

"BRILLIANT"
Holly Bourne

this
song
is
about
US

WINNER OF THE YA BOOK PRIZE

SARA BARNARD

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*For Arthur
who is already a star*



June 2025

glastonbury festival

Attendance: 200,000

Imagine you're there right now.

You're outside. It's sunny; bright and hot. There are people all around you. There's music in every space, filling every sense you have. It's the *alive* kind – the way music sounds and feels when people are playing it right in front of you, playing it *for* you. There's grass underneath your feet, squidgy beneath your wellies. (Yes, you're wearing wellies.) You can smell that grass, warm with summer, mixed with beer and sweat and perfume and mud and weed and sun cream and dry shampoo and churros and chips and baby wipes. When you smile, you feel the glitter your friend painted onto your cheeks crinkle and crease. In front of you, far ahead and as high as only gods can be, there's a band on a stage, the kind you've only ever seen in videos and on TV. But this is real, and you are *in* that crowd. *You* are one of those faces.

You feel electric. Alive in a way you're just not anywhere else. Everything about your real life feels distant and small, because how could anything possibly be more real, or matter more, than this?

And that band on stage? That beautiful boy with the messy brown curls, the one everyone is staring at and cheering for, who can't possibly be a real person that brushes his teeth and waits for the toast to pop and cuts his toenails over the bedroom bin? He's someone's boyfriend. When his eyes scan the crowd, she is who he is looking for, and this is a secret only they know. She is his face in the crowd.

Can you feel it? Are you there?

OK. Let's go.



June 2023

**little bit loud!,
(tenley, yorkshire)**

Attendance: 12,000

FRIDAY

1

a hell of a show

“You are looking gorgeous today, Tenley!” the lead singer of the band calls, beaming into the microphone. His name is Drew Schafer, and he’s one summer away from superstardom.

The crowd cheers obligingly, either in thanks or agreement – probably both. It’s almost 3 p.m. on a Friday afternoon, one of the slowest slots of the opening day of the Little Bit Loud! Festival in Yorkshire. The crowd is cheerful, and Drew *has* them, the way he somehow manages to have every crowd he stands in front of, even though he’s only seventeen. He’s wearing a Nirvana T-shirt that he bought from Primark but somehow still looks like it was tailored just for him.

“We’ve got time for one more, if you don’t mind?”

The crowd cheers again, and Drew’s grin widens on the huge screen dwarfing him to his right. He raises a hand in a salute, and the three other members of the band launch into the opening beats of “Dominoes”.

“We’ve been The Kerbs, and you’ve been wonderful.”

Drew isn’t usually the cliché type, nor one for words like “wonderful”, but there’s something about the stage that transforms him. He becomes, effortlessly, a rock god in waiting, all teeth-flashing grins, winks into the camera, clichés and all. It’s not even that he looks like he was born for this; it’s more like he sprang into existence on this very stage, like every atom of his being was created solely to sing “Dominoes” in this moment, for this exact crowd. It’s magic.

When the set ends, I wait for a few minutes, soaking in the electricity of the performance and the cheers of the crowd, my eyes fixed on Drew as he gives an elaborate bow then bounds off the stage, jumping onto the back of the bassist, Lex. I listen hopefully to the conversations starting up around me, and sure enough—

“They were really good?!” a girl says beside me to her apparent boyfriend, sounding surprised. “Right?”

Apparent boyfriend is tapping away at his phone.

“Lewis?” she prompts.

“I’m just finding them on Spotify,” he says, and I bite my lip to stop myself beaming. “There’s an EP... Yeah, they were cool.”

“Not to be shallow as fuck,” someone else is saying from behind me, “but that lead singer is *hot*. Right?”

“So hot,” another voice agrees. “Those curls! I wonder if he’s got a girlfriend.”

“Guys like that don’t have girlfriends,” the first girl replies. “They have muses and one-night stands.”

“I’d take either of those,” her friend says, and they both start laughing.

Smiling, I make my way out of the crowd towards the side of the stage. When I get there, I flash my wristband and lanyard at the security guard, who nods and waves me past. I make my way up the ramp, searching for a familiar face among the people milling around backstage.

