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Lily's  
just  
fine

Sweet  
Cherry  
PUBLISHING

Sweet Cherry Publishing Limited  
Unit 36, Vulcan House,  
Vulcan Road,  
Leicester, LE5 3EF,  
United Kingdom

Proof copy, not for resale

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

ISBN: 978-1-78226-443-9

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Cover Design by Rhiannon Izard

[www.sweetcherrypublishing.com](http://www.sweetcherrypublishing.com)

Printed and bound in the UK

Printer code E.C007

To David, Alexander and Zachary  
You are all very fine

# Lily

Gemma says, ‘So how come *you* get to go to the prom?’

We’re sitting on the bench that overlooks the harbour, eating ice cream. The waterfront is one of Newton St Cuthbert’s claims to touristy fame, but it’s too early in the season for visitors. It’s warm, though, so we’ve taken off our Galloway Academy blazers. I’ve pulled up my skirt and unbuttoned most of my shirt. We’re on the south coast, even if it is the south coast of Scotland. You can always hope for a tan.

‘Why shouldn’t I go?’

‘Because you’re only sixteen? And you’re not in the sixth form?’

‘So? I got them the venue. I arranged the décor. In fact, I’ve organised the whole thing. Oh, and I’m going out with the head boy.’ I interrupt a complacent smile to lick some ice cream dripping down my cone. ‘Aargh, that was close!’ Chocolate ice cream on a white school shirt – not a good look.

Gemma is still going on about the prom. ‘Yes, yes, I know all that. But why is it always you? You shouldn’t even be on the organising committee.’

‘I’m not on it officially; it’s just that they couldn’t manage without me.’ I know I sound smug, but hey, why not when you’ve got a lot to be smug about? ‘They were the ones who came and asked me, when their first venue fell through.’

‘I bet they didn’t expect you to take over the running of the whole thing.’

‘I haven’t taken over. Well, not completely.’

Gemma sniggers and nearly has an ice cream catastrophe of her own.

I say, ‘Hey, do you want to come too? I can maybe find you a partner. I’ll talk to Gerry Hawkins, or Dan, or—’

‘No, no,’ she says hastily. ‘I didn’t say I wanted to go. I’d have to get dressed up and all that stuff.’ She shudders. ‘I just don’t understand how you manage to get involved in everything.’

‘I told you, it’s because I *do* things.’ I’ve tried to explain this before. Gemma just sits back and lets things happen. I don’t understand how people can be like that. You should take life by the scruff of the neck. Get things done. Otherwise, what’s the point?

I’m actually quite looking forward to the prom (stupid American name, but that’s what the sixth form voted to call it). The school has never used the Abbey House Hotel before, with its fancy ballroom

and views over the river. The lilac colour scheme was my idea and it's working out brilliantly. I'd even considered wearing a purple dress, but decided that would be a bit too much – and I definitely do not want to blend in with the trimmings! Instead I've gone for a silky sheath in aquamarine, with a slit right up to my knickers. I don't think Mum's too keen on it, but she's always suggesting I wear something other than jeans. My clothes are pretty much the only thing about me she seems to take an interest in these days. Fortunately my sister, Corinne, backed me up, so I got my way.

'I suppose I'd better go and start getting ready.' I lick the last of the ice cream from my fingers. 'Want to come and be my style adviser?'

Gemma shakes her head. 'I do not. I'm going home to watch daytime TV, eat rubbish and *not* study. The bliss.'

She's just taken her last exam. I finished a couple of days ago, but I can still feel the relief. 'Bliss,' I echo. No more revising. Summer coming. Life is good!

We head back into town. I don't have far to go. My parents' house is in one of the pretty, pastel-coloured Georgian terraces the tourists are always oohing and aahing about, right near the town centre. Gemma lives in a semi in one of the newer estates farther out. She moans constantly about the walk, but when I suggest she get a bike she just ignores me. Come to think of it, she ignores me quite a lot.

As we reach the corner where our routes part she

says, 'Will you keep an eye out for Tom? He's going to the prom too. He's definitely not looking forward to it.'

