

'Funny, sexy and smart, this is the romcom
to beat all romcoms. I loved it'

Cat Clarke

THE
FALLING
IN

Love

MONTAGE



CIARA SMYTH

THE
FALLING
IN
Love
MONTAGE

THE
FALLING
IN
Love
MONTAGE

CIARA SMYTH



ANDERSEN PRESS

First published in Great Britain in 2020 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.

The right of Ciara Smyth to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Text copyright © Ciara Smyth, 2020

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 966 8

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

*For Steph,
Never gonna dance again.*

1

I don't believe in love at first sight or soul mates or any of that guff you see in the movies. You know, where you meet someone in an impossibly coincidental way and you lock eyes and true, everlasting love ensues. I've read a bunch of think pieces about how the romantic comedy is making a comeback, but I think it's just a nineties hangover trying to crawl its way back into relevance. Like plastic chokers, glittery eyeshadow, and TV reboots.

I do believe in wanting to get the shift. You know, maul, snog, lob the gob, feek, meet, wear . . . or as the French say, kiss. That doesn't get its due as the beautiful phenomenon it is.

Wanting to shift the life out of someone was about as much as I could hope for if I went to the post-exam party, but it wasn't enough to get me out of my fluffy socks and sweatpants. I was exhausted. I'd spent two gruelling weeks sitting in a hall with no air-conditioning and the mandatory exam period heat wave making me so sweaty my thighs squelched every time I stood up. True to form, however, Dad found a way to make putting on clothes and running away to a party an appealing prospect.

“Saoirse,” his voice rang out.

That’s Seer-sha, by the way. I know Saoirse Ronan’s been on an international tour of duty telling everyone it’s Sur-sha and God knows she’s a national treasure but it’s Seer-sha. It’s really messing things up for all of the other Seer-shas in the country. I don’t know why the poor girl won’t pronounce her own name the way I want.

I could hear the excitement in Dad’s voice, but I needed another minute. My brain was so numb it wasn’t sending any signals to the rest of my body. Everything I’d been storing in my head until a few hours ago was gone. This could be how it started. Or maybe this happened to everyone. What was the Franco-Prussian War about? Did I care any more? Could I remember how to spell Württemberg? Unlikely.

“Saoirse, come on,” Dad called again, the foot-stomping tone evident.

I pasted a smile on my face and reminded myself that he was trying to be thoughtful for a change. I’d seen him put a bottle of champagne in the fridge when he got home from work a couple of hours ago.

In October, assuming I got the bundle of As I needed, I’d be moving across the sea to go to Oxford. Mum had studied there too. Dad was obsessed. He told everyone he met. Some people feigned interest; others, like the postman, stopped ringing our doorbell. Thanks to Dad, whenever we got a package we always had to go down to the depot.

I think he thought it would be something nice for Mum

and me to have in common, but good exam results were not the thing I was concerned about sharing with her.

When I applied, Hannah and I had broken up very recently, so putting the Irish Sea between us seemed like a good idea at the time. Fast forward to June, and the increasingly real prospect of leaving Mum behind was giving me second thoughts. Actually, I was having second thoughts about the whole university malarkey altogether. But I couldn't tell Dad that. He'd flip his lid.

"We don't have champagne flutes," he said when I walked into the kitchen. He frowned at the mugs on the mug tree.

"The banana one or the stripy one?"

Our kitchen was bright and cosy with a wonky spice rack on the wall and clutter on every surface, cookbooks with the pages stuck together with sauce, and crooked wooden cabinets that Granddad built because when we moved in here, we didn't have money for things like redoing the kitchen. Dad was no cook, though, so these days the spices were clumping together and there was dust collecting on the recipe books.

"The stripy one," I said.

"Right." He beamed and ran one hand through his hair, wavy and still black even though he was nearly forty-five. In the exact moment of noticing it, I realised he must dye it. "So, history today, wasn't it? Was it what you hoped for? Bernadette Devlin and Bismarck?"

“Yeah, I really don’t want to dissect it. I’m fried.”

“All right, all right. Let’s toast instead. We have a lot to celebrate.”

I squeezed the cork out of the bottle with a satisfying *pop!*

I had a lot to celebrate, technically. The last year of school had been hell topped off with the Leaving Cert, but it was over now and I would never have to go back there again. Dad, on the other hand, would not have realised my exams were over if the schedule hadn’t been posted to the fridge for the last nine months. Ironically he was always the one with the scatty memory.

