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First published 2023 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2023 Freja Nicole Woolf
Cover illustration © 2023 Lucia Picerno

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This book has been typeset in Agilo Handwriting, Avenir, Gilroy, Guthen Bloots, MyrasHand and Pain de Mie

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5295-0999-1

www.walker.co.uk



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LIBRA SEASON



Conversations with Taylor Swift

I cannot stop dreaming about Alison Bridgewater. This could be because it's Libra Season… Love and relationships are on everybody's minds during Libra Season, according to my *Bible to the Stars* – or my *Book for Blithering Idiots*, as Dad calls it. But it could also indicate that I'm reaching dangerous and dizzying new heights of my Alison Bridgewater Obsession, which is not good news, as I'm dizzied almost to death already!

They're very innocent dreams: Alison and me walking hand in hand across Tower Bridge in London … Alison and me playing tag on a white-sand beach … Alison and me lying side by side on a queen-size bed and then, just possibly, shuffling close enough that our lips can touch, and we brush fingertips, and I say under my breath, "I love you," and in my dreams, Alison's perfect face will glow, her smile like pure sunlight and rainbows…

She opens her mouth to say, "Love you too…!"

But I always seem to wake up before that happens.

It's Tuesday morning in Lambley Common, Kent, and I have school soon, where I will have to see Alison

face-to-face and not be awkward: not easy when you're a born clown like myself! I stay in bed for ages feeling troubled. Specifically, about the fact that I just dreamed about kissing Alison again! Then I hear Mum's sing-song morning call.

"Cat, come down for breakfast! I've made porridge!"

In that case, I might as well stay in bed for ever! Mum is far from competent in the kitchen. Her porridge is like cat food! But when I've raised this with her, she just says, "It's a good thing we named you Cat then!" Then she laughs a lot with Dad.

But woe alas, I do have to get ready (a timely process indeed if your gang has the überest of standards like mine does), so I stumble to my mirror and examine my blonde curls. They're basically a bird's nest, so I quickly comb my fingers through them, then add mascara. To my eyelashes obviously, not my hair, though a bit does get caught in the wand.

Then I sigh a tragic sigh – because I do this every day...

My morning routine is simple: get up, get dressed, pray to Almighty Aphrodite (she is the Goddess of Love, and nothing is more important than that), then make myself as beautiful as possible for my friend and romantic obsession, Alison Bridgewater.

But today, before I've even applied my lucky lavender deodorant, my phone buzzes and my eyes almost explode. Which would be really messy and traumatic, to be honest. But I have a text from Alison herself!

Hey bb! Can we talk after school, just us? Xox **08:09**

"Gooseberries!" I exclaim (my favourite curse word). Alison Bridgewater wants to talk to me ALONE? After school? ON A TUESDAY? About what?! Then my bedroom door flies open and I Frisbee-fling my phone and shriek, "I'M NOT ON MY PHONE, MUM, HONESTLY, I'M JUST COMING DOWN!"

My phone smashes through my nail polishes on the dresser and right into the pinky-purple lava lamp, which teeters dangerously. I have to jump to catch it and end up face-planting in the pile of dirty underwear on the floor: a true moment of knickerbocker glory.

Then I look round and see it's not Mum but my tree-hugging terror of a sister, Luna, who is interrupting my celestial flows. She really is the WORST person – this text from Alison could be the most important conversation of my life! And that includes my conversation with Taylor Swift. (Luna says it's "not a conversation" when she's never once replied, but I disagree.)

Oblivious to my woes, Luna waves her phone around and says, "Cat, have you seen your horoscope? Apparently, Aquarius lives are being blessed today. Maybe that fungal infection on your leg will clear up!"

"It's just a bruise, Luna!" I snap, swiping her phone. "I've told you already!"

Usually, I'd be deeply unamused that Luna is rabbiting on about astrology now. I'm the one with the *Bible to the Stars*, and my mud-loving sister has already claimed pacifism, anti-consumerism, intersectional feminism and radical veganism! Can't she leave anything for me?

