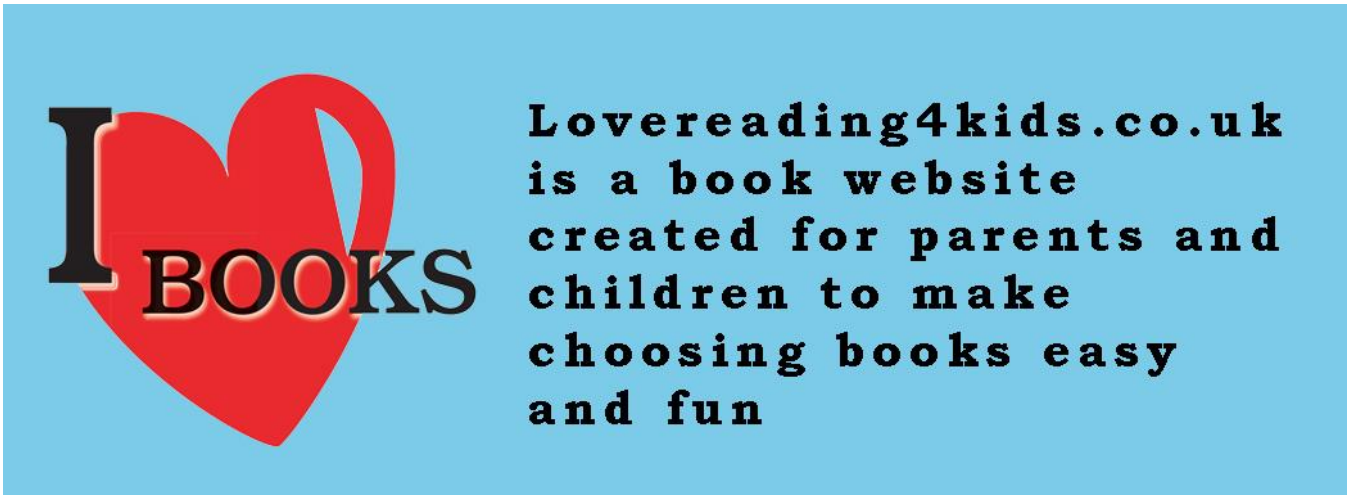


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Where Is Noah Flynn?

A small interruption to regularly scheduled blogging!

If you're a regular *Girl Online* reader, you know I love answering your questions, either in the comments or via email. Despite most of you being super cool and asking about normal things like my new school year and how I go about getting organized for my up-and-coming coursework and exam deadlines . . . I've also had my inbox flooded with questions about Noah Flynn. More specifically: Where is he? What is he doing? Why did he leave The Sketch world tour?

Now, this isn't just happening here on my blog but on every social media account I have, and even in real life too! So I feel it's time to set the record straight about what I know.

If you're a new reader of my blog, you might not be familiar with the fact that Noah and I used to date (emphasis on the 'used to'). Long-term

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readers may also know him as 'Brooklyn Boy', and although I haven't written about him in a while – or us, for that matter – his recent hiatus has left a lot of people wondering about him.

So, deep breath, here's the truth: I don't know either. I know as much as you do, and all I can hope is that he's OK and happy, whatever he's doing. His management issued this statement:

'Due to juggling a heavy workload alongside personal matters, Noah has made the decision to leave The Sketch world tour a month ahead of schedule. He sends his apologies to his fans for any disappointment caused and thanks them for their continued support.'

And that's all I've got. Unfortunately, being a friend of Noah's doesn't automatically mean I have him GPS-tracked, so I can't log into some app on my phone and see where he is (although I'm pretty sure my mum does this for me and my brother). All I can say to you is that I know Noah, and he wouldn't have made this decision lightly. But he is also a very strong guy and I'm sure he'll be back before we know it.

I hope this answers your questions and that we can resume life here on *Girl Online* as normal.

And for those of you who might not have a clue what I'm talking about . . . I'm sorry, ha ha! Also, Noah, if you're reading this, text me back or I may have to send out a private investigator to track you down.

Girl Online, going offline xxx

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Chapter One

The moment I finish the blog post, I hand over my laptop to Elliot. 'Do you think this is good enough?'

His eyes scan the screen and I worry at a hangnail on the edge of my pinkie finger.

