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Opening extract from

# Cherry Blossom Dreams

Written by

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To be honest, I was feeling a bit nervous about telling Lily my big news. It's not that I don't trust her. After all, she's my best friend and I know she's always got my back, even if lately it seems like all she's interested in is boys, fashion, soap operas and more boys. It was just that this was such a Big Thing and the consequences if she did spill the beans – especially at school – would be massive. And I'm not just talking a little bit massive. I'm talking volcano-erupting massive here.

'So tell me *everything*!' demanded Lily, closing her bedroom door as I went over to flop down on her bed. I hadn't seen her this excited since I'd first dished out the news that Mum was dating our English teacher, Mr Anderson.

Or *Leo* as we call him now (except when we're in school, of course).

'I can't believe you guys actually went *on holiday* with him!' Lily dived on to the end of her bed like she used to do when we were much younger. Lily and I have been best friends since we were in the infants. Now that we're older – Lily is already thirteen and I will be too in a couple of months – we aren't really in the same classes and we don't hang out together much in school. But the two of us still see each other in the holidays and at the weekends. 'This is way beyond cool, Sasha,' Lily informed me. 'This is like the most amazing thing that's *ever* happened to a kid in our school!'

'Don't be daft!' I snapped. Lily tends to exaggerate when she gets excited about something – and my mum and our English teacher (who is generally considered to be pretty hot) spending the Easter holiday together in Greece with me and my twin brother, Sean, as witnesses, had to be . . . well . . . the most exciting thing ever to happen in our little town as far as she was concerned.

'So *spill*,' she said. 'Don't miss out a single detail. I bet he looks great in swimming trunks, doesn't he?'

'*Lily!*' I hissed, feeling myself flushing.

'You do realise your mother's a total cradle snatcher?' Lily declared. 'Don't look like that! It wasn't a criticism.

We're all dead impressed that she's got herself a boyfriend ten years younger than her. My mum says good on her and even my gran said "Way to go" when Mum told her you were all going on holiday together!'

'He's only *nine* years younger and you promised not to tell anyone!' I suddenly imagined her entire extended family sharing the news about Mum and Leo with the whole planet on Facebook.

'I thought you just meant don't tell anyone at school. I don't know why you want to keep it a secret though. It's nothing to be ashamed of. After all, Leo is a total H.O.G.!'

'Huh?' I looked at her blankly.

'Hot Older Guy,' Lily elaborated impatiently. Lily can be pretty embarrassing the way she talks about guys sometimes. Mostly her crushes are on pop stars or famous actors, but just occasionally she gets one on an unobtainable person in real life instead.

I don't think she has a proper crush on Leo but with Lily you can never be a hundred per cent sure. 'Come on then,' she prompted. 'Tell me what happened!'

'Well . . .' I began. 'Actually I've got some *really* big news but Mum wants to keep it a secret for now. I'll tell *you* as long as you promise not to tell anyone else –

seriously, Lily, not *anyone*. OK? Not your mum or your granny or your auntie or your cousins and definitely not anyone in our school.'

'OK, OK, I promise,' Lily said. 'You know you can trust me with a real secret.'

'Well . . . Mum and Leo got *engaged* on holiday.'

Lily practically screamed. 'No way! You mean he actually proposed? Did he get down on one knee? Did he already have the ring? Tell me everything, Sasha – and I mean *everything*! Oh my God, this is awesome!' Lily is a bit of a drama queen in case you hadn't noticed. In fact her mum says 'hyperbole' is her middle name (I had to look it up, but she's right).

Actually, it was Mum who proposed to Leo. But Leo said yes straight away and went out and bought her a ring from a little jewellery shop in the seaside village where we were staying. And now me and my brother are going to have Mr Anderson as our step-dad. And no one at school – absolutely no one – is allowed to know. At least not until Leo has worked out how to tell our head teacher, Mr Jamieson.

'You know Clara has a major crush on him, don't you? She'll be so jealous!'

'No, Lily! You promised not to tell anyone at school!' I said fiercely.

'I don't mean *now*, but eventually, when people find out. I mean, they will have to know some day, won't they? They'll be having a wedding! You can't do that in secret.'

I muttered something under my breath.

Lily frowned. 'What?'

'I said *if* it actually happens. This is *Mum* we're talking about here.'

Lily shook her head at me. 'You're such a pessimist, Sasha. This is, like, the best thing that's happened to you in *forever* . . . and you've got to be all gloom and doom straight away.'

'I'm just being realistic,' I said hotly. 'Mum's always been unlucky when it comes to love. Even Granny says so and she doesn't even believe in luck and fate and stuff like that.'

'Unlucky? You mean because your dad died?' Lily sounded genuinely puzzled before adding quickly, 'I know that *was* pretty unlucky, but –'

'It's not just that,' I told her. 'Mum is always falling in love with the wrong people! Remember when she met Gambling Gordon?'

