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WOLF

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# **LIBRA**

# **SEASON**





I cannot stop dreaming about Alison Bridgewater. This could be because it's Libra Season... Love and relationships are on everybody's minds during Libra Season, according to my *Bible to the Stars* – or my *Book for Blithering Idiots*, as Dad calls it. But it could also indicate that I'm reaching dangerous and dizzying new heights of my Alison Bridgewater Obsession, which is not good news, as I'm dizzied almost to death already!

They're very innocent dreams: Alison and me walking hand in hand across Tower Bridge in London ... Alison and me playing tag on a white-sand beach ... Alison and me lying side by side on a queen-size bed and then, just possibly, shuffling close enough that our lips can touch, and we brush fingertips, and I say under my breath, "I love you," and in my dreams, Alison's perfect face will glow, her smile like pure sunlight and rainbows...

She opens her mouth to say, "Love you too...!"

But I always seem to wake up before that happens.

It's Tuesday morning in Lambley Common, Kent, and I have school soon, where I will have to see Alison

face-to-face and not be awkward: not easy when you're a born clown like myself! I stay in bed for ages feeling troubled. Specifically, about the fact that I just dreamed about kissing Alison again! Then I hear Mum's sing-song morning call.

"Cat, come down for breakfast! I've made porridge!"

In that case, I might as well stay in bed for ever! Mum is far from competent in the kitchen. Her porridge is like cat food! But when I've raised this with her, she just says, "It's a good thing we named you Cat then!" Then she laughs a lot with Dad.

But woe alas, I do have to get ready (a timely process indeed if your gang has the überest of standards like mine does), so I stumble to my mirror and examine my blonde curls. They're basically a bird's nest, so I quickly comb my fingers through them, then add mascara. To my eyelashes obviously, not my hair, though a bit does get caught in the wand.

Then I sigh a tragic sigh – because I do this every day...

My morning routine is simple: get up, get dressed, pray to Almighty Aphrodite (she is the Goddess of Love, and nothing is more important than that), then make myself as beautiful as possible for my friend and romantic obsession, Alison Bridgewater.

But today, before I've even applied my lucky lavender deodorant, my phone buzzes and my eyes almost explode. Which would be really messy and traumatic, to be honest. But I have a text from Alison herself!

Hey bb! Can we talk after school, just us? Xox 08:09



"Gooseberries!" I exclaim (my favourite curse word). Alison Bridgewater wants to talk to me ALONE? After school? ON A TUESDAY? About what?! Then my bedroom door flies open and I Frisbee-fling my phone and shriek, "I'M NOT ON MY PHONE, MUM, HONESTLY, I'M JUST COMING DOWN!"

My phone smashes through my nail polishes on the dresser and right into the pinky-purple lava lamp, which teeters dangerously. I have to jump to catch it and end up face-planting in the pile of dirty underwear on the floor: a true moment of knickerbocker glory.

Then I look round and see it's not Mum but my tree-hugging terror of a sister, Luna, who is interrupting my celestial flows. She really is the WORST person – this text from Alison could be the most important conversation of my life! And that includes my conversation with Taylor Swift. (Luna says it's "not a conversation" when she's never once replied, but I disagree.)

Oblivious to my woes, Luna waves her phone around and says, "Cat, have you seen your horoscope? Apparently, Aquarius lives are being blessed today. Maybe that fungal infection on your leg will clear up!"

"It's just a bruise, Luna!" I snap, swiping her phone. "I've told you already!"

Usually, I'd be deeply unamused that Luna is rabbiting on about astrology now. I'm the one with the *Bible to the Stars*, and my mud-loving sister has already claimed pacifism, anti-consumerism, intersectional feminism and radical veganism! Can't she leave anything for me?

But reading her phone, I realize I may have to Elsa-style

Let It Go. Because my sister, who is so bizarre that she grows mushrooms in a shoebox for fun, might actually be right. According to my horoscope, my life is about to change for ever, which sounds pretty outrageous for a Tuesday morning.

Deep in my knickers pile, my phone buzzes again. I dig it back up and gasp.

I really need u!!! xxx 08:11

Head spinning with a thousand Taylor Swift lyrics, I feel the stars align... Well, that might be my stomach rumbling. But could today really be the day Alison Bridgewater falls in love with me?! It's a lot to take in. Especially given that, as I might have mentioned already, it's a Tuesday.

I'm in an Alison-induced coma all through Mum's horrendous breakfast and all the way to school as well, which is a wonderful distraction from Luna raving on about Mum's "anti-animal" shopping agenda. Last night's dreams are all over my skin like pollen... You can't see it, but you can feel it clinging to you.

Gosh, that was a very poetic thought! Maybe I should be writing Alison one of my amazing poems... She's bound to fall in love with me then! I try to think poetically, but Luna won't shut up! It's no wonder I never get anything done.

"... just because it said 'farm fresh' on the packet – farm fresh?! Everybody knows that's code for battery farm!" Luna gasps in annoyance. It isn't unusual for my sister to be angry at our parents – or "symbols of a capitalist dystopia" as she calls them. I'm only fourteen but she makes ME feel like a boomer. I guess I'm nearly fifteen, so I'm not far off.

"Mum seemed to think the picture on the front justified it as well," Luna rants. "As if that chicken ever really saw a field! Then she's bought those sausages for dinner – again!"

My sister (a Scorpio, Aphrodite save me) is very passionate. Last Christmas, aged twelve, she announced she wanted to change her name from Lauren Anna Phillips to "Luna Anaïs Celeste Phillips." She'd printed the official forms and everything! Apparently, she wanted this or nothing as her Christmas gift.

"At least she's keeping the surname," Dad grunted, not even lowering his paper.

Mum told her to "try it out" before making it legal. Then when Luna left the room, she turned to my utterly shocked face and said, "Don't worry, love. It's normal to play with identity at this age. Just let her work through it, and she'll be Lauren again before you know it."

Nine months on, Luna is more Luna than ever! No one calls her Lauren any more, so I suppose I'll have to start taking her seriously... But seeing as she's currently wearing an embarrassingly enormous pin saying VEGAN FROM MY HEAD TOMATOES on her blazer, perhaps I won't call her Lauren or Luna. I'll just call her ridiculous instead.

But you know who isn't ridiculous?

Alison Bridgewater. She really is so perfect. She's half-Ghanaian and her hair is gorgeously dark and curly, and her golden-brown skin glows even in the depths of winter... Gosh. I actually slightly hate how poetic and stunning she is.

"Perfect..." I sigh out loud, then my eyes widen. Oops.

Luna stops talking about the crimes of the farming

industry. "Excuse me? Did you just say 'perfect' when I was talking about animal genocide?!"

"No!" I pause walking. "I'm tired. I was thinking about something else!"

Luna rolls her eyes. "You know, if you listened to me, you might learn something! Why are you tired? Were you writing *Frozen* fan fiction until four in the morning again?"

"Yes," I say. "I mean, NO! I've never done that!"

Gooseberries ... how does Luna know about that?

"Whatever." Luna adopts her peak zen face. "Libra Season is sending everyone into a frenzy. Just because they're scared of being alone another year. Maisy McGregor literally fainted over it yesterday..."

That catches my attention. I pause trying to mentally compose a sonnet.

"Wait, for another YEAR? Luna, what do you mean?"

Luna gives me a smug smile. Which is also a very annoying smile, but that's just her face. "Haven't you been reading your *Bible to the Stars*? Some people believe if two don't become one in Libra Season, you'll have to wait until next year to find someone. And that's a long, long time. Eight million metric tons more plastic will have gone into the ocean by then, which is a lot of tons, Cat..."


She rambles on. But I am ozone-layering out all over again.

