

Let
the
Light
In

Also by Jenny Downham:

Before I Die
You Against Me
Unbecoming
Furious Thing

Let
the
Light
In

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& LOUIS HILL**

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For Grandad

Leah

I check how I look in the bathroom mirror. The flickering lightbulb doesn't help. I run my fingers through my hair and retouch my lip balm, trying to see myself through Alex's eyes. He told me once that I look like the girl in a painting by some Russian artist. He showed me a picture on his phone – she had pale skin, dark hair piled up, a book in her hand. I liked him thinking I looked like a famous painter's muse.

It's true I can look pretty when I try. Tonight, I've used a foundation with tiny sparkles in it. And mascara. It's like putting on a disguise. I almost look sophisticated. It's like there used to be a secret, unnoticed Leah who I hardly dared believe in and now she's come to life. I'm no longer just the boring schoolgirl, the reliable daughter, or the person to turn to when the washing machine breaks. I am so much more. Because of Alex.

I squint at myself in the mirror and imagine his eyes grazing the length of me when we meet in an hour's time.

You, Leah, are the best secret of my life.

The spell's broken by Abby battering the bathroom door with her little fists demanding I let her in to pee and further broken by Charlie bolting out of his bedroom when he spots me attempting to sneak downstairs wearing my favourite jacket.

He skids to a halt. 'Where are you going?'

'Study session.'

'Looking like that?'

'Looking good makes me study harder, Charlie.'

'You're wearing make-up.'

I turn on the stairs and flutter my eyelashes for him. 'Got to make the effort for A-levels.'

'What about dinner?'

'Up to you.'

He sighs and plonks himself on the top step. 'What am I supposed to make?'

'You're fifteen, Charlie. Work it out.'

'I'll do it,' Abby says coming out of the bathroom and wiping her wet hands down her jeans. 'I'll do toast.'

'No,' I tell her. 'Charlie's perfectly capable of making food. Plus, you're only seven.'

'And a half.' She sits next to Charlie on the step and grins up at me. 'Can I help though?'

'You can be a team,' I say. 'Charlie will cook and you can assist and the pair of you will hang out having a lovely time together until eight o'clock when, Abby, you'll brush your teeth and go to bed with zero fuss. Charlie will read you a story. Charlie will then do his homework.' I smile at them each in turn. 'Sound doable?'

But I know from the look in Charlie's eyes that he needs more than this. Together, the three of us go into the kitchen. I yank open the fridge and pull out some potatoes. There's a hunk of cheese and a scraping of mayonnaise left in the

jar. I put everything on the table and then check the cupboards and the freezer. No baked beans but there's a couple of inches of sunflower oil in the bottle and there's plenty of frozen sweetcorn. I tell Charlie that it's more energy efficient if he microwaves the potatoes for five minutes, but yummier to then drizzle them with oil and salt and cook in the oven until the skins are nice and crisp.

'You need to keep checking on them though. And don't put the oven too high.'

I send Abby off to inspect the gas and electric meters. She comes skipping back saying both have over a pound on them – they'll be fine for warmth and light until I get back.

'While the food's cooking, ask Mum if she wants some,' I say. 'If she says no, try and get her to drink something at least.'

'Hey,' Abby says, 'maybe she'll get up if she knows you're going out.'

'She's sleepy today, babe. Give her space. Charlie's going to look after you.'

'You know, she was supposed to pick me up from school . . .'

'And she tried.'

Just not hard enough. She probably didn't get beyond crossing the courtyard to the main gate. On days when Mum promises to do Abby's pick-up, me or Charlie always go to the school anyway. Plan B is always required. In fact, it's easier when Mum doesn't try and achieve anything. No one gets disappointed.

‘Right,’ I say, ruffling Abby’s hair. ‘Shall I tell you where I’ve hidden the biscuits?’

Abby grins. ‘Can I have two?’

‘Sure.’

‘Can I play outside?’

