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Golden Boy

Written by Abigail Tarttelin

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GOLDEN BOY

Abigail Tarttelin

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For my parents

PART ONE

Karen

My parents were each other's antithesis. My mother was a beautiful, sad woman; dark, small and quick to anger. She would mutter about sacrifice and everything she had given up for us. She died when I was sixteen and now I wish I had known her better. My father was tall, with golden hair swept from a side-parting, and had a gentle, mild temperament. Dad used to practise law, and would leave for York very early in the morning, every day, to go to his office. Later, he became a politician. He saw enough of the world to have dreams for us, and when I could go – when it was still free to go study for a degree – he sent me to Oxford University.

I was three years older than my sister Cheryl, and I didn't want to go alone, so my friend Leah applied to train as a nurse in Oxford and followed me there. Two years after we moved to Oxford she met Edward, a philosophy student, while out rowing on the river. I was surprised she liked him so much, because Leah was so down to earth, and Edward was prone to arrogance. He felt too cold for warm Leah. Six months later, he took her for a picnic on that same river and proposed in front of all his friends. They married and moved to Hemingway for Edward's work. The houses were better value and roomier, and the town was quiet and safe. A few years after that, they found out they were going to have a baby – a boy.

Leah had moved to the suburbs, but I loved Oxford. The city was where I became a lawyer, where I met my husband, where we bought our first flat, where the buzz of energy took on a unique momentum and propelled even the most mundane start to an evening forward into something new, something different and unexpected. My boyfriend, Steve, was two years ahead of me in law school. After he graduated we would meet at the pub around six most nights, then either stay there until late,

drinking and talking, or walk home together. He was from London, tall, leanly muscular, earnest, blithely good-looking and deliciously self-righteous. He was passionate. We argued a lot but had the same values. We both strove for independence and control, but somehow imagined success was already waiting for us. We were healthy and young and full of promise. We had no problems and no doubts.

We got married in Oxford a few weeks after I graduated. Afterwards we went for a meal at an Indian restaurant we both loved.

We found out I was pregnant just before we exchanged on the flat in Oxford, and we moved to Hemingway a few months after the birth of our first child. Steve was twenty-eight and I was twenty-six. The move was unexpected, but suddenly Oxford was too claustrophic. Our friends would drop by at all times, without calling ahead, and above all we wanted privacy.

We took a long time, a few weeks, to decide on a name for the baby. Steve kept suggesting ones I hated: Jamie, Taylor, Rowan. In the end he grew impatient with me, and starting calling the baby 'Max'. After a while, it stuck.

Later, when we had Daniel, our second child, my sister moved to Hemingway to be closer to me. Cheryl's life is very different from mine. She travelled instead of going to university. Cheryl has had several long-term boyfriends but only got married last year, at 38, to Charlie, who has a wide, boyish grin and wild, curly hair.

I know it sounds irrational, but sometimes I feel jealous of all the freedom and solitude she has experienced. As a barrister for the court and a mother of two, my own free time is precious. I spend it with my family, and when I get the chance I see Cheryl or Leah, but even these occasions seem to be few and far between. I call them both regularly but we only manage perhaps one lunch or dinner a month.

Perhaps because we made similar choices in life, Leah and I are closer than my sister and I. I know if anything happened to me, Leah would be there for my children, and if anything happened to Leah, I would be there for her son, Hunter, who,

like many children without siblings, can be moody and controlling. I don't share that thought with Leah, obviously, because we all like to believe that our children are perfect, and personally, I wouldn't want to be disabused of that notion.

Despite Hunter's bossiness, Max and he have been best friends since they were little, and Leah and I have always been glad of this because on shared holidays they are good at entertaining themselves. They are both resourceful, playing football together, exploring, swimming, surfing, fighting and making up without our input. Max is always the first, and sometimes the only one, to forgive, ever the peacemaker.

Leah was the first person I confided in about Max's condition, and Hunter has known since he was four. He was young when he found out, sharing a bath with Max before bedtime, but he seemed to understand as much as a child could. We just told him Max is different. Max is special.

