

L.N. HUNTER

TURNING POINTS

The background of the cover features the silhouettes of two people from the chest up, facing opposite directions. The person on the left is in profile, facing left, and has short, spiky hair. The person on the right is also in profile, facing right, and has short, wavy hair. They are positioned in front of a vibrant, multi-colored background that transitions from a deep blue at the top and bottom to a bright orange and yellow in the center, creating a sunset or sunrise effect. The overall mood is contemplative and artistic.

*TWO TALES
ENTWINED*

L.N. Hunter

LN.Hunter@outlook.com

L.N. Hunter © All rights reserved.

An adaption of:

Hastings in *Two for the Show* (<https://books2read.com/TheShowAnthology>); and

Maggie and Mary first appeared in *Short Circuit #3* (<https://short-edition.com/en/story/short-fiction/maggie-and-mary>)

by L.N. Hunter

This edition Published by Free Kids Books

<https://www.freekidsbooks.org>

Note: Photos are procured from a combination of stock shots (public domain) and AI generated images

Part One – Hastings

Here we are again. Just like every other sodding year. Haven's Holiday Park—pile of rickety wooden houses and crappy static caravans, one of those being the weather-worn shitheap the six of us are crammed into. 'It's traditional, innit?' Bruce says—he's Mum's latest *maaann*, trying to make like he's got any right to our family customs. Bloody tosser. Anyway, here we all are, me 'n' Jack taken out of school early, not that I'm too upset about that. Waste of time, school, especially with the so-called teachers I have. They gave up on me years ago, and I've given up on them.



We've been coming to Hastings as long as I can remember, the only holiday we ever take—it's all we can afford. Truth be told, we can't really afford it this time. The benefits disappear on booze and ciggies, but with Dad's dodgy cash-in-hand schemes bringing in a little more, Mum reckoned we had enough for this holiday. A week of fuck all to do here in fucking sunny fucking Hastings. Kill me now. I'd sooner have stayed in Brent, but who says I had a choice?

Hastings again. Quaint little town, pretty in places, run down and shabby in others. Auntie Jean runs one of the hotels just off the sea front, *Hotel Elegance* it's called. Three stars; I suppose that's not bad... for Hastings. We're staying in an apartment a

few streets away, on Warrior Square, since the *Elegance* is packed to the rafters, and schools haven't even broken up yet. State schools, I mean—I go to the Blackheath, and as with all private schools, summer starts a fortnight early. Mummy always says that lets us have better holidays, since they're cheaper and less crowded, and we get to spend time somewhere nice before the *charge of the chav brigade*, as she puts it. Mind you, Hastings wouldn't really be my first choice, but it has been a while since we've seen Auntie Jean. Still, it's sunnier than central London, so I can work on that tan. And it's only a week.

Wide awake at seven. I slip out of the caravan—can't bear the snoring and the farting, not to mention the stale beer and cigarette stench, any longer. The on-site caff's open already, so I get a black coffee (three sugars) and a Mars bar—yeah, healthy breakfast, sue me. I stretch the coffee out 'til almost nine. Only two other people have been in while I've been here, stuffing their faces with a *full English* as if there was a food shortage, ugh, then buggering off for their fun-filled seaside adventure. Christ, what a life. Should I wait for the rest of the rabble and get a lift, or just walk into town? Fuck it, it's only a mile and a half, and I've got sod all else to do. Half an hour later, I grab a six-pack from the offie by Grosvenor Gardens and make my way towards the pier. I stick two fingers up to Queen Victoria as I pass Warrior Square. Some blonde tart sunning herself on the grass gives me a look. Fucking flake, topping up her skin cancer. I nab a bench on the pier, pop open a can, and let my eyes drift over the view. Gulls slide across the clear blue sky, shrieking at nothing; all that disrupts the flat grey of the sea is a container ship inching across the horizon. The new pier's all smooth wood and shiny metal. No character, not like the one that burned down.

I'm surprised at how warm and sunny it is this early in the morning—very different to home. Islington is neat and tidy, but Hastings is... fresher. More alive; more open. It's

the sea that does it, the smell, the sound, the sense of the infinite. After a croissant and a mint tea, I decide to spend the morning sunbathing. I take my phone and a lemonade out to the grass in front of the apartment and settle myself on a towel. I glance up to see some yob in a tatty leather jacket stick two fingers up at me—no, at the statue of Queen Victoria on the wall between me and the sea front. Dickhead. I frown at him and return to messaging my friends as he slouches off, scuffing his boots. Wait. I pull down my sunglasses and peer more closely at him—he's a she. Tall, beanpole skinny, with short, spiky red hair. I frown: either a she, or a he who's not afraid to wear tight lime-green leggings. I'd best move on soon, don't want to cook in the sun too long. I'll wander into the Old Town, poke around the shops.

