

# Chapter Three

I opened the curtains the next morning to see a semi-naked body in a deck chair in next-door's back garden. I took a step back from the window and risked another peek.

I could make out a tight muscular torso with small brown nipples. His skin was startlingly pale. My eyes slowly traced a fine line of dark black hair from underneath the belly button to the top of his faded jeans. They continued along the line of his jeans pausing to take in the tear on one of the knees and the white toes that were rhythmically stroking the grass.

His face was hidden from view by the book he was reading. I watched and waited, hoping no one could see me. Every now and then his hand would scratch his chest or brush a fly away.

The door squeaked suddenly and I jumped away from the window. No one likes to be caught drooling, do they?

'Tallulah!' I sighed with relief as the cat padded in, looking for attention.

When I looked again, the boy had turned round and was pulling on a faded red T-shirt with his back towards me. I liked the way his dark black hair curled around his neck.

I smiled as Tallulah batted me with her paw and meowed crossly. Then I smiled again, because it had felt weird to be smiling. The only smiling that I'd been doing lately was of the

joyless, laugh-out-loud, ‘Ha! I don’t give a damn’ variety that made your face ache and your heart burn.

Tallulah weaved herself between my legs, head-butting my knees in order to get some attention. I was starving, too. Yesterday, Mum had been too mad at me to think about eating so I’d survived on chocolate bars bought during our service station stops. Last night I was too tired to be tempted by Sarah’s offer of reheated mung bean curry, but now I could eat the entire contents of the fridge.

I looked out the window once more before heading to the kitchen. The deck chair was empty, apart from the book. Hadn’t I sworn that I was going to have nothing to do with boys for at least a year? Liking boys had played a large part in the trouble Mia and I had got ourselves into. One boy in particular, but I wasn’t going to think about Jackson now. I couldn’t even bear to look at his photo, hidden away in my purse.

I found Sarah standing on her head in the lounge. She called out, ‘Help yourself to breakfast!’

The kitchen was only marginally less dusty than the rest of the place. There was an assortment of cupboards, a grease-encrusted cooker and an ancient fridge. As I tugged the heavy door open the fridge rumbled and shook. Inside was half a carton of milk and some bean curd that looked more like green turd. Eating the entire contents of the fridge instantly lost its appeal.

There was a large shelf full of cookbooks, but the rest of the cupboards were empty. I found an old box of cereal and the milk didn’t smell bad. I wandered out into the back garden to eat it. It was a lovely sunny morning and it wouldn’t do any harm to check out Torso Boy some more from a better vantage point.

Sarah had maintained the ‘neglect’ theme into the small back garden. It was an overgrown tangle of weeds with a rusty car door right in the centre. I sat down on a wobbly wooden bench.

‘Bit of a mess, isn’t it?’ Sarah said as she sat down next to me.

Your life or the garden? I thought to myself, but aloud I said, ‘Isn’t Kai into green things? His poems are all about nature, aren’t they?’

Sarah started to laugh loudly. It startled me because the laugh didn’t seem to belong to her. It belonged to a coarse loudmouth, not to my quiet, sensitive aunt. Then she gulped in some more air and said, ‘Ha! You thought Kai was into green things, did you?’

I watched in horror as the huge belly laughs transformed themselves into floods of tears and she lunged at me. I had no idea how to deal with this, so I gave her back a few awkward pats as if she were some grotesque oversized baby.

After a painfully long time she said, ‘Kai’s left me.’

I was speechless again. This wasn’t supposed to be happening. Sarah was supposed to be supporting and guiding *me*. I wasn’t equipped to deal with her problems. The only thing that should have been on my mind was trying to see if Torso Boy’s face was as cute as his body.

‘He left me three weeks ago. Said he needed some creative space. He felt that my poetry was stale and that he turned into a vegetable whenever I walked into the room.’

I resisted asking the question, ‘Carrot or courgette?’ – even I knew that this wasn’t the time for silly jokes. It would be hard for Sarah to see the funny side when someone you love had insulted you so badly. I nodded and made a sympathetic grunt.