'Tom Owen?' I'm slightly put out. There aren't many people in our year going, and I certainly wouldn't have expected Gemma's quiet neighbour to be one of them. 'Who's he going with?'

'I'm not sure. One of Sonya Robson's crowd. Morag? Yes, I think it's Morag. She wanted him to wear a kilt but he's refused.'

'He'll have to wear a suit, at the very least.' The organising committee have been very strict about the dress code – with just a little nudge from me.

'Yes, he knows. He's probably dreading that too. I thought you could just say hi to him, so he doesn't, you know, feel like a total outsider.'

'Okay, no problem.' I haven't got anything against Tom Owen – he's just one of those people who fades into the background. But I like to help when I can. And I almost always can.

# Tom

I'm cooking chicken fajitas. It's something Sarah will usually eat, even if she only manages half of one, and Mum loves them. Plus they'll keep if Dad doesn't get home in time for dinner. Not that I'll be eating with them tonight – you get food at this stupid dance.

Sarah's having a good day. She's been up in her dressing gown since lunchtime, and now she comes through to the kitchen to talk to me while I cook.

She sits on one of the stools at the breakfast bar, all pale and drooping, like it's been an effort to get up there.

'You shouldn't be cooking,' she says. 'You should be getting ready to go out.'

'Getting ready's not going to take long: put on horrible suit, finished.'

'You should at least have a shower first.'

I shrug. 'I had a shower this morning. Look, I'm not trying to impress anybody.'

'But still. Your first prom ...' Sarah sounds wistful,



grey-green eyes dreamy behind her thick glasses. ‘Will you take photos?’

I let out a snort before I remember how much she would love to be the one going – or at least to look forward to going in future. But she’s been ill for years. As far as I can see, the chances of her ever attending a prom are just about nil. ‘I’ll do my best,’ I say instead, trying to sound more enthusiastic, ‘and I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow.’

‘Thanks.’ She flashes me a smile, something hardly anyone outside the family sees, even those who do bother to come visit. ‘Listen, pass me the peppers and I’ll chop them. That’ll help speed things up, won’t it?’

I remember not to say *Are you sure?* or *Don’t do too much*. I hand over the chopping board and the shiny red peppers. I even give her the onion to do, to show I have faith in her. It isn’t much help, she’s so slow, but I don’t tell her that.

When Mum comes home she makes even more fuss than Sarah about me going to get ready. It’s easier just to give in. They’re all excited about seeing me in a suit and tie, and don’t I look grown up, and does Morag know how lucky she is to have me as her partner? As if. I know for a fact I’m at least her third choice. That’s why I said yes. I didn’t want her to have to go on and on asking people, plus I hadn’t had time to think up a good excuse.

Whatever. I agreed to go and now I just have to get on with it.

# Lily

Dressing up is fun! I've put my hair into these big curlers so it's come out all bouncy, and I've shaved and moisturised, highlighted and contoured until I feel like a whole new me. I wish Corinne was home to help, but I do my best and go to show Mum the results.

She's in the conservatory with the doors open to the garden. The early evening sun lights up the garden and it looks beautiful, the lilac bushes in bloom against the old stone wall, and all sorts of other flowers starting to come out. 'Ta-da!' I say, twirling to get her attention.

For a moment she doesn't react. Then she looks up from her magazine and smiles faintly. 'Very nice, darling.' After another pause she frowns, again faintly. 'Maybe that split is a little too revealing?'

'It's nothing. I am wearing pants, you know.' I wonder if she'd even notice if I was showing a bit of side bum. Probably not. I say brightly, 'And the neckline is very demure.'

Mum sighs. Okay, maybe “demure” isn’t the right word. But the neckline is definitely high – no flesh on display, although the shimmery material certainly shows my boobs off to good advantage.

‘Is Jamie walking you there?’ Wow, Mum is really making an effort to be interested.

‘Walking! It’s nearly a mile. I’d never manage that in these heels.’ They’re three inches high, which makes me over six feet. Jamie won’t be happy that I’m the same height as him. Hah! ‘He’s borrowing his mum’s car. Should be here to pick me up any minute.’

