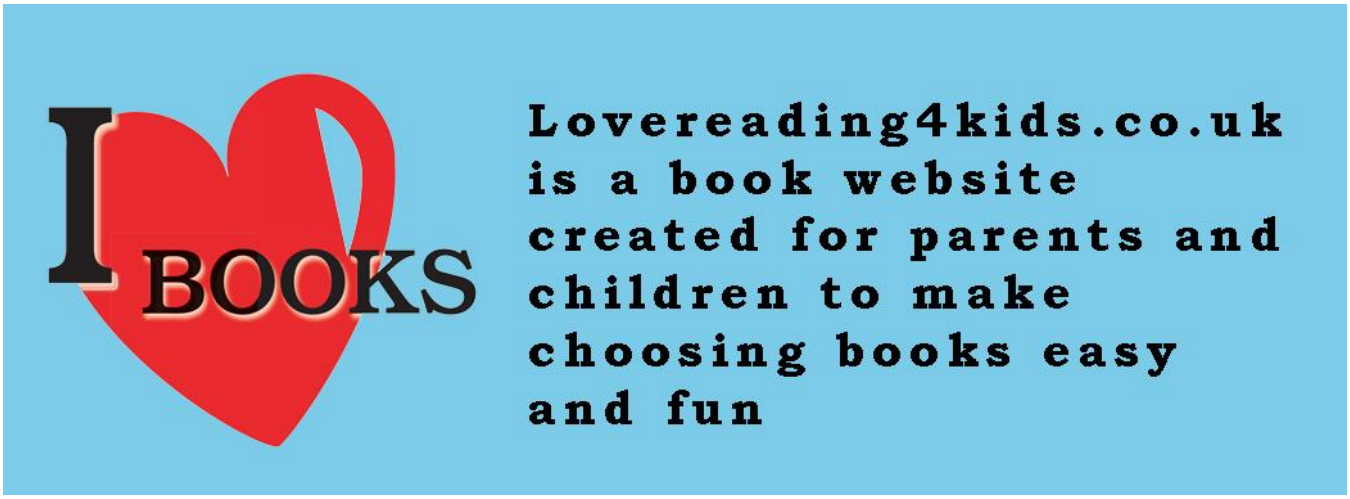


Opening extract from

When We Collided

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CHAPTER ONE

Vivi

I knew I was in love with Verona Cove on the first day, but I waited until the seventh day to commit. After one week here, I'm carving my name into a tree in the center of town. It's way harder than you might think, digging a pocketknife into ancient bark. Eleven letters have taken me hours, or it felt like that, anyway. Fortunately, before the sun rises, no one polices Irving Park—or anywhere, really. I'm pretty sure the worst crime Verona Cove has ever seen is someone dropping a napkin. The napkin dropper tried to chase it, I bet, but the wind swept it up, and eventually, somewhere, the napkin became litter.

And besides, I'd actually enjoy getting caught—clearly, since I implicated myself in jagged lines forever etched into a tree older than any of the 3,051 people in this town: *Vivi was here*.

When I'm done, I pat my handiwork because—okay, yes, I'm a nature vandalizer, but this is a crime of passion. I know the park doesn't mind because I love it here, and I think even the neatly trimmed grass and placarded benches can sense my affection.

I take the footpath out of the park, only now realizing how much later I am than usual. The morning sun has edged past the horizon line, casting shadows of the leaves like lace on the sidewalk. Flowers burst throughout every inch of the town—fuchsia roses crawling over trellises, forsythia blazing like yellow fireworks. As I walk down the sidewalk, the trees undress above me, dropping pale pink petals like a slow burlesque.

This is why I want to stay forever, not just for the summer. So far, my argument to my mom has been that Verona Cove makes Hawaii look like a floating garbage heap. I mean, I've never been to Hawaii, technically speaking, but I've seen pictures. Verona Cove is a tiny coastal town you might expect to find on the shore of Massachusetts or North Carolina, but instead it's tucked into a tiny notch on California's curved back. I've lived in a few towns, so believe me when I say that Verona Cove isn't one. It's Mayberry meets the rain forest meets Shangri-La. Each detail is so perfect that it feels like a film set, and I want to run my hands across the painted lattices, the retro mailboxes, the street lamps that glow like rows of white moons. Everything is clean but not totally pristine, like every inch of town is lived in and loved.

