

*In "The Love She Forgot", Beatrice and Matt are thrown together again when Beatrice needs a place to stay, moving into the house Ben shares with Matt. This is an additional chapter, their first meeting from Matt's perspective, before the story starts.*

## MATT

My mobile phone beeps and I sigh to myself as I reach for it. I know who it will be, and I really wish she'd just stop sending me messages.

JEMIMA: *Matt, will you please talk to me. I miss you. We can make this work.*

I suppress the urge to text back and ask how she thinks we can make this work, how she thinks we can carry on a relationship when I'm a recovering gambling addict and she won't stop betting on anything she can put her money against.

I don't bother, because I'd asked her these things to her face before she gave in and left.

She should know better than to be sending me messages. My answer is never going to change. It *can't* change. I can't be with somebody who seems so willing to risk my recovery, somebody who wants to encourage me back into a lifestyle that I've worked so hard to put behind me.

Before I can get too distracted with my phone, the front door opens.

"Matt?" Ben shouts out.

"In here," I call back.

Ben comes into the living room, tentatively smiling at me. I know why his smile is tentative. He's been like this since I ended things with Jemima. He thinks I'm about to throw my whole world into chaos again, and his life by extension. Ben had been thrilled to see the back of Jemima, but every day he's been watching me, looking at me like I'm a ticking timebomb of self-destruction.

"Not working tonight?" he asks.

"Nope, not tonight."

"Oscar is working tonight, isn't he?"

"Yeah, you just missed him," I comment. Oscar hadn't been gone long, probably about fifteen minutes, heading off for his night shift as a paramedic. I'm suddenly curious if Ben's arrival home is timed to be as close to Oscar leaving as possible, to give me less chance to do something stupid.

"What are you doing tonight?" Ben asks.

"I thought I'd take some money out of the bank, blow it at the casino, and maybe go find somebody to celebrate or commiserate with afterwards," I reply, and then I roll my eyes at his reaction. "Chill, mate, I'm joking. I'm planning on ordering some food and watching a film."

"I was thinking you should come with me tonight," Ben says, stepping further into the living room and taking a seat in the armchair.

"Remind me, where are you going?"

"My parent's party. You know, the 'we're off to see the world' party," he reminds me.

I honestly cannot think of anything worse than going to this party with Ben. I'd forgotten all about it since he last mentioned it, my brain only registering that I knew I'd be alone tonight. I'd just forgotten and assumed it meant he was going to see Lily, because if Ben isn't at work, he's always going to choose to be with her.

"I think I'm going to be fine here." I try to let him down gently. It's better than telling him the party is going to be the definition of boring, his parents surrounded by similar aged people, trying to throw a nice gathering in a house that apparently has been stripped bare of possessions given they've sold everything so they can go see the world. Their first stint is traveling across North America.

"If you stay here, you're going to have nothing but time on your hands," Ben points out.

I know what he's alluding to. Time on my hands is time to think and to question my strength to stay out of the casino. It is time to wonder if I can make a relationship work with Jemima, to convince myself that being back together and going to one poker game wouldn't be a bad thing.

It'd be the worst thing I could do. I know that. I don't want that, either. But Ben is right. Time alone makes you question your decisions, gnaws at your self-resolve, pokes tiny pinpricks of doubt into everything you know to be the truth.

"Come with me," he urges. "I don't really want to leave you on your own after a breakup. Come on. It's better than sitting here by yourself."

I've told him no what feels like a hundred times before. I've told him no every day he's asked me since I ended my relationship with Jemima. I still want to tell him no because I shouldn't need to be babysat to make sure I can be trusted not to slip and ruin my hard work.

"Okay," I concede.

"Great! You can finally meet my sister. You'll like her, she's awesome. We'll get going in about an hour, yeah?" Ben says, looking delighted that I've given in, and that for another night he'll know I'm not going to do something incredibly stupid.

Ben spends most of the car ride to his childhood home prattling on about Lily. I don't mind. Lily's lovely, she reminds me of a classical princess in fairy tale stories, the type where animals sing to her and help tidy the house, except she's kickass smart as well. Ben adores her. I'm waiting for him to admit he's planning on asking her to marry him, he's besotted.

"So, how many people are going to be at this party?" I ask when Ben finishes a story about Lily's new boss and rotation at the hospital she works at.

"I don't know, maybe fifty, sixty people? They've got a gazebo in the garden and some heaters set up," he explains.

"Good job, given its freezing." I laugh, looking out of the car at the frost that is already settling on the ground.

"I know they invited all their friends and the neighbours; no doubt the neighbour's kids too. I'm expecting to spend a lot of the night with my parents pointing out people I used to play with as a kid," Ben grumbles.

