



pull
down
the
sun

DANNI KEANE

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

PULL DOWN THE SUN

By Danni Keane

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

The black-and-white photo shows two handsome, well-built, bare-chested young men, kissing passionately as they lie in the shallow waves on a beach. Still wearing their jeans, they look like they have tumbled into the water, so caught up in the moment and their love for each other they are oblivious to the world around them.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He was the boy I spent my summers with; every long, hot summer holiday by the beach. For six weeks every year, he was my best friend, my partner-in-crime, and eventually my first kiss, my first everything. And then one year, what should have been our last summer before university, he wasn't there. He didn't come back. I waited all summer. Now, ten years later, on a different beach, in a different town, another country, we run into each other and all those old feelings come rushing back.

Please, no BDSM or cheating, but plenty of UST and some flashbacks to the summers as children and teenagers before they parted would be lovely.

Sincerely,

Amy

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: childhood friends, friends to lovers, first time, virgins, coming of age, hurt/comfort, summer love, reunited, British, public activity

Content Warnings: child abuse (off page), drug use, underage sex (not descriptive)

Word Count: 29,697

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PULL DOWN THE SUN

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Part One

Eight years old

I can still remember the first time I saw him. He was sitting on the steps of his family's static caravan when he looked at me, a gentle smile on his face, the sunlight shining against his blond hair. His hair was lighter then, his smile easier. Everything was easier then.

It was my first trip to 'the coast', as my mum called it. Six long weeks staying in my granddad's holiday home while she and dad worked hard on the business. As much as it sounded boring staying home while my parents did stocktaking and accounting, I still hadn't wanted to go to 'the coast'. All those weeks in a chalet with some old guy I barely knew, away from my friends and my room, and my guinea pigs. My mum tried to persuade me it would be fun. "You can paddle in the sea," she said. "You can eat ice cream in the sunshine." And when I pointed out for the hundredth time that we had sunshine where we were and I could get ice cream down at the shop, she really pulled out the big guns, or so she thought. "The sun's different on the coast."

I knew she didn't mean it literally. I was eight years old, for God's sake, and I wasn't stupid. I knew it wasn't actually a different sun. Just like I knew God or Mother Nature or whoever it was didn't pull down the sun at the end of winter and replace it with a new brighter, hotter one when the clocks changed, I knew that the same sun that shone on us in Holwell was the same one as on the coast. But when I saw the way it made his skin glow, as he sat there, gangly legs poking out of his shorts, ending in a pair of scruffy trainers, with no socks, I almost believed my mum was right.

As soon as he saw me, he lifted his hand in an almost-wave. A friendly enough gesture, and being shy about meeting new people, it was one I appreciated. Maybe he was bored, and the arrival of a new kid who looked to be about his age at the caravan park—a possible partner in crime—might have been his only prospect of excitement over the next few weeks. At the time I thought it was just his way of saying 'hi'. Looking back, I wonder if that almost-wave was his way of trying to say so much more.

Despite my reservations, it didn't take me long to settle in at the chalet. Of course I had met my granddad a few times before, but even if I hadn't, it still wasn't difficult to warm to him, although I must admit he did seem ancient. As

far as my workings out go, he was sixty-three that first summer I stayed on the coast, but at the time anything over my mum's age of thirty-nine was *old* old.

I didn't see anything more of the boy from the steps—as I thought of him then—until the next day. Even at that age I would have slept in until at least nine in the holidays, but the new surroundings disturbed my usual lazy routine. I found myself awake by seven, lying in that cosy little room, with the superhero covers Granddad must have bought especially for my visit tangled around my legs. There was a loud knock on the chalet's front door, and then what sounded like a child's voice. A few minutes later Granddad came in.

“Who was that?” I asked him.

“The boy from the caravan across the way. He wants to know if you want to play.”

I shrugged. “I guess.” I wasn't sure if that was the answer he wanted to hear. This holiday wasn't just a way of keeping me out from under my parents' feet, but also a chance to spend some time with my granddad.

He had obviously thought of that, too. “It's a bit early yet. I said after lunch, maybe you could do something together. Would you like that?”

“Sure.”

Granddad took me for a walk down to the beach that morning. It was a beautiful day, hot and sunny, the sky clear. We walked for miles while Granddad chatted, asking me about school and friends. By the time we got back I'd virtually forgotten all about my new potential friend, and it was only the hammering on the door just as we finished eating our lunch that reminded me. As soon as Granddad opened it, the boy came in and walked straight over to me.

“Can you come out and play now?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Where?”

“The windmill?”

Granddad laughed at that. “It's a bit far! How about I give you boys some money and you can go to the beach and get some ice cream?” That idea was greeted with an enthusiastic nod from both of us, and we waited patiently while Granddad searched the bowl in the living room for some change. “There you go,” he said, handing me a couple of quid. “Get yourselves an ice cream, and don't be too long.”

As soon as we got out the door, I felt my usual shyness descend. What the hell was I supposed to talk about with this boy? I needn't have worried. Jacob—as he immediately told me his name was—took the lead, something that became the standard in our friendship throughout the years. Whatever we did, Jacob started it. After all, he was the first to almost-wave, the first to ask to play, the first for everything.

Even in that short walk to the shop next to the beach, we found out plenty about each other. His name was Jacob, mine was Tom. My mum and dad ran their own business. His dad was a professional footballer and his mum was a model. “But she’s not one of those ones who gets their tits out,” he added quickly in case I had expected she was. His house wasn’t that far from the caravan park, mine was a long way away. The only reason he was in a caravan rather than a chalet was because he was staying with his sister, Lucy, and her boyfriend, Ryan, and it was Ryan’s caravan, and he wasn’t that rich. “The chalet lot don’t like the caravan lot,” he explained. He shrugged. “I don’t care. I don’t like them. Except you,” he added quickly. “You’re cool. And your granddad’s cool too. Not like the other chalet lot. They’re snobby. Think they’re better than us.” He shrugged again. “They don’t know about my dad, see?”

We found out we were the same age, literally, because we shared a birthday—June 26th. Like I said, Jacob always came first, and when I quizzed my mum that night on the phone to find out what time I was born, and then reported back to Jacob the next day, it shouldn’t have been a surprise to find out he was ten whole minutes older than me.

The shop by the beach—which soon became a regular haunt of ours—was owned by a Mr Tulley, Jacob told me. When we got there, I was surprised to find Mr Tulley was thin, dark-skinned and wore a turban. Absolutely nothing like I had imagined, not that I had spent much brain power on it, but for some reason I had expected a tubby old guy, a bit like Postman Pat. Tulley didn’t sound like a very turbanish name to me, but when I mentioned that to Jacob, he laughed and assured me it was definitely Mr Tulley’s shop and always had been, even taking the time to point out the *Tulley’s* sign above the door.

We stood outside together on the pebbly path to eat our ice cream, and as soon as we had finished, Jacob looked at me. “What we gonna do now?”

“I don’t know. I think I’m supposed to go back to the chalet.”

His face fell. “We only just got here. Let’s go to the windmill.” He gestured to something in the distance.

Don't think I hadn't noticed my granddad wasn't too keen on that idea when Jacob had mentioned it earlier. "I'm not sure. I think I should—"

"Come on." He tugged on my arm. "Race you there."

What harm could it do, spending a few more minutes with my new friend? And that's what he was already. There was *something* about Jacob—quite apart from the fact he was the first kid my age I had met there—an easiness I didn't get with my friends back home. There was none of the one-upmanship I experienced with them. If one of them had a dad who was a professional footballer I would have felt the nasty sting of jealousy, but with Jacob it wasn't like that. It was as if having a friend on the coast who was successful or clever or rich reflected on me, and somehow boosted my status, instead of diminishing it. Meeting someone cool on holiday was something I could even brag to my mates about. The idea that someone else's success could be *my* success was a totally new concept to me, and I basked in it. The coast would be my bubble of glory.

As we ran towards the windmill, I managed to keep up with him, but before long I started to fall behind. He'd been cunning, pacing himself for a longer journey than I expected. I should have listened to Granddad. Eventually though, we reached the top of the hill, and Jacob rushed over to place his hands, first, on the large windmill that stood at the top of Tutt's Mount. It was a huge wooden structure, set back from the cliff edge, sails creakily turning. I realised then that the sun wasn't the only thing different on the coast. The wind was different, too. Gusts of it shot across the long grass, flattening it against the ground, and almost knocking me off my feet. Jacob grabbed my arm to steady me. "God, it's so windy up here!" I yelled, feeling the need to shout to make my voice heard over the racket of the wind, and the windmill's sails.

"What did you expect? Look at the windmill's sails turning. They're making all that wind."

"The windmill doesn't make the wind, does it?" I asked him, confused.

I watched the way his nose wrinkled up in surprise, his hair whipping around his face. "Of course it does. What do you think it's there for?"

I guess it made sense at the time. The windmill was there, and so was the wind. Coincidence? $A + B = C$ and all that. A lot of stuff Jacob told me made sense at the time. It was only later when I really thought about it, I realised none of it made any sense at all.

He wandered over to the side of the windmill, with me following. “Sometimes,” he said, “I feel like if I stand in the right place, or if I wish hard enough, the wind might blow me away. It might take me away from here.”

“Why would you wish for that? It could blow you right off the cliff!”

“I wouldn’t care.”

“Really?”

He turned to me, his blue eyes narrowed, looking closely at me as if he were trying to read something in my own expression. I don’t think he found what he was looking for.

“Nah, not really. I just think it would be cool, that’s all.” At that he let out a fart so massive, it was clearly audible over the racket going on.

“What the hell?” I sniggered.

He shrugged. “Just making some wind,” he said with a grin.

What can I say? I was eight years old, and that was a seriously impressive fart, timed to perfection. It might not have been the moment I fell in love with Jacob, but it *was* the moment I fell head over heels in *like* with him.

We got back to the chalet to find Granddad pacing around outside. “Where on earth have you been?” he asked. “I’ve been so worried. You went to the shop two hours ago! It doesn’t take two hours to get ice cream.” I had no idea we’d been that long. I’d been having too much fun with Jacob to notice the time. Having got swept up in Jacob’s enthusiasm, I’d also rather conveniently forgotten that Granddad had expressly told us not to go to the windmill.

“Sorry,” I told him, and I really was. “We went to the—”

“It’s my fault,” Jacob cut me off before I confessed. “When we went to Mr Tulley’s I lost my key, and we spent ages looking for it. Tom found it. I would have been locked out if it wasn’t for him, and my sister would have been mad at me, and yeah, I’d dropped it at the edge of the beach, and Tom found it where it had slipped between a couple of pebbles. It was right outside Mr Tulley’s, but it took us ages to find it.” He looked at me from under his eyelashes, a sneaky look hidden by half-closed eyes. “Didn’t you, Tom?” he urged. “Wasn’t it between two pebbles? Right outside Mr Tulley’s?”

His face completely changed when he looked up at my granddad. His eyes opened wide, with a look so sincere I almost wondered if he was telling the truth and I had imagined our entire trip to the windmill. “Honestly, he pretty

much saved my life,” he said, offering Granddad a beautiful easy smile just like the day before when I first saw him on the steps.

He had obviously put a spell on my granddad, because Granddad said, “Well, I’m glad you found it, Tom, but don’t ever do that to me again. Oh, and don’t tell your mum I couldn’t find you either.” He winked.

So Jacob lied to my granddad, and Granddad lied to my mum, and I let them lie without saying a word. Maybe what happened later was karma.

Ten years old

I’m ashamed to say it now, but that first couple of years I barely thought about Jacob. If I’d have known that ten years later I would have given every penny I owned to spend so much as a day with him, maybe I would have appreciated those early days more. But at that time, being without Jacob didn’t feel as if God or Mother Nature or whoever had pulled down the sun when summer ended, and forgotten to put another one back in its place.

However much I had enjoyed it, as soon as our first summer together ended, I went back to real life with nothing more than the occasional smile at a memory, and I assumed he did too. Life was different away from the coast—not better, not worse, just different. In those two years, I went to school, did my homework, and hung out with my friends. One of the guinea pigs, Patch, died and was replaced with a new one, Chunks. We spent at least half a term at school, but what felt more like an entire year, studying renewable energy, which helped confirm my suspicions that windmills didn’t actually make the wind themselves. *That* did make me think of Jacob, and the smile on his face when he told me that particular fact. Did he really believe it, or was he just having me on? I wasn’t sure.

I took up football and found out I was pretty good at it. Occasionally I told my friends at school about my best friend from the coast, and how his dad was a professional footballer, and they’d ask me his name and who he played for, and I made a mental note to ask Jacob when I next saw him. There was never any doubt he would be there the next time I stayed at Granddad’s chalet. The coast was the place Jacob existed.

Like I said, it was two years until I saw him again, the summer we both turned ten. The year after that first summer, my parents’ business was taking off nicely and they didn’t need my granddad to keep me out from under their feet in the summer, so instead we went on a family trip to Crete. I honestly

didn't think Jacob would notice my absence that year, but to my surprise he did. The first thing he said when he saw me was, "You didn't come last year!" He didn't greet me with the easy smile he had that first day. If I'm honest it was nearer to a scowl, but it soon softened when I told him I was staying with Granddad for six whole weeks.

After my granddad's initial worry about me disappearing, he turned out to be quite old school in his child-rearing practices. He was the sort of person who thought kids shouldn't be inside playing video games and eating crisps, they should be out in the countryside, in the sunshine, scraping knees and scrumping apples and getting up to mischief. Well, maybe not quite all those things, but his laid-back attitude, along with the fact Jacob's sister was rarely at the caravan, gave me and Jacob plenty of opportunity to get out and about together. I'm not sure how truthful Granddad was with my mum about our lack of adult supervision, but he went along with the whole idea of 'what she doesn't know can't hurt her'. I guess once you lie about something, the untruths become easier and easier, until they almost become truths in your mind.

Besides, Granddad was incredibly proud of where he lived and saw it as a place of complete safety. It had one of the lowest crime rates in the country, and he loved the fact he didn't have to worry about getting mugged, or even about remembering to lock the door when he wandered down to Mr Tulley's. He was just one more person for whom the coast had cast its spell—where it appeared as a magical bubble of calm, not quite of the real world.

As a result of our freedom, Jacob and I were immediately able to fall into a good routine. We raced each other to the windmill—Jacob, of course, came first every time. We splashed in the sea—I said it was cold, and he said it was lovely and warm, and we bought ice cream from Mr Tulley's.

One day on a trip up Tutt's Mount, I thought of something I wanted to ask him. "Hey, you know your dad?"

"Uh-huh."

"What's his name?"

His nose wrinkled up and he stared at me. "Why do you want to know?"

"Oh, just because some of my mates at school were talking about football, and I told them I knew someone whose dad's a professional footballer, and they wanted to know who it was."

"Oh right." He shrugged. "Well, he doesn't play anymore."

“Really?”

“Yeah, he got injured. Some bastard tackled him. Nearly snapped his leg in two.”

“Wow!”

“Yeah, you should’ve seen it. Disgusting it was.”

“So he can’t play anymore? At all?”

“You try playing football with your ankle hanging off.” He sniffed. “That’s his career over. Just like that.”

I didn’t know what to say. “Sorry mate.”

“S’okay. I don’t really wanna talk about it. It’s really fucked up.”

It was a calm day on the top of the hill, and the sails of the windmill were barely turning. After his unexpected answer to my question, I resisted the urge to make a smart comment. Instead, I said something like, “The windmill’s not making much wind today, is it?” and left it at that.

He didn’t reply, just looked out at the water, dotted with boats.

I carried on. “Hey, in Crete, we saw some windmills.”

He looked at me, his eyebrows raised. “There are windmills in Crete?”

“Uh-huh. Yeah, we saw a few of them.”

“Wow. What did they look like?” He turned his head to look at the one behind us. He squinted in the sunlight, which formed a halo-like effect around his head. “What I mean is, did they look like our windmill?”