‘He won’t be drinking, will he?’ Mum sighs again, like it’s all too much for her.

I say diplomatically, ‘He’s only seventeen, they won’t serve him at the hotel.’ Knowing Jamie he’ll find some way to get hold of some alcohol and we’ll end up getting a taxi back, but no need to tell Mum that.

Just then my phone goes and it’s Jamie saying he can’t find a space and can I come outside. Parking on my street is ridiculous, so there’s no real reason for me to feel miffed that he hasn’t come to the door.

I say goodbye to Mum and grab the tiny glittery bag Corinne picked out to go with the dress before hurrying out. There’s already a car hooting at Jamie from behind, so I jump in and we head straight off.

He’s wearing the full kilt outfit, including a black jacket, but not (thank goodness) one of those laced-up shirts.

‘Looking good,’ I say as we head through the town.

‘And you,’ he answers without looking.

Things are crazy when we get to the Abbey House Hotel: parents dropping off their kids, taxis queuing, a few new drivers with borrowed cars like Jamie trying to park without embarrassing themselves. Everyone else is milling about outside, waiting for the photographer to take a picture of us on the broad steps. They’ve stuck to the dress code – even Debby-Lou in a long Gothic dress, long black hair and long black eyelashes. The boys are adjusting tight collars and trying to hide cans of beer. The girls are squealing and kissing cheeks, as though they haven’t just seen each other a couple of hours ago.

‘You look gorgeous, babe.’

‘Gorgeous yourself!’

‘Sonya’s missing a bit of her dress, ha ha!’

‘Nothing that matters! Not sure about the dye job, though.’

‘It’s not nearly as bad as Debby-Lou’s.’

‘No, that looks totally fake. Sonya’s looks more like Lily’s.’

Gee, thanks. I thought my curls were pretty stylish, not to mention the colour is natural.

The photographer takes an age, then finally everyone starts to head inside. Jamie stands at the door of the reception room, telling people where to go.

‘There are seating plans,’ I mutter. ‘I know because I drew them up.’

‘I’m just trying to be helpful.’

‘Point them in the way of the seating plan, then.’ As far as I can see, the only thing he’s doing is blocking the entrance.

He smiles brightly at everyone but me. ‘You’re being bossy again.’

*I’m being bossy?* He’s the one personally telling everyone where to go.

‘Come on, Rob’s already over there.’ I take his hand and pull him to our table. He doesn’t look happy, but at least it allows everyone else to get into the room. He releases my hand as soon as he can and turns to talk to his friend. I really hope he isn’t going to sulk.

# Lily

The evening isn't as good as I'd expected. Most of the boys have done too much pre-drinking – and some of the girls, too. Sonya is waaay out of it. Everything I can control is absolutely fine: music, dress, food, even the behaviour, up to a point. But actually the whole thing just isn't that ... *exciting*. Most people seem keener on taking stupid selfies than chatting or dancing.

I collect a soda water from the bar and go to hang out at the back of the room, to try and work out what I can do to improve things. Tom Owen is standing there, which makes me remember my promise to Gemma.

'Hi,' I say, waving my glass. Oops, nearly spilt it. 'How's it going?'

He's a thin boy with a narrow face, not quite as tall as me in these heels. I've always found him to be a bit of a loner. Certainly he's never the centre of a crowd like Jamie. Recently he's let his dark blond hair grow out and the way it hangs in his face makes his expression

hard to read.

‘Oh. Hi.’ He glances at me for a moment and then away.

‘Who are you here with?’ I say, trying to remember.  
‘Morag Leslie. And you?’

That’s a bit much. Everyone knows I’m with Jamie – even if I haven’t actually been *with* Jamie much this evening. He seems to think it’s his duty to dance with practically every girl in his year, not to mention some of the teachers who’ve come along to supervise. He’s really hot on keeping in with the teachers, is Jamie.

‘Oh yes, Jamie,’ he says, and it’s almost like he’s sneering.