Down to my last two cans, and I need a piss. If it was night time, I'd squat below the pier, but instead I fork out 50p for the public toilets by White Rock. Bloody rip-off, but if you've got to pee, you've got to pee. I've had enough sitting on my arse watching the sea, so I go for a walk along the beach. Beach! Hastings doesn't do beaches, just gravel beds decorated with the occasional condom or needle. No way am I taking off my Docs to wiggle my toes in that. I kick a chunk of rock towards a seagull. It flies off, screaming at me. I know what you bloody



mean, mate; I don't want to be in this shithole either. I head back to the road, past the peeling beach huts and worn deckchairs. Jesus Christ, what a dump. The grand hotels on the seafront are grimy and dilapidated, the shops dingy. When I was eight or nine,

the arcades were bright and noisy and irresistible—I'd spend hours pumping the tenpence pieces Gran gave me into bleeping and flashing machines. Now... What the hell am I doing here? I wonder if the aquarium's open. It's a bit of a hike, but it's not like I've got other things to do. Hey, it's that bint again, heading into the Old Town. She's the sort that can afford the tourist tat they sell in the shops there, and dim enough to part with her money. Wait. She looks more interesting on the move than the sunbather I first saw. Walks with an air of self-assurance, neat and tidy in her pink jacket and tight white jeans—bet they'll never see dirt. I watch her swaying hips as she turns the corner. I find myself staring after her for a few moments before I snap back and continue to the aquarium.

There's that boy again—no, girl—in the leather jacket and green leggings. Who does she think she's staring at? Look at her. Slack shoulders, drooping arms—gormless pleb. Bet she's on benefits—*sponging off people like us*, Daddy says. I continue along George Street then the High Street, and spend a couple of hours wandering in and out of those little alleys off that.

The Old Town really is pretty, so many cosy little shops with all sorts of cute and interesting stuff. All tourist tat, of course; I wouldn't waste my money on any of it, at least not for myself—though one of those scarves could make a nice present for Chloe when school starts again. I find myself getting distracted from the shops, thinking about the girl. She looked like she's no pushover. She knows what she's



doing. A girl on a mission and not just killing time in Hastings like me. As I replay my earlier sightings of her, I realise she is quite pretty, with strong features behind that scowl. I try to imagine what she'd look like if she smiled. I find myself smiling too.

Bastard aquarium's closed. Well, that was a bloody waste of time. I plonk down on a low wall below the Castle cliff and chug my last two cans. I scrunch them when they're done and toss the empties in the general direction of the bin; one bounces off it and the other misses entirely. A grey-haired biddy with a yapping Yorkshire Terrier rat-on-a-rope scowls at me. I flip her a finger and start the march back to the caravan, when I notice the time. Fuck me, four o'clock already. We said we'd grab a bite and a pint at the *Sea Salt* tonight, so I can't be arsed with walking out of town only to turn about and come right back in; might as well stay here. Maybe I'll hang around Warrior Square. Perhaps I'll see that bird again. She was definitely easy on the eye. Long smooth hair resting on her shoulders—I bet that sparkles when she turns her head. Luscious lips; I wonder what she'd look like when she smiles.



After buying a few trinkets and an over-priced vanilla-decaf in one of the trendy artisanal coffee shops—*Whole Latte Lovin'* it was called—I head back to our apartment via the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery. Not the most exciting place in the world, not even the most exciting place in Hastings, but it's got air-conditioning. It sits in a small park, and it's nice to see a bit of green away from the brown and grey of the

sea front. Mummy and Daddy have been sunbathing on the pier all day and he says

all the exertion's made him really hungry. I roll my eyes, and he laughs more at my response than at his feeble dad-joke. We're heading for dinner with Auntie Jean at the *Sea Salt*—a bizarre name for an Indian restaurant. I wonder why there are so many Indian places on the sea front, more than any other type of eatery, even that



staple of the seaside, the greasy fish and chip shop. I've almost finished my Korma when I glance up. I freeze, fork stopped halfway to my mouth. Look who's walked in, lime-green leggings and all. I can see a stud glinting on her nose, something I hadn't noticed before. She runs a hand through her hair—I find myself wondering what that feels like—and says something to the boy beside her. Is he her boyfriend? No, he looks too much like her. Brother, I find myself hoping. He laughs, and I wonder if she's smiling; I can't see her face because the boy has moved in front of her. Daddy says something, and I turn away from the girl. 'Sorry, I was miles away,' I say, and we natter on about something, but I'm paying more attention to her and her... family? Scruffy looking bunch. I try not to let them see me staring.

