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"A welcome reminder that
love is love, no matter what."

—Jodi Picoult,

New York Times best-selling author

Liz Kessler

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

Where's your best friend when you need her?

I mean, seriously.

It's Saturday night, and here I am in Luke's front room with his sister, Zoe, and a bunch of his mates, listening to a rock band blaring about how we're all going to die and watching a couple of lads do something that I think is meant to be dancing but looks more like they're being slowly electrocuted.

Oh, and did I mention? It's my birthday. Mum said I could have a few friends over if I wanted to, but it turned out Luke's parents were going away for the weekend, so he offered to throw me a party at his house.

I keep glancing at a couple in the corner who seem to be the only ones having a good time. Their arms and legs are wrapped around each other as tight as rope. They haven't come up for air once since I've been here. Not that I'm jealous. Not that I'm wondering how nice it might be to have someone desperate for that much of *my* attention.

My phone beeps in my pocket, and I pull it out. It's a Snapchat notification. I open the link. It's a selfie of Cat and her mum, both holding up bottles of San Miguel

and grinning at the camera. The text across the photo reads, *Happy birthday, mate—wish I was with you!*

Two seconds later, my phone beeps again. Another Snapchat. This one's a picture of a tall, dark, handsome, presumably Spanish waiter carrying a tray of drinks. The text across the picture reads, *On second thought, quite glad we're here!*

I can't help smiling. Cat always manages to do that. It's why she's my best friend, I guess. Even when she's not here, she knows I'm going to need cheering up—and she knows how to do it. At least, she knows one way. Try to sit her down and discuss feelings with her, and she'll run for the hills, but give her any crappy situation and she'll find a way to get you to laugh your way out of it.

And she wouldn't thank me for saying this, as it might cramp her style, but she's not here so I'll say it anyway: she's one of the most caring, thoughtful people I know.

Take this weekend. Yeah, it's my birthday and everything, but it's also the anniversary of her mum and dad's divorce. He left years ago, and Cat is cool with it, but her mum, Jean, always needs cheering up, and Cat remembers that kind of thing without having to be told. So you know what she did? She worked extra shifts at her Saturday job for months, then bought tickets for a weekend break in Magaluf for the pair of them—her and Jean. That's the kind of thing she does.

And I love her for that. I do, really. But it does leave me standing on my own, fiddling with the top of a can of Diet Coke and wondering if it's rude to be the first person to leave your own birthday party.

I'm on the verge of sinking back into some self-indulgent wallowing when this boy strolls out of the kitchen. . . .

Super-skinny jeans with white Calvin Kleins sticking out the top, black sneakers, a kind of surfy-type T-shirt, messy dark hair that might have taken an hour to fix or could have been like that since he rolled out of bed, deep, intense brown eyes that scan the room as though he's searching for someone. Then he spots me and comes over.

"Is that Corsa yours?" he says. "It's blocking me in, and I need to nip to the grocery store for some supplies."

OK, so, no, it's not the most romantic chat-up line in the world. But given the standard of the evening's highlights so far, it's good enough for me.

"It's my mum's, actually." I smile up at him. "She's lent it to me for the night."

For a second, I bask in the idea of myself as a mature, responsible person. Someone who can drive herself to a party. I mean, sure, we only live two blocks away. And, yeah, Mum had to sit in the passenger seat when I drove. And, OK, Luke had to promise to sit with me when I drive home. But, still. It's the principle. The fact that I can.

The boy is kind of nodding slowly, then there's this long pause. Is he shy? I'm about to ask what kind of car he's got, just to keep the conversation going, when I suddenly realize what he's said. It wasn't a chat-up line at all.

"Oh! Wait! You want me to move it! I'll get my keys."

My cheeks burning up, I go in search of Luke and move the car.

