

Excerpt from *Me and Me* by Alice Kuipers

As Alec drives, he bites his bottom lip, which is pierced in the center with a silver stud. Cute habit. I've seen him do it in class when he's figuring something out. He's thoughtful in class like that, intense almost. But not broody. He's spontaneous, but not crazy. Relaxed, yet passionate about the things he loves. Last week in English he started talking about a book on climbing he was into: *Touching the Void*. I bet everyone is going to read it now. I pick at the meant-to-be-there rip in my pastel-green jeans. My leather boots come close to the knee. My pale shirt has tiny pink flowers peeping out from beneath my long black hair, which is loose.

He pulls onto the highway, and soon the city falls away. "I think you're going to enjoy today."

The prairies stretch out like a vast ocean before us. I drum my hands on my knees to the radio — Seafret — and then I'm thinking in lyrics: *Wanna give your heart to me. The fire in the woods, one tree ...* I note the words on my cell. I glance at Alec. I wonder if he's aware I mentally left the vehicle and traveled into a song. I wonder if he's thinking about me like I'm thinking about him. I wonder if he's noticed what I'm wearing.

"So, you canoed before?" He checks his rearview mirror and overtakes a car in front of us.

The song tugs at me. "I've got a lyric idea. Sorry. Can I just finish this?"

"Oh ... sure." Alec falls quiet, hand on the wheel as he stares ahead.

The words are flowing. Sometimes it happens like that, and a whole song appears where seconds before there was nothing. Whenever this happens on a date, boys think it's a challenge.

They want my full attention. But Alec just drives. Time flashes by. It's as if I've dived into deep water and I'm exploring a coral world, blue and beautiful. There's a psychologist we learned about recently who talks about *flow*. I get it when I'm in the zone like this. I only emerge when Alec pulls the truck into the lot at Pike Lake.

Songs almost never appear all at once. This one came out fully formed, so I'm feeling a little pumped.

"All done?" he says, turning off the ignition.

"Yeah. Sorry about that."

"It's cool. But now that you're done, let's go." He grins, unfolds himself from the truck and shuts his door.

I jump out, too. The lot fronts the beach, a thin strip of sand that runs along the tree line for three hundred yards or so. Beyond the beach is the silk-calm lake. I breathe in deeply, meditating on the clear view. The fresh breeze gives me goose bumps.

The place is almost deserted. Through a line of pine trees, I spot a couple and a small, blond child. I realize that it's the Fields family. He's *the* Martin Fields of Fields Studios, which is why I took a babysitting job with them six months ago. Except he was always at work so I hardly saw him. Whatever. I fell in love with his little girl and worked for them for about two months, before they decided to hire a full-time nanny instead.

"Annabelle?" I yell.

She turns and whoops but then pauses, as if suddenly shy. Suzanne — her mom — pushes her wild, curly hair from her face and waves hello. She walks over. Annabelle follows.

"Hi, Lark." Annabelle tips up her chin. "I'm nearly five now."

"Wow! You grew up. Soon you'll be older than me!" I count to five.

She giggles, and her blue eyes meet mine.

"Want to help me load the cooler?" Alec calls from the back of the truck.

Suzanne nods toward their two canoes, which are already at the edge of the lake. "We're hitting the water, too."

"Come find us out there."

"Mom?" Annabelle asks.

"Of course. Though I'm not sure we should disturb your privacy."

I smile. "No, come and find us on the water. Seriously. Sorry, Alec, I'm coming." A gust of cool wind ripples the water. I wave to Annabelle. Across the beach, Martin is still talking on his cell.

Back at the truck, I heft the cooler with Alec, the weight straining my muscles. "What are we eating?"

"By the end of the day," he says, "you'll be awestruck by my gourmet cooking skills. Now, help me get the canoe off the top." We carry the canoe down to the water. Then suddenly I'm diving back into the song I was writing. One of the opening lines would work better if I added a word near the end to change the rhythm: *Wanna give your heart to me, the fire in the woods, cut down, cut down, just one tree ...* We slide the canoe into the water. It *thunks* against the sandy ground, and cold water slops over my pant leg.

"I've ... I'll just be a moment, promise." I take my cell out of my back pocket.

"Okay. If you want. But I'm going to show you something amazing." Alec waggles his eyebrows.

"Is this 'something amazing' out on the lake or something you can do?"

"I am indeed talented —" he winks to show he's kidding "—but no ... no, you write your song."

I tuck my phone away. "This better be good," I say, smiling. A gull swoops overhead, a long way from the ocean. I pull off my shoes and socks. The icy water makes me gasp. The canoe wobbles as I climb in to join him and slip on my life jacket. The bottom of the canoe is hot from being in the sun on the roof of the car. The temperature contrast on my feet unfurls something in my chest. I ease fully into the moment.

"I wish I could sing," Alec says. "It must be awesome to be able to express yourself like that."

I love that he's curious about me. "Everyone can sing," I say.

"Not true."

"Okay." I sit on the front bench and turn back to Alec. "Not *exactly* true. But what I mean is that everyone can do *something* well. My mom taught me that." There she is. My mom. Even when I forget all about her, she's still watching over me. She left me a video. In it she tells me she's *always there*. Once I wrote a song with that as the hook.

Alec passes me a paddle, and I dip it into the water. The sound of the splash makes me think of ice cream, of summer, of holidays on the lake when I was a kid. In mutual but not uncomfortable quiet, we head along the shore of the lake. When I glance back at Alec, he smiles languidly. My heart does a pancake flip. Alec points out a beaver gliding by in the shallows.

A little while later, he interrupts the silence: "My dad used to take me on the water. He thought fishing was good for — I don't know — turning me into a man. 'Cept, I hated it, which drove him

insane. I couldn't stand being cooped up in a small space — I wanted to swim, kept jumping in. Disturbing the fish. He used to yell at me, which was ... well, not exactly relaxing."

He steers the canoe toward a small inlet, where the reeds hide us. His voice floats forward to me.

"We don't go on the water together anymore. And it's weird, but without him around, I don't mind the small space. Maybe that's because you're here."

We both stop paddling and let the canoe drift. My paddle drips freezing water over my knees. I swivel so I can see him. He leans his head to one side and smiles. His paddle is still in the water, and he occasionally re-angles it, making a deep ripple.