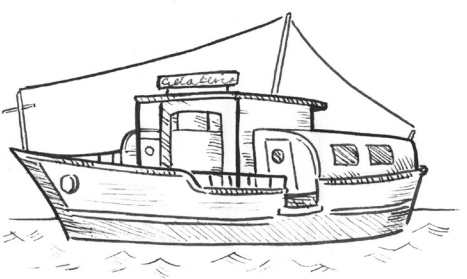
The Place We Met

ISABELLE BROOM



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First published 2017
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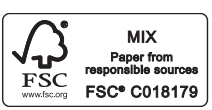
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Set in 12.5/14.75 pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–718–18668–5

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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I

Taggie

Winter is on its way.

I can feel it creeping through the folds of my scarf, and when I breathe in, the air pooling into my lungs is sharp and cool, bringing with it a clarity and freshness. I feel more awake, more alert, and I allow myself to inhale deeply. There is a faint scent of pine, and something else that I can't distinguish. Perhaps it is coming from the plants that I know are there, but cannot see, behind the high stone walls, or perhaps it is the lake that I can smell, which is just now coming into view below me.

It is silent, as it always is at this early hour, and I wonder if the birds have even woken yet. When I come down here in the afternoons, they're always busy rustling away in the surrounding trees, doing whatever vital job it is that they always seem to be in the midst of completing. It would be nice to be a bird, I think fleetingly. To have the freedom to take off whenever you desired, and soar through the endless blue sky above the water as if you were weightless. Then again, I remind myself, the birds aren't the only things that have escaped.

The gradual downward slope of the stony path ends abruptly in front of me, and ahead sits a narrow strip of beach. Beyond that, the lake sits calm as glass, with barely

a ripple interrupting its deep blue canvas. I feel better already.

I stand for a while gazing out towards the horizon, and then my eyes trail west, to where the distant mountaintops seem to shimmer in the morning light, and I take another breath. Yes, winter is definitely on its way. Soon I will wake to find blankets of frost thrown over the ground, and red berries will burst out amongst the clumps of holly that decorate the outer walls of the hotel. It will be cold and stark, but the sun will still shine. Even when the snow comes, it will be baked into a glistening meringue, and the clouds will be permitted only for a short time each day – perhaps not at all. Such is the desire of good old Mother Nature here in Lake Como, and I would not want it any other way. The beauty here feels like a tonic, the relentless sun like a beaming clown, chasing away sad thoughts, and the rich colours of the contrasting landscape a palette that soothes and calms me.

And this is the place where it all comes together. This beach, this view, this place. My place.

I bring my hands up to rub some warmth into my upper arms, and lift my shoulders to keep the chill from my throat. My scarf is a helpful barrier, but the thin cotton material is no real match for the cold, and I pull it tighter in a fruitless attempt to cover up more skin. Turning left, I make my way along the narrow corridor of shingle, my hand on the high wall to steady myself, and follow it along until I reach the corner. There's a wide gap where the lake floods in through an underground passage, and then a wider stretch of beach beyond. An abandoned rowing boat sits idle on the shore, and in that moment, I have a

sudden urge to reach it, to run my hand across its coarse, rotting surface and watch the paint disintegrate beneath my fingers – but I hesitate. I will have to jump, and from this position on the corner there is no room for a run-up. And what if I make it across, but then have no way back? It's too cold to paddle back through the water, and anyway, my skinny jeans are far too tight to roll up.

'Don't be such a wimp,' I say aloud, scolding myself as I so often used to as a child. The young Taggie would not have deliberated; she would have leapt straight over and already be at the helm of that boat, on course for an imaginary adventure. I smile as I conjure her up in my mind, that fierce and fearless version of me. How I wish I still had her strength.

Mind made up, I take a deep breath and crouch down on my haunches, the plan being to spring up and over the channel in one graceful leap. I pause, my hands on the wet stone walkway, then fling myself up with as much energy as I can muster, letting out a shriek as I go. There's a split second of exhilarating movement, followed by a splash, and then awful, total coldness.

'Wahhhhhh!' I yell, swallowing a good portion of the lake in the process and spluttering in disgust. I have somehow managed to land face down in the water, and my rapidly soaking clothes are pinning me down. I try to shuffle myself up, but my knee connects with the jagged edge of a stone and my leg buckles again beneath me. Now I'm not just angry, but scared, too, and the realisation causes me to thrash about wildly. I'm going to drown in ten centimetres of water, I think hopelessly, and it will be days until I'm found, washed up on the shore in Como, pecked apart by swans.