That one word stunned me. He could have said ‘the windmill’, or ‘this windmill’, or even ‘my windmill’—after all, he had been coming to the caravan park for two years more than me, and would be entitled to think of the windmill as his. But he chose to call it ‘*our* windmill’. He was sharing this wonderful thing with me. The warmth of the sun, the gentle breeze, and that one word made me feel strange—dizzy, light, floaty. I wished I could soar into the sky to pull down the sun, and give it to him, because right then I wanted to share something special with him too.

“Tom?” he asked. “Did they look like our windmill?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Kind of different. Tell you what, I’ll take a photo when we go next year and then I can show you.”

The only cloud in the sky covered that bright sun, making Jacob's halo, and my warm dizzy feeling disappear immediately. His face darkened and I suppose mine did, too.

"You're not coming here next year?" he asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "We're probably going to go back to Crete. Or somewhere else. One of the other Greek islands, I think."

There was a really long pause; neither of us seemed sure what to say. I felt the need to apologise to him, as if I had chosen to spend next summer away from the caravan park, away from him. It wasn't like I'd made any promises, but I said sorry anyway, in the hope it would make us both feel better.

He frowned. "Well, I won't be here anyway, so it doesn't matter. It's a good thing, really. I'm going to Florida next summer. We're going to Disneyland. We've already got it booked. We're staying at this awesome hotel right next to Disneyland. There's this swimming pool with a lazy river and twenty water slides, and we're gonna go on a jeep safari, and swim with dolphins, and it's an opportunity to create memories that will last an entire lifetime."

It made my holiday in Crete sound really boring, but I didn't mind. I had felt bad about going away without him, but if he was going to be doing all that stuff, then he'd hardly miss me. "Wow, that sounds so cool!"

"Yeah, it is. So, sorry I won't be here, but it's okay as you're not going to be here anyway, and we can meet up the next year, right?" He peered at me. "You are coming back the year after, aren't you?"

I nodded. "Yep, I think so. My mum and dad said we could only go abroad every other year, and I want to come back here and stay with my granddad anyway, so yeah, I'll be here then. If we go to Crete then I'll make sure to take photos of the windmills for you. And you make sure to take photos of the dolphins. Swimming with dolphins is so cool. You're so lucky. I really want to see them."

The sun had come back out by then. The downy hairs on his throat were lit up and shimmered in a wave as he swallowed. "I... uh... don't think you can take photos with the dolphins. I think you probably can't take your camera with you. I don't know why. Maybe it might fall in the sea and break or maybe the dolphins don't like it. So, I might not be able to take any photos."

"Well, you can always take some of the hotel and all the other cool stuff."

He swallowed again. "Um, yeah, I guess. I'll try."

That evening I stayed in with Granddad, and after dinner we settled in the little living room to watch TV together. Granddad wasn't a big fan of having the telly on all the time, and he had the smallest TV I had ever seen, but it was nice to be able to curl up on the sofa and watch even if there wasn't much on. Maybe it was strange for a ten-year-old boy, but I enjoyed my granddad's company, and time on the coast in this little chalet was already my favourite time of year.

"I don't know why they have to have adverts every five minutes!" he said. "And they always have to show you what they showed you ten minutes ago, all over again. It's because nobody's got any attention span. I'm really glad you enjoy doing all those outdoorsy things, Tom. It's good for kids and they don't get enough of it nowadays."

There were a couple of ads for car insurance and no-win no-fee legal services, and then something came on that I'd seen a hundred times before but had never really noticed, until now. A trip to Florida, where you could relax in the hotel swimming pool's lazy river, or have fun on the twenty water slides. You could go on a jeep safari and swim with dolphins.

It looked exactly like the holiday Jacob was going on next summer. The voice-over ended with the words, "an opportunity to create memories that will last an entire lifetime." My stomach did a little flip. Those words that sounded so right on an advert, now seemed so wrong coming from a ten-year-old boy.

I decided that if we went to Crete I wouldn't take any photos of the windmills there, because something told me Jacob would have nothing to show me in return.

Eleven years old

It turned out we didn't go to Crete or any of the other Greek islands in the end. As my mum put it, things were 'up and down' with the business, and they weren't 'up' enough to risk going on an expensive holiday the summer I turned eleven. "Maybe next year?" she suggested, although if I'm honest I wasn't too bothered. The sun and the wind were no better in Greece than they were on the coast, but the coast definitely had things going for it Greece didn't.

I'll admit I wasn't surprised to see Jacob when I arrived at the chalet, although he looked stunned and embarrassed to see me. He must have been there a few days because his face already looked tanned, but it didn't cover the way his cheeks reddened when he saw me.

“Hey,” I said to him.

“Oh, hi. I didn’t think you were going to be here. Um... I thought you were going to Crete?”

“My mum and dad were worried about how much it would cost, so they thought it might be better if I came here. I don’t mind. I like it here.”

“Oh, okay.”

There was a painful silence as his trip to Florida with the jeep safari and the dolphins and the twenty water slides hung between us, neither of us wanting to mention it. He cleared his throat. “Well, I like it here too, even if I was supposed to be in Florida. I should be swimming with dolphins right now, but um... there was some problem with the hotel. We were going to have one of the biggest rooms, with two floors and a whirlpool bath and stuff, but then the hotel totally messed it up. They said we could stay in one of the smaller rooms, but my mum said she didn’t want to because it was supposed to be a proper luxury holiday, and it wouldn’t be if we didn’t have one of the best rooms, so they said if the hotel couldn’t get their shit together, then I might as well come here instead.”

“Oh, right, well that makes sense,” I said to him, and his whole expression brightened.

“Does it?”

“Sure it does. Who needs Florida or Crete when they’ve got this place? And who needs shitty dolphins anyway?” I made a weird dolphinesque squeaking noise.

He grinned. “Yeah, who needs shitty old dolphins? You wanna go to the windmill?”

“Of course I do.”

“Race you there.”

One day when we went to Mr Tulley’s, Jacob said something weird to me. “Do you dare me?” he asked.

“Do I dare you what?”

“Nothing. Just, do you?”

I shrugged. “I guess.”

“Okay. Cool.”

It was busy in Mr Tulley’s, as usual. A few people were milling around at the freezer, and I went straight over to stake my claim in the huddle, while Jacob wandered around the aisles. Eventually, I grabbed us each a Calippo—orange for me, strawberry for him—and when I went to pay, he came and joined me without saying a word. He watched me hand over the money for the lollies, and then strolled out of the shop, still silent.

As soon as we were out of there and onto the pebbly path by the beach, he turned to me, and asked, “Do you think I did it? Your dare?”

“I don’t even know what *my* dare was.” I put the emphasis on *my* to make sure he realised it had nothing to do with me.

He grinned. “Close your eyes and hold out your hand.”

I held out my lolly-free hand, and obediently closed my eyes. Something was pressed into my palm. “There!” he said. “Take a look.”

In my hand was a red heart-shaped eraser, the type with a hole that you can stick on the end of a pencil. My eyes went wide.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“You *stole* it?”

“Yep. It’s all yours.”

“Mine?” I laughed at that. I think it was nerves. I had never committed a crime of any sort in my life, and now here I was at the age of just eleven, handling stolen goods.

“Uh-huh.”

“You stole it,” I repeated. “It’s Mr Tulley’s.”

“Not anymore, it’s not,” he said. “It was Mr Tulley’s, and then it was mine, and now I’ve given it to you, so now it’s yours.”

“I don’t want it,” I said.

His cheeks went really pink, and his hand tightened in a fist around his Calippo. “For fuck’s sake,” he told me, “it’s only a rubber. There are a million of them in there, do you really think Mr Tulley’s going to miss *one*?”

“That’s not the point.”

“So what is the point?”

“The point is...” The point was that it was *wrong*. Stealing was wrong, no matter if it was just a heart-shaped rubber that Mr Tulley wouldn’t miss, but the way his face had dropped when I told him I didn’t want it surprised me. He’d been so triumphant at his daring escapade, and I’d just pissed all over his parade. “It’s okay, it’s cool,” I said.

“You like it then?”

Reluctantly, I nodded. “Sure.” My fingers curled around the heart in my hand.

Later that evening, I lay on my bed turning the heart around and around in my fingers. Jacob had given me his heart. All right, technically he had given me Mr Tulley’s heart, but as far as Jacob was concerned, he owned that heart and he had chosen to give it to me. He was right, there were a million rubbers in Mr Tulley’s shop, in all different shapes and sizes, and out of all of those, he had chosen a heart for me. I couldn’t figure out why that meant so much to me, but I knew it did.

I desperately wanted to keep it, but my conscience got the better of me. The next day, I dutifully put it back among all the other erasers, where Jacob’s heart was lost in a sea of flowerpots and hamburgers and dolphins. Shitty old dolphins.

Thirteen years old

It might sound strange, but by that age I had already figured out I liked boys. For a start, I had a huge crush on one of the guys who came into school to do athletics with us. Theo was old enough for me to see him as a man, but not so old he seemed like one of our teachers. Looking back, I suppose he was probably only in his late teens. God, his legs were incredible. I found myself gawping at them, watching the way his hard muscles flexed until I had to look away before anyone noticed.

I wasn’t exactly crazy about being ‘different’—as I thought of it at the time—but I knew things could be worse. I was doing okay at school, both academically and socially. My grades were good for most of my subjects, and although I wasn’t part of the popular gang, I had a good group of friends to hang out with, and even the popular gang didn’t consider me a complete dork. Most of that was because I was sporty. While I was good at football, I eventually admitted to myself I wasn’t that much of a team player, so I concentrated on running instead, which I was damned good at, even if I did say

so myself. I was looking forward to giving Jacob a run for his money when we next raced to the windmill.

It was two years before I visited the chalet again, and in that time, I found myself thinking a lot about Jacob, and looked forward to seeing him. We had swapped numbers, and we kept in touch sporadically. If I'm honest, I would have liked our calls to have been much more frequent than they were, but he didn't seem to want the same. I always felt like I was the one putting the effort into keeping in touch, and while it might sound stupid to be bothered about the lack of commitment from a holiday friend, I knew there was more to it than that. In figuring out I liked boys, I also figured out I liked one boy in particular. Theo's muscular legs might well have left me feeling odd and a bit breathless, but the thought of seeing Jacob again made me both buzz with excitement and feel sick to my stomach with nerves. When we were together he did stuff that made me think he liked me—'our windmill', the heart-shaped eraser. But any time apart, and let's face it, there was far, far too much of that, and his dismissive nature made me want to curl up and die.

The insecurity I felt about meeting up again became full-blown panic the first time I saw him that summer, to find he had turned into a man. Considering my less than entirely innocent thoughts about Theo, I guess I was experiencing the start of puberty, but as soon as I saw Jacob it was obvious he had been there, done that. The guy must have hopped right onto the high-speed puberty train with a one-way ticket to Adultsville.

Whereas, before, we were of similar height, he was now nearly a whole head taller than me. He had got broad too. His shoulders were wide and slightly rounded. He stooped, like he was still trying to come to terms with his new height. He had quite a few spots on his face, particularly his chin, and although that might seem like a bad thing, to me it was quite the opposite—proof the guy had so many hormones surging through his body, they had no place to go but to break right out through his skin. I was speechless. And I mean that literally, because when he opened his mouth and a scratchy low man's voice came out, I completely clammed up, not willing for him to hear the still high tone of mine.

What I had thought before about having a holiday friend whose achievements I could celebrate like my own, went straight out the window the moment I heard that gravelly 'Hello'. I could boast to my mates about my friend's dad being a professional footballer, but I couldn't find anything good to say about him beating us all in the puberty race. "You know my cool friend Jacob from the coast? Well, guess what? He's turned into a man. Bollocks the

size of grapefruits he's got." That was hardly something I was likely to come out with. No, this success of Jacob's did nothing but make me feel small, pathetic, and weak. No wonder he never called me back, probably too busy being a grown up to want to talk to the likes of me.

Of course, this was all speculation, and none of it bore any resemblance to real life. For whatever fucked up reason, this new man-sized Jacob wanted to spend as much time with me as possible, and he didn't seem to care I was just a little kid in comparison to him. We spent the whole of that summer hanging out together at the windmill, the beach, or sometimes even 'the big town'.

'Big town' was a misnomer because in reality, it was a small town, maybe even a village, but it had more shops than the *one* we were used to back at the caravan park. Granddad let me and Jacob take the short bus ride there, now we were that much older. Foolishly, he yet again mentioned the low crime rate in the area, probably because he hadn't reckoned on Jacob doing his best to increase the figures tenfold.

It happened the moment we visited the first shop. I had promised Granddad I would get a couple of things for him that weren't available at Mr Tulley's, but while I dutifully paid for my items, it turned out Jacob was stuffing his pockets with a few 'extras'. As soon as we got outside, he bumped me with his shoulder and I looked at him to see a smirk ten miles wide on his face. He nodded down to his hand which was turning out his pocket just enough for me to see the edge of a chocolate bar. It pissed me off something chronic.

"What the hell?"

He shrugged. "It's cool. We got away with it."

We? Like fuck. It was fine him sharing his awesome windmill with me, but the chance of a criminal record? No fucking thanks.

I tried to keep my voice low because we were only just out of the shop, and who knows who might have been listening? "It's not we, Jacob! I didn't steal anything." It came out like, "I didn't—anything," because 'steal' was just a mumbled breath. "What the fuck anyway? I've got money. My granddad gave me money. You don't need to—"

"It's fun. Maybe you should lighten up a bit."

I swung round, pushing him away from me. We spun away from each other like repelling magnets.

"If that's what you're gonna do, I'm not hanging out with you anymore. I don't want a criminal record. Just because you've got fuck all you wanna do

with your life, don't drag me into it. I've got plans." It was true. I did have plans. Even at that age, I wanted to do well at school, get good grades, go to uni. I certainly didn't want a criminal record—and that was what this could lead to, we'd had 'the talk' at school—messing any of that up. I didn't want Jacob messing it up.

"You didn't complain when I gave you that heart from Mr Tulley's."

That heart. Not that rubber, that eraser, that anything else. That heart. I stood on the pavement as people pushed past me, my mouth opening and closing like a guppy. I knew more about those strangers than I did about Jacob. That guy there? The one with the beer belly and the buggy and the screaming kids? I could have told you more about him in the next minute than I could about the guy in front of me I had spent so many weeks with. Was his name even Jacob? Everything I knew about Jacob came from him, and he was turning out to be a very unreliable witness. Did he really not remember what I had said about that heart? Was he so caught up in his own fantasy world that nobody else existed except in his own mind? Maybe he needed reminding.

"Um, in case you hadn't noticed, I told you I didn't want that fucking rubber." And yes, I emphasised the word rubber, not heart.

He said nothing, so I carried on. I was on a roll. "Do you know what I did with it? I put it back. I went into Mr Tulley's the next day and I put it back. And do you know how scary it was for me? It was like I was stealing it! But I put the fucking thing back because I didn't want it."

His face had gone pale except the top of his cheeks, which burned bright red. For all he might have had a manly voice, when he said his next words, I had never heard him sound more like a little kid. "You gave back my heart?"

"It wasn't yours."

"You gave it back?" There was nothing physical about it, nothing those passers-by would have seen, just a tiny flicker in his eyes, but that was the moment he crumpled, and I knew it. I hadn't just given back his heart—I had broken it.

We walked along the pavement in silence, side by side, an invisible barrier between us. I couldn't understand what I was feeling—I had never been so confused. Jacob was the one who had stolen. He was the one who had done something wrong, broken the law and drawn me into it. But I felt like I had done something far worse, and it might sound crazy, but I wanted to make it up to him.

In the end, I said, “I’m sorry, okay? But please, I don’t want you to steal anymore. I don’t want you to get caught, and to get into trouble.”

“Kay.” He stuffed his hand into his pocket and pulled out two chocolate bars. “Want one?”

I held out my hand, and made sure he saw me smile at him. “Of course I do.”

