School should have been the safest place...

DON'T TELL TEACHER

'Just brilliant. Full of twists and turns'
Lisa Hall



SUZY K QUINN

Suzy Quinn

Don’t Tell Teacher: A gripping psychological thriller with a shocking twist, from the #1 bestselling author

«HarperCollins»

Quinn S. K.

Don’t Tell Teacher: A gripping psychological thriller with a shocking twist, from the #1 bestselling author / S. K. Quinn — «HarperCollins»,

School should have been the safest place…For Lizzie Riley, switching her six-year-old son Tom to the local academy school marks a fresh start, post-divorce. With its excellent reputation, Lizzie knows it’ll be a safe space away from home.But there's something strange happening at school. Parents are forbidden from entering the grounds, and there are bars across the classroom windows.Why is Tom coming home exhausted, unable to remember his day? What are the strange marks on his arm? And why do the children seem afraid to talk?Lizzie is descending into every parent’s worst nightmare: her little boy is in danger. But will she be able to protect him before it’s too late?***If you loved Behind Closed Doors, Sometimes I Lie and The Couple Next Door, you won’t be able to put down the chilling new psychological thriller from Suzy K Quinn. Don’t Tell Teacher will have you hooked from the very first page!

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From SUZY:



Every page in this book is a connection between us – author and reader.
I am so grateful you have chosen to make that connection.
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Don't Tell Teacher
Suzy K Quinn

ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES
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For my little girls, Lexi and Laya – sorry this isn't a bedtime story. You can read it when you're older :) xx

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About the Publisher
Prologue

We're running. Along wide, tree-lined pavements, over the zebra crossing and into the park.

'Quick, Tom.'

Tom struggles to keep up, tired little legs bobbing up and down on trimmed grass. He gasps for breath.

My ribs throb, lighting up in pain.

A Victorian bandstand and a rainbow of flowerbeds flash past. Dimly, I notice wicker picnic hampers, Prosecco, Pimm's in plastic glasses.

No one notices us. The frightened mother with straight, brown hair, wearing her husband's choice of clothes. The little boy in tears.

That's the thing about the city. Nobody notices.

There's a giant privet hedge by the railings, big enough to hide in.

Tom cries harder. I cuddle him in my arms. 'Don't make a sound,' I whisper, heart racing. 'Don't make a sound.'

Tom nods rapidly.

We both clutch each other, terrified. I shiver, even though it's a warm summer's day.

Tom gives a choked sob. 'Will he find us, Mum?'

'Shush,' I say, crouching in my flat leather sandals, summer dress flowing over my knees. 'Please, Tom. We have to be quiet.'

'I'm scared.' Tom clasps my bare arm.

'I know, sweetheart,' I whisper, holding his head against my shoulder. 'We're going away. Far away from him.'

'What if he gets me at school?'

'We'll find a new school. One he doesn't know about. Okay?'

Tom's chest is against mine, his breathing fast.

He understands that we can't *be found.*

Olly is capable of anything.

Lizzie

Monday. School starts. It won't be like the last place, Tom knows that. It will be hard, being the new kid.

'Come on, Tommo,' I call up the stairs. 'Let's go go go. We don't want to be late on our first day.'

I pack Tom's school bag, then give my hair a few quick brushes, checking my reflection in the hallway mirror.

A pale, worried face stares back at me. Pointy little features, a heart-shaped chin, brown hair, long and ruler-straight.

The invisible woman.

Olly's broken ex-wife.

I want to change that. I want to be someone different here.

No one needs to know how things were before.

Tom clatters down the polished, wooden staircase in his new Steelfield school uniform. I throw my arms around him.

'A hug to make you grow big and strong,' I say. 'You get taller with every cuddle. Did you know that?'

'I know, Mum. You tell me every morning.'

I hand him his blue wool coat. I've always liked this colour against Tom's bright blond hair and pale skin. The coat is from last winter, but he still hasn't grown out of it. Tom is small for his age; at nearly nine he looks more like seven.

We head out and onto the muddy track, stopping at a blackberry bush to pick berries.

Tom counts as he eats and sings.

'One, two, three, four, five – to stay alive.'