Let me tell you a bit about Luke. He's one of the good guys. You know the type. Wears nice clothes—not the trendiest ever, but not geeky or scruffy. Helps old ladies across roads. Does his homework on time. Gets along with people's parents. Has lovely blue eyes that crinkle and shine when he smiles—which he does a lot—and light brown hair, parted neatly.

He's what my nan used to call well groomed, but not so much that he comes across as vain. I'd probably fancy him if I hadn't grown up thinking of him practically as a brother. I've known him forever. We were at nursery school together and have hung out together pretty much ever since.

For the past year or so, he's been extra nice to me because he fancies Cat and he figures if he keeps in with me, then one day she'll realize what a good guy he is and go out with him. Unfortunately, Cat only likes boys who are unavailable or who treat her badly. Luke thinks he can save her from all that. He's always asking me to put in a good word for him. He hasn't realized that she doesn't like good words. Maybe if I tell her he's an absolute bastard, then she'll notice him.

Who knows? Even I can't figure Cat out sometimes.

So, a bit more about Cat. Her real name is Catherine, but the only people who call her that are teachers, doctors, and me, occasionally, if I'm trying to annoy her, since she *hates* it. She's small, mischievous, somewhat feisty, and fiercely independent. She's like, well, a cat.

I guess she's what someone in a shop might call petite, except that sounds a bit too prissy for her. Plus she never shops in the kind of places that have a petite section. She buys *all* her clothes from thrift shops, and the wackier the better. Her favorite outfit at the moment is a pair of jeans that are so ripped you can see more skin than denim, a pair of yellow Doc Martens, and pretty much anything on top as long as it's tight enough to show off her figure and bright enough to make sure she gets noticed. She has crazy blond curly hair, bright-green cat eyes, a tattoo on her butt, amongst others, and piercings in her ears (four on each), nose (just one), mouth (two at the side), and left eyebrow.

Luke is not Cat's type.

So that's Luke and Cat. Now back to me.

I've moved the car and am scanning through Luke's playlist looking for something to lift the party mood before we all sink into clinical depression. I pick out Zoe's One Direction album. Luke's mates won't like it, but it's better than their music-to-slit-your-wrists-to, and I think I have the right not to end up in a room full of dead people on my birthday.

"I got you a drink." Calvin Klein is tapping me on the shoulder.

I give some careful thought to his words before replying. I know they're not very complicated, but there's no way I'm going to make the same mistake again.

"Here." He smiles as he hands me a can of Coke.

I take the can without removing my eyes from his face: (a) to check that he's not messing with me, and (b)

because he's totally gorgeous and I'm not sure how to get my eyes to move away of their own accord.

"I owed you one. It was a bit mean, making you move your car like that. On your birthday and everything."

"It's fine. Nothing. It's OK." Smooth, Ashleigh. Turn into a tongue-tied idiot the minute a half-decent boy talks to you.

Actually, wait a second. I'd better get something straight here, just in case I'm giving the wrong impression. I'm not one of those brain-dead bimbos who talks about boys and makeup all the time. For one thing, I hardly ever wear makeup, and for another, boys are, well, they're OK, but they're not everything. As soon as I start going out with someone, I seem to lose interest in them. Most of the boys at school are losers of one variety or another. I think they all take secret lessons in how to become utter morons when they turn fifteen or sixteen. Sometimes I think we'd be better off without them.

Sometimes, but not right now.

We get talking. His name's Dylan, and he's in a band. He works at a clothes shop in town ("just till the band takes off"). He's come with some friends, but they're all getting drunk in the next room and he's bored because he's the driver.

We're getting on really well when Luke comes over, looking flustered.

"Ash, you've got to talk to Zoe. Nick's just broken up with her, and she's locked herself in the bathroom. She said she won't speak to anyone except you."

“Why me? You’re her brother!”

Yes, I know it’s selfish, and I’m sorry, OK? But, come on. It’s my birthday and I’m talking to the only decent guy in the place.

Luke gives me his sad, pleading eyes. “Will you go up?”

