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Darkmere

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There was a girl in the water.

The waves were many times bigger than she was and infinitely stronger, but she fought her way through each one. She kicked and clawed and lunged even though the coldness lent every wave the impact of a hammer blow. The girl gasped, her body juddering.

It hurt.

Another huge wave came crashing down over her head like a rockslide and she knew she was going under. She flailed, panicking, but the water shrugged and flipped her over.

Then it swallowed her whole.

How could she fight something that didn't know she was there?

She wasn't even a very good swimmer.

The girl surfaced in a different wave altogether. Before she could catch her breath, a new wave rose up and tried to haul her in another direction. Her mouth was rough and salty with seawater. Already she could imagine how it would feel in her chest, her lungs.

She was horribly afraid she would die. But the alternative had been to watch *him* die. And that hadn't felt like an alternative at all.

No, she was not going to let it happen.

Because just as the sea has always been the sea, girls have always been girls.

She would not give in.



Kate

When Leo asked me if I was going away for the summer, I nodded immediately – and untruthfully.

'Where?' He lifted his eyes to mine the way motorists switch their headlights up to full beam.

I pictured myself sunbathing in the communal garden of the flats I lived in with my mum and washing up at the pub in the evenings.

'Not sure yet . . . France or Spain, probably.'

'That's a shame.' He took another sip of his coffee.

In the pause that followed, I could hear the clunk of heavy white cups, the tinkle of teaspoons and the whoosh and gurgle of the coffee machine. We were in the school canteen. But because this was Denborough Park, one of the best private

schools in the country, it was a school canteen with a stuccoed ceiling, marble columns and chandeliers. *Chandeliers!* And I was probably the only one who noticed them.

All the other students were noticing me and Leo instead. This happened whenever I sat with him. He turned me into a person to be envied rather than some kind of sociological experiment.

It had been months since I'd been awarded the scholarship to come here, but there still weren't many days when I didn't miss my old state school. Denborough Park made me wear my background like a badge of shame stitched to the pocket of my blazer.

'Why?' I asked defensively. 'Where *should* I be spending the summer?'

'At my castle.'

'Your – what?' I wondered if I'd misheard. It sounded extravagant even for Leo. 'You mean you've rented an actual castle for the holidays?'

'Nope,' he grinned. 'My aunt died and left me one.'

'A real . . . *castle* castle?'

'You don't believe me, do you?'

'No, I think you're winding me up.'

'I have a solicitor's letter and an ancient set of keys. And I'm far too lazy to go to that sort of trouble for a wind-up.'

I stared at him. If anyone our age *were* to inherit a castle, it would be Leo. He probably had a great-uncle with a château in Paris and a granny with a floating palazzo in Venice. His father was not only the school's Chair of Trustees but also

owned a string of hotels – and had fought viciously over them during his recent divorce from Leo's stepmother. Everyone knew the Erskines.

So the first time that Leo Erskine had come sauntering towards me in the school library, it had taken all my nerve not to dart behind a bookcase and hide. He was the biggest – and scruffiest – boy in the school. I was sure no other student here would get away with a uniform so thoroughly dishevelled. Up close, the state of his tie surprised me so much I asked him – out loud – if it had been caught in a shredder. Leo had laughed and told me he liked my hair.

I hadn't really believed him, because all the other Denborough Park girls had hair that was long, gold and glossy. *Expensive* hair.

Mine was purple – I'd dyed it to match my new Doc Martens.

But Leo had found me almost every day after that to tell me he liked my hair or my boots or my black cherry-coloured lipstick. And now we were . . . friends. Or something.

'But that's just it,' I murmured. 'You *are* lazy. And scruffy – you just don't seem posh enough to own a castle.'

'Oh, it isn't a posh castle. It'll be in a shit state because no one's lived there for years. But it's still a castle. And best of all it's supposed to be haunted.'

'By one of your ancestors, you mean?'

'Hope so – that'll be hilarious. Poor thing's bound to want some company after all this time. I'll see if it wants to join the gang.'

'You're all going there then?'

'Yep – for the whole summer. I'm going to take Beano in the campervan, and Hat-man Dan and Jackson are going to drive down, if they can afford the petrol.'

I made an effort to look unconcerned, while mentally calculating the number of days I'd have to get through before I saw him again. Fifty-five? Fifty-six, maybe?

Before I'd arrived at an exact number, one of Leo's friends entered the canteen and yelled an un-self-conscious '*Hey!*' at us from the other side of the room.

Hat-man Dan. He was wearing headphones and he came bouncing towards our table with a listening-to-music strut. I noticed several female heads swinging round to follow his progress.

Unlike Leo, Hat-man Dan's uniform was immaculately pressed and tailored. He was a modern-day dandy in an over-sized beanie. He wore strips of leather around his wrists, the newest trainers and a watch that all the other boys coveted. He also had one of those finely-sculpted jaws and dark, shining hair. Good-looking – but too clean-cut for me.