'It's going to be exciting,' I coax as Tom and I pass the school playing field. 'Look at all that grass. You didn't have that in London. And they've got a little woodland bit.' I point to the trees edging the field. 'And full-sized goalposts.'

'What if Dad finds us?' Tom watches the stony ground.

'He won't. Don't worry. We're safe here.'

'I like our new house,' says Tom. 'It's a family house. Like in *Peter Pan*.'

We walk on in silence and birds skitter across the path.

Tom says, 'Hello, birds. Do you live here? Oh – did you hurt your leg, little birdy? I hope you feel better soon.'

They really are beautiful school grounds – huge and tree-lined, with bright green grass. Up ahead there is a silver, glimmering spider's web tangled through the fence wire: an old bike chain bent around to repair a hole.

I wonder, briefly, why there is a hole in the fence. I'm sure there's some logical explanation. This is an excellent school … But I've never seen a fence this tall around a school. It's like a zoo enclosure.

I feel uneasy, thinking of children caged like animals.

A cage is safe. Think of it that way.

The school building sits at the front of the field, a large Victorian structure with a tarmac playground. There are no lively murals, like at Tom's last school. Just spikey grey railings and towering, arched gates.

A shiny sign says:

STEELFIELD SCHOOL: AN OUTSTANDING EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENT

HEADMASTER: ALAN COCKRUN, BA HONS SEMPER FORTIS – ALWAYS STRONG

The downstairs windows have bars on them, which feel a little sinister and an odd paradox to the holes in the fence. And one window – a small one by the main door – has blacked-out glass, a sleeping eye twinkling in the sun.

The playground is a spotless black lake. No scooter marks or trodden-in chewing gum. I've never seen a school so clean.

We approach the main road, joining a swarm of kids battling for pavement position.

Most of the kids are orderly and well-behaved. No chatting or playing. However, three boys stand out with their neon, scruffy shoes, angry faces and thick, shaggy black hair.

Brothers, I decide.

They are pushing and shoving each other, fighting over a football. The tallest of the boys notices Tom and me coming up the lane. 'Who are *you*?' He bounces his football hard on the concrete, glaring.

I put a hand on Tom's shoulder. 'Come on, Tommo. Nearly there.'

The shortest of the three boys shouts, 'Oo, oo. London *town-ies*'.

I call after them, 'Hey. Hey! *Excuse* me—'

But they're running now, laughing and careering through the school gates.

How do they know we're from London?

'It's okay, Mum,' says Tom.

My hand tenses on his shoulder. 'I should say something.'

'They don't know me yet,' Tom whispers. 'That's all. When they get to know me, it'll be okay.'

My wise little eight-year-old. Tom has always been that way. Very in tune with people. But I am worried about bullying. Vulnerable children are easy targets. Social services told me that.

It will be hard for him …

As the three black-haired brothers head into the school yard, a remarkable change takes place. They stop jostling and pushing each other and walk sensibly, arms by their sides, mouths closed in angry lines.

Tom and I walk alongside the railings, approaching the open gates.

It's funny – I'd expected this new academy school to be shiny and modern. Not to have grey brick walls, a bell tower, slate turrets and bars.

I sweep away thoughts of prisons and haunted houses and tell Tom, 'Well, this is exciting. Look – there's hopscotch.'

Tom doesn't reply, his eyes wide at the shadowy brickwork.

'This is my *school*?' he asks, bewildered. 'It looks like an old castle.'

'Well, castles are fun. Maybe you can play knights or something. I know it's different from the last place.'

'Castles have ghosts,' Tom whispers.

'Oh, no they don't. Anyway, big nearly-nine-year-old ghost-busters aren't afraid of ghosts.'

We move towards the school gates, which are huge with spikes along the top, and I put on an even brighter voice. 'You're going to do great today, Tom. I love you so much. Stay cool, okay? High five?'

Tom gives me a weak high five.

'Will *you* be okay, Mum?' he asks.

My eyes well up. 'Of course. I'll be fine. It's not your job to worry about me. It's mine to worry about you.'

Tom turns towards the soulless tarmac and asks, 'Aren't you coming in with me?'

'Parents aren't allowed into the playground here,' I say. 'Someone from the office phoned to tell me. Something to do with safety.'

