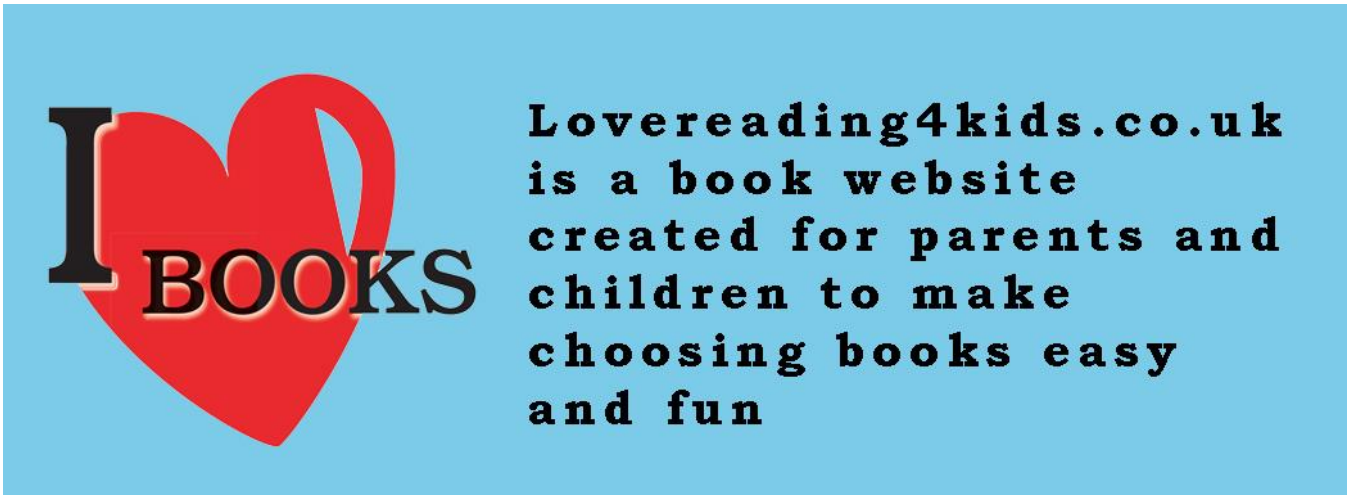


An extract from

Life is Sweet: A Chocolate Box Short Story Collection

Written by

Cathy Cassidy

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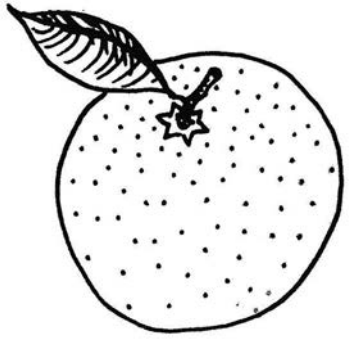
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Ash has been a bit of a mystery character in **Sweet Honey** and **Fortune Cookie** . . . I just couldn't resist the opportunity to give him a story of his own and see just what makes him tick! The timing of this story takes place after the book **Fortune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



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1

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

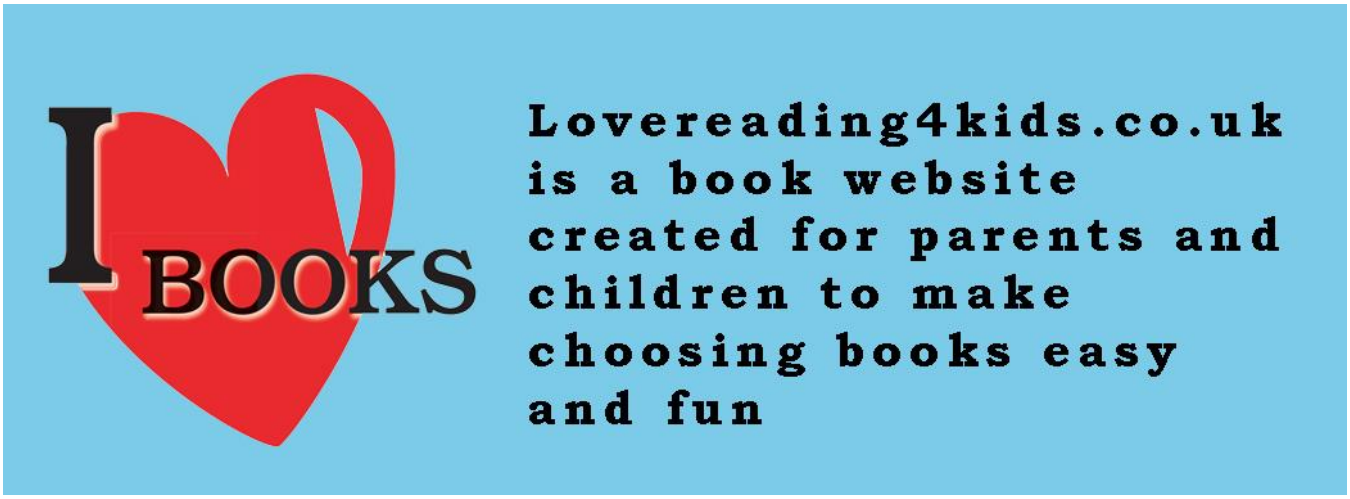
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I want to study any more,' I admit. 'Maybe I should be studying English? Or journalism? Or maybe I should just get a job in a coffee shop until I've worked out what I should be doing?'

