

Prologue

Present Day

I RECOGNISED HIM BEFORE HE SAW ME. It wasn't his face at first. It was the way he was standing—too still, like he had nowhere else to be. He was thinner than I remembered, his hair cropped close to his skull, his face covered in lines and harder somehow. As though prison had stripped away whatever softness he'd once had.

He stood outside the off-licence, one hand shoved deep in his pocket, the other lazily trying to obscure the spliff that he was so obviously smoking. He was watching people come and go. Not browsing. Just watching.

I slowed, then stopped walking altogether.

Oh, crap.

I couldn't believe this day had finally come.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

Suddenly, I felt very exposed. As though I were the only one on the busy street, even though people were still passing by, casually getting on with their days. A car door slammed nearby and scared the living daylights out of me.

He looked up.

For a moment, his face didn't register anything at all. But then, recognition settled in, unmistakably.

'Hello Trouble,' he said.

Hearing my old nickname sent a familiar shiver through my body. Nobody called me Trouble anymore and hadn't done for years.

My chest tightened, and my breath caught before I could help it.

'Did you think I wouldn't remember you?' His voice was calm. Almost casual. Like this was a coincidence. Like we were two people who'd simply run into each other.

I didn't say anything.

He smiled then, just slightly, at some unspoken joke.

'It's funny,' he said. 'I've had a lot of time to think about you.'

My stomach jolted. I felt the implication in his words. He'd been rehearsing this moment for a long time.

He pushed himself away from the wall and took a step towards me.

I instinctively took a step back.

I didn't wait to see what he would do next. Instead, I turned and fled, my heart pounding harder than my feet were hitting the pavement. I didn't turn around or slow down. All I could think was that I'd waited too long. That I should never have stopped in the first place.

Some instincts are learned the hard way.

BELONGING

LIGHTNING

March 1998

WALKING INTO TOM'S LOUNGE, I prayed that the boy from last week would be there. My head was so high on life right then that I could have lived for a week on nothing but that feeling. As I passed the edge of the door and the room came into view, I could see him sitting on the sofa.

Nick.

My stomach flipped around like I was on a fairground ride. Our eyes locked, and for a moment, the rest of the world disappeared.

'Sarah!' He jumped to his feet with puppy-like enthusiasm, and before I'd had time to think, he'd wrapped me in an exaggerated hello, lifting me clean off the floor.

Must. Be. Cool, I reminded myself, as I so often did back then, always so eager to be liked

'Nick!' I laughed, trying to sound as confident as my feet dangled briefly before he set me back down.

Everything about him made the moment feel suddenly bigger than it should have been, and I didn't yet know what to do with feelings like that. People say that teenage feelings don't last. But standing there in that lounge, it felt like the most important thing in the world.

I'd met Nick and the rest of the boys at the cinema a week earlier. Emma McCarthy and Jennifer Wren, my two closest girlfriends, had introduced us. Emma was the one who knew everyone; Jennifer had arrived early to save us seats at the end of the back row. Emma and I were late, as usual, and crept in halfway through the first scene, scooting past the unseen boys in the dark.

No sooner had we sat down than drinks and popcorn arrived, passed down by the shadowy outlines of the boys. We shared our nachos and pick 'n' mix sweets before settling back to watch the film.

Now, call me a square, but when I watch a film, I actually watch it. I'd been brought up to be quiet and respectful in cinemas, so when loud laughter and rustling started behind us, irritation prickled. I leaned forward to see who it was and caught the outline of a boy sitting with a girl on either side of him.

He froze and stared straight back at me.

'Shhh!' I pressed my fingers to my lips.

He raised his hands apologetically, still staring, while the girls beside him dissolved into laughter. I sank back into my seat, annoyed.

Moments later, Emma handed me a soda. 'From Nick. He says sorry,' she whispered.

I took a sip from his straw, trying not to smile. *That's the first time a boy's ever sent me a drink*, I noted, astonished. I passed it back and met his gaze again, warmth blooming where irritation had been.

He can't be so bad.

The film itself wasn't great from a sixteen-year-old's perspective—all violence and very little heart—and by the end, we were fidgeting. When the lights came up, I slipped past the boys without looking at them. The boy from before was sitting alone now, the other girls gone, and I felt his head follow me as I walked past. It's not that I was rude or that I didn't want to say hi; it's just that I suddenly felt so awkward that I preferred to slip on by.