The shopping district is a three-by-three grid, and Main Street creates the center line. Every morning, I pass a handsome brick restaurant, a locally owned hardware store, and the bookstore. The storefront I'm aiming for is marked by a sandwich board with "Betty's Diner" in beautiful, chalk script at the top. Below, it reads in pink block letters: Voted Best Breakfast by the *Daily Gazette*, followed by the breakfast and lunch specials. Cove Coffee displays a similar certificate in its window: Voted Best Coffee by *Daily Gazette*. There's only one of everything in this town—a drugstore, a grocery, an art store—so each is the best by default, but I love that the town takes the time to honor each contribution.

Bells jingle on my way into the diner, and I'm hit with the smell of maple syrup and coffee and spicy sausage. I've come here all seven mornings, since there's nowhere else to go at this hour, and the excitement of a new town has been waking me up early.

Because I'm later than usual, Betty's is full up with octogenarians—white puffs of hair hovering like clouds over the backs of the aqua vinyl booths.

Betty herself is behind the register, punching at buttons. "Oh, hey, honey bun. One sec."

I think Betty keeps words like *sugar*, *darlin'*, and *honey* etched on a pair of dice in her mind. With each customer interaction, she shakes one or both dice to land on a single word or a combo: *honey pie*, *sugar darlin'*, *doll baby*. I like to hear who I am each day. The term of endearment is like

a fortune cookie at my favorite Chinese restaurant; it's not why I go there, but it makes the experience a touch sweeter.

She comes out from behind the counter, surveying the packed diner. "Might be a quick minute before a table frees up."

But I've already spotted my in: an older man wearing a thin sweater. "That's okay. I'll sit with Officer Hayashi."

She looks at me as though I have just said, *I will tame a tiger now, and he will feed me pancakes with his paws*. "Uh, sweetie, he's a little particular about his alone time in the morning. And always."

"I'm not worried." I flash her a smile because I know something she doesn't: Officer Hayashi is no curmudgeon.

My third morning here, I was on my way into Betty's when I spotted a German shepherd—all sharp angles, nose, and ears—sitting in the back of a cop car.

"What are they bringing ya in for, cutie?" I asked through the cracked window. The dog stared back, proud and attempting the stoicism required for his job. "Not assault or battery, no way, you're too gentle for that—I can tell. Trafficking? Nah, not the type. Aha! Theft, I bet. What was it? A whole pizza off the table? A birthday cake right out from under a little kid? You look like the sweet-tooth type."

His long tail smacked against the back of the seat.

"Boneless wings with jerk sauce," a low voice behind me said. "That's her weakness."

A girl dog. I felt silly for assuming otherwise. And, of course, she was wagging her tail at the sight of her partner—a man with white hair and a navy-blue police uniform. When he got close enough, I read the name on his silver badge: *Hayashi*.

"But she's not under arrest. Yet, anyway." He took a sip of his to-go coffee from Betty's.

"Oh, I know she's on duty," I said. "I was just teasing her. Couldn't resist—I'm crazy about dogs, and she's a real gem. I can tell these things."

"Yeah, she's a good girl, aren't ya, Babs?"

"Babs?" I asked, bristling. What a name for a police dog! Honestly, all the male German shepherds get to be Rex and Maverick and Ace.

"Kubaba, actually."

Even more ridiculous, though I tried not to react.

"Well, nice to meet you, Kubaba," I told the dog, and, turning back to her partner, I held out my hand. "I'm Vivi, by the way."

He shook my hand. "You a law-abiding citizen?"

"I've never been under arrest." I smiled, coy about quoting him. "Yet, anyway."

But see, here's the thing: after that, I went home and searched the name Kubaba. And now I understand Officer Hayashi well enough to know he'll be kind to me.

"Hi!" I say, approaching his table. He's staring down at the crossword, printing neatly with blue ink. "Vivi. From earlier this week? I accused your K-9 unit of being under arrest."

He looks up, studying me as if I'm trying to trick him somehow. "I recall."

"Kubaba," I say, "was the only queen of Sumer in her own right. The only woman on the Sumerian King List."

A smile creeps onto his face. "You looked her up, eh?"

A world of male shepherds trained to rip out a criminal's throat, and he named his regal girl for what she is: their equal.

"Can I sit with you?"

He glances around, clearly trying to find another open seat he can dispatch me to. I just smile pleasantly, waiting for him to give in. Everyone does, eventually. His gaze shifts back to me. "Of course you *can*."

