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Two soulmates . . . three broken hearts



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a refreshing take on the happy-ever-after tale'

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Marie Claire

For Nigel Stoneman
who, with five little words, helped
make my dreams come true



When I Was Eighteen . . .





Chapter 1



‘*There’ll be bluebirds over . . .*’

‘We’re going to Dorset, not Dover, Mum.’ I interrupt as she launches into another rendition of ‘The White Cliffs Of Dover.’

‘I know, but I can sing, can’t I?’ She pretends to be wounded.

‘It would be better if you stuck to painting,’ I tease.

She flashes me a grin and I smile back at her from the front passenger seat.

‘This is going to be fun!’ she exclaims, reaching for the knob on the car’s radio. She’s about to settle for Heart so I quickly intervene. Dammit, there’s no XFM this far out of London!

‘iPod?’ I suggest hopefully.

‘Go on, then,’ she concedes. ‘Anything to get you in the holiday mood.’

‘I am in the holiday mood,’ I try to convince her as I plug in my brand-new white MP3 player – a present from my parents for my recent birthday. Mum gives me a discerning look before returning her eyes to the road.

‘I know you’re disappointed Lizzy can’t come, but you’ll still have a good time. Plus, you’ll be able to get started on all your university reading.’

‘Mmm.’

‘Over’ by Portishead begins to play.

‘For goodness sake, Alice, this is making me want to slit my wrists!’ protests Mum after a while. ‘I mean it,’ she continues when I ignore her.

‘Something more upbeat. *Please!*’

I sigh, but comply. Madonna’s ‘Holiday’ starts belting out from the speakers.

‘This is more like it!’ She starts to sing again.

‘*Mu-um,*’ I moan. ‘Remember your vocation.’

She laughs. ‘That’s a big word for a teenager. Aah, but you *are* going to Cambridge University.’

‘University *in* Cambridge, not the University *of* Cambridge,’ I correct her for what feels like the umpteenth time. I’m actually going to Anglia Ruskin, but she seems to forget the details when relaying this fact to her friends.

‘It’s still a big deal,’ she says and I don’t disagree because it’s nice to have proud parents. Then she’s off again: ‘*Holiday!*’

And like they say, if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em, so I do.

My mum is an artist. She specialises in painting abstract landscapes using oils, and incorporating other materials like metal, sand and stone. She’s struggled for years to make decent money, so although her last collection sold well, my dad is still the main breadwinner. He’s working at his accounting job in London during the week and will be joining us in Dorset at the weekends. It’s the middle of July now and we’ll be here until the end of August. Mum plans on spending these six weeks working on her new collection which, to her delight, is being exhibited at a super-cool East London gallery in September.

As for me, initially I agreed to this long summer break because my best friend, Lizzy, was going to come too. She’s heading off to university in Edinburgh and we’re both sad at the idea of leaving each other. We’ve spent the last few years living practically in each other’s pockets, so this will be the end of an era. The pair of us envisaged long, lazy summer days sunbathing in the garden or borrowing Mum’s car to go to the beach. But Lizzy’s mum, Susan, recently discovered she had a lump in one of her breasts, which turned out to be malignant. The shock was immense and I still feel absolutely sick at the thought of what my friend and her family are going through. Susan is having an operation this week to remove the lump and then will have to undergo chemotherapy; so, needless to say, Lizzy needs to be with her right now.

‘Isn’t this pretty?’ Mum says. I look out of the window at the rolling green hills. ‘Look! Are those wild horses?’ She doesn’t wait for me to answer, not that I’d know. ‘You could have riding lessons while you’re here. And there’s a castle not too far from where we’re staying. You can catch a steam train from Swanage that takes you all the way there.’

‘I know, you’ve told me already.’

‘Well, that will be fun, won’t it?’

‘Sure,’ I reply non-committally. It *would* have been fun. If Lizzy were

here. Oh, I hope her mum is going to be okay . . .

‘You might make some new friends,’ Mum suggests hopefully, oblivious to my inner turmoil.

‘I’m not eight anymore,’ I reply with a wry smile.

‘I know, but you’ll have a good time,’ she says again.

I think she’s trying to convince herself of that as much as she’s trying to convince me.

The cottage where we’re staying is off the beaten track. It’s built out of cream stone, and a dry stone wall encloses a small, grassy garden at the back.

There’s a bench seat out at the front in full sunshine and I can already picture myself sitting there and tackling some of my English Lit books.

The place has been recently renovated, and it feels cosy and clean. Mum puts the kettle on and unpacks milk from the cool-box while I sit at the kitchen table and look over the manual left by the owners.

My mum is tall and slim with shoulder-length blonde hair and green eyes. I take after my dad’s side of the family. I’m shorter at five foot five inches tall and I have long, very-dark-brown-almost-black hair. My eyes, although green like my mother’s, have a slightly Oriental look about them. My paternal grandmother was Chinese, but she died before I was born.

‘What does it say about things to do around here?’ Mum asks as she puts a cup of tea down in front of me.

‘Pretty much everything you’ve already told me,’ I reply. ‘Apparently there are some nice walks along the cliff if you go up there.’ I point in the opposite direction to the way we came in. ‘There’s also a pub within walking distance if you head that way.’ More pointing.

‘That sounds promising. Maybe we could go there for an early dinner and then relax in front of the telly for the night?’

We drive to the pub because, despite having sat in a car for almost three hours, neither of us has the energy to walk.

Our nearest village is lovely. Limestone cottages with painted window frames in shades of blue and green line the streets, and the sea is visible across the rolling hills. We walk up the steps to the pub. There are grey stone tables and bench seats outside with views towards the sea and we decide to come out here to sit down, but first we head inside to have a nose around, and to order.

I see him almost immediately, the guy working behind the bar. He's tall – about six foot one or two – has chin-length, dead-straight black hair and his right eyebrow is pierced with a silver ring. He's pulling a pint and looking down, but as he glances up his dark eyes momentarily meet mine. POW! I know how crazy this sounds, but it feels like my heart has just leapt out of my chest and slammed into him.

Then he's looking down again, filling the pint glass to the brim and carrying it, somehow without spilling a drop, to a middle-aged man at the other end of the bar. The hairs on the back of my neck are standing up. Mum snaps me out of it.

'He looks to be about your age,' she says, gleefully nudging me as she nods in the direction of the unsettlingly attractive bartender.

'Shh!' I warn, inwardly cringing and trying, but failing, to tear my eyes away from him as he takes money from the man and goes to the till. He comes our way and my pulse quickens.

'What can I get you?'

A big, burly man with short, gelled black hair and enormous tattoos on his arms has materialised in front of us. The disappointment is intense.

'A glass of white wine, please,' Mum asks pleasantly. 'Alice?'

'Um . . .' My eyes dart towards the guy, but he's already taking another order. 'Half a cider, please.' The man gets on with the job without another word. He's wearing a white vest and his dark chest hairs are visible beneath the fabric. I wonder if he's the gorgeous boy's father. He plonks a half-pint glass full of honey-coloured liquid in front of me. Some of it sloshes over the brim, but he makes no apologies, nor does he smile as he requests money or when he returns Mum's change. I feel oddly uneasy about him.

'Do you have any menus?' Mum asks him.

'We don't do food,' comes his gruff reply.