But reading her phone, I realize I may have to Elsa-style

Let It Go. Because my sister, who is so bizarre that she grows mushrooms in a shoebox for fun, might actually be right. According to my horoscope, my life is about to change for ever, which sounds pretty outrageous for a Tuesday morning.

Deep in my knickers pile, my phone buzzes again. I dig it back up and gasp.

I really need u!!! xxx **08:11**

Head spinning with a thousand Taylor Swift lyrics, I feel the stars align… Well, that might be my stomach rumbling. But could today really be the day Alison Bridgewater falls in love with me?! It's a lot to take in. Especially given that, as I might have mentioned already, it's a Tuesday.

I'm in an Alison-induced coma all through Mum's horrendous breakfast and all the way to school as well, which is a wonderful distraction from Luna raving on about Mum's "anti-animal" shopping agenda. Last night's dreams are all over my skin like pollen… You can't see it, but you can feel it clinging to you.

Gosh, that was a very poetic thought! Maybe I should be writing Alison one of my amazing poems… She's bound to fall in love with me then! I try to think poetically, but Luna won't shut up! It's no wonder I never get anything done.

"… just because it said 'farm fresh' on the packet – farm fresh?! Everybody knows that's code for battery farm!" Luna gasps in annoyance. It isn't unusual for my sister to be angry at our parents – or "symbols of a capitalist dystopia" as she calls them. I'm only fourteen but she makes ME feel like a boomer. I guess I'm nearly fifteen, so I'm not far off.

"Mum seemed to think the picture on the front justified it as well," Luna rants. "As if that chicken ever really saw a field! Then she's bought those sausages for dinner – again!"

My sister (a Scorpio, Aphrodite save me) is very passionate. Last Christmas, aged twelve, she announced she wanted to change her name from Lauren Anna Phillips to "Luna Anaïs Celeste Phillips." She'd printed the official forms and everything! Apparently, she wanted this or nothing as her Christmas gift.

"At least she's keeping the surname," Dad grunted, not even lowering his paper.

Mum told her to "try it out" before making it legal. Then when Luna left the room, she turned to my utterly shocked face and said, "Don't worry, love. It's normal to play with identity at this age. Just let her work through it, and she'll be Lauren again before you know it."

Nine months on, Luna is more Luna than ever! No one calls her Lauren any more, so I suppose I'll have to start taking her seriously… But seeing as she's currently wearing an embarrassingly enormous pin saying VEGAN FROM MY HEAD TOMATOES on her blazer, perhaps I won't call her Lauren or Luna. I'll just call her ridiculous instead.

But you know who isn't ridiculous?

Alison Bridgewater. She really is so perfect. She's half-Ghanaian and her hair is gorgeously dark and curly, and her golden-brown skin glows even in the depths of winter… Gosh. I actually slightly hate how poetic and stunning she is.

"Perfect…" I sigh out loud, then my eyes widen. Oops.

Luna stops talking about the crimes of the farming

industry. "Excuse me? Did you just say 'perfect' when I was talking about animal genocide?!"

"No!" I pause walking. "I'm tired. I was thinking about something else!"

Luna rolls her eyes. "You know, if you listened to me, you might learn something! Why are you tired? Were you writing *Frozen* fan fiction until four in the morning again?"

"Yes," I say. "I mean, NO! I've never done that!"

Gooseberries … how does Luna know about that?

"Whatever." Luna adopts her peak zen face. "Libra Season is sending everyone into a frenzy. Just because they're scared of being alone another year. Maisy McGregor literally fainted over it yesterday…"

That catches my attention. I pause trying to mentally compose a sonnet.

"Wait, for another YEAR? Luna, what do you mean?"

Luna gives me a smug smile. Which is also a very annoying smile, but that's just her face. "Haven't you been reading your *Bible to the Stars*? Some people believe if two don't become one in Libra Season, you'll have to wait until next year to find someone. And that's a long, long time. Eight million metric tons more plastic will have gone into the ocean by then, which is a lot of tons, Cat…"

She rambles on. But I am ozone-layering out all over again.