'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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Opening extract from

Girl Online: On Tour

Written by

Zoe Sugg

Published by

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Girl Online ON TOUR

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20 June

How to Survive a Long-distance Relationship When Your Boyfriend is a Super-hot Rock God

1. Download Skype, WhatsApp, Snapchat and basically every communication app you can find. Stay up all night in your panda onesie, chatting with your boyfriend until your eyelids start twitching and you absolutely have to go to sleep.

2. Whenever you wake up and miss him, listen to *Autumn Girl* on repeat.

3. Set up an app on your phone that tells you the time wherever he is so that you don't accidentally wake him at 3 a.m. for a chat. (I've done this *maybe* ten times already!)

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4. Buy a calendar and mark down the number of days until you see him again (which, by the way, is now only FIVE DAYS AWAY).

5. Somehow win the lottery so you can quit school and fly to wherever he is and you don't have to be apart for this long ever again.

6. Whatever you do, do NOT go online and watch videos of super-stunning pop star Leah Brown as she dips and twerks around said boyfriend in front of millions of screaming fans.

7. And do NOT search his name so you can see all the cool stuff he's doing while you're studying for your exams.

My lovely readers, even if one day I feel like I could publish this blog in a non-private way, I never will.

Because, I know – I'm not allowed to admit to feeling insecure and less than pretty and more-than-a-little jealous when my boyfriend is the sweetest guy in the world and has given me no reason to feel this way, right?

Tell me this feeling gets better. I don't know how I'm going to survive.

Girl Offline . . . never going online xxx

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Chapter One

Five days later

It should officially be illegal for exam rooms to have a view of the sea.

How is it fair that we're stuck inside, fingers cramping from gripping a pen for two hours straight, while outside the light is dancing on the waves and it looks so bright and comforting? How am I supposed to remember who King Henry VIII's fourth wife was when the birds are singing and I swear I can hear the happy, jaunty tune of an ice-cream van nearby?

I shake my head, dispelling the vision of a deliciously soft ice-cream cone with a cheeky Flake sticking out of it, and instead try to summon up a direct link into my best friend Elliot's brain. He won't be having much trouble remembering any of these facts and figures in his history exam. I gave him the nickname Wiki, because his brain seems to contain as much knowledge as

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Wikipedia, whereas my revision notes disappear from my memory as fast as a Snapchat.

I sigh and try to concentrate on the exam question, but the words swim in front of my eyes and I can't make sense of my own messy scrawl. I hope whoever has to mark it has better luck.

Choosing to take history for GCSE was never a good idea. At the time, I just picked based on what everyone else seemed to be doing. The only subject I knew I definitely had to take was photography. The truth is I have no idea what I want to be when I leave school.

'OK, everyone, pens down,' says the examiner at the front of the room.

My mouth instantly goes dry. I don't know how long I've been daydreaming for, but I know that I haven't finished answering all the questions. These exams determine what subjects I'll take next year and I've already mucked it up. My palms feel slick with sweat, and I can't hear the birds outside singing any more. All I can hear is the squawk of seagulls. It sounds like they're chanting 'Fail, fail, fail' in my ear. My stomach turns, and I feel like I might be a bit sick.

'Penny, are you coming?' I look up, and my friend and classmate Kira is waiting by my desk. The examiner has already snatched my paper and I've barely noticed.

'Yeah, just a second.' I grab my bag and slide out of my chair.

And then, as I stand up, a wave of relief takes over the nausea.

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No matter what the result, that's it: my final exam. I'm finished school for the year!

