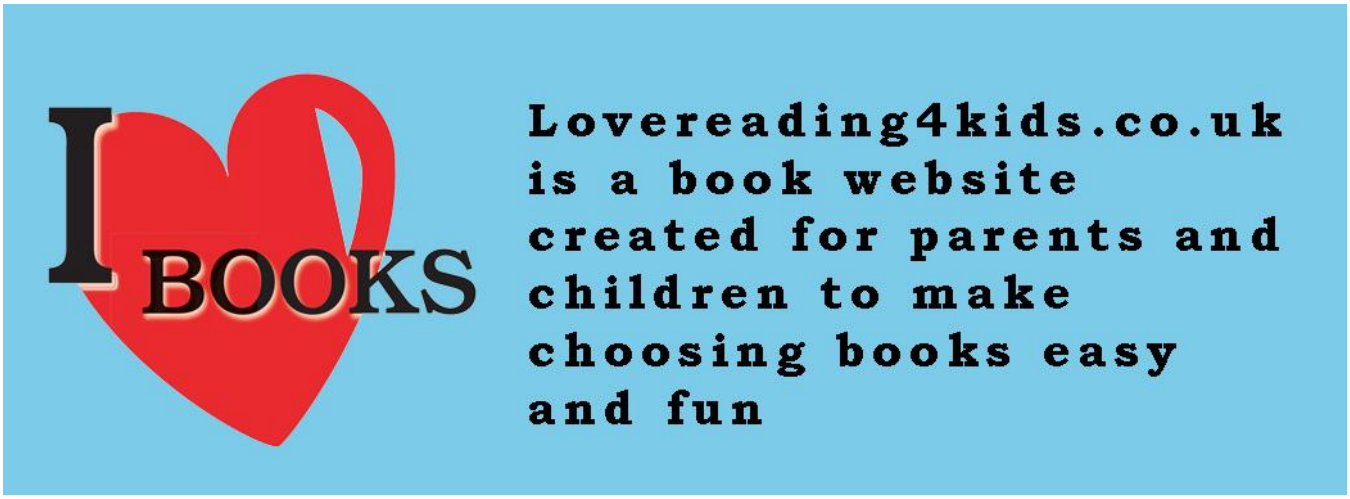


Opening extract from

Beautiful Broken Things

Written by

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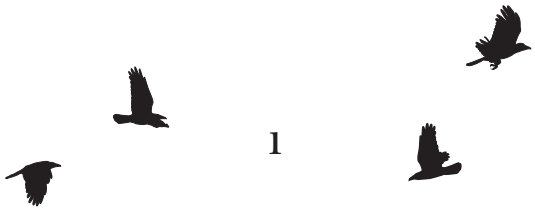
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Part 1



1

I thought it was the start to a love story.

Finally.

The boy, who looked to be around my age or slightly older, had skidded to a stop in front of me. He gave me a quick, obvious once-over and then switched on a wide, flirtatious grin. His friend, better looking but very much not grinning flirtatiously at me, rolled his eyes.

'Heeeey,' the boy said, just like that. Heeeey.

'Hi,' I said, sending up a quick prayer that my bus wouldn't arrive before the conversation ended. I tried to flick my hair casually – difficult to do when it's a touch on the bushy side – and lifted my chin, like my sister once showed me when she was trying to teach me how to act confident.

'What flavour have you got?'

'What?'

He gestured to the ShakeAway cup in my hand. 'Oh,' I said, stupidly. 'Toblerone.' I'd only had a few sips of the milkshake. I liked to let it melt a little before I started drinking it properly, and the cup was heavy in my hand.

'Nice.' The boy carried on grinning at me. 'I've never tried that one. Can I have a sip?'

Here is what I was thinking as I handed over my milkshake: He likes ShakeAways! *I* like ShakeAways! This is a MOMENT. This is the START.

