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Opening extract from

The Last Summer of Us

Written by

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Published by

Usborne Publishing Ltd

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For everyone we've lost,
and everyone we've found along the way

First published in the UK in 2015 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House, 83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. www.usborne.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781409587699 03562/1 JFM MJJASOND/15

Printed in the UK.

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"Limpet?"

Steffan has always called me Limpet, ever since the first time we met. Why should the day of my mother's funeral be any different?

"How're you doing?" he asks.

"You're seriously going to ask me that? Today?"

"You'll feel better when it's over."

"Did you?"

He shrugs.

Everything's off, everything's uncomfortable. Even the way he's looking at me: like he's still him, and I'm still me, but there's glass in between us, like we're somehow distanced from each other; different. In his case, it's the outfit. I would barely recognize him if I passed him in the street dressed like that: black suit and tie, and looking as smart as I've ever seen him – right down to the polished

shoes. I've never really seen him wearing actual *shoes* outside of school before. Trainers, yes. Those ridiculous hiking boots he wore with shorts for the entire summer a couple of years ago? Sadly, yes. They were unforgettable – and not in a good way. But actual black-shiny-leather-shoes-with-laces? I can only think of one other time. I want to be normal, to make a joke, to smooth down his dark hair – which is still sticking up in spikes like a hedgehog with a headache, however tidy the rest of him might be – but his dad's waiting for him with a hard look on his face and I guess I'm not supposed to make jokes today.

Today I have to be…someone else.

It's been twelve days since my mother died; twelve days since the noises in the night. The sound of footsteps and the front doorbell seeping into my dreams. Twelve days since the voice in the small, dark hours of the morning, saying: "I think your mother's dead."

Steffan's barely gone inside before someone else says my name, and Jared's standing behind me. More at ease in his funeral get-up than Steffan – or me, because however hard I try to ignore them, my shoes *really* hurt – he looks like one of those Hollywood stars you see in old films. He does that. Look good, I mean. He has that Steve McQueen, young Paul Newman thing going on. Tall and blond and cool and broad-shouldered, with his hair swept back, looking like he doesn't even have to try. He probably doesn't.

Take today, for example. Jared looks like he's about to walk the red carpet. It's effortless for him. Meanwhile, Steffan looks like a backing singer for a wedding band. And me…?

Well, I look like crap. Moving on.

Jared, Steffan and me.

I guess the usual thing would be to say we're some kind of triangle, or a tripod, or something else that makes you think of the number three. Inseparable. Something which goes wibbly at the corners and collapses if all its sides aren't there. But us, not so much.

We're more like that poster you see on the wall in mechanics' workshops; you know the one? A triangle with the words *QUICK*, *GOOD*, *CHEAP* written along the sides (feel free to insert your own joke here, by the way – you know you were thinking it). The point is, the diagram's telling you that getting the combination to work is rarer than hens' teeth. The three sides of the triangle, however you look at it, always break down into "two-plus-one". You'll get a repair done quickly and it'll be good…but it won't be cheap. Or you could get a cheap, quick repair which won't be good…and so on. Same with us – in any number of ways, we're always two-and-one. Never quite three. But somehow, we kind of fit. You might not think it, but we do – that's why I like it; like us. We're…unexpected.

Jared, Steffan and me. Less the Three Musketeers, more the Mechanic's Paradox. Glamorous, right?

And by the way, if we *were* the Three Musketeers, I'd totally be Athos. Except for the shoes. I bet you anything Athos never had to put up with shoes like these.

Like everything else I'm wearing, they're new. New shoes, new dress, new bag. Normally, I'd be feeling pretty good about that – but the magic of it's lost on me right now. In the shop, I handed over the cash as the assistant folded the dress into tissue paper, tucking everything into a thick paper bag with woven ribbon handles. She passed it across the counter to me and smiled and said, "Treating yourself to a new outfit? Lovely." She meant it, too. I guess maybe to her it didn't seem weird for a sixteen year old to be buying a bunch of black stuff that makes her look like she's thirty-five or something. Maybe it's not – not in that kind of shop, anyway.

As if the shoes weren't enough of a pain, there's the thing with the flowers. Which is…awkward. The florists have forgotten to attach the cards to the wreaths, and apparently as I'm the one who organized them all, it's up to me to fix this. Me, and the funeral director – who I find kneeling by a pillar in the church, poking at the flowers and getting his black morning suit all dusty. A few paces behind him, a little knot of family are talking quietly.

The funeral director sees me coming and stands up, brushing his knees.

"I wondered whether you might be able to…" He nods

at the flowers. "I wouldn't want to get it wrong." Why he couldn't ask my dad, I don't know – and then, with a sinking feeling, I realize that he probably did. Like he'd be any use.