As we filed down the steps, I thought about how lucky I was to have found Emma and Jennifer. They'd been best friends since Year

Seven, both at the same Catholic school. I was the newcomer, the shy girl who'd joined Emma's youth theatre group at The Bull Theatre a year earlier, and somehow, against all odds, ended up belonging.

When I first started at the youth theatre, I'd been painfully shy, all nerves and self-consciousness. But my nerves had given way to a slightly mad sense of humour, and now I dreamed of being a Hollywood actress and sticking it to everyone at school who'd ever been horrible to me.

'I didn't really see the point in it,' Jennifer huffed, dissecting the film. 'So, she died—big surprise—and he survived. Why is it always the woman who dies or gets brutally murdered somehow?'

'And only after she's done drugs and had sex,' Emma added. 'I mean, isn't the message getting a bit old already? "Bad" girls are worth nothing in Hollywood. It's like—you have sex—and suddenly they kill you off. Or stop inviting you to parties, at least.'

'What do you mean they stop inviting you to parties?' I asked.

'Well, like, in *Friends*,' she explained, referring to the popular television sitcom. 'When Joey sleeps with someone, suddenly that woman never gets invited to another party again. The whole group just abandons her. It's mad.'

I listened, absorbing it all, filing it away carefully as fact. Glancing behind me at Jennifer, I noticed her lips had drawn thin, and her eyebrows had drawn together in a deep frown.

Uh oh. I racked my brain for something mollifying to say, but it was too late.

'I don't think that was the point I was making,' Jennifer cut in, her mouth tightening. 'I was talking about violence, not sex, *actually*.'

It had been like this for weeks, the pair of them squabbling whenever Emma mentioned sex. Ever since Emma had decided it was time to start dating and going to parties and hanging out with the mysterious boys, who were now coming down the stairs behind us. As a strict Catholic, Jennifer was far more reserved and emphatically disapproved of Emma's choices. Both girls identified as feminists and owned their choices, but seemed to increasingly wish that the other

would change tack and join them on their own path, by either loosening up massively or becoming far more restrained.

As for me, Miss Piggy in the middle, I was just relieved to be included at all. At school, I'd been the class loner not so long ago. Now, I was part of something, and I wasn't about to jeopardise it.

So, I did what I always did: smoothed things over.

Just as Emma was opening her mouth to retort, I scoffed and cut her off. 'Ha! The whole entertainment industry is run by *sexist old men*,' I shook my head vehemently and looked back up at Jennifer. 'They wouldn't know a new idea if it hit them squarely between the eyes,' I snorted.

'That's true!' laughed Emma, as she trotted down the stairs. 'They don't have a clue what it's like to be like us.'

Slowly, Jennifer smiled and put her arms around my shoulders as we filed out through the cinema doors. In the lobby, Emma herded us together. That was the first time I saw the boys properly. A tall boy with flame-red hair and a face full of acne smiled kindly and shook my hand, putting me instantly at ease.

'Hey Emma, who's your friend?' he asked kindly.

'Hey Tom, this is Sarah,' Emma made the introduction. 'Sarah, this is Tom...'

'Hiya, how's it going?' I smiled, closed-mouthed, trying not to show the enormous double gaps in my teeth.

'...and this is Johnnie,' Emma concluded, as a second boy, much shorter than Tom, with black, gelled curtains plastered to either side of his forehead, stepped forward and hustled him aside. I recognised him immediately.

'Hiya, Sarah...' he started.

'Hey! Don't you go to my school?' I asked, my four front teeth bursting through my closed smile like Bugs Bunny's. Johnnie glanced at them, briefly startled—something that happened a lot back then. I was still waiting for my braces, embarrassingly late, while most people in my year had already had theirs on and off again.

Johnnie seemed to catch himself and met my eyes. 'Hey. Yeah, I've seen you around,' he said, darting in for a quick, limp handshake before retreating again, hands shoved into his pockets as he scuffed his trainers along the floor. 'Funny — we've never actually spoken.'

I laughed, a little nervously.

'So, what shall we do now, then?' Emma cut in, flicking her poker-straight blonde hair. 'We can go back to mine if you want. My parents don't mind.'

'Yeah, that works for me,' Johnnie began, adding something about needing to be home for synagogue.

But I barely heard him.

I turned, and that was when I saw the boy who had sent me his soda properly for the first time. He was well over six feet tall with broad, solid shoulders, baggy jeans, and a loose shirt worn casually open at the neck. He had the kind of face you noticed instantly: piercing eyes, an easy confidence, and a jaw so square it looked like it belonged in a men's shaving advert.

Most striking of all was that he was looking right at me. And then he walked towards me.