And then his back was to me and he and his friend were running away, their laughter lingering after them. When they were a few feet away, the boy turned, waving my cup triumphantly at me.

'Thanks, love!' he bellowed, either not realizing or not caring that he was not old enough – not to mention suave enough – to pull off 'love'.

I just stood there with my hand holding nothing but air. The other people at the bus stop were all staring at me, some hiding smirks, others clearly pained with second-hand embarrassment. I adjusted my bag strap as nonchalantly as I could, avoiding anyone's gaze, seriously considering stepping in front of a passing bus.

Three days ago I had turned sixteen – the first of my friends to hit this particular milestone, thanks to my early-September birthday – and my parents had rented out a hall for my birthday party. 'You can invite boys!' my mother had told me, looking more excited by this prospect than anyone. The problem wasn't that I didn't want boys (definitely not), the problem was that I went to a girls' school, and I could count the number of boys I knew well enough to speak to on one hand. Despite the efforts of my best friend, Rosie, who went to the mixed comprehensive and had plenty of boy/friends, the gender mix at the party was hopelessly unbalanced. I spent most of the night eating cake and talking with my friends rather than flirting wildly and dancing with what Rosie called potentials, like sixteen-year-olds are supposed to do. It wasn't a bad way to see in a new age, but it wasn't exactly spectacular either.

I mention this so my OK-have-my-milkshake-stranger idiocy has some context. I was sixteen, and I honestly believed that I was due a love story. Nothing epic (I'm not greedy), but something worth talking about. Someone to hold hands with (etc.). The milkshake meet-cute should have led to that. But instead I was just me, standing empty-handed, and the boy was just a boy.

When the bus pulled up just a couple of minutes later and I retreated to the anonymity of the top deck, I made a mental list

of milestones I *would* have reached by the time my next birthday rolled around.

1) I would get a boyfriend. A real one.
2) I would lose my virginity.
3) I would experience a Significant Life Event.

In the following year I achieved just one of these goals. And it wasn't the one I expected.

'So he just *took* your milkshake?' Rosie's voice was sceptical. It was nearly 9 p.m., and she'd called me for our traditional last-night-before-school-starts chat.

'Yeah. Right out of my hand.'

'He just snatched it?'

'Um. Yes?'

There was a pause, followed by the sound of Rosie's laughter tickling down the line. Aside from my grandparents, Rosie was the only person I spoke to using the landline. 'Oh my God, Caddy, did you *give* it to him?'

'Not deliberately,' I said, already wishing I hadn't brought up the milkshake story. But it was always hard to stop myself telling Rosie everything. It was just second nature.

'I wish I'd been there.'

'Me too – you could have chased after him for me.'

Rosie and I had spent the day together, another before-school-starts tradition, and had actually bought a milkshake each before going our separate ways. She would definitely have chased after him, had she been there. When we were four, not long after we'd first met at a ballet class we both hated, an older boy had snatched my bow (I was the kind of kid who wore bows in her hair) and Rosie had sprinted after him, taken back the bow and stamped on

his foot. Our friendship had followed a similar pattern ever since.

'Why didn't *you* chase him?'

'I was surprised!'

'You'd think after all this time in separate schools you'd have learned to chase your own bullies,' Rosie said, her voice light and teasing.

'Maybe Year 11 will be the year.'

'Maybe. Do they even have bullies in private school?'

'Yes.' She knew very well that they did. She was the one I'd cried to for several straight months in Year 8 when I'd been the target. My school, Esther Herring's High School for Girls, had more than its fair share of bullies.

'Oh yeah. Sorry. I mean boy bullies. Obviously you don't get those at Esther's. Those are the ones I chase for you.'

I let her tease me about teenage boy thieves for a few minutes more until we hung up. I headed back upstairs in the direction of my bedroom, walking past my mother, who was ironing in front of the TV.

'I've got your uniform here,' she called after me. 'Do you want to come and get it?'