'Looks fine to me,' he says after a few agonizing seconds.

His confirmation granted, I grab the laptop back and hit publish before I can change my mind. Immediately I feel a burden lift off my shoulders. It's done now. I can't take the words back. My 'statement' is officially out there, even though it's ridiculous that I even need to make a statement. Heat rises in my cheeks as I realize how angry this situation is making me . . .

Elliot coughs – loudly – interrupting my train of thought. His lips are bunched up into a corner, which makes my heart drop because I know he's worried about something. 'Have you really not heard from Noah since mid August?'

I shrug. 'Nope.'

'I can't believe him. Brooklyn Boy is letting us down.'

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I shrug again. It's about the only gesture I can muster. If I think about it too hard, all the emotions I've been struggling to hide will come bubbling to the surface.

'All I have is this one text.' I take out my phone and pull up the message. 'See?'

Sorry, Penny. It all got a bit too much.
I'm quitting the tour and taking a break.
I'll be in touch soon Nx

I don't know what Noah's definition of 'soon' is, but it's been well over a month now and I haven't heard a peep. I have sent numerous texts, DMs and emails, all with no response. I also didn't want to seem like some desperate ex-girlfriend trying to track him down, so that slowed to a stop recently, but it still sends a gut-wrenching flicker through my mind every time I think about the fact he hasn't responded.

'Well,' Elliot resumes, 'you've done the right thing by putting your story out there and getting people off your back. Who needs that kind of drama, right?'

'Exactly.' I shuffle down to the end of the bed and grab a hairbrush off my desk. My eyes wander around the selfies pinned to the mirror as I run the brush through the knot of newly sun-kissed auburn tangles; there are pictures of me with Leah Brown, Elliot and Alex, even one with Megan. Most of them are obscured, though, by cut-outs of my favourite photographs from magazines – inspiration for my

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portfolio – and my A-level revision schedule, carefully highlighted and colour-coded so I know exactly what I need to do. Mum made a joke that I spend more time colour-coding than actually studying, but it helps me to feel in control of something. Everything else in my life seems just beyond my reach – Noah, my photography career, even my friends . . . Everyone is preparing for life beyond sixth form. Even though I've got a huge head start with my internship with François-Pierre Nouveau – one of the hottest photographers on earth – I feel like I'm standing still while everyone is running around me. Where do I go from here?

'Do you think he's found someone else?' Elliot peers at me over the rim of his glasses with an expression I know all too well: the 'this is never going to go down well with Penny' expression that he likes to surprise me with every now and then.

'Elliot!' I throw the brush at him, which he ducks easily. It hits the back wall and lands on a pile of laundry.

'What? He's single; you're single. It's time for you to get *out there*, Pen. There's more to life than just Brooklyn.' He gives me one of his exaggerated winks and I roll my eyes. If there's anything that makes me feel more agitated than Noah's silence, it's the thought of Noah with someone else.

Needing to change the subject, I ask Elliot, 'How's Alex anyway?'

Elliot raises his hands to the sky. 'Perfection, as always.'

I grin. 'You guys are too cute, if not slightly sickly.'

'Did I tell you he's moved on from the vintage shop? He's working in a restaurant now.' Elliot beams with pride. 'I can't

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wait until I'm finished with sixth form and we can move in together. I mean, I spend most of my life at his place anyway. When I'm not here, of course.'

He smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. I lean over and grab his hand. 'Your parents will come around . . .' For weeks now, it's been non-stop fighting in the Wentworth household. Sometimes we can hear them shouting through the thin walls of my attic bedroom; those nights are a little awkward.

Now it's his turn to shrug. 'In my opinion, they should just put themselves out of their misery. We'd all be happier if they'd just split up for good.'

'Penny!' My mum's voice echoes up the stairs to my bedroom.

I turn my phone over and check the time. 'Oh nuts. Come on, Elliot – we're going to be late! I can't miss my first lesson.' I scramble off the bed and start throwing books into my bag. I quickly check my face in the mirror, and it's only then that I realize I only brushed one side of my head before throwing the brush at Elliot. I grab a hairband from my desk and gather my hair – tangles and all – up into a rough top-knot. It will have to do.

Elliot's ability to turn a dark cloud into a ray of sunshine always amazes me, and when I turn round he's back to his bright and bubbly self. He hooks his arm through mine and then grins at me. 'Race you for a chocolate croissant?'

