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Opening extract from

And Then He Kissed Me

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Oh God.

What is love? It's just a hoax.

One of life's most brutal jokes.

Kill me now.

"Are you a poet?"

"Hardly. It's coursework. We have to write a love poem. It's stupid."

She raises an eyebrow. "Poetry? Or love?"

I shrug.

"You" – she grins – "just need a muse. Follow me." She grabs my hand.

"Um, have we met?" I ask as she drags me up a hill.

"Typical Pom, all handshakes and intros!" She folds her arms. "OK, who are you? But" – she places a finger on my lips – "I don't care what your parents named their screaming baby. Who are *you*?"

I blink. "I don't understand."

"I don't know you and you don't know me." She smiles, tucking a stray curl behind her ear. "We can be whoever we want to be. So who are you?"

No pressure. A million names crowd my head.

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Brad? Too American. Sean? That's a fricking sheep. Hugo? A kid's film.

"Maybe I should choose for you."

I cringe inwardly as her dark eyes slide slowly over my body. What do I look like to this goddess? A nerd? A pasty Brit? I brace myself for her choice. Nigel? Worse? Graham?

Suddenly she nods decisively. "Romeo."

My eyebrows shoot upwards.

She shrugs. "He wrote terrible poetry too."

I grin. "And who are you?"

"Juliet. *Bien sûr.*"

"Bien sûr." I smile.

As we emerge from the trees, I find myself staring up at a crumbling tower on the cliff edge. "What is this place?" I ask.

"This" – Juliet strokes the peachy stones – "is Myrianthe's castle. She was a Greek princess who fell in love with a servant, Stefan. Her furious father shipped Stefan to Crete, hoping Myrianthe would forget him. But she never did. She moved into this tower, forever gazing across the waves that

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parted them, waiting for her lost love to return."

"And did he?"

Juliet sighs. "No."

"Bummer."

"But then Aphrodite took pity on Myrianthe. She told her to jump out of her window, and she would be reunited with her lover."

"What, in the *afterlife*?" I stare up at the window, with its sheer drop into the gushing waves far below.

Juliet smiles. "Aphrodite promised that if Myrianthe took a leap of faith, love would be her reward. So she jumped. And the instant her feet left the windowsill, Myrianthe turned into a beautiful white bird, so she could fly across the sea to her long-lost love."

"Cool."

"But what she didn't know was that Poseidon had also taken pity on Stefan, and had at that very moment turned him into a dolphin, so he could swim home to Myrianthe."

"Bugger."

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"But that didn't stop the star-crossed lovers. They found each other, and, determined to be together, the bird learned to swim in the sea and the dolphin learned to leap high into the sky, and they lived in the ocean together forever more. Romantic, huh?"

I nod. "If you don't mind having freaky mutant kids!"

She laughs, her eyes following a seagull as it soars effortlessly above us. "Don't you wish you were a bird? That you could just take off and fly away whenever you want, wherever you want?"

I shake my head. "I'm scared of heights."

"Scared of heights, or scared of falling?"

"Falling, I guess. From heights."

"You should do something that scares you every day." She smiles. "It's the only way you know you're alive. Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Follow me." She winks, then turns and sprints towards the cliff edge, and before I can stop her, she dives off.

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I race to the edge, heart pounding, as she plummets head first into the sea, her long brown legs disappearing in a circle of white froth.

"Juliet!" I yell. *"Juliet!"*

Suddenly she bobs to the surface.

"Are you *mental*?" I yell down at her, dizzy with relief. "You could've been killed!"

"At least I'd have died living!" She laughs. "Come on in – the water's beautiful."

"No way." I step back.

"Come on! Take a leap of faith, Romeo." Suddenly she winces. "Ow!"

I frown. "Are you OK?"

"No!" she cries. "Cramp. I can't swim!"

Shit! "Hold on – I'll get help!"

"No time! Help me, Romeo! Jump!"

Jump?! My knees tremble at the thought but I swallow hard. *I can do this. Just don't look down. Don't look down.*

I look down. Bugger, it's a long way!

I back away from the edge, take a deep breath, run up, jump – then OH BLEEDING BUGGERING

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BALLS, *WHERE'S THE BLOODY SEA?* My arms flail like spaghetti and a ridiculously girly scream rips from my throat as the water rushes up to meet me and I smash into the waves.

I'm drowning! There's nothing but dark sea everywhere. Which way's up?

Somehow my head breaks the surface and I gasp for air, lungs bursting, seawater stinging my eyes as adrenalin floods my veins.