I have a stupid grin on my face as I high-five Kira. I feel closer to my classmates – and especially the twins, Kira and Amara – than I have in my entire time at this school. They gathered round me in the aftermath of the drama at the beginning of the year – a solid wall of friendship against the breaking tidal wave of news. The media went into a frenzy when they found out I was dating rock star Noah Flynn, and then they discovered my blog; they unearthed private details of my life and labelled me a homewrecker, since Noah was supposedly in a relationship with mega pop star Leah Brown. It was the worst few days of my life, but my friends helped me to weather the storm. And, when it was all over, the drama had brought us together.

As we spill out into the hallway, Kira says, 'Celebratory burgers at GBK? We're all going there before we head to the concert. You must be so excited to see Noah again.'

A familiar flutter rises in my stomach. I'm excited – of course I am – but I'm nervous too. I haven't seen Noah since the Easter holidays, when he spent my sixteenth birthday with me. Now we're about to spend two weeks in each other's company. And even though that's the only thing I want – and the only thing I can think about – I can't help wondering whether it will be the same.

'I'll catch you at the restaurant,' I say. 'I just have to pick a few things up from Miss Mills's office and then head home to change.'

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Kira squeezes my arm. 'Oh god, I have to figure out what to wear too!'

I smile weakly as she rushes off, but the elation of finishing my exams has given way to a new set of nerves. The will-my-boyfriend-still-like-me kind. I know I should feel more confident that Noah likes me just the way I am, but when your first boyfriend is currently one of the most famous new musicians on the planet that's easier said than done.

The hallways are almost deserted and the only sound is the squeak of my Converse trainers on the linoleum floor. I can't believe this is my last catch-up with my photography teacher, Miss Mills. It feels like she's been there for me a lot this year – she's probably the only person I've really opened up to about what went on last Christmas and New Year, other than my parents. Even with Elliot I sometimes hold things back. Having a set of impartial ears was something I never wanted – but also never knew I needed.

It didn't help that I had a panic attack in the small cupboard Miss Mills converted into a makeshift darkroom. It was only a couple of weeks after the news 'broke' online about Noah and me. Normally I find the darkroom soothing, but whether it was the fumes or the enclosed space – or the fact that the picture I was developing was of Noah's handsome face, a face that I wouldn't be seeing for ages – I almost passed out into the chemicals. Luckily it was after school, so no one had to see 'Panicky Penny' in action all over again, and Miss Mills made me

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a cup of tea and fed me biscuits until I started talking and just couldn't stop.

She's helped me ever since, but I knew what would've helped the most: my blog. Blogging had always been so liberating. Even though I had set all future posts on *Girl Online* to private after posting my final blog 'From Fairytale to Horror Story', I couldn't ignore the familiar itch that I wanted to scratch – that urge to share my thoughts with the world. *Girl Online* had been my creative and emotional outlet for over a year, and I missed it – and the community of online readers I had come to call friends. I knew, if I had just reached out to them, my blog readers would have supported me through this, just as they supported me through the early stages of my anxiety.

But the only thing I could picture whenever I closed my eyes and dreamt of updating my blog was all the hateful people online, poised over their keyboards, waiting to tear me apart. Even though so many people were supportive and lovely to me, it only took one nasty comment to send me back into a dark spiral. I'd never felt so paralysed before, so unable to write. Normally words flowed out of my fingers like water, but everything I wrote seemed stilted and wrong. I put it all down in a journal instead, but it just didn't feel the same.

I'd tried to describe these feelings to Miss Mills. In that spiral, the people online become clowns in thick make-up – and when they smile their teeth are razor-sharp. They're like monsters, but instead of lurking in the dark they're right there for everyone to

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see. They're all my worst fears rolled into one. They're a million nightmares. They make me want to pack up all my things and move in with a remote tribe in the Amazon rainforest who think aeroplanes are evil spirits sent from the gods. Elliot told me about them. I bet they've never heard of Girl Online or Noah Flynn. I bet they don't know about Facebook. Or Twitter. Or viral videos that just don't ever seem to disappear.

Even if I lived only in Brighton, England, it would be OK. Most of my school has forgotten about my 'scandal', the same way they've forgotten the name of last year's *X Factor* winner. My dad says that today's news is tomorrow's fish-and-chip paper. And he's right – the novelty of finding out about my blog, and even about Noah and me, has now worn thinner than the knees of my favourite jeans. But I don't live in a remote jungle or really even in Brighton, England. Instead, I am a citizen of Planet Internet, and right now it's the worst place in the entire world to be me – because, on the Internet, I worry that no one will ever forget.