Max

The seats in English class are this eggshell blue fabric-cum-plastic. My fingernails scratch lightly over it. My nails are neat. Everything about me is so neat. Everything I do, I do well. I can't remember the last time I messed up. This is a big mess up. I feel like it's my fault. I know it's not, but that doesn't stop me feeling like it is.

'You got forty-six out of forty-seven on the first draft!'

'What?'

'You got the same thing last time. Dick.'

I look down to my English essay, scrawled all over in red pen: 'Excellent', 'eruditely, mellifluously communicated', 'fantastic', all followed by exclamation points larger than the words.

'Oh, no wait, you got forty-five last time.'

'Did I?'

'You're still a dick.'

I can feel Carl grinning at my left ear, but I can't turn to look at him. It's almost ten-fifteen in the morning. Carl is spouting the usual rubbish we spout in class and we're sitting at the back where we usually sit and we bought Coke cans and Maltesers on the way like we usually do, but today I'm not here. I'm thinking about STDs. I'm thinking about that splitting sound. I'm thinking about blood.

'So what's up?'

'What?'

'Are you pissed off at me?'

'No.'

'So, what's wrong?'

'Nothing.'

'You'd normally be gloating by now.' Carl nudges me. 'What is it?'

'Shut up. Nothing.'

*

I was thinking last night about how I live in the country just outside the town, but the town centre is ten minutes away by car. It's about five miles and that's where the doctor is, and they don't even take patients without an appointment. Then I realised it was going to be Monday in a few hours, and I'd be going to school. I could take the bus in and then walk off the grounds.

I didn't sleep after. How could you sleep? I lay in bed around 2 a.m., after I had dealt with it all as best as I could, washed myself off and changed the bedsheets, and I thought, *So what now? Do I go to sleep?* I turned over and started to wiggle my leg in my pyjamas in the way that you do when you're not tired, but then I realised it was hurting to move. It was stinging. I got still, and stared at the wall. The wall is a light blue. My dad painted it himself just before Daniel was born, so I didn't feel threatened. The new baby was getting a brand-new room. We had just moved from the centre of Hemingway to the suburbs, to this massive house on Oakland Drive. The house was big enough, but they built an extension over the garage to house the new baby, and Dad painted it yellow. I walked in the new room when it was done and felt really bummed, because they were getting a perfect new baby, after getting over the shock of me, their old, faulty one. I was worried they were going to forget about me.

Then Dad said, 'So, what do you want your room to look like?' and I grinned. Sometimes I've felt so close to my dad. Sometimes not so much.

I chose light blue and I got blinds, which at the time felt really grown up. I was five, almost six. Dad did the roller work, and then built me a cupboard for my games consoles, which back then just included the Sega and a PlayStation One. This was before he worked all the time. He just used to work normal hours then: nine to six like Mum does. I helped paint the delicate bits around the door and windows, joyously ripping the masking tape off afterwards to reveal perfect straight lines of paint. I can't remember Mum being around much when we

were decorating, but I remember her teaching me how to make the straight lines on the walls, how not to go over the edge. She was round with pregnancy, a huge bump that pushed against me when she stood behind me, holding my hand as we painted, then, her voice stern and strained as if her throat were constricted, telling me off when I went wrong.

Then Daniel was born. He is an awkward little guy, but I'm glad I've got a brother. I can't remember life before him much now. That time seems so hushed and temporary and unstable, as if we weren't yet living, as if we were waiting for Daniel to secure us in space, to make whole a family that wasn't yet fully complete.

The wall is grey in the dark, the night that Hunter comes in, when I'm lying there afterwards, pressed against the wall, breathing in and out, trying not to think. The pain is heightened with nothing else there, no sound or colour. It hums and grows, gripping my back. I screw up my eyes and bury my face in the sheets. I sit up again and quietly open the drawer next to my bed. No pills. I take out a pair of socks and put them on. I pick up a jumper on the floor. It's green and knitted and from Topman. I open the door to my room slowly, so it doesn't creak, and I walk downstairs, the socks dampening the sound of my feet.

