

Before The Dream

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Published by Alison May, 2021.

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BEFORE THE DREAM

First edition. July 15, 2021.

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Written by Alison May.

1995, Exeter



A café full of people. A blazing hot summer's day. A grumpy six year old in tow. Theo breathed through the unremitting hell and crouched down in front of his red-faced daughter. 'Sweetheart ...'

His voice trailed off as she let out a piercing scream. All around him eyes flicked in their direction. 'Sweetheart, listen to Daddy...'

Emily was in no mood to co-operate with Daddy. She seldom was, unless Daddy came bearing gifts.

'Sweetheart, if you're good while we wait you can have a cake.'

His daughter paused, mouth open, ready for the next scream, and considered his offer. 'Chocolate cake?'

Theo nodded. Bribery was the coward's way out. He knew that Emily was too old for tantrums. The notes from school talked about his little angel's 'challenging

behaviour.' What Emily needed was discipline and routine, rather than being shuttled between whichever neighbours and grandparents happened to be free, and placated with gifts when Daddy came home. It was entirely his fault, and, at the same time, not his fault at all. Single parenting had never been Theo's plan.

The queue inched forward. Emily pressed her nose against the cover of the cake display. Today a combination of his neighbour's sick sister-in-law and his parents' coach trip to Salisbury had left him without a babysitter, so Theo had attended his interview, at Exeter University with Emily clinging to his ankle. He didn't think he'd got the job.

The queue shuffled on. They were now one place from the front behind a young woman with long dyed red hair. She turned and her eyes met Theo's. His breath stopped. Perfect eyes, but full of fear. Theo ached to tell this stranger that everything was going to be okay. He didn't. He had no idea if it was true.

'I wanted that!' Emily's voice cut through the background chatter.

His daughter was pointing at the cake cabinet. The last chocolate cupcake was being plated up for the woman in front of them. 'Well you'll have to pick something else.'

'I wanted that one!' Emily shrieked.

Theo shot a glance at the woman. Under the heavy red hair, the soft hazel eyes darted between his face and Emily's. She pulled her coat across her body. 'You have it.'

Theo shook his head. 'She can have something else.'

'Nooooooooo!'

Around the coffee shop, conversations paused. Eyes moved in their direction. Theo reminded himself that it wasn't Emily's fault. She'd had a very difficult childhood. She was bound to be a bit highly strung. The woman smiled a tense little smile. 'It's fine..' She turned back to the counter. 'Just the tea. Sorry.'

Tania paid for her tea and scurried to the most secluded corner of the coffee shop. Shannon was waiting. 'So how was that?'

Tania shrugged. She hadn't got the cake she went for. She'd almost run away from small child's tantrum. People had stared. 'A little girl was crying. Everyone looked'

Shannon nodded. 'At the little girl?'

Tania shook her head.

Shannon leaned forward. 'Nobody knows you here. You're just a stranger in a café. Nobody's watching.'

Shannon was wrong. Someone was always watching. Sometimes it was that glance across the aisle on the bus that said, 'Don't I know your face?' Sometimes it was the flicker of suspicion in their eye when she started to write her name and then corrected herself. But usually it was him. Despite everything they'd told her, everything she'd seen, everything she'd lived through, she still believed that he was out there, just out of sight, just around the next corner, watching her and waiting.

Tania's eyes flicked around the café, checking the door, the tables next to the counter, glancing through the windows to the street beyond, before settling on the man with the little girl and the cupcake. The man had looked tired. She reminded herself that other people

were going through their own stuff, each and every one of them believing that they were the main character in life's story. Tania was nothing more than a tiny dot on an insignificant planet. Somehow the idea soothed her. She was a tiny dot and a tiny dot could be invisible.

2003 Seahouses, Northumbria



Tania held the icing bag at an angle like her grandmother had taught her and piped swirls of chocolate buttercream onto the cupcakes. It was her own recipe – double chocolate and cranberry – that they were trying in the shop for the first time today.

Life here was simple. She was busy. Up early, bakery uniform on, jet-black hair tucked under her hat, on her feet all and fast asleep as soon as she got to bed. She had no time to think, and she was a long way from home, a long way from the suspicious glances and knowing looks.

Time had passed too. Eight and twelve. That was how Tania thought of the passing years now. This year was eight and twelve. Eight years since her appeal. Twelve years since they'd told her he was dead and gone once and for all. She told herself she believed them. She told herself that the deadlock and pair of extra bolts on

the door of her rented flat were just the sort of security measure anyone would take.



