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Opening extract from

Girl Meets Cake

Written by

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Recipe for a Heidi

Ingredients:

Hair (plaited)
2 eyes (brown)
Assorted other body parts
Epic DVD collection
Detective skills
Tendency to fall in love with imaginary people

Method:

- Whisk all ingredients with parental implements until thoroughly mixed up
- Dump resulting goop (including parental implements) in the Goldfinch School for Troublemaking Drop-Out Freaks
- Bake until mental

"Poop on a fork, Heidi. What part of 'I don't want to see your face in here Saturday' did you not follow?" Betsy yells before I'm even halfway through the door of the Little Leaf cafe.

Which is OK, because she owns the place. And is my second-favourite human being in the universe. And anyway she's American, so the whole Traditional British Hospitality thing is allowed to pass her by.

She tries though. If you don't look too closely, the Little Leaf is a perfect picture-postcard tearoom on the village green. It sells home-made scones with jam and clotted cream, twenty-four

different kinds of tea and only one kind of coffee (instant and horrible), and there are lacy tablecloths on half of the tables. There's even a shelf running round the ceiling displaying novelty teapots in the shape of red London buses.

But then you notice the walls: tangerine, sky blue and pink – one of each, with a dusty black wall behind the counter, which Betsy uses as a chalkboard for the day's specials, and the Daily Wisdom: SMILE! *it makes me remember to wash my hands before serving you.* EAT A CAKE! *or the kitten dies.* There are squashy sofas and armchairs infiltrating their way between the lace tablecloths. The shelf with the buses also has dragons, a bust of Shakespeare with a red plastic clown nose, and a selection of novelty hats, from deerstalker to top. There's even a picture of the Queen (and you can only see the felt-pen moustache if you stand on a chair).

Tourists eat it up. Tourists take photos of themselves pointing at the menu. Locals go to the Big Bean coffee house opposite for venti mochas.

I still smile every time I walk through the door anyway, even after spending all summer in a Little Leaf frilly apron, juggling teapots and getting raspberry jam smeared up to my elbows. You get free cake when you're a waitress. Sometimes even on your day off.

I hope.

A few heads turn as I sidle past: two cardiganish old ladies from the town (cream tea x 2); a couple of guys in the corner in bright-red anoraks and hiking boots, maps and guide books all over the table (Earl Grey, almond slice, angel cake). Pretty quiet for a Saturday afternoon – but it's September, end of season. Back to school time for the tourists too.

"Very welcoming, ta," I say, bagging myself a stool at the counter.

"Sincerely, honeybee, it's always a pleasure," says Betsy, setting me up with a pot of Assam tea without me needing to ask, sliding

fistfuls of jangly bangles up her arms. "But aren't you supposed to be a little occupied right now? You know, studying, or whatever it is you kids do up there on the hill?"

It's arrivals day. The day they open up the posh Manor entrance, with its big stone pillars and big stone steps, and welcome the Finches back to the nest. The Goldfinch is where you get sent when you've been kicked out of everywhere else – if your parents can afford it. Today's the day all the Finchy freaks promise Mumsy and Papa they won't get expelled again this year, and wave goodbye to parents till Christmas, as the chauffeurs in the shiny cars wheelspin on the gravel and speed down the drive to safety.

"Nobody's back yet," I tell her.

Nobody I want to see anyway. The Mothership dragged me up there last week to help her count the hockey sticks in the PE stores, ready for the new term, and I sneaked away to check the arrivals schedule in Dad Man's little office. Fili and Ludo are due at 4p.m. Dai's flight gets in at 6, assuming he manages not to miss it this time. These facts may just possibly be written on my calendar, and in my phone, and on the back of my hand in red felt pen, just in case.

"Anyway, I can't stay away. I think I may be addicted to your carrot cake."

"That'll be the teaspoonful of crack cocaine in every slice," comes Teddy's voice from the kitchen out the back.

Betsy rolls her eyes, scrubs out today's Wisdom (NO, WE DON'T DO CAPPUCCINO! *or any other monk-based beverages*), and replaces it with OUR CARROT CAKE DOES NOT CONTAIN ILLEGAL NARCOTICS.