Two of the black-haired boys are fighting in a secluded corner near a netball post, a pile of tussling limbs.

'Those Neilson boys,' I hear a voice mutter beside me – a mother dropping off her daughter. 'Can't go five minutes without killing each other.'

The headmaster appears in the entranceway then – an immaculately presented man wearing a pinstripe suit and royal-blue tie. His hair is brown, neatly cut and combed, and he is clean-shaven with a boyish face that has a slightly rubbery, clown-like quality.

Hands in pockets, he surveys the playground. He is smiling, lips oddly red and jester-shaped, but his blue eyes remain cold and hard.

The chattering parents spot him and fall silent.

The headmaster approaches the corner where the boys are fighting and stops to watch, still smiling his cold smile.

After a moment, the boys sense the headmaster and quickly untangle themselves, standing straight, expressions fearful.

It's a little creepy how all this is done in near silence, but I suppose at least the headmaster can keep order. Tom's last school was chaos. Too many pupils and no control.

I kneel down to Tom and whisper, 'Have a good day at school. I love you so much. Don't think about Dad.' I stroke Tom's chin-length blond hair, left loose around his ears today. More conventional, I thought. Less like his father. 'How are you feeling?'

'I'm scared, Mum,' says Tom. 'I don't want to leave you alone all day. What if Dad—'

I cut Tom off with a shake of my head and give him a thumbs-up. 'It's fine. We're safe now, okay? He has no idea where we are.' Then I hug him, burying my face in his fine hair.

'I love you, Mum,' says Tom.

'I love you too.' I step back, smiling encouragingly. 'Go on then. You'll be a big kid – going into class all by yourself. They'll call you Tom Kinnock in the register. Social services gave them your old name. But remember you're Riley now. Tom Riley.'

Tom wanders into the playground, a tiny figure drowned by a huge Transformers bag. He really is small for nearly nine. And thin too, with bony arms and legs.

Someone kicks a ball towards him, and Tom reacts with his feet – probably without thinking.

A minute later, he's kicking a football with a group of lads, including two of the black-haired boys who were fighting before. The ball is kicked viciously by those boys, booted at children's faces.

I'm anxious. Those kids look like trouble.

As I'm watching, the headmaster crosses the playground. Mr Cockrun. Yes. That's his name. He'd never get away with that at a secondary school. His smile fades as he approaches the gate.

'Hello there,' he says. 'You must be Mrs Kinnock.'

The way he says our old surname … I don't feel especially welcomed.

'Riley now,' I say. 'Miss Riley. Our social worker—'

'Best not to hang around once they've gone inside,' says Mr Cockrun, giving me a full politician's smile and flashing straight, white teeth. 'It can be unsettling, especially for the younger ones. And it's also a safeguarding issue.' He pulls a large bunch of keys from his pocket. 'They're always fine when the parents are gone.'

Mr Cockrun tugs at the stiff gate. It makes a horrible screech as metal drags along a tarmac trench, orange with rust. Then he takes the bulky chain that hangs from it and wraps it around three times before securing it with a gorilla padlock. He tests the arrangement, pulling at the chain.

'Safe as houses,' he tells me through the gates.

'Why the padlock?' I ask, seeing Tom small and trapped on the other side of the railings.

Mr Cockrun's cheerful expression falters. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Why have you padlocked the gate?' I don't mean to raise my voice. Other parents are looking. But it feels sinister.

'For safeguarding. Fail to safeguard the children and we fail everything.'

'Yes, but—'

'Mrs Kinnock, this is an outstanding school. We know what we're doing.'

I pull my coat around myself, holding back a shiver. It's a very ordinary wool coat, bought while I was with Olly.

I was a shadow then, of course. Hiding behind my husband.

I'm hoping that will change here.

'It feels like I'm leaving Tom in prison,' I say, trying for a little laugh.

Mr Cockrun meets my eye, his hard, black pupils unwavering. 'There is a *very* long waiting list for this school, Mrs Kinnock. Thanks to social services, your son jumped right to the top. I'd have thought you'd be the last parent to criticise.'

'I didn't mean to—'

'We usually pick and choose who we let in.' The politician's smile returns. 'Let's make sure we're on the same page, Mrs Kinnock. Not start off on the wrong foot.'