I glance over my shoulder as I follow Mum through the door, and then I'm outside in the late-afternoon sunshine.

'This is nice,' Mum says when we sit down. 'He was a bit tasty.' She nudges me again, once more snapping me out of my reverie.

'Mum, no one says "tasty" anymore.' I sound unbothered, even though I'm not.

I try to concentrate while she engages in conversation, but soon the gentle sound of clinking glass from behind us makes me turn around. I realise with a flurry of nerves that he's there, collecting empties from recently vacated

tables.

‘Hello!’ my mum calls cheerfully.

Oh, Christ, Mum, *shut up!*

‘Alright?’ He gives her a vague smile and his eyes flicker towards mine. POW! That feeling again. It’s like I’m made of metal and he’s a powerful magnet. What on earth has got into me?

‘We’re on holiday,’ Mum tells him. ‘Can you recommend anything nice to do around here?’

‘Um . . .’ He stands upright and thinks for a moment, holding the glasses he’s collected between his fingers. ‘Have you been to Corfe Castle yet?’

‘We’ve only just arrived.’ She shrugs and smiles.

He’s wearing black jeans and a black indie-rock T-shirt. My kind of guy.

‘Where are you staying?’ he asks, glancing at me. I’m unable to speak so, thankfully, Mum does.

‘In a little cottage over those fields. We’re here for six weeks, so if you’ve got any ideas . . .’

A dog starts to bark and his head shoots around towards the pub. Almost on cue, the big, burly man storms out.

‘JOE! Sort it out,’ he shouts angrily.

Joe . . . The gorgeous boy has a name . . . Well, of course he has a name, Alice.

‘Coming,’ Joe shouts back wearily. ‘Gotta take my dog for a walk,’ he says to us as he turns away.

‘Do you want some company?’ Mum calls after him hopefully, as the annoying nudging arm comes out to play once more. ‘Alice is desperate to meet people her own age.’

‘Mum, no!’ I hiss, mortified.

He looks at me as my face turns bright red and I would give anything – *anything* – for the ground to open up and swallow me, or for an enormous Pterodactyl to swoop down from the sky and gobble me up. I really don’t care, I’m not fussy, I just DO NOT want to be here right now.

‘JOE!’ the man shouts again, interrupting any reply.

‘No, no, it’s okay, you go ahead,’ I manage to splutter.

‘Okay. See you around.’ He quickly makes an exit. My face continues to burn as I bury it in my hands.

‘That was so embarrassing!’ I screech under my breath.

‘Why?’ Mum asks.

‘I cannot believe you just did that,’ I moan.

‘Goodness sake, Alice, he’s just a boy,’ she replies, sounding all uppity.

But he’s not. He’s not ‘just a boy’. Do not ask me how I know this, but somewhere, deep inside, my heart has already started to fracture and I know that Joe has everything to do with it.



Chapter 2



Back at the cottage, I found myself lying on my bed and staring up at the ceiling thinking about You Know Who. And then it occurs to me that I might bump into him if he's walking his dog . . . I hurry downstairs.

'I'm going to go for a walk.'

Mum tears her eyes away from her sketchpad and looks up at me. 'We can watch telly together, if you like?'

'No, don't worry. I need some fresh air.'

The wind has picked up so I tie my hair into a loose bun and slip on my waterproof and wellies, in case it's muddy. I turn left onto the track and follow a sign for Priest's Way. After a while I see another sign for something called Dancing Ledge. That sounds pretty. I carry on walking. There are a few people out and about, and every time I see a dog before its owner I jolt with anticipation. I know I'm being an idiot, but I'm bored; I can daydream.

I turn right into a grassy field and make my way along a stone track lined with wild flowers. The sea is visible up ahead – shimmering dark blue in the hazy evening sunlight – and I pause for a moment to breathe in the fresh air.

God, he was gorgeous. I feel nervous at the thought of seeing him again, but I'll be dragging Mum to that pub tomorrow, whether she likes it or not.

I remember with sudden mortification how she told Joe I was 'desperate' – and how I blushed! He couldn't escape fast enough. I instantly feel deflated and I almost decide to return to the cottage, but I've come so far, I may as well see this Dancing Ledge, whatever that may be. I pass through a gate and then the path narrows and becomes rockier and steeper, leading me downwards between tall gorse hedges. It's sheltered from the wind here, and then suddenly . . . well, I have never been a nature freak, but the view as I come out of the gorse nearly takes my breath away. In front of me is a grassy slope which seems to roll away to a sudden stop. To my left, more rolling

hills jut away at the cliff edge. It's breathtaking, and slightly scary, but I wander a little way down the slope and sit on the grass. No wonder Mum chose Dorset as a destination – she should come here to paint.

A big, black, shaggy-haired dog bounds past me, coming from the direction of the gorse walkway. He runs towards the cliff edge and I tense up, but then he turns around and comes my way. I hold out my hand to him and smile – I like dogs – and he rewards me by manically wagging his tail and panting the biggest doggy smile I've ever seen.

'Hello!' I say as I pat him vigorously. Out of curiosity I glance behind to look for his owner and then . . . *no way!* I must be psychic or something, because there he is! JOE! It's bloody Joe! My stomach swirls with Amazonian-sized butterflies as he approaches.

'DYSON!' he shouts with a furious wave of his hand. 'AWAY!'

Dyson, who I'm assuming is the dog, starts to bark like a nutcase before chasing his own tail. Joe shakes his head with amusement and then Dyson launches himself at me and knocks me backwards.

'Oh, shit! Sorry!' Joe exclaims, rushing over and dragging his dog off me. 'DOWN, BOY!' he shouts at his dog. 'Are you okay?' he asks with concern.

'I'm fine,' I manage to splutter.

His face breaks into a grin as he looks at me directly. 'It's you.'

'Yep, it's me.'

My nerves – strangely – have dissipated. Then he collapses down on the grass next to me and I nearly have a heart attack.

'Alice, right?'

'Yeah.'

'I'm Joe.'

'Hi.' My face heats up so I look at Dyson. 'I thought he was going to fall off the cliff.'

'It's a steep slope all the way down. There's a fence at the bottom.'

'Aah, okay. Dyson is a funny name for a dog.' Said dog is now sprawled out in a coma-like position next to him.

'I named him after the vacuum cleaner.' Joe reaches across and pats him. Dyson's tail pounds the grass as it wags.

'What do you mean?'

'He snaffles up rubbish on the pavement like it's steak.'

'Yuck!' I pull a face and laugh.

'He's one gross dog,' he says affectionately. 'So you're here for six

weeks?’

‘Yeah.’ I focus on his chunky black boots. I feel tongue-tied. Come on, Alice, talk or he’ll walk! ‘My mum’s a painter,’ I explain quickly.

‘Oh, right. That’s cool.’

‘Was that your dad working at the pub?’

He rolls his eyes and pulls up a handful of grass. ‘Yeah.’

‘Don’t you get on?’

He looks across at me. His eyes are so dark. ‘Not particularly,’ he replies.

And then there’s that feeling again, that magnet, pulling me in. For pity’s sake, I said I was psychic, but at this rate psycho would be more apt.

‘Have you lived here for long?’ I ask, trying not to act like a crazy person.

‘Only since May.’ He breaks eye contact and I feel an immediate sense of relief. He rests back on his elbows.