I glare at Luke while simultaneously trying to smile seductively at Dylan (not easy — try it sometime), and head for the bathroom.

Zoe opens the door a crack to check that there’s no one with me. Then she pulls me inside and plonks herself down on a wicker laundry hamper in the corner of the room. I perch on the edge of the tub, waiting for her to say something.

She’s heartbroken. Kind of. She’s been seeing Nick for three weeks and thought he was The One. But let’s be honest here. Zoe does tend to have slightly unrealistic ideas of what might constitute The One. And, to be fair, after a few days of utter despair, another One generally comes along quite quickly.

Zoe is a year younger than us. She has long blond hair (which she swears doesn’t come out of a bottle, but which was totally mousy brown for at least the first fourteen years of her life), enormous blue eyes, and pretty much her pick of all Luke’s friends.

It seems her rebound rate is speeding up, as it turns out the only reason she wants me is to find out if Dylan’s here on his own.

“It’s just that, if I met someone else, it would help me get over Nick,” she whimpers between sobs.

“He’s just asked me out, actually,” I reply quickly.

And yes, OK, hands up, I admit it isn't *technically* one hundred percent true. But I've learned that you don't take chances with Zoe.

She makes this kind of choking noise as she stares at me, as if I've just said the most unlikely thing in the entire world. Thanks, Zoe. Then she recovers and hides her shock with a cough. "Oh. Right. Great." She yanks a towel off the radiator, wipes her nose on it, and chucks it into the hamper. "Go for it, then."

I feel a pang of guilt. "Are you sure?"

Zoe's leaning over the sink to squint at herself in the mirror, already over it. "Of course," she says, getting out her lipstick. As I generally don't have quite the same pickings as her, I decide to accept her blessing and give it a shot with Dylan.

I check myself out in the full-length mirror on the wall. My hair looks OK. It's sort of blond, thanks to highlights, and sort of straight, thanks to straighteners. Not short, not long, it tapers out somewhere around my shoulders. It's got one obstinate kink down the left side, which I try to flatten with my hand, but fail. I look at myself sideways and hold my tummy in, even though I'm not fat. I'm kind of average, I guess. Average clothes, too. I suddenly wish I'd gone for thicker mascara, brighter eyeshadow, and something a bit more interesting than jeans and a T-shirt. But I haven't. I don't; it's not me.

"You're positive you're all right?" I say as I turn to leave.

Zoe looks at me from the mirror. "'Course I am. I'm

fine, honest.” She smiles. “Go on. Go. I’ll be down in a minute. Good luck!”

I give Zoe a quick hug from behind and charge back downstairs.

Dylan’s nowhere to be seen.

After I’ve sauntered casually into every downstairs room twice, and all the upstairs rooms that aren’t locked and/or don’t have any noises coming from inside, I give up and go in search of Luke instead. He’s in the kitchen. There’s a long wooden table with about twenty cans of Stella and two boxes of wine at one end and five plastic bowls of nibbles at the other. I slide onto the bench next to him and grab a handful of cashews.

“So. Where’s that what’s-his-name?” I ask in my best indifferent voice.

“Who’s what’s-his-name?”

“Umm, what was it, now . . . ? Dylan, I think.” Dead casual.

“Oh, him.” Luke’s hand hovers briefly over the pretzels before plunging into the tortilla chips. “Had to go. One of his friends threw up, and Dylan offered to take him home.”

My heart sinks under the table. “Is he coming back?”

“Don’t think so.”

My head drops. And so do my hopes. The perfect ending to a perfect birthday.

Then Luke mumbles through a mouthful of peanuts, “He asked for your phone number, actually.”

“*What?* Did you give it to him?”

“I couldn’t remember it—sorry.”

“Sorry? That’s it?”

Luke looks crestfallen, like he’s only just this second realized that he’s messed up. “Ash, I’m really sorry, mate. I’ll make it up to you. I’ll get his number and tell him you like him. . . .”

