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Oakfell Autumn Nights. Pumpkin Pies & Promises

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New Adult Fiction | Recommended age: 16+ | ISBN: 978-3-96976-089-5 | Pages: 352

First Published: August 2026 | © Moon Notes im Verlag Friedrich Oetinger, Hamburg

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Everlee loves autumn, the traditions of her cosy hometown of Oakfell and the charming chaos of her family, whose veterinary practice she works at alongside her studies. And she loved Cooper Sinclair. The boy next door she grew up with – who broke her heart when he left without her ever getting the chance to tell him how she truly felt. When Cooper unexpectedly shows up again after four years, the dangerously familiar closeness is back in an instant. And as the dreamy little town prepares for the Oakfell Autumn Nights among glowing pumpkin lanterns and the scent of apple cider, Cooper and Everlee must decide whether they are something more than best friends.

- He left without a word. Now he's back – and autumn in Oakfell has never felt so complicated, or so full of possibility.

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Oakfell 2015

Everlee

Cooper is 15, I'm 13

"This song is absolutely revolting."

I crossed my arms over my chest and pushed my lower lip out as far as it would go. I couldn't believe this bad joke was supposed to be my life.

"I kind of like it." Cooper's right corner of his mouth lifted, and the little dimple on his pale cheek appeared.

He still looked terrible. Exactly the way I felt. But I wasn't about to admit that. I couldn't afford to feed into this madness.

"You like being locked up and listening to this horror music?" I grabbed one of my crumpled tissues and threw it at him. "What is wrong with you? Are you on her side now?"

This time he responded with a loud laugh and turned his head in my direction.

We'd been lying side by side for hours, staring up at the ceiling.

The old wooden beams of the attic ran through our artwork – the mural we'd painted in the white spaces between them just last winter when the flu had got us. Since then, dark blue and grey streaks had decorated what had once been plain white wallpaper. Small fluorescent plastic stickers formed the constellations we'd found in an astrology book.

"I'm always on your side, and you know it. Remember – you and me against the rest of the world. So don't play the wounded toddler. You're only annoyed because we're not allowed out yet."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The anger at my mother's childishness came flooding back. She was the one behaving like a four-year-old, not me.

"Coop," I said with emphasis, propping myself up on one elbow. "That woman is completely off her rocker. She cannot decide whether we're well again based on some creepy old song. Someone should report this to Child Services." I shot a furious glance at the dusty record player. The Carpenters were still blaring Top of the World across our sick bay, mocking our situation. That song should have been banned decades ago, it was that unbearably saccharine. "Dad gave us antibiotics. We're not contagious anymore. That's what science says – not a vinyl record." At least, that's what I'd read. Scarlet fever was only contagious for twenty-four hours when properly treated.

But Mom didn't want to hear any of that. She had no time for science or facts – she was too busy chasing some peculiar theories of her own. Because she was simply ... different. I couldn't think of a better word without being unkind. But with all the love in the world, there was no logical explanation for why, at the first sign of illness, we got bundled up into the attic and weren't allowed back down until we were fully recovered.

Fortunately for me, Cooper always seemed to get the same illnesses I did, and since my fifth birthday I hadn't spent a single minute up here without my best friend.

One winter he'd even eaten cheesecake with toothpaste on it just to make himself sick so we could be together. Without him, I'd go out of my mind with boredom. And he knew that. The way he knew everything about me. Us against the rest of the world. That's how it would always be.

"I like the tradition. Besides, I'm sure Child Services has bigger cases to worry about. I don't think loving, attentive parents rank very high on the priority list."

I stared at him, wide-eyed. His dark curls spiralled at his ears. He had one arm folded behind his head. His muscles had genuinely grown lately. He looked different at fifteen than he had last spring.

"Come on, Lee. There's something kind of cosy about being up here. At least when you're not throwing up every ten minutes. And at no other time of year are we this spoiled."

We both automatically glanced over at the tray piled with sweets and our favourite magazines that Mom had just brought up.

Yes, she spoiled us. Unlike Cooper's mom, who was probably just relieved she almost never had to nurse a sick child and could conveniently drop him off next door. Still, I found it completely bananas that Mom played that stupid song every day and waited for us to feel like dancing. Because that was the entire basis of her assessment! That was her utterly absurd method of gauging our health. Her rule: When you finally feel like spinning in circles, you're well enough to go back to school. This tradition was strange, and the more I thought about it, the stranger it got.