Then there’s a hand on my arm, and I’m being spun towards a wide smile on a bright, sweaty face, and there’s a mouth against mine, and I’m kissing Drew Schafer, both of us laughing in the sunshine with happiness and success and hope and love.

Drew does have a girlfriend. It’s me.

“What a set!” Topher, the drummer, is enthusing as we make our way as a group across the band area. He’s still holding his drumsticks and he keeps drumming them against whatever surface he can find – his jeans, Lex’s back, thin air. “We killed it! We did, right, Ruby?” He turns to me, beaming. “The crowd loved it, didn’t they?”

“They did,” I confirm, and he smacks his drumsticks together triumphantly. “Some guy near me was already looking you up on Spotify.”

“You’re like our mole,” Lex says, grinning as he lands a hand on my shoulder. The hand is so sweaty I feel it through my shirt, which would annoy me if it was anyone but Lex, who is oblivious but sweet and has acted like the older brother I never had since we first met. “Hiding in the crowd like that. You know you could watch from the side of the stage, right?”

“I like it in the crowd,” I say. “I can see you guys up close any time.”

This draws a laugh. Drew puts his arm around my neck, tugging me towards him, and kisses the side of my forehead with a smacking *mwah*.

“The videos wouldn’t be as good from the side of the stage,” Mavi, the guitarist, says from where he’s walking slightly ahead, turning his head to talk to us and looking at his phone at the same time. “Shit, Ruby, this is so good! You got it up so fast!”

I take a mock bow to cover how genuinely pleased I am. I’ve already uploaded two videos from the set onto the band’s socials, more basic than I’d usually like, just the performances of “Flex” and “Dominoes”. Later, when I’ve got time, I’ll be able to play around with the edits a bit more, hopefully adding some back-stage stuff as well. This is what I do, and – not to blow my own horn too much – I’m pretty good at it. I’ve been the queen of The Kerbs’ socials since before the band even had their name. “Thanks! Not bad, right? I wanted to do a live but the signal wasn’t good enough.”

“You even remembered there are three other members!” Mavi teases. I roll my eyes and stick out my tongue at him like a child. No one else cares how much video time they get except Mavi, who complains that Drew “soaks up” all the attention. Which he does, because he’s the frontman. And he’s Drew.

“Where’s Stel?” I ask, turning to Lex. “Isn’t she coming?”

Lex’s girlfriend was meant to be out in the crowd with me, watching the show. We’ve met briefly a couple of times but don’t

know each other well, and this was meant to be the time we finally had a proper conversation. She and Lex only just became official after a few casual hook-ups – entirely coincidentally coinciding with the fact that the band is about to become mega-famous – and I want to suss her out a bit. Just a little bit. It's not that I'm doubting her intentions or anything. I just care about Lex.

"She's stuck in traffic," Lex says, making a face. "Can you believe it? Our first festival – *her* first festival! – and she's stuck on the M1."

"Boys!" Kesh, the manager of The Kerbs, greets us outside the portable cabin that the band have been allocated in the artists' area. "And Ruby," he adds, pointing at me. There's a "THE KERBS" sign stuck on the door, which I think Kesh might have written himself. The cabin allocation is just temporary – the band had it for an hour before their set to rehearse, and in another hour it'll be handed over to another act on the line-up.

Kesh is wearing a suit with the sleeves rolled up and two buttons of his white shirt undone. He looks like he thinks he just stepped out of a magazine. "That was a hell of a show."

"Yeah?" Drew says, grinning. "Were you actually watching? You made it back here fast."

"I'm a highlights man," Kesh says. "I have an instinct for when to be there and when to leave. And you know what I had to be back here for? Calls." He lifts his phone into the air, and all four boys follow it with their eyes like cats, transfixed. "Many, many calls."

"You serious?" Mavi asks, like he can't quite let himself believe it. He's almost vibrating with energy.

"I'm serious," Kesh says. "I've booked four slots already for tomorrow. And an extra set."

"An extra set?" Lex and Topher say at the same time.

"For Onyx Radio," Kesh says. "Live from the 'Introducing...' tent." Seeing their faces, he lets out a laugh. "I told you guys to trust me. And look how I deliver, right? But that's all for tomorrow. Today, I just want you to soak it all up. Go and see as many sets as you can, make the most of the band areas to meet people. Network. *Don't be a dickhead*. I know you feel like kings right now, but you're kids at your first festival. That means *respect*, whether you're talking to one of the headliners, one of the crew, one of the staff or one of your new fans. And" – he puts a definitive finger up into the air – "girls. Don't be a dickhead with girls. OK?"