At least one good thing has come from the Internet, though. Pegasus Girl and I swapped email addresses after she supported me, and she's gone from being *Girl Online*'s most faithful reader to one of my best friends – even though we haven't met in real life yet. After listening to me moan for the millionth time about wishing *Girl Online* still existed, she told me that I could change my blog settings so that only people I gave a password to could read what I wrote. Now she, Elliot and Miss Mills are the only people who read my ramblings, but it's much better than nothing.

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I can see Miss Mills through the warped glass in her classroom door, her light brown hair tumbling forward as she leans over her marking. I knock on the door frame and she looks up at me, smiling.

'Afternoon, Penny. Are you all done for the year, then?'

I nod. 'Just finished my history exam.'

'That's great! Come on in.'

She waits until I've sat down in one of the hard plastic chairs. All around the room are my fellow students' photography projects, mounted on black foam board ready for the summer exhibition. Against Miss Mills's wishes, I specifically asked not to put my work on display. I completed all the assignments but couldn't face showing my photographs to anyone else. Most of my class also put their portfolios online, but I stopped uploading mine after Christmas. I'm terrified someone will find it and use it to make fun of me. Instead, I've been compiling a paper portfolio and handing it in to Miss Mills each week. The physical act of creativity has been very therapeutic.

She pulls out my portfolio and hands it back to me. 'Great job, as always, Penny,' she says with a smile. 'This is our last meeting for a while, isn't it? I wanted to talk to you about your last blog. You know, it does get better.'

I shrug. Getting through each day seems to be just about all I can handle.

As if she's reading my thoughts, Miss Mills continues. 'I think you can do far more than simply survive each day. You can thrive,

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Penny. You've been through a lot this past school year. I'm glad you've decided to continue with your A levels – especially in photography – but I don't think you should let your choices worry you too much. You're allowed to not know what you want to do yet.'

I want to believe her, but it's hard. It feels like everyone has their lives all figured out, except me. It's not something Elliot can relate to. He knows he wants to study fashion design and he dreams of one day having his own label. I just found out that Kira wants to be a vet so she's taking biology and maths to make sure she can get into a good university. Amara is some kind of physics genius and has always wanted to be a scientist, so she is set. All I like to do is take pictures and write blog posts that I can only publish in secret to a select group of my closest friends. I don't think there's a career in that.

I know there's an ocean of possibility out there, but I'm stuck on the shore, not prepared to dive in. 'Didn't you always want to be a teacher?' I ask.

She laughs. 'Not really. I kind of . . . fell into it. I wanted to be an archaeologist! Until I realized that archaeology isn't about Indiana-Jones-style adventuring and too often involves categorizing tiny fragments of bone for hours on end. I spent a lot of time feeling lost.'

'That's how I feel,' I say. 'Lost in my own life. And I don't know how to use a compass. Is there GPS for your life?'

Miss Mills laughs. 'No matter what those *other* adults might

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tell you, I'll let you in on a little secret: you don't have to know now. You're only sixteen. Go ahead and enjoy yourself! Live your life. Turn that internal compass of yours upside down and backwards and in circles so it doesn't know which way is up. Like I said, I fell into teaching completely by accident, but now I wouldn't want to do any other job.' She leans towards me and smiles. 'So, are you looking forward to the concert tonight? It's all anyone in my other classes could talk about. Isn't Noah supporting The Sketch?'

I grin, glad for the change of subject. My heart lifts as I think of seeing Noah again. There's a point when Skype and texting just don't cut it, and that point is now. It's also going to be the first time I've ever seen him perform live on stage, in front of thousands of screaming girls. 'Yes, he's the opening act. It's a huge deal for him.'

'Sounds like it. Well, you take care of yourself over the summer. And don't forget about your prep for A-level photography.' She gestures to my portfolio. 'Are you sure you don't want to exhibit? You've got some amazing work in here, and it deserves to be recognized.'

I shake my head. She sighs, but she knows it's a losing battle. 'Well, all I can say is keep on writing your blog, Penny. It's your talent. You know how to connect with people, and I don't want you to lose that. Make that your summer assignment from me this year, alongside your photographs. I want a full report of your travels when you get back.'

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I smile, sliding the portfolio notebook into my bag. 'Thanks for all your help this year, Miss Mills.'

I think about our photography assignment for the summer. Miss Mills has asked us to look at 'alternative perspectives'; a challenge to see things from a different angle. I have no idea what I'm going to do, but I'm sure going on tour with Noah will offer up a million different opportunities.