A whole year?! I'll basically be almost sixteen and I won't even have had my first kiss! Suddenly, my conversation with Alison Bridgewater is even more important. Really, I deserve some sort of award just for holding it together! I'm like Florence Nightingale, if she was a blonde

fourteen-year-old with a crush on her best friend. Which she isn't, so I suppose I'm not actually like Florence Nightingale at all, but I'm still very virtuous and saintly. Today could be bigger than Disney's silence on Elsa's true romantic persuasion!

Because no way, Swift-Tay, am I going to wait another year to find true love.





# For the Love of Alison



The first thing I see when I walk into registration is Alison Bridgewater, pressing flowers into her scrapbook like some kind of creative demigod. She really is the Prettiest Pisces Princess who ever walked this cruel, cruel Earth... Big, poetic sigh.

Back in Year Eight, me and Alison sat together in science, and because science is properly Yawnsville Express, I doodled a flower in my planner.

Alison spotted me. "Aww, that's so pretty! Do you draw a lot?"

"Um ... sometimes," I replied, thinking about my entire portfolio of kissing-princess drawings. Probably best Alison didn't see those. "Do you?"

"I make scrapbooks!" Alison reached into her bag to show me. The scrapbook was a mix of newspaper clippings, photos from magazines, postcards, scraps of fabric, all thrown together in a way that somehow looked beautiful, like all the chaos in the world sorted out.

"That's... so cool!" I murmured, and Alison beamed, and her teeth looked so perfect, and her hair looked oh-so curly

and gorgeous, and my stomach clenched like a sour grape, because how did I never notice this before? She's actually mesmerizingly beautiful!

Sour grape became full-on LEMON when, one sleepover, Siobhan (THE Queen Bee of Queen's) instructed me to bring my star bible and much-admired grand and impressive zodiac wisdom so we could study our star charts and find our perfect match. She's been bleating for a Capricorn ever since. But then we tried Alison's details and the website just reloaded MY chart. I thought it was a mistake at first, like falling in love with a Gemini, but no... Everything aligned. Every single planet. WE were the perfect match!

"Well, that's a massive coincidence," Siobhan said, blinking in surprise.

I could barely breathe. But Alison just wiggled her (perfect) eyebrows. "I don't know, Cat... What if it's written in the stars? I've always loved your adorable button nose..."

Everyone shrieked with laughter and I went *AHAHAHA* as convincingly as possible, but inside, Aphrodite was throttling my heart with a glittering garland of roses, and ever since, I've been stupidly and pathetically and intergalactically in love with Alison Bridgewater.

Nobody knows except for my so-called best friend, Zanna, who is currently observing me, one eyebrow raised in complete and utter judgement. I snap back to the present. It's rather like being thrown into a swimming pool... and I should know; it's how Dad wakes me up on our summer holidays in France. I'm late, Zanna knows I'm staring at Alison, and I still have no idea what Alison wants to talk about later.



To put it simply, I am stressed in a vest. And the rest of my clothes as well.

I take a deep breath, then beeline towards my seat in the most unnoticeable way possible. But at once I hear, "Cathleen Phillips, well, well, well."

Gooseberries! I judder to a halt, internally groaning. Then I turn around with the fruitiest, fakest smile I can muster. "Good morning, Mrs Warren!"

"Good morning, Cathleen." Everyone says Irish accents are dancing-dingo divine, but I'm not sure I'll ever trust one in all my life thanks to Mrs Warren. She taps her pen on the surface of her desk. "Why don't you come over here," she says, sing-song-stomach-churningly, "and explain to me why you're five minutes late to registration?"

I slide to the front desk. "Sorry I'm late, Miss," I recite. "My sister got up late."

Not strictly true, but I'm hardly going to tell her it was my fault! Me and Mrs Warren have had a mutually hateful understanding since FOR EVER. Well, since she caught me drawing Shrek ears on her photo in the hallway anyway.

After I have agreed with Wicked Warren that no, I am not my sister, and therefore yes, it's a fair-and-square "late" mark, I slump down next to Zanna and do everything in my power not to gaze longingly at Alison Bridgewater. Sadly, everything in my power is like a Capricorn's capacity to love (meaning: not much), and I gaze longingly at Alison after all.

She sunbeams back with all the usual summertime and rainbows and I almost fall off my chair. For the love of Libra Season, this is hard! What does she want to talk about? Aphrodite above, please give me a sign...

Zanna clears her throat. "Good morning, my useless blonde friend."

Pausing mid-prayer, I scowl. "What are you judging me for now?"

"Possibly the way you stared at Alison for five painful seconds before you came in?" Zanna tuts, tapping her owlish glasses like she often does when she's disapproving. Which is basically all the time. "There's such a thing as subtlety, Cat."

Zanna Szczechowska is an utterly horrendous friend who mocks me on a daily basis for absolutely everything. But I've known her since primary school and she knows far too many of my shameful secrets to ever risk falling out with her. Also, unlike me, she knows my timetable off by heart, so I really can't afford to lose her. I can still glower at her though.

"A real friend tells you the truth," Zanna says, shrugging. "You've got to get over that girl!"

"That's a valid opinion," I agree, as Mrs Warren trawler-drags through the announcements. "But here's a better idea. What if Alison falls in love with me back?"

Zanna frowns. "Falls in love with your back? What about the fungal infection?"

"IT'S A BRUISE, ZANNA!" I shriek. I really shouldn't have posted about that on Instagram. Then I remember we're in the middle of class. Oops. Everyone and Alison Bridgewater goggles at me in shock. After Mrs Warren has logged my second caution of the day, I whisper on with Zanna... "It's on my leg anyway! And I didn't even say that... Although she'll hopefully fall in love with my back as well. But first, she has to fall in love with my front, my sides, and the rest of me! And that's where the poetry will help."

Zanna's eyes widen in horror. "Sorry. The poetry?"

"I've decided it's now or never," I explain. "I'm reliably informed by my horoscope that today is the day I should tell Alison how I feel, so I'm going to write a poem and give it to her after school. It's a new chapter – sorry, *stanza* – of my life, and Alison is definitely going to fall in love with me, because poetry is the language of the soul."

"That's the worst idea I've ever heard," Zanna replies. "*Please* don't do that. You will ruin our friendship group and make everything awkward for ever."

"It's too late, Zanna," I say. "It's not even an idea. It's a concept."

"Good grief," Zanna murmurs. "That does sound worse."

She might be more annoying than my fungal infection. Gooseberries galore.



By lunchtime, I still don't have so much as a haiku to give to Alison Bridgewater. And the moment I find a quiet corner to write something spectacular in my notebook, Jamie Owusu appears with his Ninja Turtles lunchbox, sounding off about how desperately hard his life is.

I really have no choice but to be friends with Jamie. Our mums are besties and host this sad-fest "sewing group" in my house together every weekend. Jamie always comes along because he's scared of being home alone, and mostly we lounge in my bedroom and he complains. I usually don't mind because I'm used to not listening, but today it's too much. How am I supposed to write wondrous poetry if tragic, non-poetic types keep bothering me?

Today Jamie's big problem is that no girl in Lambley Common will date him. "Why do nice guys always finish last?" he moans, halfway through a mouthful of chocolate digestives. I'm only half listening, because I'm sketching the most cute-alicious sketch of Elsa from *Frozen* marrying Merida from *Brave*. And writing my poetry... of course.

"Girls only want white guys, don't they?" Jamie mourns on. "Like Chris Hemsworth or Tom Holland."

"The toilets are covered in graffiti about Chidi Unigwe," I muse, drawing Merida's curly hair and sighing wistfully because it's so much like Alison's. "Everyone fancies him."

"Chidi's TikTok famous!" Jamie protests. "Literal Stormzy called him a legend!"

"Well, maybe you should start making music," I suggest. "Then you can be as cool as Chidi! You're bound to find a girlfriend then."

