

a  
solitaire  
novella

this  
winter

Time to pretend we're  
the perfect family...

ALICE OSEMAN

# This Winter – a Solitaire novella

Alice Oseman



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

## Copyright

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“Caroline decidedly says that none of the party will return into Hertfordshire this winter. I will read it to you:

‘When my brother left us yesterday, he imagined that the business which took him to London might be concluded in three or four days; but as we are certain it cannot be so, and at the same time convinced that when Charles gets to town he will be in no hurry to leave it again, we have determined on following him thither, that he may not be obliged to spend his vacant hours in a comfortless hotel. Many of my acquaintances are already there for the winter; I wish that I could hear that you, my dearest friend, had any intention of making one of the crowd – but of that I despair. I sincerely hope your Christmas in Hertfordshire may abound in the gaieties which that season generally brings, and that your beaux will be so numerous as to prevent your feeling the loss of the three of whom we shall deprive you.’

“It is evident by this,” added Jane, “that he comes back no more this winter.”

*Pride and Prejudice, Jane Austen*

## VICTORIA ANNABEL SPRING, 16

I wake up two hours after I fall asleep. The amount of sleep I get on Christmas Eve seems to be steadily decreasing each year, probably because each year my average falling-asleep time gets steadily later, probably because I'm an Internet-addicted idiot. Maybe, eventually, I'll just stop sleeping altogether and become a vampire. I'd be good at that.

Not gonna bother complaining about my sleeping pattern right now though, because it's Christmas and this is the one day of the year when I should at least try not to complain about anything. This is hard when your seven-year-old brother is hitting you in the face with a pillow at six o'clock in the morning.

I say something along the lines of "nooooo" and retreat under my duvet, but this doesn't stop Oliver from following, tearing back the covers and crawling on to my bed.

"*Tori*," he whispers. "It's *Christmas*."

"Mm."

"Are you awake?"

"No."

"You are!"

"No."

"*Tori*."

"Oliver ... go wake Charlie up."

"Mum said I wasn't allowed because he's ill." He starts ruffling my hair. "Toriiiiiiii—"

"*Ugh*." I roll over and open my eyes. Oliver is completely under the covers, looking at me, wriggling with excitement, his hair sticking up on end, like a dandelion. Charlie and I have discussed at length how it is possible that Oliver can be at all related to us, since he's the literal

embodiment of joy and we're both miserable fucks. We concluded that he must have got all of the happy genes.

Oliver has a Christmas card in his hands.

"Why do you have a—"

He opens the card and a disgustingly cheerful version of *We Wish You A Merry Christmas* begins to play right into my ear.

I groan and shove Oliver off the bed with one hand. He rolls on to the floor and bursts into giggles.

"So annoying," I mutter, before sitting up and turning on my bedside lamp, resulting in a shriek of "YAY!" from Oliver. He begins to wander around my room, opening and closing the card, repeating the first two notes over and over again, and my eyes are opening and closing like they do in my early morning English lessons. The realisation that it's Christmas Day is creeping over me and I guess I feel kind of ... I don't know. It's not exactly a normal Christmas Day this year.

Christmas is okay at our house. It's chilled. Quiet. Dad calls it a Spring Christmas, which he thinks is hilarious, for some reason. We open presents when we wake up, then family come over for Christmas dinner and stay until late, and that's it. I play multiple video games with my brothers and cousins, Dad always gets drunk, my Spanish grandfather (Dad's dad) has an argument with my English grandfather (Mum's dad) – truly wonderful stuff.

It's not a normal Christmas this year though.

My fifteen-year-old brother Charlie had to go to a psychiatric hospital back in October because he has anorexia and some really shitty stuff happened. Don't really want to think too much about it on Christmas Day.

He ended up staying there for two months and he only got back two weeks ago.

I don't really think there was a reason he got so ill. That stuff just happens, like diseases or cancer. So it's not his fault. Actually, I think it was probably my fault he had to go to hospital. When he stopped eating meals with me in the summer, I didn't tell my parents and I didn't ask him why. I didn't talk to him enough. I didn't even ask him "How are you?" or anything like that. I didn't think it was weird that he stayed in his room all the time. I didn't think about it. About anything.

So, yeah. Everything's been pretty stressful because Charlie's got this food regime that he has to follow and he hates it, and Mum and Charlie

aren't really getting along and Charlie doesn't want to join in Christmas dinner and, to cut a long story short, nobody has been feeling very Christmassy at all.

I sometimes feel Christmassy because everything is pretty and not boring for once, but at the same time, the amount of Christmas couples kissing under the mistletoe on my Tumblr dashboard really needs to calm down. And this winter I haven't been feeling very cheerful or anything. I thought maybe it was because of the Charlie stuff, or the fact that I've started Sixth Form and it's even more boring than I thought it'd be, but I think it might just be me. All I do is mope around sadly and spend extreme amounts of time alone in my room on the Internet – just being another self-pitying sixteen-year-old girl for newspapers to criticise, I suppose. I'm sure I'll get over myself eventually.

I pick up my phone, ignore the notifications, and text Becky, my best friend. Well, I say best friend, but what I really mean is the-only-person-who-doesn't-find-me-completely-dull. I have told her about what Charlie did but not all the gory details and I don't know how well she understands mental illnesses. I think she just thinks he had a sort of tantrum.

**(06:16) Tori Spring**

HAPPY CHRISTMAS. Be thankful you don't have siblings. I am tired.

Oliver threw a pillow at me. Enjoy sleep. Bye. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Mum and Dad said we can't wake them up until at least 7:30. It's 6:17 now. I get up and open my curtains to find the world still dark, tinged yellow from the street lamps. I fall back into bed and put the radio on. It's playing a quiet hymn for once, instead of *All I Want for Christmas Is You*. It's nice. Oliver is spinning around in my desk chair and a choir is singing *Silent Night*, my eyes are closing again and Oliver's sitting in my bed with me, the musical card on a pile of clothes on the floor, it's 6:29, 6:42, 6:55 ... Oliver's pulling my hair gently, he's talking about what presents he wants and whether Father Christmas ate the biscuits we left him and I'm mumbling something, I don't know what, I'm drifting off ...

And then my bedroom door opens again.

“... Victoria?”

I wake up for the tenth time. It's Charlie, just visible through the dim light standing at the door in a navy Adidas sweatshirt and checked pyjama bottoms. He looks tired but he's smiling. "You awake?"

"No," I say. "I'm having an out-of-body experience. I'm just my ghost."

Charlie snorts and enters my room, shutting the door softly behind him. I turn to Oliver, who has fallen asleep against my shoulder, and give him a little nudge with my elbow. He snaps awake and sees Charlie.

"CHARLIE'S HERE!" he yells and charges from the bed towards him, slamming into his legs and almost causing him to fall over. Charlie laughs and picks Oliver up like he's a baby, which he does at least once a day, causing him to giggle. "Wow, you're very awake, aren't you?"

"Can we go downstairs yet?"

Charlie carries Oliver towards my bed. "Nope, Mum said seven thirty."

"Arrghhhh." Oliver wriggles in Charlie's arms and drops down next to me, immediately snuggling under the covers, and then Charlie sits down next to him against the headboard.

