



a
solitaire
novella

nick
and
charlie

This is literally
a love story...

ALICE OSEMAN

nick
and
charlie

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“Yes, very indifferent indeed,” said Elizabeth, laughingly. “Oh, Jane, take care.”

“My dear Lizzy, you cannot think me so weak, as to be in danger now?”

“I think you are in very great danger of making him as much in love with you as ever.”

- *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Advert for Solitaire](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Author Biography](#)

[Other Books By](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

ONE

CHARLIE

As Head Boy of Truham Grammar School, I've done many things. I got drunk on the parents' wine at parents' evening. I've been photographed with the mayor three times. I once accidentally made a Year 7 cry.

But none of that was quite as bad as having to stop everyone in Year 13 from enjoying their final day of school, which is what our head teacher, Mr Shannon, is trying to make me do right now.

It's probably worth mentioning that my boyfriend of two years, Nick Nelson, is one of those Year 13s.

"You don't mind, do you?" Mr Shannon leans on the common room table where I'm supposed to be revising for my AS Levels but am actually watching Mac DeMarco concerts on my phone. "It's all got a bit out of hand and I think they'd be more likely to listen to you than me, if you see what I mean."

"Erm..." I shoot a look at my friend Tao Xu who's sitting next to me eating a packet of Galaxy Minstrels. He raises his eyebrows at me as if to say, 'Sucks to be you'.

I don't really want to say yes.

This year, the Year 13's final day of school is *High School Musical* themed. They hung a giant 'East High School' sign over the Truham sign at the school gate. They've been playing the soundtrack on classroom computers, so wherever you are in the school you can hear a *High School Musical* song playing from somewhere, but you're never quite sure where. They participated in a 'What Time Is It' flash mob on the football field at breaktime. And they have all turned up to school either in red basketball outfits or cheerleader outfits. Disappointingly, Nick went for basketball.

To top it all off, on a non-HSM-related note, they've built a fort out of cardboard boxes on the tennis courts and are having a barbeque inside it.

"I just want them to put the barbeque out," says Shannon, obviously detecting how reluctant I am to walk into a box fort of one hundred and fifty people older than me and

tell them to stop having fun. “You know. Health and safety stuff. If someone gets burnt, I’ll be the one dealing with angry parents.”

He chuckles. Mr Shannon has come to trust me completely over the several months I have been Head Boy. This is hilarious because I rarely do anything he tells me to do.

Keep the teachers on your side and the students on your side. Don’t make enemies or too many friends. That’s my advice for getting through school.

“Yeah, sure, no problem,” I say.

“You’re an absolute life saver.” He points a finger at me as he walks away. “Don’t revise too hard!”

Tao looks at me, still shoving chocolate into his mouth. “You’re not actually gonna go confront the Year 13s, are you?”

I laugh. “Nah. I’ll just go see what they’re up to and tell them to watch out for Shannon.”

My other friend, Aled Last, looks up at me from the opposite side of the table. He’s been colour coding his maths revision notes for the past hour. “Can you please get a photo of Harry Greene in a skirt? It’s urgent.”

I stand up from my chair and put my blazer on. “I think we all need to see that, to be honest.”

The Year 12s have already left for study leave and the only reason I’m here is because I revise better at school than at home. Tao and Aled thought the same. None of us really want to be here though. It’s the hottest day we’ve had this year and I just sort of want to lie down somewhere with an ice pack on my head.

Nick and I have plans for this weekend. He’s finally free from school, I’m taking a weekend off revision. It’s Thursday today; I’m staying over his tonight. Tomorrow night we’re going to Harry’s party for everyone in sixth form. Saturday we’re going to the beach. Sunday we’re going to London.

Not that we don’t spend every weekend together anyway.

Not that we don’t see each other every single day.

If you’d told me three years ago I’d be in a two-year-long relationship by the time I was seventeen, I would have laughed in your face.

“CHARLIE SPRING!”

As I walk through the box fort entrance underneath a banner that says ‘WILDCATS!’ Harry Greene approaches me, arms outstretched. He is wearing a twelve-year-old’s *High*

School Musical cheerleader costume and is exposing a lot more thigh than is probably appropriate for school.

The fort is huge – they’ve taken over two tennis courts. Along with the hilarious amount of cardboard, they’ve also stolen at least ten tables from various classrooms and have a fully functioning barbeque set up in between the two courts. A couple of people are handing out burgers and buns. Vampire Weekend is playing from a wireless speaker in a corner. Most, if not all, of Year 13 are here. It’s a *huge* year group compared to the rest of the school – most of the Higgs girls from that year group moved to Truham after their school burned down.

Harry puts his hands on his hips and grins up at me. “Thoughts?”

Harry Greene, a fairly short guy with very tall hair, is probably the most notorious individual in the entire school, partly due to how many parties he throws and partly due to the fact that he never, ever shuts up.

I raise my eyebrows. “About the fort or about your thighs?”

“Both, mate.”

“Both are great,” I say, deadpan. “Good job. Keep it up.”

Harry steps to one side and lunges. “I knew the skirt was a good decision. I should do this more often.”

“Definitely.”

Still in a lunging position, he asks, “Did Shannon send you? Have you come to shut down our fun?”