"Juliet!" I stare around desperately at the empty sea. "Where are you? *Juliet!*"

"Here!"

I twist round and she bobs up in front of me.

"Are you OK?!"

"Never better." She grins. "You?"

"What? But—"

She stops my mouth with her lips, and as she kisses me I find myself drowning all over again.

That night, I lie awake, convinced that I invented her – that I fell asleep on the beach and dreamed up a golden-skinned goddess who called me Romeo

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and persuaded me to jump off a cliff. That sort of thing doesn't happen in real life. I've been reading too much Shakespeare; spent too long in the sun. Now I'm even imagining taps at my window. On the first floor. Sunstroke, for sure.

"Romeo!"

My eyes fly open.

"Romeo!"

I roll over.

"Where are you, Romeo?"

I open the window. "*Juliet?*"

"Hi." She grins at me from the balcony. "Whatcha doing?"

What am *I* doing? "Uh, sleeping?"

She rolls her eyes. "We can sleep when we're dead."

"Wait – how did you … you climbed a *tree*?" I stare as she gingerly climbs back onto the branch.

"Didn't want to wake your folks," she whispers. "But it's gonna be harder getting back down."

"Well, use the stairs."

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"Where's the fun in that?" She winks. "You hungry?"

"You're cute when you're worried." Juliet grins, tracing her fingers over my forehead as the waiter pours champagne into our glasses at a little taverna on the harbour. "You get all these little lines."

"Juliet, I haven't – I mean…" I lower my voice. "I don't think I've got enough money on me for—"

"Relax." Her finger silences my lips. "It's fine. I hope you like lobster – I pre-ordered."

"But—"

"Trust me." She tilts her head. "Just enjoy, OK?"

"OK…" I say uncertainly.

"Oops, there's more lines." She leans forward, her warm breath making goosebumps prickle all the way down my neck as she kisses me. "They're irresistible."

The lobster is incredible and the champagne is cold and bubbly and delicious, but it takes three glassfuls before I pluck up enough courage to ask

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the question that's been bothering me.

"Juliet…" I hesitate. "Why me?"

"Huh?"

"I mean … there were heaps of guys on the beach today – bronzed, buffed blokes – so why choose me?"

She laughs. "Why not you?"

"I mean – seriously. I'm just…" I shrug.

"We know what we are, but know not what we may be." She shrugs back. "We've all got untapped potential. Hidden talents. We don't know what we're really capable of till we're put to the test." She grins. "I can't believe you jumped off that cliff for me. I bet you didn't even think you could do it."

"I was conned," I argue. "I *thought* you were drowning."

"But do you regret it?" She raises an eyebrow.

I grin. "No way."

"Exactly. We waste so much time being afraid." She raises her glass. *"Carpe diem!"*

"Carpe diem!" I smile.

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"Now run."

"What?"

"Run!"

She leaps from her chair, grabs my hand and sprints out of the restaurant, dragging me, stumbling, behind her.

"Hey!" A burly Greek waiter yells after us. "Stop!" He knocks over a table as he gives chase.

"He's gaining on us!" I cry as we race along the harbour.

"Come on!" Juliet shrieks, kicking off her shoes and sprinting towards the edge.

"What?" Not again!

"Jump!" she squeals, leaping into the sea.

So I do. The water engulfs me, colder now, as I swim as hard as I can, the waiter left gesticulating angrily on the marina.

We don't stop swimming till we reach a rocky cove.

"Why is it" – I gasp for breath – "that whenever I'm with you, I end up soaking wet?"

She giggles.

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"You're crazy!" I laugh. "You're certifiably—Oh my God, Juliet – you're glowing!"

Her entire body is surrounded in a glimmering blue halo. She grins. "Magical, huh?" She looks like a mermaid. Or a siren. Or Mystique from *X-Men*. "You're doing it too."

"What is it? Radioactive seawater?"

"Plankton. They light up when they're disturbed." She sweeps her arms through the water and a million blue sparks ignite.

"It's beautiful."

"Yup. It's meant to attract their predators' predators. Like sharks."

"Sharks?" I spin around quickly.

She laughs, splashing me with cascades of turquoise crystals. "You're such a dork!"

"Oh, really?" I splash her back, and as she retaliates the sea erupts like a blue volcano.

"OK! Truce! Truce!" I laugh, wiping seawater from my eyes. "Ouch! They kinda prickle on my arms."

"That's because they're trapped under your

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clothes," Juliet says. "You should take them off."

"What?"

She pulls her dress over her head in one smooth move, sprinkling blue diamonds all around as she flings it onto a nearby rock.