I'm just about to try and roll over on to my back when I hear a shout, and a few seconds later strong hands reach down under my arms and I'm hauled out of the water, dripping and coughing and shuddering with cold. Taking an instinctive step away from my rescuer, I bang the back of my head against the high stone wall and swear in earnest, my chattering teeth making the words sound ridiculous.

The man, who I realise guiltily is now almost as wet as me, starts laughing gently.

'It's not funny!' I snarl, rubbing the sore spot as I look at him properly for the first time. He's very obviously Italian, with jet-black hair and the remnants of a summer tan, and his eyes are the most extraordinary shade of bright green. He's wearing a red jumper that's been turned part-maroon by the stain of my wet body, and the sleeves are rolled up to reveal thick, muscular forearms.

'Are you OK?' he asks, peering at me in amusement. His English is heavily accented, but he speaks it with an ease that makes me suspect he's fluent.

'I think so,' I reply, my cheeks burning with mortification. 'Thank you for helping me.'

He shrugs. 'Of course.'

I want to ask him what he's doing down here, on my special, secret beach, so early in the morning, but I don't. I simply stand there mutely, wringing out my dripping hair and peeling off my saturated scarf with a grimace.

'You're all wet,' I point out needlessly, and he looks down at himself, again with a wry smile.

'It will dry.'

'Aren't you cold?' I want to know, but he shakes his head.

'Not really. I don't really feel the cold too much.'

'What are you, a robot?' I joke weakly, but he frowns in confusion.

'Just a man.'

He's certainly that, I can't help but agree. In fact, this man is the most manly-looking man that I've encountered in a long time. Which makes the whole plucking-me-out-of-the-lake thing all the more humiliating. Why couldn't an old fisherman have found me?

'You are shivering,' he tells me, stepping forwards. 'Can I help to warm you up?'

'No!' I practically yell, stumbling away from his outstretched arms in horror. He's right, I am shaking with cold, but there's no way I'm going to let him hug me. Who the hell does he think he is?

The man folds his arms as he considers my rebuff, his eyes narrowed and his mouth set in a line.

'I do not bite,' he informs me lightly, but his smirk rankles. I can tell exactly what he's thinking – he's looking at me, so small next to him and so apparently helpless, and he's assumed that I'm just another pathetic female that needs looking after. He's doing what so many men do when they meet me – he's making a presumption based on my size and on my sex, and there is literally nothing that annoys me more. OK, so I fell into the lake, but that doesn't mean I'm weak; it just means I'm unlucky.

'I'm going home,' I inform him, giving him as challenging a look as it's possible to do when you're a sodden mess, and turning my back on him before he has a chance to reply. My boots, which have filled with water, make an embarrassing squelching sound as I stomp away, but I

hold my head up high regardless. By the time I reach the beach and the opening that leads to the path, my hot head has cooled, and a twinge of guilt makes me glance back the way I came.

He's still standing there, his hands now in the pockets of his jeans and his head on one side. What I should do is mouth a silent apology, or flash him a small smile, hoping it will convey that I'm sorry for overreacting, and that I'm genuinely grateful to him for saving me, but I don't. The humiliation still feels too acute, and I've lost too much face already – so instead I stick my chin defiantly up in the air, and stomp away out of view.

2

Lucy

I was nine years old the first time someone cheated on me.

His name was Johnny, and he had curly brown hair and permanently pink cheeks. We had been officially boyfriend and girlfriend for two whole weeks, which was a record at our primary school, and I had written his name on the back of my hand in purple felt-tip pen and drawn a heart around it. I was so proud to have been singled out by Johnny, because he was the most popular boy in our year – if not the whole school – and so he could have taken his pick of the girls. But no, he'd chosen me, Lucy Dunmore, with the train-track braces and scuffed knees. The girl who wore her older sister's tatty hand-me-downs and still sucked her thumb in her sleep; the quiet one in class who would never raise her hand even if she knew the answer; the non-descript, non-beautiful and non-exciting Lucy. I was as surprised as everyone else.

Every lunchtime, I would make my way to the edge of the fenced-in pitch where all the boys played football, and watch my beloved tearing up and down the grass after the ball. Occasionally he would glance my way and smile, or blow me a sly kiss behind one of his hands, and I would swell with such pleasure that even my fingertips would tingle.

On this day, however, he was nowhere to be seen.

'I saw him with Chloe and her lot,' one of Johnny's minions informed me, abandoning his position between the goalposts and lacing his dirty fingers through the gaps in the mesh fence.

'Oh. Thanks.'