Maybe at the age of seven it had been amusing, but we weren't children anymore, for goodness' sake. I was thirteen. And even if I'd been healthy for all eternity, I would never dance to the Carpenters again. That song had almost certainly given me a childhood trauma.

"It's still annoying." I sat up properly and wrapped my arms around my knees. My arguments weren't particularly creative, but every fibre of me was rebelling against staying up here any longer. "Tomorrow is the basketball team's summer party. I've been looking forward to it for weeks, and she wants to forbid me from going because in the eyes of my hippie mom I haven't bounced around adequately? This really cannot be the end of it. We have to dance tomorrow, Coop. Whatever it takes. I want to go to that party. Please!"

"Because Tom Jenkins will be there?" Cooper looked towards our star-filled ceiling and pretended to hug someone, making kissing noises, which looked completely ridiculous. He'd been acting like a baby lately.

"Idiot!" I smacked him on the upper arm, which did nothing to stop him from teasing me further.

"Oh, Tom," he groaned, sticking out his tongue at me.

That was disgusting.

"Kiss me, Tom. I absolutely want to snog you, just like the entire female half of Year Seven already has." He slobbered into the air.

"You're such an arse!" I punched him again. He tickled me in retaliation, and quickly it turned into a proper scuffle. I used the fact that he was still lying on his back and clambered on top of him to get the upper hand.

"Tom Jenkins is an arse, but you girls are all too naïve to see it." He laughed while half-heartedly trying to fend off my attack.

"I'm not naïve."

"So you're not denying you want to kiss him?" He gripped my wrists and pinned me in place. For a moment we paused and looked each other in the eye. "Oh my God. You actually do, don't you?" This time he made gagging noises.

I tried to pull my arms free again, but Cooper was two years older and had been a head taller than me since I was seven.

I had no chance against him.

"So what if I do." I glared at him, then fixed my gaze on a spot on the wall behind him. "Why shouldn't I? Everyone's snogging someone."

Although I was still perched on his lap, he sat up until our noses were almost touching. Silence settled over the dusty attic.

"I'm not."

He only whispered the words, but they hit me like a bomb.

I stared at him immediately.

"What do you mean, you're not?" He was still holding my wrists. "You disappear behind the gym with Sally all the time. I was sure you were smooching each other senseless and she was leaving her slobber all over your neck."

Cooper's face screwed up the way it did whenever Mom served us chicken soup. He hated soup.

"We just talk back there."

"What?"

He shrugged. "I think she wants to, but ... "

"But?" I asked, since he didn't continue.

He slowly loosened his grip on my wrists but didn't let go. I made no move to climb off his lap. I sat there all the time, and it wasn't weird to be this close to him. He was Cooper. I was Everlee. We belonged together like those little dolls that only made a whole when they were clipped to each other.

"No idea."

"No idea?" Since my hands were still caught, I nudged him with my shoulder. "Come on, tell me. You don't want to kiss her?"

"Yes. No. Oh ... hell, Lee. I don't know either."

When he finally let go, I immediately reached for his hands again.

"Tell me," I said, looking deep into his pale blue eyes. The colour always reminded me of summer. Of open-air swimming pools and cloudless skies. Of ice cream and sunshine. And of being happy.

"I'm scared." The confession was followed by a long exhale.

"Of Sally?"

"Of not doing it right. I'm fifteen. She only turned fourteen last week. I don't want to make a fool of myself."

I pressed my lips together.

Objectively speaking, his fear was ridiculous. Cooper seemed far more grown-up than Sally Chesterfield. I didn't particularly like her anyway, but the idea that he might embarrass himself in front of her struck me as completely absurd. I didn't say that out loud, though, and I didn't laugh. It would have been mean to laugh at my best friend's fears. Simply because I understood his worries, and because I felt exactly the same way.

My hands were still resting in his.

For a fraction of a second, my gaze flicked to the hatch that led up to the attic. Mom had been up here just ten minutes ago. Nathan was still at school, the twins and Nana weren't allowed up the stairs alone, and Dad was at the practice.

"We could give it a try." I forced the words out quietly and could barely bring myself to look at him as I said them. Even so, I felt Cooper freeze beneath me.

"You want me to kiss you?"

The way he spat out the question – as though I'd just suggested he snog a raccoon – made me angry. "Oh, just forget it."