He strolls back to the school building, and I'm left watching and wondering.

When I get back to our new Victorian house with its large, wraparound garden and elegant porch pillars, I sit on the front wall, put my head in my hands and cry.

I try not to make a sound, but sobs escape through my fingers.

Things will get better.

Of course I'm going to feel emotional on his first day.

Lizzie

I've been invited to a party, but I'm on the outside, not knowing what to do with myself. I'm not a skier or snowboarder, so I'm … nowhere. Standing on the balcony, looking at the mountains, I feel very alone.

Morzine is one of the world's best ski resorts. I've heard it described as 'electric' after dark. Tomorrow, the slopes will be tingling with pink, white and yellow snowsuits. But tonight, they're white and calm.

It sounded so adventurous, being a chalet girl out here. But the truth is, I'm running away. Things with Mum are unbearable again. I thought they'd be better after university, but if anything they're worse. Her need to tear me down is stronger than ever.

It's not about blame.

All I know is that I needed to get away, for my own sanity.

Behind me, Olympic hopefuls talk and laugh in their day clothes, drinking sparkling water or, if they're real rebels, small bottles of beer.

Most of them aren't interested in a twenty-something chalet girl with straight, brown hair and floral-patterned Doc Marten boots.

But … someone has come to stand beside me. He's a tall, blond man wearing ripped jeans and a loose, light pink T-shirt. His light tan and white panda eyes tell me he's a skier or snowboarder – probably a serious one, if the other guests at this party are anything to go by.

'It's Lizzie,' the man asks. 'Isn't it?'

'How do you know my name?'

'You're still wearing your name badge.'

I glance down and see my health and safety training sticker: Lizzie Riley.

'You don't remember me?' the man challenges, raising a thick, blond eyebrow.

'I'm sorry, I don't—'

'Olly.' He holds out a large hand for me to shake. 'I'm staying in the chalet next to you. With the Olympic rabble over there.' He points to a rowdy group of young men holding beers. 'You're a chalet girl, right?' He grins. 'Nice work if you can get it.'

'Actually, it can be exhausting,' I say.

Olly laughs. 'Are you thinking about jumping off the mountain then?'

My smile disappears. 'No. Why would you ask that?'

'Just joking.'

We stare out at the peaks for a minute.

A live band strikes up behind us, playing a Beatles cover – 'Love Me Do'.

Olly's shoulders move to the music.

Mine do too.

'You like the Beatles?' Olly asks.

'Yes.' I look at him shyly, hoping this is the right answer.

'Me too! I have a massive collection of Sixties vinyl.'

'You collect vinyl?' I ask.

'No, well … not really. Most of my records are my mum's. She listens to CDs now. It feels like time-travelling when I play vinyl, you know? Like I'm part of the swinging Sixties.'

'Olly!' A tall, red-cheeked man swaggers over, holding out a beer bottle. 'Olly Kinnock. This is supposed to be a lads' night out and here you are chatting up girls again.'

Olly smiles at me, staring with blue, blue eyes. 'Not girls. A girl. A very interesting girl.'

I feel myself blushing.

'Fair enough,' announces the red-cheeked man, thrusting the beer into Olly's hand. 'We'll see you in the morning then.' He returns to his group of friends, who break into guffaws of laughter.

'Sorry about them,' says Olly, putting his elbow on the balcony and, in the process, leaning nearer to me. 'They can be morons.'

'You can go back to them if you like.'

'Actually, I've always preferred female company,' says Olly. 'Girls smell better. But you must have a boyfriend, surely? A pretty girl like you. So tell me to get lost if you want.'

I blush again and stammer, 'Um … no, I don't have a boyfriend.'

'Have a drink with me then.'

Surely he's just teasing me? Handsome snowboarders don't chat up chalet girls. And he really is handsome, with his lean, toned arms and perfect white teeth.

His eyes are serious, holding my gaze.

Maybe he isn't joking.

'Okay,' I hear myself say. 'Why not?'

'It's a date.' Olly takes my hand like he's won a prize.

I laugh, sucking in my breath as his strong fingers close around mine.

'So what are you drinking?' Olly asks.

'Um … white wine?'