Sarah blew her nose on a screwed-up piece of tissue and said, ‘He took the TV, computer and most of our money. The phone has been cut off and I’m going out of my mind with worry wondering where he is.’

I made some more sympathetic noises, although I had to admit that part of me felt a tinge of pleasure at learning that I wasn’t the only person in this family who had stuffed up. Mum was always going on at me about the bad choices that I was making. You didn’t have to be Sherlock Holmes to figure out that Kai was not going to be Mr Reliable. All those poems about hunting for rare flowers in damp tropical forests and worshipping naked statues of goddesses were a bit of a give-away.

We sat in silence for a few moments. I tried not to make too much noise crunching my cereal. From time to time I glanced over at next door’s garden. This was probably not the best time to ask about who lived there.

Sarah blew her nose again and continued. ‘We didn’t have children because he said that would kill off his creative spirit. He said that running Sarakai Books was enough of a distraction. I would have loved to have children. Came pretty close to persuading him once, but I respected his creativity. Kai’s art comes first . . .’

The cereal turned to sawdust in my mouth. What could I say? I’d never seen an adult in this state before. My brain flapped around like a goldfish out of water until it came up with, ‘Has he got someone else?’

My dad had left us for his PA before marrying a librarian called – I kid you not – Foxy. It was difficult at first, but now Mum’s happy and Dad’s happy. We get two dinners at Christmas. Result all round.

Sarah smiled at me. ‘It’s nothing as clichéd as that! I’m sure he’ll come back. He never misses the Netherby Festival. He’s always such a big hit there.’

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘You’ve never heard of the Netherby Festival? What *does* my sister talk to you about? It’s only one of the most famous alternative festivals in the country. It takes place on the August bank holiday in the grounds of Netherby Hall. It’s amazing. You’ll have to go.’

I grunted unenthusiastically. I wasn’t planning on sticking around that long. I was hoping to be back in London within the next couple of weeks.

Sarah sprang up and punched the air. ‘What we need is some positive action!’ she declared. ‘When do we want it? NOW!’

We spent the rest of the morning hacking away at the weeds. After about an hour I ‘casually’ asked, ‘What are the people next door like?’

‘I’ve been really lucky with my neighbours. This terrace was originally built to house farm labourers so they are quite small and close together. Mr Gordon lives on that side, but he only uses the cottage at weekends. Evie Winthrop lives on the other side, but she’s off on another of her jaunts to Africa so she’s rented out her place to some college students for the summer. Freddie and Charlie live there at the moment. They’re fun. The only thing they take seriously is their music. They are an anti-folk band.’

I had no idea what anti-folk was, but I just nodded my head. I wondered which one, Charlie or Freddie, I’d already seen. They might turn out to be company for the short time I was here in this weird summer.

At around twelve the sun was really beating down on us so we stopped working.

‘Is there anything else I can do?’ I asked.

Sarah tugged at her hair and said, ‘You could go to Greater Netherby and open the shop up for me. The float is hidden in the old toffee tin under the counter and all the books are priced up. I’ll join you later. Saturday is my busiest day.’ She handed me a large set of keys and explained which ones opened what.

Mum never let me go to the shops without a list and strict instructions to give her all the change back. Was Sarah really asking me to *run* her shop for the day?

I felt the weight of the keys in my hand and I didn’t say a word. At least I was being taken seriously.

## Chapter Four

**G**reater Netherby was only a ten-minute walk from Little Netherby. It had one charity shop, a café, a chemist's, hairdresser's and the bookshop, which was tucked away on the corner at the bottom of the street, with just a small, hand-carved sign that said: *Sarakai Second-hand Books*. Blink and you'd miss it.

I fiddled with the keys to find the right one, trying to recall Sarah's instructions. As I struggled with the door I felt a prickly sensation on the back of my neck, as if a hundred pairs of eyes were watching me. The curtain in the hairdresser's window opposite twitched and two old ladies walked out of the charity shop to take a good long look at me before doubling back into the shop. This was not like London, where people don't care to know your business. Here, a stranger unlocking the bookshop was hot news.