Even as I tried to climb off his lap, because it suddenly felt strange to be sitting there, and to finally silence that stupid record player, Cooper held me back. He practically clawed his hands around my fingers.

"Have you never done it either?" His voice sounded different from usual. Somehow ... uncertain.

I hesitantly looked up at him, giving the smallest shake of my head.

"And ... would you? I mean ... with me ... is what I mean."

I had to grin, because he was stammering like Jason had in Year Four. I found it sort of endearing. Cooper usually had such a big mouth.

This time I just nodded.

I watched his throat move as he swallowed. His right eyelid twitched. Probably from the pain. The sore throat really was awful, and I could almost feel the scratchy sensation in his throat myself.

"How ... ?" He shook his head at his own expression. God, I felt stupid. "How are we supposed to do it?" Coop asked.

I could tell our palms were sweating. Were we getting a fever again?

"I don't know." I looked down at our intertwined fingers. "I've been wondering what I'm supposed to do with my arms when I kiss a boy. It'll be mortifying if I just leave them hanging there limply."

"Yeah. That's not a good idea. What if you put them on his shoulders?"

I followed his suggestion and touched the warm fabric of his T-shirt. Cooper was always warm.

"Like this? Would you like it if Sally did that?" I raised one eyebrow, which made him grin.

"Yeah." He looked down at my touch. "Yeah, I think that would be good. And mine?" He lifted his arms as though they were far too long and only getting in the way.

"Hmm ... " We both looked around, as if we might find a suitable place for his oversized limbs. "Maybe you put them on my waist? But don't you dare tickle me." I pointed a threatening finger at his face to underline my words.

Still sitting on his lap, Cooper drew me slightly closer and placed his hands at my sides. It didn't feel strange. We touched each other every day and slept in the same bed more often than anyone knew. But this was something else entirely. His fingertips played with my long hair as it fell freely over my shoulder.

"Okay. That's good, right?" I was sure that's exactly how teenagers did it in the shows.

"Yep. That feels right."

We both winced slightly at his words.

"You start. You're older, after all."

He took a deep breath.

"You're right. I can do this." His face moved in rapidly, and I jerked my head back as fast as I could.

"Wait!"

Cooper flinched. "What?"

"You're not going to stick your tongue in my mouth, are you?"

He made the chicken-soup face again. "God, no."

"Okay." As he leaned in again, I jumped in once more. "And shouldn't we close our eyes?"

He thought for a second. "Good idea, yes." He closed his eyes and pursed his lips.

"What if it gets weird?"

"Lee," he warned, opening just one eye. "Shut up and let's try it."

"Okay. You're right." I shook off the tension and gripped his shoulders.

Cooper was still squinting at me through one eye, which made me giggle. He had to smile, too.

"Are you ready?"

I could feel my stomach settle and my hands relax.

This was Cooper. I couldn't possibly embarrass myself. He was there when I was sick, and he'd seen me in just about every situation a person our age could find themselves in. I would trust Coop with my life. If I did something wrong, I was sure he'd tell me without judging me for it.

"I'm ready," I answered, without hesitation, and closed my eyes.

It took a short while, then I felt the warmth of his face close to mine. Closer than ever before. I felt his breath on my flushed skin.

His lips touched mine, and we both gave the faintest involuntary jolt. But we didn't pull back.

On the contrary. Cooper gripped my waist a little tighter, and I let my hands slide slowly over his shoulders. His mouth pressed gently against mine. Then we parted briefly, only to do it again a moment later.

Something warm stirred in my stomach, and I had no idea whether it was from the antibiotics or whether it was my best friend's lips causing this strange sensation inside me. It tingled and bubbled – like when you've eaten too much popping candy all at once.

When we finally broke apart completely, it took quite a while before I opened my eyes again.

Cooper was the first to laugh.

"Oh my God, that felt so weird." He wiped his mouth.

"I don't know if that's what everyone's talking about," I agreed, giggling helplessly.

Had I really just kissed my best friend? What on earth had I been thinking? I wiped my lips too. "Do you think that's what it's supposed to feel like?"

"I have absolutely no idea, but I think I should probably try it with Sally just to be safe. Because if it feels exactly like that, I'd rather not bother."

"I'm definitely not going to kiss Tom." I placed a hand on my stomach. "I feel a bit sick."

He just laughed and pushed me off him.

"We are never doing that again, Everlee Parker. Do you hear me?"