Jamie jogs my elbow, almost ruining Elsa's bouquet of flowers! I scowl as he points across the playground to where Siobhan is talking to her latest boy obsession, Kieran Wakely-Brown. She's letting out an annoying gibbonish laugh every five seconds and bobbing up and down like a rubber duck as Kieran boasts away about his collection of signed tennis balls.

"That's the kind of guy all you girls want," Jamie says decisively.

I'm not sure what he means, saying "all you girls" like that, but somehow it really prickles my pumpkins, so I slam my notebook shut and say, "Well, maybe if you stopped moaning all the time, Jamie, some girl would notice how secretly good-looking you are, or whatever, and go out with you!"

Jamie gapes at me. Oops. Was that too harsh?

Then he says, "So, you think I'm good-looking?"

I widen my eyes. Really?! That's the part he chose to hear?! I flap my lips about like a salmon, trying to articulate that I didn't mean it *like that*, because I don't want Jamie thinking I fancy him when I certainly in a million-billion years do not!

Unfortunately, I end up saying, "I don't mean – I mean... good-looking, but – I mean!" I decide not to mention that he's sadly no match for Alison Bridgewater. But I suppose he's okay, if that's what sinks your submarine, so I say, "You're all right!"

But he keeps grinning like I made his day, week, or entire zodiac year. "That's special," he goes on. "A proper compliment from a girl like you."

I'm worried he's reading far too much into this. Gulping down the merry-go-round of panic that's spinning in my chest, I watch Jamie slowly bite into another chocolate digestive, maintaining eye contact the entire time. What now?! Then someone smacks their hands onto my shoulders and I jump out of my knickers.

"O-M-ACTUAL-G! Did you SEE that, Cat?!" And Siobhan Collingdale leaps onto the tabletop, obliviously barging Jamie's lunchbox to the ground. "Über-special moment with Kieran – were you watching?!" She tosses her hair back and whips Jamie right in the eye.

Siobhan's hair is famous: she uses five different conditioners mixed together, and although I'm secretly sure it's just brown, Siobhan insists her natural colour is "burnt umber". She's probably just blinded Jamie, but she's

exploding with Kieran news and doesn't even look at him. Although I notice she swipes a digestive while he's busy groaning in pain.

This is the last strawberry. I'm never going to come up with a poetic masterpiece! Anyway, Siobhan's been talking about Kieran Wakely-Brown all day and I'm beyond over it. We all have crushes, but for the love of Alison, she takes hers way too seriously!

"He's not like other boys," Siobhan raves on. "He's a CAPRICORN, and he knows what mascara is, because his mum is a professional MUA, and he's even met Cara Delevingne! Which is great because everyone says I have her eyebrows. I'm so over Chidi!" Jamie chokes on his biscuit. "Having a new boyfriend is the best natural cleanse, Cat. I never even think about Chidi any more! That's why my skin is so clear these days..."

Jamie keeps googly-eyeing me all through Siobhan's Kieran Catch-Up Special, but I pretend not to notice. I've got quite enough on my platypus: Libra Season is clearly taking effect! Siobhan is on the verge of a sparkling new relationship and meanwhile I still have nothing to give to Alison Bridgewater. Sappho strike me down!

## WHAT RHYMES WITH ALISON???

1:45 p.m. - Madison? Atkinson?

Smalison...? How about... ALISON! Oh.

Badminton? Although... In Year Seven, I \*might\* have broken Sporty Habiba's perfect front tooth when a badminton racket slipped from my hand mid-swing... Maybe best not to remind Alison of that.

Hag-Ridden? I'm not sure "Hags" really experience true love though. I'd have to ask Mrs Warren to be absolutely certain...

Sally's son? Frustratingly, the only Sally's son I know is Nigel the Nibbler from nursery. He chewed my second-favourite gel pen so much, it practically turned into a twiglet... Not very romantic.

1:55 p.m. - "Salishan"! Thanks, internet!

Meaning: "a family of Native American languages from the northwestern USA and Canada..." Time to get inspired!!!

2:35 p.m. - I can now introduce myself in Halq'eméylem, but I do not have a poem.



# Sappho Strikes Me Down

Unfortunately, Sappho (who the most poetic among us, like myself, will know is an extremely famous and ancient lesbian poet with HER OWN ISLAND) does not strike me down, and by the end of the day, I have what can only be described as a “nice try” in my hand. I read it over while I’m waiting outside the school gates in the drizzle. Which probably means Sappho is crying.

How can I give Alison this?! I should have illustrated it, then she’d have been too distracted by my drawing skills to notice the actual words. But it’s too late now. I slide the poem into my blazer pocket, my heart already boomshakalaker-iering the house down.

“Are you good?” I hear, and I look up to see this edgy-looking girl with green glasses smirky-eyeing me. “You look stressed,” she adds, in a rather nifty accent I wish I had.

“Um...” I flounder. “Well, I’m definitely not...”

She nods slowly. “I’ve started counting to one hundred in Korean. By the time I get there, I’ve nearly always forgotten what I’m nervous about. If that helps.”

Then she does this really chillaxed smile and walks off.



I stare after her blankly. Korean? How is *that* going to help me? I'm not the Duolingo Owl. Some people have such easy-in-yeezys lives; they wouldn't know stress if it hit them like a school bus!

To distract myself from the tsunami of anxiety, I take out my phone and scroll through Instagram. Siobhan's posted a selfie that has already got over two hundred likes from her terrified brethren of followers. (Siobhan says she has "almost three thousand" followers, although I'd say 2,400 is "just over two thousand", personally.) I double-tap ... then I hear a familiar laugh.

I look up and gasp. Alison is chatting to a boy across the road! She must have been waiting for me – how did I miss her?! Between the buses and parents driving like dodgems, she hasn't seen me, so I leave the railings and raise a hand to wave. I don't recognize the boy, but to be honest, all boys look the same to me. His blazer is pretentiously purple though, which stands out among the deeply uninspiring blue of the Queen's uniform. Purple means he's from the private school, Lambley Common Academy. We call them the "Beetroot Brigadiers."

But now is not the time to get sidetracked by pretentious blazers! I take a deep and grounding breath. This is it: the most important conversation of my life! (Sorry, Taylor Swift.) Gulping down my nervy-nervousness, I step off the kerb, opening my mouth to call her name ... then Private School Dude leans forward and kisses Alison Bridgewater. MY Alison Bridgewater. Right on her perfect brown cheek.

WHAT?! I stop right where I am in the middle of the road.

My mind is reeling. He kissed Alison on the cheek! I mean,

it's not a full-blown lippy-lullaby make-out session. But a kiss is a kiss! Should I feel happy because Alison is my friend? Am I thrilled? Okay, I'm definitely not. I want to punch his lights out! Or maybe I just want to cry?! Really, I don't know what to think, but it suddenly feels like I've been blown sideways.

Then I notice I actually have been blown sideways – something has smacked me from the side and I'm sailing through the air in real-life slow motion, and that's when I realize GOOSEBERRIES GALORE, I'VE BEEN HIT BY A BUS!

I hit the tarmac and roll. Next thing I know, I'm lying flat on my back and looking at the great poetic sky – which is rapidly turning a spirited sepia – and would feel very Shakespearean if this weren't real life. Or is this real death?! The shadow of the netball team's minibus looms over me; gasps and cries fill the air as onlookers gather round.

Then I see Alison's horrified, beautiful face leaning over me like Aphrodite welcoming me to the sunny, glorious after-life. "Cat?!" she gasps. "Oh my goodness! Are you okay?!"

Even in this moment of great tragedy, she looks gorgeous. And I only hope I'm not going to wet myself if I die in front of her, because Siobhan said her cat peed when it died, and I'd literally never live that down if it happened to me. But then it's too late because everything goes dark. Perhaps I'm getting my romantic poetic ending after all.



"Right," I hear someone saying. "Everybody, stand back!"

