

MY
SECRET
LIES
WITH
YOU

FAYE BIRD

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For Julia, Eliza and Newellie, Mum and Webber and
the holidays we spent together in Ynys, North Wales.

And also for Rosa. You're a star. You know why!

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USBORNE

A grayscale photograph of a coastal scene. In the foreground, the water is rippled. In the middle ground, a person is standing in the water. In the background, a cliffside has three people standing on it. The sky is overcast. The word "ALYS" is overlaid in the center-right of the image.

ALYS

When I first saw you all sitting, talking, laughing, by the lifeguard hut on the beach, you all looked so happy. It was kind of intoxicating. I watched you for a little while, and then I kept on watching. I couldn't stop. All I wanted was to have what you all had. And as I watched I only had one thought – I want to be a part of that. The day we spent together at the lake was one of the best. If I hadn't seen you that day, spent it with you, I'm not sure I would have ever done what I did. So I want to say thank you. And I hope that if you feel what I have done is wrong, you will find a way to forgive me, and if you don't understand why I am doing what I'm doing now, this letter will in some way help you try.

PART
ONE

THIS SUMMER

A grayscale photograph of a coastal scene. In the foreground, there is a body of water with gentle ripples. In the middle ground, a dark, rocky cliff or shoreline is visible on the left. Several small figures of people are standing on the cliff. The background shows a calm sea extending to a distant horizon under a cloudy sky.

CAIT

Arriving at the cottage felt like arriving at the edge of the world.

“So, we’re here,” Mum said, getting out of the car. I could smell how different the place was as soon as she opened the door. It was the air. Cows. Or was it just a general farm smell? I wasn’t sure. Fresh and not-fresh all at the same time. It hit the inside of my nose and the coolness of it tingled.

Wales.

North Wales.

We were so far away from London now.

I watched Johnny get out of the car, and follow Mum over onto the grass. He stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her belly as they looked on together at the view. An estuary. Sheep. Mountains. I stayed in the car. I didn’t care that I’d already been in it for six horribly long hours, relegated to the back like a little kid while Mum

and Johnny talked and laughed and forgot I was even there. I mean, occasionally Mum would turn round and smile, pass me a sweet, a chocolate eclair or something, and I'd hate myself for kind of grunting back from under my headphones, because acting like this, feeling like I did, it really wasn't me. It wasn't who I am or the kind of person I wanted to be. It was just that coming on this so-called holiday with Mum and Johnny, out in this middle of nowhere place, was really the last thing in the world I wanted to do. And for some reason, despite all my moods in the week leading up to it, when Mum had suggested it and booked it all at the last minute, she hadn't picked up on the fact that I didn't want to go. And I just hadn't had the heart to tell her.

Mum broke herself free from Johnny's arms and came back to the car, opening the boot.

"Come on, Cait," she said. "Let's get our stuff and open up the cottage. Ours is the one on the left."

I looked over at the cottages – just two of them, sitting very slightly apart on a grassy bank at the edge of the estuary.

I turned back to Mum. She was smiling. She looked really excited to be here. Didn't she get that I'd just spent all of today feeling like a complete spare wheel? Didn't she get that I'd rather be back at home in London with my

friends? Didn't she get that the idea of being here for two whole weeks with this...this scenery, this smell, and her and loved-up Johnny was not my idea of a holiday at all? I mean, Mia was in Ibiza and Jade was in Malta. And me? I was in the depths of Snowdonia with my mum and her new boyfriend and it was completely, absolutely, the last place in the world I wanted to be.

"It's cute," Johnny said as we walked into the cottage.

It was small. Tiny, in fact. The three of us couldn't fit in the hall with our bags. I was half in, half out of the front door as Johnny stood at the bottom of the stairs with Mum in between. It was only when Mum moved along a bit, and Johnny shoved his case onto the stairs, that I could completely step inside.

Damp.

That's what I could smell. And the walls, they were painted a gross, buttery yellow. Or had they been white and just turned yellow over the years? I couldn't tell, but they were bumpy and rough to touch. It looked like someone had thrown a handful of rocks into the paint. And I was sure the temperature inside the house had literally dropped three degrees compared to what it felt like outside.

"Nice slate floor," Mum said, shuffling along.

"Local stone," Johnny said. "Tons of it around."

“I’m going to go up and put these bags in our room,” Mum said, and as she went up the stairs I literally thought they were going to come away from the wall with all the creaking.

I kicked my bag under the stairs and went through a door opposite into a snug little room with a window seat and a couple of sofas. There was a television on a dark wooden table. It seriously looked like it should have been in some kind of museum. I found the remote and switched it on. I heard sound before a picture appeared; alien voices, garbled words I couldn’t make sense of, rushing, clunky, fast, and then I realized – it was Welsh. The programme was in Welsh. I carried on watching as the picture emerged. It looked like a daytime drama or soap. People I didn’t recognize, speaking a language I couldn’t understand, and yet I wasn’t in the heart of some glamorous European city. I was still here in the UK, in a cottage that seemed to have a sub-zero temperature of its own. It was all so much worse than I’d even expected it to be.

“Cait!” I heard Mum calling from upstairs.