“Your exams are over,” he announced, holding his mug aloft, “and you’re going to Oxford—”

“We don’t know that,” I said quickly, my stomach churning.

“I’m certain of it. You’ll have the time of your life.” He hesitated then, and I could tell he was ramping up to something else. Suddenly, I knew what it was and my stomach did a giddy flip.

I’d been begging him to let Mum come home for months. He always had a million reasons why it didn’t make sense, but for a second my heart expanded to allow hope in. It wouldn’t be perfect, I knew that, but it would be better than now. I could see her all day. Not just a visit for an hour or two, which is not the same as living with someone. I could defer Oxford and make up for the time

we'd lost this year. Then I'd be ready to go and everyone would be happy.

"I have some exciting news. I know it's going to come as a shock. I wanted to tell you before but it's been so complicated and you've been so angry with me."

His words were not making sense. I mean yes, I'd been angry. Although I thought I'd hidden it remarkably well, seeing as I hadn't snuck into his room at night and set it on fire.

"I hope you'll be happy for me." The glass in his hand and his voice wavered.

Nothing good starts with *I hope you'll be happy for me*. The phrase is loaded with the unsaid ending *because you won't be happy for yourself*.

"Saoirse, honey, I asked Beth to marry me."

I dropped my mug on the table, champagne splashing out the top and forming a puddle. He set his down and held his hands up in surrender.

"Look, I know you haven't really got to know her yet, but you haven't given her a chance."

My mouth opened as though I was trying to respond, but my brain did not have the capacity to produce language. I closed my mouth and did the only mature thing possible. I ran upstairs to my room.

The small space between the door and the window wasn't long enough for pacing up and down to be satisfying but I did my best; smoke was practically coming out of my

nose. I wondered if he'd follow me. When I started to feel dizzy, I stopped pacing and paused to see if I could hear his footsteps in the hall. After a few moments, I heard the TV coming to life, the sounds of a sportsknetball game making their way through the ceiling.

How could he do this to me? To Mum? I conjured up everything I knew about Beth. She and my dad were having an affair. She worked at an advertising company. She was always trying to talk to me, and I had to come up with ever more creative ways to avoid these "friendly" chats. I hated Dad for being so weak, for betraying Mum like that, for hopping into bed with the first replacement he could find, like you could just swap one woman out for another if she didn't suit you any more. And the way he expected me to accept it was mind-blowing. But I never in all this time thought it was serious. I would have worried if she'd started coming around for dinner or worse, she'd been staying here overnight, but they always went out. When he didn't come home, I tried not to think about why and concentrated on being grateful for the peace and quiet.

On the edge of my bed, my finger hovered over Hannah's name in my contact list. I was so tempted to press call. Even after eight months, after everything that happened, I really wanted to talk to her. I wanted to call and let myself sink into her voice, the words soothing me no matter what absurdly well-reasoned, totally emotionless thing she actually said. But I was longing for something that didn't exist any

more. That was the thing about breaking up. You think you're over it and then something happens and you feel the loss all over again. I put the phone down. There wasn't anyone else to tell.

Don't go feeling all sorry for me or anything, though. I hate that. It's the worst part of everyone knowing you have no friends. I really don't mind being alone, it's the pity I can't bear.

Once, about six weeks after the breakupocalypse, I was alone in our form classroom, eating a sandwich, when my ex-best friend, Izzy, walked into the room.

Now sandwiches are literally the stuff of life. You can't beat food stuck between bread by a thick layer of butter. But there is nothing that looks more forlorn and pathetic than sitting alone, eating a sandwich. It happens in films all the time. Whenever they want to show how sad and lonely a character is, they have them eat a sandwich at their desk or eat a sandwich on a park bench or eat a sandwich in front of the TV.

So there I am with my sad sandwich in one hand, listening to a podcast about grisly murders, minding my own damn business and graffitiiing male genitals into the desk with a compass in my other hand. I find that teachers assume it is boys who graffiti such things onto desks. If you are a girl inclined to deface school property, may I suggest the classic penis and balls, as you will avoid suspicion due to stereotyping.

Izzy was swinging a locker key around her finger and humming show tunes loud enough to penetrate the description of dismemberment playing through my headphones. I used to love her penchant for bursting into song, but when you fall out with someone, you can grow to hate the same things you once loved. I didn't look at her but I could tell the moment when she noticed I was there. The air became thick, and I knew she wasn't sure whether to avoid me or not. We'd had this huge fight over Hannah, and I hadn't spoken to her in two weeks.