Wow. OK. Wow. The plankton stick to her skin, her curves glowing blue and ethereal in the dark water, and I have no idea where to look.

Face. Concentrate on her face.

"Your turn."

My fingers fumble on my slippery shirt buttons.

"Relax," she murmurs, swimming closer. "Don't be scared."

"I'm not scared." Nervous. Embarrassed. Painfully self-conscious, yes. Scared? Hell, yes. But part of me is excited too.

Bet you can guess which part.

Slowly she unbuttons my shirt, tugs it off, and tosses it onto the rock. Her hands move to my belt buckle and she hesitates.

"You OK?" I ask softly.

She nods. "Just … it's not like I go

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skinny-dipping every night, you know? Or, like, ever."

"No?" I smile, flooded with surprised relief. I cup her face, her cheeks blushing hot against my palms as I kiss her gently.

And suddenly I'm not scared at all.

Moonlight glimmers on our skin as we lie on the smooth, flat rock, curled round each other so I can hardly tell what's her and what's me in the darkness.

"Are you awake?" I whisper into her hair.

"Yes. Why are we whispering?"

"Don't know." I smile, brushing a hair off her neck and kissing it gently. "It feels right." I trace a silvery-white line behind her ear. "What's this?"

She sighs. "I had an operation a while ago."

"Was it serious?"

She shrugs. "It made me realize that you should seize every moment and just squeeze every last drop right out of it, you know? Shoot for the stars."

I gaze up at the glittering sky. "I've never seen so many."

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"I think there are more here than anywhere else." She sighs. "I love this island. I used to come here every summer – I even saw a falling star once." She smiles. "Grandpa told me to put it in my pocket – you know, like the song?"

"I *love* that song."

"You know, songs are just poems put to music. You should write a song for your assignment instead. You could write about the stars, or the island." She sighs again. "I can't believe this is my last summer here."

I frown. "How come?"

She shrugs. "Grandpa's gone, and I'm … not a little girl any more. Nothing lasts forever…"

"Except the stars." I smile, looking up. "They're always there."

She shakes her head. "Most of them are gone already."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"The stars are millions of trillions of miles away. It takes so long for their light to reach us that most of them have died before we ever see them."

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"That's so sad."

"No, it's magical." She smiles, her face pale in the moonlight. "They're gone, but they still get to live on in our eyes. Grandpa used to tell me their names, but I could never remember. There are just too many."

"Well" – I point over her shoulder – "that saucepan-shaped one is the Plough, and those three stars in a row are Orion's Belt." I kiss her scar. "What star sign are you?"

"Dunno. My birthday's the twelfth of July."

"So you're Cancer, the crab."

"Do you believe in star signs?" Juliet asks quietly, her eyes clouding. "That our future is written in the stars?"

I shrug. "Who knows?"

"Romeo and Juliet's was, I guess." She hugs herself. "They were star-crossed lovers. Like us."

"No." I turn her to face me. "Not like us. Romeo and Juliet suffered from a fatal lack of communication, that's all."

She laughs. "You reckon?"

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"Uh-huh. We, on the other hand – though inconveniently residing on opposite sides of the globe – live in the age of texts, Twitter and emails."

"Yeah, but you forget – your writing really sucks!"

"Ah, but *you* forget" – I stroke her cheek – "now I've found my muse."

"You don't even know me."

"I do. I know that your nose crinkles when you smile."

She smiles.

"I know that you miss your grandpa."

She nods.

"I know that you're a complete adrenalin junkie who finds absolutely any excuse to swim fully clothed. Or not."

She laughs.

"I know there's a million things I don't know about you. I don't even know your name. But I know that I want to find them out. That I don't want this night to end."

"That makes two of us."

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"Looks like the sun has other ideas, though." I sigh.

"What?" She turns to face the brightening horizon and her face falls. "I've got to go." She scrambles to her feet.

"Wait – I'll walk you home—"

"No," she says quickly, wriggling into her damp dress. "I'll be fine. Thank you." She kisses me. "'Parting is such sweet sorrow, That I shall say good night…'"

"'Till it be morrow.'" I smile. "Meet me in the morning."

She hesitates, so I catch her hand. "At Myrianthe's castle. Ten a.m."

She squeezes my hand. "I'd love to." She kisses me again, more fiercely than ever, then she dives into the sea of stars, trailing the swirling galaxies glittering behind her.

But by 10.45 a.m. there's still no sign of Juliet. The day stretches, my eyes glued to the pathway from the woods, and I feel like Myrianthe, waiting. Except

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