Teddy ducks out of the kitchen, adds "*Today*" underneath, grins and sneaks back out of sight.

Teddy is Betsy's seventeen-year-old son, and the Little Leaf's other addictive ingredient. Ludo definitely seems to think so anyway,

judging by all those times last year when she dragged me down here to giggle whenever he said "here's your white chocolate raspberry flapjack, ma'am". It's catching, that sort of giggling. And he is kind of decorative, what with the chestnut curls, and the cheekbones, and the way he holds his pencil in his mouth like a puppy when his hands are full. I get to play Mop Bucket Roller Hockey with him when we clear up at the end of the day (which he totally lets me win, sometimes). He's going to teach me how to make apple strudel. I even get talked to sometimes by The Lovely Safak, his very tall, very beautiful girlfriend, who I am in no way envious of.

I'm completely in love with someone else anyway. Mycroft Christie, my *very* favourite person in the universe.

Technically, he's not really a *person*. Technically, the debonair twenty-third-century time-travelling hero of the best! TV show! ever! *Mycroft Christie Investigates* is not actually going to turn up on my doorstep any time soon, to whisk me away to fangirl heaven. Mostly because he's time-trapped in present-day London pretending to be a detective for complicated plot reasons. And because he's obviously in crazypants love with his foxy arse-kicking sidekick Jori Song (with whom he fights crime and has Unresolved Sexual Tension). And also because they cancelled the show after three seasons, so now he only really exists inside my DVD player. But he's dashing, and charming, and conveniently available at the flick of a remote control, which is the sort of thing a girl finds handy when she's stuck with the Mothership and Dad Man's board game obsession for company all summer.

The two nice old ladies peer up at the new Wisdom, then into their teacups, looking slightly worried. The hiker guys just smile.

Betsy sees me watching them, and waits, expectant, chalk still in hand.

"French?"

"Belgian," she says gleefully, adding an extra strike under the

score sheet on the blackboard. I am now losing "Identify The Tourist" by 31 points. Belgians: they get me every time.

Betsy slides me a slice of carrot cake, with a little fondant carrot on the top. Cinnamon, walnuts, orange peel, cream cheese. Squishy without being mushy; cakey without being dry: the kind you have to eat with a fork. Instant perkage. Maybe Teddy wasn't kidding about the secret ingredient.

I realize Betsy's hovering, watching me eat, and twisting her daisy ring. I suspect she wants to steal my fondant carrot.

"So . . . you sure you want to keep the Saturday job going, hon?" she says instead.

"Yep. Why wouldn't I?"

She leaves her ring alone and plucks at her fringe instead, making sure it's lying perfectly retro-flat. "It's been a great summer but . . . you've got exams this year. Maybe you want to party Friday nights. Maybe you, uh, might want to keep it to just outside of term time, you know? Give you a little more time with your buddies?"

UH.

HUH.

(Both allowed in Scrabble. According to Dad Man, anyway. I think he might be a CHEATER – 7 letter word, extra 50 points.)

I get it.

"You mean, do I want to avoid being the only kid at the Finch who needs to earn their pocket money?"

"I just thought it might be uncomfortable for you, honeybee. Serving your friends? Serving your non-friends, even?"

I shrug. "Actually, I'm kind of looking forward to that part. It'll be like *Friends*. They'll all come here to hang out, and I'll adorably get their orders wrong while having big hair."

Betsy smiles. "I see I have a lot to look forward to. Don't marry that Brad Pitt guy though."

"I'll try to fend him off."

"Feel free to fend him in my direction!" says The Lovely Safak, breezing through the door in a billowy summer dress. "Did you hear that, Teddy darling?"

"Yes, dear," calls Teddy from the kitchen. "I'm making jealous boyfriend faces back here, I swear."

"He's so well-trained," she whispers conspiratorially, slipping on to a stool beside me. "Not working today, Heidi?"