'They said they were going to play kiss chase,' he retorted, failing to keep the glee from leaking into his voice like spilt milk. 'I heard that Chloe always picks a three.'

The version of kiss chase we all played was based on a simple numbered system: one was a cuddle, two a kiss on the cheek, and three, the most daring of all, a kiss on the lips. The fact that Chloe always picked a 'three' if she was caught by the boys was not news to me, but Johnny's friend's words still made my throat tighten up and my tummy twist into knots.

I feigned nonchalance, of course, but as soon as I was a safe distance away from the pitch, I started to panic. If Johnny was playing kiss chase, then it was up to me to find him.

He wasn't up in the makeshift fort or on the swings. There was no sign of him in the cobweb-ridden alley behind the science block or over near the infants' sandpit. I ran around the playground twice, my legs burning and my breath coming faster and harder, but still, nothing. The tears were threatening and other children were starting to look at me with ill-disguised bemusement. I was about to scale the big slide for a better look when I saw him.

And he wasn't alone.

They were a fair distance away from me, but I could still make out the beam of pride on Chloe's face as she followed my boyfriend across the playground. He was looking ahead, rather than at her, but one of his hands was stretched behind him, his fingers entwined with hers.

I took a breath, and followed them.

I knew where Johnny was taking her, because it was the same place he'd led me a fortnight ago, on that magical day when he'd whispered in my ear that he liked me, that he thought it was cool how clever I was, how well I could spell, how I was the only person in the class who could hold Snuffles the guinea pig without him wriggling.

He was taking Chloe to the kissing corner.

I went as far as the cloakroom doors before I stopped and leant against the glass, watching with a mixture of shock and inexplicable fascination as Chloe and Johnny went straight for a three, both shutting their eyes as they rubbed their faces together. She was taller than him and had to bend down a bit, and if it had been anybody else, I would have laughed. But it wasn't – it was my Johnny, my boyfriend – and so instead I turned away and went inside. I washed his name off my hand and glared at myself in the toilet mirror, willing my bottom lip to stop trembling. Nine-year-olds aren't cry-babies.

In that moment, it was myself I hated, not him. Not even Chloe.

I went back into the cloakroom and sat by my peg, waiting for the bell to ring and signal the end of lunch break. There was a faded sticker of Kermit the Frog on the wooden bench seat, and I picked at it absent-mindedly, chewing the inside of my cheeks until I could taste blood.

I never told anyone what I'd seen, or how it upset me.

But I never forgot it, either.

'Lucy, are you in there? The patient in cubicle three is back from X-ray.'

'I'll be right there.'

There goes my tea break, I think, tipping the remainder of my brew down the sink and giving the mug a cursory rinse.

Letting the staffroom door swing shut behind me, I almost collide with Doctor Dhillon, who is also on his way to cubicle three.

'Nurse Dunmore.' He nods a greeting.

'Vikram.' I smile back.

'All set for a busy night?' he enquires politely, and I roll my eyes good-naturedly. It's the first Friday in December – AKA the night where all the office Christmas parties begin – and as such the Accident and Emergency department here at All Saints Hospital in North London is undoubtedly going to fill up with revellers as soon as the pubs start to call last orders. As Vikram and I are doing a late shift, we've only been here for a few hours, and both of us know that we have a very long night ahead of us.

'So, what's the poor little duck broken?' I ask as we turn a corner, my rubber-soled shoes squeaking on the laminate floor.

'Ulnar fracture,' the doctor replies, raising a sympathetic eyebrow when I instinctively glance up at him in dismay. 'It's a clean break, though, and she won't need an op.'

'I've got my brave-girl stickers at the ready,' I tell him, tapping my pocket, and the two of us exchange a knowing grin before I reach up and pull aside the curtain.

The little girl in the cubicle is pink-cheeked and subdued, while the woman beside her looks positively terrified. It's a look I'm used to, and as always, I'm relieved that Doctor Dhillon is bringing relatively good news with him.

'Is her arm broken, Doctor?' the mother cries, grabbing Vikram's hands before he's even had time to speak. They're fabulous hands, the colour of burnt caramel with long, slim fingers, and his nails are short, clean and buffed.

'Take a seat, Mrs Davis,' Vikram soothes, easing her slowly into the chair next to the bed. 'It's a nice, neat break, and she'll need a cast, but once that's done she'll bounce back in no time.'

'Am I going to get a new arm?' the little girl asks now, and the three of us turn to her. She looks so tiny and helpless sitting up on the bed, with her cuddly toy dog clutched in her good hand and tear marks streaking through the dirt on her cheeks.