I pretended not to notice her even though I was counting the awkward, clunking seconds piling up. While her back was turned, I peeked. She was staring into her locker. Her shoulders sagged. I knew then that she was going to try to have a heart-to-heart with me. My options were to hastily try to wrap up my sandwich and get out of there or sit through the awkward attempt to reconnect. There was a small possibility that she'd start telling me off, but it was remote. Izzy was a gentle sort, not prone to confrontation. I was the *cross me once, cold shoulder forever* type.

I'm a real catch, did I mention that?

Izzy pulled a chair around and sat opposite me. I removed my earbuds and sighed pointedly.

"Yes?" I said, as if she were a teacher bothering me about missing homework, not one of my oldest friends.

"Saoirse, let's not do this. We're friends." Her face was open, vulnerable. She really wanted me to drop the defences

and tell her how I felt. I admit I thought about it. Cutting someone out takes a lot of energy. The last couple of weeks had been the loneliest I'd ever had. Everyone I could talk to was gone, not just at school but at home too. Trying to manage my feelings by myself after years of always having Hannah or Izzy to talk to felt like I was trying to shepherd a clutter of feral cats into a pen. But I couldn't trust Izzy any more. It was just me and my cats and I would have to learn to be OK with that.

"We *were* friends, Izzy."

"So what, now we have to be enemies because we disagreed on one thing?" She put her hand over mine. "Nothing has changed between you and me."

I moved my hand away and crossed my arms.

"We're not enemies, Izzy," I said lightly, like it didn't bother me enough to get annoyed. "We're not anything. You kept something really important from me."

"It wasn't my place to tell you," she said. For the four hundredth time. I knew she really believed it too, but it was less than meaningless.

"I'm not mad," I lied. "I don't care any more."

You can't go around letting people know they hurt your feelings. It gives them too much power.

"So, what, you're going to spend the rest of the year alone? Sitting in an empty classroom playing on your phone?"

There it was. The pity.

I shrugged my best IDGAF shrug and put my earbuds

back in my ears even though she didn't seem to be finished talking. Her forehead creased and her bottom lip quivered. The kind of face a child might make if you chopped the head off their favourite toy.

I pressed the back button until I got to the place in the podcast where I'd stopped paying attention. Izzy waited a second. Keep fighting or give up? It was written all over her face. I pictured her finally getting annoyed with me and telling me to grow up, telling me that friendships don't end just like that.

But she didn't. Because they do.

I got annoyed with Izzy all over again just thinking about it. When Hannah and I broke up, I lost Izzy too, and it was all her fault. But in the intervening months I'd learned a neat trick for managing all those pesky feelings. I pretended it never happened and focused on something else.

Even if I didn't have any close friends left, it didn't mean I was a complete hermit who had to stay locked up in her room like an outcast. I scrolled through the messages on my phone and found the details of the after-party I hadn't planned on going to. The combination of cheap vodka shots and girls feeling post-exam relief who may or may not want to experiment was now my best option for avoiding staring at my bedroom wall all night, avoiding awkwardness with Dad, and avoiding being stuck in an endless loop of my own thoughts.

Since my breakup with Hannah, I've had a rule, you see. I point-blank refuse to get into a relationship. An important addendum to this rule, a part B if you will, is that I don't kiss lesbians or bi girls. I'm not saying they'd all fall in love with me or they're all looking for a relationship, but it puts the possibility out there. If I cross that line, I'm asking for trouble. But I have a perfectly good thing going. Every girl in my school who wants to see what it's like to kiss a girl knows (1) I'm super gay and (2) I won't try to date them afterwards. We kiss, we part ways, no one gets hurt. Win-win.

Hannah – when we were friends and before we were more than friends – used to complain about girls like that, the ones who wanted to use me to see what it was like, and to be honest there was a time when I would have agreed with her. Like when I was fourteen and Gracie Belle Corban said she only did it because she wanted to be able to tell Oliver Quinn that she'd kissed a girl. I cried to Hannah for a week about that. But now, well, I have different priorities. As long as we both get what we want, no strings, just good old-fashioned girl-on-girl kissing, then what's the problem? I still draw the line at girls who want to do it to make their boyfriends horny. But a girl who wants to satisfy her curiosity? I am all over that. Literally.

I snorted when I finally found the message. Of course, it was good old Oliver Quinn's party. It was always his party. He had an enormous house and the only reason he didn't

go to some fancy private school is because there wasn't one anywhere near us. So if I ended up puking in his mother's rosebushes that wouldn't be so terrible. Not that I'm still bitter or anything.