Regardless of how he sounds, I know he doesn't mean it and he won't complain to his parents. He's such a good-natured guy. If his parents want him to stand and talk to somebody that he once played hide-n-seek with as a kid, he'll do it without complaint. If Lily is the classical princess from the fairy tales, Ben's the charming prince, except like Lily, he's also kickass smart.

"Are you planning on staying late?" I ask, mentally calculating if I can strategically take a taxi home if the evening turns out to be as boring as I expect it to be.

"I'm sure you'll have fun, Matt. If you get bored, take charge of the bar they'll have set up," he suggests.

"What, get a load of people in their fifties good and proper drunk," I joke.

"Not my dad though, he's embarrassing when he's had a drink." Ben laughs. "I'm sure it won't come to that. Stick with me, you can save me from awkward conversations with people I haven't seen since I was a kid."

"You're going to get sucked into conversation with somebody, I know what you're like," I say, laughing. Ben's the type of person who talks to everybody. He listens to everything that gets said to him and doesn't seem to know how to walk away from an awkward conversation. I'm sure it's why he's such a good doctor. People take one look at him and tell him everything, and he never seems disinterested in what they have to say.

"Well, I'll introduce you to Beatrice when we get there, then if I get suckered into conversation, at least you know somebody closer to our age," Ben cuts in.

Despite living with Ben for as long as I have, I've never met Beatrice, his sister. I've heard a lot about her though. The last time Ben mentioned her, he said she was busy at work, to the point his mum and dad were starting to worry she'd overdo it and end up getting sick.

"I'm sure your sister will be too busy being sucked into the same kind of conversations that you'll be stuck with tonight," I say. Whenever Ben mentions his sister, the image I have in my head is Ben, just with longer hair. She'll be smart and stoic, solid in character and a peacekeeper, I'm sure.

"I doubt it. I'm sure she said her friend Jas will be there. That'll mean they'll be up to mischief and driving my mum mad." Ben laughs. He turns off the main road onto a side street and I assume we're not far from our destination.

"So, what else do I need to know about your family, just so I don't get myself in trouble with a Schofield family member?" I ask. "Aside from your dad being an embarrassment when he's had a drink."

"Dad's fine, but when he's had a drink in him, he's got the worst dad jokes that he likes to tell everybody. He's a good guy though, talk to him about football, cricket, the Olympics, rugby, fishing, even darts. Just don't mention politics."

"You mean, talk to your dad about all the topics you don't talk about?" I laugh.

"Yeah, take that as a good starting ground. Mum, she's great. She'll talk about everything, though sure she'll ask you a million questions about what I get up to when I'm not at work."

"Why, does she think you're up to no good? Is she worried you're living a life of debauchery?" I joke.

"No, the opposite. She thinks I don't relax," Ben complains. I'd laugh if I didn't think it would hurt his feelings. Ben and relaxed doesn't often end up in the same sentence.

"Tommy and Fiona, right?" I check.

"Yep, and don't call him Thomas or Tom. He's always been Tommy," he says.

"What about your sister?" I ask instead.

"Oh, Beatrice is fab. I'm sure I've bored you with stories about her before, but okay, if you've forgotten, here's a few details. She's twenty-four, she's an executive assistant to the boss of the company she works at, though she'll tell you she's a personal assistant because the two owners like to have this laidback vibe where everybody is on the same level, and apparently the word executive gives the wrong message."

Ben rolls his eyes, but I know he finds titles important. I guess if I'd spent as long as he has, studying and training, I'd want to be using the correct job title. It's a bit more relaxed at the bar I manage. I might be a manager, but we don't consider titles to be as important as Ben finds them. The only time somebody uses the title boss is when they're jokingly calling me boss-man. Typically, boss-man is followed by something sarcastic.

"Okay, what else?"

"Nothing, really. She's smart and she runs rings around the rest of the family. I'm looking forward to seeing her, she's been so busy, I can't remember the last time I saw her." Ben frowns as he indicates to turn around another corner.

"Okay, I feel prepared. Tommy, Fiona, Beatrice, best friend Jas," I repeat.

"Oh, and Ryan," Ben adds.

"Who is Ryan?"

"Beatrice's boyfriend," he says, and then he pulls the car to a stop at the side of the street. "Come on, time to get your party on," he says.

"God, Ben, please don't ever say that sentence again," I tease.

We get out of the car together and I follow Ben down a long, block paved driveway in front of a large house. Ben's childhood home is a far cry from what I grew up in. Me, Mum, Toby and Sam spent most of my childhood living in a house so small that it felt like we lived on top of one another. Mum even took the smallest bedroom as her own, with me and my brothers sharing the largest bedroom, me and Sam sharing bunk beds with Toby on a single, shoved into the corner. I didn't know it was possible for kids to have their own room until my great uncle had supported Mum, all of us moving into a much larger house when I was a teenager.