"Ugh. Younger brothers are annoying," I say, but I'm sort of grinning too. I curl up under the duvet. "Couldn't you stay in your own beds?"

"Just doing our job," Charlie smiles. "Are you listening to Radio 4? What's with the church music?"

"I don't think I can deal with Mariah Carey at this time of the morning."

Charlie laughs. "Me neither." Like Oliver, his hair is sticking up from his forehead, though it's not as manically curly. He's got purple circles under his eyes and I can't remember what he looks like without them any more. Aside from that, he looks almost his normal self, all long-limbed and gentle and healthy. Like he was early this year, before he stopped eating.

"I only slept for like two hours," I say.

"Same," he says, but I think his lack of sleep might be from different reasons to mine.

"How many presents does Father Christmas give you when you're seven?" asks Oliver, who's now standing up on my bed and trampling over the duvet. Charlie and I laugh.

"Seven," says Charlie, decisively. "The same as the number of years you've been alive."

"So ... when I'm eighty, I'll get eighty presents?"

Charlie prods Oliver in the chest and he falls over with a wide smile. “Only if you’ve been good!”

“I can’t wait till I’m eighty,” says Oliver.

“Me neither,” says Charlie.

It’s good that we’re all back together now. It felt weird, just me and Oliver and Mum and Dad. Oliver’s still too young to talk to properly, and I don’t hate my parents or anything but I don’t feel like I’m too friendly with them either. Mum has this thing where she avoids talking about anything even slightly deep or emotional. Dad’s the same, but he makes up for it by talking about books all the time. We all get along fine, but I don’t feel like we ever talk about anything important.

Even now that Charlie’s really ill they still don’t like talking about that stuff. I thought things might change; that we might start being more open about feelings and stuff.

But we’re not.

“Can you imagine being a *really old man with a walking stick?*” Charlie says, putting on an old man voice, and Oliver giggles, shuffling up to join us against the headboard. Charlie’s smile is contagious.

They start playing I-spy. Today’s going to be difficult for everyone, but everyone has difficult days, I guess. I used to think that difficult was better than boring, but I know better now. There have been a lot of difficult days in the past few months. There have been too many difficult days.

“Happy Christmas,” says Charlie, without any warning. He leans over Oliver and rests his head on mine. I lean a little too, my head on his shoulder. The radio plays. I think the sun is rising, or it might just be the streetlamps. I’m not going to think about the past few months, about Charlie and me, about all of the sad. I’m going to block it all out. Just for today.

“Happy Christmas,” I say.

I try not to fall asleep again but I still do, Oliver’s laugh ringing in my ears.

It’s ten to twelve and we’re still in our pyjamas, sitting on the sofa playing *Lego Harry Potter* on the Xbox, which is essentially exactly the same as *Lego Star Wars* except the characters are less exciting. It was a present for

Oliver, but he's busy with the very large amount of toy tractors that people gave him.

My parents got me a new laptop and Charlie a new iPod – things we both asked for. They don't really do surprise presents. And while Charlie and I have never really tried too hard with presents before now, this year I got him a Bluetooth speaker for his bedroom and he got me a laptop case with Wednesday Addams on it. I think we both know each other better than we thought we did.

"It doesn't have the sense of danger," I tell Charlie. "Where are the Stormtroopers I can slice in half?"

Charlie, who is controlling Hagrid, casts magic at a Gringotts vault and steals all the money, which I'm pretty sure isn't ours. "I think you may be missing the point, here."

I jump my character, Harry Potter, off a ledge. He explodes. "It hasn't even got any confused droids running around."

"When was the last time you saw *Harry Potter*?"

"Just saying."

"Kids?" Mum wanders into the room. She's got her Christmas dress on – a purple thing that's actually quite nice – and her hair curled. She always makes us dress up nice for Christmas, as if we're supposed to do something other than stuff our faces and slob on the sofa for twelve hours. She raises her eyebrows at us. "You going to get dressed soon?"

Charlie says nothing, so I say, "Yep, in a minute."

"Don't be too long. Everyone's arriving in half an hour."

"Yeah, we're just gonna finish this level."

Mum leaves. I glance at Charlie, but he hasn't looked away from the screen. I don't think they've had an argument yet but I can feel one brewing. And I'm not going to lie, Mum is kind of pissing me off a little bit. She's been really snappy with Charlie since he got home from the hospital, which isn't helping anyone. And half the time she pretends that he's not even ill, as if that'll cure him. If she just talked about it casually, maybe Charlie wouldn't feel so awkward about being the 'ill child'.

"You sure you want to have Christmas dinner with us?" I ask. "I'll skip it with you if you want, I bet we can persuade Dad—"

"I'm fine," he says. I guess maybe we shouldn't talk about it.

I shoot some magic at a passing Gringotts goblin. “I think I’d be enjoying this more if I could be someone cool like Mrs Weasley. Or Dobby.”

“Well, I’m not swapping you, Hagrid.”

“Do we get to battle some Dementors soon?”

“We’re only on the first book.”

“Wow.”

Charlie laughs at me. “So impatient.”

I end up wearing the only skirt that I own, which is grey, with a collared shirt and jumper. I have this problem where I literally do not ever wear any outfits that do not involve jeans. It’s not like I ever go anywhere I need to dress up for since I am pretty much the most unsociable person ever to grace the earth. But I do manage to brush my hair, which is probably the first time I’ve done that this entire holiday. Ten points to me.

Family members start to arrive and Charlie and I are on ‘greeting duty’, which involves more hugging than I would like. First Grandma and Grandad arrive, Grandad grumbling about something to do with his car and Grandma gives us an apologetic look. Our Spanish grandfather, who we rarely see but are instructed to call ‘Abuelo’, arrives with our nan, and Charlie has a mangled conversation in Spanish with Abuelo while Nan embarks on a long lamentation on how I cut most of my hair off in the summer.

Dad’s brother and his family arrive – Uncle Ant and Aunt Jules, and our three cousins: Clara, a twenty-year-old veterinary student; Esther, who’s my age; and Rosanna, a twelve-year-old who never seems to stop talking. Then we’ve got Mum’s sister Aunt Wendy, several older relatives that I’m still not sure how exactly we’re related, Dad’s sister Sofia and her husband Omar and their new baby boy Kai – the house is pretty full. Hopefully a bit later I’ll be able to sneak off to my room for a break.

We don’t see our cousins more than a few times a year, but it has become clear to me over recent years that they are very much unlike Charlie and me. They’re a lot richer than us, and a lot posher, and they seem determined to be friendly and fun all of the time. This means that they are a complete mystery to both of us.

“Charlie, darling ...” says Clara from across the Kids Table once Christmas dinner is fully underway. Clara looks excellent in whatever she

wears and has been allowed to attend Christmas Day in jeans, which annoys me quite a lot. She points a fork at Charlie, who's on my left. "You need to tell us all about your new boyfriend."