The group text said to come any time after ten, which meant I'd be weirdly early, but if I didn't leave now there was a possibility that Dad would intercept me and force me to have a deep and meaningful about his new fiancée.

Just kidding.

We would avoid the topic until we both grew so resentful that we'd shout terrible things at each other across the living room.

That sweet father-daughter moment could wait. I pried my bedroom door open as quietly as possible and peered downstairs. The light from the living room flickered against the back wall of the hall. Open plan was a real bitch sometimes. The window it was then. I changed into something more suitable and laced my feet into black military boots. I felt kind of badass as I climbed out the window.

Dad would realise later of course and send me an annoyed text. He hated me sneaking out. As he figured it, he never actually stopped me from going anywhere, so the least I could do was tell him where I was going to be. But why confront today what you can argue about over breakfast tomorrow?

2

You know how the Great Wall of China is visible from space? Well, Oliver's house was audible from space. It was heaving with people and pulsed like a heart. I could practically see the sound waves. I needn't have worried about being early. By the looks of things, half the kids here had been day drinking since the exam finished at four. Why hadn't I thought of that?

The noise sucked me in like a black hole. Someone had hooked up their phone to enormous professional-grade speakers that stood outside the front door like odd, modern sentinels. The music was so loud I couldn't just hear it, I could feel it pounding inside my body, making my heart thump in rhythm with the beat. I liked it like that.

I let myself get pulled into the orbit of people congregating in the garden, slipping in between bodies, suffocating in a blanket of smoke, aftershave, and sweat. Being June in a heat wave, most people had opted for outdoors. It was still warm and bright at eight. Even so, once I'd got into the house, it was so crowded, navigating my way to the kitchen was like a special round of *The Crystal Maze* or the zombie apocalypse. I had my eye out for Izzy or Hannah so I could

avoid them if I had to, but neither had replied to the group message that went out, so I wasn't expecting them. Hands grabbed me and people called my name, but I couldn't see who they were. I squeezed through arms and legs and a tangle of intertwined people who had decided foreplay was a spectator sport, and they were putting on a good show.

The kitchen heaved like a living organism. People slithered over one another, through gaps in cliques, to reach the fridge or the door. It looked strangely choreographed, and I felt out of place like a scientist observing it under a microscope instead of being part of it.

Luckily I'd been to many of Oliver's parties before and I knew where the solution would be. I skittered around two people who were basically dry humping against the kitchen island to reach the freezer and sure enough, several bottles of vodka were nestled among the luxury ice cream and ice cube trays. If you're wondering what kind of kid has free booze at their party, it's the really rich kind. I pulled a blue bottle from under a bag of frozen peas and used my sleeve to wipe off the frost on the neck. I took an empty bottle of Coke from my bag and started to fill it, clumsily spilling a little over the sides.

"Is that yours?" A girl had taken a stool at the kitchen island, and I hadn't noticed her watching me. She'd been obscured by the humpers before. She had messy brown hair to her shoulders and most of it was flipped onto one side, where it curved in a quiff over her head like she had the

habit of running her hands through it. She was round and soft in her face and her body. I liked it. A gold lip ring drew my attention to her lips.

“Oliver owes me.” I spoke far too quietly for the noise of the kitchen and gave her my crooked half smile that always worked. She leaned in over the counter to hear me better, and I could see a hint of bubblegum-pink lace peeking out of her top, which appeared to be an elaborate colourful scarf knotted like a halter top around her neck. I leaned forward too.

“Oh, does he?” The girl seemed unconvinced, but maybe a little amused. She was cute, even if she was an officer of the Vodka Crimes Unit.

“What’s it to you?”

I watched her lips move as she replied. “This is my uncle’s house. I’m staying for the summer.”

I registered an English accent then. I couldn’t place it but I knew it wasn’t super posh and it wasn’t Northern. That was all my English accent knowledge depleted.

“You’re related to Oliver? How sad for you.” I rubbed her shoulder sympathetically, casually, as if I wasn’t noticing how soft her skin was. She locked eyes with me as I did.

“You’ll need one of these,” I said, and I poured us each a shot into (hopefully) clean plastic cups. I pressed one into her hand, letting my fingers linger for a second. I downed mine, the heat sliding down my throat and into my belly, but she set hers down and sipped from a can of Sprite.

“Living life on the wild side?” I remarked with a smirk.