I follow Ben through the downstairs of the property. There's a large porch that opens into a wide hallway that has various doors off it as well as the stairs to the upper floor. Ben walks me past what appeared to be a study, through the living room, then into a large kitchen-diner, all scarce of belongings, just a few essential pieces of furniture.

We reach the doors to the back garden. He's called hello to various people in the rooms we have passed, but he seems focused on getting onto the garden and then I see where he is aiming for, a group of people who are clearly related to him.

"Benjamin!" The woman I assume to be his mother exclaims.

The man I assume to be Ben's dad throws his arm around Ben.

"No Lily?" Ben's mum asks, looking around, a hopeful expression on her face.

"No, she's on a night shift. This is Matt," Ben says as he pulls away from his dad and gestures towards me. "Matt, this is my mum, dad, and my sister," he adds.

"Nice to meet you. You two, get yourself a drink and please eat some food. Your mother ordered enough to food to feed an army," Tommy complains.

"Better than either of you making it," Beatrice teases.

"Hey, come on, we're going to cook more when we're away," Tommy protests.

"Ben, come with me, I wanted to show you off to the Wilkinsons. You remember them, right? You used to play at this house all the time," Fiona says, and she pulls Ben away from the group, back up the garden.

"Tommy, where is the bottle opener?" somebody yells from the kitchen door.

"Excuse me, I'll be back," Tommy says, and he saunters up the path, leaving me alone with Beatrice.

I know I have a frown on my face, because I knew this would happen. All I need now is for her to make an excuse so she can also go, leaving me standing like an awkward idiot until Ben gets back.

Instead, Beatrice looks at me. I stare back at her, noticing that she's nothing like Ben. For a start, her facial expression is more relaxed than I've ever seen Ben's. She has large, wide, chocolate brown eyes and long blonde hair, several shades lighter than her brother but natural looking. She's wearing a bright red scarf wound around her neck, and her cheeks are a rosy pink from the cold, despite the thick coat she has on, buttoned up over the clothes.

"Matt, or Matthew?" she asks.

"Matt," I reply. It's nothing I haven't heard before. I've spent years saying 'no, just Matt', the same way my brothers have confirmed 'yes, just Toby' and 'no, not Samuel, just Sam'.

"You've lived with Ben for a while, right?"

"Yes," I confirm.

"How long?"

"A couple of years."

"What do you do?" she asks. "For work, I mean," she adds, looking at me almost like she doesn't believe I would have a job. Or maybe she's just implying I don't look like the type of person who would be capable of having any interesting hobbies.

"I work in a bar," I reply.

"Is it an interesting job?"

"I enjoy it." I nod at her.

"What kind of bar is it?"

I'm starting to think she has a quota of questions to ask in every conversation. Maybe she takes the idea of twenty questions as a personal challenge with every new person she meets.

I want to reply that it's just a bar, a normal bar in the city centre. Not a sports bar, not a cocktail bar, not a specialist drinks bar, not a wine bar, not a dive bar. Just a bar where people come for a drink and can order food if they wish. Except, I'm sure saying 'a normal bar' is going to make me sound like an ass. She's already looking at me in a way that makes me think of being interviewed by somebody who knows you're ridiculously underqualified for the job you thought you could blag an interview for.

The way she is looking at me makes me forget every possible and interesting adjective to describe the bar I work at.

Beatrice carries on staring at me, her head cocked to one side, patiently waiting for an answer.

"Just a regular bar," I eventually reply, wondering when it was that I forgot how to hold a conversation. In my head, I'm slightly cursing Ben for leaving me alone. I'd been concerned I'd be skulking around like a loner, but I think it would be preferable to being interrogated by his sister.

"Are you here by yourself?" she asks.

"I'm here with Ben," I say, confused. Who else does she think I'd be here with?

"I meant, is it just you and Ben, or have you got a date here with you?" Beatrice rolls her eyes at me.

Again, I feel like I'm an idiot. Clearly, my pondering about Jemima has messed with my head more than I'd like to admit if I can't keep track of a straight conversation. I can't think of proper words to reply to these questions. I can't work out why she seems to stare at me like I'm an animal about to be dragged off for scientific testing.

I can't wait for Ben to get back so I can make an excuse and get out of here.

"Just me and Ben," I confirm.

"Bea, here's your drink." A woman appears next to Beatrice, handing her a bottle of cider. She stares at me and then back to Beatrice. "Oh, who is your friend?" she asks.

"This is Ben's roommate, Matt," Beatrice says. "He works at a regular bar in town," she adds, a grin forming on her face. She sips on her cider, eyes still fixed on me.

"Wow, a regular bar," the other woman teases, a smirk on her face. "I haven't been to a regular bar in ages."

