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An extract from

Casting Shadows

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Casting Shadows extract (from chapter 16)

In my heart I knew it wouldn't be the end of the world if Flynn went away to uni next year but it felt like we'd only just settled into life on the commune – and I couldn't bear the thought of it being disrupted again. I cried for a few more minutes, then lay, sniffing, my arms wrapped around my chest.

After about half an hour, I was stiff and cold. I sat up, wiping my eyes and thinking about going back inside.

'River?' Gemma's voice echoed around the barn.Footsteps sounded below me.

'River, are you in here?' That was Ros.

I crawled out from behind the broken chairs and peered down. Ros saw me immediately. 'Hey.' She smiled. 'No guy's worth this many tears.'

'Sweetheart.' The sound of Gemma's gentle concern brought more tears to my eyes. I somehow made my way down the steps and stumbled into her arms.

She held me, stroking my hair. 'Sssh, now,' she whispered. 'Sssh.'

She led me over to a battered old shelving unit covered with ancient gardening tools. An old sofa with the stuffing leaking out of stained cushions rested against the wall. Gemma sat me down and took the seat beside me while Ros perched on the arm.

'This is filthy,' Ros said with a grimace. 'Definitely one for your bonfire.'

Gemma squeezed my arm. 'Flynn was looking for you, River. He couldn't find you in the house. Thought you might be out here. We said we'd come and see.'

I nodded and Gemma put her arm round me. 'He told us why you're upset.'

I rested my head against her. 'He did?'

She nodded. 'Yup. You don't want him to leave London to do his law degree next year. Is that right?'

'Well . . .' Hearing Gemma say it out loud like that, it sounded really mean and childish. I swallowed. 'It's not so much that I mind him leaving, as that I'll miss him. I mean, maybe he isn't as into me as . . . as he makes out.'

Ros snorted. 'I'd like to see how he behaves when he *is* into someone then. He never takes his eyes off you.' She paused, grinning. 'Or his hands.'

Gemma squeezed my arm again. 'It's true, you know, River. I think he really does care about you. He was ever so upset when we found him looking for you. He was even saying he would stay in London.'

I sat up. 'Really?'

I looked from Gemma to Ros.

Ros frowned. 'But we told him not to.'

'What?'

'That's right, River.' Gemma cleared her throat. 'It's not right for you to stop Flynn studying where and how he wants to.'

'I know.' I looked away.

'Listen, River.' Ros turned my face towards her.

'It's a miracle Flynn's still going to school, given his background. The fact that he's bright enough and working hard enough to possibly get on the best courses in the country – that's something you should support him doing.'

'I do,' I insisted. 'It's just hard to think of him being so far away. Anyway, he only wants to be a lawyer to get rich and have people respect him.'

Ros sighed. 'Look, Flynn's got a lot of growing up to do,' she said. 'He may change how he thinks. And he won't be in a position to get a job like that for years.

And anyway, even if he does get some hotshot corporate position, I think I'd rather have somebody like him, who understands how tough life can be, than some stupid rich kid who's only where he is because Mummy and Daddy pulled some strings.'

'Don't make this about you, River,' Gemma said. 'If you really love Flynn then you'll let him make his own decisions. It doesn't mean you have to stop seeing each other. I mean, if you and him are meant to last then you'll find a way through.'

I knew she was right. I didn't say anything as we tramped through the chilly air back up to the house. Once inside, I went up to our room. Flynn was lying on the mattress, reading a book. He sat up when he saw me.

'Riv?'

There was such love and tenderness and concern in his eyes that my own filled with tears again. I walked over to him and lay down. We held each other for a minute. I laid my head on his chest and let myself sink against him. His leather cord – and the tiny 'R' on the end of it – dug into my cheek.

'I came to look for you but they told me to leave you alone for a bit. That you needed some time. So I waited here.' Flynn stroked my hair. 'Is everything okay?'

I closed my eyes. 'Everything's fine,' I said.

'I don't have to apply to Oxford or Cambridge,' he said. 'I bet they're full of idiots anyway.'

'No.' I looked up at him. 'You should go for the courses you want,' I said.

'We'll work it all out when we have to.'

Flynn gazed at me for a long time. Then he kissed my mouth. 'You look so beautiful.'