Christ, can't I get away from her? We're just walking into the *Sea Salt*, and there she is. Bloody staring at me, chewing her lip. Her eyes. I hadn't seen them before; they'd always been hidden behind film-star sunglasses. Blue-grey, almost glowing. Suddenly

I feel awkward and glance down. A glob of whatever she's eating falls off her fork, and I comment to Jack that some people don't know how to eat yet. He turns to look and laughs. We sit down and order. I don't know what I'm eating or what the conversation at the table's about. I'm too busy looking at the girl and what must be her family; they all have that same neat and tidy look. I try hard not to let them see me staring. After a while, my head starts throbbing. It must be the heat and the noise, and squinting to peek at the girl. I tell the rabble I'm feeling unwell and need a bit of fresh air. I'll be back in a few minutes.

She doesn't look well. For some reason I feel concerned, then I come to my senses—why should I care? She's just some chav. I pull my attention back to my plate. When did dessert happen? Did I order this—I don't remember eating the half that's gone. She's standing up; what's wrong? I crane around to see where she's going. I suddenly feel too warm; there's something twisting in my stomach. It must be the noise and the heat, and squinting to look at her. I tell my parents I've got a headache and need a bit of fresh air. I'll be back in a few minutes. I walk out the front door, looking left and right. I spot her on a bench on the other side of the road, staring at the dark sea. I walk across and sit on the other end. She glances my way with a scowl that suddenly softens. I say, "Hi," and try a smile.

Someone sits down on the bench beside me. Why the hell can't they pick another bench; there're plenty here. I look around preparing to tell them to fuck off. But it's her, and the words stop in my mouth. She says something and smiles. Her whole face glows. Her eyes reflect the light from the cheesy street decorations; her hair shines; and her smile... I can't help but smile in response. "Hi," I mumble, and turn slightly towards her on the bench.

Her smile is more than I'd imagined. Her whole face lights up, the twinkle in her eyes rivalling her nose and ear studs. Her slightly uneven teeth make my chest tighten. I shuffle closer on the bench and tentatively stretch out a hand.

She rests her hand on the seat of the bench midway between us, as if she doesn't know what to do with it. I look at it for a moment, then hesitantly reach out and place mine on top.

Even though I'd hoped for it, her touch comes as a surprise. I flinch, and she jerks back. I curse myself for being so twitchy. My heart is hammering, and I feel a blush rushing up my face. I take a long breath and close my eyes, trying to relax. Her hand touches mine again, and I sigh.

She jumps and I flinch. Fuck. I wonder if I'm misreading the situation and look up at her face again. Her cheeks are red and her eyes are closed. She sighs, and I stroke the back of her hand gently with my thumb. She smiles again and leans closer. There are so many things I want to say, questions to ask, but I'm frightened to break the silence in case this stops.

She's stroking my hand, sending tingles up my arm. I turn my hand around, so that our palms are touching. Should I dare to interlace our fingers, or is that going too far? I open my eyes again to find her staring intently at me. There are so many things I want to say, questions to ask, but I don't want to break the spell. I stare back at her, and her frown smooths out.

My heart is hammering as I squeeze her hand slightly. She turns her hand around. Our fingers interlace as if by themselves. I lift her hand and pull it towards me.

She lifts my hand and, although there's no physical pressure, I feel a pull towards her. I slide across the bench until our shoulders and hips are touching. I find her gaze too fierce this close and look down to where my white jeans brush against her green leggings.

She looks down, and I scrutinise her profile. God, she's gorgeous. My throat goes dry. It's awkward holding hands when we're so close, so I let go. I lift my other hand and lean across to brush a strand of hair over her ear.

She touches my hair. I feel a warm buzz start in my head and meander down to my stomach. I turn back to her. She's ever so close. I can feel the warm breath from her slightly open mouth on my cheek. I lick my lips.