'Chardonnay?'

'Sure. Yes please.'

He winks at me. 'I love Chardonnay. Best wine ever. Just don't tell the lads. It's a bit girly. I've been noticing you for weeks, Lizzie Riley. I think we should spend lots and lots of time together. And then get married.'

I can barely believe this is happening. A nobody chalet girl like me, being chatted up by this confident, tanned athlete. I guess I should enjoy it while it lasts. When he works out what a nothing I am, he'll run a mile.

I laugh. 'Are you always so forward with your wedding plans?'

'Only with my future wife.'

'You don't even know me.'

'Yes, but I've been watching you and your purple puffer jacket for ages, wondering how you don't freeze to death in those DM boots.'

'Where have you noticed me?'

'Drinking black coffee in the café, buying a ginger cookie and giving crumbs to the birds on your way out. Always carrying a pile of books under your arm. Are you a student?'

'I'm training to be a nurse.'

'A nurse? Well, Lizzie Nightingale, you'll have to put your career aside when you have my five children.'

'Five children?'

'At least five. And I hope they all look just like you.'

Our eyes meet, and in that second I feel totally, utterly alive.

I've never been noticed like this.

It's electrifying.

And I feel myself hoping, like I've never hoped before, that this man feels the same sparks in his chest as I do.

Kate

8 a.m.

I'm eating Kellogg's All-Bran at my desk, silently chanting my morning mantra: *Be grateful, Kate. Be grateful. This is the job you wanted.*

Apparently, social workers suffer more nervous breakdowns than any other profession.

I already have stress-related eczema, insomnia and an unhealthy relationship with the office vending machine – specifically the coils holding the KitKats and Mars bars.

Last night I got home at 9 p.m., and this morning I was called in at 7.30 a.m. I have a huge caseload and I'm firefighting. There isn't time to help anyone. Just prevent disaster.

Be grateful, Kate.

My computer screen displays my caseload: thirty children.

This morning, I've had to add one more. A transfer case from Hammersmith and Fulham: Tom Kinnock.

I click update and watch my screen change: thirty-one children.

Then I put my head in my hands, already exhausted by what I won't manage to do today.

Be grateful, Kate. You have a proper grown-up job. You're one of the lucky ones.

My husband Col is a qualified occupational therapist, but he's working at the Odeon cinema. It could be worse. At least he gets free popcorn.

'Well, you're bright and shiny, aren't you?' Tessa Warwick, my manager, strides into the office, clicking on her Nespresso machine – a personal cappuccino maker she won't let anyone else use.

I jolt upright and start tapping keys.

'And what's that, a new hairdo?' Tessa is a big, shouty lady with high blood pressure and red cheeks. Her brown hair is wiry and cut into a slightly wonky bob. She wears a lot of polyester.

'I've just tied it back, that's all,' I say, pulling my curly black hair tighter in its hairband. 'I'm not really a new hairdo sort of person.'

I've had the same hair since I was eight years old – long and curly, sometimes up, sometimes down. No layers. Just long.

'I might have known. Yes, you're very, very sensible, aren't you?'

This is a dig at me, but I don't mind because Tessa is absolutely right. I wear plain, functional trouser suits and no makeup. My glasses are from the twenty-pound range at Specsavers. I've never signed up for monthly contact lenses – I'd rather put money in my savings account.

'I'm glad you're in early anyway,' Tessa continues. 'There is a *lot* to do this week.'

'I know,' I say. 'Leanne Neilson is in hospital again. Gary and I were up until nine on Friday trying to get her boys into bed. I just need time to get going.'

Gary is a family support worker and absolutely should have finished at 5 p.m. So should I, actually. But two out-of-hours team members were off sick and we were swamped.

Tessa inserts a cappuccino tablet into her Nespresso machine. 'So you were babysitting the three Neilson scallywags?' She gives a snort of laughter. 'They're like child versions of the Gallagher brothers, those boys. All that black hair, fighting all the time. You never know – maybe they'll be famous musicians. But *you* shouldn't have been putting them to bed. You should be in the pub of an evening, like a normal twenty-something.'

It's a bone of contention between us – the fact I rarely drink alcohol. Also, that I married at twenty years old and go to church twice a week.