I can’t stay angry at Luke. “It’s OK,” I say, trying to smile. “It’s not your fault. I wasn’t that keen on him, anyway.”

Luke gives me a “Yeah, whatever” look, and I turn to my Coke, ready to sink back into my birthday blues.

Then I notice something. A piece of paper stuck in the top of my can of Coke—like in the old days when they used to put a note out for the milkman saying, “Two pints tomorrow.” Except, obviously, better than that.

Ash,

I liked talking to you. Get in touch if you want.

Dylan

Under his name, he’s written his phone number.

I read the note three times.

After that, I no longer care about the music or the dancing or the couple in the corner who are, by the way, still so intent on snogging each other’s brains out that I’m surprised they haven’t died from lack of oxygen.

Dylan liked talking to me. He gave me his phone number!

I sit smiling to myself as I finish my Coke. After a bit, I decide it’s time to call it a night. I fold the note, put it carefully in my pocket, grab my coat—and Luke—and drive the two blocks home.

The teachers used to tell us we'd be treated differently when we got to high school. "Like adults," they said. But high school hadn't been invented a hundred years ago, when they were young. No wonder they were so wrong.

It had crossed my mind that this year might be different. Wrong again. So a few days after my birthday party, it's back to school with a thud.

We've hardly been back five minutes when the headmaster, Mrs. Banks, has Cat and me in her office for a Verbal Warning. She says she wants to start the term on a positive note, make things clear before we get into any bad habits. We have to sign this contract she's drawn up.

I will attend all my lessons and complete all my homework on time. I will not watch YouTube videos, update my Facebook status, tweet, tumblr, tinder, or text my friends while my teachers are talking.

How am I expected to get through the lessons, then?

I sign it when I see Cat scribble her name on hers,

although when she tells me later that she'd signed it Lady Gaga I could kick myself. I wouldn't exactly call it a positive start to the term, unless Banks means she wants to make us positive we hate everything about this place.

Mr. Kenworthy's gone. Which is kind of good as we never learned anything in his English lessons—other than to avoid sitting in the front row unless you wanted to be poisoned by alcohol fumes. But kind of bad in case we get a new teacher who insists on us actually doing any work.

Turns out we've got a temporary replacement: Miss Murray. She's all right, I suppose. Fresh out of teachers' college, I reckon, so she's brought the average age of the staff down by about fifty years.

We've got English after lunch. She makes us play this game where you have to pick someone in the room and describe them by saying what they'd be if they were a flower or a car or an animal. Then everyone has to guess who it is. I normally hate that kind of thing, but she makes it OK somehow. She smiles a lot and laughs at the same kinds of things we laugh at, not like the rest of the teachers, who just glare at you the minute you look as if you might actually be enjoying the lesson. Not that that happens often, but if it did, they'd probably think they were doing something wrong.

Robyn describes me. I don't really know her that well. She sat on the other side of the class last year, but they've moved the desks around and we've ended up next to each other. She's OK, I guess. She's kind of

mousy-looking: brown bob, brown eyes, glasses. Quite pretty when she smiles. Gets along with teachers. You know the kind. Harmless enough, just not really my kind of person.

Anyway, she has me down as a cactus, a lion cub, and a Mini Cooper. I've no idea what she's going on about, but Miss Murray works out that it's me after a few others make wrong guesses.

It's beginning to feel like we're goofing off when Miss Murray glances at her watch. "Right, enough of the fun and games," she says. "We'd better get down to some work." A muffled grumble spreads through the room.

She goes to the front of her desk and half sits, half leans back against it, as if she wants to show us she's totally cool and laid-back but can't bring herself to go all the way and sit on the thing.

"So." She clasps her hands together, brings them up to her mouth. It reminds me of morning prayers at primary school.

"Hands together, eyes closed," Mr. Jackson, the headmaster, would say, and we'd deliver the Lord's Prayer in three hundred synchronized monotones.