Oh wow. He's gorgeous, I thought, and snapped my mouth shut at once to hide my gappy teeth.

Time seemed to stretch as he crossed the lobby, the rest of the group blurring into background noise. I stared for half a second too long, then panicked and looked away, fixing my attention on the cinema posters as though they were suddenly fascinating. Someone asked me a question — Johnnie, I think — but I couldn't have repeated it if my life depended on it.

'Hi,' he said, stopping right in front of me. 'I'm Nick.'

He smiled and held out his hand.

I blinked up at him, momentarily stunned, as though I'd been struck by lightning and was still humming from the impact.

This must be what love feels like, I thought dazedly.

When my brain finally kicked back in, I smiled—a huge, determinedly closed-mouthed smile—and slipped my hand into his.

‘Hiya! I’m Sarah,’ I breathed, shaking his hand wildly.

At sixteen, I had never properly talked to a boy I fancied before. The fact that he was standing here, talking to me like this, felt unreal.

‘I haven’t seen you around,’ Nick said easily. ‘How do you know Emma?’

‘Drama,’ I replied. ‘She introduced me to Jennifer a few months ago. And Tom and Johnnie... just now. Today.’

I could hear myself babbling and hated it.

Nick smiled as though he found it charming. Jennifer glanced over from the other side of the group and leaned in to whisper something in Emma’s ear.

‘That movie was crap,’ Nick said, shifting closer, close enough that I had to tilt my head back slightly to look at him. My heart began to race. I noticed the silver chain against his tanned skin, the way his dark-blond hair fell just messily enough to look deliberate.

‘Yeah,’ I said weakly. ‘Really... rubbish. Properly bad.’

Emma’s voice cut through the moment. ‘If we’re going back to mine, we have to run—the bus is here in five minutes!’

There was a flurry of agreement, and Jennifer grabbed my arm, tugging me forward so the three of us walked ahead of the boys. I felt absurdly relieved—and instantly bereft.

I was acutely aware of Nick walking just behind me, or at least I hoped he was.

Don’t trip. Don’t trip. Don’t trip.

We hurried along in our tight jeans, tight tops, and towering platform heels, the unofficial uniform of teenage North London, and although my feet burned with pain, I felt as though I were floating.

The spell broke when Nick reluctantly peeled away to catch his bus home. His parents, apparently, didn’t allow him to stay out after dark, a fact that only made him more intriguing. He glanced

back and waved as he climbed the stairs to the top deck. We waved back.

One moment, I was blissed out beyond reason. The next, already hollowed out by his absence. *Will I ever see you again?* I wondered forlornly.

The rest of the boys came with us back to Emma's house, where her parents were waiting, and we all went upstairs to look at her treasured graffiti wall. It was the absolute coolest thing I had ever seen, and I admired it profoundly.

One side of her bedroom was dedicated entirely to signatures and tags from friends and family who had stopped by and left some form of wisdom or nonsense behind.

'Live every day as though it's your last, love deeply, and laugh wildly, Gina XXX,' read one.

'F U N E M? S, V F M. F U N E X? S, V F X. I'LL F X N M,' wrote another great wit.

'Love ya, babe,' wrote Stephanie B., straightforward and to the point.

Sadly, I imagined my mum's reaction if I wanted to do the same. As a highly effective schoolteacher, she'd developed an iron grip over her children, and things like graffiti walls were definite no-nos.

A few hours later, I was home, and all I could think about was Nick. I picked up the phone and called Emma. I imagined telling her how I felt and how surprised she'd be, but shockingly, she already knew.

'Have you put your eyes back in your sockets yet, hon?' she teased, before adding that there was a chance he felt the same. 'I'm not saying he doesn't like you, because he might. But maybe he's just good for a snog, rather than boyfriend material.'

Disappointment gnawed at my stomach, but I was far too curious to let it go. 'Why's that, Em?' I asked.

'Those two girls he was with? He'd literally just met them in the car park before the film. He is a genuinely nice guy and everything, but he's always up to something.'

‘Oh really?’ I felt myself being pulled further into Nick’s orbit. ‘Like what?’

‘Well, once he got expelled from a boarding school after he was caught playing drinking games in the girls’ dorm,’ Emma explained. ‘He climbed across the roof, his sister let him in through a window, and they all got drunk on vodka and Red Bull she’d asked him to bring. Then he went to Tom’s school for a while—until he was caught smoking weed out the back and tried to buy more from a sixth former who reported him.’

