

The Incredible Journey

‘Why didn’t he French kiss you?’ asked Sasha blearily. It was twelve-twenty-eight and I had just started the epic two-minute walk to Poppy’s house.

I had clearly woken Sasha up. The thing is, she already had a boyfriend, Darren, and could therefore prioritise optional things like sleep on Saturday mornings. Sasha had been my friend ever since infants’ school, though she had her own gang of outside-school friends and lived quite far away, so over the summer we pretty much just caught up over the phone.

She was spoiling my plan, though. I had phoned her so I would look popular and busy in case it was Luke who opened the door at Poppy’s, and now she was asking difficult questions!

‘What do you mean, why didn’t he French kiss me? Should I have asked him to stick his tongue in my mouth?’

I had to slow down and do little mouse-type steps in order to resolve this before getting to Poppy’s door. I was speaking in low tones – partly from the effort of little mouse-type steps combined

with my heavy bag – but also from suppressed outrage. Why did everyone keep questioning it? I mean, he wouldn't have done it if he wasn't interested, would he? This was just the start!

'No, but are you sure he wants to go out with you now?' said Sasha.

'It was amazing,' I said, wounded. 'It felt really *promising*. I'm on my way round to talk to him!'

I spotted Lorraine coming out of her house and abruptly went back to walking normally. Instead of blanking me totally, she looked at me! Even people from soon-to-be-Year-Twelve were taking notice of me now I had snogged Luke!

'Maybe let Luke make the first move,' said Sasha hesitantly. 'A kiss is great, but – you know, it wasn't dead passionate or anything. If you act cool you can figure out exactly what's going on. It's less risky and embarrassing that way.'

Not passionate? I know Sasha is really cool and knows about These Things, but she hadn't *been there*. I ended up sacrificing my cool I'm-on-the-phone moment to say, 'I've got to go – I'm outside Poppy's.'

I arranged my features into an alluring, braces-hidden smile and knocked on the door in a state of breathless anticipation, but it was just Poppy's mum who answered. It was almost like a normal visit, which was hilarious because everything was different now!

On the way up to Poppy's room I was hugely tempted to knock on Luke's bedroom door and snog him immediately. But at the end of the day it was Poppy who had invited me round, not Luke, and I didn't want her to think I was abusing my position as Best Friend. Things were only just back to normal after last term, when

she had gone off with Claudia, this girl from our Year. It had been totally awful. Apparently dissatisfied with simply stealing my best friend, Claudia had then tried to get together with Luke! I still felt sick at my memories of Claudia parading Luke in front of my nose. Thank God it turned out he wasn't interested. So, I could have warned Poppy at the time that Claudia was a ruthless, attention-seeking boy magnet. But Poppy hadn't realised Claudia's true colours until Claudia had gone off with Jez, Poppy's long-term crush! All this while Claudia was supposed to be matchmaking them! The accepted theory was that, while Claudia masqueraded as a rich, half-Italian fourteen-year-old girl with gorgeous dark hair, underneath she was just a big, spiky monster with a make-up bag where its heart should be.

As I went up Poppy's stairs I recalled the other, more radical theory, the one that kept nice people like my friend Jo speaking to Claudia. This theory was that Claudia was OK really and Jez had simply been there when she was feeling low and needed some attention.

I guess that in a completely factual, itsy-bitsy-detail kind of way, Poppy and Jez weren't *actually* going out when Claudia swiped him from under Poppy's nose. But since when did you have to be completely factual to know what is right and wrong?

Anyway, I found Poppy sitting on her bedroom floor, visibly fizzing with excitement as she piled brightly coloured T-shirts and strappy sandals into a big, pale pink holdall. I looked at her stuff with amusement. Apart from her huge first-aid kit for any medical emergencies, Poppy and I could have just shared one bag – we'd packed pretty much identically.

I triumphantly held up the magazine which I'd carried over

separately so it wouldn't get squashed in my bag. (OK, I broke into my holiday money, but it had free flip-flops worth ten pounds! So, really, it was an investment purchase.)

'Ooh, can I borrow those on holiday?' said Poppy.

'Of course.'

Poppy fished Claudia's brochure out of her bag and browsed it reflectively. It was Claudia and Jo's holiday that had inspired ours. Poppy's mum had booked ours through a different company which didn't have its own brochure, and OK, our holiday was only in Cornwall, not Spain, but it was the same sort of deal. Fourteen-to eighteen-year-olds, tons of late night discos and stuff, plus lazing around on the beach during the day! In fact, Jo had told us that Jez wasn't too happy about Claudia going on her holiday, because apparently there were always tons more boys than girls. Brilliant!

'Mum made me pack a cagoule and a tea towel,' I said, giggling.

Poppy laughed. 'We won't need any of that. Just, you know, sun cream.'

'And phone credit for calling Luke.'

'And shades.'

'And – and some of those little parasols that go in your drink, so we look cool in all the photos.'