That makes me turn and look at him properly. I want to point out that he has *nothing* to sneer about. But he’s tossed his hair back and I’m distracted by his totally stunning eyes: sapphire blue with dark bits in them, like dark pools of summer sea, focussed on me with a questioning look.

For a moment I lose my train of thought.

‘Huh?’

‘Where is he?’ Tom repeats, turning that gaze from me to the crowd beneath the strobe lights.

‘How should I know?’

‘I thought you knew everything that’s going on.’

He says it so deadpan that I can’t tell if he’s trying to be sarcastic or not. Either way, before I’ve worked out a reply, he’s disappeared out of a side door with his mobile to his ear.

Well. That was pleasant – *not*. That must be the first time I've had a one-to-one conversation with Tom Owen in years, if ever. He's Gemma's friend, not mine. I'd thought he was kind of sweet because he was always quiet and well behaved. Now I'm not so sure.

Jamie insists on us being the last people to leave, like we're the hosts or something. A bit ridiculous, but I don't object to extending the evening. I'm still waiting for something thrilling to happen. For it to live up to my expectations.

We say goodbye to Mrs Broadfoot, who's the last of the teachers to go. She's head of Pupil Support so she apparently feels responsible for us all. Plus I think she has a teeny crush on Jamie, who does look pretty good in his kilt.

Finally we get into Jamie's mum's car. He doesn't start the engine so I turn to him, wondering if he's going to move in for a kiss. Suddenly I don't really feel in the mood. I'm pissed off with him for ignoring me all evening.

Instead he says, 'Lily, I think we should talk.'

Uh-oh. That's never the start of something good.

'Talk away,' I say brightly, scooting around further so I can see him properly. It's handy that there are lots of lights in the hotel car park.

His expression is serious, which makes him more good-looking than ever: short, neat hair, slim, symmetrical face. Sometimes he can look the tiniest



bit bland. Now he looks grim and interesting.

He's looking towards me but not really at me, certainly not meeting my eyes. 'Look, you know I'm off on this school trip to Nicaragua next week, then after that to France with the parents, and then I'm off to uni.'

'Ye-es.' Of course I know all that. We've discussed it already and I'm fine with it. It's not like I'm the clingy type. I function perfectly well on my own.

'Well,' he says, and pauses.

Jesus, why doesn't he just get on with it? I know what's coming now.

He says, 'Maybe it's time for us to take a break, meet other people, you know? I wouldn't want you to feel I was away having a good time and you were left here ...'

'I wouldn't feel that, believe me,' I snap. What is he on? Does he think I'm going to be languishing in my room? 'I'm quite capable of having a good time whether you're here or not. But that's fine, we can go our separate ways.'

He lets out a sigh of relief so strong it ruffles his light-brown fringe, and the grim expression goes back to bland. What did he expect? That I'd make a scene? Burst into tears?

He says, 'I'm glad you're taking it so well,' and then just sits there, like he's not quite sure what should happen next.

'It's fine,' I say again, although I could have done

with him being a little less relieved to be shot of me. ‘Right, shall we go home then?’

‘What? Oh, yes, if you’re sure.’

Maybe the last girlfriend he broke up with made a scene. Actually, as that girlfriend was Sonya Robson, she probably made a *big* scene. Now he’s realised he’s going to get away with this so easily, he hurries to start the car. The roads are quiet and it’s only a few minutes before we reach my house. He’s driving faster than he usually does, like he’s desperate to get away from me.

I slide out of the car before he’s decided whether he needs to give me a goodbye kiss or not.

I raise a hand in a vague farewell. ‘Thanks for the lift.’ I almost add *Have a nice life!* but decide that would sound like I care.

He drives off and I’m left with my fury. How dare he finish with me? I’m the one who makes decisions like that. *And how dare he be relieved?*

But the really annoying thing is that I’m a bit relieved, too. Maybe he’s made a decision that I hadn’t yet realised needed making. How mind-blowingly infuriating is that? Now everyone will think I care, and I don’t.

I really don’t.

# Tom

Gemma says, ‘Did you hear Jamie broke up with Lily?’