I explain awkwardly. The Lovely Safak goes to Mendip Road, the sixth-form college round the corner, and Mendies and Finches don't exactly mix. Safak's a bit above territorial fist fights in the Victoria Park fountain though. She just smiles, and wishes me luck.

"You sticking with this whole look for term time, too, honey?" says Betsy, waving up and down me with a fork.

"You mean The Coat? Oh, The Coat is definitely staying."

The Coat is my Thing right now. It's a raincoat: one of those belted beige ones that old pervs wear in parks to flash people. I found it in a cardboard box in the Finch garages after an afternoon's dust 'n' spider battling with Dad Man. I've decided it was left there by some ancient teacher who figured out the only way to escape the Goldfinch was to flee secretly in the night-time, leaving all his possessions behind. Old Stinky Mancoat sounds disgusting, I know, but I kind of like the way it skims the ground. It flaps out behind me when I'm on the Bike o' Doom in a not uncapelike, vaguely superheroic manner. It makes me feel very detect-y. I kind of love it.

The fact that Mycroft Christie wears one too is totally a coincidence.

"Well, I *love* it," says The Lovely Safak, continuing to be Lovely despite all my efforts to not like her. She even gives me a hug.

The two old ladies leave, so we embark on a game of "Advanced Identify the Tourist" with the remaining Belgians. (Plain old "Identify" got boring back in July when everyone was Australian for three

days straight so we added an extra level, where you invent their lives as well. Betsy says it's a game people play on trains, to pass the time. I think she must mean American trains: doing that on a British one would probably get you stabbed. So Teddy does the pictures, Betsy and Safak come up with names and I do the making-up-crap-about-them. We created a whole life story for this one guy who came in every day for a week and only ever ordered soup: Dieter Jeter, Soup Eater. The strip of pictures is still pinned up behind the rows of mugs, with Teddy's weird scribbly cartoons of this guy with hair that kept mutating into whatever vegetable was in the soup that day. Yes, this is what people who work in cafes do to pass the time. Forgive us. We mean you no harm.)

The Belgian hikers become Hercules and Bertrand, a pair of sinister burglars whose maps reveal the route to heaps of pirate treasure buried beneath the Finch. They get immortalized in biro, pinned to the wall on the back of an order slip.

The Lovely Safak helps me eat more carrot cake.

Betsy lends me another Agatha Christie novel, continuing my mission to more fully detectify myself. I lend her the last disc of the *Mycroft Christie Investigates* Season 2 boxset, continuing my mission to share the Mycroft appreciation.

The Big Bean across the road fills up.

The Little Leaf stays weirdly quiet.

Then Betsy flips the NO TEA FOR YOU, SILLY LATE PEOPLE sign around on the front door, and starts to close up.

Dad Man drives up outside in his knackered blue van, waiting to take me up the hill for the first dinner, as promised.

It's time to go back to Finchworld. Time for real life to begin again.



The usual weirdnesses greet me. The discovery that Polly Cole has two matching smaller sisters of descending height, like Russian dolls, and a mum who would be the outside doll if she weren't the width of a pencil. Timo Januscz bursting into tears as his parents drive away. The Mothership, in her best purple velour tracksuit, waving at me like a loony as she drags a train of bored-looking couples in their best suits and going-to-church shoes off towards the lake.

"Hi, babes! Just giving some of our new parents the guided tour. This is *my* daughter, Heidi. She just loves it here at the Goldfinch, don't you, babes?"

I smile weakly. She's not exactly wrong though. I mean I could live without having to learn what co-valency means at 9a.m. on a Tuesday. I could definitely live without my Mothership being the person responsible for shouting "tuck in that bottom!" at me when I'm attempting gym class. But I'm going to have friends again, and we're going to hang out, and be gossipy (in a very intellectual, not talking about shoes kind of way), and be generally superheroic. Team Finch, Finch Force Four, the Leftover Squad are about to reunite for another term of thrilling adventures. The credits are about to roll, introducing Fili, enigmatic tech witch; Ludo, sexy-beautiful wildchild; Dai, the big guy with the heart of gold; and me, Heidi, the the fledgling detective whose geekiness is actually strangely attractive. Together we'll fight crime and/or homework, guided by our mentor Betsy, who'll supply us with our undercover missions via coded messages hidden in cupcakes. We'll have a theme tune. And costumes. We'll be completely awesome.