"Definitely not. No."

At least we agreed on that.

I lay back down on the mattress and closed my eyes, trying to get rid of the strange feeling in my stomach.

Top of the World had faded out, and the record player was clicking softly because someone needed to move the needle back to the start. Cooper and I, however, made no move to get up.

Instead, I squeezed my eyes even tighter shut.

I was fairly certain kissing wasn't for me. But somehow, despite everything, I was absolutely delighted that I had been the first person to kiss Cooper Sinclair – and not Sally Chesterfield. Even if we were never going to do it again. Definitely not ...

Chapter 1

Cooper

Raindrops hammer mercilessly against the taxi windows, almost drowning out the old nineties song on the radio. What they can't drown out is the suspicion in Celeste's voice, which has been raining down on me on a loop for twenty minutes.

"I don't understand why we can't just sign. The apartment is a dream, babe." Her sharply manicured nails make it visibly difficult to scroll through her smartphone. "The view is unbeatable, and the schools in the area are great too."

I turn to look at her in surprise. I think I might be sick. "What do we need schools in the area for?" Honestly, I'm not sure I want to hear the answer.

She simply raises both perfectly shaped eyebrows. Her expression says more than a thousand words.

"Cece." I sigh, running a hand through my overgrown hair. I really should add a haircut to the thousand items on my to-do list. "It's been an incredibly long day."

The taxi driver snorts.

"Can we maybe talk about this tomorrow? I'd just like to get tonight over with. You know how much I hate this gala nonsense."

The suspicion that I won't like her reaction is strong enough that I turn to look out the side window instead. The wet streets mirror the many lights of the Baltimore skyline, and in the distance I can already make out the first masts in the harbour.

"Sure."

I've known Cece long enough to know she doesn't mean the answer – far too quick and far too short. Breathing heavily, I let my eyes fall shut and brace myself for what comes next. Because she won't let it go. That particular quality is definitely not one of her strengths.

"No problem. We'll just keep putting it off. It's not like my dad specifically asked the realtor to wait for our offer, or like there's a queue of people ready to move into the penthouse. But hey – we can rent any other apartment, one that costs significantly more and isn't half as nice. Right?"

I take a slow breath, trying to choose my words carefully. "I just don't understand the rush. Aren't we happy as things are? Shouldn't you at least be in a solid relationship for several years before taking this kind of step? What we have has always been pretty relaxed, and we're only twenty-six, for God's sake. There's no reason to stress, Cece." I place my hand over hers and stroke the back of it soothingly. "I only just finished my last exams. It's a lot right now. In a few months I'll be starting my residency. All of that takes up a huge amount of energy." Energy I can't afford to spend on arguments like this one.

"Cooper. We've been sleeping together for a year now."

The taxi driver clears his throat. I swallow the comment that it's been eight months at most – and we weren't even exclusive for the first two of those.

"It's time to take a step forward. And I'm sure we're ready for it. Your parents and mine would probably cover part of the costs, and a respected surgeon can't go on living in that dive, babe. What will people think?"

"That I'm a student in a university city who shares a flat with two people to save money, and has the chance to study alongside other students? I'm a long way from being a 'respected surgeon'. And besides, I genuinely don't care what people think." I make air quotes around the word *people*.

Cece lets out a laugh so shrill that the taxi driver's shoulders flinch.

"What nonsense. You're a star student. You don't need study groups anymore. Plus your flatmates are terrible ... and the apartment is an embarrassment for guests."

I've always been good at arguing, but on this particular point, I can't find a decent counter-argument. Our flat is an embarrassment for female guests. No defence strategy, however brilliant, can get around that. Any top barrister would agree with me.

"Besides, the penthouse is close to the golf course in Clifton Park. You could play a few rounds with Daddy there every week, or whatever they call it."

She tosses her long blonde hair over one shoulder. The dress she's wearing beneath her beige coat is incredibly stunning. Honestly, I'd rather be pulling it off her than talking about apartments and fathers.

"That would be so much more fun than drinking boxed wine with your dim flatmates. Please, Cooper. You need to grow up."

"Mhm," I murmur, biting back the confession that I find golfing with her father excruciatingly dull and only go because I love Clifton Park. I like being there. Wandering around Clifton Mansion for hours, imagining what it was like when Johns Hopkins lived there. He founded my university and built the first hospital in Baltimore. The man is my absolute hero. And besides, the wine from a carton doesn't taste nearly as bad as everyone claims. As for my flatmates – you can hold plenty of things against them, but dim they are not.

