

Love you
to

DEATH

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GINA BLAXILL

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 SCHOLASTIC

*To the Kalettes, Melanie and Nina –
all the best things come in threes.*

Sunday 26 February

Sunday dawns with foreboding clouds that swiftly blacken. It's like the weather gods know my mood.

The seafront draws me to it like a magnet. There's something so atmospheric about the crashing waves and poor light when I feel low.

Aaron hasn't messaged. I really thought he would have by now. I'm usually the one who compromises when we fight, but I can't bring myself to apologize after how he behaved last night.

I'm halfway up the pier when some activity by the cliffs catches my eye. There's a cordon flapping in the wind and a growing crowd. Are those ... police officers? There are figures in scrubs too, shielding whatever's happened.

Wait. That's not just any patch of beach. It's the nook.

Our nook. The secret place Aaron and I share.

I feel the air frost over. The only sound is the deafening thump of my heart, growing louder and louder. My feet

fly down the wonky wooden slats. By the time I hit the beach I'm panting, my chest tearing in two, but I push on until I reach the nook.

Someone in uniform steps into my path, telling me in a low, firm voice that this is a crime scene and to please move away. Other voices echo around me. One word cuts through the hubbub.

Body.

It can't be.

Surely Aaron wouldn't jump. *Get a hold of yourself, Mia.* Yes, he was finding school tough, he talked about being under pressure, he was still struggling with grief, but he was getting better. Our argument wasn't catastrophic. I would know if things were that bad, right?

I pull out my phone.

WhatsApp: no messages from Aaron Mercer.

Aaron Mercer, last seen online yesterday at 19.38.

Aaron Mercer's voicemail, his familiar cheery voice asking me to leave a message.

Bleep.

A social media notification pops up on my screen.

Followed by another.

And another.

My feed's *exploding*.

In a daze I read the messages.

RIP mia, wish id known you better, you didn't deserve to die
Heaven's gained another angel, I hope you're at peace, fly

high Mia

Can't believe you're gone. So tragic. RIP xxx

What the hell?

More comments spring up. I feel like I'm in the grip of a nightmare, like I've gatecrashed my own funeral. Is this some sick, elaborate joke? But why—

Oh. *Oh.*

Further down the feed is another thread:

What happened??

Go to the beach. Police are everywhere. There's a body. It's definitely Mia.

But it isn't me. I'm here on the wet shingle surrounded by excited chatter and the crash of the waves.

If the body isn't mine ... it must be *hers*.



Eight days earlier

“Crazy bitch!”

The man is right up in my face. I’m too startled to react at first. I’ve waited for friends at the end of this residential street dozens of times with no problem. It’s early afternoon – broad daylight. Not the time for trouble.

Hoping he’ll lose interest, I avert my eyes and back away, bumping into the postbox. Something sharp snags my tights.

The man leers close. He reeks of booze, his eyes wild and bloodshot. “What’s with the frilly doll dress?” he slurs. “It’s the twenty-first century, love.”

A fleck of spittle lands on my cheek.

“Please leave me alone.” It doesn’t come out sounding very assertive.

This man’s big, unpredictable. I’m aware of everything. How tiny I am in comparison. The empty street. *Run*. My boots have heels, but he’s drunk. Surely I can outpace him. I slide around the postbox, but the man’s arm shoots out, stopping me.

“Know what I think?” His face is close enough for me to see the crumbs in his beard. My heart lurches into my mouth. “I think—”

“Is there a problem here?” The voice is my boyfriend Aaron’s. Over the man’s shoulder I spy him jogging towards us.

Drunk guy instantly withdraws. “All right, all right, mate. Just a bit of banter.”

Aaron reaches us, sliding his arm around me protectively. “Lay off her, all right? Go. Now.”

And, like magic, the man legs it, zigzagging across the pavement.

Aaron turns to me, face flushed from running and full of concern. His eyes have a wild spark in them. “Are you OK, Mia?”

Did the last minute just happen? “I ... don’t know. He was suddenly there, insulting me. If you hadn’t come—”

I stop. Horrible and all-too-common stories about what happens to girls who have the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time flit through my

mind. My legs go putty-like and I lean into the safety of his arms.