"Men and flowers, right? Clueless."

He blinks at me, and – exactly three seconds too late – I remember the *Be Somebody Else Today* rule. Keep your chin up and your mouth shut. Suck it up and choke it down. All that. So I try to look solemn and start matching cards to flowers as everyone takes their seats in the narrow pews, and I'm barely done before the coffin's at the door.

"Do you want to see her? Do you?" Twice, my dad asked me that, and each time I answered it got harder to stop my voice from cracking.

"No. I don't want to." Three thirty in the morning, and we were waiting for the coroner's officer. I made tea. It's what you do, isn't it? Don't ask me why, but when everything goes wrong, you make tea. So that's what I did. Constantly. The two police officers who'd come with the ambulance waited with us. At first I thought they were just being, you know…nice. But then a little voice in the back of my head piped up and asked whether it wasn't more likely that they were, essentially, guarding the body. Guarding my mother – or at least, what used to be her. The shell of her.

I ignored the little voice and made them tea. Lots of tea.

And to their credit, they drank every single cup.

Or poured it on the houseplants when I wasn't looking…

"Lovely service."

"Beautiful service."

"Your eulogy was perfect. You had her exactly right."

"Just what she would have wanted."

"Such a beautiful funeral."

The handshakes and platitudes go on for ever, and I feel like my skin is inside out: every part of me is just one big exposed nerve. I smile and nod and dig my fingernails into my left palm and remind myself that I'm someone else today and she will be keeping her cakehole firmly shut. Because no funeral is lovely. No funeral is beautiful – mostly because it's a fucking funeral and you only have them when somebody's dead. And my mother would, I'm sure, really rather not be dead. What she'd *want* right now is to be on a cruise around the Caribbean. Or lying on a sunbed by a pool with a stack of books. Not shut in a box that's about to be dropped down a big hole.

But today's not the day for telling the truth. Today's a day for lying, and pretending you don't know that everyone else is lying too. I'm not sure who I hate more: all of them for lying to me – lying *with* me – or me for almost believing them because it's what I thought I needed.

* * *

It's done. Over. Dead and buried, and people are starting to move away from the graveside and towards the cars. Some are looking at the flowers. A great-aunt I think I've met twice in my life is crouching next to one of the wreaths, switching the cards round.

"Are you kidding me?" I say it a little louder than I probably should, but *seriously*? She stops and makes a loud tutting noise before scuttling off, clutching her handbag. She passes Steffan on her way to the cars, giving him a dirty look. He sticks his tongue out at her. Seventeen years old, and he still sticks his tongue out at people. He winks at me across the graveyard and I wonder whether it was more for my benefit than his.

Most of the funeral party have drifted off – after all, there's tea to be drunk and sandwiches to be eaten and the carcass of a life to be picked over. My dad's hanging back by the grave and I know I should go to him – but I just…can't. The hole's too deep and too cold and so very, very lonely. So I wait, leaning against a tree midway between grave and gate, getting hotter and hotter in this ridiculous dress in the summer sun, and when Jared slips out from behind the tree he scares the life out of me and I barely hold back a scream. I had no idea he was there; I hadn't expected him to wait. He gives me one of his Hollywood smiles.

"You going to move over?"

"It's a tree, Jar. It's, y'know…round?" I edge sideways, keeping my back against the tree. Making a full circuit of it, I slide all the way round and back to the front so I'm next to him again, on the other side to where I started. He doesn't seem impressed.

"Jokes? Today?"

"Piss off." I was doing so well.

We stand there, neither of us speaking for a while. And then he says: "Dad's back."

"That was quick. I thought he had another year before he got out?"

"Good behaviour, wasn't it?" Jared sticks his hands in his pockets. "Bet you a tenner he gave them the speech."

"He's got a speech?"

"Probably. He's had enough practice by now, hasn't he?"

"Are you okay?"

"Don't have much choice, do I?"

"What does your mum think?"

You'd have to be standing as close to him as I am to notice the way his jaw sets and his shoulders tighten before he answers. "Mum's moving in with Marcus."

Marcus is Jared's mum's boyfriend – the latest in a long line. The first time they met, Marcus took the time to sit Jared

down and tell him, man to man, that he had absolutely no interest in building a relationship with him; that his mother was the only part of this package he was interested in. That he already had enough kids of his own and wasn't interested in raising someone else's, let alone some *scumbag convict's boy*, thank you very much.

We don't like him a whole lot. Jared's Jared, so he'll tell you it isn't a big deal…but wow. I mean, *wow*.