AT HALF PAST NINE TANIA'S colleague, Shelley, arrived at the bakery. Tania asked after Shelley's family. She sounded like a normal person, doing a normal job, chatting about normal things. Shelley was grinning as she wiped the counter down. 'My Dean's got this mate, Gav, ...'

Tania didn't respond. Shelley's Dean was a giant cube of a man, shaven-headed with tattoos stretched across bulging muscles, but, according to Shelley, a pussycat underneath. But Tania didn't have relationships. Relationships drew you in and squeezed you until there was no air left to breathe, and no flesh left unbruised.

Shelley was still talking. '... and we're going to this quiz night on the weekend and I was saying to them that

you're dead clever, and Gav'll be there, so I thought you could come down.'

Tania nodded without thinking, and then waited for the panic to set in. A quiz night. A room full of strangers. Eyes all over, eyes on her. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. The bell rang as a customer came into the bakery. Tania caught his eye as he stepped toward the counter, and something in the back of her memory jumped. The butterflies in her stomach took sudden flight. Even here someone could recognise her. She dropped her head and scurried into the back room, leaving Shelley to deal with the man with the familiar eyes.

Theo left the bakery with his cupcake wrapped in a paper bag and walked towards the first stretch of golden sand. He settled amongst the dunes looking out towards the ocean.

He was on a term's sabbatical from his university job; Emily was on a school trip to Barcelona, so Theo was alone. It was a feeling he ought to be used to. He'd been alone, in one sense, for over a decade now, ever since he'd picked up his office phone to a call from the

main switchboard. ‘The police on the line for you, Doctor Midsomer.’ That was all she’d said. He remembered the sinking feeling in his gut. No. He didn’t remember it. He relived it. The voice of the police officer on the phone was lost to the depths of time. He remembered the switchboard operator. He remembered the feeling. He could even remember some of the words, ‘... your wife ... possibly an accident ... your daughter is at the station,’ but the voice was gone.

He remembered in every detail of the face of the police officer who sat with him in the tiny grey room at the station. He remembered the red spots on his cheeks, and the nicotine stains on his fingers. He remembered him repeatedly pushing his glasses up his nose as he spoke, in stilted, sympathetic tones about what had happened to Theo’s wife. No. Theo stopped the memory. Not what had happened. What she’d done to herself.

Theo stuffed his cupcake back into the bag. He picked himself up and set out walking along the sand. Emily – the most important thing in his universe – was growing up. A school trip this year, exams next, and then

what? Daddy would be reduced to a cheap taxi service and convenient cash machine. This was supposed to be his time. He was supposed to be half of a couple strolling along the quiet beach. He stopped, and stared out at the sea. He needed to let go. He needed to learn to be on his own. One way or another it was time.

2008, Heathrow Airport



Tania ran her fingers through her newly bleached and cropped hair. She was doing the right thing. She gripped her passport in one hand, dragging her suitcase along with the other.

Exeter, Swansea, London, Liverpool, Northumbria, Orkney, Edinburgh, Inverness. In the end, none of them had been far enough, so this wasn't running away. This was starting again. Again. She needed some proper distance between her and her past. That meant abroad, she'd decided. Europe. She could waitress. She could tend bar. She could even teach English. There was bound to be something.

The check-in queue edged forward. Tania's mind jumped two days' back. The ring. The ring in Olly's sock drawer. It was perfectly normal, she supposed. They'd met the first week she'd been in Inverness, so they'd been

dating nearly a year. He had mooted the idea of moving in together, which she'd batted away, changing the subject. Maybe that was her mistake. Maybe he'd taken it that she wanted more, not less. She was used to hiding her terror; maybe she hid it too well.

She'd held the ring between her fingers, before sliding it on and inspecting the result. It was like staring at someone else's hand, but, Tania was jealous of that imaginary someone. An engagement ring was a promise; a promise to take hope and build it into something that would last. This time, Tania really wasn't leaving because she couldn't make that promise. She was leaving because she couldn't make it to Olly. He was kind. He was cute, and relaxed, and she genuinely believed that he would never slam her hand in a door, never tell her that her shorts were too short, her dress too red, her hair too showy. He'd never tip the contents of the bin onto her dinner plate to teach her a lesson about not wasting food.

Olly was a perfectly nice guy, but he wasn't her perfectly nice guy. He said 'pacifically' when he meant 'specifically.' He returned her car radio to Five Live every

time he got in the car. Tania shook her head. Those things didn't matter. What mattered was that, however well Tania knew Olly, he didn't know her. Tania was practised at hiding, practised at biting her tongue. Without thinking, she'd acted the part she'd been given – Olly's wavy-haired, sensible girlfriend. No more. If she ever did let someone slide a ring onto that finger it would be someone who knew her whole story.

