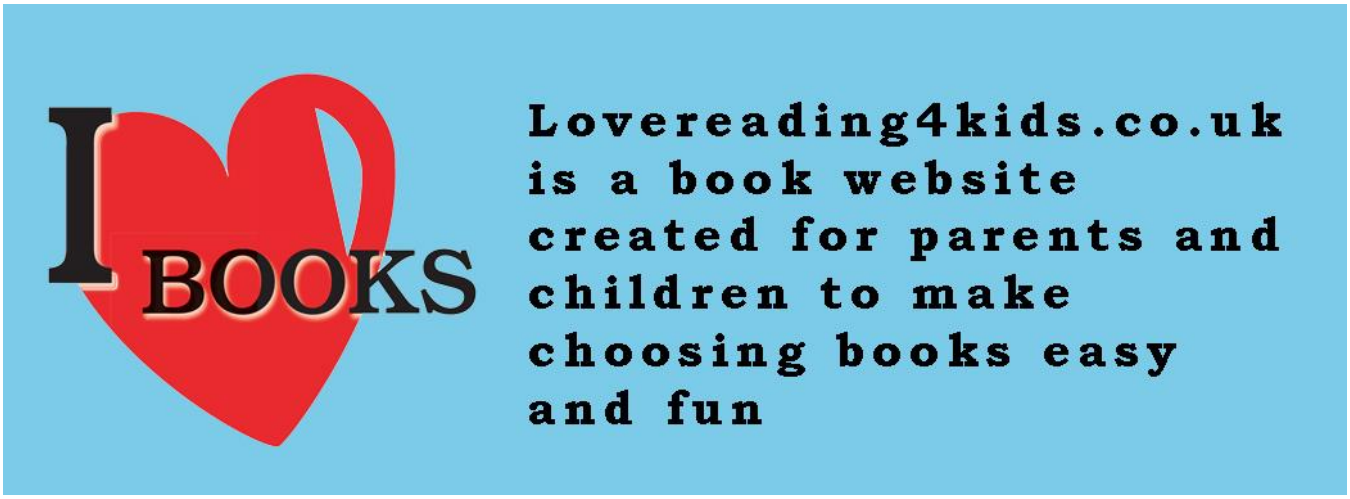


An extract from

Life is Sweet: A Chocolate Box Short Story Collection

Written by

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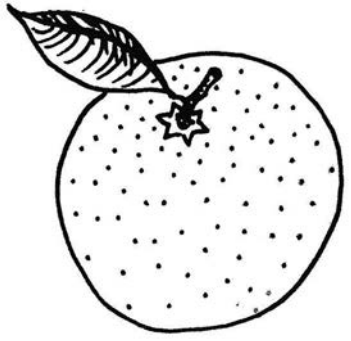
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Ash has been a bit of a mystery character in **Sweet Honey** and **Fortune Cookie** . . . I just couldn't resist the opportunity to give him a story of his own and see just what makes him tick! The timing of this story takes place after the book **Fortune Cookie** . . . and Ash has some big decisions to make. Will Honey be a part of his future or not?



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The night train to Paris is only half full, and I have room to stretch my legs, lean back, dream. My rucksack sits on the seat beside me, looking tatty and worn now after nine months of adventures. I am probably looking tatty and worn myself.

I reach into a side pocket of the rucksack and pull out an orange – an orange picked straight from a tree in a side street on the outskirts of Madrid just a few hours ago. Picking your own oranges right from the tree might be seen as a little bit cheeky as a rule, but this particular tree was in the grounds of the backpackers' hostel where I'd been staying and I reckoned it was fair game.

I dig a thumb into the thick dimpled skin and begin to peel it away, releasing the sharp, sweet citrus aroma. The

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minute I bite into the first segment, memories flood my mind – not memories of Madrid, not memories of Spain at all, but of Tanglewood.

I am running out of the sea, the salt water starring my body with droplets of silver. The beach is deserted except for a girl, a long-limbed beautiful girl, fair-haired and laughing as she watches me run up and fling myself down on to the striped picnic blanket. I snake my arms round her and she wriggles free, still laughing.

'Ash, no! You're all wet!'

She shoves a towel into my arms and I wipe the water from my skin and drag it over my hair before dropping back on to the blanket to let the sun finish the job of drying me off.

Then I smell citrus and the girl wafts a slice of orange under my nose; I grab it and eat it, letting the sweet juice slide across my tongue. The girl flops down beside me and I turn to look at her just inches away from me on the blanket: her tanned cheeks crusted with golden sand, her blue eyes brighter than the summer sky.