I trudged reluctantly back towards her. My uniform was hanging on the cupboard door, the pleats on the skirt perfect, the blazer practically shining. I'd avoided looking at my uniform all summer. It was even greener than I remembered.

'All freshly ironed,' Mum said, looking pleased and proud. No one was happier that I was at Esther's than her. When she found out I'd got in, she cried. Actually we both cried, but mine were not happy tears.

'Thanks,' I said, taking the hangers.

'Are you excited about tomorrow?' She was smiling, and I wondered if she was being oblivious on purpose.

'Not really,' I said, but I injected a note of humour into my

voice, to avoid a long 'don't disparage your opportunities' speech.

'It's a big year,' Mum said. The iron made a loud, squelching hissing noise, and she lifted it up. I suddenly realized she was ironing my father's pants.

'Mmmm,' I said, edging towards the door.

'It'll be a great one,' Mum continued happily, not even looking at me. 'I can already tell. Maybe they'll make you a prefect.'

This was unlikely. Being well behaved and getting good grades was not enough to set you apart at Esther's. The two prefects likely to be selected from my form were Tanisha, who'd started a feminist society in Year 9 and wanted to be prime minister, and Violet, who headed up the debating team and had campaigned successfully to get the school to go Fairtrade. Esther's was made for people like Tanisha and Violet. They didn't just achieve, which was expected to be a given for everyone, they thrived.

'Maybe,' I said. 'Don't be disappointed if I'm not though, OK?'

'I'll be disappointed at them, not you,' Mum replied, like this was any better.

Great, I thought. Another thing to worry about.

'I really hope you'll be focusing on your goals this year,' Mum said, looking up at me just as I tried to make my escape from the room. She was always big on goals.

I thought of the milestone list I'd mentally penned earlier on the bus. Boyfriend. Virginity. Significant Life Events.

'I am,' I said. 'Completely focused. Goodnight.'

Here's my theory on Significant Life Events: everyone has them, but some have more than others, and how many you have affects how interesting you are, how many stories you have to tell, that kind of thing. I was still waiting for my first one.

Not that I'm complaining, but my life up to the age of sixteen had been steady and unblemished. My parents were still married,

my best friend had been constant for over ten years, I'd never been seriously ill and no one close to me had died. I'd also never won any major competition, been spotted for a talent (not that I had a talent) or really achieved anything beyond schoolwork.

This wasn't to say I hadn't been on the fringe of these kinds of events for other people. Rosie herself had had two, both bad. At two and a half her father walked out on her and her mother, never to be seen again. When she was eleven, her new baby sister, Tansy, was a cot-death victim. My older sister, Tarin, had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder at the age of eighteen, when I was ten, and the entire period of her diagnosis had been marked by dark clouds and tears and Serious Discussions. I'd experienced these latter two events from the middle of the storm, and had seen how they'd shaped the lives of two of my favourite people in the world.

Rosie and Tarin both thought my significant-life-event theory was ridiculous.

'Don't wish tragedy on yourself,' Tarin said. 'Or mental illness.' She didn't get it when I tried to explain that significant life events could be happy things as well. 'Like what?'

'Like getting married?' When her eyes went wide I added quickly, 'I mean in general, obviously, not for me any time soon.'

'God, Caddy, I hope you dream bigger than marriage as your life's significant event.'

Rosie was dismissive. 'They're just horrible things that happened, Cads. They don't make me more interesting than you.'

But the thing was, they did. The only interesting story I had to tell about my own life was that of my birth, which aside from my starring role as The Baby really had nothing to do with me. My parents, holidaying in Hampshire several weeks before my estimated arrival day, were stuck in a traffic jam in a little village called Cadnam when Mum went into labour. She ended up having

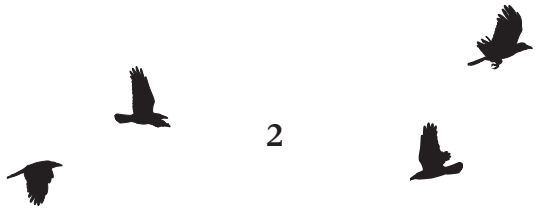
me on the side of the road, with the help of a nurse who happened to be in another car.

