

Sealed With a Secret

BY LISA SCHROEDER*



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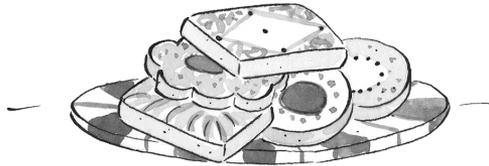
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For Amanda and Sarah,
editorial duo extraordinaire.

Thank you so much for everything.

Chapter 1



CRICKET: A BAT-AND-BALL GAME

Paris is a wonderful city, it's true, but in my mind, there's no place better than London, and I was thrilled to be home. Homebody Phoebe Ainsworth, that's me. Give me a book to read, a piano, or a kitchen filled with gadgets, and I'm happier than a foodie in a five-star French restaurant. My older sister, Alice, however, was acting as if the world was coming to an end. She hadn't wanted to leave Paris. Well, that isn't exactly true. She hadn't wanted to leave *Justin*.

I sat on the edge of Alice's bed staring at the large fish tank across the room, trying to decide if I should be

the nice sister and rub her back as she sniveled into her pillow. My parents gave Alice the fish tank for her fifteenth birthday. Mum had told her she'd read an article that said aquariums can help calm the mind and reduce stress. So they filled it with beautiful fish in the hopes that Alice's room would become a relaxing, soothing place, even when she's anxious about school and grades. My sister is ambitious and, as Mum likes to say, a perfectionist with a capital *P*. Sometimes it seems like she lives in a constant state of worry. I never understood what she had to worry about, since she always gets good grades.

As I sat there next to her, I considered telling her to roll over and watch the fish, because maybe it would help her feel better. But I'm sure she would have told me it would definitely *not* help. Fish don't have magical powers to cure a wounded heart, after all. Though that'd be pretty cool if they did.

It'd been five days since we'd said farewell to our new American friends, Nora and Justin, whom we'd met while in Paris with our dad to look for antiques. But you wouldn't have known it by looking at my sister. It was like she and Justin had kissed good-bye only a moment ago.

It was Monday morning, and I'd come to her room to tell her I was making strawberry crêpes before we went with Dad to work at the antiques shop. Next thing I knew, she'd flopped down on her bed face-first.

The longer I sat there, the more irritated I became. All I wanted her to do was to join us for breakfast, and she was acting like the world was ending.

I stared at the fish, hoping they might make *me* feel calm. It didn't work.

"Let me guess," I finally said with a sigh. "Crêpes remind you of Justin. Well, you don't have to have any breakfast, you know. Go hungry if you'd like. I was just trying to be nice."

Of course I missed my new friend, Nora, too. But not enough to cry about it. After all, we'd only known each other for a few days, and from the moment we met on the Métro, I knew that our time together in Paris was temporary.

While Justin and Alice were off falling head over heels in love, Nora and I had gone on glorious adventures around the City of Light. Nora's grandmother had made up a treasure hunt for her, with items scattered in various places. We'd had so much fun together, but as

Mum liked to say from time to time, “All good things must come to an end.” Besides, something told me I’d see Nora again someday. Maybe she would come to London, or maybe I’d travel to New York City, where she lived. That would be a dream come true! In the meantime, we’d stay in touch. I was sure of it.

And so, here we were, back at our flat in south London (Greenwich, to be exact) with another week of Easter holiday before we returned to school. If Alice intended to blather on about Justin the entire time, it was going to be one *very* long week.

“Cooxhughetmaatishh?” Alice mumbled, her head turned only slightly so the pillow heard her words better than I did.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand baby talk.”

She sat up, sniffing. “I’m not a baby, Phoebe. I’m heartbroken. But, silly me, you wouldn’t understand since you’ve never been in love.” She dragged her arm across her nostrils. *Gross*. “I said, could you get me a tissue?”

“Why?” I asked. “Are your legs broken, too?”

She stood up with a harrumph. “You’re not nice at all. In fact, you’re the meanest little sister in the history of the world.”

While she went toward the loo, I headed back to the kitchen. “Breakfast will be delicious and you’ll regret not having any,” I yelled. “All because of a silly boy.”

Dad and Mum sat at the old, pedestal kitchen table, drinking tea and reading the newspaper. Our house is small and filled to the brim with antiques. If something doesn’t sell at the store, I think Dad feels guilty, so he brings it home and pretends like it’s something he really wanted to keep anyway. A few weeks ago, he tried to bring home an antique cricket bat.

“But you don’t play!” Mum had cried.

“I might,” Dad had told her. “Someday.”

That’s when Mum put her foot down and made Dad promise he wouldn’t bring any more stuff home until he got rid of some things. I kind of agreed with her. I mean, what was next, a vintage coffin? I could just hear Dad’s perfectly good reason—“I don’t need it now, but someday I will.”

I walked over to the stove and turned it on. Eyes were on me, I could feel it. Finally, Mum said, “Weren’t you being a bit harsh with your sister, lovey?”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “She’s too lovesick to eat breakfast. You can’t tell me you think that’s perfectly acceptable.”

As the pan warmed, I dropped a pat of butter into it, which made a nice sizzling sound. I'd mixed up the batter before I went to Alice's room, but I took the wooden spoon and gave it a few quick turns to ensure it was nice and thin.

"It's a lucky thing the two of you are going with me to the shop today," Dad said, setting the newspaper down on the table. "There's nothing like a good day's work to take your mind off your troubles."

"Don't be surprised if she comes out here and says she's changed her mind about going," I said, swirling the pan around to get the bottom of it nicely covered with the butter.

Mum stood up and brought her teacup to the sink. "Well, she's going whether she likes it or not. I have a shift at the hospital and I don't want her moping about at home by herself all day long."

"Why does she have to be so impossible anyway?" I wailed. "I miss the old Alice. The one who used to sing along while I played the piano. The one who made sure I got the last biscuit during teatime. The one who loved to browse flea markets with me rather than going off on her own." I sighed. "You know, the one who actually *liked* being with me."

I leaned into my mother when she came over and put her arm around me. “She still likes you, Phoebe. This is only temporary. You’ll see.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” I said as I went back to making breakfast. “You didn’t see how she treated me in Paris. I couldn’t do anything right. She wouldn’t even let me sit next to her on the Métro. Although I suppose that turned out to be a good thing, since it allowed me to meet Nora.”

While I poured the batter into the pan, Dad said, “What you two are going through is normal. Your sister is growing up, that’s all. She’s trying to figure out who she is. What she wants out of life.”

“Or *doesn’t* want out of life,” I said as I watched the bubbles appear and took in the delicious aroma of the batter cooking. “Like her sister, for example.”

Mum chuckled. “Sweetheart, don’t you think you’re being a bit overly dramatic?”

“Not really,” I replied.

I flipped the thin pancake over and was happy to see it wasn’t too dark, the way they usually turned out when Mum made them for us.

“Look at that,” she said, peering over my shoulder. “You obviously didn’t learn how to cook from me.”

That was another thing Alice and I used to do together a lot—cook. Since Mum and Dad were pretty lousy at it, we'd taken it upon ourselves to do as much of the cooking as possible. And I loved doing it. Alice had taught me so much. Not just when it came to cooking, either. With six years between us, she'd often been more like a second mother to me than a sister.

But soon she'd be off to university, and then what? Once she left, would she even care to stay in touch with me at all?

“Let me get the strawberry jam,” Mum said as she made her way to the fridge.

I had hoped Alice would change her mind and join us for breakfast after all. But she didn't. And as I went to work making another crêpe, no matter how wonderful they looked, I wished with all of my heart that I'd chosen something different to cook that morning.