I pushed past a wedge of post to get inside. The shop was much larger than it seemed from the outside. There was a counter to the left of the entrance and behind that was a small office space. Beyond the counter, the shop turned into a forest of shelves that seemed to stretch for miles and miles. Beside one of the bookcases was a tatty armchair. This place was so dusty it made Sarah's cottage seem like an operating theatre by

comparison. I started to cough. This was not a place to work in if you had a dust allergy or delicate nerves. The badly fitted shelves groaned under the weight of books. It seemed like it would only take one false move or loud sneeze and the whole thing would collapse.

The only dust-free object was a shiny new poster advertising the Netherby Festival in August. I noted that there were some pretty cool bands playing.

On my way to fetch the float, I tripped over a box of old records, labelled: *Kai's personal property. NOT FOR SALE.* I gave the box an extra kick. How dare he say he turned into a vegetable every time Sarah walked into the room! It was a bit rich, coming from a man who transformed into a lecherous toad whenever anything remotely female entered a room.

I scooped up the mountains of post, plopped it all on the counter and took a look at the office space. It didn't take long. There was a cash register, an old computer, a grubby radio and a battered office chair, complete with an old velvet cushion that was covered in cat hair. There was also an ancient telephone made of heavy plastic. There was no dial tone, but at least the radio worked. I tuned it to an R'n'B music station. I took the cushion off the chair and swung round in my seat. On my second swing I encountered a mass of white whiskers and a pair of watery eyes looking back at me.

'You're new,' Whiskers said.

Without thinking, I answered, 'You're old.'

He burst out laughing and said 'Touché!' Then he held out his hand. 'Julius Lawrence, at your service! Everyone calls me Julius.'

'I'm Jenna,' I said, eyeing him cautiously.

Julius continued smiling and speaking in a loud voice. 'Ah,

Jenna. The girl with the green eyes! I used to own this fair establishment until I retired. It was called Julius Lawrence Antiquarian Books in my day. It specialised in books about art and photography then.’ He fingered the straps of an old camera round his neck and went on. ‘Many moons ago, I fancied myself as a bit of a photographer. Now like a faithful old Labrador, I keep coming back to my old hunting ground. It’s come in very handy since they closed down the library. By the way there’s some correspondence stuck in the door.’

I followed his gaze to where a crumpled brown envelope was jammed under the door.

‘I guess that’s why I didn’t hear you come in,’ I said.

He walked over to a shelf and pulled out a book that had a bookmark in it. Then he sat down in the armchair. ‘Don’t mind me. I’m what is known as a “local character”.’

I turned the music up and tried to ignore him. Although I’d never admit it, I was actually quite glad of the company. I liked being treated like an adult, but it was scary to be left in charge of a shop – albeit a dusty old bookshop with a naff name.

Julius barked across the room, ‘Sarah usually has Radio 4 on low. Music can be quite distracting when one is trying to lose oneself in a book.’

‘You know what they say, Julius,’ I yelled back at him, bending down to switch on the computer. I was hoping to send some e-mail to Mia and Jackson. “‘Music hath charms to soothe the savage beast.’”

Above me, a sparky voice said, ‘*Breast!* I think it’s breast.’

I popped my head out from underneath the table and found myself staring at a familiar faded red T-shirt. I bobbed quickly back under the table.

‘Er, breast,’ I said as I struggled to banish thoughts of his naked chest from my mind. Then I banged my head as I backed out from underneath the table and into an ambush of cobwebs that had been hanging in wait for me.

By the time I had got to my feet he had walked over to a shelf, pulled out a book and handed it to me.

“‘Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast,’” he said, then he nodded, turned and walked out of the shop, leaving me with a book of quotations in my hands and wearing a fetching cobweb headdress.

Not the most promising of introductions. Plus, I still hadn’t really been able to take in what he looked like without a book in front of his face.

I dislodged the letter that was wedged under the door. I didn’t want any more surprise visitors. To keep myself busy, I dug out a box of felt-tips from under the counter and added *Customers preferred!* to the tatty *Browsers welcome* sign. Then I sat back and began to relax.