“You’re safe now,” Aaron says. “It’s OK. Just a random drunk man.” His voice catches as he squeezes me tight. It sounds like he’s reassuring himself as much as me.

Aaron isn’t usually intense like this. I lean back so I can meet his eyes. “I’m fine, Aaron. It’s over now.”

He gives me a weak version of the usual wide, shy smile I love. “Just as well he backed off. I’m not sure what I’d have done if he hadn’t. I’m a lover, not a fighter.” He cranes his neck in the direction the man stumbled. “Do you still want to go into town? I don’t mind if you’d rather not.”

“No, let’s go. We can’t stand Leyla up. I might need one of those hideously expensive brownies, though. You know, as a pick-me-up. You look like you could use one too.”

“I’ll treat you.” Aaron lets go of my shoulder but takes my hand. He’s looking sheepish now.

My own shock is fading too. Part of me is ashamed. Was I pathetic back there? Should I have handled it myself? Been firm, instead of defaulting to being nice? Ugh, I even said *please*.

I glance up at Aaron, wondering what it’s like to never feel physically vulnerable. He’s skinny and all arms and legs, with floppy ginger hair and big glasses, but his shoulders are broad, and at over six feet tall, people think twice before messing with him.

He catches me looking. “What was this ‘banter’ about, anyway?”

“My clothes, obviously.” I look down at my flouncy moss-green dress, hemmed with a white frill. I’ve layered it with a roomy crocheted lace cardigan, a new Etsy steal which makes me feel cute and comfortable. Ten minutes ago, I’d been excited about showing the outfit off. If I’d zipped my parka up, the man probably wouldn’t have picked on me at all. “It’s too much, isn’t it?”

“No! You look great. Is that the hairband you made with the stuff from the market?”

How lucky am I to have a guy who notices things like this? Aaron’s into aesthetic details – he’s designed some incredible original characters for the manga he’s been sharing online. Without his encouragement, I’d never have had the confidence to go full-on Mori Girl, a look I fell in love with after reading *Honey and Clover*. The idea is you dress like you live in the forest, in natural fabrics and draping layers, all neutral shades and earth tones.

Buoyed up, I squeeze his hand. We chat about Aaron’s manga as we wind through streets of tall, Edwardian terraced housing. Aaron warns me not to look at a lamp post with a missing pet poster; he knows I can’t deal with anything bad happening to animals.

Soon we’re in the town centre. It’s heaving, just like it has been all half-term. A lively warren of winding lanes with independent shops selling everything from beads to books to artisan sandwiches, Southaven is colour and buzz all year round.

The Green Leaf, my favourite coffee shop, is tucked

down a quieter lane between a vintage clothing boutique and a bubble-tea parlour. A rainbow flag flutters from the first-floor window. The bell jangles as I push the door open.

Behind the till is the owner, Cale. He raises his eyebrows. “Oh, hey, Mia. Did you forget something?”

I frown as I loosen my scarf. “Um, no? We’ve only just arrived.”

“Huh. You weren’t here ten minutes ago?”

I shake my head, bemused.

Cale peers at me more closely. “A girl I could swear was you just left. Ayo saw her too. Didn’t you, hon?”

“Sure did,” Cale’s husband calls from the kitchen.

“Really? How much did she look like me?”

“Enough that I didn’t question it. There was a queue so we didn’t chat – I guess I wasn’t paying enough attention. She must’ve thought I’d lost it, handing over your usual latte without even asking what she wanted! Are you sure you’re not messing with me?”

Cale carries on joking as he brews our coffees. This girl must have been quite convincing for both him and Ayo to make a mistake – I pop into The Green Leaf all the time. So I have a lookalike. One who accepted my oat milk latte, then vanished into the chilly February afternoon.

I’m already forming a suspicion of who she might be...

“Don’t,” I say to Aaron, who is struggling not to grin. “It’s not funny.”

“It is a bit though, Mia.”