"Or boys," I say.

"Or boys," Kesh amends without missing a beat. "Sorry. Yes, thank you, Ruby. That was a non-gender-specific command. Drew, hang back for a minute. I'll see the rest of you guys later."

Mavi, Lex and Topher lope off together, their excitable, loud voices bouncing off each other as they go. Topher glances back to wave at me, grinning, and I wave back with such a hit of pure affection that I want to run and hug him.

"That was fucking epic, Drew," Kesh says, reaching out a hand for Drew to slap, which he does, his face alight with happiness. "Everything we hoped for and more. You guys are going to kill it, and it's going to be because of you. Did you feel it?"

Drew's cheeks are pink, his eyes bright. He's nodding. "Yeah, I did."

“I said you would,” Kesh says, looking so proud that my heart fills for Drew. “Didn’t I? Right!” He claps his hands together briskly. “That’s the praise bit done. Now, business. You know what I’m going to ask?” He looks from me to Drew, then back again.

Drew and I glance at each other. We do know, because there’s only one question that matters at the moment. *The* question; the one that’s going to define the rest of our relationship, possibly Drew’s career, and maybe even our lives.

“Have you got an answer for me yet?” Kesh prompts.

“Not yet,” Drew says.

“No bother, no bother,” Kesh says smoothly. “It’s good to take your time thinking about it. But we do need an answer, OK? By the end of the festival.” He claps Drew on the shoulder. “All right, kid. You’re free for the day.”

Drew turns to me with a grin, holding out his hand. “Let’s go.”

2

do you want them to want me?

Here's the choice we've been given: do we want to be public with our relationship, or keep it private?

Right now, Drew is the frontman of a small band in a festival line-up here at Tenley, but everyone's expecting that by this time next year, the band will have gone from the TikTok-centric, small-but-growing success story they are now to The Next Big Thing. And so the people behind the scenes are getting all the "ducks in a row" for the hard launch of the band this September. That means positioning the band in the current market, crafting the story, and creating little narratives for each member.

And one of those ducks? That would be me. The girlfriend of the star.

Before I found myself a part of this world – even if that's just from the sidelines – it hadn't occurred to me that I might get a say in any of this, but apparently I do. I get to decide whether I want to be known as Drew Schafer's girlfriend. The girl on his

arm, a feature of his Instagram, thanked in speeches. Picked apart on the internet. Photographed on the street when I've got no make-up on. Potentially hated by fans.

Or, I can stay secret. Drew will be presented as if he's single, hot and free – a playboy, even. Fanciable and attainable. Our relationship will stay private, something that belongs just to us. No intrusion, no spotlight. Just a lot of secrets. (Maybe some lying.)

Drew is being very laid-back about this decision, whereas I've thought about little else since the question was first raised a week ago, at a meeting he had with the label. It feels a lot like being offered directions down two entirely different roads, with no turning back, and huge repercussions for the rest of our lives, not to mention our relationship. How am I supposed to make a decision like that?

Not right now, is the answer. Not today, in the bright sunshine.

Drew's warm hand is in mine as we head to the nearest bar tent. He orders two beers that the guy behind the bar hands over without question, even though neither of us is eighteen. Drew gives me a conspiratorial grin, tipping his cup against mine.

"So, how was it really?" he asks. "The set?"

"Fishing," I tease. I take a sip of beer, which tastes amazing even though I don't usually like it. But it's a sunny day in June, this is my first ever music festival, and my boyfriend just lit up the stage. It's the best beer of my life.

"Come on, I need it," he says, tugging at the waistband of my denim shorts to pull me closer. He kisses me, his lips cold and wet from the beer, and an electric shock zips through me like it's the

first time we've kissed and not the ten thousandth. Kissing Drew is electricity. You could power my heart with it.

"You already know how great it was," I say when we break apart. "But give me a few more of those and I might manage some more compliments."

He laughs, curling an arm around my neck and kissing my hair. His cup of beer presses against my collarbone. "I saw you from up on the stage."

