

THURSDAY 3RD AUGUST: After seven months, three and a half days and two hours of delectable dating, my boyfriend Joel, the bloke I intended to share a duvet and a shopping trolley with for the entire rest of my life, takes off for a year in Australia and breaks my heart.

SATURDAY 5TH AUGUST: Attempt to distract myself from broken heart at the Next summer sale. Whilst rattling through a rail of micro minis, some lowlife nicks my purse clean out of my bag, and makes off in the scrum with my life savings.

SUNDAY 6TH AUGUST: I wake up screaming from this nightmare that makes *Blair Witch* look like *The Teletubbies*. It begins OK. Here I am sashaying down the street, feeling like hot stuff in my new micro skirt, when a car pulls up behind me. I turn, hoping to see Justin Timberlake behind the wheel of his open-top Jag. Sadly, it isn't Justin. It's not even a car. Parked in a disabled parking bay is an old-fashioned carriage drawn by six black horses.

This is where the dream changes. There is something horrible about this carriage, the way it glitters like the shiny casing of a black beetle. Even the horses are sinister. Their flanks gleam with sweat, their eyes roll, their hooves stamp and the black-feathered plumes on their heads remind me of death.

One thing I know - I'm not getting inside that thing, no way. When the window rolls silently down, I try to run. Trouble is, my legs seem to have sprung roots and I'm stuck to the spot. I look inside. I can't help myself. But instead of the monster I'm expecting to see, the carriage is empty, the scarlet padded interior yawning like a great mouth.

Then I realize. The carriage has come for me. *I* am the passenger. Well, that's when I wake up screaming and then my mother sticks her nose round the door and says I'm overwrought, and puts me on a cocoa and night-nurse routine for a week. Or tries to.

MONDAY 7TH AUGUST: Lauren comes round, and she's in one of her bossy, Lauren-knows-best moods. I tell her about my nightmare and she says I've seen too many costume dramas recently. And there's nothing 'weird' going on, for heaven's sake, because we've grown out of ... you know ... *that stuff*.

By *that stuff*, she means those visits from the Other Side that we're a little prone to. I should explain. Lauren and I have this, like, fatal attraction for the undead. The first time, it was Henry VIII who took a fancy to us. There we were, messing about with our home-made Ouija board and thinking we'd be dead lucky if someone's granny turned up, and who should we get but the randy royal, determined to see off our boyfriends and add us to his collection of doomed wives. Then there was the seventeenth-century Witchfinder, Matthew Hopkins, who even locked us up and accused us of cavorting with the devil, if you please. That was all thanks to our friend Delilah, who really is a witch. Delilah is Joel's sister, and it was her spells that attracted the witchfinder's ghost in the first place. Not that we blame her. In fact, I wish she was here right now so I could tell

her about my dream and that. But she and her mum have gone off to visit some long-lost aunty in Transylvania.

So you can hardly blame me from panicking when I get this weird feeling in my scalp. I know this feeling. It means Lauren may have 'grown out of that stuff', but I haven't. It means that some *seriously supernormal type thing* is about to happen any day now. And don't ask me why; I just know that the festival Lauren is rabbiting on about has got something to do with it.

The poetry festival is coming to Northgate next week, and Lauren's idea was that we both apply for some holiday work there.

'Poetry festival? Eugh!' I scrunched up my features into an expression of utter disgust when she first mentioned it. 'I mean, if it was a rock festival or something, then I might consider it.'

'What's wrong with poetry?' Lauren arranged her skirts carefully before sitting on my bed. Ever since being cured of her eczema by Delilah's moon-dew, she's been planning on becoming a healer - once she's finished her A levels, that is. She's taken to wearing these white cotton garments that look like a bunch of tea towels strategically arranged. There was one on her head too, knotted jauntily over her plaits.

'Think about it, Lauren. The last thing a person with a broken heart needs is to listen to a lot of drivel about lovers skipping hand in hand through the bluebells and stuff.'

'Really' - Lauren sighed - 'poetry's got nothing to do with bluebells these days. And anyway, all you have to do is serve coffee and give out leaflets and show people where the loos are and that kind of thing. You need the money, don't you?'

She had me there. I was hoping the police might show up one day with purse and life savings intact. There was a

hundred and fifty pounds inside, which I'd dug out of my post office account when Joel left.

'I suppose,' I murmured grudgingly. The money I got for cleaning my mother's chiropody surgery, Feet First, would barely keep me in styling mousse.