I go down to the large living room, where my parents entertain people. Mum used to smoke all the time, before we were born, but now she only does it socially. It stinks, and it makes all the cushions in the living room stink, so Daniel and I never hang out there after she has. I know she's smoked that night, with all her friends over, because the smell is hanging in the air at the half-open door. The coffee table has wine glasses and bowls of nuts on it from their evening, but the room is quiet now, the lights off. The door to the living room is wood, with two panes of frosted glass in the top two-thirds of it. Next to it, towards the back of the house, is the small living room, which is cosier and has the TV in it. Opposite the little living room is the kitchen, with a full wood door. I walk beneath

the stairs to the kitchen door, push it open, reach to the wall on my left and turn on the light.

My ghostly reflection appears in the window over the sink.

I walk towards the other me, pull out a drawer and get some Ibuprofen out of it. I pour a glass of water and down two pills. I think of chucking down a third then decide not to be stupid and dramatic.

The other me looks across the kitchen to the first me.

We have changed. We have split into two. The me surrounded by the window frame looks a little tired, but otherwise healthy and happy, confident, OK, normal. A fit, unremarkable, soon-to-be-sixteen-year-old boy, wearing a forest green jumper. My slim frame has been ameliorated by football and weights and a short course of hormones when I was thirteen. Testosterone and something else. I don't know. Mum wrote everything down. My chest is a good size. Not large but not small. Well-developed compared to other boys in my year, which has a lot of skinny, scrawny and spotty guys who don't play sports. I'm an OK height for my age, and I think I'm still growing. I'm five foot nine, nearly ten.

The round neck of the jumper is kind of eighties, because right now those kind of jumpers are all over the shops and I like them because they're knitted and warm. It suits my neck, which is smooth and a light golden colour from spending hours outside in the summer playing footy on the school field and going to Spain before school started.

My face is soft-jawed for a boy, but not too much, not remarkably. Maybe I just notice it because that's what the doctors told me the last time we saw them, that I am soft-jawed for a boy. There is no facial hair there, not even any sprouting. My nose is small to medium, my eyes are a light green-blue. I used to have a lot of freckles as a kid and now I have just a few, on the tops of my cheeks. My eyelashes are quite long, but there's really no reason, right now, for anyone to suspect that I'm anything other than a teenage boy.

But wait until my facial hair doesn't grow. Wait until I don't look any manlier. Wait until all the other guys in my year

become men, and I stay smooth-chinned, under-developed, androgynous. Wait a year.

I never think about these things, but now I am thinking about them, touching my chin, peering closely at the pores of the other me. My hair is blond, the yellow-blond colour of a newborn chick, and slightly fluffy. It hangs down from a very slight side-parting, not lank, but full and nicely. The hair at the back of my neck is cut closer.

I like how the other me looks. I mean, I know there's a clock ticking. I don't know what will happen after I reach eighteen, but we didn't know what would happen after puberty, after thirteen, and we got through that. Mum and Dad have always been OK about it. We don't talk about it much but I've never been made to feel that it was a huge deal. I mean, I know it is, I guess.

The other me touches the back of his hair, where lying on a pillow has fluffed it up and tangled it. The other me looks relaxed. The other me looks like he did yesterday.

But the first me, the flesh and blood me feels . . . weird. I'm hollow. I'm blank. I'm going through the motions of walking and getting and swallowing and rinsing the glass and putting it on the sideboard but I am just. Not. Here. I can't be, because any sane person would be freaking out, and I don't feel much right now. I've gone into survival mode. I'm tired, and shaky, and I know if I'm not a blank, if I allow myself to feel, I'll shake and shake and shake until my legs give way.

I think back to our Sex Ed classes. So far we've had:

1. How boys and girls work. Black and white line drawings on sheets of A4. I felt, understandably, left out. I wondered where I fitted in.
2. Checking for breast and testicular cancer. Foam models.
3. Where babies come from. Plastic models of different sized wombs, which we had to 'fit' to different sized babies. The clue: the bigger the womb, the larger the baby. We were twelve. I go to a grammar school. It wasn't rough, let me put it like that.

4. Rolling a condom onto a carrot or banana. The teacher tried to buy all bananas but the market had run out. The carrots were not shaped like penises. I know. I piss at urinals; I also have one.
5. STDs. This was a slide show our form tutor had to show us. We had to guess what they were. He then looked at a sheet he had been given with the slides and told us we were wrong, then frowned in amazement, not knowing himself what the slides were. Halfway through he ran out the room and never came back.