‘Where were you before?’

‘Somerset, then Cornwall. We’ve lived in Dorset before, though. We used to have a pub in Lyme Regis.’

‘Wow. You move around a lot.’

‘Not by choice,’ he admits, turning the tables before I can press him further. ‘Where do you live?’

‘London.’

‘Which part?’

‘North London. East Finchley. Do you know it?’

‘No. I don’t know London very well. But I’m going to move there soon.’

‘Really?’ My heart leaps and then crashes when I remember I’m off to Cambridge in September. I tell him this.

‘Are you? Why?’

‘I’m going to university.’ His eyes widen. ‘The former polytechnic,’ I hurriedly explain. ‘I’m not smart enough for the actual university.’

‘I’m not smart enough for *any* university,’ he replies.

‘I’m sure that’s not true,’ I feel compelled to say.

‘It is.’ He shrugs and stares ahead. ‘But I’m getting out of here, anyway.’ He stands up. ‘I’ve gotta get back. Tomorrow night is *Quiz Night*,’ he says with derision. ‘And I’ve got to write the questions. Which way are you going?’

‘Back up there.’ I scramble to my feet and point to the gorse walkway.

‘I’ll walk you.’ Re- *sult*! ‘You know, seeing as you’re desperate for company, and all that,’ he adds. I blush, but he elbows me jokily.

‘Bugger off,’ I reply and his corresponding laugh fills me with warmth.

He has a grey hoodie tied around his waist and his bare arms are tanned from the rare heatwave we’ve been enjoying this summer. I unzip my waterproof to let some air in – the exercise has warmed me up, too. We walk side by side as we navigate the rocky path.

I return to our conversation. ‘This place is so beautiful. Why would you want to leave?’

‘Yeah, it’s pretty nice, but . . . I don’t know. Im leaving as soon as I get a car, I’m out of here.’

‘Are you taking Dyson with you?’

‘Of course.’ He frowns. ‘I wouldn’t leave him with my parents. ’

‘Why do you work for them?’ I ask, seeing as they clearly don’t get on.

‘I can’t afford to move out yet, but working pays my rent.’

‘They make you pay *rent*?’

‘Well, I *am* eighteen. Just.’ He snorts. ‘Not that they didn’t have me working behind a bar for a few years before that . . .’

‘Isn’t that illegal?’

‘Yep,’ he replies bluntly.

I can’t imagine my parents ever charging me to live at home with them, or putting me to work behind a bar when I was just a kid. Maybe I’m naive.

Dyson runs ahead and we soon catch up to see him trying to drag an impossibly large stick out from underneath a tree. He drops it and growls at it before barking at Joe and wagging his tail.

‘You daft dog,’ Joe says, shaking his head. ‘You can’t play fetch with that.’ Dyson barks again. ‘Find a smaller one. Go on!’

Nope. Dyson wants that one.

‘I’m not throwing it,’ Joe says adamantly, and there’s something endearing about the way he speaks to his dog.

Woof!

‘No.’

Woof, woof, woof!

‘Bloody hell,’ Joe mutters, grabbing one end of the stick while stamping hard on it somewhere in the middle. With a crack, the wood snaps in half. I watch, smiling, as he throws it a hefty distance into the field and a deliriously delighted Dyson bounds after it.

‘You softy,’ I say.

‘Too soft.’ He glances sideways at me.

‘How long have you had him?’ I ask.

‘About two years. I found him roaming the beach when we lived in Cornwall. He followed me home and I made the mistake of feeding him. He wouldn’t leave me alone after that.’

‘I wonder who he belonged to.’

Dyson returns with the stick so Joe throws it again. ‘Who knows? He didn’t have a collar. He was really scrawny, so either he was treated badly or he’d been homeless for a while. My dad nearly kicked off when he found out I was giving him leftovers from the pub kitchen.’

‘Why should he care? Waste not, want not, right?’

‘He can’t stand dogs.’

‘Why did he let you keep him, then?’

‘He was pretty distracted at the time.’

‘What with?’

‘You’re going to know my whole life story at this rate.’ He grins at me and changes the subject. ‘Alright, then, Brainiac, help me come up with some questions for this stupid quiz.’

By the time we reach the cottage, I’ve found out that Joe has the same taste as me in music, TV and film, so it’s been an amusing walk back trying to outdo each other with our knowledge of indie rock, British comedy classics and sci-fi flicks.

‘I’m going to have to come to this quiz now, just so I can win,’ I say.

He laughs and leans back against the cream-painted wooden gate. My nerves swiftly return. ‘I haven’t finished with the questions yet. I might put in something about *Big Brother*, just to trick you.’

‘That would mean watching it. Are you sure you’ve got the stomach for that sort of research?’ I ask drily.

‘Actually, no.’ He stares at me and the butterflies go berserk. ‘So you’re coming, then? To the pub tomorrow night?’

‘Is that okay?’

He smiles. ‘Definitely.’

I smile back at him. ‘Cool.’

‘Right, then. See you tomorrow.’

‘See you tomorrow.’

We stand awkwardly for a brief moment until he realises he’s blocking my way. He leaps away from the gate and then recovers by reaching over and

undoing the latch.

‘Thanks.’ I’m still beaming as I pass. ‘See you tomorrow,’ I say again as he closes the gate after me.

‘See ya.’ He turns away and clicks his fingers at Dyson. ‘Come on, boy.’ I stand and watch them until they’re out of sight.



Chapter 3



‘Name the vessel aboard which Luke Skywalker meets Princess Leia for the first time.’

I hastily scribble down an answer on my sheet of paper.

‘Alice . . .’

I glance up at my mum’s disapproving face. ‘What?’

‘Do you really think you should be participating in this quiz if you helped with all the questions?’

‘I didn’t help with all the questions!’ I snap. ‘He came up with these ones on his own. It’s not my fault we’ve got the same taste.’

I look over at Joe behind the bar. He looks amused as his mother – a heavy-set woman with frizzy, dyed-blond hair, heavy eye make-up and an orange tan – reads the next question.

‘Who walked out of the *Big Brother* house on Day 20 of this year’s series?’

‘You bastard,’ I mouth at Joe. He laughs and carries on pulling a pint.

‘What? Don’t you know that one?’ Mum asks me wryly.

‘No. Happy now?’

She raises her eyebrows. ‘I suppose so.’

Today felt like one of the longest days of my life. Mum worked and I sat around trying, but failing, to get into my university reading. All I could think about was seeing Joe again. I would have gone to the pub at lunchtime if I hadn’t thought I’d look desperate.

‘Ladies and gents, we’re just going to take a short break and we’ll resume in a minute,’ Joe’s mum tells us in a thick West Country accent. Strangely, Joe may have been brought up around here, but his accent isn’t nearly as broad as his parents’.

‘I’m going to nip to the loo. Do you want another on my way back?’ Mum

indicates my drink.

‘Sure.’

I scan my quiz sheet to check my answers.

‘Alright?’

With a start, I look up to see Joe standing there.

‘Budge up.’ He nudges me so I shift along the bench seat.

‘*Big Brother?*’ I ask him with a raised eyebrow.

‘I had to resort to internet research. Wait until you get to the question about *Pop Idol*.’

I groan comically and he laughs. ‘What are you doing tomorrow?’

‘Nothing,’ I reply hopefully.