Is that Aphrodite? Luna says it's utterly nonsensical believing in astrology AND Greek goddesses, but what does she know?! I like having all bases covered. Still, I don't think

that is Aphrodite. I'm vaguely aware of the cold air, a crowd around me, lots of murmuring and gasping. I'm still lying in the road, which is damp and icy beneath my palms.

I suppose the fact I'm aware of all this means I'm not dead. Though there's still time! What if I'm bleeding out, slipping in and out of consciousness? Alison's face still in my mind, I part my lips and try to tell her before it's too late...

"If I die ... I want you to know that you're truly beautiful..."

Then I open my eyes. I'm staring right at Mr Derry, my history teacher. He looks surprised behind his Tetrisy glasses... And I suddenly realize what I just said. TO HIM.

"Oh," I murmur, and everyone is chattering and giggling, and I wonder how loudly I just told Mr Derry that he was truly beautiful and what I'm going to do now. "Um..."

"Don't worry, Cat," Mr Derry says, though his cheeks do seem a little pink. "You're probably feeling a bit confused. There's a doctor on the way – you've had an accident."

An accident?! I really hope he just means the whole getting-hit-by-a-bus fandango. If I've soiled myself as well, I may ask the bus to full-on run me over...

Then Alison does appear, and I could headbutt her for the pain and torture she puts me through every single day without even knowing! Well, I possibly wouldn't actually headbutt her. But I'd give her a very stern look, which is also pretty brutal broomsticks.

"Cat!" she gasps. "Are you okay?"

"Stay back, Alison," Mr Derry says, annoyingly. "I've got this."

But I reach out a hand and Alison kneels beside me in the road, squeezing my hand in hers. Her skin is cool from the October air, but she rubs a thumb across my palm and

suddenly I don't feel so dizzy any more. Or maybe I feel dizzier? Either way: SCORE!

Alison shines down upon me with the smile where all her teeth show, and it's like the clouds have parted and the sun has just broken through. Thank you, Aphrodite...!

"You daft thing," she says, shaking her head.

Not the best compliment in the world, but I'll take it.

"Sorry," I croak back. "Was I knocked out?"

Alison grimaces. "Not for long..."

"We're not sure," Mr Derry cuts in. I wish he'd leave me to faint in Alison's arms in peace. It's not like this kind of thing happens every day. This might be my only opportunity!

But then a bald man with a first-aid bag snatches that opportunity from my grasp when he barges his bald head in and Alison has to back away. I suppose this is the doctor, but since he interrupted my moment with Alison, I'm already not a fan, whether he saves my life or not.



There's a long wait at A&E, especially once they see I'm not actually dying, or even hurt at all really. They do a weird brain-scan thing though.

"Anything in there?" Dad asks the nurse, and Mum chuckles away.

My parents like to think they're professional comedians, but they're literally bankers. They're boring for pay! Try telling that to Dad's baguette-themed tie collection though. Just so he can loaf around saying he's "the bread maker" of the family. Truly crusty scenes.

Frowning at Dad's croissant-crazy tie, the nurse explains

to my clown parents that I'm mildly concussed and (as if I haven't been punished enough) will need to stay home for a few days, but it's nothing to worry about. Easy enough for her to say! Mum will be vroom-vrooming on about road safety for the rest of my life now, so I'm VERY worried actually.

"Your father's had to leave work early for this!" Mum gabbles on the car ride home.

I'd have thought that was a relief, given Dad's job – he should be thanking me! But before I can make this extremely valid point, Mum changes the subject to Luna. Apparently, Luna invited Niamh over (her best friend and Siobhan's little sister) who shares her cuckoo-clock cacophony of bizarre beliefs. It seems that despite my getting hit by a bus, Niamh came over anyway, and Luna's still expecting her to stay for dinner. Unbelievable!

"I can see she's really concerned," I grumble.

"Oh, don't be so dramatic, Kit-Kat," Dad chuckles. "You're fine."

"I nearly died!" I protest. "I was hit by a bus!"

"Might do you some good," says Dad.

Mum laughs out loud at this and Dad pats her knee across the gearstick. Then Mum switches on the radio and it's playing "Walking on Sunshine". She turns up the volume and begins singing along with Dad, joyously clapping her hands.

I sigh hopelessly. If getting hit by a bus can't earn me some sympathy, Aphrodite knows what can! Maybe I should get hit by a plane next time? Then I remember Alison. And the poem, still lurking in my pocket, which, reading it now, sounds a bit less Shelley and a bit more shell-shockingly awful. Gooseberries. What was I thinking?!

I suppose it had to happen eventually. Libra Season would come, Alison would find a boyfriend, and I'd have to watch it happen. It hurts deeply, being in love with your friend. I suppose it doesn't happen to most people. I should be crushing on some boy I don't know properly, like Kieran Wakely-Brown. But I just ... can't.

Gooseberries, now my eyes are stinging! And not just because I got disinfectant gel in them at the hospital. I'm crying real tears. Zanna's right to call me a "messy clown." And she was right about something else as well:

I really, really, REALLY need to get over Alison Bridgewater.

It could all be so perfect. I know Alison! So much better than Private School Dude does. I know she likes pineapple juice, she's left-handed, she likes rom-coms... She's wanted a Dalmatian since she was seven. And I never turn on overhead lights when I'm with her, because Alison once told me lamp-light is softer. We have the same favourite colour: orange. And according to the STARS IN THE ACTUAL SKY, we're soulmates! But none of that matters because she just doesn't see me that way.

Perhaps I'm being a selfish sardine. I should just be grateful I have an amazing friend like Alison Bridgewater, even if I am officially going to be alone for another zodiac year. But when you've been hit by a bus on the same day you've seen the girl you love so very painfully and poetically getting kissed by some random, stupid boy in a pretentious blazer, I think it's fair enough to feel a little sad and tragic.

I wonder if it's too late to go back to the hospital and offer my heart to organ donation services. I won't be needing it myself after all.

# THE PISCES PRINCESS POEM

by Cat Phillips


Alison is so sunny!  
And buzzy like a bee!  
I wonder if she notices  
the buzz she's giving me?

The sun is made from fire,  
and Alison is not.  
But they have this in common:  
they're both really hot,


Emotionally speaking.  
Objectifying is wrong.  
But Alison is as pretty  
as a really pretty song!

She's like a real sunbeam:  
really, really bright,  
In creative subjects.  
Not in science, right?

So now this poem's over,  
I finally have to say  
I secretly really like you,  
as more than friends... Yay...?!



# Concussed and Traumatized



As soon as word spreads that I've been hit by a bus, Siobhan springs into full Queen Bee action: bludgeoning everyone into signing me an A2-size "Get Well Soon" card, writing a "Serious Letter of Complaint" to the bus company, even opening a fundraiser in my name.

The school quickly puts a stop to the fundraiser – especially when I have to admit that (a) I'm not that badly hurt, and (b) the accident was mostly my fault anyway, because I was "dancing about in the middle of the road like a bloody idiot" (Dad's words).

So instead, Siobhan insists on arranging a Recovery Party at my house on Friday. I suspect Siobhan just wanted to organize an event, but it's still a nice gesture, especially since my parents are not taking my traumatic experience seriously at all.

All the gang come round: Siobhan, Alison, Kenna, Habiba, and Zanna, and even Lip Gloss Lizzie makes a special guest appearance. Lizzie Leeson-Westbrooke is sometimes in the gang and sometimes not, because she's staggeringly lip-glossy and popular and has several



groups of friends. On her phone, she numbers her group chats, or so I've heard.

"Wow!" says Kenna, who's never been round before. "Your house is amazing!"

"Christ on a bike, Kenna!" snaps Siobhan. "You're so easily impressed. It's not like she has a butler or anything! Anyway, pay attention: Cat's had a TERRIBLE accident! She doesn't need you sweeping in here and making a fuss..."