I was surprised. I’d never met anyone who smoked weed before. ‘Is that why he had to go home early today?’ I asked, suddenly worried for my new friend.

‘Yeah. He’s still in the doghouse about it. But he’s trying really hard now. His mum’s obsessed with him going to medical school and becoming a doctor. She’s constantly riding him to keep him in line. It’s savage.’

‘Does he even want to be a doctor?’ I asked.

‘I don’t think so,’ Emma said. ‘Honestly, I haven’t got a clue what Nick actually wants to do. I don’t think he does either.’

I came off the phone feeling sad for Nick, and intrigued, as I’d never been before.

Before I knew it, three days had passed. He left my mind for all of ten seconds when I crossed the road and almost walked straight into moving traffic. In that brief moment, my short life flashed before my eyes, and I felt strangely happy and peaceful.

Other than that, Nick was always there—always with me—like a longing that couldn’t be satisfied, and an indescribable high I’d never felt before.

It must be a crush, I kept telling myself. I’ll get over it soon. That’s what they say. A teenage crush will pass.

At home, Mum was always hammering on at me for something. The daughter she seemed to hate, who hadn’t turned out as she expected. I wondered exactly how she had wanted me to be. Clearly, school grades were important to her, but I always got straight As,

although I never did my homework. Perhaps it was that that pissed her off. But really, the depths of her bitterness seemed to stem from my inability to tidy or clean my room properly.

She seemed to revel in telling me how stupid I was when 'doing exactly as I'm told,' joining in with the family chores. 'You take everything *off* the table *before* you dust it,' she scolded and mocked as she re-dusted the immaculate glass coffee table. It seemed to me that I wasn't the one being stupid in that situation. But I no longer cared; I had my medicine.

I thought of Nick while she talked. I thought of him walking home from school, in the shower, in bed. I replayed the way he'd crossed the cinema lobby, that loose, confident sway, the casual way his lips had formed the words, *that movie was crap*.

In my head, the scene kept going. Only this time, he said, *I want you, Sarah. You look so beautiful. I don't care about your teeth. Kiss me!*

And I replied smoothly, *You're not too bad yourself, Nick*.

Reluctantly, I dragged myself out of my daydream and sat cross-legged on my bedroom floor with my revision notes. The school year had reached the point where studying was no longer optional. GCSEs loomed, mock exams were on the horizon, and I was already behind.

I stared at the page, but nothing went in.

How are you meant to concentrate when you're in love? I thought miserably. *Not love*, another part of me snapped back. *A crush. On a boy you've met once. Who probably doesn't even remember you exist.*

As if on cue, my little sister Bethany came bounding up the stairs carrying a plastic bag. At just eight, she always wanted to be a part of what I was doing, and I wasn't always kind about it. But right then, I was grateful for the interruption.

'What's up Beth-Peth?' I asked.

'Oh, nothing,' she sighed dramatically. 'Stacey Bunn said that my bag was very ugly at school today, so I thought I'd try and make it nicer.'

'She said your bag was ugly?' I asked, immediately protective. Stacey Bunn was the undisputed leader of Bethany's friendship group. 'That's not very nice. Did you tell the teacher?'

'No. But Mum said we could decorate it,' she said, peering into the bag.

'Can I help?' I asked, already eyeing the glitter glue pens and forgetting all about revision.

'Yes!'

We disappeared into her room and set about transforming the bag with glitter, stickers, and plastic flowers, giving it what Bethany proudly declared a 'crafty look'.

A while later, I checked the time and realised I had to leave for drama. Back in my room, I refreshed my overdone makeup, grabbed my bag, and headed for the bus stop.

The bus rattled through the green belt that hemmed London in, past fields and quiet stretches of road, before depositing me on High Barnet High Street—Tudor pubs rubbing shoulders with greasy spoon cafés, charity shops, and American fast-food joints.

I hurried into the theatre and straight into the thick of it: teenage chatter, nervous energy, hormones hanging in the air. Class had started, and everyone was limbering up with some improv and vocal exercises. Emma spotted me and waved enthusiastically, as if we hadn't spent an hour on the phone together after school. As I swayed on the spot, pretending to be a howling tree, Emma drifted over in dramatic twirls, playing moonlit wind.

'Hey,' she whispered. 'What are you doing this weekend? We're going to the fairground—me, Jennifer, and the boys. My parents said I could. Do you want to come?'

'Yes!' I said instantly.

My heart thudded. I couldn't believe I was going to see Nick again.

I was so excited I could barely keep my roots on the ground.