I roll my eyes and go to join Leyla, who's nabbed the table by the window with the big sofas. My best friend's wearing an oversized tee with a spaceship motif, loose jeans and a jacket nicked from her brother Riyadh's wardrobe. Her curly black bob is tucked behind her ears, her glasses slightly steamed up.

"Did you hear that?" I ask.

"Nuh-uh, Mimi." Leyla picks up her phone. "We don't talk until you get a question right. Let's see... How many of Henry VIII's wives were called Catherine?"

"Ugh, Ley. Give it a break."

"You know the rules."

This "rule" is a new one, ever since my form tutor Mr Ellison selected me for the school Quiz Challenge team, along with Riyadh and our friend Oliver. Hardly cool, but I'm secretly thrilled – I've never been chosen for anything before. My GCSE results were what our head of year politely described as "variable".

I take a wild stab. "Three?"

"Correct." Leyla grins. "And yeah, I heard. You know what this means, don't you?"

I groan. "It means you were right."

A month ago, Leyla and I were in the indie bookshop, trying to decide which of the thrillers in the window display would be best for Mum's birthday present. Leyla had nudged me and pointed out the year eleven girl at the bus stop outside, long hair in the same half-up half-down style I often wear, with a big white bow just like one I own.

On her shoulder swung a Studio Ghibli tote bag identical to mine.

“This must have been her,” says Leyla. “She’s been copying your style for weeks. Every time we see her, there’s something new. Her coat’s a lot like yours. For all we know, she dresses the same as you outside of school too. We’ve never seen her in anything other than the violet horror, have we?”

For the billionth time, I’m grateful that sixth formers don’t have to wear the school uniform that somehow managed to be equally unflattering for my pale freckled skin and Leyla’s light brown.

“It can’t have been her, though. She’s blonde.” I swivel around. “Hey, Cale? What colour was that girl’s hair?”

“Same as yours,” says Cale.

I turn back to Leyla. “See? It was someone else.”

She looks at me knowingly. “Or year eleven girl has dyed her hair.”

“Oh my God. Do you think so?” I let out a low whistle. “A lot of girls would kill for corn-blond hair. Why would she dye it mousy brown?”

Aaron arrives, balancing our coffees on a wooden tray. “Is this such a big deal? Maybe she’s just into the same look as you?”

I doubt that. Mori Girl is way past its peak of popularity and these days it’s niche even in Japan. But I push the thought away. “Yeah, maybe. We don’t *know* she’s dyed her hair.” Embarrassed, I search for a new topic. “Hey, you

know what happened on my way here, Ley? Aaron saved me...”

As soon as I’ve said it, I wish I hadn’t. *Leyla* wouldn’t need to be saved. She’d have sorted it out herself. Drunk guy probably wouldn’t have challenged her at all. I’m the one who’s polite and likes to please. Until now, I thought that was the best way to get by, to not make myself into a target.

Leyla gives Aaron side-eye. “Is this story going to make me want to vomit? You guys are too much sometimes.”

Aaron clasps his coffee cup, his expression clouding over. “Some drunk guy was hassling Mia. He was pretty aggressive, and I thought— Well. It was good timing that I showed up. I didn’t do much, though.”

Cale interrupts by delivering a warm vegan brownie which is oozing chocolatey goodness.

“I know you two share everything,” he says, placing it between me and Aaron with two forks. “Oh, are you coordinating today?”

I glance at Aaron’s pale green T-shirt. “Not intentionally.”

“Too cute,” says Cale. “Could you be any better matched?”

I secretly love it when people tease us, even though it’s cheesy as anything. “I mean ... Aaron *could* stop eating meat and dairy,” I say, waggling my eyebrows, and Aaron pulls a face.

“Well, nobody’s perfect,” says Cale. “Ask your friend Oliver which film that’s a quote from, he’ll know. Is he

not coming today? You guys are normally the fabulous foursome.”

“He’s working, I think.”

“Shame. Remember, I want an invitation to the wedding when it happens, lovebirds.” Then the doorbell tinkles, and Cale goes to welcome two guys carrying a cute French bulldog.

Leyla slides her phone across the table. “Your doppelgänger’s name is Jade,” she says. “I’ve seen her with Camille Bailey – turns out Camille’s her year thirteen mentor. Feel free to compliment my brilliant detective work.”