“Yeah?” I said, and I switched off the TV and moved from the sitting room back into the hall to follow her voice. I wondered if my hoody was still in the car. I seriously needed to put on another layer.

“Will you bring some more stuff in?” Mum said. “And pop the kettle on while you’re down there?”

“Yeah,” I said, and I went through the only other door off the hallway and found the kitchen. A set of cabinets, a sink, more yellowing walls, and a tiny little window at the back looking out onto a scrap of grass with a tree and a plastic swing. And beyond that there was a gate that went straight out onto the estuary – the estuary being a whole load of grasses and marsh, and eventually it looked like there was possibly some sand before the water.

I found the kettle and flicked it on, pulling open the nearest cupboard to look for teabags and mugs. I pulled out three and set them on the worktop. Three mugs. Three. Three always used to mean Mum, Dad and me. Not any more. No one tells you that when someone dies, it’s the stupid little things – three teabags, three mugs, just the number three – that floor you. Little things that lurk in grief’s dark corners and jump out and grab hold of you at the most unexpected times.

Where are you, Dad?

I’d often found myself saying those words over the last eighteen months. Sometimes I’d say them out loud, sometimes just in my head. I’m not sure why. I think it was just the comfort of talking to someone...no, talking to *him*. I knew that if he could see me now, standing here,

in this cottage, making tea, he'd have said something like, *Oh, Cait. Not quite the holiday you were hoping for, eh? Come on, give me a hug. We'll make it fun, okay?* And it would always work; whatever he said it always seemed to make things better. He could make everything okay.

"Oh...you're making tea!" Johnny said, coming into the kitchen. "Great."

I nodded and walked quickly over to the fridge.

"Hopefully there'll be some milk in here," I said, opening the door, and sticking my head in, partly so I didn't have to look at Johnny, partly so I didn't have to keep making more conversation. I mean, I knew I needed to make the effort with Johnny, but it was really hard. We had literally nothing in common but Mum.

"Yup, milk, and there's some butter here too," I said walking back to the mugs with the milk.

"Just a drop for me, thanks, Cait," he said, coming to stand next to me, watching me pour and stir. He was really annoying me now. I wished he'd just go away.

"Where's Mum?" I asked. Really for something to say, because the kitchen felt even smaller now, like there was no room to breathe with just me and Johnny in it.

"She's still unpacking. You should take your stuff up. Your room is nice. It's the one at the front. You can get yourself sorted."

I nodded, hating him for telling me what to do, and then I watched him take two mugs and go out the kitchen and back up to Mum.

I looked at my tea, the one left on the side. I didn't want it now. I picked the mug up and sloshed the contents into the sink, watching the steam rise as the brown liquid slinked its way down the plughole. I went back out of the house towards the car to find my hoody and try and shake the chill I could feel against my skin just from being here.

I opened up the car and reached in. My hoody was lying on the back seat. It was mad how much warmer it was being outside the house than in. It was actually ridiculous.

"Hey!"

A voice. I looked to see where it was coming from. I hadn't seen any other signs of life, anyone else around.

"You just arrived?"

A boy was walking towards me now from the road, wearing colours that were way too bright – red shorts and a huge oversized red hoody. I smiled at him, and noticed his black hair and deep olive skin. He kind of exuded warmth in the coolness of this place, and it wasn't just his clothes.

"Yeah," I said. "Just arrived."

"From London?"

I nodded, and noticed how dark his eyes were too. They were so brown they were almost black. “So does everyone who stays here come from London, then?”

“A few,” he said. “Getting away from it all.”

“Right,” I said, nodding.

“You can’t get more away from it all than here, I guess,” he said.

I nodded. “Yup,” I said. He was so right.

“I’m Marko,” he said. “I’m in the cottage next door, staying with my dad. I’m here for most of the summer.” He pointed to the cottage along from ours.

I nodded again. He was so easy with himself, and so friendly, so familiar with me, I almost thought I was going to blush, but I didn’t. Instead I just kept nodding like some kind of idiot.

“And you are?” he said, smiling.

“God, sorry, yes, I’m Cait. We’re here for a couple of weeks.”

“Great,” he said. “Great – Cait...well nice to meet you. If you need anything at all while you’re here then just let me know.”

“Thanks,” I said, and as he started to walk across the gravel in front of the cottages and over to his front door, glancing back at me, I lifted up my hand as if to wave and then stopped myself. What was I doing?

“Listen...” he said, “if you fancy coming to a party, we’re having one at the beach tomorrow night. It’ll be a good one. You should come.”

“Oh, right, okay,” I said. “Thanks.” I stood there for a moment, wondering what to say or what to do with my face, because I’d been here less than an hour and had managed to get myself invited to a party and I wasn’t quite sure how I’d done that. Admittedly I’d been invited by a slightly over-friendly boy who was definitely older than me, dressed predominantly in fire-engine red. But still...

I was pretty sure I wasn’t going to go – there was no way I’d be brave enough to just turn up on my own to a beach party with a whole bunch of strangers on a Saturday night – but I liked the thought that I’d been asked. I liked it a lot. Maybe this holiday wasn’t going to be quite as dead as I’d thought after all.