She licks her lips and swallows. I can feel her breath against my cheek. Our faces come ever closer and...

...we...

...kiss.



Part Two – Maggie and Mary

I wake a few minutes ahead of the alarm and click it off before it can buzz. After a few more seconds of warmth, I force myself out of the comfort of my bed, pull a robe over my nightdress, and make my way to the kitchen to prepare for another day.

Even before the fluorescent tube flickers to life, my hand is reaching for the cupboard containing Mum's medicine, to start sorting her colourful cocktail of pills into the day's containers. It's the one to the right of the shelf displaying her collection of crosses and figures of Jesus and pictures of various popes, as well as coronation photographs and other royal trophies—a Charles and Di wedding plate, another of the Jubilee, and a mug with a picture of William and Kate. Nothing since then: illness and old age defeated her obsession.

She needs so many pills with different instructions for how often they should be taken, or whether they're with meals or not, that I still have to check a sheet of paper stuck to the inside of the cupboard door. I gulp down an Ibuprofen for my own dull headache.



As I close the cupboard door, I catch sight of the faded photograph pinned to the outside, two young women on a Val d'Isère ski slope. I don't have to turn it over to recall the writing on the back, 'Together forever, Maggie and Lottie.' While I wait for the kettle to boil for Mum's morning cup of tea, I gaze past my reflection in the darkened window pane, staring across the decades to that week in France.

Everything is white apart from the skiers' bright clothes, though I see only you. I hear your giggles mingling with the swish of skis as you glide across to help me up from yet another undignified fall. Along with the chill of the air, my own laughter



reddens my face. Later on, the warm smell of the log fire has replaced crystal clear pine scents. Your breath, as you whisper, 'I love you,' caresses my cheeks, flushed again, but for an altogether different reason now. I feel the soft brush of your mouth on mine...

The kettle clicks off and I find myself snapped back to the present, regarding my worn reflection with its fingers touching its lips. The brightness of the ski slope and comfort of the cabin have been replaced by kitchen drabness in a fourteenth floor flat, the fragrances of Val d'Isere ousted by the insistent smells of boiled food and dishcloths that never have a chance to completely dry.

Will today be good or bad? Mum's alert and almost pleasant on her better days; on her lowest days, it's as if I'm still Mary, the child she wishes hadn't been born.

I've been a disgrace in her eyes since I 'came out' on that holiday in Hastings forty-odd years ago. School taught me I was abnormal and The Church said I was damaged. Mum agreed with both. Dad hid from the worst of our arguments behind his newspaper, but his presence still somehow exerted a small calming influence. Jack, my brother, was no help whatsoever: doling out drugs on street corners was more respectable than whatever I was.

After we'd met on that visit to Hastings, Lottie and I had kept in touch—mainly by phone, but sometimes we'd meet in secret, usually in Islington. The nice bit of London, not like the council estate where I was brought up. Over the years since then, we'd both finished school

and—in Lottie’s case, university—and got jobs. Lottie was ‘something in advertising,’ while



I was a temp, a delivery cyclist, a supermarket shelf-stacker, or anything else that didn’t need decent exam results.

I moved out a few months after Dad died, leaving Mum alone—no, not alone: she has always had her religion, her steadfast Faith, the stubborn spark that ignited many disputes. The Faith that made me abhorrent.

She didn’t protest at my leaving, disowning

me before the door had closed.

I moved in with Lottie. We became ‘an item’—Maggie and Lottie—and started our life together with that skiing holiday. The two years with her formed the most blissful period of my life. But then, Mum suffered a stroke, leaving her semi-paralysed and unable to talk for almost a year. Jack was locked up for GBH, so I had to come home to look after her, back to our dank flat on the fourteenth floor.

I didn’t have time to think about Lottie while I tended to Mum in those early days. When she was able to speak again, I tried to build up the courage to tell her about us, but I failed. And kept failing.

After another year, Lottie and I had our first and last argument.

“I just can’t handle this right now,” I said, exhausted. “I’m too busy with Mum.”

“You and me, we’re just ‘this?’ Is that it?” Lottie crossed her arms below her breasts.

“She needs me. She’s helpless and needs a familiar face.” As if it wanted to hide my face from Lottie, my hand automatically went to my forehead.

“Ha, when did you last speak to her before her stroke? You’re hardly a familiar face!”