'So ...' Lauren smoothed her saintly white petticoats over her knees. 'So what about the festival? Oh come on, Abbie, think of all those gorgeous poetic types wandering about. We might be serving coffee to some famous literary genius. It's not every day people like that come to Northgate.'

'No ... but ...' I couldn't explain what was really putting me off. I wasn't even sure myself. Just some gut feeling I had. A hunch. It was as if some clever, more evolved part of myself knew the future already and was trying to warn me. The poetry festival had something to do with that nightmare I'd had about the empty carriage with its stifling crimson interior, waiting to suck me in. I was sure of it. Yet how to explain this to Lauren?

Still, if it hadn't been for my stolen purse and the fact that there was virtually nothing left in my post office account, I don't suppose I would ever have agreed so feebly.

'Oh all right then. But it's under protest, mind. Because I don't have a good fleeing about this.'

Lauren inspected her pale face in the mirror. 'Face it, Abbie,' she said, 'you never have a good fleeing about anything.'

Chapter One

*She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:*

ACTUALLY, LAUREN WAS usually the one having bad feelings about things. The difference was, while she gave herself premature frown lines fretting about UV rays and irradiated tomatoes, my worries were mostly of the unearthly kind.

Next day, as we crossed Bromfield Park on our way to our interview at the festival office, my scalp was prickling so much, you'd think a giant head louse was moving in. 'Get a hold of yourself, Abigail Carter,' I told myself.

After all, there was nothing spooky about the park, which was down the road from our school, where I'd had my very first snog with Mark Cristofolus in the second year. I'd also planted a gladiolus bulb in the Millennium Gardens there - part of a magic ritual which had made Joel fall hopelessly in love with me. That is, until some hooligan with a football snapped its blossomy head off about a month ago. The exact same week that Joel had told me about Australia.

The festival office was actually a paper-strewn room in the park keeper's lodge. Goodness knows where old George the park keeper was. He'd been replaced by a middle-aged bloke with a pony-tail and a shirt exactly like my neighbour Mrs Croop's flowery wallpaper.

At the sight of Lauren and me, the man clutched a hand theatrically to his chest and uttered: 'I wandered in a forest thoughtlessly, And on the sudden, fainting with surprise, saw two fair creatures, couched side by side ...'

As we stood there, trying not to look too mortified, he explained, 'John Keats, *Ode to Psyche*. Sorry, couldn't resist - Lauren, isn't it? And Abigail? I'm Giles, by the way.' He held out his hand. 'Oh damn, excuse me a moment!' The phone was ringing, and a long conversation ensued - something about train times and herrings.

Finally slamming the receiver down, he apologized again. 'Accommodation arrangements for our poets - you wouldn't believe how difficult it is to get the right kind of hosts. I don't suppose either of your parents have a spare room going, do they?'

'No, sorry,' I said at once. 'Not an inch to spare, I'm afraid.' Our flat in Smedhurst Road was so cramped there was barely space for me. And anyway, the idea of some versifying old beardie being fussed over by my mother was too excruciating.

'Sorry, we're decorating,' Lauren said, alarmed. This was understandable. Lauren's mum's hobby is belly dancing, and she's well known for her impromptu practice sessions. Enough said.

'Ah, well, never mind.' Giles glanced at his watch. 'Actually I was expecting another young lady to turn up at this interview, but she's late. We'll just have to start without her. So ... ladies, tell me, what is your favourite poem?'

'Er ... favourite?' we both stammered.

'You must have one, everyone does. Come on. Don't be shy. Anything you like.'

Was this some kind of test? Lauren must have thought it was, because she launched straight into the first verse of 'Tyger, tyger burning bright'. Not that it was her favourite poem or anything. We'd done Blake for our GCSEs, and it

was, like, imprinted for ever on our brains. Thankfully she'd only got as far as 'In the Forests of the Night' when the door was suddenly flung open. Whoever pushed it used so much force, the rush of air scattered papers from Giles's desk onto the floor.

A girl about the same age as Lauren and me stood there panting, hand clasped to her chest as if she were about to draw her very last breath. 'Oh, you've started. Look, I'm reelly reelly sorry ... but my mum was held up, and I had to look after my baby sister, and then the bus was late ... But anyway, I'm here now! I'm Ruby. Ruby Blagg.' She held out her hand. 'Nice to meet you, Mr ...'