They don't actually know any of this yet, obviously. That's how undercover we are.

The Mothership leads the rest of the parentals away, and I head for the main entrance. There's a girl sitting on the top step of the

Manor, peeling an orange and dropping the skin into the pot of one of those weird square-cut hedges like green cubes on spikes, ruining the carefully constructed air of expensive perfection quite casually, like she isn't even trying.

"Good orange?" I ask.

Filicia Mathilde Diouf, the world's blackest Goth, scrunches up her nose. "Tart," she says.

"Same to you."

"Appreciated." She sucks on another segment: looks me up and down. "Nice coat."

"Detective," I explain.

She nods. Eats more orange. Flicks pips away with a flash of silver rings.

With anyone else, all these pauses would be awkward. But best friends don't need to do all that awkward "hi, missed you, how have you been" stuff: she says it all with that minute quirk at the corner of her mouth, which is very nearly a smile. And anyway, there's a shriek from inside the Manor house, echoing glassily off the walls of the corridor inside, funnelled out through the open oak doors, announcing the arrival of our resident noisemaker.

"HEIDIIII!"

A human cannonball with invisible jetpack attachment flies out of the doorway and flings its skinny arms around me. Also hair. Lots of hair, all glossy and dark and a bit more in my mouth than is pleasant. I miss a few sentences while trying to escape. These little details do not worry Ludo.

". . . and the traffic was like AWFUL and I was totally UNPLEASED, because I wasn't even going to BE here, and there's like THE party tonight, and I have SO much to tell you before we even get to that, only you will SO not believe OH MY GOD, FILI! You're here! I didn't even KNOW you were here!"

Fili receives the hair-in-face treatment too. Ludo keeps talking. Fili rolls her eyes, and shoves a wet chunk of orange in Ludo's mouth.

Fruit: new weapon of choice.

Ludo squints as she swallows.

"Tart," she squeaks.

"Same to you," I say.

"She means it with love," says Fili.

"OH MY GOD I've missed you SO much!"

Ludo hugs us together again, and I find myself grinning like a loony.

Fili scoops up the orange peel from under the bush (which somehow she makes seem more rebellious than leaving it there) and we head inside to the Manor common room, with its squishy blue sofa and its plasma screen, to wait for Dai to complete the team.



A couple of hours later, once I can't see the TV for bodies, I realize I'm at the McCartney Party.

At the start of each term there's a blowout. The Upper School kids have to use up all the contraband hidden in their suitcases anyway before it gets confiscated, but the real prize is to get kicked out before school even begins – all in loving memory of STUART A. MCCARTNEY, 1979. McCartney is a legend. No one knows exactly what he did to get the boot. The story probably changes every year. But his name's on the Student of the Year board, carved into wood, painted gold and hung in the entrance hall where he stays, inspiration to all. The McCartney Party's not exactly invite-only: you just need to know where it is, and you'll only

know that if you're the inviteable type. Usually it's in one of the Upper houses (the 16–18s, Stables for the girls, Lake for the guys): whoever got lucky enough to bag one of the bigger double bedrooms and has a roomie who doesn't mind people being sick in their bed. It's the thing everyone will be talking about tomorrow. It's the gossip textbook for the whole term.

And I'm at it. We're at it.

UM.

WOT?

This is not standard Heidi protocol. The Finch isn't exactly your average school, but it has its cliques, its little groups. The druggie kids in bands, the alky kids in bands, the Ana girls, the We Hate Everything crowd. Our cheerleaders are cutters with credit cards and police cautions but it's no different to any other school once you slice past the extra cash. Same rules everywhere. And the rules say that weirdass Leftover Squad Lower Schoolies do not get to play with the grown-up toys. Maybe Ludo might have sneaked in last year, back when she hung with the Pill Popettes. Maybe even doomy loomy Fili, when she was an emo. But never Big Dai, the fat gay kid in the corner. And definitely never me, the girl with the parents, the girl with the plaits, the girl who only ever hears about this stuff the next morning, after the Mothership's driven me back up the hill.