Siobhan proceeds to order Kenna and Habiba about, making them lay down a picnic rug in the middle of the floor, where they spread out hundreds of cakes, biscuits, dips, and snacks. Lip Gloss Lizzie posts a picture of me on Instagram to "show everyone Cat didn't die after all", and I'm given pride of place in Dad's leathery armchair.

Siobhan instructs me not to lift a finger to help.

"I'll take care of absolutely everything, Cat," she assures me. "Don't worry at all. KENNA! DO NOT MIX UP THE HUMMUSES! ARE YOU ACTUALLY STUPID?!"

I subtly throw Kenna a life-jacket smile as she carefully places a teaspoon in each dip. She's too busy gazing in awe at the "digital fireplace" to notice though.

My house is so modern, I'm practically living in the future. Me and Luna ceremoniously named it the "iPhone Box" when we moved in last year, because it's all wall-height windows and completely open plan, a privacy nightmare. Dad said we couldn't put "The iPhone Box" on a sign though, so it's just called 11 Beech View Lane.

Personally, I'd prefer somewhere whimsical and Tudor, with beams and uneven walls. Any walls at all would be nice actually. My dream house is the cottage we always used to

visit in Cornwall, which *actually* had a beach view. I even suggested we buy the cottage one summer, but Dad just laughed and said, "Wouldn't that be nice!"

Which it would, obviously. Why else did he think I suggested it?

The theme of our kitchen in the iPhone Box is "Things That Slide Shut Automatically So You Can Never Leave Anything Open" and "Is That a Wall Panel or a Cupboard, They Both Look the Same". It takes Habiba about twenty minutes to find any glasses. Eventually, everything is set up, and we sit around and they all listen in detail to my story...

"I got hit by a bus," I tell them.

"You're so strong," says Lip Gloss Lizzie, gripping Kenna's hand.

"You're unbelievable," says Zanna.

"We're just all so glad you're okay!" says Alison, hand on her heart, and I melt like a chocolate bar. Alison looks especially glowy and beautiful today, wearing soft pink nail polish and a sunny yellow sweater. Her eyes are creased in dewy concern, mascara licking her long eyelashes, and I gaze at her and ... suddenly remember I'm not saying anything, and everyone is looking at me, waiting. Gooseberries! "You *are* okay, aren't you?" Alison asks, and I feel my face redden.

Zanna smirks, knowing exactly what I am.

"Oh, she's fine," she drawls, and I glare at her to shut up at once, or else I might get Siobhan to kick her out.

"She's obviously still concussed," Siobhan announces all-knowingly, and she snaps her fingers. "Kenna, pour Cat an apple juice! Actually, get me one too."

Kenna and Siobhan have been friends since Reception. Kenna is basically her Number Two and Personal Assistant. Sort of like the minion who drives the White Witch's carriage for her in Narnia. We all think Kenna is a little hard of hearing due to the low success rate of going, "OI, KENNA," in the playground (which Siobhan does often). Her grandparents, older sister Marta, and nearly all her friends apart from us, are Deaf so Kenna knows British Sign Language – and because Siobhan hates not knowing something, she learned some too. Sort of. She did an exchange with someone at Marta's Deaf school and was highly praised by the teachers for her "unique and inventive" style of signing ... so she must be doing something right!

Kenna runs around getting apple juice, then out of nowhere, Siobhan says, "Habiba, is there anything you'd like to share, since we're all gathered here?"

Kenna freezes pouring juice and even Zanna looks up from her phone.

Habiba's fairly fearless: she's captain of both the netball AND trampolining teams, as well as head cheerleader and tennis county champion: true Fitstagram royalty. She's actually brought one of her tournament trophies today just to drink her juice from. (I think she wants to make sure none of us forget her power.) She looks quite Sweaty Betty nervous now though.

"Something ... to share?" Habiba repeats.

"Don't act thicker than you already are!" Siobhan snaps, nostrils flaring. "I spotted your tragic and vapid attempts at flirting with Nico Benneston after netball on Wednesday! Did you really think we wouldn't find out?! Spill. Now."

"RIP," Zanna whispers, shuffling closer to me.

Habiba wavers through some shaky account of how her and Nico have been "practising ball techniques" (Zanna spits her drink at that) and I find myself gazing at Alison again. I suddenly notice her shoulder, which is showing because her gorgeous yellow sweater has slipped.

Aphro-DAYUM, I think I might have an Alison Addiction! I've seen shoulders before, but *Alison's* shoulder is like a whole new creation! She looks so smooth... Her face lights up in a perfect, glorious smile and my heart swells like a water balloon. Alison adjusts her sweater, touching her shoulder, and I sigh. If I were the hand upon that shoulder...

"Cat, who do *you* fancy?" Lip Gloss Lizzie asks, ripping me right out of my music-video moment. Habiba's stopped talking and everyone's looking at me again.

"Wh-who do I wh-what?!" I stutter.

"Don't be so insensitive, Lizzie!" Siobhan gasps, barging Zanna aside and clutching my hand in her manicured talons. "Cat's far too busy going through life-changing trauma to think about boys!" Then her grip on my hand loosens. "Some boys are ravishing though. Like Kieran..."

I roll my eyes at Zanna, who's scrolling through her secret Tumblr and carefully not getting involved. The last thing I want at my Recovery Party is for Siobhan to sound off about Kieran Wakely-Brown again! But the gang seems to have other ideas.

"Kieran is dreamy, to be fair," Habiba agrees, as Kenna signs "beautiful" over her shoulder. "He's so tall and blond, and have you seen his forearms?! Kieran is everybody's type. You're so hashtag-blessed, Siobhan."

"Well, no offence," I snap, without thinking. "But Kieran is not *my* type at all, actually."

There's a shocked silence. Zanna mouths, "Uh-oh." Then Siobhan explodes.

"NOT YOUR TYPE?! Did that bus liquefy your brain?!" Siobhan stomps around the picnic rug, waving her arms about like she's on fire. "Kieran is an exquisite fusion of human DNA! How is WALKING ART 'not your type'?! If Kieran Wakely-Brown isn't good enough for you, Cat, then actually you'll almost definitely DIE ALONE!"

"It's because Cat likes someone else," Zanna says, still glued to her phone. Then she freezes, eyes widening. I gawp at her like a catfish. WHAT THE ACTUAL FRUIT JUICE SMOOTHIE?! Zanna's eyes dart between me and Siobhan. "I mean, probably," Zanna says, in a teeny-tiny voice. "It's *probably* because Cat likes someone else."

I could strangle my Sagittari-USELESS friend! Now everyone is looking. Siobhan ogles me like a seagull. Kenna grips her juice in trembling suspense. Lip Gloss Lizzie has even stopped applying her lip gloss. Habiba just looks relieved the attention is off her and heckles me with "Who? Who is it, Cat?!"

And then it's like I'm being swarmed by owls, everyone going "who, who, who" and I stare at Alison, who is looking right into my soul, only I pray to Aphrodite she isn't really, else I will be ruined. And I open my mouth, grasping for a name, a face, anything apart from Alison Bridgewater, who is still staring right at me and—

"JAMIE!" I blurt, then clap a hand to my mouth.

Too late. There's an uproar of screaming and shrieking.

Mum appears at the top of the stairs, looking alarmed and mum-like in her cardigan. "Is everything all right, girls?"

"No, it's absolutely not!" Siobhan gesticulates, but I think Mum is scared of Siobhan because she goes, "That's all right, then!" and disappears back into her study.

"You fancy Jamie Owusu?!" Siobhan rages. "I can't believe you didn't tell me!"

"I'm surprised," Alison says.

"Why?!" I squeak, already defensive.

Alison shrugs her gorgeous shoulders. "He's really quiet and you're kind of ... loud, you know?" She smiles, then reaches over and squeezes my hand. Gooseberries, I'm about to incinerate! "In a good way, obviously," she adds.