'Jesus drank, didn't he?' Tessa continues. 'I thought it would be okay for you lot.'

'Us lot?'

'You young churchy types. You'll be drinking soon,' Tessa predicts. 'Just you wait. You're new to this, but everyone ends up on the lunchtime wine eventually. Now listen – have you done the home visit for that transfer case yet? From Hammersmith and Fulham, Tom Kinnock? The one with the angry dad.'

'No. I sent a letter on Friday. She'll get it today.'

'Get on to that one as soon as you can, Kate. The transfer was weeks late. There'll already be some catching up to do. Have they got him a school place?'

'Yes. At Steelfield School.'

'I bet the headmaster is furious,' laughs Tessa. '"More social services children thrust upon us … we already have the Neilson boys to deal with."'

'I'm not sure a high-achieving school is the right environment for Tom Kinnock,' I say. 'Very strict and results obsessed. After what this boy has been through, maybe he needs somewhere more nurturing.'

'Don't worry about the school,' says Tessa. 'Steelfield is a godsend. They keep the kids in line. No chair throwing or teacher nervous breakdowns. Just worry about getting that case shut down ASAP. The father is a risk factor, but all the dirty work is done.'

'I'm pretty overwhelmed here, Tessa.'

'Welcome to social work.' Tessa gives her Nespresso machine a brief thump with a closed fist.

Lizzie

A brown envelope, addressed formally to Elizabeth Kinnock. The mottled paper has a muddy shoeprint from where I stepped on it.

I study the postmark. It's from the county council, i.e. social services. I know these sorts of letters from when we lived with Olly. *We'd like to meet to discuss your son …*

I should have known social services would want to meet us. Check we're settling into our new life. But we don't need any of that official stuff now. Olly is gone.

My fingers want to scrunch the brown paper into a tight ball, then push the letter deep down into the paper recycling, under the organic ready-meal sleeves and junk mail. Stuff away bad memories of an old life, now gone.

But instead I shelve the letter by the bread bin, resolving to open it after a cup of tea. There are other letters to read first.

I sit on the Chesterfield sofa-arm and slide my fingers under paper folds, tearing and pulling free replies to my many job applications. They're all rejections – I'd guessed as much, given the timing of the letters. If you get the job, they mail you straight away.

I look around the growing chaos that is our new house. There are toys everywhere, children's books, a blanket and pillow for when Tom dozes on the sofa. Really, it's hard enough keeping on top of all this, let alone finding a job too.

The house was beautiful when we moved in over the summer – varnished floorboards, cosy living room with a real fireplace, huge, light kitchen and roaming garden full of fruit trees.

But all too quickly it got messy, like my life.

I have that feeling again.

The 'I can't manage alone' feeling.

I squash it down.

I am strong. Capable. Tom and I *can* have a life without Olly. More importantly, we *must* have a life without him.

There's no way back.

A memory unzips itself – me, crying and shaking, cowering in a bathtub as Olly's knuckles pound on the door. Sharp and brutal.

Tears come. It *will* be different here.

I head up to the bathroom with its tasteful butler sink and free-standing Victorian bathtub on little wrought-iron legs. From the porcelain toothbrush holder I take hairdressing scissors – the ones I use to trim Tom's fine, blond hair.

I pick up a long strand of my mousy old life and cut. Then I take another, and another. Turning to the side, I strip strands from my crown, shearing randomly.

Before I know it, half my hair lies in the bathroom sink.

Now I have something approaching a pixie cut – short hair, clipped close to my head. I do a little shaping around the ears and find myself surprised and pleased with the result.

Maybe I should be a hairdresser instead of a nurse, I think.

I fought so hard to finish my nurse's training, but never did. Olly was jealous from the start. He hated me having any sort of identity.

Turning my head again in the mirror, I see myself smile. I really do like what I see. My hair is much more interesting than before, that mousy woman with non-descript brown hair.

I'm somebody who stands out.

Gets things done.

No more living in the shadows.

It won't be how things were with Olly, when I was meek little Lizzie, shrinking at his temper.

Things will be different.

As I start tidying the house, my phone rings its generic tone. I should change that too. Get a ring tone that represents who I am. It's time to find myself. Be someone. Not invisible, part of someone else.