She doesn’t wait for my answer, which would have been ‘No’. I’m not interested in that kind of stuff, but it looks like I’m going to hear all about it anyway.

Apparently it happened at the dance last night, presumably late on. They’d certainly arrived together, Jamie looking all smooth and self-important, Lily just looking like, well, herself, and turning every head. I don’t know what it is with that girl. She isn’t pretty, but she has something about her that makes people want to look. Not me, obviously, but a lot of people.

Gemma’s still going on, ‘... and he said it was because he was going to be away so much and it wouldn’t be fair on Lily. But he must have wanted to break up, really, mustn’t he? If he was keen on her like he used to be, he wouldn’t even have signed up for the Nicaragua trip.’

‘Looks good on his CV,’ I say automatically. Wasn’t

that why everyone signed up?

And thinking about it, I'm not sure Jamie has ever been *that* keen on Lily. More keen on the kudos of being seen with her, on what a striking couple they made. That must have been before he realised the downside of spending so long in her company. Not that I know Lily Hildebrand well, but I've observed her from a distance and heard more than enough about her from Gemma. She's been Gemma's best friend forever, but even Gem has to admit she's *hard work*. Like she always has to be right, and she has all these ideas and so much energy.

Which immediately makes me think of Sarah, who's paying for the effort she made yesterday helping prepare dinner, and now has no energy at all. Life is so unfair.

'I can't decide whether Lils is upset but too proud to show it, or genuinely not upset. Which means she didn't like Jamie that much after all, despite them going out for six months, which is the longest she's ever been out with anyone.'

Does it matter? I want to say, but apparently it does to Gemma.

We're sitting on the broken-down summer seat in Gemma's back garden. She insists on having the sunshade up because the sun only needs to glance at her skin to burn it. And as soon as she burns she worries about skin cancer. There's one thing you can say for sure about Gemma – she knows how to worry.

‘How’s Sarah?’ she says, changing the subject abruptly as though she’s realised I’m bored.

‘She’s not so good today.’ I keep my tone neutral.

‘I gathered. Your mum said she didn’t want to see me.’

‘It’s not that she wouldn’t want to see you, it’s just ...’

‘She’s tired.’

‘Yes.’ I let out the tiniest of sighs. How can a fifteen year old girl be this tired? And how is it they can’t find out what’s wrong with her? She’s been like this for over two years now. At first they’d talked about post-viral fatigue. Now they say maybe Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, but they don’t really know. They’ve done tests for every illness I’ve ever heard of (and lots I haven’t) and found nothing definite.

‘There’re lots of pictures of the prom online. I thought she’d like to go through them with me. I could tell her who everyone is, fill her in on the gossip.’

‘She’d love that.’ And it would be a lot more fun for Sarah – and for me – if she looked through the photos with Gemma. ‘Maybe she’ll feel better this afternoon.’

‘Okay, message me if she does and I’ll come over. Now I’m going to go home and finish my book.’ Gemma pulls back her fine, reddish hair, squinting out into the sunshine. ‘And I need to think of something to do to distract Lily. She’s only happy when she’s active. I don’t suppose you have any ideas?’

I shake my head, alarmed to even be asked. I might

feel very slightly sorry for Lily Hildebrand having been dumped by her perfect boyfriend, but I doubt it will make much of a dent in her immense self-confidence and otherwise wonderful life. I'm certainly not going to waste time dwelling on it.

# Lily

It doesn't take long to realise that I've taken my eye off the ball. I'd known Jamie was going away for the summer, and I certainly hadn't counted on him keeping me entertained if he wasn't. But stupidly, I haven't made any plans of my own.

I need to decide how to make use of all this time – ten whole weeks of it, stretching out like a great blank space before us. Three of those weeks are for wrapping up the school term, but who does any work at this stage of the year?

I get up early, upload some pictures, and talk to Gemma who seems desperate to know All About It. Then I take Mum a cup of tea, because that way I know she's awake. I think about bullying her to get out of bed but don't have the energy. She asks how the prom was and I say fine. She doesn't mention Jamie, so I don't need to tell her anything there.