LOUD?! I swallow, not sure how to take this. Alison sees me as LOUD?

"I sit next to Jamie in science!" Kenna squeals, and I feel my soul leave my body through cringe-fest embarrassment. "He asked if you were okay three times today."

"That's not so many!" I protest, but Siobhan is having none of it.

"That confirms everything!" she exclaims. "He's obviously totally infatuated with you. Don't worry about a thing, Cat! We'll make this happen."

I'm not sure I've ever heard anything so ominous. I look to Zanna in despair, but she's being about as helpful as, well, Zanna – who is the most unhelpful person of all. I think my panic is showing too, because Alison squeezes my hand and says, "Well, nobody's asked me who I like." And Siobhan goes into cardiac arrest for the third time in five minutes.

Alison, probably thinking she's totally saved my knickerbockers, tells everybody about Private School Dude, and I think I'd rather be on a West End stage performing a naked salsa with Mrs Warren than where I am right now, listening to this.

"That's why I wanted to talk to you, Cat, so you could check his signs in your star bible... But then you got hit by the bus! Anyway, his name is Oscar, and he's a Gemini." Alison grins as I retch up my voice box. ALISON FANCIES A GEMINI?! This is too much. My cousin, Lilac, aka the Queen of Everlasting Evil, is a Gemini, and she's literally cut my hair while I'm sleeping before. You can NEVER trust a Gemini!

But before I can warn Alison off, she says, "We're going to the park together this weekend! So that's my secret out." Alison winks at me, and I am positively beaming to hide the tornado of horror brewing in my stomach.

Alison Bridgewater is going on a date. Just like that, my heart is officially broken, and I am destined to never-ending solitude.

*An Aquarius Alone* will probably be the title of my biography.



22:20



**Zanna Szczechowska**

Hey, umm, didn't mean to say that out loud. Sorry lolz. Are you all right? 22:11

I'M FINE!!! PERFECTLY SPLENDID  
HAHAHAHAAA!!! 22:13

Are you laughing hysterically via text message? You know there really are other fish in the sea, right? 22:13

That's an unfortunately Piscean metaphor you've chosen :(

And Zanna, what if I'm a rubbish fisherman!!! 22:14

You probably are, you're rubbish at everything tbh 22:17

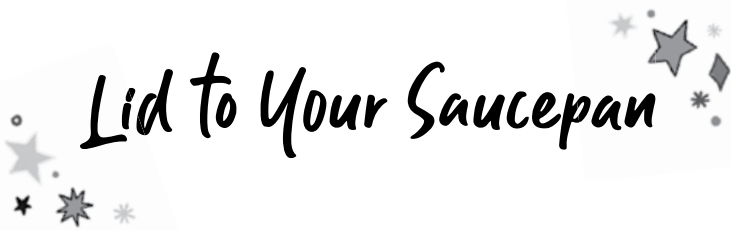
??? Aren't you meant to be comforting me??? 22:17

Oh yeah lol. There are other fish in the sea! 22:17

YOU'VE SAID THAT ALREADY!!! 22:18







# Lid to Your Saucepan

It rains at the weekend, so Alison and Oscar are going to the shopping centre instead. The shopping centre. Apparently that was his idea, which is the most loathsome Gemini idea ever! But I still reply to Alison's message and say I'm glad it's not cancelled.

I'm not glad though. I'm heartbroken and upset. I lie in bed all morning eating cereal directly out of the box and wallowing (the best word for such activities). Libra Season ends in two days and I'm still no closer to finding true love.

Unfortunately, it's Saturday, the day Mum and Jamie's mum, Fran, have their "sewing group", so there shan't be much time to search for romance today. It's not much of a group: it only includes Fran and Mum and seems to consist of a lot more biscuits and cups of tea than it does sewing. "It's escapism!" Mum always claims, which is valid. If I were a banker, I'd want to escape too. "My job can be hectic. And that's only the job I'm *paid* for."

Then she'll laugh annoyingly, like I'm too young and stupid to understand she's talking about being a mother as well.

After some more wallowing, I get up and go to my mirror, which is covered in Disney princess stickers but has a small opening so I can actually see my face. Perhaps I need more

stickers though, because this morning I look horrendous. Like that painting *The Scream*.

Ironically though, screaming isn't going to help. Alison is going on a date with Oscar and I'm spending the morning with Jamie, whether I like it or not.

HINT: I do not.



When the doorbell rings, I'm already downstairs trying to stealthily return the cereal before anyone notices I had it in my bedroom, so I answer it myself. "Coming!" I even call, to cement my false-sunny mood as I swing open the front door.

Mum appears behind me, chuckling cheerfully (too cheerfully) at Fran, as Jamie hops out of his mum's little red car like a rabbit out of a hat. "You're very keen to play butler this morning! That's a pleasant change. You should see her on Sundays, Fran – never up before two in the afternoon! Not sure why she's so keen today..."

They witter on. Jamie is grinning ear to ear and I wonder right away what *he* has to be so happy about. Something awful I expect. Mum and Fran head to the living area, and I hear Fran say, not too quietly, "She'd be good for him, Heather!" Excuse me?! Good for him?! You'd think I'm being married off like a princess in Tudor England!

"Hey there, Cat," Jamie says, weirdly sauntering over with a weird sauntering sort of smile. "Shall we go upstairs or something?"

I'm not sure where "or something" would be, as it's literally just upstairs or down, so I turn on my heel and head to my room – which, quite luxuriously for the iPhone Box, has four

entire walls. Usually, I lie on my bed and Jamie sits on the floor to complain. Jamie (not unusually for a Cancer) has many sorrows, such as his losery friend Lucas never letting him win at computer games, or his mum forgetting to wash his bed socks, so his feet get cold at night.

Today though, Jamie seems to want to talk about my friends. Luckily, not my bed socks. "Siobhan – she's your friend, right? Isn't she dating Kieran Wakely-Brown?"

"She just likes him," I mutter, eye roll incoming. "Apparently, everyone does."

"Do you?" Jamie asks, and I splutter offendedly.

"No! I wouldn't date Kieran if you threatened me with crocodiles!"

"Oh, cool," says Jamie, grinning strangely. "So, about Alison..."

I freeze. "What about her?"

"Her mum goes to our church! She knows *my* mum." He says this like it's an achievement, cracking his knuckles. He winces, then rubs them mournfully. "They're both from Kumasi, the Garden City of Ghana," he adds proudly. "So they're friends."

Ghana sounds gorgeous when Alison talks about it. Apparently, her middle name means "Tuesday", the day of the week she was born, which is a Ghanese tradition. Or is it Ghanaian? I consider this, then realize I'm just thinking about Alison's smile... Big, poetic sigh.

"Alison said that you mentioned me at your recovery party," Jamie says. "She said you told your friends you'd date me."

Ghana vanishes. I sit up sharply. "She said WHAT?!"

Jamie has a twinkle in his eye that gives me the heebie-jeebies. "She said you told your friends you'd date me."

I might be about to throw up my skeleton. Freaking Alison! "I mean, I talked about you!" I babble. "You're, like, my friend, right?! I didn't think you'd mind, and everyone expected me to say someone, so...!"

"I didn't mind at all," Jamie says, then he jumps from the floor to the bed with remarkable speed. "I thought it was... Well, you know." He smirks. "Cute."

I gulp. "Well, good! I'm SO relieved, Jamie, thank you for understanding! And I hope you know that, well, if you ever need to tell anyone you've kissed a girl, for example, I'd be HAPPY to put my name forward in return – not that we HAVE TO kiss, just...!"

I'm feeling faint. How can I explain my way out of this? Maybe I should tell Jamie I'm in an arranged marriage with a German prince? But then Jamie might ask his name, and I don't know any German names. My mind races. Strubert Humbervink. Rudolph Strudolph. Just as I'm beginning to wonder if an Italian prince would be more believable, Jamie says, "I'd love to take you up on that offer, angel," and he leans forward and KISSES me.