'How could I forget Gee-Gee?' Lily said with a grin. She was especially proud of her pet name for the boyfriend who was always borrowing money off Mum to bet on the horses. 'That didn't last long. What was it? Six months, tops? Your mum's not *that* daft!'

'I know, but then there was Married Michael . . .'

Lily had named him that in retrospect. Mum had met Michael when Sean and I were nine (four years after our dad died) and we had all really liked him. After he had been in our lives for a whole year we found out that he didn't actually travel a lot for work as he'd always claimed, but that he had a wife and kids in another part of the country. Mum had been devastated. I still can't think of that time without getting butterflies in my tummy.

'I'm telling you, Mum is totally jinxed when it comes to romance,' I told Lily. 'So I don't want to get too excited about Leo just yet, OK?'

Lily sighed. 'But this is different. She's been dating Leo for over a year and they knew each other way before that, the whole time he was tutoring Sean. They've actually had a chance to really get to know each other. Sean trusts him, doesn't he?'

I nodded. Sean thought the world of Leo. It had been Sean's Year Five teacher who had first encouraged Mum

to employ Leo as a tutor, saying that my brother was a lot more capable academically than he let on. (I've always worked hard and done well at school without needing any extra help – a fact which I sometimes think Mum doesn't appreciate enough.)

Anyway, thanks to Leo, Sean had managed to get through the entrance exam for Helensfield High (the grammar school just down the road from us), where Leo is one of the English teachers. And later, when Sean had been struggling to cope with Year Seven, Mum had asked Leo to come and give him some more help. Mum was single again at that point and Leo had started staying for a drink and a chat with Mum after Sean's lesson was over.

Now my brother and I were about to start our final term of Year Eight I could hardly believe that Mum and Leo had been dating for more than a year. I mean, it's pretty weird seeing your teacher in his dressing gown, knowing what his favourite pizza is and even seeing him snog your mum on the odd occasion you walk in on them and they can't jump apart quickly enough. But we'd eventually started to get used to it, and I was getting so accustomed to Leo being around at home that I had even stopped noticing how good-looking he is. Until someone like Lily draws attention to it, that is.

'Right then, so it's just *you* that's being all negative as usual,' Lily concluded.

'It's not just me! Granny's worried too,' I pointed out, thinking how right my grandmother's instincts had been where Married Michael was concerned. In fact our grandmother had once told Mum that maybe she should stop looking for love and concentrate on bringing up me and my brother instead. That had gone down like a ton of bricks, because if there's one thing Mum can't stand it's the thought of staying single for the rest of her life.

'Yeah, well, she's *meant* to worry,' Lily responded impatiently. '*She's* an old lady. You're not, in case you hadn't noticed. Honestly, why can't you just lighten up and enjoy life for once?'

'I *do* enjoy life!'

'No, you don't. You're so cautious, Sasha. You never do anything outside your comfort zone.'

I sighed loudly. I should have known she would turn the conversation round to this. It was getting to be a recurring topic with Lily, who wanted me to do more stuff with her and her new friends outside school. Frankly, her persistence about it was starting to get on my nerves. Why should I like all the same things they liked? I decided to try a new tactic.

'So what's wrong with that? I *like* my comfort zone. It's . . . well . . . *comforting*!' I gave her a grin to cajole her but her frown didn't budge.

'Look, Sasha,' she went on with feeling, 'you're practically a teenager and you don't act the least bit like one. You're not even interested in clothes. Look at you – you've got a really great figure and yet you dress like . . . well . . . like you want to hide it or something.'

I just gaped at her because this was over the top even for Lily.

'Who's got a great figure?' said a teasing male voice. I nearly died of embarrassment when Lily's fifteen-year-old brother Rafferty – or Raffy as everybody calls him – pushed open the door and stuck his head round. He was wearing jeans with a tight black T-shirt on his top half. I couldn't help staring at his chest and thinking that it was quite a bit more muscly than my brother's. It was then that I found myself beginning to blush.

I stood up in a rush and made a grab for my big baggy cardy that was lying on Lily's bed. 'I'd better go,' I muttered. I couldn't bring myself to brush past Rafferty, who was still watching the two of us from the doorway, looking amused.

'She's right. You *do* have a nice figure,' he told me with a grin. I'm sure my face was like a beetroot by then, and my palms felt clammy. 'I mean, a lot of girls your age still have loads of puppy fat – like Lily here.'

'*WHAT*?' Lily screamed, hurling a shoe at him. 'I HATE YOU! GET OUT OF MY ROOM RIGHT NOW!'

As she picked up a second shoe I made my escape, not looking back as I bolted down their stairs, shouting, 'See you at school!'