I find a sun lounger and carry it into the garden,

setting it up on the decking at the far end where you get the most sun. Then I lie down and think.

Finally I'm going to be able to do all the things I haven't had time for. I'd had loads of ideas, I'm sure I had. But now I can't think of a single one of them. And something's been niggling at me. It's the tone of Gemma's voice, all full of sympathy. Yes, she'd been curious, too, but I can handle that. I'm used to people being interested in my life. But *concern for my well-being*? No way. I don't need anyone to feel sorry for me. I'll be fine, just like always.

Jamie Abernethy – smart, sporty, good-looking Jamie Abernethy – had broken up with me. So what? There are other fish in the sea if I want one (a boyfriend, not a fish), and as it happens, I don't right now. I'm perfectly okay on my own. I just have to make sure everyone knows that. I'll go on as normal but more so, and no one will *dare* feel sorry for me.

Right. So how am I going to do this? Be normal but also *new* and *interesting*?

I don't like to diss the town where I've been born and brought up, but it's hard to think of something new and interesting to do in Newton St Cuthbert – or Galloway, even. Maybe I should go and stay with Corinne in Edinburgh like she's always asking me to.

No! I am not going to do that. That would look like running away. I'm going to find something to do right here.

Okay, so start with the easy things: get fit – that's



been on the agenda forever, why not make it happen now? Dad'll be good for a new pair of trainers, maybe some fitness gear. I can have a whole new image: Lily in Lycra. And maybe I should pay a bit more attention to my diet? Not to lose weight, but I could definitely eat more healthily. I'll do more cooking!

I grin to myself. I'm cheering up already. That's two things decided, although cooking's not that visible. Which is fine, I don't just do things because they're visible, but right now it's important that I'm not thought to be moping. I do *not* mope.

Surprisingly, it's Gemma who provides the best idea of all. Something fun and useful – and very public indeed.

She comes round in the late afternoon to cross-question me/offer more sympathy. I cut her short.

'Didn't expect to see you out walking in the sunshine when you didn't absolutely need to be.'

'I thought you might appreciate some moral support.'

'I don't,' I say. Sometimes you have to be blunt to get the message across. 'What's that?' I indicate the flyer she has in her hand.

'It's, er,' she looks more closely. 'I'm not sure. Someone stuck it in my hand as I was walking through town. Something about the gala.'

She hands it to me so I can read it myself.

'Gala committee,' I read aloud. 'Newton St

Cuthbert's annual gala takes place in the first week of August and we need new blood! Young or old, long-time resident or new, it's you we're looking for!

'Oh god,' says Gemma. 'Now I remember. It was Mrs Hebden who gave it to me. That's why I didn't dare put it straight in the next bin. You weren't in her Biology class. She's always going on about how the gala committee need more input and how we shouldn't leave everything to the same old people.'

'She's right. You shouldn't.' I tap the paper thoughtfully. 'You know, this might be a very good idea. This could be fun.'

'Are you mad? You've just finished on the prom committee. Even you can't possibly want to get involved in something like this.'

'Yes I can.' It's exactly what I need – and Gemma too, although she doesn't realise it yet. 'We'll have to get our thinking caps on. Gala Week has been the same forever. They're right, they definitely need new blood.'

Gemma is looking anxious. 'It'll be too late to change things for this year. They'll have most of it arranged already.'

'And who says arrangements can't be altered?'

'They're not really looking for people to have ideas,' she says, looking panicky now. 'They're adults. You won't be able to boss them. I bet they're just looking for gofers.'

'They might *think* they're looking for gofers. That isn't necessarily what they're going to get.' I feel

happier than I have done all day. ‘They’re having an open meeting on Monday evening. We have to go.’

Gemma opens her mouth in horror, revealing small, neat teeth. ‘Wha-at? I’m not going. You know I hate that kind of thing.’

‘All the more reason to do it.’ I grin. This is going to be amazing. We are really going to make a difference. Then I tone down my expression and use my trump card: ‘And it’ll be so good for me to have something to distract me from, you know ...’