Esther perks up at this, staring at Charlie through her glasses. Esther doesn't usually say as much to us compared to Clara and Rosanna, but, from what I can tell from her Twitter, she's a bit of a fandom addict (her username is @MerthurIsEndgame), and is therefore always interested in Charlie's love life, what with him being the only known gay person in our entire family. I'm not quite sure how I feel about this.

Charlie shuffles in his chair. He's wearing black jeans, which is extremely unlike him, and still the navy Adidas sweatshirt, which I suddenly realise belongs to Nick. I think he chose his outfit purposefully to annoy Mum.

Clara takes a decisive mouthful of potato. "What's his name?"

"Nick." There's a bit of hesitation in his voice. He probably didn't expect an inquisition on top of his other issues with eating dinner.

"How long have you been going out?"

"Er ... eight months."

"Oh! Not exactly new, then!" Clara laughs and shovels another mouthful.

Charlie fiddles with his sweatshirt sleeves. "Haha ... no ..."

I think maybe Clara can't tell when she's making people uncomfortable. Charlie keeps glancing towards where Grandma and Grandad are sitting, making sure they can't hear anything from our table. Charlie doesn't want to come out to Grandma and Grandad yet because we think they might be a bit homophobic. Lots of old people are, unfortunately.

"And you met at school, did you?"

I wish Clara would just shut up. This isn't her fucking business.

"Yeah." Charlie forces a laugh. "Did Uncle Ant tell you all this, or ...?"

"Oh God, yes, you know what he's like."

Esther watches Charlie carefully. Rosanna is trying to plait Oliver's hair, much to Oliver's irritation. Clara continues, "You should *totally* bring him to ours tomorrow."

Esther meets her eye and grins. "Oh my God, yes."

We go to their house every year for Boxing Day, and boyfriends and girlfriends are always welcome, but so far that has only included Clara's

numerous and ever-changing boyfriends, three of which have been called Chris, all of which looked almost identical.

Charlie smiles awkwardly. “Oh, I think he’s doing stuff with his family tomorrow.”

Clara pouts. “Aw, that’s a shame.” And then her piercing gaze swaps to me. “What about you, Tori? Any lovely men in your life?”

I fight down the urge to hysterically laugh. “Um. No. Haha. No.”

Clara does the laughing for me. “Oh gosh, you are not missing much, I promise you that. Straight boys are the absolute worst.” She points her fork towards Oliver. “Let’s all hope that this one turns out better.”

“He totally might not be straight,” Esther finally pitches in. Her voice sounds startlingly like Clara’s, though she doesn’t quite look the Made-in-Chelsea posh-girl part. I think I like Esther more than Clara. We’ve had some okay conversations about *Doctor Who*.

“You’re so right,” says Clara, leaning on one hand, gazing at Oliver like he’s a new-born. “Charlie, when did you know you were gay?”

Charlie’s eyes widen in fear at the prospect of having to embark on this conversation, but thankfully, at that moment, Dad appears at the head of the table, still with his apron on over his shirt and waistcoat, and a Christmas cracker crown hanging dangerously off the top of his head. “How’s everybody doing over here?” He looks specifically at Charlie and claps him on the shoulder. “Everyone doing okay?”

For the first time, I have a look at Charlie’s plate. He does appear to have eaten some of it, which is a very good sign, since Charlie didn’t even like roast dinner that much *before* he got ill. However, he hasn’t eaten half as much as the rest of us, and Dad’s making that fact painfully obvious to everyone present.

Clara and Esther and all the family know that Charlie was in the hospital and that it wasn’t a normal type of hospital. But I don’t think that they know exactly why he had to go there. What happened.

Mum and Dad don’t ever talk about it.

They refuse to talk about it.

“We’re fine,” I say, before anyone else can beat me to it.

Dad meets my eyes and gives me a little nod. “All right-y. Let me know if you need any more to drink.” He wanders back to his table.

Clara starts having a loud conversation with Esther about how turkeys are cared for and then slaughtered. They seem to get on quite well, like Charlie and I do, which is cool. I have no idea what it must be like to have a sister but I expect it's useful to be able to share clothes.

Charlie turns to me and says quietly, "He's so *pester-y*."

I don't really want to say it, but I do anyway. "I think he might just be worried."

Charlie rolls his eyes. "Can't I just have a normal ..." But his voice dies away and he goes back to staring at his plate.

He doesn't say much more for the whole meal, which means that I have to suffer through a horrific question and answer session from Rosanna about all of my school friends, and then Esther wants an update on what TV shows I watch, and then Clara gets started on the whole "so what are you thinking about for university" thing, to which my answer is simply, "I'm not."

Charlie keeps taking out his phone and texting under the table, which kind of starts to piss me off, but I don't really want to annoy him, as everyone else in this family is doing that already.

I manage to escape the cousin trio after dinner and sit quietly with Grandma, who has fallen asleep on the sofa, so I check my own phone.

(11:07) **Becky Allen**

Lol lol lol lol lol I'm so glad i'm an only child.

(11:09) MERRY CHRISTMAS YOU INSOMNIAC

(11:10) Love u bby xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

(12:22) Dad got me the new Call of Duty. See you in my next life x

(14:01) Mum's so drunk already. Can your family adopt me?

(14:54) MUM IS DANCING ON A CHAIR

(14:59) #SaveBecky

"How are you feeling, anyway, Charlie?"

Uncle Ant's voice snaps my attention away from my phone. Uncle Ant is very much like Clara – big on gossip, big on talking about deep things, generally very irritating. He's a large man, sort of a large version of Dad but without a beard, and always looks out of place with his absolutely miniscule

wife. He's sitting on a chair on the other side of the room, facing Charlie, who's next to me on the sofa.

"Er ..." Charlie's eyes widen as he searches for something to say. "Oh, I'm much better now."

"It's so nice that you could come back for Christmas. Can't imagine what Christmas must be like in a place like that."

Noticeable tension draws up around us. The grandparents are luckily all having a separate conversation on the other sofa, and Mum and Dad are absent from the room, but Uncle Ant and Aunt Jules, all our cousins and various miscellaneous relatives now have their full attention on Charlie. Charlie's hands curl into fists.

"Actually, it was pretty good there," he says. "Like, they were all really helpful and nice. And it all got decorated for Christmas, so ... erm ... yeah ..."

I really need to think of something to say to stop this conversation but, as always, I can't think of anything.

"Oh, I'm sure," continues Uncle Ant. "But you hear some horror stories, don't you? White walls and straitjackets and all."

Aunt Jules laughs and whacks Uncle Ant playfully on the arm. "Oh, come on now, Antonio, no mental hospitals are really like that. This isn't the 1950s, darling." She shoots a creepily wide grin at Charlie. "We're all very happy that Charlie's all better and back with us, aren't we?"

"Absolutely," says Uncle Ant.

"Thanks," says Charlie, but he looks like he's about to throw up.

"And how are you, Tori?" asks Aunt Jules. "How's sixth form going?"

I begin to recite the classic answer to this question ("It's fine / it's a lot harder than GCSEs / it's nice not to have to do P.E. any more"), and as I do Charlie gets up and leaves the room. I excuse myself and follow him at my earliest opportunity, trying not to hate Ant and Jules as much as I actually do. It baffles me sometimes that people can just say stuff like that. That people can just have no idea about things.