A whole year?! I'll basically be almost sixteen and I won't even have had my first kiss! Suddenly, my conversation with Alison Bridgewater is even more important. Really, I deserve some sort of award just for holding it together! I'm like Florence Nightingale, if she was a blonde

fourteen-year-old with a crush on her best friend. Which she isn't, so I suppose I'm not actually like Florence Nightingale at all, but I'm still very virtuous and saintly. Today could be bigger than Disney's silence on Elsa's true romantic persuasion!

Because no way, Swift-Tay, am I going to wait another year to find true love.


BIKE
TO THE
STARS



For the Love of Alison



The first thing I see when I walk into registration is Alison Bridgewater, pressing flowers into her scrapbook like some kind of creative demigod. She really is the Prettiest Pisces Princess who ever walked this cruel, cruel Earth… Big, poetic sigh.

Back in Year Eight, me and Alison sat together in science, and because science is properly Yawnsville Express, I doodled a flower in my planner.

Alison spotted me. "Aww, that's so pretty! Do you draw a lot?"

"Um … sometimes," I replied, thinking about my entire portfolio of kissing-princess drawings. Probably best Alison didn't see those. "Do you?"

"I make scrapbooks!" Alison reached into her bag to show me. The scrapbook was a mix of newspaper clippings, photos from magazines, postcards, scraps of fabric, all thrown together in a way that somehow looked beautiful, like all the chaos in the world sorted out.

"That's… so cool!" I murmured, and Alison beamed, and her teeth looked so perfect, and her hair looked oh-so curly

and gorgeous, and my stomach clenched like a sour grape, because how did I never notice this before? She's actually mesmerizingly beautiful!

Sour grape became full-on LEMON when, one sleepover, Siobhan (THE Queen Bee of Queen's) instructed me to bring my star bible and much-admired grand and impressive zodiac wisdom so we could study our star charts and find our perfect match. She's been bleating for a Capricorn ever since. But then we tried Alison's details and the website just reloaded MY chart. I thought it was a mistake at first, like falling in love with a Gemini, but no… Everything aligned. Every single planet. WE were the perfect match!

"Well, that's a massive coincidence," Siobhan said, blinking in surprise.

I could barely breathe. But Alison just wiggled her (perfect) eyebrows. "I don't know, Cat… What if it's written in the stars? I've always loved your adorable button nose…"

Everyone shrieked with laughter and I went *AHAHAHA* as convincingly as possible, but inside, Aphrodite was throttling my heart with a glittering garland of roses, and ever since, I've been stupidly and pathetically and intergalactically in love with Alison Bridgewater.

Nobody knows except for my so-called best friend, Zanna, who is currently observing me, one eyebrow raised in complete and utter judgement. I snap back to the present. It's rather like being thrown into a swimming pool… and I should know; it's how Dad wakes me up on our summer holidays in France. I'm late, Zanna knows I'm staring at Alison, and I still have no idea what Alison wants to talk about later.

To put it simply, I am stressed in a vest. And the rest of my clothes as well.

I take a deep breath, then beeline towards my seat in the most unnoticeable way possible. But at once I hear, "Cathleen Phillips, well, well, well."

Gooseberries! I judder to a halt, internally groaning. Then I turn around with the fruitiest, fakest smile I can muster. "Good morning, Mrs Warren!"

"Good morning, Cathleen." Everyone says Irish accents are dancing-dingo divine, but I'm not sure I'll ever trust one in all my life thanks to Mrs Warren. She taps her pen on the surface of her desk. "Why don't you come over here," she says, sing-song-stomach-churningly, "and explain to me why you're five minutes late to registration?"

I slide to the front desk. "Sorry I'm late, Miss," I recite. "My sister got up late."

Not strictly true, but I'm hardly going to tell her it was my fault! Me and Mrs Warren have had a mutually hateful understanding since FOR EVER. Well, since she caught me drawing Shrek ears on her photo in the hallway anyway.