‘That’s up to Charlie.’

Charlie simply looks bemused. ‘Am I supposed to wash the potatoes first?’

I put an arm around him and squeeze. ‘Confidence, bro.’

‘Right,’ he says, and I feel his body tensing, ‘well, that’s me screwed then.’

‘You’ll be fine.’

‘It’ll be fun,’ Abby says, hopping from one foot to the other. ‘I’ll help. I can do cheese grating.’

‘Fantastic,’ I say. ‘So, can I go now?’

Charlie sighs. ‘If you must.’

I give him another squeeze. ‘You’ll be fine.’

He nudges me off. ‘Just go. Go and study.’

I promise I’ll teach him a proper meal for next time. I should have done it before now, but what with school and Mum and well, the Alex thing – time slips by. I grab my bag and keys, blow them both kisses from the door and try not to let the thought of Charlie’s worried face dampen my mood.

As I make my way along the walkway, down the communal stairs and across the courtyard to the main door and out into the street, I shrug him off. Abby and Mum too. I feel them leave. The weight of responsibility lifting from my shoulders and chest.

Alex messages as I wait for the bus, checking I'm still coming. He reminds me of the rule: *No flirting*. I message back: *Not even a little?* And he messages: *Restrain yourself, woman*. Which makes me laugh out loud. It's amazing how as I get further from my family and closer to Alex, I feel happier and more alive than I've felt all day.

Charlie

‘Mum?’ I say, softly. ‘Mum, you awake?’

She makes a moaning noise like waking up is the worst idea in the world then flicks her eyes open and straight away shuts them again.

‘Mum?’

‘Gorgeous boy?’ There’s sleep and slowness in her voice.

I step into her bedroom. It’s dark and the air has the weight of a room that’s been occupied too long.

‘I wondered if you wanted something to eat?’

‘Let me look at you.’

‘Shall I turn on the light?’

‘No, no. Leave it.’

She squints at me in the gloom, seems to reassure herself it really is me and then closes her eyes again. Not hungry then.

‘What have you been up to?’ she asks. ‘Drawing?’

‘Not tonight, Mum.’

It was a neighbour who sent her spiralling back to bed this time. Mum was halfway across the courtyard on her way to collect Abby from school when Mrs Shah, the retired woman from three doors down, asked Mum if she was interested in joining the tenants’ association. Don’t people realize

you can't just ambush people and ask them to do stuff? Not everyone wants to be involved.

I perch on the edge of her bed. 'How are you feeling?'

'Just a bit of a headache.'

'You want paracetamol?'

'I'll be fine.'

I wait a few seconds more. 'Um, so you probably heard the smoke alarm go off . . .'

She tenses. 'Is everything OK down there?'

'Nothing to worry about. Leah gave me instructions for jacket potatoes and it didn't go well.' I attempt a chuckle.

'They look like black tennis balls.'

Mum sits up slowly. I've worried her. I didn't mean to do that. She notices a lot even when she's not looking. Like now, for instance, she knows something's up. It's almost like she can hear the tension building in my head.

Block it out, I tell myself, you ruined dinner but you can fix this.

'Is Leah sorting it?'

'She's at study group.'

'Anything else in the cupboard? Soup or beans?'

'Not really. So . . . I was wondering if I could get Abby some chips? I wouldn't need much. Just a couple of quid.'

'Is it dark out?'

'Kind of.'

Mum gazes at me. 'OK, take Abby with you and get the money from the housekeeping tin.'

'It's sort of empty.'

She sighs. 'It'll have to be the rent tin then. Make sure you let Leah know. Top shelf in the lounge behind the clock.'

She snuggles deeper under the duvet. 'You're a good boy, Charlie Marly.'

I don't move. That was Dad's name for me and she hardly ever uses it. That's got to be a sign, right? That she's getting better? But then she asks me to shut the curtains and close the door on the way out.

Guess I got that wrong too.