The next day we went to the beach together. He had suggested a trip to the windmill, but after our sort-of argument the day before, I needed us to be somewhere more neutral. He might have seen the windmill as ‘ours’, but at that time it felt too much his to go there.

“I’ll have to get my trunks on,” he said.

“Sure.” I was already wearing mine.

“Won’t be a minute.”

He dashed over to the caravan, while I grabbed my towel and followed him. I didn’t think the next bit through, and if I had, I might have done things differently, but you know what they say about hindsight. He had flung the door open, and stupidly I saw that as an invitation to go in. I probably should have noticed the grubby curtains at the windows, and the run-down look of the place before, but in my innocence the whole thing had passed me by.

As soon as I stepped inside, I was transported to a world I knew nothing about, nor did I want to—a world as far from the cosy chalet with its pine furniture and superhero blankets as it could get. Cracked plastic garden chairs stood on the threadbare, stained carpet, barely visible under piles of unwashed clothes strewn around the floor. The draining board was stacked so high with dirty dishes it would have been impossible to find the sink to wash them, and ashtrays overflowed with cigarette butts, ash spilling onto the surfaces. I knew holiday homes often had that damp smell about them, but usually the cause was invisible. Here, the walls were speckled with patches of mould. The only time I had seen a place like this was on one of those TV programmes where the police get special cleaners in to check for needles left lying around.

There was a sound from one end, and I spun round to catch sight of Jacob behind a partly opened door, back to me, stripping off his clothes. His shorts came down, and while it should have excited me to see his butt like that, naked,

I was too taken aback by the state of his living arrangements to feel any kind of stirrings that way. Swimming trunks were pulled up his legs, and then he paused, lifting his arms to sniff his pits. He pulled his T-shirt off, chucked it onto the bed, and then crouched down, presumably looking for another discarded one. His back was covered in acne.

My throat tightened. I actually thought I might cry. My mum had often uttered the immortal words, “Life’s not fair,” when I tried the whole, “but all my friends are allowed,” argument, but those words could have been spelled out with the spots on his back. They were a final slap in the face—one God had administered as testament to the fact that life certainly isn’t fair, and neither should we expect it to be. It wasn’t enough that Jacob lived for six weeks of the year in this hellhole, he needed that extra serving of crap right on the top of the shit sandwich that was his life. No wonder the poor guy wished the wind would take him the hell away from here. I’d been in here less than a minute and I wished for that, too.

Silently, I backed my way out of the caravan. Once I was far enough away to know he wouldn’t realise I had been there, I pulled in a huge lungful of the summer air, hoping for the oxygen to cleanse my brain of what I had just seen.

He talked as we walked to the beach. I was thankful for his chatter filling what would have been silence between us, because I had absolutely nothing to say. I kept my mouth shut and pretended to listen while I thought about the million and one things I wanted to say, but didn’t. I wanted to tell him I was sorry. Sorry he lived like that, sorry I had seen it, sorry I *hadn’t* seen it before, sorry about giving away his heart, sorry about having a go at him for stealing, sorry about the spots on his back. I wanted to ask him things too. It was for selfish reasons, because I wanted to feel better about it all.

Please tell me you only live like that because your sister’s having an off-day/week/year with the cleaning.

Please tell me it’s because you’re staying with your sister’s boyfriend, and he’s not that rich like your ex-footballer dad, and that’s why he lives in that horrible, grotty caravan and not one of the nice chalets like the one I’m staying in.

And most of all, please tell me that this is as bad as it gets, that the reason you like it at the coast is because I’m here with you, and not because this is your escape from somewhere even worse.

As soon as our feet hit the sand, we raced to the sea, jostling each other in our scramble to get there first. We didn't stop to strip off, just chucked our towels down and splashed right in. Something I'd discovered about the sea in England is it's never warm like in Crete. Even on days when the blazing sun could turn a Calippo into a sticky mess in seconds, the water stayed cold. Jacob might have said it was 'lovely and warm', but if he had ever experienced that swim with the shitty dolphins of Florida, I think he might have felt differently. I hadn't yet had the courage to wade waist deep, and as soon as Jacob saw, he swept up a huge wave of freezing water to hit me straight on the chest and belly. "You're wet now, you wimp!" he yelled. "Get the fuck under or I'll duck you!" and he splashed me again.

When I whistled with my intake of breath, he laughed and I glared at him. "How can you say it's warm? It's fucking freezing!"

He shrugged. "You soon get used to it."

It was all right for him—being so much taller than me now meant that standing side by side, the water only came up to his waist, while it virtually reached my armpits. He was right though, I was already wet, so I embraced the cold, lay back in the sea, and closed my eyes to enjoy the heat of the sun on my face. I stayed like that until my body relaxed, and I realised now I was immersed in it, I couldn't feel how cold the water was anymore. Jacob was right about something. You do get used to it.

When we'd had enough of floating and splashing about, we raced back to where we had thrown down our towels—Jacob won—and lay on them side by side. It was about midday, and being the hottest day of the year so far, the sun dried our skin in minutes. My T-shirt felt clammy against my chest so I stripped it off, wrung it out and dropped it onto the sand next to me. When I lay back down, for just a second I felt Jacob's eyes on me, but as soon as I caught his gaze he brought his arm up to shield his face from the sun. He made this soft sound in his throat and rolled onto his stomach, his right cheek lying on his forearms so he was facing me, although his eyes were closed.

"You okay?"

"Mm-hmm," he mumbled. "I'm, uh, just gonna sunbathe for a bit."

"Sure." I took in a deep breath of the still air. "It's so hot. Don't you want to...?" I stopped mid-sentence, my mind jolted back to what I had seen earlier. No, he probably wouldn't want to take off his T-shirt.

"Huh?"

I cleared my throat. “Want an ice cream?”

“You buying?” He smiled but didn’t open his eyes. His face looked funny squashed against his arms, like one of those novelty pigs in a jar that only exist to look cute. I’ve got to admit, Jacob looked pretty cute too.

“Yep. I won’t be long.” When I rubbed my shoulders, I could already feel the heat radiating from my skin. I was getting burnt. I snatched up my towel and draped it over me, and made my way across the beach to the shop.

Mr Tulley’s was busy as usual, especially around the freezer which made sense considering the heatwave we were experiencing. The air was so stuffy in that shop, that while I queued to pay, I held the lollies up to my sweaty face to cool down. I didn’t care if I looked ridiculous—it felt as uncomfortably hot in there to me as the sea felt cold. As soon as I got outside, the light breeze cooled the wetness on my cheeks, and I stood among the buckets and spades and the racks of postcards, just enjoying the feel of it on my face. One of the buckets held a selection of colourful windmills. I picked one up and blew it gently. It made me smile to see the twisted ribbon sails turn, and I knew it would make Jacob smile too.

I could have waited. I should have taken the already melting lollies to Jacob and eaten mine with him on the beach. I should have gone back to Mr Tulley’s the next day with enough money to buy a windmill for Jacob, but I didn’t. I was struck with a weird sense of urgency I couldn’t ignore. I just knew that if I didn’t do it now, Jacob would have one more night in that place without knowing someone cared about him, without knowing how sorry I was, even if he had no idea what for. I held the wooden stick of the windmill tight in one hand, and before I could change my mind, I pulled the towel off my shoulders to cover it, and walked away from Mr Tulley’s.

My heart was pounding, as I trudged over the sand. I wasn’t sure if it was the adrenaline rush of stealing, or the anticipation of giving my ill-gotten gains to Jacob, but either way, it beat so strongly I expected everyone to see the tremors under my skin.

Jacob was still lying face down, his eyes closed. I wasn’t sure if he had fallen asleep. “Hey,” I whispered. “I got your lolly.”

“Cool.” He turned over, sat up, and I passed the Calippo to him. Keeping the windmill covered by my towel, I sat beside him on the sand.

“Jacob?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“Do you dare me?”

“Do I dare you what?”

“Nothing, just do you?”

He wrinkled up his nose the way he always did when he was either thinking about something, or pretending to think about something. “Nope.” He laughed in his deep man’s voice.

“Aw, but I’ve done it now.”

The laugh changed to a giggle making him sound nearer his real age. “Oh my God. What have you done?”

“Close your eyes and hold out your hand.”

He held his hand out to me, although he didn’t close his eyes. I pulled the towel away, and pressed the wooden stick of the windmill into his palm, where his fingers immediately closed around it.

“You got me a windmill!” He lifted it to his pursed lips and blew gently, watching the sails turn. “That is the most awesome present ever.” He blew it again, and only when the sails stopped did he look at me, a puzzled expression on his face. “Did you pay for it?”

“Not exactly.”

“So can I keep it?”

“Of course you can.”

“Even though it’s Mr Tulley’s?”

“Mr Tulley’s got a million windmills. Do you think he’s going to miss one?”

“Well, no, but I didn’t think you would want to—”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “It was Mr Tulley’s, and then it was mine, and now I’ve given it to you, so now it’s yours. I want you to keep it.”

And that was when it happened. “Thanks, mate,” Jacob said, and he leaned right over and kissed me. It was a great big smacker on the lips, a comedy kiss, but for me there was nothing funny about it at all.

Fifteen years old

I carried that kiss with me for two years. In the messed up filing cabinet of my teenage brain, I wasn't sure where I was supposed to file it: *Jacob, gay, falling in love, first kiss or most completely awesome moments of my life*. It didn't matter really, because eventually everything ended up in the *Jacob* compartment that filled my mind.

Filed under *things I don't want to think about* was my granddad's cancer diagnosis, which was the reason for the two-year gap between visits to the chalet. Mum told me he was going to be fine, but because of his treatment he would be living at the cottage for a few months, which took us over the summer. I was gutted. Not only did I desperately want to see Jacob, but I was scared about Granddad, despite what my mum said.

I made sure to phone him a lot and when he sounded exactly the same as always, the fear dissipated a little. He even made jokes about his treatment. "Well, at least I've not got any hair to fall out." And when I laughed at that, he acted all offended although I knew he didn't mean it. "Oh, it's easy for you to laugh now, Tom, but hair loss passes down the mother's side of the family, so bad news buddy, you're going to be bald as a coot by the time you're twenty-five."

At that time, the idea of losing hair seemed impossible, as whenever I looked in the mirror, I found tons of the stuff sprouting out of new places. By then, thankfully, my body had hitched its ride on the puberty train, and although I might have started a couple of stops behind Jacob, I soon caught up. I was insatiably horny every second of the day, and all those thoughts focussed on Jacob and 'our kiss' on the beach. That's not to say it couldn't be triggered by something or someone else—Theo had moved on but there were still plenty of other guys to lust over—but eventually those thoughts always came back to Jacob's lips and how they felt on mine, and how I imagined they might feel on other parts of my body.

Jacob seemed as gutted as I was that we would miss a whole summer together, which only confirmed that something had definitely shifted in our friendship ever since the beach. I didn't know if it was because of the kiss or the windmill or any other reason, but whatever it was, our contact became much more regular and predictable. By that, of course, I mean Jacob didn't leave me hanging anymore.

From the long, slow intakes of breath that sometimes punctuated our phone conversations, I suspected Jacob had taken up smoking. It bugged me like

crazy. I was going all-out in the fitness stakes, close to obsessive about what I took into my body food- and drinkwise, whereas he couldn't care less. Not only was he risking his health, it bothered me even more that I felt it set us apart. All my friends at school were sporty and we were fiercely competitive. None of us would have dreamed of smoking, seeing the few who did as losers—ones going nowhere with their lives. I didn't want to think of Jacob in that way, but deep down I knew I saw him through my rose-tinted—or sunshine-tinted—glasses from the coast. I was a different person with him than with my mates back home, and it was most likely the same for him. The whole thing was so bloody confusing. Living at opposite ends of the country frustrated the hell out of me because I ached to be with him, but sometimes I wondered if the distance between us was for the best. If we went to the same school, would we even be friends at all?

There was a huge sense of relief when I saw Granddad the first time that summer to find he hadn't changed at all. I don't know what I had expected—Mum had said his treatment had gone well—but seeing him smiling and 'normal' looking made me realise how much the whole thing had scared me. I was prepared to spend most of my time at the chalet with him just because that was the right thing to do, but when I suggested it, he answered that idea with a loud snort. "Good God, Tom, just because I've been ill doesn't mean you have to hang about with an old fart like me. Go and have some fun. Aren't you going round to see Jacob? He's already been round here a few times wanting to know when you'll be here. Go, and put him out of his misery."

"Are you sure?" I asked. I couldn't wait to see Jacob, but I didn't want to tread on my granddad's toes.

"Yes, quite sure!"

I spent time getting myself ready, something I had never done before, but this time round, seeing Jacob felt like a big deal. When I noticed the little windmill through the gap in the grubby curtains, I had to take a few deep breaths to compose myself before knocking. Almost immediately, Jacob flung the door open. "I thought you were never gonna get here! Your granddad said you'd be here lunchtime."

"Yeah, sorry. Journey took longer than we thought."

He closed the door, jumped down the steps in one go, and stood there looking at me, as if he were sizing me up, which it turned out he was. "You've grown, like loads!"

He was right. I was probably only an inch or so shorter than him by then, and I had broadened out too. I know it doesn't sound modest to say, but the amount of time I put into my fitness showed in my body. I was working out a lot, and I looked good for it. I knew a few of the girls at school were checking me out, and even though I had no interest in them, it was still an ego boost. Jacob's assessment of me was an entirely different thing though. To feel his gaze wander over my body and linger on my chest shot bolts of lust and anticipation—and God knows what else—through me, reddening my cheeks and leaving my armpits damp with sweat.

“Windmill?” he said.

“Sure.”

He immediately took off at a sprint, yelling, “Race you there.”

I'm not meaning to brag, but this time it was easy for me to catch up with him. Our legs were the same length now, for a start, but not even taking that into account, I was quick and I knew it. After his head start, he looked surprised to see me beside him so soon, and he immediately quickened his pace. It made no difference. Whatever he did, I could keep up, and I could have easily overtaken. With mates from school my competitive nature would have kicked in immediately, and I would have left them gasping in the trail of dust I left behind me, but I didn't do that with Jacob. I didn't want to leave him behind, so I dropped my pace. It felt better to be by his side than to beat him.

He touched the windmill first, and then sank down to the ground, where I joined him, our backs resting against the wooden slats. “You got so fast!” he said. “You'll beat me next time, I reckon.”

I shrugged. “I dunno. You're still pretty quick.”

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a packet of fags, taking out what was very obviously not a cigarette. He put it between his lips and went to light it, but the breeze kept messing with the flame. “Here,” he said, grabbing my hands and cupping them around the lighter. The touch of his fingers on mine was thrilling, but what I was doing thrilled me in not such a great way, too. Just like the time I had been complicit in stealing Mr Tulley's heart, Jacob was now making me complicit in drug use. He breathed the smoke in, and then sucked it down into his lungs, holding it there before blowing it back out in a long stream that floated away on the breeze. “Thanks, mate,” he said, indicating to the now lit end of the joint, which he held out to me, his eyebrow raised.

I shook my head, trying not to show my distaste too much. “Nah, it's okay.”

“Kay.”

He took another drag.

“When did you take up smoking?” I asked him.

“I dunno really. A while ago.”

“And weed?”

“A while ago too.”

“Where do you even get it from?” The thing was, I knew a couple of guys at school who smoked weed. If I wanted to get hold of it I probably could, but the thought never once crossed my mind. I’d never even taken so much as a puff on a cigarette, hadn’t wanted to.

He shrugged. “Well Ryan for a start, when I’m here. When I’m back home it’s not exactly difficult to get hold of. Everyone does it.”

“No one I know does.”

“Really? You never tried it?”

“Nope.”

It had been a hot day, and although the evening was warm, the sun was low enough in the sky to make the light breeze feel chilly against my bare arms. I shivered. I don’t know if shivers can be catching, like yawns, but Jacob shivered too.

“Do you dare me?” he asked suddenly.