So it was time to move on. She stepped up to the check-in desk, heaved her whole life's possessions onto the conveyer and forced a smile.

Four places behind Tania, Theo glanced at his watch.

An EU-funded symposium on 'student mobility across European academic institutions.' Theo was a veteran of many academic conferences, but, even to him, this one sounded deathly. That, however, was not the point. His application for Head of Department was currently sitting on the Vice Chancellor's desk. EU-funded symposiums were the sort of thing that pushed applications over the finishing line.

At the front of the queue a blonde-haired woman was on her hands and knees pulling shoes out of her suitcase and stuffing them into her oversized shoulder bag, apparently trying to squash her hold baggage under the allowance. As she moved onto repacking her books, Theo noticed a copy of *The Little Prince*. He'd bought that one for Emily, hoping it would become a shared favourite. He didn't think she'd ever read it.

Eventually the woman satisfied the baggage requirements and refastened her case. Theo watched her turn her head. She was beautiful, with wide, open hazel eyes. There was something familiar about her. Maybe a former student? Too old to have been a friend of Emily's he thought. She collected her boarding pass, picked up her bulging shoulder bag, and walked away.

Theo found himself hoping she was seated near him on the flight. It was a stupid thought. The woman was a goddess. He was a prematurely middle-aged academic. He had nothing to offer her. His small talk revolved around having a good moan about the limitations of his undergraduates' vocabularies.

The queue edged forward. Theo's phone buzzed in his pocket.

Emily calling.

'What's wrong, darling?'

He listened for a second to her disjointed gulps and half-sentences. Emily had a university exam resit today. If she failed again she'd be off the course. His daughter sobbed down the phone.

'Emily! Calm down. What happened?'

What had happened was that the exam had been horrible, the questions unfair and Emily had walked out without finishing. Theo took a deep breath. 'Okay. Try not to get upset. I'll be home tomorrow.'

A louder cry erupted in his ear. Theo really needed to go to this meeting. Emily wasn't a little girl any more.

Another sob came down the phone. Who was Theo kidding? 'Okay. I'm coming home. Okay?'

All at once the crying stopped. Theo wondered, for a second, if the hysterics were a ploy to get him to come home. Almost immediately guilt replaced doubt. He was all she had, after all.

2014, Verona



Tania sat down on the pavement outside the club. She'd been working as a waitress in a cocktail bar. Well, it called itself a cocktail bar. It was a strip joint, but Tania had been working as a waitress, nothing more. Not that it mattered now; she'd been sacked.

'Are you feeling subjugated by the patriarchy?' Tania looked up towards the slightly slurred voice. The stranger was in his fifties, dressed smartly in chinos, and shirt and linen jacket. Good-looking in an 'English gentleman abroad' sort of way, somewhere between Charles Dance and Michael Palin. He was the sort of man who might have been an awkward youth, but had grown into his looks.

'I'm sorry?'

'Are you feeling subjugated by the patriarchy?'

'What?'

‘Are the bastards getting you down?’ The man pointed at her pavement seating area. ‘I’m guessing your evening isn’t going well.’

Tania laughed. ‘Yes. Well one particular bastard.’ She nodded towards the club behind them. ‘I got fired.’

‘I’m sorry. May I?’ The man waited for Tania’s nod before sitting down on the pavement next to her. ‘What happened?’

‘I hit my boss in the face with a nachos dish.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I couldn’t find anything heavier.’

‘Faultless reasoning.’

Tania was aware that she might not be painting herself in the best light. ‘He deserved it. He’s a horrible person.’

The stranger glanced back at the club, reading the neon sign. ‘The proprietor of the’—he cleared his throat—‘Slap ‘n’ Tickle Private Gentlemen’s Club is a horrible person. Whoever would have thought?’

Tania laughed again. That was twice in one conversation. ‘The girls have to pay for their costumes and for

breakages. Some nights they hardly take anything home. Anyway, one girl couldn't pay, so he was trying to take his payment ...' Tania's voice tailed off. 'Another way.'

'And you stopped him?' The stranger sounded impressed.

Tania nodded.

'And the girl's all right?'

'I think so. She left. And then he fired me.'

The man turned his full attention to Tania. 'And that's where I came in?'