This made a great story to pull out of the hat if I ever needed to, and I'd told it so many times ('Caddy's an interesting/weird/funny name. What's it short for?') I knew what kind of facial expressions to expect from the listener and the jokes they'd likely make ('Good thing they weren't driving through Croydon/Horsham/Slough! Ha!'). But that still didn't make it *mine*. I couldn't remember it, and it had no effect on my life. It was a significant event for my parents, not for me.

If anyone asked me for a story from my life in the present tense, I always went blank.

Of course I wasn't trying to invite tragedy into my life. I knew the takeaway from pain is sadness, not anecdotes. But everything about me and my life felt ordinary, hopelessly average, even clichéd. All I wanted was something of some significance to happen.

And then, so slowly at first I almost didn't notice it happening, it did.



2

Tuesday

Rosie, 09.07: New girl alert.

Caddy, 10.32: ??

10.34: We have a new girl!

10.39: Really? Details please.

10.44: Her names Suzanne. Seems very cool. More later, maths now.

13.19: She just moved here from Reading. Takes same options as me! V funny.

13.20: I mean shes v funny, not the options thing.

13.28: Cool. How's everything else?

13.33: Same as. Call me tonight for chattage x

13.35: Will do x

Wednesday

08.33: I am on the bus and I just realized I forgot to brush my teeth.

08.37: Lovely!

10.38: Guess who isn't a prefect?

10.40: Is it you?

10.42: Yes.

10.43: WOOOHOOOOOO! *streamers*

10.44: Your support means the world to me.

13.01: You will always be PREFECT to me!

13.05: Um, thanks?

13.06: Geddit?

13.09: Yes!

13.11: HAHAHAHAHA. Suzanne says I shouldn't laugh because maybe you wanted to be prefect.
13.29: You told her?
13.33: Yeah! I told her you def didnt want to be prefect and I'm laughing in a good way.
13.35: Sz says all of the best people she knows aren't prefects.
13.40: Cads?
13.46: I def didn't want to be prefect. Mum wanted me to be though.
13.48: :(
13.49: We'll be not prefects together xx

Thursday
13.19: Nikki has clocked that Suzanne is cool. She tried to get her to sit with her at lunch.
13.25: Successfully?
13.27: No. Suzanne said she was good with me. Nikki said, you must have noticed she's a loser by now. Sz was like, wtf? and Nikki goes 'SERIOUSLY. I'm SAVING YOU.'
13.28: Bitch!!! Are you OK?
13.29. No. I'm crying in the toilets.
13.30: Want me to call you?
13.31: No.
13.31: Yes please.

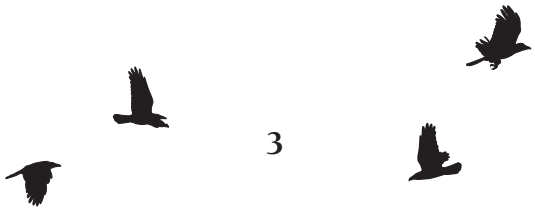
Friday
09.01: What did you have for breakfast this morning?
09.02: Um, cereal?
09.03: Mum made me pancakes. I WIN!
13.12: Idea. How about I bring Suzanne with me when I come to yours after school? Then you can meet her!

13.42: Sure, OK.

13.43: Yay! You'll love her, she's amazing. We'll come straight over, probs be at yours at about 4.

13.58: See you then x

15.33: WEEKEND!!!



3

I'd planned to make it to my house before Rosie and Suzanne arrived, mainly because I tried to keep the amount of time Rosie saw me in my school uniform to an absolute minimum. She was lucky enough to have an ordinary uniform – black skirt, white shirt, black cardigan – and she had a tendency to laugh in my face if she ever caught me in mine.