I laughed. “Oh, don’t start that again. Do I dare you what?”

“Not telling. Just do you?”

He had this look in his eyes like he might do something crazy, like strip off all his clothes—God, please let it be that!—run to the edge of the cliff, and let the windmill blow him away into the sea below. It was a good thing it wasn’t making much wind that day. Whatever the idea he had, it was something that excited him, and *that* excited me.

“Go on then, I dare you.”

“Cool. Close your eyes.”

I did as he asked, hearing him draw on the joint. Maybe I was naïve, but whatever I could have guessed his dare to be, I wasn’t prepared for his hand

cupping the nape of my neck, and the sudden press of his lips against mine. So when he blew, the shock made me inhale sharply, sucking the smoke deep into my lungs. I immediately spluttered and choked, my chest and throat burning. Instinctively I pushed him away, so hard he fell backwards, and I ended up doubled over, hacking my guts up as my eyes streamed with tears. Every time I tried to draw in a new, clean breath, my lungs protested and forced the air back out, leaving me heaving, spraying spit into the grass.

“What the...” Another hacking cough. “Fuck!”

“Oh my God, I’m sorry!” He slammed me hard on the back a few times, as if I had something caught in my throat. It didn’t help.

“I’m so sorry!”

More rasping coughs, until eventually I wiped the back of my hand over my face and managed a few shallow breaths before another cough snuck in. From my position on all fours, I looked at him through watery eyes to see him trying to control a fit of giggles. “You fucking bastard!” I yelled, although my own coughing was turning to laughter too. Thank God nobody could see how stupid I looked, except Jacob of course.

“Well, you did dare me!”

“I didn’t dare you to nearly kill me,” I croaked.

“And you didn’t dare me not to, either.” He had the most mischievous look on his face, like a wicked gremlin. “You wanna try again?”

“No fucking way!”

“I do.” He sprang forward, tackling me so I fell back, his hands pinning my wrists to the ground. I wriggled underneath him, and although I wasn’t about to admit it, his weight on top of me felt so damned good I could almost have cried. It was so close to all those times I’d imagined it, alone in my bed, but this time it was real.

I jerked my hips from side to side, trying to buck him off, but he only tightened his grip. “Uh-uh! No you don’t!” he teased. The more I struggled, the harder he fought to maintain his dominant position, pressing down onto me. I could have said it was a battle of wills, one that he won, but that wouldn’t have been true because I desperately wanted to lose.

“Do you give in?” he demanded. I gave one final pathetic thrust of my hips, before I slumped with defeat. We both stilled, our breathing harsh, our faces so

close they were almost touching. He released his grip on my left wrist, and brought the joint to his mouth. The end glowed as he pulled on it, and then his lips were on mine. This time he didn't breathe out. My mouth opened to his, and he just let the smoke drift in. At first, I didn't draw it down into my lungs, scared to ruin this moment with another coughing fit. Besides, for those first few seconds, it was enough to feel the softness of his lips, and the way they moved so gently against mine. Eventually, he pulled away just enough to blow the remaining smoke from his mouth into the air around us. "Better, right?" he whispered.

"Yeah." My voice sounded thin and weird.

In a sudden bold move, I reached for the back of his head, pulling him down to me again, and this time, when our lips met, I inhaled deeply, breathing in the air from Jacob's lungs. That was all I needed to get me high. I slid my tongue into his mouth, exploring the taste of him. Whoever said kissing a smoker was like kissing an ashtray had obviously never kissed Jacob. It pained me to think I might have thought that was the whole truth, without realising all the other things this was about. It wasn't just the way he tasted—it was so much more. It was the way we explored each other's mouths, like they were something completely new, as if we had never noticed we had lips or tongues or teeth of our own. It was the way he made these soft sounds in his throat, the way his chest felt so closely moulded to mine I couldn't tell whose heart I could feel beating. It was the way the strands of his hair felt in my fingers, and the way he moaned ever so quietly when I gently tugged them. And for all he tasted of smoke—and I'd be the first to admit it wasn't the most pleasant taste in the world—he just tasted like Jacob to me. And Jacob tasted awesome.

I don't know how long we kissed for, but by the time we pulled apart, the sun had dipped under the horizon, chilling the air around us. I hadn't noticed at the time, all I cared about was the feel of Jacob's body against mine, and the soft press of his lips. I felt dizzy and drunk with sensation. Although I could have blamed the weed for that, I suspected that one small lungful had played a very minor part when diluted with the total sensory overload I experienced in kissing Jacob.

Eventually, he sat up, and pulled me up to join him. "I've wanted to do that forever," he said. "I just didn't know how to tell you."

"Me, too," I told him. "Oh, and me neither about the telling you thing, too. I didn't want to say anything over the phone."

The sun might have gone down, but his whole face glowed with the most beautiful smile. “I know. I thought I was gonna go crazy when you said you couldn’t make it last summer. Didn’t think I’d last out a whole other year.” He paused. “You done that with anyone else?”

“What, got made to smoke weed, and then had my face sucked off?”

He laughed. “Well, not quite like that, but you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know. And no, I haven’t. You?”

“No. I’ve always wanted to though.”

“With me, or with anyone?”

“With you. You’re not like everyone else.”

He reached down to adjust his shorts. He might have tried to be discreet, but as soon as he saw I’d caught him, the smile spread even wider across his face. “Don’t even try and tell me you’re not the same,” he said.

“I’m not!” I protested, although he must have known I was kidding by the way I very obviously put my hands on my lap to cover the tented fabric.

“Bullshit! I could feel it the whole time, Mr Boner.”

I laughed. “I think we’re boner buddies.” It felt strange joking about it. At school, getting a hard-on was the ultimate humiliation, but with Jacob there was none of that awkwardness. Being the cause of each other’s boner-buddy status made it all right.

I rubbed at my goose-pimpled arms. “It’s fucking freezing.”

Jacob rolled his eyes. “You always think it’s freezing. Man up.”

Trying to get some warmth, I pressed into his side, tucking my head under his chin. His arm came around me, and we sat in silence for a while, listening to the gentle creak of the windmill’s sails. They weren’t turning, but they creaked anyway.

Suddenly, Jacob’s arm squeezed me tighter. “What are we, though?” he asked. “Really? I mean, apart from boner buddies?”

“What do you want us to be? Boyfriends?”

“Boyfriends?” he said, and then immediately repeated it in a quieter voice, without the inflection, trying it in different ways to see if it sounded right. “Boyfriends. Yeah, I think I’d like that.”

We spent the next few weeks kissing, with just the odd break to do practical stuff like eat and drink and sleep. I spent some time with Granddad too, but he often encouraged me to go out. He said I should be hanging out with kids my own age, and as that meant Jacob, I was let off the hook.

It became a priority to find somewhere to go other than the flat open area that housed the windmill. Not far from there was a dip in the hill, like a large step, backed with sand. It became ‘our bunker’. We couldn’t guarantee we wouldn’t be interrupted, but at least we were partly hidden from view. It seems strange now, but that summer we did little more than kissing. And more kissing. My entire body was screaming at me to push things further, and by the way Jacob’s hard dick speared my groin every time he was on top of me, I guessed he felt the same, but neither of us did anything about it. At the time, it was enough just to kiss and talk, and when I look back on that summer, before we brought more adult behaviour and problems and disappointments into our relationship, I’m not sure if that wasn’t the best time of all.

On my first-ever trip to the coast, six weeks had seemed such a long time. At eight years old, those weeks were a life sentence stretching out before me. But just a few years later, we were conscious that with every second that ticked by, our time together was closer to ending for another year. Six weeks was nothing to the forty-six we wouldn’t spend together. Sure, we could still talk to each other every day, but that was nothing to feeling Jacob’s hand in mine, or my lips against his. Some evenings we went to the windmill or to our bunker, and his hand squeezed mine as we watched the sun being pulled down behind the horizon. “I don’t want to go back,” he told me, and I squeezed his hand even harder. “Me neither,” I said, although I had a horrible feeling in my gut that his reasons for dreading a return to normal life were more valid than mine.

I nearly messed everything up the day before I left to go home. It stunned me things could change so quickly between us with a few words. We had been in the bunker for hours, our lips getting sore from kissing, and my body aching for more. We had been exploring the hard outlines pressed against the fabric of each other’s shorts, and while it had sent me into a complete frenzy of lust, I hadn’t been brave enough to do what I really wanted—to push my hand under Jacob’s waistband and touch him properly there. He had made no moves on me in that direction either.

I was a bit pissed off with him to be honest, had been for a while, after he made it clear that a lot of his body was simply a no-go area when it came to me

touching him. The first time I slipped my hands under the hem of his T-shirt, he grabbed them to make sure they didn't go any further. Other times I tried anything, he wriggled away. The whole thing was ridiculous. I knew he had acne all over his back, and I didn't give a fuck. I wanted to touch his skin, and if that meant getting a handful of pimples then so be it. But I could hardly tell him that, when I wasn't supposed to know why he always kept his T-shirt on, even when we were swimming or sunbathing. It was all very well him being shy about his not completely perfect body, but didn't he realise we all had our own insecurities? For instance, I knew just from the handful I'd got that his dick was bigger than mine. Did that stop me letting him run his fingers all over the front of my shorts? You bet it didn't.

His stupid insecurities were robbing me of the closeness I craved, and it being our last official night together, when he moved my hands away yet again, a flash of anger ran through me. We had less than twenty-four hours together, and he was going to let a few little spots ruin what we could have. But I couldn't say that, so when he sat up and lit a fag, I homed in on the one thing I *could* complain about. I shook my head. "I really wish you'd stop smoking."

He took a drag and blew it out slowly, watching the smoke drift away in the dusky light. "Why do you care?"

"It's bad for you," I told him.

He shrugged. "My great-granddad lived to ninety-nine and he smoked sixty a day."

"Well, he was lucky, I guess."

"Maybe I'll be lucky."

"And maybe you won't. Seriously, I hate it. I wish you wouldn't do it."

"Sooo-rryy!" he said in a sing-song voice, as if lung cancer was a great big joke. It pissed me off something chronic, and as a result, I didn't choose my next words carefully.

"It's a dirty habit."

His shoulders stiffened, and his cheeks hollowed as he took another drag. It made him look like an old man. He could have been his ninety-nine-year-old great-granddad. "You think I'm dirty?"

"I think... I think smoking's dirty."

He blew smoke rings, punching them out with his tongue. They were good ones, perfectly round, I'd give him that. He chucked the fag down and ground it into the grass with his trainer. "I'm going to the windmill."

I had no idea what that meant. Did he want me to go with him? It wouldn't have been up for question before. We would have raced or wandered over, fingers woven together, but now I had no idea what I was supposed to do. I left it a few minutes before walking there. I wasn't sure if I was giving him space, or giving myself a chance to think of a way to take back what I'd said. The trouble was, that was impossible. Just like the smoke he breathed into his lungs, even when it drifted away into the air, the damage was already done.

I could barely see him at first—both he and the windmill were silhouetted against the moonlit sky, standing stock-still. His back was turned away from the sails, and he stared out at the water, or at least I thought he did. In fact, when I got closer I realised his eyes were squeezed shut.

Sometimes, I feel like if I stand in the right place, or if I wish hard enough, the wind might blow me away. It might take me away from here.

He was so lost in his thoughts or his wishes, he didn't notice I had joined him, and when I gently touched his shoulder, he jumped as if I'd given him a static shock. "Jacob?" I whispered.

He looked at me, his eyes shining under the dark sky. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry."

"What for?" It was a challenge. I saw the way his eyes narrowed. He was waiting to see if I would say it again.

"Well for..."

He lightly punched my arm. "You're right, I shouldn't smoke, it's bad for me, it's like kissing an ashtray, it makes your teeth go yellow, blah, blah, blah, whatever, whatever, whatever. Do I give a fuck?"

I was so thankful he had let me off the hook that I reached for his hand and pulled him against me.

"I never said it was like kissing an ashtray," I told him, and it was true. I had never said that out loud.

"But is it?"

"Mmm, well, I need to test the theory." I pressed my lips against his, gently prising them open with my tongue, and he responded with a small sigh. His hands pulled us even closer, moulding us together, and we stayed like that for a long while, just like we had before I opened my big mouth and nearly ruined everything.

Eventually he pulled away. “So, is it?” he asked.

“Is it what?”

“Is it like kissing an ashtray?”

“Oh that. I don’t know. I think I need to test it some more.”

I slept well, but my worries about the night before came flooding back when there was no knock on the chalet door that last morning together. We didn’t even have a full day—I was travelling home that evening—and I had expected him to be round first thing. Of course, I could have gone to the caravan, but that wasn’t our usual routine, and maybe I was testing him to see if he had forgiven me for my careless words.

It turned out he had. Or if he hadn’t, he wasn’t about to let it show. A little later than expected, there was that familiar knock, and when I opened the door, Jacob bounded in. The whole room instantly filled with the smell of deodorant, so intense my eyes watered. He must have used a whole can. He had a towel slung over his shoulder, ready for the beach. “You coming?” he asked.

“Sure.” If I’m honest, I was glad to get out of there just to get a breath of fresh air. I grabbed my towel, yelled goodbye to Granddad, and we raced down the hill to the beach. As soon as we got to our usual place, Jacob slapped his towel onto the sand and flopped face down onto it, staking his claim as the winner. I put my towel down next to him, kicked off my trainers and lay back, closing my eyes. It was too early for the sun to have made its way directly above us, but it still felt good to have its gentle rays warming my face.

“I thought you’d have wanted to go to the windmill,” I murmured. That would have made more sense. We couldn’t get up to any sort of making out on the beach.

“Well, we can do that later,” he said. His hand lay on my stomach, and for just a second it moved lower, brushing against the fabric of my shorts.

“Fucking hell, Jacob!” I rolled over. “Don’t give me a boner at the beach.”

He laughed. “You can always get in the water, boner buddy. It’ll soon shrink in the cold.”

“Yeah, and you’re forgetting I’ve got to get to the water somehow without anyone noticing it.”

I leaned up on my elbows, and squinted at him to see him smiling at me. God, he was beautiful, acne and all.

“Hey,” he said. “I got you something.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. Close your eyes and hold out your hand.”

The sunshine was so bright that my eyes were only half-open, anyway. I squeezed them shut and put my hand out on the sand in front of me.

“Open your eyes, then.” I opened them, and blinked at the eraser in my hand. It was a heart-shaped one, exactly the same as the one he had given me four years ago. The one I had put back.

“Oh, Jacob,” I said. “Is it from Mr Tulley’s?”

“Yeah it is, but I bought it this time.” His eyes narrowed as he looked at me, trying to gauge my reaction. “You don’t believe me, do you?” I swear he looked more like a little boy then than the first time he had given me his heart.

“Of course I do.”

He let out a long breath through pursed lips, the way he blew out smoke. “So you won’t give it back or not take it or anything, right? Because this time, it really was mine, and now it’s yours and I... I want you to keep it.”

My fingers closed around it, and I brought my fist up, against my own heart. “Forever, okay?”

Sixteen years old

My granddad was the first person I came out to, unless you counted Jacob, and I didn’t since we had never had any discussion about it. Spending all our time wrapped around each other in the bunker was enough proof we were inclined that way.

Granddad took it well, although I wasn’t surprised. A while back, he had mentioned a couple he was friends with, Bill and Tony, who lived near him at the cottage. They could have been a man and a woman, maybe Tony was spelt Toni, but for whatever reason I never got that impression. That’s not to say it was easy to tell him. Just saying the words “I’m gay,” was a totally new and scary experience, something I knew I would eventually have to get used to. I might even get bored with it one day, but until then, each time my heart would thump so hard, I’d feel like it might drown the words out.

“What does your mum think about it?” he asked, and I shook my head.

“I... um... haven’t told her yet. You’re the first one I’ve told.”

“Really?” His cheeks went quite pink. “You know your mum will be fine about it, don’t you? She’s a good lass.” He winked at me. “Brought up properly, you see?”