After I have agreed with Wicked Warren that no, I am not my sister, and therefore yes, it's a fair-and-square "late" mark, I slump down next to Zanna and do everything in my power not to gaze longingly at Alison Bridgewater. Sadly, everything in my power is like a Capricorn's capacity to love (meaning: not much), and I gaze longingly at Alison after all.

She sunbeams back with all the usual summertime and rainbows and I almost fall off my chair. For the love of Libra Season, this is hard! What does she want to talk about? Aphrodite above, please give me a sign...

Zanna clears her throat. "Good morning, my useless blonde friend."

Pausing mid-prayer, I scowl. "What are you judging me for now?"

"Possibly the way you stared at Alison for five painful seconds before you came in?" Zanna tuts, tapping her owlish glasses like she often does when she's disapproving. Which is basically all the time. "There's such a thing as subtlety, Cat."

Zanna Szczechowska is an utterly horrendous friend who mocks me on a daily basis for absolutely everything. But I've known her since primary school and she knows far too many of my shameful secrets to ever risk falling out with her. Also, unlike me, she knows my timetable off by heart, so I really can't afford to lose her. I can still glower at her though.

"A real friend tells you the truth," Zanna says, shrugging. "You've got to get over that girl!"

"That's a valid opinion," I agree, as Mrs Warren trawler-drags through the announcements. "But here's a better idea. What if Alison falls in love with me back?"

Zanna frowns. "Falls in love with your back? What about the fungal infection?"

"IT'S A BRUISE, ZANNA!" I shriek. I really shouldn't have posted about that on Instagram. Then I remember we're in the middle of class. Oops. Everyone and Alison Bridgewater goggles at me in shock. After Mrs Warren has logged my second caution of the day, I whisper on with Zanna… "It's on my leg anyway! And I didn't even say that… Although she'll hopefully fall in love with my back as well. But first, she has to fall in love with my front, my sides, and the rest of me! And that's where the poetry will help."

Zanna's eyes widen in horror. "Sorry. The poetry?"

"I've decided it's now or never," I explain. "I'm reliably informed by my horoscope that today is the day I should tell Alison how I feel, so I'm going to write a poem and give it to her after school. It's a new chapter – sorry, *stanza* – of my life, and Alison is definitely going to fall in love with me, because poetry is the language of the soul."

"That's the worst idea I've ever heard," Zanna replies. "*Please* don't do that. You will ruin our friendship group and make everything awkward for ever."

"It's too late, Zanna," I say. "It's not even an idea. It's a concept."

"Good grief," Zanna murmurs. "That does sound worse."

She might be more annoying than my fungal infection. Gooseberries galore.



By lunchtime, I still don't have so much as a haiku to give to Alison Bridgewater. And the moment I find a quiet corner to write something spectacular in my notebook, Jamie Owusu appears with his Ninja Turtles lunchbox, sounding off about how desperately hard his life is.

I really have no choice but to be friends with Jamie. Our mums are besties and host this sad-fest "sewing group" in my house together every weekend. Jamie always comes along because he's scared of being home alone, and mostly we lounge in my bedroom and he complains. I usually don't mind because I'm used to not listening, but today it's too much. How am I supposed to write wondrous poetry if tragic, non-poetic types keep bothering me?

Today Jamie's big problem is that no girl in Lambley Common will date him. "Why do nice guys always finish last?" he moans, halfway through a mouthful of chocolate digestives. I'm only half listening, because I'm sketching the most cute-alicious sketch of Elsa from *Frozen* marrying Merida from *Brave*. And writing my poetry… of course.

"Girls only want white guys, don't they?" Jamie mourns on. "Like Chris Hemsworth or Tom Holland."

"The toilets are covered in graffiti about Chidi Unigwe," I muse, drawing Merida's curly hair and sighing wistfully because it's so much like Alison's. "Everyone fancies him."

"Chidi's TikTok famous!" Jamie protests. "Literal Stormzy called him a legend!"

"Well, maybe you should start making music," I suggest. "Then you can be as cool as Chidi! You're bound to find a girlfriend then."

