

SPLINTERS

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Day of the Whale

Electric Life

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troika

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*To Ben,
who has worlds to explore.*

Prologue

I'm climbing the stairs to the attic again. Leon leaps ahead of me, bounding the steps two at a time, light and fast. When I get to the top he is already at the window, pressing his nose against the glass and looking down on the gardens below. I rest my face next to his. Everything is silent.

'That's where it all began for us, just there.' I point to a spot in the lane behind the garden. 'I remember, the sun made your hair look on fire.'

'Do you regret it?'

'No, of course not.'

'None of it?'

'None of it.'

'Good. Because I've got something to show you.'

Leon peels away from the window and makes himself comfortable on the floor, cross-legged, his rucksack between his knees. He pats the floor in front of him. I shrug and kneel down opposite.

'Okay,' he says decisively. 'Promise me again you have no regrets?'

'I promise I have no regrets.' I raise my hand in a Scout salute.

'And that you trust me.'

'I promise that I trust you. With my life,' I add, and he likes that. He knows it.

His smile is unreadable, as though it's made up of more than one emotion. But nothing he says would surprise me now, not after everything we've been through.

'Shut your eyes and hold out your hands. No, closer together, like you're holding a book.'

I do as he says, sitting in my own darkness, tingling. Am I hoping he'll kiss me? I'm not sure.

'Now think,' he says, 'what we could do with this.'

He places something in my hands. It's long and irregularly shaped, covered with a cloth. I open my eyes to see him unwrapping the material.

'What –'

'Shhh,' he says. 'Wait.'

The cloth falls back, spilling over my hands and revealing a glass shard. Murderously sharp.

'No,' I whisper, shaking my head.

His eyes radiate excitement.

'No,' I whisper again. Barely a sound, through dry lips.

'Come on.' He grins, rocking from side to side. 'It'll be different this time. We'll do it together. I won't let you go.'

Chapter 1

‘So, this is it, then.’ Jodie cocks her head and presses her lips together. Behind us, her dad heaves the last of the suitcases into the estate car and her mum paces, wondering if she’s forgotten something.

I just stand there and flap my hands pathetically, as if that might stop the tears.

‘We can FaceTime. We can even do the social media thing!’ Jodie dances her phone in front of my face. ‘Or old-fashioned snail mail. I can post you bits of Scotland. Thistles and rocks. I’ll write, in ink. I’ll do calligraphy. I’ll address it to Jean Sylvester in my curliest handwriting.’

‘You have to be kidding!’ I splutter. ‘By the time I decipher your writing, I’ll be old.’ I wipe away escaped snot. ‘And I don’t want bits of Scotland. I just don’t want you to go.’

‘Jodie.’ Her mum says it like a full stop. Jodie clicks her tongue. This is it.

Before I know it, I’m sobbing in my best friend’s arms, leaving all kinds of disgustingness on her shoulder.

She pushes me away, her blue eyes wet, her grin shaky.

‘You’ll come up and stay in the holidays,’ she says. ‘There are beaches and everything.’ She lowers her voice. ‘We’ll take chips down to the shore and watch the sun set, and we’ll sip whisky, wrapped in tartan blankets.’

Jodie’s mum hovers. Smiles apologetically. ‘You girls will stay in touch. A few hundred miles won’t get between you. No chance.’

Jodie staggers to the car, pretending to be drunk, singing. *‘Is this the end of my bottle or the start of our life, my love?’*

Baffled Poets. She’d just have to quote Baffled Poets.

I’m laughing like an idiot with a bad cold as the car drives away, and then I’m alone, hiccupping at the air. Here one minute, gone the next. Just like that.

Behind me, Jodie’s empty house feels like a black hole. I can’t believe everything is gone: the family portraits on the wall, the hallway jumble of coats and boots, the shredded toys of Squirrel, their spaniel. All disappeared. Transported to another place.

Lingering here in the front garden, decapitating flowers, I am now officially trespassing. But I can’t bear to go home just yet, back to Mum and her reasoning. I don’t need to hear obvious advice like ‘you can always call each other’. I need to be miserable for as long as possible, because that’s what this deserves.

My best friend is gone.

A whine of straining gears. I look up and Jodie’s car

is reversing, weaving erratically back down the road towards me. Her dad shouts, 'Make it quick' as he slams on the brakes. Her head pops out of the back window. Squirrel sticks his head out too, knocking her sideways.

'I forgot to say . . . Keep me posted on what happens with Leon.'

'Of course. Who else am I going to tell?'

'Glad I won't be around for the mushy bits. Wouldn't want to be odd one out.'

'You'll always be odd.' I just about manage a smile.

'You were going to set me up with Guppy, weren't you? Actually, that's why I'm leaving.'

'I'd never do that to you.' I laugh. 'Don't go.'

Jodie shouts as the car starts to move. '*I am King of Kairos, now for here!*'

'*And here for now!*' I yell.

She waves, then pulls her arm back inside the window. The car picks up speed. And this time she's gone for good.