Maybe I've been watching too much *Mycroft Christie Investigates* lately, but it's possible there's a hole in the fabric of time and space, responsible for us being here.

The room is filling up now, starting to get crowded and stuffy. Bottles and cans of Coke get passed to the corner by the window, where, under cover of an armchair, Brendan Wilson tops them up from a glass bottle. Packets of crisps fly overhead. Jo-Jo Bemelmans brings in a stack of pizza boxes, and the smell of

cheese and garlic takes over from the icky mix of perfume and hairspray. Scheherezade Adams swans in, all bounce and straps and brand-new nose.

I think about sneaking out, but Ludo's squeaking next to me, eyes big, reeling off a list of names under her breath like a butler at some fancy soirée. She's got her hand wrapped round my wrist, squeezing whenever someone especially significant goes by. It's not so bad, I suppose. I'm out of the habit of being squished in with so many other people, but really it's not that different from watching TV, in smellovision. And I'm in the perfect location to play detective. I'll observe the Finch species in its natural habitat: monitor behavioural patterns; take notes.

Timo Januscz is drinking alone.

Flick Henshall has reportedly locked herself in the second-floor loo in Stables. (Are these two facts related?)

Honey Prentiss has broken her arm, which may prevent her from playing the oboe all term. (Scheherezade looks quite pleased.)

Miyu Sugawara wants Oliver Bass to know that someone is a bitch, very loudly, just at one of those moments when the room falls oddly quiet. (NB: Anna-Louise Darbyshire's ULife photo page has been an impressive array of snog photos all summer, none of them featuring Oliver.)

And there are the newbies to check out, too: the ones who were just pretty or booze-equipped enough to get the McCartney Party auto-approval. A new Ana girl. Some guy with peroxide hair, a military greatcoat and piercings on his piercings, trying to eat pizza without snagging mozzarella on his spikes. A skinnyboy, all in black, that Fili's gone to talk to by the window, as if Goth radar is yanking them together – though actually he looks sort of familiar.

There's another new girl I almost miss, from the crowd around her, then from how almost-invisible she is in person. She's pale and

gaunt and angular, arms and legs folded up and sticking out like some sort of insect, and wearing the sort of make-up that looks like it isn't make-up. I hear someone say "model". It computes.

"OH MY GOD," breathes Ludo. "Yuliya Kusnetsova? She's, like, EVERYWHERE. She did, like, *Vogue* Italia two months ago? She's HUGE."

She's kind of the opposite, but I let it slide. The name's familiar anyway.

"I think she's Fili's new room-mate," I say. "They've got that big double on the top floor of Manor, upstairs from you?"

Ludo gets her death-grip on to my wrist again.

"NO! Oh My God. Seriously? OH MY GOD. That is . . ."

"Awesome?" I suggest.

"TOTALLY!"

Somehow I'm not sure Fili will be so keen. But before I can drag her away from Gothboy to ask, I feel a tug on one of my plaits, and then nearly fly off the sofa as a body leaps over from behind and drops into the empty space beside me.

"Ding ding, Ryder. All aboard."

Big Dai Wyn Davies: man mountain, king of the bear hug. Well, what's left of him. Dai didn't get to be Big Dai just from being six foot tall, and it looks like he's going to need a new nickname. Same stupid grin, same rubbish spiky blond haircut, entirely new body.

"Holy crap, Dai, the lions really did eat you."

He looks stupidly pleased. "Safari diet. Followed by masochistic gym torture." He flexes an arm at me. Bits of it stick out in a manner that is probably meant to be impressive.

"WHOA!" says Ludo, leaning over me to poke his biceps. "Personal trainer?"

"Yep. On whom I had the most pathetic crush, so hello, dedication! You likey?"

Ludo gives him a small round of applause. I wrinkle my nose.