"Our father, who art in heaven, Harold be thy name," I intoned earnestly every morning. It was years before I realized God wasn't actually called Harold.

I look up at Miss Murray. She's propping her lips on her fingertips, eyes almost closed, and, for a second, I wonder if she's praying too.

"So," she repeats. "Can anyone tell me a poem they've read and enjoyed recently?"

No one says anything. A *poem*? That we've *enjoyed*? I stifle a laugh and look down at my desk like everyone else.

"Oh, no!" she suddenly exclaims and goes back behind her desk. She picks up a piece of paper and frowns at it. "I must have written down the wrong room. I thought this was an English A-level class."

Why do teachers *always* have to be sarcastic?

But then I notice her cheeks have gone red. Just a bit, just enough to make me feel sorry for her, and I don't care about the silent agreement. So I do something I haven't done for as long as I can remember. I put my hand up.

"Does it have to be an actual poem, miss?" I raise my eyes to look up at her without lifting my head.

"What did you have in mind? Ashleigh, isn't it?"

"Ash, yeah."

"What did you have in mind, Ash?"

"Well, there's this song I wrote the words out to; I think it's kind of like a poem." *What am I doing?*

"That's great," she says with a smile that feels like it reaches right into me and looks around inside. Can a smile even *do* that?

"Can you remember it?" She's leaning forward, looking at me so intently I'm afraid she's wading through all my hidden secrets.

I can feel a room full of gobsmacked eyes zoning in on me. So I pull myself together and give the only answer that'll save me. "No. Sorry."

Miss Murray purses her lips, still looking at me.

“But I know it’s good,” I add feebly. She’s going to think I’m an idiot now. Not that I care what a teacher thinks of me. At least, I never have before now.

“Maybe you could bring it in sometime,” she says as she turns away and picks up a book from her desk. I feel dismissed, and I’m not sure I like it—although it does mean I’ve gotten away with not looking like a total weirdo in front of my peers.

“I’d like to see it.” Her head, slightly tilted, turns her smile into a question, and I shrug in reply.

“Good.” She opens the book. “Now, here’s one of my favorites.”

Then she says, “They fuck you up, your mum and dad.”

I look around the class. Everyone has stopped doodling and passing notes to one another; the air’s tightened.

“They may not mean to, but they do.”

Is it a poem?

She holds our attention all the way to the last line, when she puts the book down and says, “Philip Larkin.” Into the silence, she adds, “He’s a poet.”

As she passes photocopies around the room, we study them with suspicion.

“Any thoughts?” Miss Murray asks.

I find myself nodding as I read the poem, as I relate to every word. It’s as if the poet knows exactly what’s going on in my head. I want to say so, but I’ve already done my bit, so I do the looking-down-at-my-desk thing again and wait for someone else to speak. The

tension spreads awkwardly around the room, seeping into every little space.

Finally, Luke breaks the silence. “Is that really a poem, miss, or did you make it up for a laugh?”

But before she has time to answer, the bell rings. Bags are instantly on top of tables, chairs scraped back.

“Excuse me!” she shouts over the racket. “I didn’t tell anyone to go anywhere.”

She’s standing in front of her desk, arms folded, and frowning as she looks around at us. We eventually stop moving while we wait for her to speak. Weird. We never did that for Mr. Kenworthy.

There’s something about her. It’s as if she’s not on the opposite side of a high wall, like most teachers. She makes the wall seem like a thin line—as though she can reach across to our side of it. Maybe it’s because she’s probably only about five years older than us. Maybe it’s because she smiles more than most teachers. Maybe it’s because she shared a poem with swear words in it. I don’t know what it is—I just know that, yeah, OK, she’s cool. For a teacher.

Outside the room, people are already running past the door, chasing each other to the bus queue.

“As we’ve been getting to know each other today, we’ve not had time to study this poem,” Miss Murray goes on. “We’ll continue with it tomorrow. In the meantime, I’d like you to read it again at home and jot down your initial responses to it. Any questions?”