I am King of Kairos is not a quote you can say to just anyone and expect them to understand. For us, it means 'I'm here at the best possible time; my power is in this moment'. No one would get that if they didn't love the song 'Making It in Everywhen'. And I don't know anyone else our age who's even heard of Baffled Poets.

They're our favourite band. We found one of their albums on an old cassette tape inside a retro Walkman Jodie bought at a car boot sale. At first the music seemed

dense, with weird, wheezy instruments, but before long the tunes and words were glued onto our brains and the lead singer Chip Moon's face was plastered over our bedroom walls. We used his 'King of Kairos' quote to baffle the stupid.

I get on my way, putting the *Weird Times* album on shuffle, wondering if Jodie might be listening to it too.

Kiss me or don't, it's not like it matters;

The end of each road is the same, hearts in tatters.

Scuffing my feet, I take a winding route home, not caring if it adds ten, twenty minutes to my journey. I imagine the McGowan family hitting the motorway north, chattering with excitement, carried by the thrill of what's ahead: future potential eclipsing everything they've left behind. They are in the perfect moment of possibility: Kings of Kairos.

Call me melodramatic, but Jodie McGowan and I have been friends since primary. Most friends grow out of each other and swap allegiances, but we never did. Not even for a second. That's why what's happening now feels so wrong. Does she feel it too?

I lean against a bus stop and scroll through my contacts. Jodie rolls into place under my thumb. *Pull yourself together*. She says that to me all the time. So I'll try, Jodie, I'll try to pull myself together. I won't lean on you just yet.

I put my phone in my pocket and look at the sky above. Summer blue with apricot at the edges. Evening

is coming in. I suppose I should go and present a brave face to Mum. She's primed herself for my meltdown over Jodie leaving and she's probably got Carol on standby for this very moment. Carol's her counsellor friend, and her specialist topic is Teenage Angst. Apparently, I'm starting to show a lot of it. Or, you know, maybe I'm just tired of being peered at like a specimen.

At the corner of my road, I stop in my tracks. Leon is there, right outside my house, leaning against the gate post, long legs out at an angle – a total trip hazard.

'Hey, Leon.'

'Hey, Jean.'

He pushes himself upright and shoves his hands into his pockets, rocking slightly on the balls of his feet. He's six inches taller than me – more, even. Next to him, I feel like a squat mushroom. I rise up on the balls of my feet and Leon awkwardly plants a kiss on my cheek.

'You don't mind me being here? I knew Jodie was going today. I just thought you might need a – oh, you've been crying.'

'Yep, a little.' So, he's clocked my blotchy face and snot trails. Great. If he can see the state of me and not flinch, he's a keeper.

'I'm sorry,' he murmurs. 'Hug?'

He holds out his arms and I go to him, resting my cheek against his chest. I can feel his heart beating hard, like a horse cantering on dry earth. He doesn't know what to do with his hands, so he rubs my back. I don't

know where to put my hands, either, so I put one around his waist, the other in my pocket, which strikes me as ridiculous. No one ever tells you how to act when you first fall in love.

‘Hello, you two!’ Mum is at the door, looking surprised and kind of pleased. ‘Not interrupting, am I?’ She so clearly is. ‘Just come in when you’re ready.’

‘Thanks for the invitation into my own house,’ I say pointedly. Leon laughs silently, and it jolts my head against his chest. I’m tempted to keep it there – primarily because I’m too shy to show him my face, which is doing a half-grin, half-grimace thing. I’m incapable of behaving normally.

‘Thanks for coming,’ I say, finally standing back. ‘You didn’t have to.’

Leon blushes and brushes his fringe to one side. ‘I wanted to.’

‘Great.’

He bends down, cheeks the colour of plums, and presses his lips to mine.

Now I’m standing at a weird angle, wondering if my breath is okay and concerned that Mum or my little sister will be peeking through the curtains. I pull away.

‘Oh, sorry,’ he says, blushing deeper.

‘No!’ I insist, regrettably loudly. ‘It’s just that . . .’ I nod towards the house. A curtain twitches and Posy ducks below the windowsill. ‘Are you around this weekend?’

‘No, we’ve got family time booked.’

'Family time?'

'Don't,' he pleads. 'It's painful enough. No technology, family meals, PG-rated movies and Monopoly.'

'No way! That's horrible!' I squeak into the back of my hand.

The breeze blows the conversation away and we grin at each other. He flutters his eyelids, like he has grit in them. I step towards him, lift my chin, reach up and plant another kiss on those soft lips.

'When will I see you then?' I say.

'We have the whole summer. If you want me around the whole summer, that is?'

'Yes. Okay.'

'Yes, okay yes, or just yes, okay, kind of?'

'Yes, okay yes. Now, go!' I laugh, pushing him. He walks away with mock rejection, and his long legs trip over themselves. Then he pivots, runs back and takes me in his arms again. A short, slightly rough hug. Nerves. We're so alive with goddam nerves.

'Pinch me,' he says.

I pinch him.

'Good. Not dreaming.' He backs away, still red-cheeked, running his hands through his long floppy hair. Both of us smile like fools. He's definitely into me.

It's surreal. My first boyfriend. In this life, I never thought it would happen.