I don’t know if I had ever realised it before, but I loved Granddad so much. The time spent at the chalet had been the best weeks of my life, and not only because of Jacob, although of course he played a massive part, but because of everything that went with those summers. That included my granddad’s humour and kindness. He not only accepted me for who I was, but for who I aspired to be. The only time I could be that person was on the coast. Just like the sun and the wind were different here, so was Tom Connelly.

At home I went to school, did my homework, hung out with my mates and laughed off the occasional comments from girls who told my mates I was ‘hot’. It wasn’t difficult. I was known to be focussed, not just on my studies but on my fitness too—I ran every morning before school, and sometimes after too—so no one was surprised when I showed little interest in having a girlfriend. I simply didn’t have time. It never felt deceitful and I don’t think it was. I just kept my private business to myself. Life was like a job. Forty-six weeks of slog for the trade-off of six weeks of freedom. Forty-six weeks of playing by the rules, fitting in, going through the motions, for six weeks of letting loose and finally being me. I came alive at the coast. The real me was the one only Granddad and Jacob knew.

“Tom?” Granddad asked.

“Yeah?”

“You and Jacob?”

If my cheeks weren’t already red, by now they were burning up. When I said, “Yeah,” my voice sounded croaky.

Granddad nodded. “I thought so.” He pressed his lips together tightly, as if he didn’t want the next words to come out until he’d thought them through. “Tom? Is everything all right with Jacob?”

“How do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I just wonder if he’s... Well, if he’s okay, I suppose.”

“Sure he is.” Even as I said it, I knew it was a lie.

Jacob and I spent the entire summer exploring. Not the sort of exploration my granddad had suggested when I first visited, but it was a lot of fun. I think we both regretted the hands-off approach we had taken the year before—I know I did—and it appears the heart isn't the only part of the body to grow fonder with absence. The first day we met up that summer, we raced to the bunker. Not one of our usual races—more a desperate sprint to get somewhere private and get our hands all over each other. As soon as we dived onto the grass, Jacob rolled onto me, and we rubbed against each other as our lips and tongues clashed together. We didn't have time to rip each other's clothes off like they do in the movies. Instead, Jacob's hand snaked up the leg of my swim shorts, mine slipped into the waistband of his, and we got each other off. Forty-six weeks of build-up, over in what was probably less than that in seconds. Up until then, it was the only time in my relationship with Jacob I came first, although it was a close-run thing.

Afterwards we lay there panting and sticky and feeling crazy, like we'd just discovered this amazing thing you could do with two bodies that no one else could have possibly experienced before. I was so blissful, I didn't even care when Jacob took out a joint and lit it. We lay there in our bunker, looking up at the sky, and when Jacob murmured something about how the sky looked bigger than normal, and how we might just be these tiny little specks under it, but today he felt bigger and stronger and more powerful than the brightest sun, I knew it wasn't the weed talking, because I felt it too and I hadn't taken one puff.

It was like that every day that summer, a constant search for new ways to make each other shake or moan. We discovered I was noisy when I came, Jacob virtually silent. We experimented with different techniques, different speeds—sometimes fast, frantic and passionate like that first time, other times more leisurely—but we always lay in each other's arms afterwards and told each other in soft voices how much we wished it could stay like that forever.

Seventeen years old

The year we turned seventeen was another summer of discoveries for the two of us. Having been used to Jacob always taking the lead, I was surprised to find that when it came to sex, I was much more forward in wanting to try new things. I was desperate to use my mouth on him, something I couldn't help telling him at every opportunity. I'd whisper it in his ear while we were fooling around, and it gave me a great feeling of power to know the words I used could push him right over the edge. Sure my hand helped, too, but my choice of

words was the deciding factor in how fast it all happened, and when I really got him going, it was *fast*. I learned quickly not to use that kind of talk when he wasn't turned on, though. It was all or nothing with Jacob, we were trying to get off or we weren't, and there was nothing in between. On one occasion, when I mouthed the words, "I wanna blow you so bad," when we were in the chalet, and wouldn't have dreamed of getting up to anything with Granddad in the next room, Jacob's whole body stiffened before he gave a shaky laugh.

"Well, you can do it to me sometime," he said. "But no way I'm doing it to you. It's gross." He laughed again a bit louder like he'd made some great joke, but it was one I didn't get. Fair enough. If it wasn't his thing, I was more than willing—if not desperately disappointed—for the transaction to be one-sided, but I didn't like the way he talked about it that way. Maybe he did think it was gross, but he didn't have to say it. I thought his smoking was gross, but I'd kept quiet about that ever since that time at the windmill. Maybe he was getting me back.

I did do it to him a few times that summer—four, to be precise—when we were at the bunker and had checked a million times there was no one around. The thought of a dog walker reporting us frightened the life out of me, but horniness won out over fear each time. There was no added exhilaration from the thought of discovery, but it wasn't like I needed it. The feel of Jacob's fingers playing with my hair, the sound of his breath quickening, the way I felt him squirm underneath me, and most of all, the taste of him, was thrilling enough. And despite what Jacob said, it was about as far from gross as I could imagine. Afterwards he wouldn't let me kiss him, and I understood why, but that was becoming the standard in all our encounters at the bunker, whether I'd used my mouth or not.

By the end of that summer I'd realised something. I couldn't have it all with Jacob. He wanted the kissing and the cuddling and the soft, sweet, whispered words. He wanted the sex, too. But under no circumstances did the two mix. As soon as my hand was in his shorts, the kissing stopped and became pure concentration on his part to reach the end goal. I started to miss that time two years ago when we had kissed for hours, my body tingling with anticipation for something that didn't even happen. Sometimes I watched him as he got close. His eyes were always closed, but I saw the soft flicker under his eyelids as if he were dreaming. He zoned out, the way he did when he smoked weed, or stood with his back to the windmill, willing it to take him away. I only prayed it wasn't from me.

Eighteen years old

Forty-six weeks wasn't enough to prepare me for my visit to the chalet the year we turned eighteen. It should have been a great summer. I had finished my A levels and—having decided to take a 'year out' to save before uni—had acquired myself a decent-ish job which didn't start until September. That left me with a whole summer of complete freedom. But none of that could change the fact that Granddad's cancer had come back, and as much as Mum tried to sugar-coat it, I knew it was back full force. Thankfully, Granddad soon put a stop to any speculation I might not visit that year. "As long as Tom still wants to come, he's coming," he told us. "Tom is my tonic. I wouldn't miss him for the world."

Despite having come out to my parents, which went predictably smoothly, I felt more and more isolated at home. None of my friends knew I was gay, so I never mentioned Jacob. I didn't even know why—I didn't think any of them would treat me differently—but there was never an appropriate moment to bring it into the conversation. I felt like I was living two very different lives, and the situation with Granddad only highlighted that. There was no way I could talk to my friends about my fears. All they knew was I spent my summers down at my granddad's chalet, just like I knew they went to Turkey or Spain or Cornwall. They had no understanding of how much Granddad or my time at the chalet meant to me. Grandparents got ill, or even—I didn't want to think it—died all the time. It was no big deal.

Just seeing Granddad that first day left me gulping back tears, not willing to make eye contact for fear of upsetting him with my reaction. "It's okay, Tom," he said, and led me to the table. We sat, and he put his arm round me and pulled me in for a hug that should have been stronger than it was.

"I'm sorry," I told him, unable to stop the tears from creeping out and spilling down my cheeks. I wiped them away only to have them followed by more.

"Well, I didn't want you to be sad being here," he said. "If I'd have known, I might not have made you come."

"You didn't make me come. I wanted to be here!"

He chuckled. "Well, that's nice to know."

After the obligatory cup of tea for each of us, and a good wodge of loo roll to cope with my sniffing, we talked properly. "I'm getting everything in order," he said. "I'm not about to leave any extra problems for your mum and

dad. They've got enough on their plate without having to deal with any rubbish from me. It's all in writing, but because you're here now I want you to know my plans." He talked about it in such a matter-of-fact way that he could have been telling me about changing gas suppliers.

"I'm leaving this place to you—"

My head jerked up. "What?"

"Don't look so surprised, Tom. Who else is it going to go to? If you're worried about your mum, don't be. She'll get the cottage and a few savings, not that they're worth much, but she's getting the bulk of it." He carried on, "This place has quite a long lease left on it, but it's up to you what you do with it. Don't feel obliged to keep it. If you want to sell it to pay for university—or for whatever reason—that's your choice."

The tears started again, and I pressed a fistful of tissues to my face. "I don't want you to—" I didn't say die. I couldn't.

Granddad patted me gently on the shoulder. "I'm good with it, Tom. I'll get to see your granny again."

"Is that what you believe?" I asked him, and immediately regretted it. Careless words, but he took them well, like he did with everything.

"It's what I *know*, Tom. We have our time here with the people we love, and we might be apart for a while, but it comes full circle. We go back to them because it's where we're meant to be."

It was pouring with rain that first day, so instead of racing to the windmill or the bunker or the beach, Jacob and I ended up in my room in the chalet. As soon as he walked in, he spotted the heart eraser on the windowsill. "Oh my God, you've still got it!" He was absolutely beaming.

"Of course I have. I promised, didn't I?"

"People don't always keep their promises."

"People don't," I said. "*I* do."

"You've put it by the window. That's where I keep our windmill." *Our windmill*. I didn't tell him I knew that, that I'd noticed it, bright and beautiful between the dirty curtains. "At home I keep it by my bed so I always know it's there," he said. "Sometimes I..." He stopped.

"Sometimes you what?"

“Nothing. It’s stupid.”

“What’s stupid about it? I keep your heart by my bed too. So I can keep you close to me.”

His cheeks dimpled. “Cool. I guess our windmill keeps you close to me too.”

The rain barely stopped the whole six weeks that summer, with just the odd ray of sunshine poking its way through the overcast sky. The gloom matched my mood, and as much as Jacob tried to cheer me up, the clouds didn’t clear. Telling me, ‘next year I bet it’ll be way hot’, was no consolation, because it wouldn’t just be the sun I missed next summer. What was more, the incessant rain confronted me and Jacob with practical issues too. We had nowhere to go to be alone. After his first visit that year, I could see Jacob wasn’t keen to come to the chalet again if he could avoid it. I don’t think he wanted to see Granddad the way he was. I understood. I didn’t want to see him like that either, and he was my family, not Jacob’s.

Maybe it was my pessimistic frame of mind, but Jacob’s unwillingness to see the perfect solution to our problem ate away at me, a constant reminder he was keeping me at arm’s length. He had never once invited me into the caravan, despite the fact we both knew his sister and Ryan were rarely there. He ignored the possibility of hours alone without interruption. I didn’t care that the place was a dump—wishful thinking even told me they might have cleaned it up since my last ‘visit’—just like I didn’t care about the spots on Jacob’s back. But he didn’t see that. As a result, our conversations about finding some privacy became an awkward dance, both of us trying desperately not to step on each other’s toes. He wouldn’t let me see where he lived, wouldn’t let me touch his skin, wouldn’t let me look into his eyes as he came. Unsaid words hung in the air between us like a bad smell.

Occasional gaps in the rain led to hasty visits to the bunker, where we ignored the mud and made do with what we could get. At least the terrible weather kept everyone else away. Other people weren’t as hardy—or as horny—as us, so I could happily have my head in Jacob’s lap without fear of getting caught. We tried new stuff, too, things we had only talked about over the phone when we were trying to get each other as wound up as possible. Those long-distance conversations, along with a healthy dose of porn most nights, had turned me on to exactly what I wanted when it came to sex. I knew

that if and when we did it—and I hoped to God it would be when—I wanted Jacob to be inside me. I never fantasised about it the other way round. And on particularly wet days when no sensible person would leave the house, much less make a trip up Tutt’s Mount, sometimes he pressed right up against me, *there*, making it clear in my mind that was the way he wanted it, too.

The last day I stayed at the chalet that year, the rain came down in sheets. It was torrential. My clothes clung to my skin, water dripping down my bare legs and into my shoes from just the short sprint to Jacob’s caravan. When he opened the door, I was shivering like the Princess and the Pea arriving at the castle.

“Hey,” he said. Lightning flashed in the sky. “Fuck!” He stepped back. “Get in here.” He only retreated enough for me to make it up the steps, and—just—out of the rain. He stood tall, obstructing my view of the caravan. Instinctively I wrapped my arms around him, but he pushed me away. “You’re soaking. Don’t get me wet, too. Where we gonna go?”

“Are you kidding?” I wiped at my forehead where the rain dripped from my sodden hair.

“Can we go to the chalet?” he asked. I shook my head, droplets spraying off me and onto him. “Oi!” He swiped at his face.

“Granddad’s not feeling well. He needs it to be really quiet.”

“Well, we can be quiet.”

I reached a wet hand out and squeezed his crotch. “What I’ve got in mind, there’s no way we can be quiet.” I leaned into his neck and nibbled against it. “I’m gonna make you come so hard,” I whispered, and I felt him swallow. That gulp made me nervous. Had I crossed some invisible line? We’d talked dirty so many times on the phone, it should have been natural, but face-to-face—or face-to-shoulder—was something else. I knew he didn’t respond well if he wasn’t turned on, but the way he was rapidly hardening under my fingers, maybe he was. “Where’s your sister?” I asked.

“Well, she’s out, but...”

“When’s she back?”

“They’re both out all day.”

“So?” I pushed my hand right into his shorts and started to stroke him. He let out a long shuddery breath.

“We can’t here,” he said. I gave him a few more strokes. I knew I was going to win this battle, and by the way his hips started to move in time with my hand, he knew it, too. “Okay.” Another gulp. He took my hand out of his shorts and linked his fingers with mine. “Look, I’m really sorry about my room, it’s kind of a mess.”

“Like I give a shit,” I told him.

“It’s pretty bad.”

“I told you, I don’t give a shit. I promise I won’t even look.”

“Come on, then.”

I kept my promise by refusing to take in our surroundings as I followed him, but as soon as we were in that tiny room, I couldn’t help noticing how small and scared he looked, as his eyes scanned from one place to the next. “I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just... If I’d known you were gonna be here, I’d have done something about the... mess.” There was nothing I could say to that. There wasn’t that much mess in his room, not in comparison to the rest of the place.

“It’s fine,” I told him. “You wanna see the state of my room at home.”

He sat down on the bed. “You wanna get out of your wet clothes?”

I grinned at him. “I thought you’d never ask.” I stripped my T-shirt over my head, catching the way his gaze ran over my chest. It soon moved to somewhere else when I pushed my shorts down my thighs and stepped out of them, completely naked and as hard as I’d ever been.

“Fuck,” he breathed, and reached a hand out to pull me onto the bed. As we kissed, he rolled on top of me, simultaneously trying to push his own shorts down. His breathing was already fast. I could have brought him off in an instant, but this time I wanted more. I’d thought about how to ask him a million times, and every single one of the words I could have used fled my mind as I lay on those grubby sheets, his body pressing onto mine. What is it they say about actions speaking louder than words? I took his hand, held it to my mouth, and spat onto his palm.

His throat made a strange sound. “You wanna...?”

I nodded. I kissed him hard on the lips, pushing my tongue into his mouth, and he responded with a groan before he pulled away. “You sure?”

I was sure. I brought my knees up, exposing myself to him. When his hands gripped my hips, I didn’t expect him to try to roll me over. It caught me by

surprise, and as a result he easily twisted me, so I ended up on my stomach, my cheek against the mattress.

When he tried to open me up with his fingers, it burned like crazy, and made me even more nervous about what was to come, but there was no way I was going to stop him. I wanted it so badly. I didn't care if it hurt—all I wanted was to feel close to him. I heard him spit against his hand again a few times before he reached down, and it was happening.