“I’m all the family she has left.” Jack had been on the receiving end of a shiv in prison and died—nobody had told me, and I only found out when the hospital tracked me down after Mum’s stroke. “It’s my duty.”

“Where’s your duty to me? Why can’t you at least tell her about us?”

Her voice always went posher when she was angry, and the idea crept into my chaotic mind that she sounded like the upper-class villain in a B-movie. Except, in this quarrel, I was the villain.

“I will, sometime, but I’m afraid how she’ll react,” I stammered, unable to find the right words. “I could ... could introduce you as a friend...”

“Is that all I am?” she shouted.

I reached towards her. “No, of course not—”

“Are you ashamed of me?” Lottie thrust her hand into her bag and threw the first thing she retrieved. I flinched, and she took a step forward, arm still outstretched—then she faltered and her features tightened.

“No, I’m...” I choked out, tears coming, as she turned and left. The door slammed and I continued internally: *I’m not ashamed of you, I’m ashamed of myself.*

It was an eyelash curler that barely missed me; I still have it in my bedside cabinet, part of my meagre box of memories from our time together. I didn’t even know such a device existed until I met Lottie. I was always fascinated by her morning make-up ritual and would sit on the bed, leg drawn up and head resting on my knee, simply watching in the dressing table mirror as she carefully applied layer upon delicate layer to a face I already thought perfect. Occasionally, she would move her head, and I would catch a glimpse of my own plain face, made beautiful by my contentment. I couldn’t help but smile every time she used that strange looking ’lash curler, biting her lower lip in concentration. Every day, when the artwork was complete, I sealed her lipstick with a soft kiss.



I can still taste it.

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment and open them again. The pills are sorted into their containers and the tea is brewing. What do I have to look forward to for the rest of the day? Mum will want fish or chicken for dinner. With only potatoes and gravy; she doesn't like vegetables. I know she should eat them—she knows she should eat them—but I just don't want to argue any more, and I'd just end up throwing them out in any case. And bland bland bland—none of that spicy foreign muck for her.

Father Mulligan will be visiting today. Mum can't get to Mass anymore, but Father Mulligan comes here one afternoon a week. I'll need to fetch Mum's best china, make sure it's gleaming and that we have 'his favourite biscuits,' as she refers to them. I don't see what's so special about Viennese Fingers, but he does seem to eat a lot of them when he's here.

These social calls are usually tense. Mum unsubtly hints that I need to 'mend my ways' and that I am an embarrassing disappointment to her and to The Church. Perhaps that's her major concern, even now, the embarrassment. Father Mulligan is more accepting of my inclinations than Mum is, but seems to be mainly concerned with demolishing the plate of biscuits when

he's here. I wonder if keeping his mouth full is his way to avoid having to contribute more to the conversation than mumbles, nods and sympathetic hand gestures. I expect that as he takes his leave, he'll tell me to 'be strong' and that 'she does love you, you do know that, but she's an old woman fixed in her ways' or something comparable from his collection of well-used homilies.

We receive few other visitors: most of Mum's associates have passed on or have similar limited mobility. A professional carer comes in once a day, sometime between nine o'clock and ten usually, to help Mum perform her morning ablutions and get dressed. These activities are too intimate for she and I to perform, but somehow less troubling to have a stranger assist with. The young women, Julie or Susanne or Jessica, depending on their shifts, are always cheerful and chat much more happily with either Mum or me than we can manage between ourselves. They're each like a sparrow brightly twittering at the bird table until all the seeds have been consumed. I'm not sure if we actually think of them as real people: Mum welcomes their assistance but dislikes needing them, while I treat their time here as an opportunity for a quiet coffee. Once the door has closed behind the day's sparrow and Mum is ensconced in her chair, daytime television provides background noise as she half watches, half dozes, a library book on her lap for when she becomes bored with what's on the screen. I top up her teacup and arrange her cushions regularly, while I perform the day's chores.

Waiting for Mum to wake after her afternoon nap, I look at the photograph again. Perhaps it's time. Perhaps Lottie will forgive me. I fetch the small box of letters, notes and pictures from my bedroom and find the phone number for her parents. Lottie has surely moved several times, but I hope her parents will know where she is. I lift the receiver. I've got this far before, but this is the first time I dial.

"Hallo."

I recognise the voice immediately and my heart lifts, but then I hear movement elsewhere in the house. I sigh, replace the handset, and straighten my back. “Coming, Mother, I’ll make you a fresh cup of tea.”



END