She falls for my sad face and plea for support way more easily than when I just straight out tell her what to do. I’ll have to remember that.

# Tom

It's Sunday afternoon and John Forsyth, the commodore, has asked me to go down to the sailing club. It's my least favourite time – too bloody busy – but he wants me to help out coaching some of the kids. It's only fair: people gave up their time to coach me and Sarah when we were younger. Dad's down there as well, manning the rescue boat, but Mum stays at home. She says she needs to catch up on the washing and ironing, but it's really so that Sarah isn't left alone.

Sarah used to love going down to the club. She was way more competitive than me, had the makings of a really good sailor. Now she rarely leaves the house.

I feel bad going down there without her, being able to enjoy it when she can't. Maybe I can try to work something out. Get Mum to drive her down on one of her good days, even if she just sits on the jetty, hears the wind in the rigging, smells the raw, salty, seaweed smell. That should do her good, shouldn't it?

Or will it just make her regret all she's missing even more? She'd been very quiet after Gemma went through the prom photos with her last night, kind of withdrawn. I wish I knew what she was thinking.

I wish I could make her better.

But I can't, so I take my frustration out on the squealing eight- and nine-year-olds, telling them to concentrate or that boom is going to come round and hit them ... Ah, there it goes. A bash on the head may be what they need, it tends to quieten them down.

In the late afternoon, when most people have gone home because the wind is dying down, I take Dad's ancient Mirror out to the Flett Islands. It's a biggish boat to manage on your own, but it handles better than the Toppers the kids were using, and something about the touch of the varnished wood, the smell of the faded sail, makes me feel good about life.

There's more wind out at sea (we kept the kids in the estuary) and suddenly I have that feeling; the one you get when the jib and mainsail are taut and the water is hissing beneath the keel, splashing up salty and sharp in your face.

You have to concentrate on what you're doing and you can't think about anything else. You *are* the boat, the wind, the water. It's bloody fantastic and I want to go farther, out towards the Isle of Man and on and on. But I don't, of course. I tack when I reach the southernmost island – little more than a clump of rocks and grass – and head back to shore.

Like every sane person who's just finished their Higher exams, I've been planning on an easy few weeks running down to the end of term. Okay we're back at school for now, but no one takes it seriously at this stage.

Then Gemma comes up to me at lunchtime on Monday. She practically sidles up, and she has that anxious look on her pale face so I know she wants something – that and the fact that we don't really hang out together at school. We're neighbours and she's good with Sarah, but we're in different crowds. Well, she's in Lily Hildebrand's crowd and I'm mostly on my own, which is the way I like it.

'Hiya,' she says, sitting down on the bench next to me where I'm finishing my lunch.

'Hiya.' I take a last bite of my apple and put the core inside the Tupperware box.

'You doing anything this evening?'

'Maybe.' I haven't got anything planned. Mum did a huge vegetarian chilli last night and there's plenty left over so I don't need to cook, but I'm not going to lay myself open to some invite I don't want to accept. Look what happened with Morag Leslie. Just thinking about that suit makes me put a hand up to my neck to loosen my tie.

'The gala committee are looking for volunteers. There's a meeting at seven.'

'I know.' I was in Mrs Hebden's Biology class too.

I'd heard *all* about it.

'Lily and I are going along. She – we – thought it would be good if a few other young people came too, you know?'

She looks at me beseechingly. I know who's put her up to this. For whatever reason, Lily Hildebrand has decided that people should go to the meeting. And what Lily decides, happens. I can see her right now at the edge of the playing fields, tackling a group in the year below us, hands flying, head nodding, bulldozing over what I imagine are objections.

The gala committee? Not my kind of thing.

'Please say you'll come,' says Gemma. 'I'll get my brother to give us a lift back in so you won't have to walk.'

As if that's the reason I'd say no.

'It'll be fun,' she says, her eyes wide and desperate. 'I don't want it to be just Lily and me.'

And like with Morag Leslie – like an *idiot* – I find myself saying, 'Okay then, why not?'