So Jared's father is back from his latest stay at Her Majesty's pleasure just in time to see his estranged wife move in with the latest loser, and as usual Jared's stuck in the middle and watching the whole show from his grandparents' place, which is where he spends most of his time these days.

And I thought I had problems.

The car ride is uncomfortable. Prickly. Silent. My father stares out of one window, I stare out of another. Never on the same side: why break the habit?

I never realized how big the space my mother filled was. You could put your arms around it and your hands wouldn't meet on the other side. And without her, without something solid in that space, my father and I are absolute strangers. Strangers with the same last name, and the same nose, sitting beside each other in the same car and mourning the

loss of the same soul… But strangers.

A five-minute car journey has never, in the history of mankind, taken so long.

I picked the pub for the wake. It has roses round the door, rusty-red against the white paint, like blood on sheets.

I can't go in.

I was never going to.

Instead, I walk out of the car park, and turn right into the road. It's quiet – it always is round here – and even though I can hear traffic on the bypass, there's not a car to be seen. So I walk in the road, and I walk, and suddenly, without quite knowing when it happened, I'm running. Running in the stupid black shoes and the stupid black dress, away from the stupid pub and the stupid wake and the stupid, stupid people, right down the middle of the road.

I'm running to the bridge. To the river.

Thanks to the hot summer, the river's low and the ground on the other side of the wooden stile is dry, cracked and dusty soil instead of ankle-deep mud like it is in winter. There are potholes in the path where there are normally puddles, and pebbles big enough to turn your ankle over if you're not watching where you put your feet; forks branch off into the trees on either side, with the river close enough for you to land in if you don't know where you're going. But I do. I've spent my whole life here – here, or wishing I was

here – and when I come to the tree with the twisted branch and the old nail sticking out of it, I know I'm almost safe and I step off the path and into the undergrowth.

It's cool in the trees, out of the sun. The shadows have kept the moss damp, and it's green and soft. There are ferns everywhere, and the heels of my shoes keep catching in tangles of ivy – so I take them off, and just hope no one's been chucking bottles about again. I trod on a roll of barbed wire here once when I was a kid. It's not an experience I'm keen to repeat, I'll be honest. But treading on the moss is like treading on pillows, and it tickles. Something pulls on the hem of my dress and I don't care. I don't care if it gets torn to shreds. Instead, I pick up my shoes and push through the branches, sliding down a steep grassy bank that smells like summer should…and there they are.

Steffan and Jared, waiting at the river's edge. With beer.

They've taken off their ties and their jackets and hung them on a tree. Jared's shirt is hanging open and he's sitting on a rock in the sun with his head tipped back and his eyes shut. Steffan (less movie star and a bit more…movie-set builder – and as self-conscious about it as ever) has his sleeves rolled up and is standing right by the water, poking at the bottles they've stashed in there to cool. It feels like there's half a conversation hanging in the air – bitten off and swallowed the second I appeared. I have enough grossed-out experience to realize that I probably don't want

to know what they were talking about. Steffan takes one look at me and laughs.

"Come through the hedge backwards, did you?"

I'm not rising to it. Nope. Not me. But that's not because it's today, and it's not because I need to be someone else any longer. It's because I'm safe and I'm home and they were waiting for me.

And there's just one thing I have to do right now.

I pick my way down to the water…and standing right on the edge alongside Steffan, I throw my shoes as far into the river as I can.

Jared opens his eyes when he hears the splash and sits up. Steffan's mouth drops open.

I give them both my best smile and grab Steffan's open bottle of beer out of his hand, take the biggest swig I can manage, and throw myself down onto the bank.

"You're welcome," says Steffan, pointedly. He's not that bothered. There's more beer in the river. Besides, he's had plenty of time before now to get used to me, and today isn't the day he's going to have a strop. People who don't know any better usually think we're brother and sister when they see us together. Might as well be, I suppose – although I'm pretty sure my chin is nowhere near the size of his.

Neither of them tries to talk to me. Neither of them asks me how I'm feeling; if I'm alright, if there's anything they can do. Thank god for that. One more apology, one

more lie, one more well-meaning sympathetic face and I'm going to smack someone. But Jared and Steffan, they wouldn't. Not here, not now. They know what I need more than anything.

Beer and the river and my friends.

Maybe not in that order.

So we're silent, and Steffan gets himself another beer from the collection they've wedged in the water with a pile of stones and opens it, and the current hurries on past us like we don't matter and that's just how it should be.

When we've been there long enough for the sun to have moved all the way round, and for there to be more empty bottles in the plastic bag beside Jared's rock than there are in the water, Steffan looks up from the label he's peeling off his bottle and says: "You know what we should do? Road trip."

Jared raises an eyebrow.

And I've had just about enough beer to say yes.