My mother's name glows on the phone screen.

Ruth Riley.

Such a formal way to store a mother's number. I'm sure most people use 'Mum' or 'Mummy' or something.

I grab the phone. 'Hi, Mum.'

There's a pause, and a rickety intake of breath. 'Did you get Tom to school on time?'

'Of course.'

'Because it's important, Elizabeth. On his first day. To make a good impression.'

'I don't care what other people think,' I say. 'I care about Tom.'

'Well, you should care, Elizabeth. You've moved to a nice area. The families around there will have their eyes on you. It's not like that pokey little apartment you had in London.'

'It was a penthouse apartment and no smaller than the house we had growing up,' I point out. 'We lived in a two-bed terrace with Dad. Remember?'

'Oh, what nonsense, Elizabeth. We had a conservatory.'

Actually, it was a corrugated plastic lean-to. But my mother has never let the truth get in the way of a good story.

'I was planning to visit you again this weekend,' says Mum. 'To help out.'

I want to laugh. Mum does the opposite of help out. She demands that a meal is cooked, then criticises my organisational skills.

'You don't have to,' I say.

'I *want* to.'

'Why this sudden interest in us, Mum? You never visited when we lived with Olly.'

'Don't be silly, Elizabeth,' Mum snaps. 'You're a single parent now. You need my help.' A pause. 'I read in the *Sunday Times* that Steelfield School is one of the top fifty state schools.'

'Is it?'

'Yes. Make sure you dress smartly for pick-ups and drop-offs. I paid a personal visit to the headmaster this morning. To impress upon him what a good family we are.'

I laugh. 'You didn't think to ask me first?'

My mother ignores this comment. 'The headmaster was charming. Very presentable too. He tells me Tom is lucky to have a place there. Make sure you put a good face on.'

'Social services got us that place. I'd feel luckier not to have a social worker.'

'Elizabeth.' Mum's voice is tight. She hates it when I mention social workers. 'Don't be ungrateful.'

'You really shouldn't have visited the school, Mum,' I say. 'Teachers are busy enough.'

'Nonsense,' says Mum. 'You need to make a good impression and for that you need my help. You never could do that on your own.'

'I appreciate you trying to help. I really do. But can you *ask* in future? Before you do things like visiting Tom's school? It feels a bit … I don't know, intrusive.'

I feel Mum's annoyance in the silence that follows. And I become that needy little girl again, doing anything to win back her favour.

'Sorry,' I say. 'Forget I said that. It's wonderful you visited Tom's headmaster. Look, come and visit whenever you like.'

When I hang up, I think about Olly.

You miss him sometimes. Admit it.

The voice comes out of nowhere and I try to squash it down.

Of course there were good times. But if I want to remember the good times, I have to remember the bad ones.

Do you remember him screaming at you? Calling you every name under the sun? And worse, so much worse … Saying things too shameful to think about.

How I could fall in love with someone who wanted to tear me apart?

Lizzie

'So why the blindfold?' I ask, as Olly leads me over crunching snow.

'Because you like surprises.'

Did I say that?

This has all been such a whirlwind. I'm insecure, certain our romance will be over when Olly finds out he's too good for me.

'This way,' says Olly, and I hear a chalet door creak. 'Welcome home.'

'Home?'

'My chalet.' Olly unties my blindfold. 'Where you'll be sleeping for the rest of the ski season.'

I laugh. 'You'll be lucky.'

As my eyes adjust to the light, I see a cosy sofa area and Chardonnay, a bowl of Pringles and glittering tealights laid on a chunky, wooden dining table.

'I'm calling this evening "Lizzie's favourites",' says Olly, plugging his phone into a speaker. 'Your favourite food. Favourite music. Favourite everything. I've got sea bass.' He goes to the fridge and slaps a wax-paper packet of fish on the kitchen counter. 'New potatoes in the oven. Lots of tomato ketchup in the fridge, because we're both philistines.' He winks. 'Sour-cream Pringles to start. And Joni Mitchell on the stereo. Oh – and black forest gateaux for dessert. The one you like from the café.'

I smile, shaking my head in disbelief. 'You did all this for me?'