'You're welcome, Penny.'

I leave the classroom, and am back in the deserted hallways. I feel my heart beating inside my chest as I pick my pace up to a jog, and then a run. I burst through the doors that lead outside, throw my arms wide and twirl on the front step of the school. I blush pink when I realize how cheesy that must look, but I have never been so ready for the school year to be over. Freedom has never felt so good.

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25 June

Exams Are Officially Over! (And How To Survive Them When They Return)

Drum roll please . . . I've finished school for the year! Done! *Finito!*

It wasn't that bad. Repeat: it wasn't that bad. But I did have some help (big thanks to Wiki, my bestest pal!) coming up with some strategies for coping when it felt like all I was doing was studying . . . studying . . . and more studying!

If I don't write these strategies down now, I know I will have forgotten them when exam time comes round next year. For some reason, no matter how many times I have to sit exams, I always find them just as terror-inducing as before.

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Five Ways to Survive Exams (from Someone Who HATES Exams)

1. Revise

OK, some might say that's an obvious one, but this year I drew up a calendar with each subject on it and gave myself a gold-star sticker whenever I completed an hour's revision. It felt a bit like being back in primary school again, but actually seeing all the progress I was making (by way of a constellation of gold stars all over the calendar) made me feel loads more confident in my preparation.

2. Bribes

Not ones for your teachers or your examiner, but for yourself! Whenever I completed a full revision week (see Step 1) I went to Gusto Gelato and got myself a gelato burger as a reward. Nothing like using a sweet treat as motivation!

3. Do the hard questions first

Wiki's top tip! He says to focus on the questions that are worth the most marks first of all so you don't get stuck at the end and have to scribble down nonsense for your big essay.

4. Coffee

I don't even like coffee, but, according to my brother, it helps. I did try it, but every time I took a sip it made me cringe, and I ended up

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staying awake all night, plagued by anxious shivers. So maybe that's not such a good tip after all . . .

5. Dream of summer

Remember that there is life after exams! This is basically what got me through. The knowledge that, very soon, I'll be with Brooklyn Boy again . . .

Girl Offline . . . never going online xxx

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Chapter Two

All the way home, my excitement levels have been growing – so much so that I practically waltz into the kitchen. It seems like a pretty apt thing to do because Mum is dressed in a full-blown *Strictly Come Dancing* glitter outfit, twirling as she and Elliot dance a mean salsa across the black-and-white tiles. Elliot's boyfriend, Alex, is sitting on a stool by the island, shouting out scores in the flamboyant manner of Bruno Tonioli. 'Seven!'

Just an average afternoon at the Porters'.

'Penny darling, you're home!' Mum says, between steps. 'You never told me Elliot was such a good dancer.'

'He's a man of many talents!'

They finish off with an elaborate dip – of Elliot, by Mum.

Alex and I break into spontaneous and enthusiastic applause.

'Upstairs?' I say to Elliot and Alex. They nod in almost perfect synchronization.

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Seeing them sends a familiar pang through my heart. Elliot and Alex are the perfect couple – and they don't have to contend with my and Noah's long-distance woes. They're able to be together whenever they want, without having to worry about time zones or whether there's enough wifi to Skype properly. They're completely relaxed in each other's presence.

In fact, they spend so much time together that my family has even given them their own portmanteau nickname, like Brangelina or Kimye. They're Alexiot.

'Are Alexiot staying for dinner?' Mum calls to us before we disappear upstairs.

'No, we're going to grab burgers at GBK before the concert!' I shout back.

'We are?' Elliot asks, raising an eyebrow.

I cringe. 'Kira invited us. Is that OK?'

Alexiot exchange a look but seem to come to an agreement. 'No problem, Pennylicious,' says Elliot. He reaches back and grabs Alex's hand, and I smile.

I remember the day they met, not long before Valentine's Day. Elliot had dragged me to a vintage-clothing store in an obscure part of the Brighton Lanes, even though we'd just been in there the day before and we both knew they weren't going to have anything different in stock. But then I'd seen a new guy slouched behind the counter. It took me a few seconds, but I recognized him.

'Oh my god, Penny, he is so cute!' Elliot had pulled me

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behind a rail of clothing and covered himself with an enormous feather boa.

'That's Alex Shepherd,' I said. 'He's in sixth form at our school.' Of course I knew him, but mostly because Kira had a massive crush on him. I lowered my voice. 'Are you sure he's gay?'