WHAT IN THE NAME OF RUDOLPH STRUDOLPH?!

It's my first ever kiss. I don't know what to do! What if I dribble in his mouth? I don't even remember to close my eyes! My balance, propped up on the bed on my elbows, is not ideal, and his weight against me means my neck is straining to hold up my head.

"Mmfmmphmhrmph!" I go, and Jamie pulls back. "Um, I'm falling!"

Jamie winks. Oh, gooseberries. "Head over heels in love, I hope."

I cough. "Um, wow, how swoony is that? Listen, I actually—"

"I took your advice and started writing songs like Chidi Unigwe," Jamie says, flicking his eyebrows up. "Wrote one about you the other day."

I naturally assume he's kidding, so I laugh right in his face, but he doesn't laugh back, so I stop laughing. "Wait, really? You're serious? That's ... um ... so sweet!"

Taylor Swift me down, I didn't tell Jamie to write songs ... did I?! Oh, perhaps I did. But I didn't mean it! And perhaps I'm a terrible actress, as well as a terrible kisser and advice-giver, because Jamie goes all sheepish. "You think it's cringe, don't you?"

He looks like he might cry. I look to the door, wishing for once that Luna would barge in ranting about veganism, but no such luck. Jamie sniffs. Gooseberries! What am I supposed to do? Quickly, my lips squeezed all the way shut, I kiss him super-fast on the cheek.

"It's not cringe!" I squeak. "Don't be upset!"

Jamie looks round, eyes brimming with hope. "I can play it for you, if you like," he says, eager as a puppy. "I know the lyrics off by heart."

I gawp at him. "Play it for me? Like, here? Like, now?"

Before I know what's happening, Jamie is fixing me with an intense stare. First, he starts clapping. Then he's singing! I quickly clock the tune. It's "Jolene" by Dolly Parton.

*"Her smile is like Marilyn Monroe's,  
Her skin is white and soft as snow,  
And she has got the nicest nose, Cathleen..."*

It's awful. It doesn't even scan! If Dolly Parton could hear this, I am certain she would drop dead from shame. But what can I do? He's in my bedroom! I keep my smile plastered on like my life depends on it and Jamie continues his ballad.

*"Cathleen, Cathleen, Cathleen, Cathleen...  
I'm begging you, please let me be your man...  
Cathleen, Cathleen, Cathleen, Cathleen!  
Please let me be the lid to your saucepan..."*

There seem to be a lot more verses than I remember being in "Jolene", but eventually Jamie stops slapping his knees and pauses dramatically, eyes squeezed shut with emotional intensity. Then he breaks into a grin. "What did you think?"

Slowly, I clap. "It was ... very good, Jamie! Thank you so much."

He leans forward to kiss me again. I let him, because at least he can't sing if his lips are occupied. Then my phone lights up. I make out Alison's name on the screen, so I break away from Jamie to read the message.

CAT! Date is going GRATE. He's so cute!!!

Details to come!!! xxxxx

12:29

She's right about that: her constant updates are definitely GRATING on me. I open the keyboard to reply like a decent friend and bombard her with support, but woe alas, I can't find the words. Alison Bridgewater is on a date with a boy, and the boy is cute. I sit in silence and stare at the screen. Jamie waits awkwardly.

Finally, he clears his throat. "Who's texting?"

I hastily lock the screen. "No one!"

"Not a guy, is it?"

I don't meet his eye because I might cry. I force a smile, but I actually might have to rip my face off to cope. (Which would still be less painful than this.) "Why? Jealous?"

He shrugs, aloof as a loofah, but his mouth droops and he's clearly the most jealous jelly bean ever. He looks almost as miserable as I feel! Did the stars plan this? What with the bus and now Jamie kissing me, slap-bang in the middle of Libra Season, maybe the universe is trying to tell me something? Perhaps I can't save Alison from a Gemini, but I can save myself from needing to write *An Aquarius Alone!* Siobhan swims dangerously to mind... "A boyfriend is the best natural cleanse, Cat... I never even think about Chidi any more!"

I nudge Jamie with my foot. "It was just a friend. Don't worry."


My phone vibrates again, but this time I ignore it. Licking my lips determinedly, I grab Jamie's collar and yank him in so we can kiss some more. I'm not sure what to make of the kisses: they're more *hard* work than fireworks. But maybe I've been watching too much Disney? I kiss Jamie and try very hard not to think about Alison Bridgewater. Then I realize that there's a problem.

I'm actually always thinking about Alison Bridgewater.

## WHAT I LIKE ABOUT JAMIE OWUSU

- \* He's ... there. Yes. Good start!
- \* He always has biscuits on him.
- \* I mean on his person, not on his clothes ... although that too.
- \* He has really, REALLY good ... intentions?
- \* He's bad at texting, so we don't have to talk lots.
- \* He's a Cancer, the easiest sign to order about.
- \* He already visits every Saturday, so we don't need to arrange dates.
- \* He's not Alison Bridgewater!
- \* I slightly wish he was though.





# Nine Rules of Necking

Alison gives her date rave reviews on Monday, but I remain unconvinced. I mean, a shopping centre? I still can't believe Private School Oscar took Alison Bridgewater to a shopping centre. Boys can get away with anything! I scowl across the playground.

It's coming up to snake-ridden Scorpio Season, but because Siobhan says "the library is for nerds and losers," we're outside huddled in our blazers like penguins. We always occupy the same picnic table by the art studios, which Siobhan claimed as our group's space in Year Seven. Her initials are literally carved into the tabletop, so no one else dares sit here now. Not even the teachers.

"... then he loaned me a fiver!" Alison reminisces. "For an ice cream at the café."

"Sorry," Zanna butts in. "Loaned you a fiver?"

Alison's smile doesn't even flicker. "His dad works in finance," she explains. "So Oscar's very careful with money. I'm going to pay him back next week."

Then Siobhan demands, "Did you guys neck it out?"

Alison's smile tightens. "Not on the first date, Siobhan!"

Siobhan goggles at her. "This isn't medieval England,

Alison! Are you dense? How is it even a date if you don't neck each other? Boys aren't good for much else..."

"Well, she could always talk to him," I suggest.

Siobhan does not look impressed at that. "If a boy took me on a date and didn't try to kiss me, I'd assume he was a frigid weirdo. What are you supposed to talk to boys about anyway? I don't think that's natural, to be honest."

On that, we possibly can agree. Alison smiles at me in allyship though, so obviously that makes everything worth it, even if I am now in the foolish position of defending Private School Oscar. "Thank you, Cat," she whispers, as Siobhan rants on. "Love you the most."

Blushing like a clown, I hastily look away from Alison and accidentally make laser-precise eye contact with another girl on the other side of the grass. Wait – I recognize her! It's the girl with the green glasses who counts in Korean. She's slouched against a tree with Marcus and Maja, these two goony goths with bleach-blonde hair from the drama crowd.

She has dark hair with blonde highlights and bold black eyeliner, which is shockingly outrageous all by itself, since fashion-loathing old fossils like Mrs Warren usually sniff out makeup like bloodhounds. Perhaps she's too Avril Lavigne rebellious to care though. Her shirt is untucked and her socks are pulled up to her knees.

Basically, she's über-cool as can be. She's the überest.

The girl looks at me and I look at her, then I frown, because it's almost like she was looking at me already. She tilts her head curiously, then turns back to Marcus and Maja, like our moment of intergalactically intense eye contact never even happened.

I nudge Zanna. "Zanna. Zanna. Zanna. Who's that girl?"

Zanna looks round from Siobhan, who's occupying the tabletop, cross-legged like some sort of deity, and reciting her Nine Rules of Necking to Kenna and Alison. Habiba's had a lucky escape today – she's teaching tae kwon do to Year Sevens with anger-management issues.