I wander down the hallway and almost go to enter the kitchen, but stop when I see Charlie and Mum inside, standing in front of each other as if they're having a sort of face-off.

"Do you want us to talk about it or do you not want us to talk about it? You're being very immature, Charlie."

“How am I being immature?”

“You’re acting like a baby who just wants everyone’s attention all of the time.”

“I don’t want people’s attention, that’s the f— that’s the *problem*.”

Mum rips her washing-up gloves off her hands. “Look, everyone’s aware that this is a *difficult* Christmas for you, but the least you could do would be to let everyone else have a nice time, even if you’re determined to feel as sorry for yourself as possible.”

“It’s just you people who are feeling sorry for me and it’s pissing me off!”

“*Language*.”

“Half the time you refuse to even acknowledge that I have a fucking problem, and the other half you try as hard as possible to make me feel like I’m fucking disabled.”

And that’s when Mum snaps.

“*GET OUT!*” She points towards the door. “Just ... *get out*.”

Charlie doesn’t say anything at all. He turns around, walks away, exits the room and finds me there. Mum disappears out of view and Charlie stands there, looking down at me.

“I’m going to Nick’s,” he says, in what he tries to make a calm voice.

“Oh,” I say.

He turns around and starts putting his shoes on.

“Please don’t,” I say.

“I can’t ...” He stands back up. “I can’t deal with —” he gestures towards the living room and the kitchen — “all of that.”

“It’s Christmas, though,” I say.

“Let’s be honest,” he continues as if he hadn’t heard me, “I’m just the joke of the family, anyway.”

“You’re not.”

He reaches into the porch and grabs his coat. “This winter’s been the fucking worst.”

He picks up a spare key and opens the door. It’s raining. The cold comes in.

I want to cry. I want to do anything to stop him from leaving.

“Can’t you at least spend Christmas with me?” I say.

He turns back. His eyes are watery. His jeans are supposed to be skinny but they're just baggy on him. "What does that mean?"

"You spend all of your time with Nick anyway."

He starts to shout at me. "That's because he treats me as something other than a fucking anorexic!"

I stay quite still.

"I do too ..." I say, but my voice trails off.

"Sorry," he says, but he's already leaving. "I'll see you later."

The door closes and I don't move.

I look down at my grey skirt and I really wish I was wearing jeans. I don't feel like myself. I realise I still have my cracker crown on, so I take it off and tear it into several pieces.

I probably should have seen this coming.

He's being unfair, but I don't have any right to be annoyed at him.

I walk back into the kitchen. Mum is still washing up. I walk up to her, and her face looks like stone. Like ice, maybe. There's a pause, and then she says, "You know, I'm trying really hard."

I don't really know what to say to that, so I walk out of the kitchen and sit on the landing stairs.

Oliver runs past me with one of his new tractors.

I go into the porch and open the door to see whether Charlie is just sitting on the curb at the end of our driveway. But he isn't. Winter is usually my favourite season, but Charlie's right – this winter has been the worst. I sit down on the porch, my feet sticking out of the doorframe. There are some fairy lights outside someone's house across the road, but the more I look at them, the dimmer they seem to get. It doesn't feel like Christmas.

I think I'm trying really hard too. I sit with him at every mealtime, even when he cries and shouts at me. I ask him how he is every day and sometimes he tells me. I started being his friend as well as his sister.

But maybe that's the wrong thing to do. I don't know any more. Sometimes I want to just stop trying altogether. Just stop doing anything at all.

Not that that matters. I don't matter. *He* matters.

A car drives past. It's getting sort of dark now. Dark and cold and rainy. I think about how nice that is, and then I laugh to myself. Since when did they become my favourite things?

## CHARLES FRANCIS SPRING, 15

**Nick Nelson**

(00:01) Happy Christmas you xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

**Charlie Spring**

(00:02) happy christmas xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx i love you loads

(00:02) **Nick Nelson**

(00:02) Go to sleep you mug

(00:03) (I love you loads too xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)

\*

**Charlie Spring**

(06:31) oliver's waking victoria up with the musical xmas card i bought  
him hahahahaha

(06:32) i don't know why i'm laughing, i'm awake too

(06:32) Oh how the tables turn

**Nick Nelson**

(10:40) HAHAHA.

(10:40) This has to be the latest I have ever woken up on Christmas Day.

\*

**Charlie Spring**

(13:23) DID YOU GET A DOG

**Nick Nelson**

(13:30) YES WE GOT A PUG!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

**Charlie Spring**

(13:31) WELL I'M GOING TO DIE

**Nick Nelson**

(13:32) I'M ALREADY DEAD

(13:34) [*Nick selfie with pug puppy*]

**Charlie Spring**

(13:35) unfair

**Nick Nelson**

(13:36) Another reason for you to come over later.

**Charlie Spring**

(13:37) the pug is now the only reason

**Nick Nelson**

(13:38) Stop texting me loser. Go be sociable.

**Charlie Spring**

(13:38) 😞

**Nick Nelson**

(13:39) <3

**Charlie Spring**

(13:51) a dog is for life

(13:51) not just for christmas

**Nick Nelson**

(13:53) Dog is life

**Charlie Spring**

(13:54) ball is life

**Nick Nelson**

(13:55) That's what Henry the Pug said.

**Charlie Spring**  
(13:56) HENRY

**Nick Nelson**  
(13:57) I know.

**Charlie Spring**  
(13:57) that's a name for a train, not a dog

**Nick Nelson**  
(13:58) Have you been watching Thomas the tank engine with Oliver again?

**Charlie Spring**  
(13:58) maybe

**Nick Nelson**  
(13:59) Nerd

**Charlie Spring**  
(13:59) u love it

**Nick Nelson**  
(14:00) Yes your interest in trains turns me on greatly

**Charlie Spring**  
(14:01) screenshotted for future reference

**Nick Nelson**  
(14:02) GO AND SOCIALISE YOU ABSOLUTE TRAIN NERD

\*

**Charlie Spring**  
(15:14) hey can i come over earlier than i said i would?

**Nick Nelson**  
(15:17) Yeah of course, what's up?? You ok?

**Charlie Spring**

(15:23) yeah family's just being a bit annoying

(15:24) i'm the novelty gay cousin

**Nick Nelson**

(15:25) Oh Char 😞 you don't wanna just stick it out with tori for a bit?

**Charlie Spring**

(15:29) she can't really do anything to help tbh

(15:34) i can just come over later if you're busy

**Nick Nelson**

(15:35) It's busy but jesus I could do with a break. Seriously it's fucking chaos in this house.

(15:35) There are talks of all the people under 25 having to put on some kind of fucking awful Christmas panto

(15:36) Mum's downed two bottles of Merlot and put the Michael Bublé Christmas album on. There are people over 50 dancing in the lounge. I think I recognise like twenty percent of the people here.