"So. Shall I ask the realtor for an appointment tomorrow?"

The phone in my coat pocket rings, and I could almost sigh with relief – it buys me a little more time to think of an answer. Or to pray that a convincing reason to keep waiting occurs to me.

I do not want to move. And least of all with Celeste.

"It's my mother," I register as soon as I see the screen.

"She does know it's Friday after eight, doesn't she?"

I ignore Cece and answer the call. My parents never get in touch. Never.

"Mom?" I ask cautiously. A dull feeling spreads through my stomach.

"Cooper. It's your mother." She speaks in a flat, monotone voice, as though she's been rehearsing the sentence for a long time.

"I know, Mom. What is it? Is something wrong?"

We only call each other at holidays or when there's a specific reason. My parents and I aren't the kind of people who ring each other several times a week just to chat. It's not that we've fallen out. We simply don't have very much to say to each other.

"Your father has had a heart attack."

My ... Before I can even repeat the sentence in my mind, I freeze.

Images surface behind my eyes. My dad in his white coat, his expression serious. Sitting at the dining table on Sunday mornings, leafing through the newspaper. Giving me a silent nod when I've done something particularly well.

"How ... " I have to clear my throat and pull my hand away from Cece. Out of the corner of my eye I see her continue to scroll through her smartphone. "How bad is it?"

It takes a few seconds for Mom to answer. "He's still being examined." She breathes heavily. "I don't know."

I take a deep breath. My mom has no knowledge of medicine, and she doesn't cope well under pressure. I can picture her clearly – wandering helplessly around the emergency department, not knowing what to do.

"He collapsed in the practice. I was wondering why he hadn't come home, and then Ms Petterson drove me over." She clears her throat too, and I close my eyes.

I understand what that means. Every minute counts with a heart attack. The longer the heart muscle goes without proper blood supply, the greater the damage. But I won't tell my mom that now.

"I don't know exactly how long he was lying there. It was awful, Cooper."

I raise my wrist and look at the watch my parents gave me when I started medical school. The last patients must have been at the practice hours ago. I close my eyes and take a slow, steady breath.

"Do you know whether the doctors have checked the troponin levels and creatine kinase yet? Can you tell me anything more specific, Mom? Any results?"

My mother makes a sound I've never heard from her before.

I open my eyes.

Is she crying?

"I don't know," she answers again, softly, after a delay. "They won't tell me anything, and they won't let me in to see him."

"Okay. I'm coming home."

"You don't have to."

"I know." Resolve settles through me in the form of a warmth I wasn't expecting. "But I want to. I'll get in touch as soon as I'm there."

I end the call and loosen the tie around my neck.

"Turn around, please," I tell the driver. "We need to go back."

Celeste lowers her phone and looks at me.

"What? Why? What's happened?"

"I need to go home. My dad has had a heart attack."

"Oh God, the poor man." Her red lips form a pout. "But you can't help from home either, babe. Let's go to the gala. It'll take your mind off things. Your mom can still reach you there if anything changes."

I stare at her open-mouthed. She smiles her most radiant smile.

"Oakfell, Celeste. I have to go to Oakfell. Home."

"You want to go to Massachusetts? Now?"

"My dad has had a heart attack."

"You haven't even booked a flight."

"I'll drive."

"The whole way? That's six hours. It's the middle of the night."

"My dad has had a heart attack," I say again, rather than point out that nine o'clock is not the middle of the night, and that I'd drive even if it were.

"Okay." She unlocks her phone again. "Then I'll have to ring Spencer and Margarite. They were going to save us a table. God, that's really annoying."

Her floral scent drifts towards me as she tosses her hair back over her shoulder again.

I like Celeste. I genuinely do. She's not a bad person. And she's incredible in bed, which – if I'm honest – is one of the main reasons we've managed to stick it out for months. She may not be particularly funny or empathetic, but the time we spend together is good. Or let's say okay. But right now, the Mercedes feels too small for both of us.

"Yep. Really annoying," I murmur to myself.

The taxi driver takes the next exit and heads back towards campus. Meanwhile my thoughts circle around my parents. Around how long my father must have lain helpless in his practice, without anyone there with him.

Without meaning to, my memories drift over the garden fence of my childhood home.