So it was just my luck that I was pushing my key into my front-door lock when I heard the stamp of feet behind me and then there was Rosie, throwing herself up against the still-closed door and pushing her face right up close to mine.

'Hello!' she shouted, all smiles.

I had to laugh. 'Hi,' I said, twisting the key and opening the door. 'Any chance I can persuade you to stay out here while I go change?'

'Nope!' Rosie said, pushing herself in front of me and blocking the doorway. 'It's too late. We've both seen you now.' She gestured behind me. 'Suze, didn't I tell you it would be the greenest thing you've ever seen?'

I glanced behind me at the new girl, who was smiling. When our eyes met, she grinned. 'Hi!' She was effortlessly friendly, her voice upbeat and her face open. 'I'm Suzanne.'

'*Obviously* you're Suzanne,' Rosie said, rolling her eyes before turning and heading into my house, leaving the two of us on the doorstep. 'Who else would you be?'

'Hi,' I said, trying to match Suzanne's bright tone and failing. 'Um. I guess you know I'm Caddy.'

She nodded. 'Your house is really nice.'

'Thanks,' I said, as if it was something I had any control over. I stepped into the house and she followed me, moving aside so I could close the door.

Rosie reappeared in the doorway to the kitchen, holding three red cans. 'You drink Coke, right?' she said to Suzanne, waving one at her.

Suzanne glanced at me, as if wondering if she should ask permission.

'Don't mind her,' I said, taking one of the cans for myself and starting up the stairs. 'She thinks this is her house too.'

'It basically is.' Rosie sounded far more cheerful than she usually did after her first week back at school. By this point the previous year, she'd collapsed on my living-room sofa and refused to move.

In my room, Rosie pulled over my beanbag chair and sank into it, for some reason choosing not to take her usual spot beside me on my bed. Suzanne sat down next to her, her eyes flitting around. I saw her glance land on my battered poster from the old Disney film *The Rescuers* – a present from Tarin several years ago as a nod to a treasured childhood joke – and a bemused smile skittered across her face.

I tried to study her surreptitiously, this possible pretender to my best-friend throne, who was so not who I'd expected from Rosie describing her over the phone.

This was probably because, for all her talking over the last few days – and there had been a lot – she'd neglected to mention what for me was the most noteworthy thing: Suzanne was gorgeous. Not just pretty, or cute, or any other standard word, but full-on stunning. It wasn't just the blonde hair – far more natural looking than mine, to the point where it might even *be* natural – or the blue eyes, or even the fact that she was model slim. It was also her make-up and even the way she carried herself. I felt daunted by

her, painfully aware of my unbrushed hair and my tendency to slouch, not to mention my hideous caricature of a school uniform. No wonder Rosie had described her as so confident. How could she not be, when she looked like that?

'So how do you like Brighton so far?' I asked, choosing the easiest question to start with and hoping it would be enough to fulfil my duty as friend of a friend.

'It's great,' Suzanne said, looking back at me and smiling. 'I was saying to Roz, you're both so lucky to have grown up here.'

I registered the use of 'Roz' and bit down on the inside of my lip to stop myself making a face.

'I told her it's overrated,' Rosie said.

'You've got a *beach*!' Suzanne replied with a laugh.

'A *pebble* beach!'

'There are worse places to grow up,' I said. 'You're from Reading, right?'

Suzanne raised her hand and wiggled it from side to side. 'Sort of. From when I was eight.' Anticipating my next question, she added, 'I was born in Manchester.'

That explained the not-Southern tinge to her accent.

'So how come you moved here?' I asked. 'Was it, like, a job thing?'

Her brow crinkled in confusion.

'I mean, did your parents get a new job or something?' I elaborated.

'Oh.' She looked uncomfortable. 'Actually it's my aunt that I live with.'