‘Want to go to Corfe Castle with me?’

Is this a *date*?

‘Sure!’

‘There’s a bus stop at the end of the road. We can catch the bus to Swanage and then take the train to Corfe Castle.’

‘Is this the steam train?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I could drive us to Swanage, if you like? I could borrow Mum’s car.’

‘In that case, you could drive us to Corfe Castle.’

‘Where’s the fun in that? I want to take the train . . .’

‘Actually, me too.’

‘JOE!’ his mum barks from the bar.

‘Coming,’ Joe replies wearily. ‘Catch you later.’ He’s about to walk off, but then he stops suddenly and bends down to whisper in my ear: ‘The answer is Darius Danesh.’

He gives me a meaningful look, his dark eyes still managing to sparkle in the dim lighting. Then he’s gone.

Mum returns with a fresh round.

‘Thanks,’ I say, taking a sip of my drink.

‘What are you smiling about?’ she asks with a knowing look.

‘Nothing,’ I reply breezily.

‘Wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain someone behind the bar, would it?’

‘Cut it out, Mum.’

She giggles, annoyingly, then her brow furrows with curiosity. ‘Looks like his mother is giving him a bit of a talking-to.’

My eyes dart towards the bar and at that moment both Joe and his mum look at me. Joe quickly averts his gaze, but his mother gives me a cold, hard stare. A bad feeling washes over me, and before I know it she's storming over to our table.

'You're cheating!' she accuses me.

'No, she's not!' Mum scoffs on my behalf.

'My son says she helped him come up with the questions!'

I realise with horror that the bar has fallen silent and everyone is watching this exchange. It's at times like these that I could do with my old friend the Pterodactyl. Joe rushes over to join us.

'She didn't help me with the questions,' he says. 'She just knows a lot of the same stuff as me. And look . . .' He grabs my quiz sheet. 'See? She didn't know the *Big Brother* one.'

'Sandy! Even *I* know that!' a drunken man shouts out from the table next to us. His laughs are silenced by the look Joe's mum gives him. She snatches my sheet from Joe and then challenges me with a new question:

'Which band plays the song over the opening credits of *The Royle Family*?'

I grimace before answering truthfully: 'Oasis. "Half the World Away".'

'See? She even got the extra point by knowing the title! She's a cheat!'

'No!' I shout. 'I just know that one! He's right, we have the same taste.'

'Well, if you've got the same taste, you won't know this; Joe can't stand the bleedin' show.' She takes a deep breath and then speaks loudly so the whole pub can hear. 'Who came third in the first series of *Pop Idol*?'

'Um . . .' My eyes dart towards Joe. He looks panicked. 'I don't know,' I reply.

'You're lying,' she sneers, drawing her lips, plastered with salmon-coloured lipstick, into a thin line. 'You're out of the quiz.'

'That's not fair!' Mum exclaims.

'No, it's fine,' I reply tersely. 'I'll sit the rest out.'

'She's not cheating!' Joe defends me, but I can see he's not going to convince this woman – his mother, of all people.

We still have quite an audience and she turns around and addresses everyone in a booming voice. 'We'll continue. For those of you who didn't hear those last two questions, I'll read them again: Which band plays the song over the opening credits of *The Royle Family*?'

I look at Joe, my face still flushed with embarrassment. He stares back at

me, mortified.

‘Joe! Get back to work.’

This time it’s his dad doing the barking. Joe turns away, but not before I see the apology in his eyes.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ Mum snaps, collecting her things.

‘No,’ I put my hand on her arm.

‘Why not?’ she asks in disbelief.

‘I don’t want to look like I’m running away.’

She regards me for a long moment before grudgingly picking up her wine glass and taking a sip. ‘Alright, we’ll finish our drinks first.’

In all honesty, I do want to leave. Even Joe, with all his gorgeousness, isn’t enough of a reason to keep me here. Surely if anything can put a girl off a guy, it’s his family.

I’m too embarrassed to walk out of the pub while the quiz is in full swing, but as soon as it’s over and the background noise pipes up again, we make an exit. I daren’t say goodbye to Joe with his parents around, but luckily he’s serving a customer at our end of the bar and he glances up and makes eye contact as we start to walk past.

‘We’re off,’ I say.

He indicates the outside door and gives me a meaningful look before mouthing: ‘Wait.’

I nod and go to the door.

‘I’ll be with you in a minute,’ I say to Mum as she heads for the car.

She raises her eyebrows, but doesn’t comment as she walks off.

I shift from foot to foot for a moment, and then Joe appears. He gently takes my arm and guides me around to the side of the building, and even with all the embarrassment I’ve endured over the last half an hour, my heart pounds at the unexpectedness of his touch.

He turns to face me in the darkness. ‘I’m sorry about that. They’re a nightmare!’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ I mumble.

‘I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to give Corfe Castle a miss.’

‘No,’ I say quickly. ‘I still want to go.’ Awkward pause. ‘If you do . . .’

‘Of course I do!’ He stares at me directly. ‘Fuck this,’ he says suddenly, roughly shoving his hair away from his face. ‘I can’t stand this for much longer.’ He looks off to the dark hills and the sea in the distance. ‘Anyway,’ he says abruptly, briefly touching his fingers to my arm. ‘What time shall we

go? Eleven?’

‘Sure,’ I reply.

‘I’ll see you then.’ He backs away. ‘Meet me up the hill.’

‘Okay.’

After he’s gone I check my feelings. Crush back in force. Even his freakishly evil parents haven’t put me off him.



Chapter 4



‘I’ll get these,’ Joe says as we approach the ticket booth at Swanage station.

‘No, I’ve got money.’

‘Forget it, I’m paying.’

So this *is* a date!

‘You’ll never be able to afford to buy a car at this rate,’ I tell him with a smile that fades when I realise he may well have done this trip with other girls.

‘It’s the least I can do after last night,’ he replies, moving forward.

‘Have you done this trip much before?’ I ask awkwardly.

‘No, first time.’

I don’t know why I should be relieved – even if he hasn’t taken another girl on this train, he will have had girlfriends in the past. Lots of them, if his looks are anything to go by.

The steam train is already waiting at the station and Dyson bounds forward, pulling hard against the leash in Joe’s hand.

‘Steady, boy,’ Joe says to him in a low voice. ‘He hates being on this thing.’ He indicates the leash.

I was a bit surprised when I turned up this morning to see Joe waiting on the hill with Dyson in tow. I wasn’t expecting we’d have company of the canine kind. Not that I mind. I get the feeling Joe is a ‘love me, love my dog’ kind of guy. I don’t think I’d stand a chance with him if I couldn’t bear his pooch.

I look up at the rusty beams overhead and the old-fashioned signage flanking the platform. I feel like I’ve been transported to another era as we board the train and sit opposite each other, a wooden table separating us.

I’ve tied my hair into a loose ponytail as it’s quite hot today, and I’m wearing cream shorts and a pale pink T-shirt. I may like indie and Emo boys,

but I wouldn't choose their style of dress for myself.

'Did you tell your parents you were seeing me today?' I dare to ask.

'Did I bollocks.'

'What do they think you're doing?'

'Who knows? They don't give a toss what I do, as long as Dyson's out of the way.'