Elliot rolled his eyes at me. 'You think I would bring you in here if I wasn't sure? We've been eye-flirting since he started working here two weeks ago.'

'You eye-flirt with everyone,' I said, elbowing him in the ribs.

'Not like this.' He gave me an exaggerated wink that made me giggle.

'So why haven't you made a move yet?'

'I will. Just . . . give me time.'

Kira would be devastated to find out Alex plays for the other team, but she'd get over it. He was a little more clean-cut than I would have imagined for Elliot, but he had a mischievous glint in his eye that would make anyone melt into a puddle. When I peeked back round the rail to look at him again, he was still staring at us, so I lifted my hand in a little wave.

'Penny, what are you doing?' Elliot's whisper rose in tone by at least an octave.

Then I grinned. 'Speeding up time. Besides, I'm just being polite. He was looking this way. OK, he's coming over – be cool.'

'He's doing *what*?' Elliot's face was white with panic, but he smoothed down his hair. 'How do I look? I knew I shouldn't

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have worn the trilby today! I look too jaunty; I should've worn something cooler.'

'Elliot, you're rambling.' I'd never seen him act so flustered before. I pulled the boa down so that it didn't sit like a fluffy animal on top of his head. 'And, besides, your trilby looks –' But before I could finish my sentence Alex had reached us.

'May I help you?' he asked, with a small smile. He didn't take his eyes off Elliot for an instant.

'Will you marry me?' Elliot said under his breath.

'What was that?' Alex frowned slightly.

'Oh, nothing . . . I was just wondering if you could help me find a scarf to go with my trilby?' It was like Elliot was a different person. All his nerves seemed to melt away in front of my eyes, and he was back to his normal, confident self.

'Of course. I have something that would go with your *Great Gatsby* vibe over here.' Alex walked across to another rail in the store.

'Did you know F. Scott Fitzgerald's wife wouldn't marry him until he had a book deal?' said Elliot, following Alex.

'I didn't, but I did know that he was really bad at spelling,' replied Alex, without missing a beat.

I watched as the two of them walked away, swapping facts about an author I had yet to read (and I hadn't seen the movie of the book either). It was like they'd known each other their whole lives. I knew then that I needed to leave Elliot to it. I didn't want to cramp his style.

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But, in true Penny fashion, I backed up straight into a coat stand, knocking a pile of vintage fur coats and stoles on to the floor. I blushed bright red and started picking up furs and heavy coats, but it was all a tangled mess. Trust me to have ruined Elliot's moment.

Alex and Elliot were by my side in a flash. 'I'll clear this up – don't worry,' said Alex.

'I'll help,' said Elliot. They both reached down and each picked up one end of the same long fur stole, pulling at it until their hands touched. I could almost feel the spark of electricity in the air. It was their *Lady and the Tramp* spaghetti-and-meatballs moment – a film I *had* seen, loads of times, as a kid. I mumbled some excuses and attempted to sneak out of the store once more, but this time neither of them noticed. They've been an item ever since. And I like to think that my clumsiness helped *just* a bit.

Now Alexiot have to help me answer the ultimate question: what do you wear to see your boyfriend in real life for the first time in two months? We rush up the stairs to the top floor, where my bedroom is. Alex takes the steps two at a time with his long legs. He's much taller than both Elliot and me.

'Uh, Penny – aren't you supposed to be leaving for the tour tomorrow?' Alex asks when he gets to the top of the stairs and stands in the doorway of my room.

'What do you mean?'

But I know exactly what he means. It's like there's been a

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tornado in my bedroom. Every item of clothing I've ever worn – every scarf, belt and hat – is in a heap on my bed. Stacks of revision notes are piled high on my desk and there are scraps of cardboard discarded on the floor from where I put together my final photography portfolio.

The only place that's clear in my entire room is the window seat, where I've tacked up a cutting from a celeb magazine with a picture of Noah and me, his arm wrapped round my shoulders. The caption reads: *Noah Flynn and his girlfriend*. It's the first time I've been in a magazine and, even though my hair looks like a mess, I kept it as a memento. There's also a calendar that's nearly completely covered in gold stars, and today's date is circled in red.

Elliot tiptoes through the rubble. 'Holy wow. Ocean Strong does not know how to pack.'