When I reach for her this time, she doesn't pull away.

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The train swoops onward through the night, swift, silent. Have we crossed the border into France yet? I can't tell. I have been on too many trains, crossed too many borders this year. Maybe the thrill of it all is finally wearing thin.

Tanglewood seems like a dream, a place I imagined or conjured up from nowhere. It's only six weeks since I packed up my rucksack and moved on, but it feels like forever.

I think I left something behind me there, something important, essential. My heart, my soul, my sense of adventure . . . Let's just say those things have been missing in action ever since the day I said goodbye to Honey Tanberry.

I didn't want to leave. I have six months of travel left to me before I am due back home in Sydney; I have a university place waiting for me there, to study philosophy and politics, starting in February. The idea of that used to excite me a whole lot more than it does these days.

I'd spent three blissful weeks at Tanglewood, but suddenly I wanted more. It's that kind of place . . . a place that feels like home, even to a teenage Aussie kid with Sri Lankan heritage whose closest family are half a world away.

I was young and in love and I didn't want to walk away from all that. Who would?



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'Come with me,' I said to Honey. 'We can travel around Europe together, see Paris and Berlin and Madrid . . . go wherever we want to. We can eat ice cream and hire a scooter in Rome, throw coins into the Trevi Fountain and make a wish . . .'

I knew what I would wish for, even then.

'Shall we?' I asked again, although I knew what the answer would be. I watched Honey's blue eyes darken like a stormy sky.

'I have school,' she said sadly. 'It's my A-level year. I can't just take time out, even though you know I'd love to . . .'

I blinked. When I first met Honey, eighteen months ago in Sydney, she was allergic to the very mention of the word 'school'. It was enough to bring her out in a rash, wipe the dazzling smile from her face. Now, school was the thing that threatened to keep us apart.

'Take a year out,' I suggested. 'Like me!'

She shook her head. 'Ash,' she said. 'It has taken me almost seventeen years to see the point of school. Now I have – now I'm actually working – I'm not going to mess it up. Don't ask me to do that!'

Hope fizzled in seconds. It hadn't been a serious suggestion,

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not really – I knew the practicalities. I knew it wasn't possible. I just couldn't help giving it a try.

'It's OK,' I said, backtracking. 'I wouldn't ask you that, of course I wouldn't. It's just that I'm going to miss you so much . . .'

'I'll miss you too,' she said.

'What if I just stay a while longer? Hang out here for a month or two, get a part-time job?'

She smiled. 'And miss your chance to see Europe? How long have you been planning this trip? You have to see it through. Go, Ash. Have adventures . . . but email me, tell me all about it. It'll be almost as good as being with you.'

I doubted that very much.

'I wish I could go, Ash,' she repeated. 'Or that you could stay . . . I'd keep you here if I thought I could, but you'd soon feel restless, start to resent me. I'm not going to be the one who keeps you from your dream, OK? This last month together has been amazing, but we can't get sidetracked. Don't throw away the adventure.'

I would have thrown everything away for Honey, but I stayed silent.

'I want you to do the right thing, that's all,' she said.



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The trouble was I didn't know any more what the right thing was, and I still don't. The fun seeped out of the plans I'd made; seeing Europe had lost its appeal without Honey by my side.

She came with me as far as the railway station in Exeter to wave goodbye.

'Remind me why I'm going?' I asked, as we waited for the train.

'Because it's been your dream for as long as you can remember,' she told me, laughing. 'And because you only have six months before your uni course begins. Don't waste it.'

'Yeah. About that uni place . . .'

Honey put a finger to my lips.

'Don't say it,' she told me. 'No cold feet, OK? You have a place at university for the course you wanted most in the world. I know you might be having second thoughts right now, but that's exactly why you need to stick to the plan and finish your gap year. Go see Europe. Have some adventures, see some sights . . . If you miss this chance, you'll regret it, I know.'

'But . . . I'm not sure philosophy and politics are what

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I want to study any more,' I admit. 'Maybe I should be studying English? Or journalism? Or maybe I should just get a job in a coffee shop until I've worked out what I should be doing?'

'Go and explore,' Honey said. 'Have fun, see Europe, soak it all up. And do some thinking, Ash, about what you want from life. That's what a gap year is all about.'

The train came in and I hugged her tight, and then I was on the train and waving as it drew out of the station, and I didn't need a gap year to know I was leaving behind everything that mattered to me.

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