“Is this the famous peer pressure I’ve heard so much about?” she said. She leaned back, breaking out of my orbit. Damn. “Are you the cool girl who’s going to shove me in a locker because I don’t drink?” She laughed to herself and hopped off the stool. My eyes followed her to the door, taking in the beachy waves in her hair, her bare shoulders, and tight jeans hugging curves that made me bite my lip, hard.

What a dick.

A quarter of my bottle of vodka and several dull conversations about exams later, I escaped upstairs. Technically there was a baby gate with a makeshift sign warning *not* to go up, but there was a really long queue for the toilet, so I used my initiative. After I left the ornate bathroom, I stood on the landing, drawn to the faint sound of a piano coming from one of the rooms.

Oliver was in the music room, no surprise there. I’d found him here before. He threw these parties and then he’d invariably get bored and leave. He looked tired as he tinkled on the piano, and a half empty drink sat on the lid sweating onto a coaster. He had a real glass, though there wasn’t a single one to be found downstairs.

“So when are Mommy and Daddy getting back this time, sad little rich boy?” I said, sitting beside him on the piano bench. He barely looked at me, but I caught a hint of a smile.

“Tomorrow.” He tucked a lock of ashy blond hair behind his ear.

“I think they’re going to notice downstairs is kind of a bomb site,” I said.

“I have a cleaner coming in the morning.”

“Must be nice to have so much money you forget how to clean up after yourself,” I sighed wistfully.

“Saoirse, it’s nice to be rich enough that I’m not annoyed you stole a bottle of CÎROC Ten from me.” He tapped the Coke bottle in my hand, which created an odd gap in the music. How he knew I’d filled it with his expensive vodka, I don’t know. Let’s call it an educated guess.

“Dude . . . this is vodka? It goes down like water.”

“I bet.”

“Besides,” I said, stretching my arms overhead, “you owe me.”

“Still?” His fingers fluttered over the keys impressively. Not that I’d ever tell him it was impressive, of course.

“Forever. You stole Gracie Belle Corban from me and I never really got over it. My cold, shrivelled heart still mourns for her.”

“I’m sure. I hear there are plenty of girls since to take your mind off her.”

Oliver acted like I was some kind of lesbian playboy with a harem of curious ladies lining up each night. His perception of my sex life couldn’t have been more wrong. I hadn’t done anything more than a sneaky shift since

Hannah and I split. OK, so the list of kissing partners was long, but so what?

I think the indiscriminate snogging started the rumour that I was getting it regularly, but in truth, a bit of over-the-bra action was as far as it ever went.

Oliver paused in his complicated sonata and then played the first confident notes of “Heart and Soul.” After a moment I joined in, my fingers sloppy over the keys. I was tipsy and missed half the notes and Oliver laughed. We’d both gone to the same piano teacher at school when we were eight. “Heart and Soul” was about as much as I could remember. I’d quit after a few weeks. Oliver had been practising, obviously.

After our impromptu duet, we drank for a few silent minutes.

Oliver started playing again, and I took it as my cue to leave and continue my journey to the bathroom. When I reached the door, the music stopped abruptly, so I looked back. Oliver was frowning, fingers frozen, hovering above the keys.

“Her name was Gracie Belle Circarelli,” he said.

“What? No, it wasn’t.” I shook my head emphatically, but after all the vodka it made me kind of dizzy.

“Yeah, it was. Her dad was this big Italian dude. They had an ice cream place on the promenade. Circarelli’s.”

“Huh . . . well, that doesn’t even sound a bit like Corban, does it? First love can be so confusing.”

*

Somehow the party lured me in again. The kitchen was greenhouse hot and smelled like sweat and hormones, so I rummaged in the back of the junk drawer and found the key to the French doors. They stayed locked at Oliver's parties since the time Loren Blake climbed a tree, jumped into the neighbours' garden, and got caught throwing up in their koi pond. Oliver's problem was that although he knew that I knew where the good vodka was, where he stashed the patio keys, and where the bodies were buried, he never remembered to do anything about it.

I slipped out through the smallest crack I could make in the door and locked it behind me. The garden would be no relief if everyone could get out there, after all.

The *thump thump thump* of the music followed me with the occasional squeal or scream, but it was like submerging yourself underwater – the detail didn't get through. I breathed in a lungful of night air and found myself following a stone trail that twisted and turned through flower beds of azaleas, past a Victorian gazebo that looked like something out of *The Sound of Music*, and down to the lilac bush at the end of the garden.