In reply, we grab our bags and squeeze out to join the corridor rush hour.

. . .

I catch up with Cat at the bus stop. She draws on a cigarette while I tell her about the party. We've hardly had a chance to talk all day.

"D'you think I should call him?" I ask. "Or text?"

Cat grins. "Send him a topless selfie?"

I laugh as Cat finishes her cigarette and chucks it on the pavement. I wish she wouldn't do that. Wish she wouldn't smoke at all, to be honest. Not out of being a goody-goody. Mainly because it makes her stink, and hanging out with her makes *me* stink and makes Mum and Dad accuse me of smoking—which I don't. Dad's never convinced, no matter how much I promise I don't smoke. Tried it. Didn't like it. But I don't have any intention of telling Cat what to do; it would only make her do the opposite.

"So, tell me about Magaluf," I say, happy to change the subject. "Did Jean score?"

Cat bursts out laughing. "Actually, nearly. She and I had a contest to see who could get the most smiles out of the waiter I sent you the pic of. She got the most, so I told her she'd won."

"Hadn't she?"

Cat smiles her cheeky Cat-smile. "Depends if you count making out with him behind the recycling bins as a winning move!"

"You didn't!"

"'Course I did. Anyway. Come on. Back to the party," she says as the bus rounds the corner. "What're you going to do about message-in-a-bottle boy?"

We get on the double-decker bus and go upstairs, where we carry on sorting out the minutiae of each other's love lives till we part company at my bus stop. "FaceTime me later," Cat calls as I get off the bus.

"Will do," I call back as I brace myself for an evening at home.

Mum and Dad are driving me mad. They've had a row and haven't spoken a word to each other for three days.

Dinner is a nightmare. A silent nightmare.

Mum perches martyr-like on a stool at the other end of the kitchen while Dad and I sit at the table. He's reading the paper while he eats, and she's staring pointedly out the window.

It's been like this for months. Things will be OK for a bit, then it all blows up over something tiny and the atmosphere makes the North Pole feel like a Caribbean cruise.

It upset me when it started happening. I tried to make them sort it out. I'd be crying and I'd beg them to make up. And they would, kind of. At least, they'd be civil to each other in front of me. Then they stopped doing even that.

I guess I've kind of cut off from it now. It's horrible. I hate myself for it, but it's better than crying my eyes out in my room because I can't make them stop.

Dad is slurping his soup. It's making me want to scream.

Has he always done that?

I've got a vague memory of very different mealtimes: Mum cooking while Dad would open a bottle of wine and pour them both a glass. They'd talk about their day, smiling, interrupting each other, refilling their glasses. Then we'd play word games while we ate, and afterward Dad and I would clear up. He'd wash, I'd dry, racing each other. He'd flick bubbles in my face to try to distract me. He'd make me laugh.

Mum interrupts my nostalgia trip. "Ashleigh, please could you ask your father to remember to put the trash bins out?" she says as she gets up and takes her plate to the sink. "And it's recycling this week too."

A while ago, I might have said to ask him herself — but it's easier to give in and do what she says.

"Dad, remember to take the trash bins out tonight," I say.

Dad doesn't raise his head from his newspaper.

"Dad. It's trash night. And recycling."

Nothing.

This is what it's like. Arctic, I'm telling you.

I try a new tack. "Dad, by the way, I've dropped out of school, become a drug addict, and committed a string of violent acts."

Dad turns the page and looks up briefly as Mum leaves the kitchen and closes the door behind her. "What, dear? Sorry. Oh, good, that's nice," he replies before going back to his paper.

I get up with a sigh and decide to sort the trash out myself.

That Philip Larkin knows what he's talking about.

Later, as I scribble down a few thoughts on the poem, I get this weird feeling about the next English class. As if for the first time in forever, the lesson might be remotely relevant to my life. As if I'm looking forward to it or something.

What the hell is *that* about?

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