So. I have to go to the doctor. I could take the school bus in then walk away from it, towards town, towards the doctor's surgery. They can't tell anyone; I saw it on the clinic wall when I went there with Carl for him to have an STD test. If you're under sixteen it's confidential. Still confidential, I mean. I don't think if you're nineteen they run and shout it to the masses in the waiting room or ring your parents or anything.

In the kitchen, I open the treats cupboard, which is high up so Daniel can't get in, although obviously he just stands on a chair. There are Twixes and KitKats and raisin-and-biscuit Clubs, which I love, but I don't feel like eating. My stomach feels sick and bruised. I pad through in my socks to the small living room.

The couch is soft and inviting, a hand-me-down from Dad's parents. I slump in it and my feet hug each other on the floor. Across from me, family photos on the marble mantelpiece above the fireplace smile and, for some reason, make me feel guilty.

The clock above the photos says it's two forty-five. I switch on the TV. *High Stakes Poker* is on. Daniel Negreanu and a behooded Phil Laak are hunched over their cards. Both have queen/ten.

'Brilliant. Negreanu.'

I turn around. 'Hi, Dad.'

'I saw the light on, pal. What are you doing awake?' Dad says, sleepily.

'Couldn't sleep.'

'Anything wrong?'

I shrug and shake my head, staring at the TV.

He clears his throat and sits down at the other end of the sofa, reaching across with one hand and ruffling my hair. 'Turn it up,' he says, smiling. 'Guilty pleasure.'

This is how I end up sat with my dad on the night Hunter came into my room. Dad doesn't know what is wrong, or even if there is anything wrong, but he stays awake, and when poker finishes, he puts on an action movie from the nineties that I used to love when I was little, and we watch John Cusack and Nicholas Cage on motorbikes chase John Malkovich on a fire engine until Mum and Daniel get up and we go through to eat breakfast.

Then Monday morning, on the bus, the rattling around making my groin hurt and my tummy ache, off the bus, onto the school grounds, a quick walk towards the ground gates and freedom and safety, then—

'Max Walker!'

I was so close to the gate. The head teacher's voice called my name behind me.

I stood still and looked at my feet. I screwed up my face, once, and let out a few long, staggered breaths.

'Max Walker!'

I was so close to the gate.

'Is the infamous Max running out on us?' This is rhetorical. With her next question she squints at me severely. 'You're not leaving school grounds, are you?'

'No.'

'You're just taking a walk around the car park before getting yourself to registration on time, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Registration is at eight forty-five, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Yes. So you're going there now, aren't you?'

I turned and walked past her, my head down. Empathy is not in Mrs Green's arsenal. So you don't want to show her your

worry. She'll only sneer at you. Don't give her the pleasure. I walked numbly across the tarmac and into the school building.

First period is after assembly, 9.25 – 10.15 a.m. So my second chance to leave is at 10.15 after English Literature, although now Mrs Green'll be on the lookout. Most of the teachers here are petty, stupid, small people who feel it's a victory in their sad, little lives to stop you from living yours.

In class I don't listen as Carl tells me about the Germany–Belarus match. I also don't listen, along with Carl, as we get a lecture on *Wuthering Heights*. Instead, I stare at the paper in front of me. I look out the window to where the trees on the field stretch away to the horizon in flames of orange, ochre, yellow, green, gold and red. I smell the mix of autumn air and dust the English lab emits. I pick my nails. I shift in my seat. I press the nib of my biro hard against the page and it makes a dull clunk and slides up inside the pen shaft.

I think about the splitting sound last night and worry. I think about future pleasure. I think about scarring. I think about how every one of us is different, how every intersex person is different from the other, about what the doctors said, about different problems. I think about contraception, and condoms and pills. I think about Hunter coming inside me.

Why didn't you fight more? says my brain.

It really hurt, I say.

Yeah. Why didn't you fight more?

I don't know. This is going to sound crazy but . . . I felt like it was his right.

You're right, that does sound crazy.