'Ocean Strong' was the name Elliot and I had come up with for my alter ego, the one I channelled whenever I was feeling anxious, like how Beyoncé used to use 'Sasha Fierce' as a protective presence on stage. Beyoncé doesn't need Sasha any more, and one day I hope not to need Ocean Strong. But, for now, I cling to the name like a life jacket that will keep me afloat on the stormy seas of my anxiety.

I gesture to my bed. 'Um, take a seat, I guess.' I perch on top of a pile of jumpers on my dressing-table chair.

'I'm kind of worried that you're hiding Megan's dead body under here somewhere,' says Elliot, wrinkling his nose.

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I stick my tongue out at him. 'As if.'

Megan was my best friend when I first started school – but she changed, morphing into this high-maintenance, boy-crazy, selfie-obsessed girl that I no longer recognized. Last year she became jealous about my so-called relationship with Ollie – a guy I had a huge crush on before I met Noah. Nothing had happened between us, but even the hint of it seemed to be enough to drive Megan wild with jealousy. It was Ollie who found out about my then-anonymous blog and recognized Noah Flynn, and he told Megan. In turn, Megan put two and two together and told the media, exposing me to the press and the public.

Still, I got my own back when Elliot and I confronted Megan and Ollie in a cafe, ending up with our milkshakes being dumped over their heads. I haven't had much to do with Megan since Milkshakegate. News of the incident – still my single greatest moment of stand-up-for-myself bravery – spread around our school like wildfire.

But girls like Megan never stay uncool for long. It's as though her inner confidence always shines through and bad or embarrassing stuff slides off her like water off a duck's back. She even makes jokes about how ice cream is the key to her milky complexion. And now she's got an acceptance letter from the top drama school in London. She's back to being untouchable and on top of the world.

Even Ollie is leaving our school. His whole family decided to relocate to help his brother take his tennis to the next level. I feel

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bad for him. Even after what he did to me I don't believe he's a bad guy. And now he's trapped in his brother's shadow. My two 'nemeses' gone, like that. The only challenge I have left is to overcome is myself.

Elliot claps his hands together. He's in full-blown Monica-from-*Friends* organizer mode now. 'OK, where's your suitcase?'

'Uh, I think Alex is sitting on it.'

Alex jumps up and shifts a pile of clothes from underneath him. The sides of my bright pink suitcase finally become visible underneath the wreckage of my belongings.

'How long are you going away, again?' Alex says, appraising the bulging nature of my suitcase.

'She's gone for fourteen days, three hours and twenty-one minutes,' says Elliot. 'I'm going to count every second!'

'I think my parents are too,' I say with a sheepish grin.

'Did it take them a lot of time to come around to the idea?' asks Alex.

'Oh, only the two months since Noah suggested it at Easter! To be honest I wasn't sure if I could do it either.' Going on tour with Noah was a huge deal. It was the first time I was really, properly going to go away on my own. And, even though every detail had been raked over with a fine-toothed comb, I was still nervous about going.

'Of course you can. This is going to be an incredible experience and I am *so* jealous. Now, Penny, unzip and show us what you have.'

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I follow his instructions and cringe at the first thing in my case. Elliot reaches inside and pulls out the biggest woollen cardigan you've ever seen, with wide, comfy sleeves I can wrap round myself almost twice. It belongs to my mum, who wore it – as she says – *only* when she was pregnant, and not before or since.

Elliot takes it out and holds it in front of him. It hangs down past his knees. 'You do know it's going to be the height of summer while you're on tour, right? Why do you need to bring an entire flock of sheep with you?'

I snatch it out of his hands. 'It's my comfort sweater.' I hug it to my face and breathe in the scent of my mum's signature perfume. It smells like home. 'It's to help with my anxiety. Miss Mills said that if I was worried about being anxious and homesick on tour I should bring with me the one thing that will always make me feel safe. That will remind me of home. Packing my entire duvet didn't seem like the most practical option, so the second choice was this cardie.'

He takes it from me, folding it up neatly and putting it back in my suitcase. 'OK, you can have that one. But this you can't have!' He pulls out a baby-pink button-down with ruched fabric roses on the pockets. 'You're going to be on *tour* not heading to afternoon tea with your nan!'

'OK, that one can go.' I laugh. 'I'm no good at this!'

Elliot dramatically rubs his temples. 'Sometimes I think you're a lost cause, Penny! We'll have to deal with this later. But back to business: what are you going to wear *tonight*?'

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Now it's my turn to be dramatic. 'I've literally tried on everything I own! I can't find a single thing. Do you think I can get away with just throwing a black tank top on with my jeans?'

Elliot pulls a disapproving face. 'No way. That's not nearly dressy enough.'