I might have instigated it, I might have fantasised about it a million times before, but it was still a total shock. I don't know what I had expected. I'd seen enough porn to know sex was just one person's body penetrating another, but it never once crossed my mind that Jacob and I would be like that. He might not ever have let me look into his eyes as he came, but that's because... I didn't even know. *This* was different. This was supposed to be the ultimate connection between two people. Wasn't it? I don't think he was especially rough, just horny and inexperienced. But although the pain was intense, that wasn't the cause of the tears that soaked into the dirty mattress. He fucked me without one kiss against my neck, or one tender word. He kept his T-shirt on the whole time. I didn't even get to experience the feel of his skin against mine. He came quickly. I didn't come at all.

Afterwards, we lay there together, and he rested his hand against my leg, right next to where my dick lay, limp and defeated. "Do you want me to...?" he asked.

"No, s'okay."

"Okay." He wiped gently at my face. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to hurt you. Spit's no good, is it? Next time, we'll get some lube."

I nodded, choking back more tears. He had no idea. I'd wanted this to bring us closer together. I wanted to keep the people I loved with me forever, but that wasn't the way life worked. As I shifted, and felt Jacob's cum leak from me, I knew he was already slipping away.

Nineteen years old

The year we turned nineteen, I had already travelled down to the coast that February along with my mum and dad. I was surprised to find out from Mum that Granny's ashes had been scattered into the sea there a few years before I was born. Of course, Granddad wanted to join her. It felt strange to realise that

Granddad and Granny had shared so many memories together at this beautiful place before I even existed.

It was a miserable day on the top of Tutt's Mount when we returned Granddad to Granny. The sky was grey and angry, but the windmill did its job beautifully, creating a strong enough breeze to lift Granddad right up into the sky. The sun did its job, too, peeking through the clouds at just the right moment, illuminating his ashes like stars as they fluttered into the sea below.

That summer, I had no real reason to go back to the chalet. It was mine in name already, and a year or so away while I decided what to do with it, was a feasible option. But I ended up going anyway. I needed to feel the hurt, the press on the open wound of my granddad's death, and possibly the death of my relationship with Jacob. I needed to see Jacob if only to confirm that it would be for the last time.

There had been no official break-up, which meant technically we were still boyfriends. Having taken a year out to re-take his exams, he had eventually applied for a place at uni close to me, with the pretence that it would mean we could see more of each other. That whole year was made up of pretending, something Jacob did better than me. If I was honest, I was doubtful he would get his A levels even second time round, especially since I knew for sure he was drinking, and I suspected he had moved onto harder drugs, too. Sometimes his messages were incoherent, but when I questioned him, he'd come back with something like, "I'm sooo wasted LOL." *Yeah Jacob, laugh out fucking loud.*

Over the year, we kept in touch, but ever since our last day together the year before, things had changed between us whether we wanted to admit it or not. Strangely, while the emotional side of our relationship was dying, the physical side stepped up noticeably, especially with online chat. Jacob could open up in a way he wasn't willing to do face-to-face. He would say stuff to me or send me pictures that would make a porn star blush, and what's more, he responded when I did the same to him. Much as I craved that rush of raw, sexual Jacob, it messed with my head. I was left with the dawning realisation that the only way I could get close to him was through sex, which was ironic seeing as that time on the grubby sheets in his dirty caravan we had never been further apart. The one time I injected a foolish "I love you" into our conversation, he responded with, "You get me so fucking hard," along with photographic evidence. I cried for hours that night.

Deep down, I think I knew he wouldn't be there, but when I saw the caravan gone, replaced with a shiny, new one, along with a shiny, new family to go in

it—a little girl sat on the steps this time—my world crumbled. All those missed calls, all those unreturned messages, all those near-arguments, no longer small seeds of doubt about our failing relationship, but full-grown weeds that had taken root and were here to stay. They had crept in slowly, stealthily, until I was left wondering how I had never noticed them before.

I made the trip up Tutt's Mount every evening and waited there for Jacob because I needed to say goodbye, just like I had with my granddad. I sat on the long grass, watching the sun dip under the horizon and take the warmth of the summer with it. I went to the windmill and made secret wishes just like Jacob had, but this time I wished for the wind to bring him back to me. I looked out at the sea to where Granddad and Granny were together again. What was it Granddad had said to me? *We might be apart for a while, but it comes full circle. We go back to them because it's where we're meant to be.* I wasn't sure I believed it.

Part Two

Twenty-nine years old

I never stopped looking for Jacob, although it was only two years before I called off the initial search. No more investigative calls to the company that owned the caravan park, no more emails to councils or schools or colleges in the area local to where—I thought—Jacob lived. No more—and I'm ashamed of the stupidity of this now—research on footballers with the name Preecy who may once, possibly, maybe have played for a team somewhere, anywhere down south. Or up north. Or east or west. That bastard had me looking for ghosts, people who existed only in his overactive imagination. I didn't even know if his surname was Preecy. I was taking a chance on his first name being Jacob.

So after two years of intensive searching, my equivalent of dredging the lakes, or sending out the helicopter, I officially called it off. I know exactly when the moment came. I sat in the clinic on the university campus, chewing my nails, and tapping my feet, and turning over in my mind the total overwhelming realisation that I knew nothing, absolutely nothing for sure about 'Jacob'. He could have had dozens of boyfriends back home, girlfriends even—he could have given them all his heart. He could have given them, or me, anything. So the trip to the clinic two years after the summer he didn't show, was my final 'fuck you' to the guy who broke my heart when I was eighteen, and had continued to mess up my life ever since.

I had two relationships after him, although it was up for question whether what I had with Danny could really be classed as a relationship. I met him in my third year at uni. He was a first-year engineering student, openly gay, and hot as all get out. His room in halls was where I received my first blow job—another 'fuck you, Jacob' moment—and numerous hand jobs. When I told him my ex thought blow jobs were gross, it made him even more determined to show me they weren't, and although we never really clicked that well outside of the bedroom, we had enough fun in the bedroom for neither of us to care that much.

Kyle was a different kettle of fish altogether. I was twenty-four, living at the chalet for most of the year, and—having taken over the running of my parents' business—working all the hours God sent, leaving me with very little social life. Mutual friends did the matchmaking—along the lines of 'well, they're both gay and single'—which shouldn't have worked but it did. Kyle was funny and

sweet and just an all-round nice guy. And guess what? He liked blow jobs, too. We were officially a couple for five months until the idea of moving in together came up. It pushed me into a corner, where I had to confront the fact I was holding back from Kyle. I felt bad about it, but we parted on reasonably good terms, and kept in touch. A year later when he told me he had met the love of his life, I was genuinely happy for him, and genuinely sad for myself that I didn't know where the love of *my* life was.

I often saw ghosts—a small boy with gangly legs and trainers, an adolescent with spots on his chin, even just a word or a laugh, they could all trigger memories. I dreamed about Jacob, too, and when I woke I'd take the heart eraser I kept on my bedside table, and hold it in my hand until the dream faded and I'd drift back to an uncomfortable sleep. I resented Jacob's heart. It had made me ghostlike too. A person living trapped between two worlds, not ready to move on to the next one until business was finished.

When Granddad told me about life coming full circle, I didn't believe him. I didn't believe in fate or soul mates or any of that bullshit then. People came and went from our lives all the time, sometimes we liked them, sometimes we didn't, sometimes we loved them—or thought we did—sometimes we didn't, but there was no master plan from any outside force. Things didn't happen for a reason. They just were. That's what I truly believed.

But when I think of all the coincidences that drew me and Jacob back together, and all the what ifs that could have kept us apart, I wonder if there could be some truth in Granddad's words. What if I hadn't booked a holiday on that date, at that place? What if I had decided to go two weeks later? A week even? What if I had gone with my mate Mark's suggestion of Zante instead of Crete? What if I had spent the day at the local market instead of the beach? What if I hadn't gone to get a Calippo at the moment the sun was directly above us? There were as many what ifs as there were grains of sand on the beach under my feet, but not one of them conspired against us that day.

The summer we turned twenty-nine, like all those other times, Jacob appeared to me as a ghost. As I watched him, the fluttering in my chest that always accompanied these sightings became stronger and stronger until it pounded in my ears and throat. The Greek sun blazed above us, bright and strong, and illuminated him just the way it had the first time I saw him. Jacob's ghost sat on a flight of steps, which led down to the golden sand of the beach. The sun shone in his hair, and glowed against the tanned skin of his legs. His eyes were closed, soaking up the warmth of the rays.

I watched for a long while, not noticing the Calippo dribbling down my arm, and dripping into the sand that burned the soles of my feet. The ghost's eyes opened, and he reached for something in his pocket. He put a cigarette between his lips. He tried to light it a couple of times, holding his hands to shield it from the breeze, until he shook his head.

A blonde woman appeared beside him, a pretty woman about our age, and she cupped her hands around it. He drew on the cigarette and smiled, and that's when I saw it. That easy smile. My body reacted as strongly as when he first blew smoke into my lungs. An instant, unstoppable reaction. My throat tightened, my stomach lurched, and I dropped to my knees in the sand. That smile. Jacob.

I closed my eyes against the head rush, and took in deep breaths, trying to steady myself as I crouched on all fours. Ten years I'd waited, and in this one moment under the sun in Crete, I'd found him.

I had wondered a million times how I would react if I ever saw him again. It had taken less than a few months for the hopeful *when* to turn to an *if*. Not long after, even that *if* had diminished to nothing, although the ghosts still tricked me sometimes—echoes of what I wanted to see. Would the anger disappear in a rush of joy, as I threw my arms around him, like a mum reunited with the child who had wandered away from her? Would the anger remain—had he hardened my heart so I could feel nothing but rage anymore? The idea that I might physically attack him frightened me. Although I knew it was a possibility, I pushed the thought away.

The smoke made him hazy, less real, and for a sickening moment I thought he might disappear again and leave me, the way all those ghosts had before. I had to reach him before he went this time. I pushed myself up, and on unsteady legs walked across the beach, partway up the steps, and stood beside him. He didn't notice me, even though I was sure the sound of my heartbeat and my uneven breaths could have been heard in Athens. It was only when my body blocked the sun, and the glow across his face disappeared into shadow, that he looked up to find the cause.

His reaction wasn't the same as mine, but maybe he hadn't seen my ghost everywhere he looked. Maybe he hadn't looked at all. His was a slow realisation, seen in the widening of his eyes. He swallowed. "Tom?"

I didn't gather him up in my arms, or attack him. I sat beside him and stretched my legs out next to his. It had never crossed my mind I would fall back on a cliché but it turned out I did. "Long time no see."

That smile, again. It dimpled his cheek, but dropped almost immediately. His hand shook as he brought the fag up to his lips. He drew on it with a shaky breath and it choked him. Good.

The blonde-haired girl cut in then. “You all right, Jay?” She smiled at me. “So, you two know each other?”

“Yeah,” I said. To my embarrassment, my hand was visibly trembling, too, as I held it out for her to shake.

“Tom, right? I’m Jess. Well, this is weird, seeing someone you know from England. How do you know each other?”

My gaze returned to Jacob. What am I talking about? I hadn’t taken my eyes off him. He was as beautiful as he always had been. The acne had gone, replaced with smooth tanned skin, but that made no difference. The guy could have contracted some horrible skin disfigurement in the time we’d been apart and still been just as beautiful in my eyes. This was the moment I ached to draw him into my arms and tell him none of it mattered, that he’d always been my Jacob and always would be. But Jess was there. Jess who called him ‘Jay’. He wasn’t my Jacob anymore.

He looked solely at Jess as he answered, not even flicking his eyes towards me. “Um... Tom... me and Tom... we used to hang out together. When I stayed at Lucy’s caravan, and Tom stayed at his granddad’s chalet. Every year. Every summer.”

“Wow, small world. Do you remember, Jay, when we met the guy from the flat above us when we were in Majorca and it turned out he was staying at the hotel next door to ours?”

He nodded.

The flat above *us*. I looked at her hands. No wedding ring on her finger, or on his either, although that didn’t surprise me. He wouldn’t be the type to wear a ring. I almost wished for a drag on his cigarette to calm my nerves. “So, you two, you’re...?” I gestured between them to make it clear what I was asking.

Jess snorted. “God no! I am *seriously* not his type.” She nudged his shoulder. When she looked me up and down, her eyes lingered on my chest. Of course I’d got used to that, I even appreciated it mostly. Not now, though. There was only one person I wanted that look from, and he wouldn’t even turn to me.

“Tom knows that,” Jacob butted in. “Me and Tom, we were...” I remembered the way he had tried out the word ‘boyfriends’ after our first kiss by the windmill. He didn’t say it now.

“Oh! Oh my God. You had a holiday romance? How cute is that?”

That hurt. This girl I had known for less than five minutes had defined our relationship better than me and Jacob had ever managed. A holiday romance. Is that what we always were?

“You here with a partner?” she asked.

“Nope. On my own.” Jacob had drawn the smoke down deep and held it there when she asked the question, and now he let it out in a long, slow stream.

“So, where you staying?”

I gestured up the beach. “Hotel Sunrise.”

“Oh, that’s just down the road from us. Looks nice.”

I shrugged. “It’s okay. It’s my last night tonight. I fly back tomorrow morning.”

Jacob flinched. He might not have turned to me, but I saw the way his shoulders jerked. “Come for a drink with us, Tom,” he said. “Before you go back.”

“I don’t know.”

Jess looked at Jacob, trying to read his expression that even I could see was stricken, and then to me. “It’d be nice,” she said. “If you haven’t got any other plans, that is?”

Up until then, my plans involved nothing more than a quiet meal on my own, and maybe a few drinks at one of the bars. Certainly not meeting up with the guy who had broken my heart and disappeared without trace.

Finally, Jacob looked properly at me, blue eyes fixed on mine. “Please, mate. Just for a bit, yeah?” He still had a hold over me. I think I hated him right then.

“All right,” I said. “Just for a bit.”

I considered not going, just not turning up. Maybe it wasn’t ever a real option, but it was one I played with while I got ready that evening. I looked in the bathroom mirror and gelled my hair, and gave myself a thought to toy

with—I could be making myself look good for someone else, someone who might appreciate it. I had never been one for going to gay clubs—or any clubs for that matter—but I could do that. I had no idea how gay-friendly the nightlife was in Crete, but I had experienced a few admiring glances from a couple of cute guys on the beach, looks that lingered longer than necessary to just be checking out a fit guy’s physique for the purposes of comparison. They were followed by a smile that told me that, too.

I could go out, pick up a guy, and let him fuck me. I could experience the strong grip of a guy’s hands on my hips and the sweat on his skin against mine, and it wouldn’t matter if I didn’t get to look into his eyes as he came, because it wasn’t Jacob. I could have all that, and not care if he disappeared the next day, because it never would have felt like anything more.

Jacob and Jess were already at the bar when I got there. Not surprising since I deliberately turned up late. Jacob could wait half an hour—it was nothing to my ten years. His back was to me, but I could see the way his leg jiggled under the table before Jess waved, and the jiggling stopped. “I thought you weren’t coming,” he mumbled around his cigarette.

“Shall I get the drinks in?” Jess asked. “What you having, Tom?”

I felt a sudden surge of panic at the thought of her leaving us alone together. To think of all those times we had longed for it just to be the two of us. I gestured to the bottles already on the table. “You’ve already got yours, right? I’ll go and grab myself a beer.” I wasn’t much of a drinker, but I needed a beer tonight. I might end up on the ouzo by the end of the evening.

I’d never really understood the phrase ‘chain-smoker’ before. Sure enough I got the idea, but had never seen it in action. The whole evening, Jacob lit up one after another, pausing only to take a swig of beer. Maybe he had taken up the mantle from his ninety-nine-year-old great-granddad, although I didn’t think so, seeing as even Jess found it out of character. “Jesus, Jacob, slow down a bit or you’ll have worked your way through the duty-free budget already!” He stopped for about three minutes, taking the time to push the cigarette packet around and around through his fingers. Side, end, side, end, side, end. Eventually, he gave in, took one out and lit it, breathing smoke out on a shaky breath.