(15:36) Feel free to come over whenever, I need a break from the madness xxxx

**Charlie Spring**

(15:37) ok i'll leave in a bit xxxxxx

**Nick Nelson**

(15:38) You okay though? <3

**Charlie Spring**

(15:39) i'm fine <3

I'm quite aware that it's my fault that my family are annoyed with me, so I guess the best way to sort that out is to just go away completely. I'm very much in favour of 'sorting things out' when I have a problem, rather than just letting it carry on and irritate everyone. The more I think about that, the more that explains the stupid things that I've done.

The one stupid thing that fucked up the lives of every single person close to me.

I also know I'm a hypocritical piece of shit. I complain all the time about people feeling sorry for me, but I still manage to be as dramatic as possible, running away to my boyfriend's house on Christmas Day, trying not to start crying and/or ruin Christmas for everyone. What the hell are people supposed to do when I act like this? Way to live up to my 'crazy person' stereotype.

I know Victoria's trying her best to help. I feel kind of bad for running out on her like that. Out of everyone in my family, she's probably being the most considerate, and I seriously do appreciate her. She doesn't pester and she doesn't avoid the issue, which my parents are apparently pros at. Victoria gets straight to the point when she needs to, but doesn't try to force it when I don't want to talk about something. I don't feel like some incapacitated maniac when I'm talking to her.

To be honest, I *am* a lot better now. I'm not back to normal – whatever that is – but I actually eat physical food now. I feel like there's a chance I could at least cope with my food problems, even if I never manage to get completely cured. When I first got to the hospital, I refused to eat anything and I had to survive on these high calorie drinks. And I hated the hospital at first, obviously. But then, after weeks of talking to the people looking after me and the other teenagers staying there and Nick and Victoria and my parents when they came to visit me, I started to realise how ill I was. And why I'd ended up there.

It's because I was actually dying.

And now I'm not dying.

So that's good.

I got together with Nick Nelson in April, a couple of weeks before my fifteenth birthday. I didn't like eating in front of anyone then, but I hadn't stopped eating yet. That came in the summer. I don't know exactly why I stopped eating. I think I just loved the feeling of being in control of something when everything else in my life felt so uncontrollable – school work, needing to be the best all the time, being the only openly gay person in my year group, feeling like Nick could leave me at any second, feeling like he could just leave and I would have nothing left.

But I couldn't even control that, in the end. It took control of me.

And yeah, I guess it wasn't a very normal start to a relationship. I was surprised Nick wanted to go out with me in the first place, even if I hadn't had eating issues. I thought he was straight until about March.

Even after we started going out, I was convinced he was going to break up with me. Why would anyone want to be with someone who can't even put food in their own mouth? It didn't take him very long to realise I had some weird food issues. And by the autumn, I was horrible to him all the time. I must have been the worst person to hang out with in the world.

And then there was that stupid night in October. When Nick came to see me in the hospital – the normal hospital that I stayed at for a while before going to the psychiatric one – I asked him why he hadn't broken up with me yet.

He looked at me like I'd suggested I wanted to die all over again and said, "I can't just stop being in love with you."

And then he cried and held me.

And that was that.

Nick lives in this huge detached house a couple of streets away. Apparently his family always have these giant Christmas parties with like a hundred people, and since this is our first Christmas as a couple, I was going to drop in for half an hour in the evening anyway once most of my relatives had entered a wine-induced slumber, but now here I am at only 4pm. And he wasn't exaggerating. The front door is open, people's voices echo from every window, there are flashing lights coming from the living room, and I can feel the bass vibrations through my feet. It's a wonder they haven't been reported by their neighbours.

### **Charlie Spring**

(16:02) i'm outside! xxxx

I stand and wait on their doorstep. Just walking into the house would probably be a bit awkward, and I doubt anyone would hear the doorbell if I tried to ring it. Luckily, Nick quickly appears at the doorway.

He looks at me for a couple of seconds, and then folds his arms. "Fucking hell, you didn't even bring an umbrella?"

I glance up at the sky. I hadn't even noticed it was raining, but when I look down at myself, I realise that my clothes are completely soaked.

"Oh," I say, and look back up to find him there.

"Hey," he says with a grin.

I don't think that Nick is a normal boyfriend, or that this is a normal relationship. If I could choose to be with him all of the time, I would, and that's awful because I know that it's unhealthy and you're not supposed to be obsessed with the person you're in love with, because you're supposed to be a person on your own too, but still, every single time, I would choose to be with him.

Maybe I'm just fifteen and an idiot.

"Hi," I say and step inside.

He shuts the door and turns to face me, his grin gone. He brushes some of my drenched hair out of my eyes. "You look like shit, Charles."

I just let my forehead fall on to his shoulder. "Mm." His arms wrap around me instantly and I lift mine to hold him too, and he rests his head against mine and his hair brushes my ear and he pulls me against him. We stay like that, in the cold porch, just for a few minutes, without saying anything, without moving, and then he whispers, "You okay?" and I start to cry, because that's always what happens when people ask me that question. I really don't want him to see me cry, because there's been far too much of that recently and it's Christmas Day, so I try extremely hard not to move from his shoulder, but that doesn't stop him seeing. When he pulls back, the tears are streaming down my face.

He looks, his eyes becoming so pained and sad, like they always do when he sees me cry. Then he removes a handkerchief from the back pocket of his trousers. The sheer ridiculousness of Nick owning a handkerchief immediately makes me snort out a laugh, which makes him smile too and raise his eyebrows, and I do stop crying as he methodically wipes my cheeks.

"Why do you have a handkerchief?" I ask. I hate how my voice sounds when I've been crying.

Nick breaks out into a grin, still brushing the thing against my face like he's dusting a bookshelf. "Don't say that like I'm too much of a chav to own a handkerchief."

"But you are too much of a chav to own a handkerchief."

Nick laughs. It's so lovely against the sound of the rain and the low bass of whatever music they're playing in the living room. "Okay, *maybe* it was a Christmas present that I put in my pocket just to prove to my nan that I would actually use it." He puts it back into his pocket and then takes my face in both of his hands. "And what d'you fucking know? I *did* use it."

I smile at him, his hands feeling so warm against my skin. "Maybe your nan knows me better than you do."

"Are you suggesting that you want to date my nan?"

"There are so many reasons why I do not want to do that."

"Good." He hugs me again, his arms reaching round my waist. "Thought I had some competition for a minute there."

"You don't have any competition," I say, running my hands up to his shoulders, wanting to just stay here forever with him in the porch, live here in the half-dark winter with the rain falling next to us, make a bed out of the coats and a fire out of the coat rack.

"You smooth little bastard," he says, leaning in with a smile and I meet him with a kiss that turns into a longer kiss than I think either of us planned but everything is suddenly far too nice for it to end ... everything suddenly feels like Christmas, I actually *feel* something, I run a hand through his hair and he pulls my hips against his and our lips brush as he changes direction and ... I actually ... feel ... something ...

"Well he weren't bloody joking about the bisexual thing, was he?"

Nick and I jolt apart and turn to find that we've drawn an audience consisting of a guy with hardly any hair, who must have been at most in his mid-twenties, another guy of similar age, wearing all black, three children under ten, and an elderly woman who looks a little bit confused.

The guy who spoke, the almost-bald one, finally moves his attention away from me to Nick. "Gonna introduce us, mate?"