'How about this?' Alex holds up a black skater dress I forgot I owned. It's got a little daisy print on it in white and yellow. I bought it from ASOS one day while I was supposed to be revising with Kira and Amara but have never worn it.

'That is just perfect!' says Elliot. 'My boyfriend, ladies and gentlemen: stylist extraordinaire.'

Alex shrugs. 'Hey, you work in retail long enough, you pick up a few pointers.'

I take the dress from Alex's outstretched hands and nip into the bathroom. I change into the skater dress, and face myself in the mirror.

I can't believe I'm finally getting to see Noah in concert. It feels like I've been both waiting for and dreading this moment ever since he got the call that he was going to be supporting The Sketch on tour. I pull my long red hair out of its bun, and it falls in waves around my face. Mum has shown me a little trick with eyeliner, which I try now, flicking the line up past the outer corner of my eye. Instantly my eyes look more alluring and cat-like. Maybe I can pull this off. My new tag line: *Girlfriend of Noah Flynn.*

I think I'm going mad as the first few beats of Noah's album

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start playing in my head, but when I open the bathroom door I realize that Elliot and Alex are playing 'Elements', one of the eight songs on *Autumn Girl*. Each song Noah has written is better than the last – but the title track 'Autumn Girl', which was written for me, is still my favourite, of course.

Alexiot have linked hands, and Elliot leans his head on Alex's shoulder. They're just way too adorable and I don't want to intrude. But Elliot must hear me because he looks over his shoulder at me. His jaw drops. 'You're *killing* it, Ocean Strong!'

'Why, thanks,' I say, doing a little curtsey.

'All right, kids – let's blow this popsicle stand,' says Elliot in a low drawl.

Both Alex and I look at him, frowning.

'What, don't you like my new Americanisms? I thought I'd practise before seeing Noah again. Now, accessories.' He pushes a handful of bangles on to my wrist and puts a long, dangling necklace round my neck. He smiles at me. 'You just need your Converse, and then you're ready.'

I look in the full-length mirror.

'You look great, Pen. That outfit is perfect,' says Elliot. 'Leah Brown, you may be the hottest pop star on the planet but you've got nothing on my girl.'

I allow myself to smile, and tell myself I look good. And I do. I feel confident. But I still pick up a jacket to go over the top. Elliot grimaces.

'What?' I say. 'It might be cold in the restaurant.'

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'Speaking of which, we'd better get a move on!' Elliot looks down at his watch.

'Tom!' I yell down the stairs to my brother. 'Will you drive us?'

I hear a grunt in response that I'm going to take as a 'yes'.

But, when we get outside, Alex doesn't join us in the car. He shoves his hands in his pockets. 'Sorry, guys, I have to head home to do something first. I'll meet you at the concert, OK?'

Elliot's happy mood deflates, his shoulders slumping.

'Are you sure?' I say. 'I know it must be really boring to have to hang out with a bunch of Year Elevens but most of them are all right.'

'It's not that,' he says. 'I just have stuff to do.'

'Oh, OK.'

He leans over and gives Elliot a quick kiss, but Elliot's heart isn't in it. Then, once Alex is gone, he shrugs his shoulders and is instantly back to his normal self. 'Let's go!'

A few minutes later, we pull up in front of GBK, courtesy of chauffeur Tom. Elliot jumps out of the car, but just as I'm about to follow him Tom reaches over and grabs my arm. 'If you get into trouble, or need any help, call me straight away, got it, Pen-Pen?'

I pull him into a hug, which he accepts with stiff shoulders. But I know he loves me really.

On a Friday night, Brighton is packed with commuters returning from work in London and revellers heading for a night

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out. There's a boy who looks younger than me playing guitar on the pavement. He sings softly, but he has an amazing voice. No one else stops to look – not even Elliot, who is so wrapped up in his own world he could walk past the London Symphony Orchestra and not notice – but I find myself lingering. I'm rooted to the spot by the boy's beautiful music.

'May I take a picture?' I ask him when he strums a final chord.

'Sure,' he says. I snap a few shots, and then take a pound out of my purse and put it in his guitar case. He grins gratefully at me and I make a dash for the restaurant as the heavens open and it starts to pour with rain. Typical British summer.

Inside, everyone is waiting. Elliot rushes up to me and pulls me to a stop. 'Don't freak out,' he says.

'What do you mean?' I frown. But then he steps to one side.

Megan is standing behind him.

And she's wearing the exact same dress as me.

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