"Oh, well, this is an opportunity. Maybe we should go for your leaving drinks," Beatrice suggests. She looks at me. "This is Jas. She's abandoning me for a whole year to go set up a new department overseas. Plucked out of the small office and thrust into the big leagues," she explains.

"I'll be back," Jas soothes. "Ben! How are you doing? How's Lily? Everything good between doctor and doctor happily loved up?" Jas shouts as Ben walks down the path towards us.

"I thought I'd never get out of that conversation," he mutters.

"Oh, I've dodged the Wilkinsons all night, and plan to do it for the rest of the night too." Beatrice smirks.

"How have you managed to dodge them?" Ben grumbles.

"Just don't listen to Mum when she says she wants to introduce you to somebody, you loser," Beatrice quips.

"As for Lily, she's great, thanks. Are you counting down to working away?" Ben turns his attention on Jas.

"I have a while to go yet, but yes. I'm looking forward to being somewhere warmer, getting away from this crappy weather," she jokes, kicking her foot across the path we're standing on, demonstrating the coldness as her foot connects to the frost on the ground.

"We're thinking of going to Matt's bar for leaving drinks, are you going to come with us?" Beatrice asks.

"Drink, Matt?" Ben ignores his sister and her offer.

"Yeah, sure," I reply. Ben turns and heads back up the garden, so I follow him.

"Well, don't say goodbye!" One of them calls out to us as we walk up the path. I'm not sure if it's Beatrice or Jas. Ben turns around and makes a gesture with his fingers, so I assume it was Beatrice who had shouted out, either that or he's just as comfortable with Jas as he is with his sister.

"Sorry for leaving you, hopefully Beatrice looked after you," Ben says once we're halfway towards the house.

"She certainly asks a lot of questions," I mutter.

"It's like being interrogated, isn't it?" Ben jokes. "She's been like that her whole life. Mum used to say she had a daily word quota to meet before she could go to bed."

I feel a little relieved that I'm clearly not the only person who has ever been subjected to the scrutiny, but I still feel oddly unsettled. It wasn't like her questions were invasive or rude. There was nothing wrong with what she'd asked me, just something about the way she'd looked at me.

There's a loud shriek from the bottom of the garden. Both Ben and I turn to look in the direction of the noise. There's an older looking guy who has got his arms around Beatrice, picked her up and swung her around.

"Who is that?" I ask.

"Ryan. The boyfriend," Ben replies. The tone he has isn't exactly disapproving, but it isn't his usual neutral way of speaking about somebody. There's clearly some animosity, not that Ben would ever admit it. He likes to act like nobody ever bothers him.

I glance again at the group at the bottom of the garden. Ryan appears to have put Beatrice back down, and he grabs her backside suggestively as she bats his hands away. From the looks of it, Jas is laughing and rolling her eyes.

I turn my attention back to Ben, following him the rest of the way to the house. As we walk into the kitchen, my phone beeps again. I pull it out of my pocket, already knowing without looking that it will be Jemima.

JEMIMA: *Matt, please. I know how strong you are. I know you have a handle on gambling. Being around me isn't bad for your recovery. You know I'm good for you. You know how much you love me.*

I roll my eyes. I had loved her. I loved her until my life imploded and she didn't do a damn thing to support me when I tried to get everything back on track. I held onto the idea that she'd get help for her own gambling. I'd loved her enough to get back together, enough that when she's suggested she join me and move here, I'd said yes. I'd loved her until I realised that she didn't care enough about herself to see the path of destruction she was on, until I realised that she'd drag me back down a path I've worked so hard to leave behind me.

"Jemima," I explain to Ben when I realise that he's staring at me. I type a response to Jemima. Short and sweet, a simple please don't contact me again, adding I'm sorry. Then I block her number and delete the messages. "Blocked," I say to Ben.

"I think it is for the best," he says. He reaches for a beer for me from the kitchen side.

"Thanks."

"So, what questions was my sister asking you?" Ben asks, changing the subject.

I laugh. "Does she have a pre-set list of twenty questions?"

"I'm sure you'll survive. Besides, after tonight, the next time you'd probably see her is at my wedding," he jokes.

"Oh, you're finally ready to admit that's on the cards?" I tease.

Ben flushes. "No, not yet. I just meant you have time before you see her again, after tonight. Come on, back outside. I don't want to get caught by another long-lost contact," he grumbles.

I laugh and follow him back into the garden, finding his dad who is telling a friend about the plans he and Fiona have for their travels. When Beatrice, Jas, Ryan and Fiona join us later, I try to keep up with the conversation, trying not to feel bothered by the intriguing stares Beatrice gives me, reminding myself that Ben's right.

After tonight, I'm unlikely to see his sister again.

I'm grateful, and by the way she stares at me as the night goes on, I'm sure she is, too.