The train chuffs out of the station with a whistle and a hiss. Joe casually puts his foot up on my seat. 'So what are you doing, going on holiday with your parents at your age?'

I tell him about Lizzy and his amusement dies.

'That sucks.'

I called Lizzy last night. It was a sombre conversation. Her mum is having the operation to remove the lump in her breast this afternoon, so she's nervous. I'll call her later to find out how the op went.

'Do you have many friends around here?' I ask Joe.

'Nah. We moved only a couple of months ago and I don't go to school anymore, so . . .' His voice trails off. 'It's not really worth making friends if I'm going to be leaving.'

'That's right, you're off to London,' I say with a teasing smile. 'What are you going to do there?'

He shrugs. 'I don't know yet. Get a job. See what comes up, where life takes me . . .'

'That's very carefree of you. I couldn't stand that. I'm a planner.'

'I can tell.'

'How can you tell?' I feel slightly affronted.

He smiles playfully. 'Just can.'

'Well, maybe I'll surprise you one of these days.'

'Maybe you will.' He holds my gaze and my stomach goes all jittery. The feeling intensifies tenfold as the seconds tick by and neither of us looks away, then Dyson shifts position at our feet, distracting us both. I really need to get a grip.

We pass through Herston Halt station and Harman's Cross with its pretty flowers planted on the banks, and then it's green fields galore until we reach Corfe Castle.

'What do you want to do?' Joe asks me as we wander up the street towards the town's small centre. 'Are you hungry?'

My stomach rumbles its own reply, but he doesn't hear, thankfully. 'I am a

bit. Where shall we go?’

‘I don’t know. It’s my first time here too, remember.’

‘That’s right. I can’t believe you haven’t brought other girls before now.’

He cracks up laughing. ‘I haven’t met any other girls!’

‘Sure you haven’t. You met me pretty quickly.’

‘Your *mum* made that introduction. And then Dyson followed up on it. I haven’t lived here long enough to know anyone else.’

‘What about girls on holiday?’ I don’t know where my confidence is coming from to ask him these questions, but talking to him is amazingly easy.

‘Summer holidays have only just started.’

I instantly feel crushed.

‘I don’t mean . . .’ He quickly corrects himself. ‘I mean no one my age has been around, girls *or* guys. Anyway, now you’re here you can keep me company.’ Pause. ‘If you want to.’

He blushes! He actually blushes!

‘Of course I do,’ I say, happily. So it’s not just me. ‘Oh, look! There’s the castle.’

We continue in the direction of the ruined castle sitting on top of a steep hill. Ivy clings to its crumbling walls, and people wander along the grassy slopes beside it.

‘What about that café for lunch?’ I point up ahead.

We enter the café and go through to the other side, into the garden. Corfe Castle towers right there above us and it’s quite something to be able to sit at a table with this view and not even have to pay an entry fee to walk through the nearby gates.

Joe is wearing a faded yellow Kingmaker T-shirt today and black jeans. I nod at his top.

‘I love Kingmaker.’

‘What’s your favourite song?’

“‘Really Scrape the Sky’ is brilliant, but my favourite has got to be ‘You and I Will Never See Things Eye to Eye’.”

He smiles. ‘Me too. I always imagine that playing at the beginning of a film.’

‘Yeah! That would be so cool. The way the bass kicks in just before the vocals . . .’

‘Exactly.’

I laugh. 'I'll think of you if I ever see a film that has that on its soundtrack.'

'Maybe I'll put a Kingmaker question in next week's quiz,' he jokes.

'Oh, God, don't.' I bury my head in my hands. 'Last night was mortifying.' I peek through my fingers at him, but he's not smiling.

'I'm sorry. My parents hate me.'

'That's a crazy thing to say.'

He shakes his head, his expression bitter, then stares down at his hands.

'Do you have any brothers or sisters?' I ask tentatively.

He glances at me before looking away, but he doesn't answer.

'Did you hear—'

'Yeah,' he cuts me off. He sighs. 'I have a brother, an older brother.'

'Where is he?'

'Jail.'

'Oh.'

'Yep. I probably should have told you this before the train left to go back to Swanage.'

'Why?' I'm confused.

'In case you wanted to get back on it.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' I brush him off. 'Why's he in jail?'

'Because he's a dickhead.'

'I mean, what did he do?'

'I know that's what you meant. Sorry. He's been in and out of detention centres ever since I can remember – joy riding, drug dealing, you name it. The last thing that landed him in jail was armed robbery.'

'Jesus.'

'My family is *great*!' he says sarcastically. 'And the best thing about all of this? Mum and Dad still think the sun shines out of Ryan's arse.'

Ryan, I'm assuming, is his brother.

'Do you have any siblings?' he asks me.

'No.'

'You're lucky.'

'I never thought that when I was growing up. I was lonely.'

'Better to be lonely than black and blue.'

'He beats you up?' I exclaim, and from the look on his face I know instantly that he didn't mean to reveal this information.

'Here comes our food,' he says abruptly. He doesn't want to talk about this

anymore – and who could blame him?

‘That was such a fun day,’ I say later in the car as I pull over near the pub.

He smiles across at me. ‘It was, wasn’t it?’

‘Are you working tonight?’

‘Afraid so. What are you up to tomorrow?’

I’m so relieved he asked me that question first. ‘Nothing. What about you?’

‘I’m coming your way if you want to join us for a walk?’

‘Us’ meaning him and Dyson.

‘I’d love that.’

‘Okay. I’ll see you at around ten thirty.’

‘Great.’

Awkward pause. We both jump as Dyson starts to bark furiously at a dog walking past with its owner.

‘I’d better put him out at the back. I’m late for work.’

‘Will your parents kill you?’

He cocks his head to one side. ‘Let’s hope not.’ He climbs out of the car. ‘See you tomorrow.’

I let out a deep breath and some of the tension that’s been inside me all day slowly evaporates. Good tension, not bad tension, but tension nonetheless. And then I check my watch as a feeling of melancholy settles over me. It’s just after six o’clock. That’s one, two, three . . . I silently count the hours in my head until I come to ten thirty in the morning. *Sixteen and a half hours* until I see him again. How am I going to pass the time?

If Lizzy could see me now she’d think I’d lost my head. Lizzy! I need to call her. Damn – I said I’d call her at five. I make a plan to ring as soon as I get back to the cottage.



Chapter 5



‘She’s trying to be brave, but she’s in a lot of pain.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ I murmur.

I’m on the phone to Lizzy. She’s at the hospital.

‘How’s your sister?’ I ask. Lizzy has just the one: Tessa. She’s younger than us by three years.

‘I don’t know. She doesn’t talk about it, and she barely comes out of her room when we’re at home.’

‘She must be worried.’

‘We all are.’

‘I wish I could give you a big hug,’ I say sadly.

‘I wish you could too,’ she replies and I know she has tears in her eyes. She’s not the only one.

‘How’s Dorset?’ she asks.

‘It’s okay,’ I reply.

My heart aches to tell her about Joe, but I don’t feel that I can.

‘How is she?’ Mum asks when I return downstairs. I fill her in. ‘Poor thing,’ she empathises. ‘Did you have a good day?’

‘Yeah.’ I nod, unable to keep the corners of my lips from turning upwards.

‘You like him, don’t you?’

‘Might do,’ I reply, looking down.

‘Shame about his mother,’ she comments.