'You don't need one,' Vikram says kindly. 'This one will mend just fine, you'll see.'

The girl doesn't look convinced. I know from her notes that she's only just turned four, but she seems older. There's a knowing look behind those eyes of hers that I'm not sure I had at the same age, and she gazes at me without trepidation.

'My Uncle Max lost his leg in the desert and his doctor gave him a new one,' she informs us. 'He has to plug it in at bedtime, like a phone.'

The woman sighs and pats her daughter's leg.

'She's talking about my husband's brother,' she explains. 'He lost a leg in Afghanistan.'

'I see.' Vikram widens his eyes and looks back towards

the bed. 'It sounds like your Uncle Max is a very brave man indeed.'

I expect the girl to agree, but she shakes her head.

'No. He's scared of spiders. Even I'm not scared of them.'

'You're not?' I exclaim. 'I think they're the scariest thing in the world!'

'Not scarier than sharks!' she cries, adorably indignant. 'And strangers.'

'Yes, Poppy. Strangers are very dangerous and very scary,' her mum says quickly, and Vikram and I nod in obedient agreement. I decide that I like Poppy very much indeed, and while the doctor takes Mrs Davis to one side to explain the course of treatment, I approach the bed and sit down on its edge.

'It sounds to me like you're the bravest one in your family,' I tell her conspiratorially, and she smiles at me for the first time.

'Here at All Saints Hospital, we have special stickers for our bravest patients – would you like to see them?'

Poppy nods her head up and down slowly, her eyes widening as I reach into my pocket and pull out my stash. There's a sheet of red hearts, one of gold stars and another of little cartoon dogs, each with a separate ailment.

'Can I have two?' she asks boldly, peering down at them.

'You can have three!' I whisper back, and again I'm rewarded with a smile. 'Why don't you look after these for me?' I add, giving her the whole sheet of dog stickers. 'Then you can use them to decorate the special cast that I'm going to put on your arm. How does that sound?'

'Good,' she says quietly, her attention now diverted by the different designs. One of the little black-and-white dogs has got a broken arm, just like her, and I point to it with a smile.

'I think this one is a winner.'

Working in A&E can be tough, but it's also the most rewarding role in the world – and the only one I can ever imagine doing. It's my job to care, to provide sympathy, to patch people up and send them on their way with a smile. I spend my days mopping up blood, wiping away vomit, holding hands, making sweet tea and, just occasionally, getting smiles from gorgeous little angels like Poppy – it's moments like this that make the sadder ones worthwhile.

I'm just carefully arranging a blanket over Poppy's legs for her when I feel the vibration of my phone against my leg. I'm not supposed to have my mobile with me during work hours, so I ignore it, but I notice the flicker of bemusement pass across Vikram's face as he hears it, too.

'Take care of yourself now, Poppy,' he says. 'No more climbing trees until you're all better.'

'I promise,' she says sweetly, going back to examining her stickers as he vanishes through the curtain.

'He seems very nice,' Mrs Davis says, rather wistfully, sitting back in her seat and visibly relaxing for the first time since she arrived.

'Oh, he is,' I reply. 'Doctor Dhillon is one of the good guys.'

'Are you and he . . .' she begins, but stops as I shake my head.

'Oh gosh, no.'

'Sorry,' she grins.

'Mummy is very nosy,' Poppy explains, not even bothering to look up, and we both chuckle.

'The truth is,' I say, smiling knowingly at Mrs Davis as I reach the curtain, 'if I didn't already have a lovely boyfriend, then Doctor Dhillon would be at the top of my list.'

It's another two hours until I have time to check my phone, but when I do I find that the text message is from Pete, as I'd hoped it would be.

'Hope you're having a good shift – can't wait to see you tomorrow.'

I lean back against the wall of the ladies' toilet where I came to seek refuge and smile indulgently at myself in the mirror.

I knew there was something about Peter Samuels that made him different. It's been five months now since we met, and every time we see each other, I feel closer to him. My stomach still flutters with nerves when I'm on my way to meet him, but I feel as if he's someone that I can really trust, which means everything to me. After what's happened to me in the past, sometimes I find it hard to have faith in people – in men that I'm dating, especially – but Pete is the real deal.

Perhaps it's time to take our fledgling relationship up a notch, I think, tapping out an enthusiastic reply and adding my usual three kisses at the end. What I would like to do is spend more time with him, but real, quality time, not just a few hours here and there. A holiday is what we need – our first trip away as a couple. And I know just the place we should go.