We looked with anticipation at Claudia's brochure. One page had an image of a nightclub full of tanned teenagers dancing, plus another of a pool with some gorgeous, tanned lifeguards. Opposite was a big group photo taken on a beach at sunset.

Poppy and I were very organised and grown-up and made lists of all the things we wanted to do on holiday:

My List

1. *Have people admire my new free flip-flops.*
2. *Phone Luke a lot and get him to send me a photo of himself so the other girls at camp melt with envy.*

Poppy's List

1. *Meet Gorgeous, Tanned Lifeguard.*
2. *Have Gorgeous, Tanned Lifeguard put his arm around Poppy and get a photo taken.*

Poppy started jiggling up and down with poorly repressed excitement and asked, 'So, do you think it was true, what Poo-brains told us about people going for midnight swims on these holidays?'

I took it that Poo-brains was the latest name for Claudia.

'I don't know. But discos and stuff most nights, definitely. Maybe even every night. Er, Poppy – you're rocking the floor.'

'But – right —' Poppy continued, struggling to control her excitement. 'What do I do if I get together with one of the eighteen-year-olds and he wants to go down to the beach and *do stuff?*'

'Well, how far would you want to go?' I said, a) checking her mum wasn't at the bedroom door, which was slightly open and b) wondering whether to say, 'You have to feel ready and not be pressured', like an agony aunt from *Sugar*. The thing is, I'd had one proper French kiss before now with a random boy called Charlie, but Poppy hadn't even got round to snogging anyone yet! Let alone 'doing stuff'.

'I don't know. What if I like him a lot?'

I hesitated. 'You would . . . I don't know, look at the stars and stuff —'

‘— and snog —’

‘And snog, but not let him do anything major.’

‘What counts as major?’ said Poppy, adding, ‘Come on, imagine it’s you.’

I couldn’t imagine it. When I closed my eyes, all I got was Luke. Which reminded me I had to go and talk to him soon, before we left. I adjusted the pile of denim and coloured tops in Poppy’s holdall so that it stood a chance of closing. As holdalls go, this one wasn’t living up to its name.

‘With an eighteen-year-old,’ prompted Poppy.

‘On the beach, in the moonlight . . .’ I said, trying hard. ‘With my new flip-flops on?’

‘If you like. Where do you stop?’

‘Um – I don’t know.’ I guessed, ‘Anything involving unzipping my clothes?’

There was a light tap on the door and Luke stuck his head round!

‘You OK, ladies?’ he said.

Nightmare – how long had he been standing there? He looked sort of surprised, and I wondered whether this was because of the imaginary unzipping or because I hadn’t gone to see him yet. Mmm, he looked all lean and arty and delicious. (Floppy dark brown hair, green eyes – yum.)

I opened my mouth but couldn’t exactly say, ‘It’s only Poppy who wants to do that! Not me!’ And, well, he sounded bright enough. Maybe he hadn’t heard anything. Then I thought of Sasha’s doubts. Maybe he had heard but he didn’t care?

‘Fine!’ I replied, hoping the next thing Luke said would give me a clue.

But he looked at Poppy's bag on the floor, then just said, 'Well, have a great time! I'll just be here, working. Top-notch TVs don't pay for themselves.'

And with that he turned and went back to his room!

If I hadn't been stricken with doubts, I would have immediately started imagining Luke and me watching our favourite films together in his room on a big, top-of-the-range screen. It is so cool that he loves DVDs and stuff too. But I realised I had no idea at all what Luke was thinking. Did he overhear our stupid conversation? Poppy started it! And I wasn't being serious. Did he think that I was keen to pull someone on holiday? Had he sounded a bit flat simply because he didn't fancy his summer job? Or was he not interested and I had read the whole situation wrongly? It hadn't seemed possible before – everything had seemed really clear – but now I didn't know.

I looked at Poppy, needing guidance, reassurance and, ideally, a bit of chocolate. But she just opened her mouth and went, 'And what if we went for a midnight swim and my top got wet? Would I take it off or would that be too much?'

I didn't think Poppy was going to have to cross that bridge for a while. She hadn't even met anyone yet.

'I'm going to talk to Luke quickly,' I said, standing up. Far better to just go and talk to him than try to read his mind.

I slipped out onto the upstairs landing and towards Luke's room at the front of the house. His door was locked as usual. It bore a barrage of *Keep Out* signs that his best friend Craig had given him. I knew the keep-out signs weren't for me. However my thoughts suddenly flashed back to last week, when Luke was a distant lust object who had barely started speaking to me. Could I

genuinely ask him out? Sasha had asked all that stuff about how I was going to act. What was I going to say exactly? 'Don't be jealous of the imaginary eighteen-year-olds?' Possibly a bit presumptuous, when I didn't even know if he wanted anything more to happen. And what if he said, 'Why would I be interested in a fourteen-year-old with fixed braces, tangly light brown hair and a slightly large bottom?' Oh God. Nothing was certain.

Then Poppy's mum called from downstairs, 'Girls, are you ready? Come and put your bags in the car!'

Things suddenly seemed really complicated. So, I turned and went back to Poppy's room.