‘Mmm. I wasn’t too keen on her, either. Neither is Joe, for that matter.’

‘Oh, well,’ Mum says, ‘at least we’re only here for six weeks.’

My heart plummets. Six weeks felt like an age on the car journey down here – now it’s nowhere near long enough. ‘What do you mean, “at least”?’ I ask her.

‘Well, it’s not like you’re going to fall for him, is it? He’s hardly going to be a permanent part of your life. Imagine dealing with his mother! And his father . . . From the look on his face when he gave me my change it’s like he thought he’d burst an artery just by cracking a smile . . .’

But I’m not really listening to her rant, because I’m still thinking about the falling-for part. It doesn’t seem like such a slim possibility to me.

By 10.15 the next morning, I’m sitting out on the bench trying to read *Titus Andronicus*. Mum was a bit disturbed when she discovered I was seeing Joe again so soon, so I promised to take a couple of books with me on our walk. I may stay at the cliffs and do some reading if Joe has to get back to the pub.

Dyson appears at the gate before Joe does, but I force myself to calmly pack my book into my bag before going to meet him.

‘Thought I’d do some reading at the cliffs,’ I explain, slinging my bag over my shoulder.

‘What are you going to be studying?’ he asks as we set off down the track towards Dancing Ledge.

‘English Lit. It’ll probably be dead boring if Shakespeare is anything to go by.’

‘I’m sure you’ll have a laugh no matter what.’

‘I hope so.’

‘Are you excited?’ he asks.

‘Yes, I am, kind of. And a bit nervous. I haven’t spent much time away from home before.’

‘Where’s your dad?’ he asks.

‘He’s in London. He’s coming down tomorrow night for the weekend.’

‘Have you got lots of family things planned?’

I shrug. ‘No, not really. You?’ I try to sound casual, but inside I’m desperately hoping we can see each other.

‘I have to work. Weekends are really busy at the pub.’

‘Oh, I see.’ Much as I want to, I can’t mask my disappointment.

‘You should stop by.’

‘I’m not sure that would go down too well with your parents.’

‘Nothing goes down well with my parents. You just have to learn to ignore them like I do.’ That’s bravado talking. It’s obvious their behaviour upsets him.

We leave the track and enter the meadow, and soon we’re face to face with

that spectacular view.

Today the sea is sparkling like billions of diamonds. Butterflies flit around the wildflowers and a few boats with white sails glide through the water. I can hear the cry of gulls from the cliffs below.

‘Do you want something to eat?’ I ask, turning to Joe. ‘I brought some snacks.’

‘Good one,’ he says, so I open up my bag and pull out a picnic blanket. ‘A rug too? So organised,’ he teases.

‘That’s me,’ I reply.

‘That’s right,’ he says as he helps me lay out the rug, ‘you’re a planner.’

‘Bugger off,’ I joke.

‘Hey, nothing wrong with that.’

He collapses down on the rug while I get out some crisps and drinks. I also brought a little plastic bowl for Dyson and I pour some water from a bottle into it.

Joe laughs. ‘Okay, now you’re making me look bad.’

‘Do you have to work today?’ I ask.

‘Not till this afternoon. That’s one good thing about the pub – it doesn’t do lunch, so I’m not drafted in to work in the kitchen like I have been in the past.’

‘Does that mean you can cook?’

‘If shaking frozen scampi and chips into a sizzling pan of oil can be called cooking, then yes, I can cook. Otherwise, no.’

He pulls over my bag and takes out a book. ‘So what are you supposed to be reading?’

‘Shakespeare and the Greek Tragedies.’

He flicks through *Titus*. ‘What the hell? It looks like it’s written in a foreign language!’

I laugh.

‘I can’t understand a bloody word.’

‘Neither can I, half the time.’

He throws the book back down.

‘Did you really never want to go to university?’ I ask.

He thinks for a moment. ‘I guess I didn’t see it as an option. My parents are *not* academically minded,’ he says with a raised eyebrow. ‘So they didn’t exactly encourage me, and with all the shit going on with my brother . . . Well, let’s just say school wasn’t my number one priority.’

‘When is your brother getting out of jail?’ I ask quietly.

His face hardens. ‘He’s coming up for parole soon. I hope I’ll be out of here before that happens.’

‘Will he come back to live with your parents?’

‘Yep.’ His reply is curt. ‘I’ll take Dyson down the hill to give you some peace.’

‘You don’t have to,’ I say quickly. Studying is far from my mind at the moment – I’d rather spend time with Joe. But he and Dyson are already on their feet.

‘See you in a bit,’ he says.

‘Okay. Thanks,’ I reply.

I watch him as he sets off down the steep grassy path. When he is finally out of sight I pick up a book. I sigh. I really can’t be bothered to read Shakespeare right now, but I suppose I should. I turn around and lie on my stomach, facing up the hill. There’s something deliriously comfortable about it. A seagull flies over my head, high above the ocean, but low against the land. It’s so close I can hear its wings flapping. I try to read. The tall grass around me sways in the breeze. It’s so peaceful and quiet. My whole body feels relaxed. The words are in front of my eyes, but they’re not going in. I close my eyes for a moment and feel the warm sun on my back.

The next thing I know, Dyson is licking my face.

‘Argh!’

‘DYSON!’ Joe shouts.

I push the dog away, but I’m in hysterics. Joe is halfway up the steep incline, trying to run.

‘Sorry!’ He’s panting when he reaches me. He stretches out the bottom of his T-shirt and uses it to wipe Dyson’s slobber from my cheeks. I can’t stop laughing. ‘Gross dog strikes again,’ he says.

He checks my face with his fingertips to make sure I’m free of slobber. His hands seem to linger. My giggles dissolve and I steadily meet his eyes as butterflies swarm into my stomach.

‘God, I fancy you,’ he says suddenly, and I know in that moment that he’s going to kiss me. My heart starts pounding ten to the dozen. I tilt my face up towards him and his lips touch mine, gently at first, then deepening to become more passionate. I know it’s a cliché, but it’s as if fireworks are going off inside my head. My whole body tingles like nothing before.

He pulls away, but stays close. And then an enormous slobbery dog tongue comes out of nowhere to lick my cheek.

‘Argh!’ I scream again.

‘Dyson, get off!’ Joe shouts, shoving him away. We look at each other and crack up laughing. ‘Next time I kiss you, I’ll make sure he’s not around.’

‘I don’t want to wait that long,’ I say, drawing him near. He’s still smiling when his lips touch mine.

We wander, hand in hand, back to the cottage. The jittery feeling doesn’t leave me and it’s blissful. We take our time, but we’re home far too quickly. My mum’s car isn’t in the driveway.

‘Do you want to come in for some lunch?’ I ask hopefully.

‘Um . . .’ He checks his watch.

‘My mum is out,’ I add.

‘Yeah, go on, then.’

I beam from ear to ear as I lead him to the front door.

‘Where do you think she’s gone?’ he asks, following me inside but leaving Dyson on the driveway. We’ve closed the gate to make sure he can’t escape.

‘Probably sitting on a beach somewhere, sketching.’

‘Have you got any of her work, here?’

‘In the conservatory. I’ll show you in a bit. Shall I make some sandwiches?’

‘Sounds good.’

‘Ham and cheese? Peanut butter? What do you fancy?’