To her.

I take a deep breath and try to stay calm. I'll drive home. I'll look after Mom and sort everything out for Dad.

It won't be strange to go back. Oakfell is home.

"How long do you think you'll be? Should I book the realtor for Monday?"

"Hell, no!"

Cece freezes with her phone in her hand, while the taxi driver gives a quiet chuckle.

"I'm sorry," I add quickly, but my girlfriend is already pulling a face.

"There's no need to be ugly about it."

She looks as though she might burst into tears at any moment, and honestly, right now I can relate to that feeling very well.

"You're right. I'm sorry. It's just ... I'm worried about my dad. And it's going to be strange, going back to Oakfell after all this time."

Back to the girl who was everything to me. Of all times, at this time of year

Celeste nods, as though she knows exactly what I'm talking about. She has no idea.

"Okay. I forgive you. But you know I don't like it when you shout."

"I know, babe."

She beams when I use that stupid pet name she so loves hearing from me – the one I've resisted using until now, unlike her. And I feel like an arse for deploying it deliberately to get myself out of trouble.

"Look," I say, all I want is to get out of this bloody taxi. "Just give me a few days to sort everything out, and then we'll sit down quietly and figure out the living situation, okay?"

She squeals as she throws her arms around my neck, pressing her revealing neckline against my chest. "That sounds fantastic, babe."

I do my best to match her wide smile, but it doesn't quite come together.

"Just the rooftop terrace alone is a dream. I promise you won't regret it. We'll decorate everything in beige and grey tones and ... "

I lean back with Cece in my arms and tune out her voice. Tune out everything around us.

And suddenly I'm seven years old again, standing in front of a huge wooden house with a pale yellow facade and blue shutters. The sign reading *Parker, Veterinary Practice* sways gently in the wind, its chains squeaking softly. Pumpkins of all shapes and sizes line the porch. The red and yellow leaves of the maple trees cover almost every inch of the green lawn. Garlands hang from the railing, and dried wreaths

decorate the windows and doors. The large tree in the front garden – the only one still holding its leaves

– is covered in glittering paper bats, and a skeleton dangles from one of the branches. I'd never seen such a cool Halloween display.

But then I notice something else.

A little girl, standing at the upper-floor window. She's wearing a red jumper and two long plaits, and she's holding a white rabbit in her arms. A damn white rabbit that makes me think of *Alice in Wonderland*.

She waves at me.

I wave back, which makes her laugh.

And so we stay like that for a good while. Waving and laughing. Pulling faces and giggling behind our hands.

Looking back, I suppose that was the moment I found a new home.

Chapter 2

Everlee

"Hallelujah, have you seen the Instagram profile of that new dentist?" Nathan has one elbow propped on the kitchen table and is still fanning the pile of unpaid bills at the elderly woman sitting beside him, who looks wan and pale. She droops her shoulders like a crumpled heap.

"Don't worry, Ms Peaches. My dad will help Casper. It'll all be fine in a minute. Don't you worry."

I ignore my brother tapping away on his smartphone and try to pour hot chocolate into a mug with one hand. With the other I'm holding onto one of the new baby kittens, who has decided that Ms Peaches' crocheted handbag is its new prey.

The old woman – whose poodle is being treated for constipation in the room across the hall – manages only a thin smile that brings out even more wrinkles on her cheeks. I lay a hand on her shoulder and set a mug of warm hot chocolate in front of her. As I do, I catch a glimpse of the feed: a half-naked man grinning into the camera with teeth of blinding whiteness.

"The guy is hot. What do I need to eat to chip a tooth?" Nathan chuckles, and I'm surprised his drool isn't dripping down his chin like an English Bulldog's.

I don't know whether Ms. Peaches leans closer to my big brother because he's stopped fanning her with fresh air, or because the ninety-year-old lady wants to catch a glimpse of our town's admittedly very hot new arrival.

Just as I'm about to tell him to show a little consideration – not that her poodle's constipation is exactly a catastrophic blow of fate – the twins come charging into the kitchen. Or more precisely, they fight their way into it. They keep circling the green kitchen island in the middle of the room,

whose wooden corners are worn smooth. The paint has already chipped, since Nathan and I were playing chase around it years before they were born.

"Boys!" I shout, but they seem unable to hear me through their testosterone-fuelled bull-fight. "Bloody teenagers!"