Hmph. Old-timer snark, after which I am supposed to correctly ask, *May I sit with you?* But instead I settle into the booth across from him, thumping my bag down beside me.

And the good officer does not know what to do with me.

"You sure you never been arrested?" he asks. "You seem like the type. Disregarding social rules."

I splay a hand on my chest, all drama. "Why, I would *never*."

My lips press together, trying not to smile. See, even if I did get caught marking up the tree, I know Hayashi is

an old softie underneath. When he returns to his crossword, I open my sketchbook to the page I was working on last night. My inspiration word is scrawled at the top and taunting me. To represent *wabi-sabi*, I meant to draw a simple pink gown, raw silk with a sort of ripped texture at the bottom. But I got caught up, and now it's a girl wearing branches of cherry blossoms, pink petals fanning out as if she's spinning.

I start over on the opposite page, occasionally stealing glances at my tablemate. When Hayashi doesn't know an answer, he chews on the tip of his pen and scowls at the newspaper, as if the page will be intimidated into giving up the correct word.

"Hey, doll baby," Betty says to me, pouring coffee into my mug. I drink coffee for the taste, of course, since caffeine is the last thing I need. Most of the things I do in life are for flavor, not necessity. "On to the waffles?"

My first morning here, I ordered the first item on the menu—the Classic Omelet—so I just decided I'd try everything, in order. I've worked through all the omelets already. "Yes, please! Sounds positively divine."

"Here you are, Pete." She sets a plate in front of him. Sunny-side-up eggs and crispy bacon on warm biscuits. *Mmmm.* I haven't gotten to that column yet.

"So." He picks up his fork. "What's with the Marilyn Monroe thing?"

I touch the ends of my curls. "It's not a Marilyn thing. It's a *me* thing."

He's digging into his food, not even paying attention. "Okay."

Oh, honestly, can't a gal do something for the hell of it? I've gained some weight in the past few months, and the curves are new to me. So I thought, *You know, what better time to dye my hair platinum blond and cut it to a length between my earlobes and shoulder tops?* I spun big sections of blond into foam curlers and drenched the whole mess in home-perm chemicals. I don't even really know anything about Marilyn Monroe. But girlfriend was on to something with her short, curly hair. Bouncing on top of my head, it feels fun and light and like I'd be ready to roll if the forest pixies ever ask me to go dancing with them. And as long as my hair is going to be all Marilyn-y, I figured I'd try out some red lips and nails.

I've read that animal coloration can be for mimicry or protection or for signaling to a predator or a potential sexual mate. Ha! Perhaps my platinum dye and red lips and pink cheeks are all of the above. Or perhaps I just like plumage.

When the waffles arrive, I push my sketchbook aside to make room, and I dig in and *oomph!* Carb heaven, golden and buttery and dusted with powdered sugar.

Officer Hayashi is staring down at my sketchbook page. He uses a chunk of biscuit to mop up the last of his runny egg yolk. "*Wabi-sabi*. You know what that is?"

"As I understand it," I say, trying to sound academic, "it's an untranslatable word. *Wabi* can mean rustic or stark or transient. *Sabi* is like . . . faded. Or fad*ing*. Old. Together, I guess it's like seeing beauty in simplicity and nature. In fleeting moments and even in decay."

He tips his coffee back, emptying it. "Where'd you learn about that?"

"From my friend." Can I still call Ruby my friend? Her image invades my brain, her hot-pink lipstick and fringed black hair, and I'm sickened with missing her, with missing her whole family. "Last spring, her mom did this huge mixed-media show juxtaposing the Japanese aesthetics she grew up with and the Western aesthetics she studied in college."

Before he can add anything, I sigh, gesturing to the sweeping cherry-branch dress. "I'm trying to translate some of the concepts into couture, but I'm not sure I can mesh them with *my* personal aesthetics. I like inventive, bold fashion, so I have a feeling that once I finally get to Japan, I'll be more about the street style. Have you been?"

"I haven't, no. But I . . ." He hesitates, pulling cash out of his wallet. "I have always wanted to see Kinkaku-ji."

"The Golden Pavilion?"

He nods. "My mother spoke of it with awe."

"Why haven't you ever gone, if you want to?"

"Oh, you know. Life." With this, he tugs a worn baseball cap onto his head. He leaves our booth without another word.