Thank God Jess was there because she carried the conversation, and for a long time, anyone watching would have thought we were simply three friends on holiday—a pretty girl, and two guys who, for whatever reason, weren’t able

to hold each other's gaze. I sneaked looks at Jacob, just as I saw him sneak looks at me, but we never really looked at each other. Any chance meeting of eyes meant an immediate look down from me, and the turn of Jacob's head, using the pretence of blowing smoke away from us as his unvoiced excuse.

I couldn't get my head round how manly he looked. And I don't mean that in the sense of being butch, but just how he had changed and developed and matured in the years we had been apart, despite what I had thought of him before. The change was almost as remarkable as the one I had seen the summer we turned thirteen, like he had turned into a man all over again. He was just as broad as the last time I saw him, but he no longer apologised for his size with stooping shoulders. Along with his clearer skin, came the arrival of a couple of silvery crow's feet, probably more visible than usual against the dark contrast of his tan. They were definitely crow's feet and not laughter lines because even on the odd occasion when Jess said something that made him smile, it never reached his eyes.

Eventually, Jess excused herself, leading to me gulping down the rest of my beer, and the return of Jacob's knee jiggling. We might have sat in silence the whole time Jess was gone, if it weren't for the fact she bumped into someone she had met at the pool the other day and came back to tell us he had offered to buy her a drink. She gave Jacob a knowing smile, which was met with a 'help me' look from him, which she totally ignored.

We fell back on small talk. "So, uh, what you doing now, jobwise?" I asked him.

"Car sales."

Professional bullshitter.

"Right. I can see you doing that."

"Uh-huh. You?"

I told him about my parents' business, and he was surprised to find out I was living at the chalet. He had stayed nearby, and it was virtually a miracle we hadn't bumped into each other before now. Of all the places we could have seen each other, Crete didn't seem the most likely.

When the conversation ran out, which took all of about two minutes, Jacob took a deep breath, possibly the first fresh air he had had that evening, and looked at me. "Tom..." He pushed his fag packet through his fingers again, three times, before letting his hand rest on the table, near mine. "I wanted to

call, or email or... I dunno. I didn't know if... if you would want me to, after..." He shook his head. "Everything got so messed up and the longer I left it, the longer it went on and I couldn't. I didn't know if you would want to hear from me."

I snorted. "What, after all the missed calls and unanswered messages, you somehow got it in your mind that I didn't want to speak to you?"

"Look, I know I didn't answer your calls at first, but when they stopped I thought it was because you didn't want to... I didn't think you'd want to hear from me after all that time. The first few months, maybe you would, but once I'd left it that long, it was too late. I fucked it all up. I know that, and I'm sorry, and I didn't want it to happen like it did, but it just did, and... I guess I just wanted you to move on."

His fingers brushed mine, and immediately I snatched my hand away. I took another swig of beer, and spluttered. "You're such a fucking liar, Jacob. If you wanted me to move on, you could have called me. You could have told me it was over. Even a fucking email where you dumped me would have been good. Well, not good, but for fuck sake, it would have been better than ten years of not knowing. I didn't know if you were dead! Do you understand what that did to me, the not knowing? I loved you, and I didn't even know if you were alive."

"I'm sorry, okay?" His eyes opened wide, that sincere, angelic look I might have believed a few years ago. The look that made my granddad believe Jacob had lost his key and I had found it between two pebbles just outside Mr Tulley's shop. But we weren't eight years old anymore. I wished we were, but we weren't.

"Just tell me one thing," I said. It wasn't too much to ask. "Why?"

He shook his head. "I don't know, Tom. That's the God's honest truth." He put his hands out in front of him, palms up, as if he were offering something, but his answer gave me nothing at all.

What is it they say about never meeting your idols? They should extend that to never reuniting with your first love, too. It wasn't that twenty-nine-year-old Jacob was a disappointment. Nowhere near. Age suited him; the arrogant edge of adolescence had mutated into a manliness that took my breath away. As far as I was concerned, the guy was handsome beyond all words. Disappointment had nothing to do with the way Jacob was now, and everything to do with the

way it changed our relationship before he disappeared. I had loved him. Simple as. But I had seen that love through my own adolescent filter, one which ignored the evidence that he didn't feel the same. There was still so much anger for me there, too. I had put my life on hold for this guy, a guy who had left me without a word. I had missed out on so much for a guy who had responded to my heart-on-the-line *I love you* with a picture of his dick.

Ten years later, all he had given me was, "I don't know, Tom." It wasn't enough.

If it hadn't been for Jacob, maybe Kyle might have meant more to me. Danny not so much—that was what it was, and I had no regrets there—but Kyle cared about me, and I cared about him. If I had let go of Jacob, if Jacob had allowed me that option, maybe things would have turned out differently. Maybe I'd be shackled up with Kyle, living happily ever after, with a blow job every night to make the ending even happier. But I never let go of Jacob.

Bastard still wouldn't let me move on. After Crete, the texts started. Nothing much at first. The odd *Hey, how you doing?* I left it a long while before I texted back to tell him I was fine. I was absolutely fucking fine. After that came the *sorries*. I ignored them. We might not have said our goodbyes, but I knew he was still alive, I knew he was called Jacob—or possibly Jay—and that was all I had ever wanted, wasn't it? Well, apart from a good reason for disappearing, but I knew that was never going to happen, and as much as I could, I laid that one to rest.

Mate, got a couple of weeks off work. Can we meet up sometime?

I responded, with a polite, *Sorry, busy*. Maybe not that polite, but to the point at least.

I was about to get on with some tax stuff I'd been putting off for weeks—an exciting Saturday night in—when there was a knock at the chalet door. I rarely had visitors, although occasionally one of the caravan owners would come round asking if it was just them or was my electricity or water off, too. It never once crossed my mind that Jacob might have ignored my polite text and turned up uninvited.

He stood at the door, open box of beer under his arm, doing that thing drunk people do—trying to look sober.

“Jacob?”

“I brought round some beers.”

“Didn’t you get my text?”

“Which one?”

“The one that said I was busy?”

His already flushed cheeks reddened even more. “Uh, I kind of did, but I ignored it.”

“How did you get here?”

“I walked.”

“You walked forty miles?”

“Oh, no. I mean, I got the bus and then I walked.”

“Right.”

There was a very long pause.

“Can I come in? I’ve brought beers,” he said again, as if that might sway me.

“What you gonna do if I say no?” I asked him, although I already knew it wasn’t going to happen.

“I’ll go and jump off Tutt’s Mount. See if I can fly.” He gave a drunken chuckle.

I opened the door wide.

“It smells exactly the same!” he told me as he walked in. “This place. It smells exactly the same! You really live here now?”

“Uh-huh. For most of the year. You’re only allowed to spend eleven months a year in the chalets, but that’s okay. I go back to my mum and dad’s for a bit, and I usually have a couple of weeks away on holiday anyway. So…”

“So that’s why you went to Crete.”

“Yep, this year anyway. I like the Greek islands.”

He nodded. “Me too. I’ve only been to Crete though.”

We sat down at the table, and he pulled a couple of beers out of the box. “You got a bottle opener?”

I gave him one, and he popped the lids off two bottles and slid one towards me. “I went to Crete to see the windmills.”

It was a world away from what I’d been expecting, and the beer caught in my throat. I coughed. “Not for the sun and the sea and the cheap drink, then?”

He laughed. “Well, that too. But you can get those anywhere. I wanted to see your windmills.”

“*My* windmills?”

“The ones you told me about.”

“Why?”

“Because they sounded cool.”

When he banged down his bottle, it frothed up, spilling out the top. He put his finger into the liquid, making circles with it on the table. He stared at his finger as it went round and round and round. “I’ve still got your windmill, you know?” he said, although he didn’t look up. “I still keep it by my bed.”

“Jacob...”

“Just saying...”

“Just saying what?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. “I miss you, Tom.”

I almost felt sorry for him as he sat there telling me lies and expecting me to believe him. I wasn’t as gullible as my granddad. I might have been once, but I’d learned better.

“Jacob, whatever we had, it’s ended. It ended the day you didn’t turn up here that summer ten years ago. Let’s face it, it had probably ended before that, but what you did, the disappearing, it was too much. I lost my granddad that year and you knew that. It was so hard for me to go back to the chalet, but I did, even if it was just to say goodbye, and that’s why I can’t forgive you. Believe me, I’ve tried and I can’t. You had no reason for it. You could have called me, dumped me, anything, and I would have forgiven you, but just disappearing for no reason—”

“I had a reason.”

“I mean, a good one. Not ‘oh, I just forgot to call a few times and then it got too long, and I didn’t know how to get back in touch’. Not—”

“I wasn’t the person you thought I was.”

“What, the one with the footballer dad, and the model mum, and the holidays in Florida, and all that shit? You don’t say!”

His cheeks burned. “Not just that.”

“Well, what then? Because what you’re giving me ain’t enough!”

He rubbed his hands over his face, leaving a streak of beer on his cheek, and sat back. “I lied about a lot of stuff.”

“Figures.”

“But only because... well, because everything was shit. At home, there were all these rumours about me, about my family. I was one of those kids everyone talked about. You know the type, right? The ones all the mums at school don’t want their kids playing with. They all reckoned my dad was in prison.”

“Was he?”

“I dunno. Maybe. My mum said he wasn’t, but, I dunno...”

“So you told me he was a footballer?”

“I wanted him to be. Tom, I’d look around at all those other kids and I’d wonder what I was doing wrong. Why wasn’t my dad like theirs? Why wasn’t my house like theirs? Our house was really dirty. All those shitty kids at school teased me about it. Do you know what it’s like to have people following you round, pretending to spray you with deodorant? Going like this...?” He pretended to shake a can, and spray all over himself. “*Shhhhhhh*. I heard that fucking noise wherever I went.”

“But I would never have done something like that!”

“Oh really? You reckon?”

I resented the implication. “Shows how well you know me if you’ve got to ask.”

“Well, whatever. I hated my life so I made one up. I made up the one I wanted—the one where we could be together and I could be just like you and we’d end up going to uni together and getting married and all that shit. Is that so bad? I didn’t want you to be just another one of those kids, so I told you that stuff about me and you believed it.”

“So it’s my fault now?”

“I’m not saying that, I’m just saying...” He gestured with his hand and accidentally caught the beer bottle. It spilled all over the table. “Shit! Sorry.”

I got some paper towels to clear up the mess, and as I did he grabbed my hand. “Tom, I miss you. I can’t even tell you how much, but I do. I loved you.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Maybe a bit.”

“Maybe a lot.” I sighed. “Look, I can’t do this. I’m sorry about your shitty life and those kids at school and your dad, but I put my life on hold for ten years because of you. And you know what? The thing I can’t forgive is you thought so little of me that if you told me the truth you thought I wouldn’t accept it. Don’t forget, I loved you too. At least I told you at the time. Now, it’s too late.”

“For us?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I’m sorry, but it is.”

“You got someone?” he asked. I bristled at that. He had no right. Nothing I did since we were nineteen had anything to do with him.

“Nope, but that doesn’t mean—”

“You seen a lot of guys since us?”

“A couple.”

He nodded, almost approvingly. “A couple, like two? Or a couple, like a few?”

That was dumb. A couple meant two. Everybody knew that. “A couple,” I repeated. “You?”

“Me what?”

“You had a lot of relationships?”

“Depends what you mean by relationships I guess. Nothing serious.” He took a swig of beer. “I’ve fucked a lot of guys.”

A surge of anger shot through me. “Right. Thanks for telling me that.”

He raised his eyebrows. “What’s it matter?”

“It doesn’t.”

“Jesus, mate, if you’re gonna get all pissy about it, why ask?”

I put my bottle down on the table. It banged down with more force than I meant. “I’m not getting pissy about anything.”

“You kind of are.”

“Well, maybe I have reason to get pissy. Think about it, Jacob. We shared all that stuff together. You were the first guy I ever—”

“Fucked?”

“Really? You wanna go there? Fucked? Yes. Kissed? Yes. Fell in love with? Yes. I fell in love with you and you let me. You made out it was something to you, too, so don’t pretend you didn’t. There was all that stuff—the heart, the windmill, the bunker, *everything*, and you made out it was something special. It was never all just me. Say it was all you like, but it wasn’t. If you wanna talk about the fucking bit, then whatever, but don’t flatter yourself. When it came to sex, just to let you know, you weren’t all that. Everything was take with you. All that ‘oh yeah, you can blow me, but like fuck am I doing that gross thing to you,’ it’s not that hot, you know? In case you didn’t notice, I didn’t even come when we did it.” He flinched like I’d hit him. That had hurt, but I wasn’t done. “I feel sorry for all those other guys you’ve fucked.”

His knuckles whitened around the beer bottle, and for one horrible moment, I thought he would crush it between his fingers. “Oh really?”

“Yeah, I do.”

And then the hard look on his face changed to a sly smile. “Well, maybe if you felt like that you shouldn’t have begged me. Seriously mate, I’ve never seen a guy so desperate for dick.”

I flew at him then, ten years of rage coursing through me. “You fucking bastard!” He hadn’t expected it, and it gave me the advantage. I saw the shock in his eyes, the way he reacted seconds too late to duck away. He jerked his chair backwards, but I was on him already, the force of my lunge bringing us both crashing down, along with all the bottles from the table. They smashed on the floor, beer seeping out between shards of glass. My legs straddled his waist, and he jerked his hips, trying to throw me off. I’ll give him this, he fought back hard. The guy was strong, but no match to the superhuman strength my anger gave me. I could have pinned a bucking bronco to the ground.

“You fucking bastard!” I yelled again, spit flying from my mouth. “You think you can just—”

When his fist came up and grazed my chin, I caught it and forced both his arms to the ground. His chest heaved. He flailed under me, but every movement of his was met with a stronger one from me. I was crazy, high on rage. That time Jacob told me he felt more powerful than the brightest sun was nothing on this.

“Get the fuck off me! Get! The! Fuck! Off!” Every syllable was punctuated with another jerk of his body. Above my grip on his wrists, his hands thrashed like fish gasping for oxygen.

Anger seared through me as my eyes fixed on his. Jacob’s were wide open, the palest blue. They looked straight through me. He wasn’t there. It wasn’t Jacob’s body thrashing under me, or at least it wasn’t Jacob as he was now. It was a little kid fighting for his life. I saw it now.

I thought I’d known the guy since he was eight years old, but I was kidding myself. All this time I’d been asking the wrong question, the wrong ‘why?’ Why did you leave me, Jacob? Not, why won’t you let me touch you? Why won’t you let me look into your eyes? Why do you wish so fucking hard for the windmill to take you away? I’d seen it all and I’d understood nothing.

Even my granddad had seen it. *Is everything all right with Jacob?* “Sure,” I’d replied, because I didn’t want to see. Underneath me Jacob jolted again, then his movements stuttered to a stop, and he lay weak against the floor, defeated. “Please,” he whispered.

Immediately, I loosened my grip on his wrists, although I didn’t let go. He needed something grounding him, keeping him there. “Jacob, it’s me, Tom.” His eyes closed, and his lips twitched as if he were trying to say something but couldn’t figure out what it was.

Cautiously, I released his wrists, and immediately his hands curled into fists. His right one lifted up—instinctively I ducked back, but it slammed against the floor, and into the broken glass. “Fuck!”

I backed off, and he scrambled to his feet. He staggered to the bathroom, trying to kick the door closed, but it swung back open, and I saw him sink to his knees and heave into the toilet. Slowly, I pulled the door closed to give the guy some privacy. He wouldn’t want me to see.

It took only the time for me to clear up the broken glass for the puking to stop, but he remained in there a long while after. When he came out, his skin was pale, the only colour on his face the blotches under his eyes. He had

mummified his hand with loo roll. Blood seeped through it. "I should go," he said.

"Are you kidding? Where you gonna go?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. One of the caravans must be free."

"Yeah, 'cause they're gonna hire one out to a drunk, bleeding guy in the middle of the night."