They've clearly heard that, because Owen flips me the finger on his way past. I wasn't aware that at twenty-four you lose all patience for that age group. Or maybe it's just me.

Ms Peaches has to tuck in her feet and her pink umbrella – which is dripping relentlessly onto our kitchen floor – to avoid getting caught in their brawl.

Pumpkin, the second of the little red kittens – or rather, little male kittens – that we've been bottle-feeding for four weeks, is drinking from the puddle as though it's his water bowl. His sister Hazel, on the other hand, is digging her claws through my orange jumper and into my shoulder. As adorable as the two of them are, there are already enough clingy little nuisances in this house.

With a sigh, I push the twins aside and rescue the kitten from the floor, who has come dangerously close to getting caught up in the fight. Henry has Owen in a headlock while Owen tries to get something off him. I have no idea what, and at the end of the day it doesn't matter – fifteen-year-old boys find something to argue about every single day and have to turn even the tiniest disagreement into a battle.

I hold Pumpkin up. Hazel is noticeably smaller than her brother and has been my little worry since the beginning. They both purr as I hold them side by side and press a kiss to each of their soft little heads. Despite all the work, it's going to be hard to let the kittens go when they're big enough. But there's no way we can feed even more animals. When they no longer need bottle-feeding, it'll be time to find them a new home.

Nathan and Ms Peaches are still studying the dentist's perfectly sculpted chest, and I'm on the verge of yelling when I set the kittens down.

I've been up all night working, my head is pounding, and one hour of peace would honestly be a dream.

Not to mention the exam I urgently need to prepare for. *Antibiotic resistance in veterinary medicine – causes, consequences and strategies for containment*. That's what I should be focusing on right now.

My gaze drifts of its own accord to under the corner bench, where Rodger II., our St Bernard, refuses to be unsettled by any of the chaos. He doesn't even lift his head when one of the kittens climbs across his fur. *Envious, old boy*.

"Everlee, sweetheart."

Mum comes in, and as always, it's like the sun rising when she enters a room. Her white painting smock billows behind her like a curtain fluttering in the morning breeze. Her cheeks and hands are flecked with shades of orange and red, and she's beaming from ear to ear. When she's in one of her artistic phases, she always looks a bit like she's permanently high. At least, I'm secretly praying it's because of her current project. If I'm honest, it wouldn't surprise me in the least if my mother had a little bag of something tucked away somewhere in her studio and she and Dad share a joint before bed. No one could stay that serenely relaxed in this family-slash-practice chaos without some kind of help.

So it doesn't surprise me that she doesn't seem to notice Ms Peaches or the boys. "Pat from Billings Farm is on the phone. Some calf is on its way and apparently lying the wrong way round. Should I disturb your father, or can you take it?"

She holds out the receiver and I take it.

My gaze flicks for just a moment to one of our treatment rooms – the one that is, tragically, directly across the hallway from our kitchen. Yes, that's right. Between the animal treatment rooms and our kitchen there are fewer than ten steps. Unfortunate, I know.

I smile at Ms Peaches and my mother simultaneously, even though I feel like crying. "Dad still has loads of appointments. I'll take care of it. No problem."

At the same moment, the bell above our front door rings, and not for the first time in my life I wish we were a completely normal family. One whose house wasn't open to all comers at any hour. One where our kitchen wasn't a drop-in centre for all sorts of people and animals. But that's how it's always been, and I'm afraid it'll never change. There is no lock on the Parker house. Nor any boundaries.

Come right in, anyone who fancies it, and do please walk through the hallway with muddy boots. That's perfectly fine. No, and do bring more patients along. Your dog needs to stay overnight because he keeps being sick? But of course, with pleasure! Or perhaps you have an ailment of your own we can help with? The daughter needs antibiotics for a urinary tract infection? No problem at all – Everlee will sort that out.

Sometimes I think our veterinary practice treats the people who bring their pets here more often than the animals themselves.

The twins nearly knock over a vase, and Owen punches Henry in the side. Hazel and Pumpkin jump in fright behind the corner bench, where Nathan has started fanning again because Ms Peaches is moaning dramatically. The old woman comes at least once a week with her poodle, and every time one of us has to set aside time for her. Last week I even made her pancakes because her stomach was growling so loudly.

Rodger II., meanwhile, snores softly.

I envy you, old boy.