"Oh, yeah," Nick replies, still in a slight daze. He moves behind me and pushes me further into his house, with his hands on my shoulders, towards his family, who seem to be multiplying in numbers as more people walk through the hallway and realise that I've arrived. "So this is Charlie."

A good half an hour is spent introducing me to every single member of Nick's family, who for some reason all want to meet me. Everything is, "Oh, so this is Charlie, then?" and nobody asks any awkward questions

about hospital or how I found Christmas dinner or anything like that. Throughout most of this, I'm carrying the new Nelson family puppy, Henry, who is the tiniest and palest pug puppy I have ever seen. Henry falls asleep in my arms and I fall immediately in love with him.

Nick's mum still has her cracker hat on and, even though I've seen her numerous times since I came home, she gives me a hug lasting at least ten seconds longer than is socially acceptable. I don't really mind, though.

After that, Nick drags me up to his room so I can change clothes, despite my protests that I don't mind staying in my soaked jeans. At least my jeans *slightly* fit me.

As I'm changing, Nick's lounging on his big double bed. He's wearing his usual old beige chinos, but with them he's got on this bright red jumper with reindeer patterns all over it. It's disgusting and absolutely hilarious.

"I like your jumper," I say, as I'm doing my belt up. "It's very sexual."

Nick blinks, clearly not paying attention to anything except me getting changed, and looks down, as if he'd forgotten what he was wearing. "Oh," he says. "Yeah, I know, right. So seductive."

"Yeah, I would bang that jumper."

"I would be very interested in watching that happen."

I pick up my damp jeans from the floor, chuck them at his face, and laugh as he dramatically rolls off his bed in an attempt to catch them.

"I like *your* jumper," he says, after crawling back on to his bed, a small smile playing on his lips. "Whoever picked that out has proper taste."

I'm momentarily confused and then realise I'm wearing Nick's navy Adidas jumper.

I stole it off him when he visited me for the first time at the psychiatric hospital. I hadn't been allowed to bring a lot of stuff with me and I'd spent the majority of my first night there crying because I felt so lonely and pathetic, which I admitted to Nick when he visited the next day as we cuddled up on my new bed. He made that pained look of his and immediately took off his jumper and gave it to me and said that if I wore it at night, maybe it would feel like he was there too.

And it did. It smelt like him.

"Oh. Oops," I say.

I inspect myself in the mirror. Nick's jeans, pretty much the same as mine, but several sizes larger, looks ridiculous on me. I groan heavily.

“I look like a nineties boy band member.”

Nick appears behind me. He’s not actually that much taller than me, he’s just *bigger*. Which is fine from, like, an aesthetic perspective. But not from a clothes-sharing perspective.

“Well it’s this or trackies, and I guarantee my mum will have something to say if you turn up to our Christmas party in trackies.”

“I think trackies would make me look even *more* like a member of Boyzone.”

“Nothing wrong with Boyzone.”

“Everything’s wrong with Boyzone.”

Nick meets my eye in the mirror. We stay silent for a moment, and then he takes my hand, so I turn round to face him.

“You gonna tell me what’s wrong?” he says.

I don’t really know what’s wrong. Well, everything, really. My parents pretending I’m not ill, everyone else treating me like I’m some kind of reformed serial killer, the dinner making me want to scratch out my insides. Two hours of sleep, too much thinking.

“I just ... wanted to have a nice day,” I say and I feel myself welling up again and I want to punch myself in the face.

“Okay,” he says, slinging an arm round my shoulders and walking me out of his room, then kissing me on the top of the head. “Let’s do that, then.”

“Oh, all right, Charlie?”

Half an hour later, Nick’s gone to the loo and I’m suddenly facing David – Nick’s older brother by four years – while I’m drinking a glass of water in the kitchen.

David’s not really like Nick in any way except for their identical dark blonde hair. David’s a lot shorter – shorter than me, actually – and completely up himself. He goes to a posh university and hangs out with lots of private school guys who do rowing and wear quilted jackets. He frequently cheats on his girlfriends and then boasts about it.

Nick and David don’t really like each other and I don’t think David likes me very much, either. When Nick came out to him as bisexual, David laughed and told him he was just covering up being gay.

“Hey,” I say.

He grabs a beer bottle from the fridge. It’s definitely not his first.

“So you all cured and stuff, man?” he says.

“Er ...” This is possibly the most ridiculous question I’ve received all day. “Well, that’s not really how it works, but sort of, I guess.”

“Oh, ace.” He takes a swig of beer and stares at me like I’m a zoo animal.

“How are you?” I ask, purely out of there not being anything else to say.

“Oh, I’m really good, thanks, yeah,” he says. “Uni work, rowing, you know. Work hard, play hard, mate.”

“Cool.”

“So what’s happening with you now? You allowed back at school yet?”

*Allowed.* Everything about him irritates me.

“I’m going back next term,” I say.

“Oh, nice, nice.” He takes another swig. “So, like, I’m super interested – what’s it like in a mental hospital? Did you meet anyone *really* crazy?”

I just stand there, silent.

“‘Cause, like,” he continues, “I was watching this documentary on schizophrenia the other day and literally it’s just fucking *awful*, innit? All that talking to yourself and stuff. And these people, they had to be locked up to stop them hurting themselves, you know?”

My grip on my glass tightens. I could just leave. “Well, I don’t have schizophrenia.”

David blinks. “Oh, yeah, man, obviously. But you must have met people like that, surely, in that place?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Just fucking *crazy*, innit. So fucking sad.”

“Yeah.”

“Must have been fucking awful to not want to eat anything as well, mate. Sounds shitty.”

I don’t say anything.

“Like, did you ever get so hungry that you just *had* to eat something? That’s what I don’t get, like, the people who just stop eating and *die*, you know?”

And then Nick walks into the room.

By the look on his face, he’s obviously heard David’s last comment, and it probably doesn’t help that I shoot him a look of severe distress.

“Are you done interrogating my boyfriend, David?” he asks, not politely.

David frowns and holds out his hands. “Mate, we were just having a chat!”

“D’you seriously think Charlie wants to talk about that stuff on *Christmas Day*?” Nick snaps, and it’s been a while since I’ve seen him get this angry. “What the fuck?”

David snorts and takes a sip of beer. “All right, all right, calm your tits.”

“Fucking hell.” Nick puts his arm around me and walks us out of the kitchen and down the hallway. Once we’re out of earshot, he says, “He’s such an insensitive little prick.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s *not*.”

“David’s always been a dickhead,” I say. “He’s still doesn’t think bisexuality is a thing. I can see it in his eyes.”

Nick huffs out a laugh. “Yeah. Last time I mentioned how hot Scarlett Johansson is he told me flat out I was lying.”

I laugh too. “Classic David.”

Nick leads us into the tiny alcove by the garage door. His arm drops but his hands find mine.

“Thanks,” I say and kiss him gently. I wish my whole family could understand what he understands. This is why I’d rather be here than there.

“I just ...” The pain in his eyes returns, the same look he has when I cry in front of him. “I just wish people could *understand*. Why do they find it so *hard*?”

My voice gets quieter. “Maybe it *is* hard.”