‘You,’ he says with a smile, pulling me in for another kiss. He presses me up against the counter and I wrap my arms around his neck. The kiss is over far too quickly. ‘But I’ve already told you that,’ he adds. ‘Ham and cheese. Let me help you.’

We work side by side and, before taking our food out to the garden we pause in the conservatory to have a quick look at Mum’s paintings.

‘I don’t know anything about art, but I like them,’ Joe says.

‘That’s all you need to know, in my opinion. That’s what it’s about, right? What you like and what you don’t like?’

‘I guess so. Smartarse.’

‘I prefer Brainiac.’

He chuckles and follows me outside to the sunny garden. We sit on the soft, spongy grass and Joe tucks into his sandwich. I take a bite of mine, but

I'm not very hungry. The winged caterpillars are taking up all the room in my stomach.

'I like this cottage,' he says.

'It's nice, isn't it? But your pub is in a great location. Do you live upstairs?'

'Yeah.'

'You must have an amazing view.'

He nods. 'My bedroom is the best thing about living there because it faces the fields instead of the car park at the back. I'd probably appreciate it more if my parents weren't always knocking about.'

'Is it noisy?'

'I don't mean knocking about in that way.'

'No, I know.' I smile and he touches my face fondly.

'It would be noisy if I ever spent any time in my bedroom,' he explains. 'But I'd rather get outside with Dyson. Anyway, I work most nights, so I'm usually the last one upstairs.'

'You work a lot.'

'I have to.'

'Have you saved up much money towards a car?'

'It's going alright. They pay me as little as possible and then I still have to shell out for rent, so it's taken longer than I wanted it to.'

'Couldn't you work somewhere else that pays better?'

'Not without moving out and then I'd still have the rent problem. I'll be doing that soon enough. I just have to stick it out for a couple more months.'

A feeling of melancholy engulfs me. I've known Joe for only a few days, but the thought of losing him in under six weeks already feels unbearable.

'You not hungry?' He nods at the sandwich that I've barely touched.

'No.' I shake my head.

He lies down and pulls me to him for a kiss. The sound of a car in the driveway makes us both jump away from each other.

'My mum must be back.'

'I'd better get going.' He stands up.

'You don't have to rush off . . .'

'I should get back, anyway. My shift starts in an hour.'

'Okay.' I'm disappointed.

He goes out through the back garden gate to the driveway. I follow him to see my mum trying to open the car door without hitting Dyson. The dog starts

to bark with excitement.

‘Sorry!’ Joe shouts. He seems to do a lot of apologising for his pooch. He hurries to the car and grabs Dyson’s collar, dragging him away so Mum can get out.

‘Hello, there,’ she says, and there’s an undercurrent to her tone which is not as pleasant as it usually is when speaking to my friends. It makes me feel nervous. I suppose she’s still smarting about Joe’s mum the other night.

‘Hi, Mrs . . . Sorry, I don’t know Alice’s last name.’

‘Simmons,’ Mum and I answer simultaneously. ‘But you can call me Marie. Did you have a nice walk?’ she asks.

‘Yeah, it was nice.’

I realise that Joe is nervous, although for different reasons to me. It endears me to him even more, if that’s possible.

‘I was just leaving,’ he says, struggling to hold Dyson back.

‘I’ll see you out,’ I say, indicating the front gate. He goes through and lets go of Dyson’s collar. The dog shoots off down the track.

Joe turns back to close the gate, leaving me on the other side. ‘Are you around tomorrow?’ he asks.

‘Tomorrow and for the next six weeks,’ I reply with a smile.

‘Five and a half,’ he corrects and my heart sinks. ‘Shall I swing by in the morning?’ he asks, oblivious.

‘Sounds good.’ That’s a lie. Tomorrow is too bloody far away.

‘Okay. Is nine too early?’

‘Nope.’ Six a.m. would be better. I’d even be happy with five. This evening would be ideal. Actually, if you could just not leave at all, that would be pretty much perfect.

‘See you.’ He glances over my shoulder at Mum, who is unpacking the last of her things from the car. He starts to walk away as she heads inside to the kitchen.

‘Joe!’ I call and he spins around. I beckon for him to come back and then I lean over the gate. ‘You forgot something.’

He grins and kisses me quickly, then turns to leave.

‘Hang on.’ I grab his arm. ‘What’s *your* surname?’

‘Strickwold.’

‘Joe Strickwold,’ I repeat.

‘It’s a bit of a tongue-twister.’ My fingers fall away from his bicep into his warm hand as he steps away. ‘Till tomorrow?’

‘Yes.’ I nod, giving his hand a quick squeeze. Then he’s off.



Chapter 6



‘You’ve moved your relationship onto the next level already,’ Mum teases when I walk back into the kitchen with a spring in my step.

‘You saw that, did you?’ I feel my face heat up.

‘A bit hard not to. The window is right there.’

‘How was your day?’ I change the subject. Thankfully, she lets me.

‘Very good. I went to Lulworth Cove and picked up a few bits and bobs. I found a fossil of a sea snail or something like that. I want to go back in the morning. You should come with me. It’s very pretty.’

‘Um, no, I can’t,’ I reply. ‘Joe’s coming to get me at nine.’

‘Joe again?’ Uh-oh. I know that tone. ‘Aren’t you seeing a bit too much of him?’

‘God, Mum, it’s only been a few days,’ I reply huffily. I hate it when she questions me like this. I’m eighteen, for pity’s sake. ‘I thought you wanted me to make friends?’

‘Friends? Is that what you are?’ Her tone is wry.

‘Well, you know . . .’

‘I just don’t want you to let your work suffer.’

‘I won’t. I’ve got weeks of summer sprawled out before me. I’ll get it done,’ I say, forcing breeziness into my tone.

She smiles at me. ‘I guess you know what you’re doing.’

‘I do. Show me the fossil, then?’

The next morning Joe and I return to Dancing Ledge. The jittery feeling has been in my stomach all night and it’s even more intense now. I don’t want to keep my hands off him. He’s so warm and perfect. To my amazement, he seems to feel the same.

‘I could kiss you all day,’ he says.

‘Don’t you need to eat?’

‘Nope.’

‘Drink?’

‘Nope.’

‘Me neither,’ I say.

‘I really can’t get over your eyes,’ he says, staring into them, almost searchingly. ‘They’re the greenest green.’

‘I like yours too,’ I admit.

‘Boring brown.’

‘They could never be boring. No, it’s like they have an inner light or something. They’re dark, but they still seem to sparkle.’

He starts to laugh at me.

‘Don’t be mean!’ I cry, whacking him on his arm. ‘Maybe that did sound a little corny, but it’s true.’

‘Where are your parents from?’ he asks suddenly.

‘They’re both British, but my grandmother on my father’s side was Chinese.’

‘Where was she from?’

‘Beijing originally, but her parents took her to Britain when she was young. My grandfather was British.’

‘I didn’t think Alice Simmons sounded very Chinese.’

‘No.’

‘Do you speak it?’

‘Mandarin? No. I wish I could, but my dad always speaks English.’

‘Maybe you could take it as a subject at university.’

I look ahead, thoughtfully. ‘That’s a really good idea. They do have an option to take a language module. I’ll check it out when I get there.’ I gaze across at him. ‘*Xie_xie*.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Thank you.’ I smile. ‘For the idea.’