The screen shows a WhatsApp chat between Leyla and Camille. Camille’s shared a link to a photo on the school website. I zoom in on one of the girls in the shot. This is the first decent look I’ve had at Jade’s face, and *whoa*. It’s like looking in a mirror. Well, not quite – her chin’s sharper than mine, her nose less upturned, and her hair’s nowhere near as long. I can almost sit on mine. But we both have the doll-like faces with big eyes that often have people assuming you’re younger than you are. Jade even has freckles too, and she looks pretty petite.

With *brown* hair...

No wonder Cale and Ayo mistook Jade for me! I can’t write off the similarities any longer. This isn’t coincidental, or someone taking a bit of style inspiration. A girl I have never even spoken to is copying my look, right down to very specific details.

We discuss Jade as we finish our drinks. According to Camille, Jade hasn't made herself very popular since she started, loudly complaining about what a dump Southaven High is, and how she'd rather be at her old school. Normally I'd have sympathy – it can't be easy moving with GCSEs looming – but this whole thing has set me on edge. Jade and I could easily exist never crossing paths. Sixth form teaching happens in an entirely different building to the rest of the school. But she must be watching me, taking an interest in me – to the extent of copying all my accessories and dyeing her hair to match mine...

It feels too odd. Almost violating.

Sinister, even.

“Are we going to talk about this all afternoon?” Aaron asks playfully, after the conversation has circled several times. “If it bothers you, ask her. It's probably just a compliment.” He lays down his fork. As usual he's gobbled up most of the brownie. “Be right back.”

Leyla waits for Aaron to vanish to the toilets before saying what I knew she would. “He seems in a good mood today.”

I scoop up the last wedge of brownie. “Maybe he's starting to feel normal again.”

“If I didn't know better, I'd ask if you set up that playing-hero thing. Let's hope his mood doesn't crash when school restarts. Sooner or later he's going to get into trouble for skiving. How dare his parents make him do A levels. Outrageous.”

Leyla's so super-academic that she doesn't get why

Aaron's sore that his parents insisted he stay on at sixth form rather than going to the art college in nearby Brighton. I feel I have to defend him. "Aaron's been dealing with a lot. Watching his granddad dying really messed with his head."

"Has he stopped the early hours phone calls?"

I nod, feeling a bit guilty for being glad. I tried my best but often didn't know what to say when Aaron rang up all sad and angry. "Thanks for saying it was OK for him to come today. I know you don't like Aaron gate-crashing."

"As long as it's not all the time, and it's not PDA central. I accept you're deeply in *lurve*."

Leyla thinks the way I am with Aaron is "extra". She's far more interested in chemistry and her violin than dating, and she's pretty certain she's not into boys anyway. It's been nice to see her and Aaron getting along today – sometimes there's friction.

"Want to hear something funny?" she says. "Yesterday Riyadh and I were clearing out the old junk from the garage." She grins. "We found Cowboy!"

"No!" I gasp.

"Yes! An age-old mystery, solved."

I start to laugh. Riyadh, who's a year older than me and Leyla, won the stuffed blue cow at a funfair when we were small, and became very attached to it. When Cowboy went missing, he accused me and Leyla of hiding it. That was back in the days when Riyadh used to hang out with us, before he got in with the popular crowd. "Poor Cowboy! Riyadh's far too cool for him now."

Aaron returns, and we chat for a while before Leyla has to leave to pick up a few things from Boots.

“See you tomorrow, Ley,” I say.

“Two o’clock sharp!” She waves.

The Electric Palace, the cinema where Oliver works, is holding a special screening for teenagers, which Leyla and I have been roped into helping with. It’s not paid, but neither of us minds. I occasionally cover shifts anyway as a favour to my twenty-three-year-old cousin Ivy, who’s one of the cinema managers.

After Leyla leaves, Aaron gives me a big smile.

“D’you want to see what I’ve been drawing? I know it bores the hell out of Leyla, so I waited.”