"Then I'll sleep on the beach."

"No, you bloody won't. You can stay here."

He shook his head. "Tom, I can't..."

I stood right by him, but I didn't touch him. I had a feeling he would flinch away. "You can stay in my old room. You're not sleeping on the beach." I tried to lighten the mood. "You don't get superhero sheets at the beach, you know?"

He gave a weak smile. "Thanks. I'm sorry about the..." He gestured around the room, even though I'd already cleared up the mess we'd made. His bloodshot eyes looked into mine. "About everything."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, too."

A thin trickle of blood escaped his makeshift bandage.

"We'd better sort out your hand," I said. "You might need stitches."

He shook his head. "Nah, it's fine."

"At least get a proper bandage on it, yeah?" There was still a first-aid kit kicking around somewhere, left over from Granddad's time at the chalet.

It wasn't exactly 'fine', but it wasn't as bad as it could have been. Like a lot of sharp, deep cuts, there turned out to be more blood than really seemed necessary, and once I'd run it under the tap and checked it, luckily it looked small enough not to need stitches. Instead, I bandaged it up just the same as he had already done with the loo roll. Once that was done, I went into some kind of strange B&B owner mode where I showed him to my old room, presented him with towels and told him to make himself at home, and help himself to breakfast in the morning. I kept the conversation as formal as possible because anything else might have led to an uncomfortable silence that I didn't think either of us would be able to deal with right then.

"Okay, if you've got everything you need, I'll leave you to it then," I said, and turned to go.

“Thanks.” He took a deep breath. “Tom?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you stay for a bit?”

“In here?”

“Yeah, just in the room. Not to talk or anything, just to...” He shook his head. “Sorry, it’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid, Jacob. Tell me what it is.”

“Just to be there?”

“Sure,” I said. “I can do that.”

I left him for a few minutes, and when I came back in he was already under the covers, eyes closed, his bandaged hand tucked under his cheek. I sat in the chair by the side of the bed without saying a word, and before long, his soft breaths became deeper. He shifted a little, and his hair fell over his face. He looked so young and innocent. The Jacob lightly snoring in bed seemed a world away from the man I had seen earlier, so full of anger and spite. But I wasn’t the same Tom either.

When I was sure he was out for the count, and I was trying to prevent myself from slipping into sleep in the chair, I went to find him a peace offering. I took a bowl out of the kitchen cabinet, wrote ASHTRAY on a scrap of paper and put them on the small table beside the bed. He would want a smoke when he woke up. I could always air the room out after.

What do you do when the person you love has been through something so bad that they’ve kept it a secret locked inside them for years? Something so bad they would choose to disappear off the face of the earth rather than risk you finding out? Well, apparently you make them a fry-up, or at least that’s what I did. I know how flippant that sounds, but I was completely lost, I had no idea how I was supposed to react, how I was supposed to deal with it. I woke early in the morning and made my way down to Mr Tulley’s to buy bacon and eggs, and baked beans, so I could provide Jacob—and maybe myself—with some normality until we figured out what the hell we were doing. Even at the early hour, Mr Tulley was doing a roaring trade, being helped full-time by Mr Tulley Jr by the looks of things. I was glad to see it. I didn’t expect my little shoplifting escapade sixteen years ago had made too much of a dent to profits,

but I stuck a fiver in the charity box by the till to atone for my sins. I guess I was feeling guilty that day.

Something in me was scared Jacob might not be there when I got back. If I was honest, the ashtray I left for him was my insurance. A deal. If I let you smoke in the chalet, then promise not to leave, not yet anyway. Not until we've worked this out, worked out what we are to each other and what we can be. I didn't know if it was my insurance policy that worked, but when I arrived back at the chalet, Jacob was there, sitting on the little bed on top of the superhero covers, his back leaning against the wall.

"Fry-up?" I asked him, and he looked up at me surprised, through a fog of smoke. I don't know what he'd been expecting, but it certainly wasn't that.

He smiled. "Sounds great."

We ate slowly and in silence, the quiet chink of the cutlery echoing in the awkwardness. When we couldn't drag it out anymore, he finally put down his knife and fork and looked at me.

"Thanks Tom. Thanks for everything. I'm sorry about last night. I didn't mean for any of that to happen."

"I know."

"I should get out of your hair."

"I don't want you out of my hair." I picked up the plates and put them in the sink. "Fancy a trip to the windmill?"

"Really?"

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, why not? Race you there?"

"Sure."

We didn't race. We jogged side by side, enjoying the sound of each other's breaths and the thud of our feet on the dry ground. I let him reach the windmill first, and we flopped down onto the grass, him on his back, me on my front. He lit a fag, and closed his eyes, soaking up the sun's rays. It was a beautiful day, one where the warmth of the sun, and the call of the seagulls, and that seaweedy smell of the water can trick you into thinking the world is perfect, when beneath that clear blue sky, the world is anything but.

He blew out beautifully round smoke rings, small perfect gifts for me. We lay in silence for a long while, me watching him as he smoked. I picked the long blades of grass, carefully wrapping them around and around my fingers.

“Jacob?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

He drew hard on his cigarette. “I can’t.”

“Not even to me?”

“Not even to you.”

Gently, I laid a hand on his chest. After a moment, when his body stiffened at the contact, he put his bandaged hand on top of mine, and the tips of his fingers closed around it. It was hard to reconcile the peaceful look on his face with the fast pounding of his heart.

Eventually, he said, “I want to be with you, Tom, but I don’t know how. My head’s so messed up, and I don’t know how to sort it.”

“We can try and sort it together?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

I knew I was pushing him, but I didn’t know what else to do. My head was messed up, too. “Who was it?”

His hand twitched against mine.

“Your dad?”

He sat up, chucked his cigarette down, and ground it out with his trainer. “No.” He kept going, as if he were trying to grind it right down to the centre of the earth. Eventually, he poked a finger into the mess, flicking the fluff of the filter and the tiny brown threads of tobacco around in the grass. “It was my mum’s boyfriend, and it was for a long time, and that’s it.”

“That’s it?”

“I can’t tell you any more.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you to know.” He took a deep breath. “I never wanted you to know any of it. Even all that stuff about my dad being in prison—and the kids at school—I didn’t want you to know that, either, because

I didn't want to be *that* kid, and when I was with you I didn't have to be. The lying came easily, but stopping it was impossible. I just didn't know how. I couldn't see any way we could be together. I didn't get my exams, there was no way I was going to uni. There was no way it could have worked."

"It might have done if I'd known. I wish you'd told me. About your mum's boyfriend. I could have done something."

He looked at me then, his eyes hard. "What could you have done?"

"I don't know. Told someone. Stopped it."

"And why couldn't I have done that, if it was so easy?"

"Because..."

"I told my mum. She didn't believe me."

"Oh God, I'm sorry."

"Said I was trying to cause trouble, to split them up."

"I'm so sorry."

He cocked his head to the side as he looked at me, his eyes narrowed like he was working something through his mind, trying to figure it out. "You know what?" he said. "You're the only one who ever believed me. Even all that shit I made up, you believed it, or at least you made out you did. No one else ever did that. When I told the truth they didn't believe me, when I lied they didn't believe me, but you did, and you're the only one. And that kind of made it real—all that stuff about my rich dad, and my posh holidays, that was my life when I was with you. That was Jacob Preecy. The real me."

"You know my granddad believed you too? When you told him about losing your key and me finding it when really we went up to the windmill."

Jacob smiled. "God, I forgot about that. Your granddad was cool."

"Yeah, he was. And gullible." That made his smile wider. I linked my fingers with his, absent-mindedly wrapping the long blade of grass I held around them. "I want to help, if you'll let me," I told him. "We can figure out who the real Jacob Preecy is together."

Jacob stayed that night, and for every night that week, sleeping in my old bedroom under the superhero covers. I longed for him to join me in my bed, but I didn't suggest it. We still hadn't figured out what we were doing. I spent a lot

of time doing research while he slept. He never confirmed exactly what had gone on, but I knew enough from just the fear in his eyes. Every search I made came up with the same answers—*time, space, listen, believe*, like one of those twee wooden signs that hang in the kitchen, token words that look cute but mean nothing. The first two made my heart sink. I wanted to help him *now*. I would focus on *listen* and *believe* and hope the others might fall into place.

We raced to the windmill each day, sometimes I beat him, sometimes I let him beat me, and sometimes we made it neck and neck. One time, when I beat him, he called for a rerun on grounds of a false start. “We’re here now,” I told him. “We’ve got nowhere else to go.”

“Sure we have,” he yelled, as he ran over the long grass in the direction of our bunker. We tumbled down onto the ground, and just in the way he had done when I had given him the stolen windmill from Mr Tulley’s, he leaned over and kissed me.

My breath caught in my throat. “Jacob...” I whispered. I longed for more, but we were just getting to know each other again, and I didn’t want to spoil what we had. He rolled onto me, his body pressing mine gently into the grass. “Are you sure?” I asked. “Because if you...”

He brushed a gentle kiss against my lips again. “Just this,” he said.

We went right back to that summer when we were fifteen, when we kissed and kissed and wanted so much more, but didn’t take it. That summer where everything was so simple and unspoiled, and it was enough to just kiss and talk, and to watch the sun being pulled down behind the horizon together.

When Jacob went back to work, and I couldn’t neglect the business any longer, we made a promise to claim back all those summers we missed. He didn’t live that far away. Weekdays would be our year apart, weekends our six weeks of summer. From then on, every weekend, Jacob slept in my bed. Most nights we lay curled around each other, talking or kissing. Sometimes I just lay there listening to his breaths, trying to make up for all those beautiful breaths I missed in the ten years we were apart. We didn’t make any rules, but I was painfully aware of my own unwritten one that I would never initiate anything more than kissing. I kept to it too, despite the fact I ached to be with him—literally. Most mornings I woke with my body pressed to his, my dick leaking into my shorts. Strategically I would fake a yawn, and use the accompanying stretch to subtly move away from him.

It wasn't helped by the fact we went back to our old days of phone sex. If Jacob was able to open up that way, then that was what we'd do. I no longer resented pictures of his dick, hard, the flushed head wet with precum. I craved them, even if it did make those hands-off times in my bed almost unbearable. It drove me completely insane. One day when I lay there wondering if it was actually possible to die of blue balls, his warm hand slipped into my shorts. I moaned with the sheer pleasure of just that one touch, and my hips arched up. "Jacob," I breathed. "I won't be able to stop."

When he pushed his own shorts down and rolled onto me, his dick touching mine, my entire body responded. I shook with lust. "I need it too," he whispered. "We're just two guys who met in a club. We'll deal with the rest later." He buried his head against my neck, and we thrust against each other, our dicks trapped between us. I did my best to stifle my groans, not sure if he would want to hear them, but when Jacob's breaths came quicker and harsher against my neck and his body shuddered, my own orgasm overtook me, stampeding over any good intentions. I cried out with pleasure.

We lay there for a long while, pressed together, our cum sticky between us, when finally Jacob rolled away from me, onto his back. I reached a hand out to touch his hair, pushing my fingers into the strands. "Are you okay?" I asked him.

"That time," he said. "That time, when we did it, in the caravan?"

"What about it?"

"You didn't come."

"No."

"Why?"

"Well... because... mainly because it hurt a lot."

"So you didn't enjoy it?"

"If you want me to be honest, no I didn't."

"Right." Silence fell between us. It scared me, and I tried to fill it.

"Why? Does it matter?"

"He could make me come."

"What do you mean?" As his words sunk in, they pushed the breath right out of my lungs in a sudden whoosh. "Oh God, Jacob, I'm so sorry."

“What do you think that means?”

“I don’t think it means anything. What do *you* think it means?”

“That I wanted it, just like he told me? That I was a dirty kid, just like everyone thought, and he saw that in me.”

“You can’t really think that.”

“Why did he choose me? Why not some other kid?”

“There might have been other kids. I think you were just there.”

“But did he see something in me? Something wrong? Like everyone else did?”

“Not everyone, Jacob.” Gently I stroked his hair.

“No. Not everyone.” He drew in a long breath. “I don’t know. I’m just thinking out loud.”

“You know what I think? I think he knew exactly what he was doing. He knew how to manipulate you and make you feel ashamed, make you feel like it was your fault. That’s all I think about it.”

“Maybe.” He fell silent again.

I tried to think of a way to let him see that sometimes there was no reason for something, no justification, but we made those links in our minds because we were trying to make sense of a world that made no sense at all.

I reached for the loo roll I kept beside the bed, and wiped up the mess. Much as I might have wanted his spunk on me forever, I figured he would want to feel clean.

“Jacob?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you remember what you told me about the windmill?”

“What about it?”

“That it made the wind?”

His lips quirked up in a wry smile.

“Yeah, I remember. Did you believe me?”

“I always believed you, Jacob. Did *you* believe it?”

“I did at the time.”

“Why?”

“Because it made sense. Whenever the sails turned the wind was there.”

“Uh-huh. But that was because you were a little kid, and you didn’t understand about air pressure and stuff like that.”

“I’m not sure I understand it now, either!”

“But you understand enough to know that the wind is there even if the windmill isn’t.”

“So?”

“So all I’m saying is, sometimes we think things happen for one reason but that’s just because they fit with what we know at the time. There could be a million other reasons for them that we just don’t know about.”

“I suppose.” He paused. “Tom?”

“Yeah?”

“I liked to think that the windmill made the wind, didn’t you? It just seemed such a cool thing to do.”

“Do you know what, then? We can believe whatever we like. Let’s believe it anyway.”

Despite the fact the real summer was well and truly over, the sun had other ideas, and shone just as brightly that day in September as it had the hottest day of the year. Or at least, that was what we chose to believe. It was quiet at the beach since the kids had gone back to school, and we could enjoy the relative privacy it gave us. We laid our towels out on the sand, and stripped off our tops. Jacob would lie there shirtless quite happily now. He still struggled with touch but more so in situations where it could lead to something more. Being at the beach, in a public place, felt safe for him, and even though times back at the chalet were more of a challenge, we were muddling through in our own way. We hadn’t fucked, and I wasn’t sure if we would again. Nothing would happen until we managed to find a compromise—some middle ground between the closeness I craved and the distance Jacob needed. And if we never found that middle ground, so be it. We were doing okay.

He picked up the sun cream and passed it to me. “Can you do my back?”

“Sure.”

He turned over, and I rubbed the cream into his already tanned skin. His back was smooth, now, except for a few round silvery marks left by the acne—scars that had faded with time but would never completely disappear.

After a while, Jacob turned to me. “Fancy a swim?”

“I dunno,” I said. “It’ll be freezing.”

“I dare you.”

“Fuck that,” I murmured, and he laughed.

He sprang up into a squat. “Race you there?”

He knew I couldn’t resist the competition, and within seconds I was behind him, splashing into the water.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, it’s cold!”

“Get under, you wimp!” He pounced at me and we both fell, tumbling into the shallow waves. I looked up at him to see that beautiful smile on his face. I didn’t care that there were still a few people milling around on the beach who might see—I couldn’t help it. I lifted my head, and claimed his mouth in a deep kiss. Or maybe he claimed mine. Neither of us gave a damn.

A sudden gust of wind skittered across the water, and we both shivered. “Jesus, where did that come from?”

He nodded towards Tutt’s Mount. “Well, would you believe me if I said from up there?”

Even from that distance we could make out the windmill’s sails turning.

I smiled at him. “Yes,” I said. “I think I would.”

The End

Author Bio

Danni Keane lives in the depths of English suburbia, where she likes to divide her time equally between writing, daydreaming and napping.

Having never really grown up, Danni fits right in at her day job working with children. She spends her days avidly listening to the whimsical imaginings of five-year-olds, and then rushes home to shamelessly plagiarise their ideas. However, she has yet to write a story about an exploding ghost banana. Maybe one day...

She loves to read and write all different types of stories, but her favourite characters usually have one thing in common: they are ordinary people with extraordinary dreams.

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