"You look like someone Photoshopped your head on to a lifeguard."

"I'll take that as the compliment you *obviously* intended it to be. *Betch*. You're looking majestic yourself, by the way. Loving the coat. Very . . . distinguished?"

I look down at myself. The Coat has started to seem a bit more bizarre now there are quite so many other people here to see it. In fact, now I'm paying a bit more attention, everyone else seems to be dressed a teensy bit more appropriately for a party. Not just the Upper kids who always look like that, all swingy hair and glitter make-up for 9 a.m. Biology, either. I mean *everyone*.

Fili doesn't count: aside from her being crazy-beautiful already, it is Goth Law never to be seen without the uniform and the face. And Ludo is always perky, and pretty, and strung about with jingly sparkly things. But she's different somehow: just a few slim gold threads around her wrists and neck instead of that ever-increasing cuff of grubby neon plastic bangles she had last year; golden streaks in her smooth dark hair; red lips instead of peachy pink. Dai's got new threads to go with his new absence of stomach too: magenta polo shirt with the collar flipped up, low-slung jeans so there's a wide line of boxers showing. He's even wearing man-jewellery: some tourist junk from his holiday, beads with a bit hanging down shaped like a tooth.

Pod people.

My friends have been replaced by Pod people. Robots. Zombie doppelgangers from space. The Leftover Squad has been hijacked by evil clones, and we haven't even been given our first mission yet.

OK, rewind that thought. I have no moral objection to people looking nice. I might not be exactly managing it myself, in my

baggy jeans and my superdork plaits, but that just makes me the poster child for not being fooled by the advertising: it's what's inside that counts, don't judge a book, etc. It's what comes with the extra layers of lipgloss and perfume that's spooking me. Ludo finally lets go of my wrist, but only to do a quick hitch-and-jiggle on her bra, tugging her vest top down a notch as she eyes Scheherezade. Dai's telling me some story about lost luggage on the way to Madagascar, but the whole time he's looking around, eyes sliding up and down, approving and disapproving. Even Fili is tinkering with her braids, eyelashes fluttering shyly as Gothboy tries on her favourite ring with the spider on it.

It's catching. Everyone's doing it. I don't think there's a person in the room actually enjoying themselves: they're too busy checking each other out.

Not me though: the eyes hit, connect and slide on by.

Maybe my fledgling detective geekiness is not so attractive. Maybe I've got the casting for the Leftover Squad all wrong. I'm the comedy sidekick who falls in poo. The talking dog. The redshirt who gets killed off in episode 4, and no one really minds.

"This is SO awesome," whispers Ludo loudly in my ear.

OAR.

SUM.

I nog: nod and shrug, both at once.

Half an hour later, with the sky dark outside and nothing but MTV on the plasma screen to light the room, I realize I'm not dealing with zombie robot doppelgangers. It's the love potion episode. Every TV show has it sooner or later. Magic spell, monster bite, something in the water; romantic kryptonite that makes people lick faces with people they shouldn't. Mycroft Christie ended up snogging a vampire, an evil old lady who trained exploding hamsters to break into banks, and Jori Song (twice)

while under the influence of bad mojo. Hilarious consequences generally ensue.

It's not so entertaining when you're in the middle of it.

OK, there's not exactly a Roman orgy happening. People are still wearing clothes, so far as I can tell from the flicker of the TV. It's pre-watershed, family-friendly, PG13. But everywhere I look it's going on. Tongues and hands and giggles in corners. Oliver Bass is proving how over Anna-Louise he is by sticking his tongue down Miyu's throat. Scheherezade is sitting on Jo-Jo's lap, arms draped over his shoulders. Brendan Wilson is sliding a hand up the new Ana girl's thigh, while she coyly smiles and fiddles with the hem of her skirt.