Aaron digs around in his rucksack. Then he freezes. I follow his gaze, but all I can see is his usual pencil case, bottle of water, sketchpad and an unopened envelope.

Aaron snaps the rucksack closed. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Didn’t you want to— Hey!”

He’s nearly at the door. I grab my parka and race after him. Outside, Aaron takes a deep gulp of air. His pale skin has gone several shades whiter. I take his arm. It feels tense. Have Leyla and I jinxed things by agreeing he seemed in good spirits? I’ve seen Aaron in a lot of low moods, but he’s not normally anxious. “Are you OK?”

“Fine... Just feel a bit sick. Maybe I had too much brownie.” For a second he’s motionless. Then he spins round, grasping my hands. “Hey, shall we go to the nook? It’s been ages.”

I blink, thrown by the suggestion. Before winter set in, we often used to walk along the beach after dark and kiss in the secluded nook by the cliffs. Aaron thought it was hilarious when I said it was romantic, pointing out the discarded beer cans and strong smell of chips wafting from the pier. “What, now? It’s freezing. The wind chill will be killer.”

“Oh, yeah, true.” He drops my hands. “Just trying to cheer you up – you know, after your weird afternoon. Let’s go back to yours.”

Confused, I let him propel me away. Aaron glances over his shoulder several times then relaxes as we leave the lanes behind.

Back at mine, we get out Exploding Kittens, but abandon the card game when my five-year-old brother Felix starts pestering us. Aaron comes to the rescue again, drawing dinosaurs with manga eyes for Felix to colour and humouring him as he reels off obscure facts about the Triassic Period.

“Sorry,” I whisper when Felix runs off to show Mum and Dad his colouring.

Aaron grins. He seems himself again now we’re inside. “I don’t mind. We’ll get plenty of alone time next weekend.”

At this, my cheeks colour. Aaron’s parents are away next Saturday night. He’s made it very clear what he would like to happen then, but I’m not sure, and I don’t really know

why. It's not that I doubt us. Wasn't Cale saying just hours ago how perfect we are for each other?

Mum calls us for dinner. Aaron's so much a part of the furniture that whenever he's here she lobs another portion in without asking. It feels cosy and comfortable, the five of us huddled round the table with Dotty the cat winding through our legs, and Dad and Aaron discussing how the local football team is doing. It's so normal, as though Aaron's funny behaviour never happened.

Life is good. Really good. I'm lucky.

After dinner I go out on to the street with Aaron to say goodbye. I balance on next door's low front wall so I'm a better height for a goodnight kiss. Aaron leans in, our noses bumping lightly as our lips connect. I smile into the kiss.

"I'll see you tomorrow at the cinema," Aaron says, drawing back. "You'd better go inside now, Mia. It's not safe to be out here in the dark."

I frown at this. Bad stuff rarely happens in Southaven. Although... There is something about the silent, sparsely lit street that suddenly unsettles me. It was only hours ago that I was approached by the drunk guy.

I shudder. Maybe Aaron has a point.

"Look at you getting all protective." I lean in to kiss him again.

As our lips meet, there's a flash.

Once, twice, a third time. Something clatters.

I pull back. A silhouetted figure streaks off into the darkness.

“What on— Did you see that flash? Was someone ... taking photos of us?” I cry.

Aaron grabs my arm, saying something about getting inside, but I’m already dragging him over the road to where the noise came from. An overturned recycling bin lies on the pavement, plastic packaging spilling across the uneven slabs. I didn’t notice anyone here when we stepped outside. Did they come out of a house? Or were they hiding? There’s a plasterer’s van parked nearby. Easy to duck behind...

“Was someone *spying* on us?” I whisper.

“Course not.” But Aaron’s voice sounds thin, as though he’s fighting to keep it level. “No one would do that. Why would they? They were probably photographing something else.”

“Like what?” The pitch of my voice rises. “Next door’s hedge? Why run away?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it wasn’t even a camera, I didn’t see.”

“What else could it have been?”

“Forget it, Mia. I’m sure it’s nothing.” But Aaron’s pale face tells me he doesn’t believe that any more than I do.

Coldness sweeps over me. Someone *was* watching us.