“Technically, yes.”

“Are you going to?”

“Obviously not.”

Harry nods. “You’re gonna go far, mate. You’re gonna go far.”

Nick is usually very easy to spot in a crowd, but today almost everyone is wearing red. There are a few people who clearly couldn’t be bothered, one of whom being my sister Victoria, who’s in her black Truham uniform, sitting on the blue asphalt in a corner talking to her friend Rita. But apart from her and a couple of others, everyone blurs into one giant mass of red.

“Nick’s over there.”

I look back at Harry and he’s pointing towards the far left corner, grinning at me. Then he starts walking towards the corner, humming ‘We’re All in This Together’, and I follow him.

“NICK, MATE!” Harry shouts over the crowds of Year 13s, all holding food and red plastic cups and taking photos of each other.

And there he is.

He turns round from a small group of people, a slightly dazed expression on his face as if he's not quite sure whether he's imagining Harry's voice.

I have been going out with Nick Nelson since I was fourteen. He likes rugby and Formula 1, animals (especially dogs), the Marvel universe, the sound felt-tips make on paper, rain, drawing on shoes, Disneyland and minimalism. He also likes me.

His hair is dark blond and his eyes are brown and he is two inches taller than me, if you care about that sort of thing. I think he's pretty hot, but that might just be my opinion.

When he spots us, he waves enthusiastically, and when we finally reach him, he looks at me and says, "All right?"

Nick's *High School Musical* costume consists of a pair of bright red gym shorts and a red tank top. He's pinned a piece of paper to the front with a very badly drawn wildcat on it. If I'm honest, he's had worse outfits.

"You didn't text me back, bitch," I say.

He sips his drink. "I was way too busy getting my head in the game."

Then he holds up a disposable camera and, before I have the chance to smile or make sure I look in any way presentable, takes a photo of me.

A second too late I hold up my hand in front of the camera. "Nick!"

He lets out a loud laugh and starts rewinding the camera before putting it in his pocket. "Another one for the Derp Charlie collection."

"Oh my God."

Harry's already wandered off to talk to another group, so Nick steps a little closer and our hands automatically touch, his hands tapping mine like we're playing a clapping game. "You sticking round here for a bit? Or are you revising?"

I glance round. "I wasn't really revising. I was watching Mac DeMarco concerts."

"Mac DeMarco?" Nick laughs. "I thought you said he was a dickhead."

"He is, but his music's good."

We just sort of stand there for a bit, hands touching, and then Nick brings up a hand to adjust my hair slightly. It hits me suddenly that this is the last day we're going to be at the same school. Six entire years of being at the same school, being in the same place every weekday, are over. The two years we've been a couple at school, two years of eating lunch together, sitting in form, hiding in music rooms, I.T. rooms, P.E. changing rooms, two years of going home together, walking home when it's sunny, getting the bus when it's cold, Nick drawing faces in the window condensation, me falling asleep on his shoulder. It's all over.

Normally we talk about this stuff – stuff that we get sad about or annoyed about or angry about – but Nick’s really excited about uni so I don’t want to start complaining or make him feel bad. I’ve done more than enough of that in my life, for God’s sake. I just . . . I’m the one getting left behind, which is kind of crap, really.

We look up when we hear a small ‘click’ and a loud laugh. We turn and Harry is holding Nick’s camera up to us gleefully. “So bloody romantic. I can’t believe I’m gonna have to find a new couple to cockblock at uni.”

Nick snatches the camera back, but he’s smiling. “Did you just pickpocket me?”

Harry winks and laughs at him before wandering away again. Nick shakes his head and rewinds the camera. “That’s gonna be such an awkward photo.”

“Where’d you get the camera from?”

“I bought it. I thought it’d be good to have some actual physical photos to put on my uni wall instead of just crappy photos on my phone.”

I grab it out of his hands and take a picture of him.

“Hey!” He grabs it back, grinning. “I don’t want pictures of just *me*. Everyone’ll think I’m obsessed with myself.”

I smile too. “I’ll have that one then.”

Nick puts his arm around me. “Okay, we need at least one picture together where we look fucking *normal*.” He holds the camera up in front of us, the lens facing us, and I say, “Let’s be honest, we never look normal,” and Nick laughs at me while I’m making sure my hair isn’t doing something weird, and then we both smile, and he takes the picture.

“When I visit you at uni, I’m expecting that one framed,” I say.

“Only if you buy me a frame. I’ll have rent to pay.”

“God, get a job.”

“What? You mean you’re not going to buy me things now that you have a job? I can’t believe this. Why am I even in this relationship?”

“I don’t even know, Nick. Why are you still here? It’s been over two years.”

Nick just laughs and kisses me quickly on the cheek, then starts to walk backwards away towards the drinks table. “You’re nice to look at.”

I give him the middle finger.

When we first started going out I didn’t really like being too flirty with Nick around school because we’d get a lot of weird looks, particularly from the younger boys. I didn’t really like holding his hand anywhere where people could see us. I even felt kind of awkward just *talking* to him in school, because groups of other boys would look at us like they weren’t quite sure whether they were supposed to be making fun of us or not.

Nowadays the weird looks only make me want to hold his hand even more.