About an hour later a loud ring shattered my calm.

‘The bells! The bells!’ Julius did a terrible Hunchback of Notre-Dame impression that he seemed to think was hilarious and I stared at the old lady who’d just walked in. With her purple hair and bright red lips, she looked like she belonged on the set of an ancient horror movie.

She plonked down a pile of books on the counter, pointed at my sign and said, ‘I prefer customers myself. Mind you, you don’t get as many time-wasters in the hairdresser’s where I work.’

‘I’m not buying today,’ I said, eyeing the pile warily. I hadn’t worked out how to use the cash register yet, and I didn’t know if I was allowed to buy books.

‘Aren’t you? Well, I’m sure you know your business.’ She went over to a shelf and began flicking through some tatty paperbacks.

Julius looked up. ‘That’s Ava. She’s another regular.’

Ava straightened her brightly coloured cardigan. ‘I’m quite capable of introducing myself, thank you very much, Julius.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘I expect Sarah has already briefed you about the Rampant Romantics.’

*‘L’amour, toujours l’amour!’* Julius gushed.

Ava was still looking at me expectantly. ‘The Rampant Romantics,’ she repeated slowly, as if I were stupid. ‘Sarah must have told you about us.’

‘Not exactly,’ I mumbled. ‘I’ve only just arrived.’

‘We have an arrangement. We circulate our romantic fiction around the village and the shop. If any should be sold in the shop then Sarah gets to keep the money.’

In a swift move she replaced the books on the shelf with her copies and whizzed the others into a string bag. She also put down a paper bag on the counter.

‘I brought this in for Sarah. Is she feeling any better? She’s got to eat. Heartbreak is a terrible thing.’ She leaned in so close to me that I could smell her peppermint-flavoured breath. She grabbed hold of my arm and squeezed it tightly, saying, ‘Mind you, I never quite trusted that Kai. He has a roving eye and a finely cut calf muscle. Mix that with a few rhyming couplets, and you’ve got a lethal combination.’

‘People say I have good legs,’ Julius cut in. He stood and rolled up his trouser leg.

Ava rolled her eyes again and said, ‘I can’t stand round chatting all day. I’ve got some heads to wash.’ She wiggled out of the shop in her tight pencil skirt.

Julius watched her every move and whistled, ‘What a woman!’

Another hour passed by and I was still struggling to get the computer to work when Julius got up from the chair and stretched.

‘Would you care to join me for a spot of afternoon tea at the café?’

‘No thanks. I’d better go and check on Sarah. She ought to have been here by now,’ I mumbled. I wasn’t in the mood for drinking tea with an old fogey.

‘After tea I’ll pop back and keep an eye on the shop for you. Sarah let me hang on to my set of keys,’ he said.

When Julius had gone I peeped into the bag that Ava had left. Inside it was a large piece of bread and butter pudding. The sweet spicy smell was irresistible so I broke off a chunk, wolfed it down and went off in search of Sarah.

On my way back up the high street, I peeped into the café. I’d expected it to be one of those over-fussy tea shops with heavy-patterned wallpaper and lace tablecloths, but it had stripped pine tables and internet access. It was definitely worth checking out another time. I paused to brush a sugar crystal from my cheek and spotted Julius sitting in the window, waving his arms and chatting animatedly to none other than Torso Boy.

Just as I was about to walk away, the boy turned his head and caught my eye for a fraction of a second. It was like someone had dropped an ice cube down my back. I looked down and continued quickly on my way.

My mind buzzed. Why had I reacted like that? Why had I said I’d go and check on Sarah instead of going for tea with

Julius? If I hadn't, I might be getting to know Torso Boy. And why was I so bothered about that boy anyway? He probably treated girls like arm-candy like Jackson did. And when there was any real trouble around, he'd walk away too.

I slapped my head. One thing was certain. I would have to get him out of my mind, because I, Jenna Hudson, had an amazing ability to always make the wrong choice.