"You did not; the crowd was huge."

"The crowd was modestly sized," Drew corrects. I know from his phrasing that he's taken this line straight from Kesh. "And of course I saw you. I always see you."

"Well, you won't next year," I say. "When the crowd really is huge."

Next year. That bright spot in the distance; the impossible dream they're all – *we're* all – working towards. At best, only a handful of people at this festival had probably heard of The Kerbs before today, because the fanbase they've been growing is mostly online or very local. The live gigs they've done have been in local bars and pubs – usually in Stevenage, where we live, or one of our neighbouring towns. Before this summer, the biggest live opportunity they'd had was when they supported Para Social on their spring tour, and even that was just the south-east dates. This summer is what it's all about: them proving themselves, winning over festival audiences and new fans, building their name.

Once the summer's over, after Drew turns eighteen in September, it's the big launch. Their debut album will drop, with

talk show appearances already scheduled – my mum is so excited about *This Morning* that Drew has promised to get her a backstage pass – and a radio tour of the entire UK mapped out. Everything that’s going to happen this summer is in preparation; Kesh calls it the soft launch. The slow build. The graft.

Yesterday all of us – the four band members and me – crammed into a tiny rental van, instruments and all. Lex drove because he’s the only one with a licence, which is a shame because he’s a terrible driver. I had to sit on Drew’s lap, his arms wrapped around me, tight and safe. Every time we went around a corner, the van rocked and we both almost fell off the seat. And every single time, I felt his breath against my neck, his laugh in my ear as he said, “Fuck.”

(It’s a bit like how all this feels. So much fun it makes me dizzy, all of it out of my control, but 100% safe and secure – always secure – because of Drew. Drew has me. I’m good.)

In the mythical land of next year there’ll be a proper driver, maybe even a tour bus. Assistants, PR people; a team. If the band really does become as famous as Kesh and their management say they will, there’ll be fans in the audience, looking out for the band – for Drew – in the crowd between sets.

This weekend at Tenley could be one of the last times Drew and I are still able to be anonymous together. Next year we might not be able to stroll through a festival hand in hand even if we’re not keeping our relationship a secret.

I’m just thinking this, that I should enjoy the freedom of anonymity, when a girl who is staring at us as we walk past reaches out a hand and stops us with a wave. She pushes her sunglasses

up over her dark hair, an excited smile widening on her face.

“Are you that guy from that band?” she asks, all of her attention on Drew. As nonchalantly as possible, I drop his hand and take a tiny step to the side. “Were you on the stage earlier? You sang the song about dominoes?”

I look at Drew, waiting for him to put on the usual charm, but he falters, looking over at me like he’s not sure why I’m not holding his hand any more. I widen my eyes. *Go on.*

“Hey, yeah,” he says. “I’m Drew.”

“Hi, Drew!” she says. “You were amazing.”

“Thanks,” he says. “Um.” She’s standing there like she wants something, and he clearly doesn’t know what it is. “So—”

“Do you want a picture?” I interrupt brightly.

“Cool, yeah!” the girl says, handing me her phone. She turns her body to Drew, who smiles but doesn’t move.

Oh my God. Kesh would cancel their entire contract if he saw this. Drew’s never been this awkward with anyone. Ever. Where’s the frontman-cool gone?

“Thanks!” the girl says to me when I hand back her phone. “And thanks, Drew.”

“The band is The Kerbs,” I say. “They’re going to be huge.”

“I bet!” the girl says enthusiastically.

I wait until she’s gone before I say it. “What was that?!”

Drew turns to me, eyes wide. “What?”

“You acting like you’ve never talked to another human being before. Where was the charm?”

Drew is *all* charm. He’s the kind of charming that sells with

just a smile, a little spark in the eye. There's no schmooze to it, nothing that feels false. But it makes you want more; more of that smile, more of his time. More of *him*.

"Well, I can't, like..." He dithers, glancing around us then back at me. "You were there."

"So?"

"It would be weird, wouldn't it?" he says. "If I was ... like that with girls."

"Fans," I correct. "And what do you mean 'like that'? Charming? That's part of the job, isn't it? You want them to want you."

He blinks at me, glances around again and then lowers his voice. "Do *you* want them to want me?"