'Giles.' Giles held onto Ruby's hand longer than is usual with your average handshake, I noticed. This was hardly surprising. Bleary eyed from nightmare-ridden nights I might be, but even I could see that Ruby was definitely a babe. As well as a stunning figure, she had these wide blue eyes (which means friendly and carefree, according to my face/head reading chart), topped with silkworm-type eyebrows (which is, like, dead lucky). Her nose was the kind I'd pick for myself if I could ever afford a nose job - cute with gently rounded nostrils; a sure sign of success, according to my chart.

OK, her get-up was a bit unfortunate. Black mesh top and pink frilly mini with white wedge-heel sandals is a cringe-making combo in anyone's book. As if that wasn't enough, her shoulder bag was pink and heart shaped, with a sequinned butterfly. A fake carnation bobbed about in her long red hair.

Lauren, miffed at not getting to recite 'Tyger, tyger', raised her willow-leaf eyebrows at me, a gesture I translated as 'Tacky or what!'

'So, Ruby ...' Giles was warbling. 'Tell me, what do you think that you, personally, can bring to this job? I want people who have a "gut feeling" for poetry ...'

‘Oh, I’ve got the *feeling*, Giles! I *so so* love poetry – always have since I was a tot. I make up little rhymes myself all the time. Like, I’ll just be lying in the bath ...’ Ruby waggled her fingers, as if to emphasize her point. She had those funky talons you’d spend a fortune on in a nail bar. Dancing in the air like exotic insects, they seemed to hypnotize Giles, as she continued, ‘I’ll just be lying there, like, miles away, and this rhyme’ll come right into my head, like *ping* ... an’ then I got to scribble it down right away—’

‘Well, look,’ Giles interrupted, looking flushed. ‘Frankly, I’ve had enough of interviewing all week. I’ll take you girls on, but I warn you, it won’t all be cavorting about with famous poets, you know. You might have to take tickets, or serve coffee in the refreshments marquee, or do a bit of promotion. Talking of which, I hope you three are free tomorrow.’ He gathered a wad of flyers from his desk and waved them at us. ‘I want you out on the High Street first thing: I want every single person in Northgate to have one of these brochures by tea time.’

As we turned to go, he caught hold of Lauren’s arm and coughed discreetly. ‘And can I just mention the outfits, girls ...?’

‘Outfits?’ Lauren looked puzzled. She was dressed as usual in her saintly white cottons, while I’d stuck to my crop-top and combats look.

He looked embarrassed. There were no uniforms or anything, he mumbled, but if we could take a leaf out of Ruby’s book, and dress a little more ... ‘A little more ... you know ...’ His hands fluttered at thigh level. ‘A little more, or a little less, I should say ... ha ha ...’

‘Totally gross!’ Lauren decided as soon as we were outside in the park again. ‘Did you get that, Abbie? He wants us to wear miniskirts. Correct me if I’m wrong, but this is meant to be a poetry festival, not an amusement park.’

'Well, it was your brilliant idea to work here,' I grumbled. My head was aching. No wonder, with this horrible sunlight dazzling my eyes. I wished it would rain. I longed for a dirty great cloud to blot out the sun, so I could be miserable in comfort.

Ruby piped up that we should think ourselves lucky about the short skirts. 'When Pizza Pronto first opened - that's the place I work at during the day time, right - I had to dress up like a giant pizza, with this great big pineapple thing on my head. You should have seen me!'

I'd expected this Ruby would just melt away, with the interview over, and leave us to go our own way. But, to my horror, she had wedged herself between Lauren and me, catching hold of our arms as if we were great mates from way back.

'Hey, anyway, we got it! We all got the job. Isn't that fantastic!'

'Wonderful,' I grunted, 'if your great ambition in life is to serve cappuccinos all day.'

'Still, it's a bit of extra cash, isn't it?' Ruby said. 'I mean, just 'cos I work at the pizza place all day doesn't mean I haven't got ambition myself.' As she steered us along the avenue of sweet-scented chestnuts, she added that she was probably going to be famous. *Very famous*. In fact, she fully expected to be 'a household name' by the time she was twenty.

'Oh yeah?'

I was just wondering how to break free of Ruby's clutches, when Lauren said, 'Excuse Abbie, she's not herself just now. She's had a bit of a rough time lately.'

Ruby peered anxiously into my face. 'Oh, I'm sorry. Did someone die?'

'Die?'

'In your family ...?'

'No, of course not.' I jerked my arm free of hers. 'It's not *that* bad.'

'To look at her, you would certainly think someone had died,' Lauren said.

'*Love* has died, as you very well know, Lauren Alexander.' I sniffed. 'At least, it hasn't died, but it's in Australia, which is a bloody long way away.'