'Oh,' I said, not sure what to say next, apart from the obvious. I glanced at Rosie to see if this was news to her. Her unconcerned expression suggested not.

Another silence. I waited, hoping she'd reveal a bit more, but she said nothing. Rosie, apparently enjoying watching the two of

us fumble for conversation, raised her eyebrows at me. I could see the ghost of a grin on her face.

'What does your aunt do?' I asked finally.

'She's a chef,' Suzanne said, brightening. 'She owns one of the cafes on Queen's Road. Muddles?'

'Oh yeah, I know it.' I'd walked past it once with my parents and my mother had commented that Muddles was a stupid name for a cafe. Dad, in a jaunty mood, had said it was a cosy name. We hadn't gone in.

'What do *your* parents do?' Suzanne asked me.

'My dad's a doctor,' I said, 'a consultant at the hospital. My mum's a communications manager for the Samaritans.'

Her eyebrows lifted, as people's tended to do when I mentioned my parents' respective careers. People assumed a lot when they heard 'doctor' or 'the Samaritans'. Words like 'saint' and 'hero' and 'selfless' and 'if only everyone was like them' tended to crop up.

The truth was more along the lines of a distracted and rarely glimpsed father and a world-weary, seen-it-all-before mother. From the evidence, they were great at their jobs. But that didn't necessarily make them golden human beings.

'What kind of consultant is your dad?' Suzanne asked, the kind of question people asked when they either couldn't think of anything else to say or just wanted to be polite.

'A & E,' I said.

She looked instantly impressed. 'Wow.'

'It's not as interesting as it sounds,' I said.

'All the best hospital shows are set in A & E,' Suzanne said knowledgeably. 'He must have some great stories.'

'If he does, I never hear them,' I said. 'He works a lot. Like, night shifts and stuff? So I don't really see him much.'

Suzanne made a face, no doubt because she had no response

to this as much as out of sympathy. There was another awkward pause, at which point Rosie finally took pity on us both and spoke up. 'Caddy's parents are great.' I looked at her, surprised. 'You know those people and you're like, oh yeah, you've got how to be human figured out.'

I laughed. 'Um, OK.'

'Seriously.' Rosie raised her eyebrows at me. 'I hope you're grateful.' She turned to Suzanne. 'When I was eleven, my baby sister Tansy died –' Suzanne's eyes went wide at this – 'and my mum had trouble coping, so I came to live with Caddy for a few weeks. So I know.'

'Rosie,' I said, 'that's very heavy information to just drop into a sentence.' Suzanne was still looking stunned.

'Your baby sister *died*?' she echoed. 'That's horrible.'

'Yeah, it was,' Rosie said, and even though her voice was casual I saw her shoulders square and her jaw tighten. These are things you only notice on a best friend. 'But the point of the story was Caddy's parents.'

'Roz,' I said.

'That's horrible,' Suzanne said again, her voice quiet. She was looking at the floor.

'Do *you* have any horrible life stories to tell?' Rosie asked. Her voice was cheerful, but it had a definite edge. For all her deliberate nonchalance, I knew she didn't like talking about Tansy. 'Caddy calls them Significant Life Events.'

'*Roz*.' My voice was sharper this time. She looked at me, pulling a deliberate innocent face. Sometimes I felt like I was *her* parent. Reining in Rosie.

Suzanne looked from me to Rosie, clearly wondering if she should speak. Finally she said, 'What counts as significant?'

'Moving house probably counts,' I said, trying to be generous. 'Nothing significant has ever happened to me. I'm dull.'

Suzanne looked at me a little oddly, and I realized too late that describing myself as dull on first meeting probably wasn't a good way to make friends. I opened my mouth to try to redeem myself, but my mind had gone blank. Oh well, I thought, resigning myself to her inevitable opinion of me. She's only Rosie's school friend. Who cares what she thinks?