'Pretty much.' Tania nodded. Another thought pushed its way to the front of her mind. 'What was all that stuff about patriarchy?'

He shook his head. 'I'm here for a conference. I spent most of the evening in a seminar on redefining of historical paradigms from a feminist perspective.'

Tania floundered. 'Did you redefine them well?'

'I have no idea. It was very boring. So I went to a bar, and then I realised that it's at least twenty years since I had more than two drinks in one evening, so I left again.'

'And that's where I came in?'

The man nodded. Tania tilted her head and looked properly at his face. His eyes flickered under the street-light. They were kind eyes. They were familiar eyes. ‘Do I know you from somewhere?’

The man stared back at her. ‘I’m not sure. You do look ...’ He stopped. ‘The airport.’

Tania shook her head. ‘I’ve not been to an airport in years.’

The man nodded. ‘This was years ago. You unpacked half your bag at the front of the queue because the woman tried to charge you for excess. You were beautiful.’

Tania swallowed. Nobody had ever called her beautiful before. Olly had said she was pretty. *He* had just told her to make more of an effort. The stranger was shaking his head. ‘I didn’t dare talk to you.’

Tania giggled. ‘That was five? Six years ago? Why didn’t you say anything?’

‘Stupidity. And other things.’

‘What other things?’

He shook his head. ‘Long story.’

She remembered unpacking her case at the airport. She stared again at the stranger. There was something else. She kept staring into his face, wracking her brain. All the places she'd been. All the lives she'd adopted. She met his kind, twinkling gaze. They both spoke at once.

'The cupcake.'

Tania nodded. 'Your little girl screamed. Everyone stared.'

'At Emily, not at you.'

Tania shuddered at the memory, and then stopped. It was just a memory. The Tania she'd been back then would never have whacked someone in the face with a nachos dish. 'I used to hate people staring at me.'

The man's brow furrowed. 'Why?'

Tania shrugged. 'Another long story.'

The man stayed quiet for a very long time. 'So we both have long stories to tell?'

Tania nodded. She was smiling. She was sitting on the pavement. She'd just been sacked, but she was smiling. 'And we've almost met before.'

'Twice.'

‘At least.’

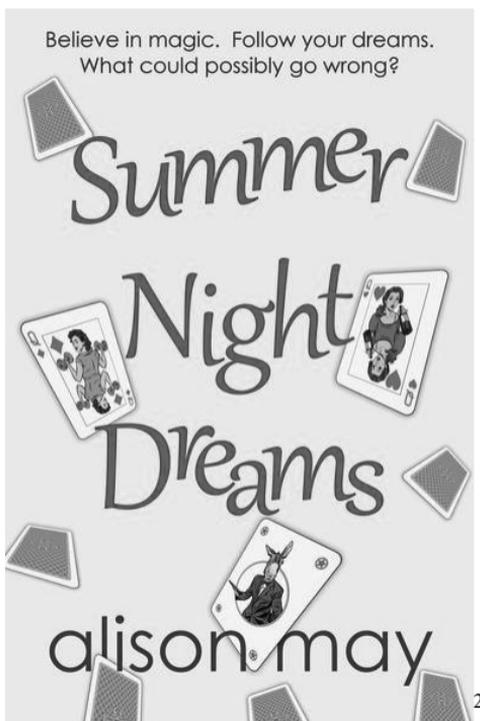
He nodded. Tania paused. She didn’t believe in fate. She didn’t believe in fairy stories. If you wanted ‘happy ever after’ you had to grab it as it passed. She took a breath. She turned back to the man with the crumpled suit and the soft blue eyes. ‘So I’ll tell you my story, if you tell me yours.’

And maybe, this time, she would. Maybe a man who’d found her in the gutter could handle the whole truth. Maybe if the universe insisted on throwing somebody in your path, it meant that you were supposed to catch them.

He held out his hand. ‘I’m Theo.’

‘Delighted to finally meet you,’ she replied.

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About the Author

Alison May is a novelist, short story writer, blogger and creative writing tutor who grew up in North Yorkshire, and now lives in Worcester. She has worked as a waitress, a shop assistant, a learning adviser, an advice centre man-

ager, a freelance trainer, and now a maker-upper of stories. Alison is also a former Chair of the Romantic Novelists' Association.

She won the RNA's Elizabeth Goudge trophy in 2012, and has been shortlisted in the Love Stories and RoNA Awards. Alison writes emotional book club fiction and romantic comedies.

She also writes modern retellings of misunderstood classics, in collaboration with Janet Gover, under the penname Juliet Bell.

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