He shakes his head with amusement. ‘You are *such* a brainiac!’

‘So, Joe Strickwold,’ I say. ‘When are you coming to visit me in Cambridge?’

‘Joe Strickwold – you even said it without tripping over it.’

‘I’ve been practising: Joe Strickwold, Joe Strickwold, Joe Strickwold.’

‘Impressive. Alice Simmons, Alice Simmons, Alice Simmons – actually, yours is a bit of a tongue-twister too.’

‘Alice Strickwold. Jesus, that’s even worse.’

‘I’ll have to change my name to something simpler before you marry me,’ he jokes.

A thrill goes through me. I know, I’m getting way ahead of myself.

‘Oi, you haven’t answered my question.’

‘About coming to visit you in Cambridge?’ he checks. ‘You might be sick of me by then.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘You won’t want me cramping your style when you’re meeting all these smart know-it-alls.’

‘I’m absolutely certain that’s not going to happen.’

‘You can’t be certain.’

‘Yes, I can. I don’t want to go out with some ponce from Cambridge University. They wouldn’t want to go out with me, anyway.’

‘No guy would ever turn you down.’

‘Stop it!’ I laugh. ‘How can you say that?’

‘You’re beautiful.’ He shrugs as if it were obvious, even though no one has ever said that to me before.

‘I think you’re gorgeous too.’

‘Come here and kiss me.’

I do as I’m told.

I can’t bear it when he leaves me that afternoon. The hours without him drag by like nothing I’ve ever known. I’ve never had a crush like this before. And yes, I *am* calling it a crush, even though the L word has popped into my mind on more than one occasion. My head tells me it’s far too soon to be using words like that, but, God, I like him so much. ‘Like’ really doesn’t cut it. I adore him . . . I fancy him . . . None of those phrases do it justice, either. I *need* him. I’m *obsessed* by him. That’s more like it. I’m not going to tell him this, though, for crying out loud. I sound like a nutcase and he’d run a bloody mile. I suppose I’m still in the honeymoon period.

My dad arrives on Friday afternoon and it’s damn near impossible to concentrate during dinnertime when he’s talking about his week at work. My mum knows what’s up with me, I’m sure of it. She’s planned a jam-packed weekend for the three of us and I swear that she’s trying to keep me from Joe, unaware that he’s busy at the pub. After dinner, I try to watch telly because reading is futile, but even that won’t take my mind off him. I keep thinking

about walking across the field to the pub so I can see him, but I'm too wary of facing his parents when I get there.

When Mum and Dad go upstairs to bed I go outside to the gate and stand there, looking out into the blackness. In some small and silly way I feel like it's bringing me closer to him.

I wish he had a mobile phone so I could call him, but he's putting all of his money towards a car.

I turn and sit on the bench. It's a clear night and the stars above are bright. Unlike in London, there is no orange haze here from streetlights. It's beautiful.

I finally cracked yesterday and told Lizzy about Joe. Her mum is recovering from the operation quite well, although they won't know yet if they've removed all of the cancer. Susan starts chemo next week; it will be horrendous for her, let alone for my friend, who will have to watch her mother go through hell.

Lizzy was surprised that I had met a boy – and even more surprised that I'd kissed him. We had both thought we'd be in a bit of a backwater here. She tried to sound excited for me, but I know she just wishes she were here having fun and that all this awful stuff wasn't happening to her family.

I suppose I should go to bed. I'm about to stand up, but freeze. Is that . . . a *dog* panting?

'Joe?' I ask quietly.

'Alice?'

I get up and run to the gate.

'Where are you?' I whisper into the darkness, and then I see him, stepping onto the track from the field. Dyson is already at the gate, wagging his tail. He crouches, ready to bark, and my reflexes work quicker than I would have ever given them credit for because I rush out of the gate and bend down to pat him rigorously before he can utter a sound. I don't want him to rouse my parents. Their bedroom overlooks the garden at the back, but I don't want to take any risks.

Joe reaches me and I stand up and throw my arms around his neck.

'What are you doing here?' I ask, beyond delighted.

'I took Dyson for a walk and my feet just kind of took me this way. I'm not stalking you,' he adds.

'I wouldn't mind if you were.'

He grins. 'What are you doing outside?'

'Waiting for you,' I reply with a smile. His kisses are tender, more tender than they have been. Out of the blue I feel like I'm going to cry. It's the weirdest feeling.

Dyson whimpers and collapses in the dirt at our feet. Joe glances down at him and then back at me. The bizarre urge to cry vanishes.

'Did your dad arrive today?' he asks.

'Yes.'

'Are they asleep?' He nods towards the house.

'I think so.'

'He'd kill me if he knew I was out here with his daughter.'

I giggle. 'I am eighteen, you know.'

'It wouldn't make a difference. If you were *my* daughter . . .'

'What a gross thought!'

'Urgh!' He grimaces and gently punches my arm. 'What are you doing tomorrow?'

'You're working, aren't you?' I check before answering.

'Yeah.'

In that case . . . 'We're going to visit some castle by the sea.'

'Portland?'

'That sounds familiar. Have you been?'

'No. I'd like to go, though.'

'Come with us?'

'I have to work, remember.'

'Pull a sickie!'

'What, with my parents right there to check up on me? And they *would*,' he adds. 'No. Anyway, you'd better spend some time with your dad. I don't want to gatecrash.'

'You wouldn't!' I am desperate for him to come, even though I know that he won't.

He smiles and kisses me. Again.

'You should go inside,' he says, pulling away and rubbing my arms with his perpetually warm hands. 'You're cold.'

'Come and sit on the bench with me for a bit,' I plead.

He hesitates and then nods. 'Stay.'

'Bring him in, just in case he barks,' I suggest.

'Okay.' The delighted dog squeezes through the barely-open gate and I

breathe in sharply as he runs down the driveway, but I know that the garden gate is locked so he won't have a chance to bark up at my parents' window. I'm past caring, anyway. I'd keep Joe here at all costs.

We sit down on the bench and snuggle into each other. He wraps his arms around me and drapes his coat over my shoulders. I nuzzle my face into his neck.

'That tickles.' He chuckles, so I kiss him there. 'Stop,' he says, laughing quietly. Then he bends down to kiss *my* neck.

'Argh!' I whisper, trying not to squeal. It does tickle.

'See?' He raises one eyebrow at me in the darkness. I put my fingers up to touch the silver ring that is pierced there.

'Did it hurt?'

'Not much.'

'Have you had many girlfriends?' That question came out of nowhere.

'Not really,' he replies. What does 'not really' mean?

'What does "not really" mean?' If he thinks I'm a saddy, so be it.

'I haven't been serious with anyone.'

'What does "serious" mean?'

'Alice!' he exclaims, laughing. Is he embarrassed?

'Have you had many boyfriends?' He turns the question around before I can pry further, but I *will* get to the bottom of this discussion; he just doesn't know it.

'No,' I reply, then, with a smile: 'Not really.'

'What does "not really" mean?'

'I haven't been "serious" with anyone, either.'

He's no longer smiling, and nor am I. He kisses me gently.

'I can't go a whole weekend without seeing you,' he murmurs.

'Me neither.'

'Shall I come by tomorrow night after closing?'

I nod, and then we're kissing again.

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