“I don’t find it hard.”

“That’s because you’re amazing.”

He laughs then, his eyes going all crinkly and the pain draining away. “Shut up.”

“Do you wanna go play Mario Kart now? One of your cousins wanted some kind of massive tournament. Also I need to spend more time with Henry. I’m already getting pug withdrawal symptoms.”

“*Fine*.” He laughs again. “Fine. Jesus. Okay. It’s Christmas, we’re fucking gonna have a nice day.”

I laugh and think for the billionth time how even though I’ve got the worst deal in many parts of my life, at least in this part I’m the luckiest person in the entire world.

When Nick had said that it was chaos in his house, he'd meant it. By the time we get back to the living room, there's a proper disco going on, compiled mostly of tipsy middle-aged people, and a rather enthusiastic game of toy-car racing happening in the hallway with people's shoes as obstacles. After I beat Nick five times at that, we somehow get dragged into a game of Monopoly, which is promptly ruined when Henry gallops over the board, followed by a Mario Kart tournament with Nick's older cousins, which I also win, which is weird, because Oliver always beats me at Mario Kart at home.

Then we go back to Nick's room to exchange presents – I'd left mine in there when I was getting changed and Nick had suggested we socialised before we opened them. I got him shoes (Vans) because he's been saying he wanted them but can never afford them, and he got me new headphones, because mine are broken. But we also both got each other the most stupidly romantic cards ever – his has pictures of us all over it and I drew all over mine. I kiss him after I read his card to me and he kisses me back with more enthusiasm than I'd anticipated and basically we end up staying in his room for at least forty-five minutes.

And suddenly it's seven o'clock and we're sitting on a sofa with *Doctor Who* on in the background, my legs resting over his and his head on my shoulder. Some kids are sitting on the carpet building a Lego pirate ship and Nick's mum and various aunts and uncles are busy organising the buffet tea on the dining table. I'm literally about to fall asleep—

“Charles, just so you know, your phone has been making sounds for the past five minutes.”

“Oh.” I sit up a little and Nick does too, a sleepy smile on his face. I withdraw my phone from my pocket to find the screen covered in unread texts.

The messages are all from Victoria. Nick leans in to read them too.

### **Victoria Spring**

(17:14) Hey when are you coming home?

(17:32) Please reply to me

(17:40) At least just tell me when you're coming home

(17:45) Mum and Dad are kind of upset I don't think they're gonna shout at you

(18:03) I think Mum's sorry tbh

(18:17) Oliver wants to know when you're coming home, he wants to play Mario Kart

(18:31) Can't believe you left me alone with Clara you fucking twat

(18:38) She's trying to get me to talk about the general election please come home now

(18:54) If you don't reply soon I'm literally gonna walk to Nick's and get you

(18:59) I'm not even joking

(19:00) Charlie

(19:01) Charlie

(19:01) Charlie

(19:01) Seriously

(19:02) Ok right I'm walking to Nick's

Nick doesn't say anything but I can tell he wants to. I instantly feel like shit. I've just done what I always do.

Run away instead of dealing with the problem.

"I should probably go home," I say.

Nick runs his fingers through my hair. I'm pretty sure he doesn't want me to go home, but he still says, "Yeah."

Neither of us make any sign of moving.

I guess I should at least tell Nick what's been happening.

He never pesters. It's one of the billion things I like about him. If he can see I don't want to talk about something, he doesn't make me.

"My family have just ... they've been, like, treating me really weird."

Nick sits up a little so we can look at each other properly. "Yeah?"

"It's like ... they either want to completely ignore what's happened or they treat me like I can't look after myself." I can't quite meet his eyes. "I hate how awkward they all are about it."

"Even Tori?"

"Well ... she's sort of the only one who's all right, like, she just talks to me like normal."

"She's always going to be on your side."

I look at him.

“It’s hard,” he says and smiles, but it’s a sad smile. “I wish everyone understood it and knew exactly what to do and say. I think everyone *should*. But I guess they don’t. Even parents.”

“Yeah,” I say, but it’s barely more than a whisper.

“Even when your parents don’t know what they’re doing, Tori’s always going to be on your side,” he says again, and he’s right, she’s always been on my side and she always will be. She’s been with me since that night in October that changed everything – since she found me in the bathroom, with blood everywhere and razor blades on the floor, since she called the ambulance, since she refused to leave the hospital and slept in the A&E waiting room three nights in a row, since she brought me a gift every time she visited every single day – she has *always* been on my side.

And then I realise that Nick’s pointing at something, and I turn my head, and there, standing in the doorway, is Victoria.

She obviously forgot to bring an umbrella too – she looks like she just jumped into a river. She’s also quite out of breath, meaning she probably jogged here, and she looks angry in that completely silent way of hers – death-stare eyes, lips clenched together, fists dug into her coat pockets.

“Firstly,” she says, “Nick, I refuse to believe that you have this many family members. It’s not logical. Secondly, your disgusting brother tried to flirt with me again and I swear to God if he doesn’t get the message soon I’m literally going to just tell him to fuck off.”

All of the kids building the Lego pirate ship turn round in shock. Victoria looks at them and raises her eyebrows menacingly. They quickly turn away again.

Nick laughs heartily but Victoria’s face doesn’t change. She looks at me.

“Thirdly, I think you should come home now, because if I have to answer one more bloody question about my school grades I might do a runner as well and Dad’s already really upset as it is.” She moves her weight to her other leg. “Also, Oliver’s in a bad mood because no one will play Mario Kart with him, and Grandma wants to talk to you about your drumming lessons, *and* you’re going to have to tell Esther more about Nick at some point because I think she’s turning you into her new OTP and you need to bring her the fuck back down to earth.”

She slumps into the other end of the sofa, not looking at us, and tilts her head back into the cushions.

I have no idea what to say.

I move away from Nick and sit next to her. I put my arms around her and, after a few seconds, she leans on my shoulder.

“Fucking hate Christmas,” she says.

“No you don’t,” I say.

“I hate this one.”

“Everyone hates this one.”

*Doctor Who* still plays on in the background. Oliver’s probably watching it right now.

“I was just ... I was just thinking about ... what if ...” Victoria’s voice shakes and then suddenly there are tears, seemingly impossible tears, and then I think I’m crying a bit as well, and it feels so stupid, everything about today feels *so stupid*. “What if it was just ... me and Oliver by ourselves ...”

“It won’t be,” I say. “That’s never going to happen.”

“It better fucking not.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say. I could say it a billion times and I still don’t think it would be enough. I rest my temple on her hair. “I’m so sorry.”

She doesn’t move. How many times have we sat here next to each other like this?

“Yeah,” she says.

It’s been the worst Christmas we’ve ever had, but here we are, still. Still here.

“You missed Grandad and Abuelo’s annual argument,” she says, after a while.

“What was it about this year?”

“I think it was about antique furniture, but most of Abuelo’s points were in Spanish and that’s not my area. I needed you to commentate.”

“There might be another round later, like last year.”

“Hopefully. It at least stopped Clara trying to get me to describe my ideal man.”

I laugh, and then she laughs too, and everything’s a little bit better. Just for a minute or so.