"What girl?" asks Zanna.

"That girl, over there!" I try to point without pointing. "Under the tree."

"Why are you twitching like that?" Zanna frowns. "Have you been Tasered?"

For the love of Coraline Jones, she truly is useless. "There is a girl, Zanna, standing under that tree. She was looking at me! She has blonde highlights and huge socks and—"

"Oh, *that* girl," Zanna says finally. She might need new glasses. "That's Morgan."

Then she stops. I blink at her. "And?! Who's Morgan?"

"*That's* Morgan," Zanna says, nodding to the tree.

Rattlesnakes galore. I'm just about ready to throttle her!

"Yes, I understand that *that's* Morgan," I reply. "But who is she? Do I know her?"

"Well, obviously not, if you're asking me," Zanna replies. I have to close my eyes at that point. I am a true beacon of patience. Then Zanna says, "She's new this year. Julia from Slavic Society is in her form and said she was in a band, which is cool." Then Zanna smirks. "So really, Cat, it makes no sense that she'd be looking at someone as uncool as you."

Before I have time to box Zanna's ears, Siobhan overhears our conversation and spins round on the tabletop.

"Morgan Delaney? URGH! You're wrong, Zanna. Morgan isn't *in* a band, she's just banned. Banned from Starbucks, I think is what Habiba said."

"Banned from which Starbucks?!" Kenna glances at Morgan fearfully.

"Every Starbucks," Siobhan says with conviction. "So she must have done something truly evil. My useless cousin – Scrounging Samantha – once worked in Starbucks and told me you can get away with anything! I heard she's Irish or something twisted like that."

I widen my eyes. "Siobhan! You can't say that! Anyway, aren't *you* Irish?"

Siobhan stares at me like I'm thicker than brown bread. "Why would you think I'm Irish?! My parents are both from Sevenoaks! Anyway, she didn't group with me and Lizzie in psychology, even though I asked her because she's new and has an all-right nose. She said she'd already promised Marcus! And he's an utter freak show on wheels – he literally plays chess for fun like some dying old man – so we won't be friends with her."

"I guess she does have a streaky hair dye," says Kenna, wrinkling her nose.

Siobhan smirks. "It looks like she's dip-dyed it in mustard."

Siobhan and Kenna exchange glances, then fall about cackling like bats. I'm just wondering what Morgan Delaney could possibly have done to get banned from every Starbucks in the country, when Alison puts her hand right on top of mine. I freeze and Alison smiles like everything is normal. Which it is, obviously. I am completely in control of the situation.

"Cat," says Alison, eyes crinkling in that crinkly and sympathetic way that absolutely ruins my life. "Can we partner up in PE? I'm awful at tennis and last time Siobhan was raging with me for losing – she's too used to practising with Habiba! But you're used to losing, right? Would you mind?"

"Sure!" I squeak. "We can team!"

"Great!" Alison gives me a gorgeous-as-a-Greek-island smile. Over her shoulder, Zanna rolls her eyes. "Cover me while I check my phone?"

I turn so that I'm hiding Alison from passing teachers, trying to ignore my cheeks heating up like I'm on that Greek island myself. What is wrong with me? It's just tennis! Why does every tiny moment feel like the biggest deal since Jupiter when it's her?

"Oh my goodness, Cat!" Alison gasps, and I whirl round. What now?!

Alison turns the screen, showing everyone round the table before she shows me. Siobhan gasps, then Kenna, then Zanna goes, "Oh, yikes," and finally, the screen reaches me. My lungs practically explode out of my nostrils! Jamie has posted a picture of me from Saturday on his Instagram (@owusuperman) and the caption says "Saturday is Caturday! Isn't MY GIRLFRIEND a right piece of heaven?" Tagged: @cathezodiaclown



We're in the PE changing rooms, being awkward and silent. You'd think we'd all turned into Zanna. Unusually, none of us know what to say (or sign, in Kenna's case). I didn't tell any

of them about kissing Jamie on Saturday and, given their reactions, I'm guessing they feel rather betrayed. And me? I'm positively flabbergastrocopied! Or is it flobberghosted?

Whichever it is, I am that, because I never told Jamie we were a thing! What does he think he's playing at?! For Alison to find the post as well... Coming to school in a clown costume would be less embarrassing.

"I can't believe you didn't say anything!" Siobhan hisses.

"I didn't..." I begin, but I trail off. Because I can hardly tell everyone he was wrong. I don't want to make Jamie the laughing stock of the school. Anyway, I still have to see him every Saturday, so this is quite the hullabaloo of a situation.

"Didn't what? Didn't think I was important enough to know?!" Siobhan unbuttons her shirt. She always takes off all her clothes before changing, just to make everyone feel bad about her toned and perfect figure. She goes jogging with Habiba twice a week, like some sort of masochist. She always has matching underwear: today it's snakeskin green.

"Sorry," I mumble.

Alison nudges me. "It's okay, babe. I'm sure you'd have told us at lunch. I spent the whole break talking about *my* date – you couldn't get a word in edgeways!"

But Siobhan doesn't look convinced. "Whatever!" she chimes, sliding on her PE top and yanking up her shorts. "Zanna? I'm partnering with you today."

"Um, cool?" Zanna is still tying her shoelaces.

As usual, the slowest to change is Millie Butcher. She's pale and wispy, and shorter than any other girl in the year, which is why Siobhan calls her "Millie the Micronaut". She's

not taken off her uniform yet, and Siobhan eyes her up like a boa constrictor.

"What's taking you so long, Mills?" she calls across the changing room.

Millie flushes red. "Nothing, thanks."

Siobhan mimes not hearing, one hand on her ear. "What was that?"

"Nothing," Millie repeats louder. "I'm fine."

"Okay, there's no need to shout!" Siobhan staggers backwards, fake-gasping, and the other girls laugh, leering at Millie in hope of a snappy comeback. But Millie is like a depressed ninja: she never fights back. She just takes off her top and Siobhan snorts. "Still in a bralette! Adorable. Anyway, I'm changed! Zanna?"

She snaps her fingers and strides out of the changing room. Zanna groans, then slopes after her. I'm watching Millie though, feeling oddly uncomfortable. I should say something positive! Tell her Siobhan's only joking, even if it's, um ... not always a TOTAL giggle-fest? Then Alison brushes my arm. My skin tingles dangerously.

"Are you okay?" Alison asks. "Don't worry about Siobhan."

"Oh, I'm not." I definitely am. "Thanks though."

Alison smiles. "Anytime! Now come lose at tennis with me."

Perhaps, if I'm really lucky, I'll get knocked out and re-concussed by a speeding tennis ball, and I won't have to deal with any of this later.



16:45



## The Gang

**Habiba**

Cat, my Auntie says she's  
so happy for u getting  
a #BOYFRIEND!!! xox 16:35

**Cat**

Doesn't your Auntie  
live in Morocco?  
How did she find  
out??? 16:37

**Siobhan**

OFC she found out, you  
DUNDERHEAD! You're in  
a RELATIONSHIP, ppl have to  
know, or what's the point???  
So I told Jasmine McGregor,  
problem SOLVED 16:39

**Cat**

YOU TOLD \*LOUDMOUTH  
JASMINE MCGREGOR\*???  
SIOBHAN!!! 16:40



**Zanna**

Maybe Cat should just change her @ to @cat.owusu now... You wouldn't want Jamie to feel like a shady secret... Share ur pride with the world! :) 16:41

**Cat**

GO AWAY ZANNA!!! Me and Jamie had a very mature discussion ACTUALLY and he's agreed to keep our relationship QUIET online so it can blossom without interference from the outside world... It's very romantic and I'm very VERY happy about this!!! 16:42

**Alison**

Awww... That's so cute! I'm so happy you're happy babe!! xo 16:43

**Zanna**

Same, bestie :) SOOO happy! 16:44