'You're on.'

We take the stairs two by two, laughing and bumping into each other as we go.

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'What are you two nutters up to now?' Mum tuts as we jump down the bottom step before nabbing a warm chocolate croissant each out of her outstretched hands. 'Don't forget – home by seven for Tom's birthday.'

'No problem!' I say, already halfway out of the door, knowing full well I have chocolate in places a well-put-together sixteen-year-old shouldn't have. I would've never forgotten my big brother's birthday, but I know why Mum's reminded me. I've taken to hanging out with Elliot after school around Brighton, snapping photographs of him for my portfolio. He's like the perfect model for me: so super self-confident he's never afraid to stand in the middle of the street in a pose, even if there are people walking by. 'Maybe I should start a blog,' he said to me one day. 'Then I could show off all these photographs! Even the ones you don't like are amazing.'

'You should,' I replied. 'It would be great for your fashion work too.'

'I'll think about it' was his response, but he's never actually gone through with it. I suspect the thought of *having* a blog is more appealing to Elliot than the thought of all the work that goes into it. He's always rolling his eyes at me when he sees me on my laptop yet again, but he also knows that's what it takes to maintain it. And, since my long period of absence from it last year, I'm more determined than ever to make it a success.

Outside, there's a chill in the air that reminds me autumn is on the way, even though it's still only September. This time of year is my absolute favourite; the leaves start to turn golden and wither away after their summer of hard work,

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and the sun seems to shine a lot more clearly as the mist from the summer heat disappears. Everything just seems a little brighter and fresher – a clean slate for the new school year. A clean slate. That's exactly what I need.

I snuggle closer to Elliot and link my arm through his. 'We'll have to cut our modelling session short tonight,' I say. 'The only bad thing about Alex leaving the vintage store is that we can't borrow any more fun costumes!'

I think back to my favourite photograph of Elliot: he was wearing his normal clothes (skinny jeans, a burgundy T-shirt with a chunky-knit cardigan on top) along with a pirate hat with a huge feather sticking out, and he was balancing on one leg on an upside-down bucket we'd found on the rocky beach. He looked like a pirate king of Brighton. Albeit one with *really* good fashion sense.

'Back to your mum's wardrobe it is!' Elliot says with a dramatic sigh. I laugh. It's true: Mum does have a ton of weird and wonderful accessories from her drama days.

I leave him at the bus stop and he gives me two extravagant kisses on the cheek – something he picked up from Paris and then honed at his internship at *CHIC* magazine. 'See you later, *dahling*,' he says, then lowers his voice. 'And don't fret too much about Noah, promise?'

I blush. 'I promise.'

It's only a short walk to school from the bus stop, but I miss Elliot's company as soon as he's gone. His absence gives me an ache like I'm missing an arm or a leg. I'm missing an Elliot – and it hurts. I don't know what I'm going to do if he and Alex end up moving to London next year. The thought

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makes the chocolate croissant repeat on me and I swallow to keep it down.

My phone buzzes, and I immediately forget my promise and think that it might be Noah. But it's not him. It's Kira. 'Where are you?' the text reads. Then I look at the time. I only have five minutes until my first lesson – and I'm supposed to be doing a presentation in history class with Kira. Oops.

I pick up my pace into a run, race up the steps and through the double doors of my school. Just inside, two new Year Seven girls are bent over their phones, giggling at something on *Celeb Watch*. Immediately I feel my anxiety rising like a tide in my mind, in case it's me they're gossiping about – but this time it isn't. It turns out that Hayden of The Sketch has broken up with his girlfriend, Kendra. When one of the girls looks up at me, she frowns – but there's not a hint of recognition in her eyes. It's just because I look a bit like a weirdo staring at them. I hurry past, my heart beating quickly inside my chest. I don't even turn any heads any more.

I breathe a sigh of relief, letting the anxiety wash away. Noah and I are officially yesterday's news. I'm just a normal girl, living a normal life in a normal school. It's what I've wanted ever since the end of the tour.

Isn't it?

'Penny! GOODNESS ME, there you are.' Kira comes running up to me, snapping my train of thought before it can get too long. She launches into a run-through of our presentation, so I let her pull me through the school hallways and back into normality.

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