## OLIVER JONATHAN SPRING, 7

First Charlie disappeared, and then Tori disappeared, and I'm starting to wonder whether I'm next. Nobody seems to be saying anything about it, which makes me wonder whether my family are behind it, and they've all been possessed by some ghosts or evil dinosaurs or something. I'm playing Mario Kart right now in front of the TV to take my mind off it, but that doesn't mean that I'm not very worried.

Mario Kart's kind of boring when you play it by yourself.

Rosanna keeps touching my hair and it's really annoying me.

Mum comes up to me just as I've finished Luigi Circuit and asks if I need another drink. I shake my head and ask, "Where's Charlie and Tori?"

Mum sits down on the sofa to my right. She's got a glass of wine in one hand. "They've just gone out for a little bit."

"Have they been kidnapped?"

"No, oh, darling, no."

"Where've they gone?"

Mum doesn't say anything for a little bit. Maybe she doesn't know ...

"Charlie was a bit upset earlier, so he went to Nick's house."

Nick is Charlie's boyfriend, who comes round our house all the time. I think they'll probably get married one day so they can have their own house and not have to walk to each other's houses every single day.

I put down the Wii remote. Charlie's been upset quite a lot lately. Mum says that he's got something wrong with his brain that makes him upset all of the time. He had to go to the hospital for it.

"Is it because of what's wrong with his brain?"

"... Sort of, yes."

"Oh. Is he going to get better soon?"

Mum sips her wine. "I don't know, sweetheart. I hope so."

"Where's Tori?"

“I think she’s gone to see if Charlie wants to come home yet.”

“Oh.”

“I said some ... not very nice things,” Mum says, and rests her chin in one hand, “to Charlie.”

I suddenly realise that she looks really sad. Mum’s never *ever* sad about things – she gets angry sometimes and complains when I leave all my tractors on the lounge windowsill or make too much noise in the car, but she doesn’t really get sad.

I get up off the floor and go and give her a hug, which is what you have to do when someone is sad.

She laughs and pats me on the head. “Aw, Oliver. I’m okay.”

“You could just say sorry,” I say. “That’s what you have to do when you say something bad. Say sorry.”

“You’re completely right,” she says, and when I step back, she’s smiling, so I must have done a good job with the hug.

And then I hear the front door open.

I immediately run out of the lounge and down the hallway and there, taking their shoes off, are my big brother and sister, soaked from the rain. I run towards Charlie because he’s the only one left in my family who still picks me up and when he sees me he grins and holds out his arms and lifts me into the air and says, “Cor, you’re getting so *heavy*. You’re like an elephant, you are.”

“No I’m *not*.”

Tori ruffles my hair, which isn’t as annoying as when Rosanna does it. “What age are you going to stop being carried everywhere?”

I take a moment to consider. “Twenty-seven.”

They both laugh and Charlie carries me into the lounge, Tori following us. When we get there, Charlie puts me down, and then he goes and gives Mum a hug, which is nice, because hugs always make everything better.

Tori sits on the other sofa and I sit next to her and say, “Everything’s better when all three of us are here.”

Tori looks at me. “Definitely.”

“Why did you go away? I was so *bored*. This Christmas has been so boring.”

She looks at me some more. “Well ... it’s been something.”

I don’t really know what that means.

“But I promise we won’t go away ever again,” she says.

“You can’t promise that,” I say. “You have to go to school.”

“Okay, next time we go somewhere, we’ll tell you before we go.”

“Fine. *And* you have to promise to come back.”

Tori smiles. “Okay. We’ll definitely promise to come back.”

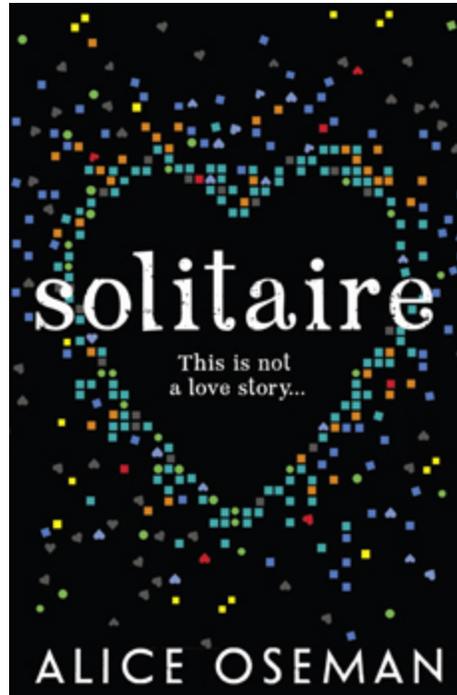
“Good.”

Being on my own without a brother or a sister would be weird. I don’t think I’d like it. Who are you supposed to play with or ask to reach stuff for you? There wouldn’t be anyone to carry me around. And there’d be two empty bedrooms in the house and we’d probably get ghosts living here. I really don’t like ghosts.

“Can we play Mario Kart now?” I ask.

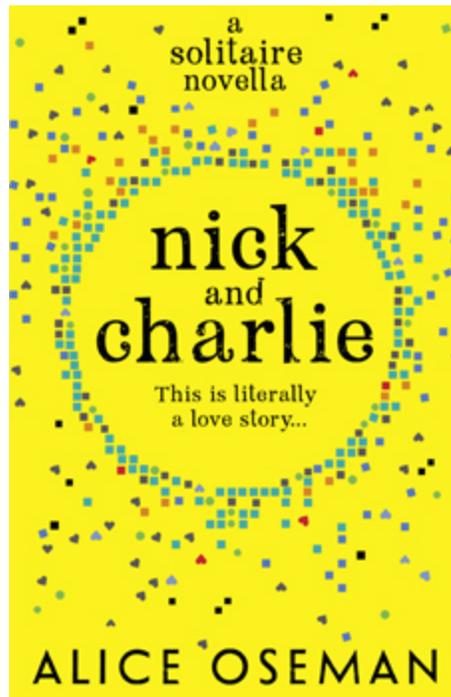
“Yes.” Tori ruffles my hair again. “Yes, we can play Mario Kart now.”

*My name is Tori Spring. I like to sleep and I like to blog. Last year I had friends. Things were very different, I guess, but that's all over now ... Now there's Solitaire.*



Click [here](#) to read the astonishing debut *Solitaire* ...

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Coming soon by Alice Oseman – RADIO SILENCE

## About the Author

Alice Oseman is a debut author from Rochester Kent, and is currently attending Durham university reading English. Alice has thoroughly researched sarcastic teenagers who spend a lot of time on the internet, by being a sarcastic teenager who spends a lot of time on the internet. Her debut novel, *Solitaire*, was signed when she was eighteen years old.

She is active on Twitter and Tumblr – her writing of *Solitaire* has been significantly inspired by behavioural trends on Tumblr. Alice is currently working on her second novel.

Follow Alice Oseman on Twitter: [@AliceOseman](https://twitter.com/AliceOseman)

Follow Tori Spring on Tumblr: [www.chronic-pessimist.tumblr.com](http://www.chronic-pessimist.tumblr.com)

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