I'm not far behind him, because my morning routine has one more stop before work.

Verona Cove sits above sea level, so if you walk westward on any street in town, you'll eventually hit the bluffs. Some of them drop off right above the ocean, and others taper downhill toward the shore. I think I imagined the California coast with surfers running headlong into the waves and with pops of colorful umbrellas. But it's quieter, just the whoosh of water and call of birds. I stand on the cliff with mist rising from the ocean almost straight below me, and, even after a week of this, it stuns me. The natural world makes the finest architects and designers and artists look like silly amateurs. I'm so lucky to stand witness to panoramic blue skies and white-tipped waves and the craggy earth beneath my feet.

I anticipated the few birds that scamper near me, which is why I pocketed some crumbs of waffle from my breakfast. They peck at the torn pieces on the ground while I dig into my purse for the thing I came here to discard. I have two neon-orange bottles in my purse, so I've got to make sure I find the right one.

The pills are smooth to the touch. I push my finger against one pill to slide it out. Once it's in my hand, I wind up because I've learned that you've really got to put some force behind the meager weight of a tiny pill. I fling my arm forward, hand opening for the release.

The pill soars over the cliff, and I imagine the tiniest *plink* as it hits the ocean's surface. Maybe a fish will spot it, and his round mouth will break above water to ingest it, and if he's been having some rough emotional ups and downs, he'll feel better! You're welcome, little guy.

Turning my back to the Pacific, I start toward the pottery shop. I can't imagine a better summer job. I don't have to wear a uniform, and I get to watch people create art, which is almost voyeuristic—a glimpse at the bare soul. Magic, I tell you. Magic.

I lucked into the job, really. On my second day in Verona Cove, I sat on the bench outside the shop hoping to entertain myself for a while once it opened. By the time the owner showed up—an hour after the posted opening time—I'd run my pencil down sketching dresses. The owner, Whitney, has the warmest energy and the best curls I've ever seen—thousands of them, tightly wound. I couldn't stop staring at her hair and thinking that God himself must have created it with a curling iron the size of a number two pencil. Her apologies flurried between explanations—that she got into this groove with her own pottery the night before, that she overslept again.

We sat for the next hour, me painting a bowl for my mom and Whitney organizing the glaze paints into rainbow formation. She kept apologizing, but I told her not to worry about it, that sleep and I are only casual acquaintances. She joked that maybe I should work in the shop

some mornings so she could sleep in. *Actually*, I said. *I've been meaning to get a job*. That's when she stopped laughing and asked if I was serious, even though she could only pay me minimum wage. And, well, you can probably guess what my answer was because here I am, digging for the shop keys in my bag.

When I turn onto High Street, I see that the bench outside Fired Up is occupied. Sitting there are a little girl with pink sneakers and a guy about my age with dark hair. Even from a distance, I can tell his hair is not a styling choice but the result of a perpetually overdue haircut—kind of rumpled, with the start of curls. It's really great hair; if I had hair like that, I would never cut it or dye it or change a single thing.

They're talking as I approach, the little girl swinging her legs. The guy is seventeen or eighteen—too young to be her dad—but he almost looks like he could be *someone's* dad. I can see dark circles under his eyes, so maybe that's it. Or maybe it's his slouchy khakis and navy T-shirt with a pocket over his heart. This is not a cool outfit or an uncool outfit, just practical. Everything about him says he's too busy to even realize he's that cute.

"Good morning!" I say. They both stare like I'm a cartoon character come to life.

"Hey." The guy stands abruptly, and the little girl follows his lead.

"You here to paint?"

"Yep," he says. The girl bobs her head.

"Well, come on in." I motion to them with one hand while still rooting around for the keys with the other, and I give my most charming smile to spur them from their muteness. I'm not much for silence; it simply doesn't suit me. I'd rather carry on a conversation with myself than crawl the trenches of awkward nothingness. Since I'm not sure what else to say, my mind wrenches back to this morning's activities and my breakfast companion.

"Are you guys locals or here on vacation?" I hold the door open, and they walk inside.

The guy clears his throat. "Townies."

"Oh, excellent." The door shuts behind us, and I plunk my purse down on the counter. "Do you know if the Verona Cove police are strict? I mean, like, on first-time offenders. Who may have created some, ahem, unsanctioned art on the local plant life. Asking for a friend, of course."