'Well, you know what I think,' Ruby burred happily. 'I think we're all going to love working at the festival. It's so exciting. And just think, Abb, you might meet a famous poet!'

'Oh yes, I hadn't thought of that. I feel so much better now. My name's Abigail by the way.' (I can't stand people who shorten your name when they've only known you, like, five minutes.)

'Never say never, Abb, that's my motto!' Ruby chirruped, unperturbed.

I ground my teeth together. 'Is it really? How fascinating.'

Sadly, the subtleties of my famed sarcastic wit missed their mark completely. It was like Ruby was wearing invisible sarcasm-proof armour. My poison-tipped arrows just pinged right off her.

'You've got to have faith, Abb. Hasn't she, Lor? It's like my dream of being famous. The girls at my school used to sneer, but it didn't bother me or nothing, 'cos I know I will be one day.'

'Famous for what though?' Lauren was using her kind-to-lesser-beings voice, which was beginning to give me the hump.

'I'm not sure exactly,' Ruby admitted happily. 'I'd really love to be an actress, but I can't afford to go to drama school. But a lot of singers go on to acting, don't they, and I love singing. I'm always singing, dancing and that. I used to do lessons, right from when I was little. Then, when my mum had Rosie, there just wasn't any ...'

What there wasn't any of when Ruby's mum had Rosie, I didn't hear, because I'd just dodged across Bromfield Road,

narrowly missing being run over by a screeching fire engine. Even that would be preferable to Ruby's life story, come to think of it. Who wanted to know? Imagine having to put up with her for a whole shift! It didn't bear thinking about. Where did she live anyway? I hoped to God she wasn't going my way.

She was. I could hardly believe my bad luck when she joined me at my bus stop.

'Oh, are we on the same route, Abb? That's so great! We can travel into work together of an evening.'

I glared at Lauren as she turned towards the stop that would whiz her safely to leafy Highgate. 'See you two tomorrow then,' she called. 'I'll, er ... I'll ring you later, Abbie.'

'Yeah, right.'

It was stifling on the bus. The plastic seats almost boiled my bum. Ruby plonked herself next to me, her perfume whooshing up in my face, sickly and somehow waxy, like a scented candle. As we lurched along, Ruby chattering beside me about her family and Pizza Pronto and getting famous, I stared miserably out of the window.

Why did Ruby have to be on my route? I was just cursing my luck and wishing myself a thousand miles away, when suddenly, horribly, I was.

At first I thought I'd got something in my eyes. I rubbed them cautiously, trying not to smudge my eyeliner. I blinked. Several times. But rather than going away, the blurring took on a strange rosy hue. This was mad. Now red bloody splashes were floating before my eyes like daubs of paint.

At this point I had a few stern words with myself. *OK, it's cool, everything's fine.* My fingers grasped hold of the seat rail in front. *Whatever you do, don't panic.* I stared and stared at the metal rail, and the blob of dirty grey chewing gum that adorned it, willing my sight to return to

normal. Then I had a terrible thought. Perhaps I was going blind?

So much for keeping cool! Now my palms were sweating so much, my fingers slipped from the metal rail. Or had the rail slipped from them? Funny thing - the rail didn't seem to be there any more. Something weird had happened to the bus seats. Where was the graffiti-covered plastic? Where was the chewing gum? The seats had turned into crimson plush, that kind of rich, fuzzy stuff you get in old-fashioned cinemas.

Taking a deep breath to calm myself, I realized that Ruby's waxy scent had disappeared too. In its place, the spicy tang of old leather and rotting velvets.

Why me? I heard myself whimper into a vacuum of red-plush silence. *Leave me alone. I want to be normal, understand? I can't take this any more.*

My dream had come back to get me. How could this happen in broad daylight? How could I be sitting here, in the beetle-black carriage I'd seen in my dream? My dream. An image flashed before me of black-plumed horses, the kind you see in historical movies, in funeral processions. Suddenly I knew that's what this was. A funeral. The plush seats felt rough as my fingers dug into them. Somehow or other I was mixed up in somebody's funeral. But whose?

The carriage rocked so hard it seemed it would tilt on its side. Grabbing the leather hand strap to steady myself, I turned to the window. The High Street had disappeared. There was only the slick of darkness, my own petrified face reflected in it like the moon.

Then, 'Hey, Abb, are you OK?' Ruby's voice seemed to come from miles away. Ruby? Oh, thank God for Ruby!

She was giving my shoulders a little shake and peering into my face. 'You sound like you've got a pain or something. There's a funny bug going round - our Roxie was in bed with it all last week.'