'Just for you. Right this way, madam.' He hesitates when he sees my face. 'Hey. Lizzie? Are you okay?'

'Yes. Really, I'm fine.'

'Lizzie.' Olly pulls me close. 'What's the matter? Did I do something wrong?'

I shake my head against his chest, tears pressing into his shirt. 'No. Not at all. The opposite.'

'The opposite?'

'All this for me. I don't deserve it.'

Olly laughs then, his big, cheery, confident laugh. 'You deserve this and much, much more.' He kisses my head and hugs me for a long time. 'Okay?'

I nod. 'Okay.'

'Let the evening commence!' He leads me to the table, snatching up a purple napkin. 'Your favourite colour.' He grins, opening the napkin with a flourish.

Purple isn't really my favourite colour. It's just the colour of the coat I wear. But I don't tell Olly that.

We eat Pringles, sea bass and new potatoes, drink Chardonnay and listen to Joni Mitchell. Then Olly lights a fire.

'I borrowed a Monopoly board,' says Olly, leading me to the sofa area. 'Your favourite game, right? And mine too, actually. Come on. You can thrash me.'

'Love to,' I say.

'Of course, we could play strip poker instead,' says Olly, flashing his lovely white teeth.

I'm hit by an uneasy feeling that this evening might be too traditional for Olly. The wine, the fire, the board game. What if he thinks I'm boring?

'I have an idea,' I say. 'How about strip Monopoly?'

'Strip Monopoly?' says Olly. 'You're on!'

We make up a few rules, deciding to lose an item of clothing every time we land on the other person's property. Then we start playing.

It doesn't take long before I'm down to my underwear.

'Are you cheating?' I accuse, taking off my bra.

Olly watches me, mesmerised. Then he says, 'You're beautiful, do you know that? Hurry up and roll again.'

'It's your turn,' I protest.

Olly struggles out of his clothes, revealing a beautiful toned body and crazy orange tan lines at his wrists and collarbone. Then he stands to remove his underwear.

'Turn taken,' he announces, standing naked. 'Now roll again.'

'That's definitely cheating,' I laugh, shy now. 'You can't take all your clothes off at once.'

'How dare you!' Olly protests. 'I am a serious rules-body. Well, if you think the game has been compromised, we'll just have to abandon it.'

He lifts me into his arms.

'But you were winning,' I laugh, as Olly carries me outside to the hot tub.

'I declare it a draw.'

Olly lowers me carefully into the bubbling water. Then he climbs into the tub himself and slides me onto his lap, arranging my legs so I'm kneeling around his hips.

'I need to learn more of your favourites,' he says, kissing me fiercely, hand moving up and down between my thighs.

Snow falls on the warm water and our bare shoulders.

I moan, but suddenly Olly pulls back.

'Wait.' He's breathless. 'I don't want to move too fast.'

'It's fine.'

'You're sure? Listen, really I can wait. I don't want this to be some quick thing. You're more than that to me.'

I must look upset, because Olly says: 'Hey. It's okay. Really. I'll get you a towel and you can have my bed, okay? I'll take the sofa.'

'No,' I insist, gripping his arms. 'I want this. Honestly, I want this. It's just … I've never felt this way either. I've never been … special.'

'You are special,' says Olly. 'The most special girl I've ever met.'

He kisses me again and I'm lost.

We make love in the hot tub and then again on Olly's bed. He's gentle at times, firm at others. He's considerate, but sometimes teeters on the brink of losing control.

In the morning, Olly makes me waffles covered in syrup and a sugary hot chocolate. Then we have sex again before I sneak back to my chalet to prepare breakfast for my host family.

While I'm whisking up scrambled eggs, my phone bleeps. It's a message from Olly: I miss you already.

I feel soft warmth in my chest, but also anxiety.

This is amazing. The most amazing thing that's ever happened to me. But how can something like this last? Half the things Olly thinks we both 'love', I only like a little bit. Like sea bass, tomato ketchup and syrup-covered waffles with sweet hot chocolate. I've exaggerated so he'll think we have things in common, scared that boring little me isn't good enough.

Oh, what does it matter?

I'm probably just a sexual conquest and Olly will forget all about me in a few days.

This can't last.

It's too good to be true.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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