At one of the first parties Oliver ever threw, Hannah and I wandered away from everyone else. She took my hand and pulled me along to a carved stone love seat set into the overgrown lilac bush. If you shook the branches, petals landed in your hair. I was fuzzy from Bacardi Breezers that

night and the garden seemed like the quietest, warmest place in the world. Hannah and I sat side by side, legs touching. I thought I could hear her heart beating in time with mine. She intertwined our fingers and hummed along, out of tune, to music playing in the house. I didn't even stop to think before I kissed her, as though thinking would break the moment.

That's how I kissed the only girl I ever loved to a corny eighties pop hit. When the sax solo kicked in, we broke apart laughing. For years afterwards all we had to do was hum a few bars and we would giggle. It became a refrain for our relationship. A code between us. Whenever I felt sad or stressed, she'd hum a few bars and I couldn't help but laugh and feel like everything would be OK. Because I had her.

Let me give you a word of advice. Never, ever have "your song" be something cheesy. Even if it's funny at the time. Even if nothing else makes any sense. I beg you, pick something epic, something soft and timeless and sweet. Because one day when you've had your heart broken, you will cry every time you hear that song. And nothing will make you feel more utterly ridiculous than being the girl who cries at "Careless Whisper".

I was about to sit down on the bench when I noticed, on the other side, a person lying on the ground, their torso underneath the bush, their legs and bum sticking out.

If I hadn't stared at that bum earlier, I would have assumed a drunk person had crawled under there and passed out. I stood for a second, wondering how to play this, then I heard her making strange kissing sounds and I burst out laughing before I could stop myself.

In a flash, the girl shimmied out from the bush and popped up onto her feet with surprising agility.

"So this is embarrassing," I said.

She planted one hand on her hip and looked at me, confused. "Why are you embarrassed?"

I stared.

"I mean for you?"

She frowned like she was trying hard to think of what she had to be embarrassed about.

"Don't know what you're talking about," she said, blowing a stray strand of hair out of her eyes, but I saw her try not to smile.

I reached out and picked a leaf that had nestled in the folds of fabric around her neck.

"You're right, totally normal to find a girl face-first in a bush at a party."

I saw her trying to work out if that was pun intended or not. Then she laughed and pulled on my hand, dragging me to the ground. Even in the confusion, as my face hurtled towards the grass, I hoped my palm wasn't sweaty.

She let go of my hand and I followed her lead, shimmying under the bush army-style. She pushed aside

the branches near the ground, and we squeezed in as far as we could get. She looked at me and then peered into the tangle of branches and leaves. I followed her gaze but my eyes hadn't adjusted to the lack of light. Awkwardly, I manoeuvred my arm around to take my phone out of my pocket, brushing up against her as I did. When I shuffled back into place, I'd closed any gap between us and I could feel the length of her body up against mine.

I turned the lit screen into the darkness. A pair of green eyes flashed first and then I made out a kitten, curled up so far into the hedge it was almost on the other side, in the neighbours' garden.

I looked at the girl. She looked back at me again. There were only centimetres between my lips and hers.

"You lost your cat?" I said, trying to sound like I hadn't been thinking about the space between our lips. With my compromised sobriety, I didn't question that this girl would have brought a cat with her to Ireland for the summer.

This would come back to bite me in the ass, of course. Almost literally.

She was about to respond when, in the light from my phone, I noticed the strangest thing and I moved closer. Only slightly, but we were so close my nose bumped up against hers. She didn't move away. I think she held her breath.

She had a blue freckle, like a tiny spot of ink under her eye.

“You have a blue freckle.”

“No one has ever noticed that,” she said, the way you know everyone she’s ever met had mentioned it.

I pursed my lips to hide a smile and I looked back at the kitten, suddenly aware that the vodka was making me dizzy. Probably the vodka.

“What’s she called?” I asked.

“Why do you think it’s a girl?” the girl asked.

“Dogs are boys, cats are girls,” I said witheringly. “Everyone knows that.”

She snorted.

“That’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard.” She nudged me with her shoulder. Was that an excuse to touch me or was I reading into it too much?

“Well, you must not get out much,” I said, nudging her back.

The kitten mewed.

“Aw, see, she’s saying *rescue me, drunk girl, I’m so sad and lonely.*”

“How am I supposed to get her?” I’d done some ridiculous things when I was drunk, but I didn’t believe I could fit my whole body that far under the hedge.

The girl looked at me with a pouty, sad face. I rolled my eyes as though that definitely wouldn’t work on me. It was an eye roll of lies.

“Fine.” I sighed. “I suppose I can try and get in next door somehow.” I didn’t think the neighbours would appreciate

a drunk teenager on their doorstep in the middle of the night slurring about a kitten, though.