The familiar sound of a large dog straining at its lead comes from the hallway, and a second later Reverend Whitaker's Boxer tries to join in the twins' brawl, to their absolute delight – they immediately start roughhousing with the enormous animal.

I'm trying to cover one ear to finally take the call from Pat when Dad comes out of the treatment room with Casper, and total chaos breaks out once and for all.

The Reverend's Boxer and Casper the poodle appear to have taken an instant dislike to each other. Both dogs growl furiously, and Henry yells because Owen has seized the moment to grab whatever it was he was after.

Dad just laughs and runs a hand through his now-greying hair. He loves the chaos that reigns in our house, every bit as much as I loathe it.

I screw my eyes shut.

I love my family. I really do. But sometimes ... in very rare moments ... I wish I could snap my fingers and teleport to another continent.

"Good morning, Daniel." My father greets the Reverend with a handshake.

"Not so good, I'm afraid." Daniel Whitaker, whose black hair is also threaded through with white, looks sad.

I simultaneously finally take the phone call.

"Hey, Pat. What's going on?"

"Everlee, glad you picked up. I think Tiffany's calf needs some help."

"Okay." Before I can even tell the farmer I'll be with him in under an hour, Reverend Whitaker's words pull my attention away again.

"He had a serious heart attack. Imagine it – the poor man lying for hours alone in his practice. In a doctor's practice, of all places."

Mom claps her paint-smudged hands in front of her face in shock.

"That's dreadful." Dad looks at me for a moment, and I pause, receiver still at my ear.

Who? I mouth the word.

When his chin tilts to the side, I forget to breathe for a moment.

"I'll be right there, Pat." Before the farmer can say anything, I end the call and step out into the hallway towards the Reverend and my parents, giving the twins a shove along the way that sends them in the direction of the stairs. They can take their pubescent nonsense upstairs.

"Caroline has been at the hospital since last night, and the boy made a special trip in from Baltimore."

I take a step backwards.

Mom asks a few questions. She wants to know how our neighbour Bradford Sinclair is doing and what the prognosis looks like. But I feel as though I can't breathe.

Dad looks me directly in the eyes. His gaze softens – the way it always does when he's feeling sorry for someone, or sad.

Are you alright? He mouths the words too, not saying them aloud, his thin lips forming the shapes.

We've always been good at talking to each other quietly across the loud chaos of our family.

I swallow: Cooper's dad has had a heart attack. That's terrible. Really terrible. The fact, however, that my childhood friend is here in Oakfell weighs on me far more heavily. Which probably makes me a terrible person. I file that away on the imaginary list of my sins, to be confessed at some point when my life stops resembling hell for five whole minutes.

Everyone's talking, the dogs are barking, the boys are upstairs, and something crashes to the floor. I'm not listening. The phone in my hand feels heavy as lead.

Cooper is back.

He was probably already in town when I rode my bike to the bakery this morning. He might have seen me coming from the Chesterfields' farm at sunrise, because one of their sheep had to be treated during the night for bloat.

If he's at the hospital with his dad, he's only a few miles away from me.

Did he see me standing in the front yard with Rodger last night, wearing nothing but my nightgown, because the old gentleman suffers from chronic diarrhea?

Cooper is back.

That feels strange.

"We should definitely ask whether there's anything we can do," Mom suggests. Her gaze flickers to me for just a fraction of a second, and I slowly emerge from my daze.

I nod, on autopilot.

The Reverend, Mom and Dad talk for quite a while, and behind me Nathan is still chuckling with Ms Peaches, who is kissing her poodle. But I take one quiet step backwards after another, until my back meets the door to the garage. I open it and slip through unnoticed. Only when I'm standing in complete darkness and silence do I let myself slide down the wall and rest my forehead on my knees.

Hell.

Cooper is back.

And of all weeks – during the festival.

My life is simply stuck in this endless loop for all eternity, and I really thought I'd finally got a handle on it.

[...]

Mimi Heeger was born in 1983 and still lives with her family in Siegerland. With her husband, two sons and two dogs, she enjoys a loud, colourful and fulfilled life. In every free minute she dives between the pages and spends her time in the book world. Whether as a reader or author and no matter what genre – from New Adult to Fantasy to Dark Romance. Two hearts beat in her chest: one for the dark exciting stories and one for those full of love and passion. For her, a life without books would be like a life without love. Unthinkable. In the past three years she has published sixteen novels and her head is still buzzing with new ideas.