I hear Fili's laugh over the music, and see her curled up and cosy with her boytwin, holding hands, shoulders pressed together. I go to nudge Ludo and realize she's otherwise occupied, the peroxide-haired pierced newbie guy's mouth on hers, his hand resting, as if by total accident, on her boob. I squint my left eye closed, trying not to look, but I can still hear a vague slurpy noise. I turn to grab Dai, but the seat next to me is empty. I finally spot him in the corner near the door, dancing with Henry Kim and looking like he's won the lottery (which he kind of has, in Finch Gay Quarter terms: Henry Kim is famously cute, rich, and smart, and Dai has been lusting from afar as long as I've known him).

The Coat suddenly feels too appropriate, in all the wrong ways. I'm an accidental perv, trapped here staring at a roomful of people getting it on, because there's not really anywhere else to look. The only other person in the room who isn't coupling up (or trying to) is Model Yuliya, who is yawning over her can of Diet Coke and flicking through a magazine.

I check my watch. I begged and pleaded until the Mothership promised I could stay until 9.30 tonight. It's only just after 8.

I remember my purple patchwork bag's at my feet, and wonder if now would be a good time to whip out Agatha and read.

OK, that's *definitely* not the strangely attractive kind of geekiness.

I could go and find Dad Man, in his little cubbyhole of an office. Though at this time of year that'll probably mean helping him get all the trunks into storage. The Mothership might have finished already, setting up down at the pool: she could leave early, take me back down the hill to my poky little attic bedroom. I could watch the *Mycroft Christie Investigates* Season 3 finale again, in bed, with that White Magnum bar that I sneaked into the shopping trolley while the Mothership was fussing over whether bananas counted as Amber on her Traffic Light diet regime.

I reach down for my bag to get my phone, and when I come back up the seat next to me is no longer empty. Etienne Gracey. He's a Shroom, or he was: one of the Lower School bands, though he must be Upper School now. They played at the End of Year Ball. He sang.

"You're Heidi, yeah?" he says, shouting, over the music. He's leaning in very close.

"Etienne, right?"

He smiles, nodding. I can see a little frost of stubble on his chin and his upper lip, glowing blue then pink in the video light. I feel something touch my back, and try not to jump. It's his arm, sliding along the back of the sofa.

"Let me get you a drink," he says, and the arm disappears from my back.

"Oh My God, Heidi!" whispers Ludo in my ear, apparently coming up for air. "You are SO lucky! He's like so TOTALLY gorgeous."

I suppose he is. I mean, he's not as pretty as Teddy. Not

anywhere near as pretty as Mycroft Christie. But he's sort of a Finch pin-up. He's dated Scheherezade. And now he's settling back on to the couch next to me, pressing a can of Coke into my hand and sliding his arm back into position.

Ludo's elbow jabbing me excitedly in the rib area is not helping me to get my brain around this scenario, but Peroxide Guy distracts her again with a little more casual hand/boob interfacing and it's like we're alone together, me and Etienne.

Heidi and Etienne.

Is this how it works then? You just kind of sit there and wait for some boy to turn up and kiss you? I've been serving cups of tea to nice old ladies all summer: this all feels ultra-weird. But I suppose it's OK. It'll get it out of the way. I'm not fourteen any more. I'm fifteen. This is what fifteen-year-olds do.

I take a sip out of my can, and try not to cough as the whatever-it-is goes down. I don't really do alcohol. I'm probably drunk already.

"Thanks," I say, tilting the can at him.

Etienne just nods, bobbing his head slightly as the music changes. Madonna, thrusting her scary manlegs at me, in a not-especially-sexy kind of way.

I drink some more, in case my mouth tastes of carrot cake still. Because Etienne's going to kiss me. I think. I wonder if he'll feel prickly. I suppose he is quite pretty, up close.

Maybe you don't just sit there and wait? I didn't see anyone else having trouble getting to the kissing part of the evening, but I'm definitely doing something wrong. Talking, maybe? Are we supposed to do that first?

"So . . . any new Shrooms songs since last year?"

"Shrooms? We split. Creative differences, you know? I'm working on some solo material now though." He snarls at the TV screen. "Real music, y'know?"

"Mhmm," I say into my Coke. "I'd love to hear it. Sometime. If you like?"

"Yeah?" He keeps bobbing his head. "Cool."