We crawled backwards out of the hedge. It took me a lot longer than it took her and my hair got tangled up on a branch. When I emerged, she was already upright, her hand extended to help me up.

I dusted myself off and walked along the wall, trailing my hand as though I thought I'd find a secret door into the garden, but I knew the only way I was getting in was by going over. I was really going to do this. Why was I doing this? I glanced over my shoulder. The girl was a few feet behind me, and I caught a flash of guilt before she grinned at me that made me wonder what she'd been looking at.

OK, so that was why.

Closing my eyes, I summoned any heretofore untapped athletic prowess. If I was sober this would be easier, I thought.

If I was sober I wouldn't be doing it.

When I opened my eyes, I didn't feel any different, but my head was swimming. I approached the tree next to the garden wall. The Loren Blake tree. The girl was still looking at me, I could feel it in the way my skin prickled. It was a good feeling. I resisted the urge to swing my hips or toss my hair. Then I spun on my heel.

"Turn around," I said, gesturing in a twirling motion with my finger. "I'm not climbing up there with you watching."

“Stage fright?” She smirked, but she covered her eyes and stuck her tongue out at me.

“Something like that,” I muttered. More like if I had to pant and puff my way up this tree, I wasn’t having a pretty girl watch me do it. It’d be like climbing up the rope in PE with Kristen Stewart at the bottom looking disappointed in you. I mean she’d look like that anyway, that’s just her face, but you know what I mean.

I hooked my foot around a gnarled knot in the trunk and hoisted myself up. I looked down. I was a whole foot off the ground. I looked up. Only seven more to go. I quickly realised, thankfully, how a totally stocious girl with no athletic ability like Loren, had managed it. There were knobbly bits and ridges in all the right places. That didn’t mean it was easy, mind you. My thighs burned and my hands stung from clinging so tight to branches. At one point I slipped and grazed my knee, letting out a string of expletives that impressed even me.

“You can do it!” the girl shouted out.

“Are you looking?” I shouted back.

“No, I promise.” A pause. “But also we should probably clean that cut when you get down.”

Great.

With one final push I didn’t know I had in me, I reached level with the top of the wall and stepped gingerly from the base of the branch onto the relative safety of solid stone.

“I made it,” I called out. I looked down at my leg.

My jeans were ripped and there was a trickling sensation trailing from my knee into my sock.

Then I realised the real problem was still before me. I had scaled a tree, risked life and limb, and there was nothing on the other side but an eight-foot drop.

“Shit.”

She was cute. But she wasn't break-your-leg cute.

“What's wrong?”

I jumped slightly. The girl was right below me. She looked worried and ran her fingers through her hair, flipping it from one side to the other.

Was she?

“Don't scare me when I'm on a bloody tightrope,” I grumbled. The world seemed to sway when I looked down. Or was that me swaying?

“Exaggerate much? The wall is two feet thick.”

“Uh-huh, well, it's eight feet high and there's nothing on the other side except a pretty poky-looking rosebush, my friend, so I think your cat is going to have to chill over there for tonight.”

Believe me when I say I wanted to play kitten hero for her and have her wrap her arms around me in gratitude, but a woozy feeling in my stomach said it was a terrible idea. The vodka hubris was wearing off in the fresh air. I couldn't do it.

“You can't leave her!”

“I really can.”

Within a few seconds, the girl had scooted up the tree trunk like a monkey and was standing beside me.

“How did you do that?”

She grinned and shrugged.

“Why am I even up here?” I said indignantly. “Why didn’t you do it yourself?”

“I don’t know. I mean, you offered. I didn’t think it would be that difficult and then when you were trying so hard I felt too bad to say anything.”

I pressed my lips together and prayed for patience.

“I can see what you mean, though,” she said thoughtfully. “That’s quite the drop.” She rubbed her chin.

“Right, so we should find another way. We could fashion some kind of cat-trapping device.”

At that moment the kitten gave a loud meow of protest.

The girl shook her head and said matter-of-factly, “We’re going to have to jump.”

“You’re kidding,” I said.

She shook her head again.

“Hello? We’ll break something.” I put my hand on her arm to try to shake her out of this absurd determination to jump. She ignored me and stood, hands on hips like a superhero, surveying the distance.

Well, I wasn’t going to be dragged down with her.

“How about this,” I said. “You jump. And I’ll go back down this way and just sort of hang out and wait for you there.” I pointed at the relative safety of Oliver’s garden.