"If that's part of The Kerbs being mega-successful, then yeah!" I take in the confusion on his face and laugh, reaching for his hand to squeeze it. "It's not *real*, Drew. You can give fans the frontman experience for five minutes, it's OK."

He takes me in, eyes moving over my face. "Aren't you... Wouldn't you be jealous?"

"No...?"

He frowns. "I think you're supposed to be jealous."

I smile as naturally and widely as I can to reassure him. "I'm not, and I wouldn't be. I promise. Because it's not about that, is it? You *should* flirt with them! Make them feel special, you know?"

"You are one of a kind," he says, coughing out a laugh. "What kind of a girlfriend encourages her boyfriend to flirt with other girls?"

"One who wants her boyfriend's band to be huge," I say, grin-

ning. “One who trusts him completely.” I lean over, touch my palm to the side of his face and kiss his cheek. Under my lips, I feel the smile spread across his face. “Don’t act like you don’t know how to flirt, Schafer.”

He laughs as he pulls back to look at me. “Sounds like you’re the one who knows! You should give me some tips.”

“You already know. Just give it some swagger. Act like you’re too cool for everything, but, like, they can be a part of it for two minutes.” I think about it, shrugging. “I don’t know, call them babe.”

“I don’t even call *you* babe.”

“Exactly. It’s not a word you use, but it can be a word *The Kerbs’ Drew* uses. It’s not real.” I’m so proud of myself for how maturely I’m handling this. And I *love* how he’s looking at me, with a kind of wonder and pride. I am so cut out to be the girlfriend of a rock star, publicly or otherwise. I get this world.

“And you wouldn’t mind?”

“I wouldn’t mind.” And the best thing? It’s true. It really is true. I trust Drew completely and I know that won’t change, whoever else is looking at him. Even if he calls them babe.

His arm slides around me as he pulls me in. “I love you,” he says. “You’re fucking epic.”

We start walking again, still entwined, our hips knocking as we go. We head towards the merch stand because I want to see what they’ve got, even though Drew has already told me that the band is too low on the billing for their own merch to be sold there. Not that they’ve got their own proper merch yet – just one T-shirt

that was designed by Lex's new girlfriend, which is going to be available during the band's meet and greet later.

When we reach the stand, Drew points to a white T-shirt pinned prominently to the backboard that has the festival logo on the front and the line-up listed on the back. The merch guy hands it over and Drew turns to me, holding it up with a flourish.

"You see us?" he asks.

And there they are. Not the biggest writing, not the medium writing, but the smallest writing. One name in a paragraph of little names. THE KERBS.

"There you are!" For a ridiculous moment I feel choked up, as if I hadn't stood in the crowd watching them on stage not even an hour ago – as if I've only just realized they're playing this festival. But there's something about seeing their name printed on that T-shirt. This is real. This is happening.

Drew pops his head over the top of the T-shirt, grinning. "Isn't that cool?"

"It's *amazing*," I say, reaching out to touch the letters. "You should buy it."

"Really?" he says, glancing down at the T-shirt. "It's so expensive. Like, thirty quid."

"It's your first festival T-shirt!" I say, stumbling slightly as someone bumps into me. "Oh, sorry."

Drew takes my arm and steers me gently into a wider space, tossing the T-shirt over his arm. "We can just take a picture."

"Drew," I say, trying not to laugh. "You're about to become mega-famous." When I say this, both the stranger behind me

and the merch guy turn – very obviously – towards us, glancing over Drew. I raise my voice just slightly. “You’ll be *signing* T-shirts like this.”

A furrow has appeared in Drew’s oblivious forehead. “Thirty quid, though.”

I hook my arm around his neck and kiss his cheek. “I’ll buy it,” I say. “You can pay me back when you’re a millionaire.”

He laughs, shaking his head. “I’ll still think thirty quid is a lot for a T-shirt.”

“Good,” I say. “That’ll mean you haven’t changed.”

Sara Barnard lives in Brighton and does all her best writing on trains. She is a bestselling author of seven novels for young adults. Her debut *Beautiful Broken Things* was a Zoella Bookclub pick and she went on to win the YA Book Prize with her third novel, *Goodbye, Perfect*. Sara believes that sad books are good for the soul, and happy books lift the heart. She hopes to write lots of books that do both.