The ultra-weird keeps on growing. I think I just asked him on a date, sort of. This is not standard behaviour. This is not Heidi. There actually really truly is love potion floating in the air, making everyone moronic, and I am not immune after all.

"So, your dad is, like, the security guy at night, yeah?"

"Night porter, yep." I try a goofy shrug. "Kind of embarrassing."

"What? Oh, yeah, I guess. Anyway, me and the guys were wondering: could you, like, distract him tonight or something?"

I look up, and see "the guys" hovering behind Etienne, looking hopeful. Big looming Upper Schoolers from Lake: Dave something, Jules Harper, some guy I don't know at all.

"The *real* McCartney Party's supposed to be up in Toni's room in Stables, only she says your dad was like patrolling all over down there, so we ended up down here with the kiddies in Baby House." He waves his can at the room, eyerolling. "No offence."

I swallow a big gulp, and taste the whatever-it-is, sticky on my teeth.

"No offence, yep," I mumble.

"So could you, like, go pretend to be ill or something, just to, like, keep him busy or whatever?"

He leans in again, arm still round my shoulder, fingers just lightly stroking the top of my arm.

"Sure," I hear myself say. "Whatever."

"*Awesome*."

He gives my arm a squeeze, hops off the sofa, and he and "the guys" vanish.

OAK.

HEY.

Emergency Protocol #4. Ejector seats engaged. Alert, alert, incoming. When I say run, run.

I fumble for my bag, but Ludo's amazing ability to get her face snogged off and still see what's going on next to her is still in place. Her hand closes round my wrist again. I pull away, vaguely shaking my head, and climb over various writhey wriggly arms and legs to get out, out into the corridor.

It's cool and bright. No sweaty people, no stinky pizza, just a nice ordinary school-like corridor, with a noticeboard about netball practice times, and when the nurse will be available. The real world, back where I know the rules.

Ludo bangs the door on the unreal world of the common room, and scoots up to dangle off my shoulder, eyes like two fried eggs.

"Oh My God, what WAS that? I mean, WHAT? I mean, OH MY GOD!"

"Ryder, baby, what gives?"

Not-So-Big Dai appears, his face pink, a huge smile on his face, Henry close behind him.

"I KNOW! He was like all over her, and then FOOM, GONE."

"Etienne Gracey. Heidi, you *turned down* Etienne Gracey. That's . . . that's a parallel universe." Dai remembers Henry lingering at his shoulder. "Sorry. I didn't mean . . .'

Henry shrugs. "It's Etienne Gracey. No offence, but I'm right there with you."

Ludo grins her tiny pearly grin at me. Then her eyes suddenly get wider. Huge. Fried eggs times twenty. She starts swatting her hands, slapping her palms against me and Dai like we're on fire, and making little squeaks.

"OH MY GOD. I get it. I totally get it. Don't you get it?"

Dai looks at Henry. They don't get it.

I don't get it either. So much for my fledgling detective skills.

"DUH! Only possible explanation? She's totally SEEING someone already."

Dai gasps. Actually gasps.

"No!"

"TOTALLY. Right, Heidi? Right?"

Before I can get a word out, Ludo wraps her arms around my tummy and hugs me so hard I feel my elbows click. Dai joins in, pressing my head into his shirt. Henry wraps a cashmere-clad arm round me too, even though I don't really know him well enough for hugging, and the three of them squish me even tighter, with Ludo making small "eee" noises and jumping up and down.

"Anything of interest?"

They break off. Fili's leaning on the wall, Gothboy just behind, looking bemused.

"Ryder here has just turned down the tongue services of one Etienne Gracey, on account of having – drumroll, please – a secret boyfriend."

Ludo nods her head superfast, mouth wide open.

Fili quirks a brow. "Seriously?"

I look at Ludo, lipstick smeared into a doughnut round her mouth. I look at Dai, Henry's hand resting ever so casually on Dai's belt. I look at Fili, and how close Gothboy is standing, fingers twining in hers.

The Leftover Squad's new line-up.

Well, honestly. What would you say?