Why on earth was I even doing this totally unnecessary thing for a girl I had just met? (I mean, you know why, obviously. She was hot, and I was weak and pathetic and the sensible part of my brain turned off and all I could think about was (1) what it might be like to kiss someone with a lip ring, (2) if she had any other piercings, and (3) whether she'd let me find out.)

"I really think it's only fair if we both jump," she said seriously, rubbing her chin again. She shook her left foot and then her right as though she was limbering up. I put my hand on her arm to get her attention, but she still didn't look at me. I wasn't jumping. Nope. No way.

If I could get her to look me in the eye I knew I could convince her this was a bad idea.

She locked eyes with me then, with a glint in her eye that made me wobble precariously.

"Fine," I said, admitting defeat.

She grabbed my hand and I felt a tingle up my arm.

"One," she said, and squeezed my hand tight. "Two."

"Maybe it isn't a good idea to do this holding h—"

"Three!"

The girl jumped. I hesitated. Of course, she was still holding my hand, so I was dragged right into the air.

I landed face-up in a rosebush, groaning. Somehow, magically, the girl was standing upright, a grey kitten in her arms, and peering down at me. She looked almost confused

about how I'd ended up like this. When I look back on it, I'm sure I lost consciousness for a few seconds.

"I'm gonna be picking thorns out of my bum for a month," I groaned. Even as I lay there, I knew the alcohol was numbing most of the pain and I'd really feel it tomorrow.

The grey kitten meowed loudly and wriggled in the girl's arms.

"Well, at least you got your cat," I said, finally struggling to get up.

"About that . . ." she said, not quite meeting my eye. "It's not exactly my cat."

"What?!"

"So I saw her, in the garden, from the window," she said, and pointed at one of the windows of Oliver's house. "I thought she was lost. I came down to get her and she skittered under the bush."

I didn't know what to say to that but she continued anyway.

"I was afraid she'd be out here alone all night and scared. She looked so tiny." The girl lifted the kitten's paw and moved it so it looked like the kitten was waving at me.

"Don't be cross, drunk girl," the "kitten" said in a surprisingly gruff voice.

I sighed and dusted myself off a little. I was now bleeding, and covered in soil that smelled a little like the neighbours might use manure as a fertiliser. I figured my chances of kissing her in this state were rapidly dwindling.

“Well, she has a collar, so at least we can get her home, I suppose.”

“Um . . . yeah. About that.”

“I’m really starting to not like when you say that.”

“So according to this collar, she lives . . . here.” The girl spread her hands, indicating the very property we were currently trespassing in, and she bit her lip, waiting for my reaction.

“So basically by coming in here we have broken into the neighbours’ garden and tried to steal their cat?”

“Yes.” She nodded in agreement. “Basically.”

I made her say goodbye to the kitten and she kissed it on top of its fluffy head. I couldn’t bring myself to the same level of affection, but I patted the kitten on the head, and we stood side by side, watching it scamper off into the dark.

“Sorry you got hurt,” she said, turning her body towards me, her face level with mine, eyes wide and cheeks flushed.

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is.” She pushed a strand of hair back from my face. My breath caught.

“Yeah, I know.”

She looked at me, and the moment seemed to close in around us, dark and enveloping like a blanket.

Then a bright spotlight shone between us. Patio lights from the house. Instinctively I pulled the girl into the shadows as the owner of the house stepped out into his back garden.

“Who’s out there?” a sharp voice called out. “Marian, those bloody kids are at it again. Leave my fish alone.”

We stealthed our way around the side of the house, trying not to laugh too loud.

When we got back to the party, we lingered around the bottom of the staircase.

“Do you think I should be a vet?” the girl asked, out of the blue. “I mean I love animals but there seems to be a lot of vet-finger-to-pet-butt action involved. But maybe I’d get used to that? Do you think I’d be good at it?”

“I don’t know you,” I said.

“Oh. Yeah.”

I wanted to ask if she wanted to get a drink but we had already established that she didn’t, and even though the outdoor excursion had kind of sobered me up, I didn’t feel like getting drunk any more. I bit my lip, trying to figure out some way to ask if she wanted to go somewhere alone that wasn’t too keen or embarrassing.

“Do you want to come up to my room?” the girl asked brightly, pointing upstairs. “We should really get you out of that filthy top.”

For a second she had a mischievous twinkle in her eye, the same one I saw on top of the wall. I felt the wobble again even though I was on solid ground this time.

“I’ll lend you a clean one,” she added, as innocent as apple pie.