'What happened to your tie today?' he asked Leo far too loudly. 'Tiger attack?'

'You know, there might be people out on the rugby fields who can't hear you,' said Leo, pulling one of Dan's head-phones away from his ear and letting it ping back into the side of his head. 'But I doubt it.'

Hat-man Dan laughed and tugged his headphones down around his neck. Then he swung one of the chairs around and

straddled it, resting his arms along the back. 'So . . . have you persuaded the new girl to come with us yet?'

The new girl. That's what they called me at Denborough – still.

'Persuade me to come where?' I said to Hat-man Dan.

'Leo's castle, of course. Go on! My girlfriend's mum will only let her come away with us if there are other girls coming too.'

Excitement rose inside me like a whole bunch of shiny helium balloons, but I didn't want to give in too easily. 'I might consider it if you stop calling me "the new girl".'

'Brilliant! Thanks – um . . . ?'

'*Kate,*' put in Leo, and a catlike grin stretched across his face as he looked at me. 'Are you saying you'd rather spend the summer in a crumbly old castle than in France or Spain?'

I held his eye for a moment. He was really asking me whether I'd rather spend the summer with *him* and we both knew it. So much for not giving in too easily! When I finally answered him with a nod, he laughed in triumph. Leo was always laughing. He made me feel as if life wasn't such a difficult business after all.

'Right, that's two girls coming,' said Hat-man Dan, jabbing a message into his phone as he spoke. 'I'll let Lucie know . . . it'll be her and you then, Kate – and there's definitely a girl Jackson's interested in. He wouldn't tell me who, though. Do you know, Leo?'

'Some slapper as usual.' Leo was still holding my eye and grinning. 'Jackson's taste in girls is inexcusable.'

Beano joined us then, carrying a couple of espressos for himself and Hat-man Dan. He drew a chair up to the table and began to stir so much sugar into his coffee it made my teeth itch. Beano was as thin and gangly as Leo was burly. I'd heard him talk a lot about lifting weights and downing protein shakes, but it never seemed to make him any bigger.

'Your housemaster's looking for you, Leo,' he said. 'I told him you were usually in the chapel around this time, but I don't think he believed me.'

'He wants me to sign up for his Leadership course,' Leo said with a weary look. 'I've already told him it clashes with Beauty Therapy.'

Everyone laughed.

To the exasperation of his parents and teachers, Leo had signed up for the unlikeliest courses the sixth form had to offer. He did whatever he wanted and refused to take anything seriously. When he'd invited me to a party a couple of weeks ago, I had been so afraid it was a joke, I almost hadn't turned up. Would it turn out to be Transvestite Night at the club when I tried to get in?

But it was just a hot, sweaty nightclub, crammed with bodies. And music so loud the floor jumped in time with the bass. In spite of all this, my eyes still found Leo before anyone else. I sent smiles and meaningful glances across the dance floor, but his friends surrounded him as always and he didn't notice me.

I wasn't worth noticing.

After a while, I gave up and went outside to look for a taxi.

I was still there, standing under the dirty amber light of the streetlamp, when Leo came out.

A wave of relief – and longing – swept over me.

And I hated myself for feeling both those things.

He came up close and lowered his face to mine. 'Leaving without saying goodbye?'

I breathed in a mixture of cigarette smoke, cannabis and alcohol – all the things that bad boys are supposed to taste of. His closeness melted all my anger and resistance away and I let him kiss me. As he pushed me back against the wall, I heard a crowd of smokers outside the nightclub cheering him on and the muffled sound of dubstep from inside the building.

Of course I thought it meant something. But when I saw him at school the next day, he smiled at me and kept on walking. Instinct warned me not to show I cared.

I guessed even then that Leo enjoyed winding people up like clockwork toys. He'd probably kissed me like that just to see what I'd make of it. So I was careful to make nothing of it at all.

'I still can't believe you're taking Beauty Therapy,' muttered Beano now, licking sugar off his spoon. 'I'd be too embarrassed. It's not exactly manly, is it?'

'He's the only boy in a class full of girls, you nimrod,' said Hat-man Dan. 'I wish I'd thought of it.'

Leo smirked. 'We're learning about massage this afternoon.'

I caught myself looking down at his huge, powerful hands and blushing.

'What have you got this afternoon?' I asked Beano.

'Um . . . I don't know . . . Psychology or Photography, I think.'

'He gets them mixed up,' murmured Leo. 'You can imagine what the Psychology students make of his long-lens camera.'

Beano spluttered and I giggled, even though I felt sorry for him. Leo's teasing could be merciless.

He met my eye over the top of Beano's head and smiled. And I could see my own excitement mirrored in that smile. A question too – maybe even a challenge.

'You mean it then – you'll come?'

The most popular boy in school – *the boy with his own castle!* – was asking me to spend the summer with him.

'Yes,' I said. 'I'll come.'