I know. I can't explain it. I mean, it's Hunter. I've always done everything he wanted. But it was more that I was shocked, because of what he said. So few people know. No one's ever said anything like that to me before. But also . . . I don't know. All the way through, I just felt like apologising.

Apologising?

For being disgusting, having messed-up junk, moving in the wrong way and not knowing what to do.

What is wrong with you?

I don't KNOW.
'Max?'
'Mm?' I look up. Carl is above me.
'Bell's gone.'
'Oh.'

Ten-fifteen is not my lucky break. The corridors drag us forward. I try to think of something to say to Carl, some excuse for why I want to go off alone, but my brain is mush. Too tired, in a daze, I end up in Biology. I figure, what's one more lesson?

I sit drumming my shoe against the desk leg. I sit blankly, staring at the board, the words unreadable, the shapes of the letters unrecognisable.

At first break there are two teachers standing by the gates. I run out of time finding another exit. And then Geography happens. And then Chemistry.

It is lunch by the time I get out. I climb over this tall wooden gate out on the school field, which leads to an alleyway. I take my bag. I'm guessing I won't be feeling like going back after the doctors.

My school is in Hemingway, which is a town next to Oxford that's referred to as a suburb of Oxford a lot. The centre is one large crossroad and a market square, but it is a pretty busy place with lots of its own suburbs. When you're in the centre, though, it feels quite small. It's basically a chocolate-box type of town that American tourists freak out over. It's very *Harry Potter*. There are some old buildings and there is an Oxford college that has its campus here. The building is huge and beautiful and five hundred years old. The place is full of ducks. We're often late to school because you have to drive really slowly behind them sometimes when they're with their ducklings on the road. Or sometimes there'll be like this one stupid duck, like a mallard or sometimes a Canada goose, that will just waddle very slowly down the centre of the main road, and there will be a traffic jam for literally a mile until someone gets out of the car, lifts the duck up and puts it on the pavement. The

buildings in the centre of town are around the square and along one road called The Promenade. The doctor's surgery is set back from the shops, and slightly tucked behind the church.

It's definitely autumn now. Summer wasn't that hot, but it seemed to stay warm for a long time. Today there's a breeze that spikes your skin with cold. The leaves are turning beautiful colours and the first have already fallen. I prefer summer to the other seasons, for the heat. You can be out all day playing football and not even have to worry about bringing a T-shirt. But autumn is loveable. It's summer's dying cousin. It's somehow vulnerable, for the world to die so publicly. You feel tender about autumn.

I wrote that in an essay for my teacher, Ms Marquesa. I wasn't there when she fed back on the essays but Carl said she (and I'm quoting him verbatim) 'basically creamed'.

I'm trying to hurry along The Promenade, partly because of the cold and partly because I don't want anyone to see me, the Walker kid, Stephen Walker's kid, out of school. Everybody knows Dad. Most people know Mum. I get stopped in the street all the time by people I don't know, talking about how great they are, how much they do for the community, how much more safe the area has been since Dad has been in charge, what it does for property prices. But if I'm stopped today I'll crack. I'll cry. I'll faint. I'm so tired and out of it, and the pain in between my legs is really uncomfortable.

Finally I walk up the public footpath, past the church, and onto tarmac. This is where I stop, under a tree, at the corner of the surgery car park.

The surgery is an ugly dirty-salmon-pink-red and the bricks are too squared off and flawless. The windows are plastic, and the whole place is fronted by a waiting room with one wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. I stay under the tree, shaded from the harsh light out in the car park. There are a lot of people in the waiting room. There are lots of eyes. The counter where you go up and tell the receptionist why you want to see the doctor is at the far end. It's set up so people don't hear what you're saying, but the door to the waiting room is often open and in any case

there's a window behind the reception into the waiting room through which they dole out medication and call people for appointments, so you can hear what the patients at the desk are saying.

It's so much nicer outside. If I stand here, very still, then nothing is happening. My eyes drift over the building and I weigh up my options.

What are you going to say in there?

Shh. Don't talk about it.

You're just going to walk in there and blurt it out?

Shh.

You're going to end up saying nothing. You'll go in to tell her and you'll chicken out and leave the surgery with eye drops.

Would you shut up? I'm thinking.

Max . . .

Shh.

Max . . . We need to go inside.