Jamie jogs my elbow, almost ruining Elsa's bouquet of flowers! I scowl as he points across the playground to where Siobhan is talking to her latest boy obsession, Kieran Wakely-Brown. She's letting out an annoying gibbonish laugh every five seconds and bobbing up and down like a rubber duck as Kieran boasts away about his collection of signed tennis balls.

"That's the kind of guy all you girls want," Jamie says decisively.

I'm not sure what he means, saying "all you girls" like that, but somehow it really prickles my pumpkins, so I slam my notebook shut and say, "Well, maybe if you stopped moaning all the time, Jamie, some girl would notice how secretly good-looking you are, or whatever, and go out with you!"

Jamie gapes at me. Oops. Was that too harsh?

Then he says, "So, you think I'm good-looking?"

I widen my eyes. Really?! That's the part he chose to hear?! I flap my lips about like a salmon, trying to articulate that I didn't mean it *like that*, because I don't want Jamie thinking I fancy him when I certainly in a million-billion years do not!

Unfortunately, I end up saying, "I don't mean – I mean… good-looking, but – I mean!" I decide not to mention that he's sadly no match for Alison Bridgewater. But I suppose he's okay, if that's what sinks your submarine, so I say, "You're all right!"

But he keeps grinning like I made his day, week, or entire zodiac year. "That's special," he goons on. "A proper compliment from a girl like you."

I'm worried he's reading far too much into this. Gulping down the merry-go-round of panic that's spinning in my chest, I watch Jamie slowly bite into another chocolate digestive, maintaining eye contact the entire time. What now?! Then someone smacks their hands onto my shoulders and I jump out of my knickers.

"O-M-ACTUAL-G! Did you SEE that, Cat?!" And Siobhan Collingdale leaps onto the tabletop, obliviously barging Jamie's lunchbox to the ground. "Über-special moment with Kieran – were you watching?!" She tosses her hair back and whips Jamie right in the eye.

Siobhan's hair is famous: she uses five different conditioners mixed together, and although I'm secretly sure it's just brown, Siobhan insists her natural colour is "burnt umber". She's probably just blinded Jamie, but she's

exploding with Kieran news and doesn't even look at him. Although I notice she swipes a digestive while he's busy groaning in pain.

This is the last strawberry. I'm never going to come up with a poetic masterpiece! Anyway, Siobhan's been talking about Kieran Wakely-Brown all day and I'm beyond over it. We all have crushes, but for the love of Alison, she takes hers way too seriously!

"He's not like other boys," Siobhan raves on. "He's a CAPRICORN, and he knows what mascara is, because his mum is a professional MUA, and he's even met Cara Delevingne! Which is great because everyone says I have her eyebrows. I'm so over Chidi!" Jamie chokes on his biscuit. "Having a new boyfriend is the best natural cleanse, Cat. I never even think about Chidi any more! That's why my skin is so clear these days…"

Jamie keeps googly-eyeing me all through Siobhan's Kieran Catch-Up Special, but I pretend not to notice. I've got quite enough on my platypus: Libra Season is clearly taking effect! Siobhan is on the verge of a sparkling new relationship and meanwhile I still have nothing to give to Alison Bridgewater. Sappho strike me down!

WHAT RHYMES WITH ALISON???

1:45p.m. - Madison? Atkinson?

Smalison...? How about... ALISON! Oh.

Badminton? Although... In Year Seven, I *might* have broken Sporty Habiba's perfect front tooth when a badminton racket slipped from my hand mid-swing... Maybe best not to remind Alison of that.

Hag-Ridden? I'm not sure "Hags" really experience true love though. I'd have to ask Mrs Warren to be absolutely certain...

Sally's son? Frustratingly, the only Sally's son I know is Nigel the Nibbler from nursery. He chewed my second-favourite gel pen so much, it practically turned into a twiglet... Not very romantic.

1:55 p.m. - "Salishan"! Thanks, internet!

Meaning: "a family of Native American languages from the northwestern USA and Canada..." Time to get inspired!!!

2:35 p.m. - I can now introduce myself in Halq'eméylem, but I do not have a poem.