



Lucy
Diamond

PAN BOOKS

Prologue

Io ricordo – I remember

For years afterwards, whenever she thought about that summer in Italy, she remembered the scent first: the fragrant pink bougainvilleas around Lucca's poolside bar mingling intoxicatingly with the tang of coconut sun oil and cigarette smoke. Back then, she was young and carefree, with a red dress, a devil-may-care attitude and the best tan of her life. The air had shimmered with heat and a million possibilities. Anything might happen.

On the day that everything changed, she had spread her towel on a sunlounger, peeled off her dress and sat down, adjusting the straps of her bikini. Then, just as she was about to lean back and relax, her skin prickled: a sixth sense, maybe. Peering through her sunglasses, she noticed a man in the deep end of the pool, leaning against the side, his broad tanned arms gleaming with tiny water droplets. He seemed to be looking right at her.

Was she imagining it or was he giving her the eye? She propped up her sunglasses to check, the world swinging into

sudden brightness. He totally *was* giving her the eye. What was more, he was bloody gorgeous.

Heat flooded her body as they exchanged a long, loaded look. The clamour of the poolside seemed to vanish as if the world had been muted. All she could hear was the thud of her heart.

Oh, what the hell, she thought recklessly; she was single and on holiday and up for some fun. He might be all of those things too. Without a second thought, she winked at him. Her heart galloped as he grinned back, revealing perfect white teeth. And then he was pulling himself out of the pool, water streaming down his muscular arms: he was tall and athletic, early-twenties at a guess; golden skin and a crooked smile. As he straightened up, she couldn't help noticing the way his swimming shorts just revealed the tops of his hip bones, and she shivered with sudden desire.

He walked over to her, beads of water still clinging to his body, his eyes never leaving hers. '*Ciao, bella,*' he said, his voice low and husky.

Her blood drummed through her. Her breath caught in her throat. It felt as if this was the moment she'd been waiting for all summer. She raised an eyebrow flirtatiously and smiled back. '*Ciao,*' she said.



Chapter One

Mio padre – My father

As a journalist, Anna Morley was used to thinking in headlines; it was second nature to her. Without consciously doing it, even the most ordinary event in her life was transformed into a punchy soundbite etched in large black capitals in her mind.

HACKED OFF! Female journalist, 32, misses bus home.

DANGER ON OUR STREETS! Loose paving slab ‘an accident waiting to happen’, says local resident, 32.

LET THERE BE LIGHT Council slammed over patchy street-lighting. *The Herald* campaign starts today!

THE HUNGER GAME Starving writer, 32, curses self for not stopping at the corner shop for a tin of beans.

Admittedly, none of the headlines were particularly scintillating. But then neither was her life, to be frank. If she died right now, and needed an epitaph for her grave, the words ‘Same old, same old’ would sum things up perfectly.

But then came the most shocking news story of all, right when she was least expecting it, and afterwards nothing felt

‘same old, same old’ again. It was astonishing how one conversation could change everything.

Clemency House was the care home eight miles out of Sheffield where Anna’s grandmother, Nora, lived. With its strong smell of wee, disinfectant and overcooked cabbage, it was home to an assortment of pensioners in varying states of confusion and decrepitude. It was certainly the last place on earth you would expect to experience an epiphany.

Anna visited her nan on the last Sunday of the month and knew almost all the residents by now. An excited twittering would greet her arrival in the lounge – ‘Ooh, it’s Anna’; ‘Wake up, duck, Anna’s here, look, come to see Nora’; ‘Anna! Cooe!’ – which always made her feel like a minor celebrity as she worked her way through the sea of white hair and support stockings.

‘Hello, Mrs Ransome, that’s a lovely dress you’ve got on today.’

‘Hello, Violet, how’s your great-grandson doing?’

‘Hello, Elsie, I’ve brought you today’s crossword if you want it?’

Nora would rise up from her favourite toffee-coloured wingback chair and offer her soft, powdery cheek for a kiss, then they’d drink stewed tea and chat together for an hour or so, before taking a slow turn around the garden so that Nora could moan in private about whichever resident was getting on her nerves that week. And that was usually that.

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This time, however, the pattern changed. It was a windy autumn day with dark clouds shouldering each other across the sky, while inside, the central heating was cranked up to soporific levels. Anna was just about to suggest going out for some fresh air when a storm suddenly broke and rain began sheeting down dramatically, spattering great heavy drops against the windows.

'Goodness!' Nora quavered, blinking in alarm, one hand up at her crepey throat. She was dressed as ever in a strange combination of garments, today's outfit a cream blouse and bobbly green fleece cardigan, her favourite tweed skirt and thick brown tights that pooled in wrinkles around her swollen ankles.

'Maybe we'll stay indoors after all,' Anna said, discreetly checking her watch. Three o'clock. Pete was meant to be coming round for dinner later – 'a roast', she'd promised him ambitiously, and she knew for a fact that there wasn't a single vegetable to be found in her house, let alone anything she could conceivably baste in oil and bung in the oven.

Nora turned and stared at Anna as if seeing her for the first time. Her dementia was an unpredictable beast; some days she seemed perfectly lucid and managed to keep up with a conversation, but other times, a veil of bewilderment would slide over her face and she would spout gibberish. 'You do look like him, you know,' she said from out of nowhere.

'Gino, wasn't it?' Her false teeth were slipping, making her words indistinct.

'Gino?' Anna echoed. 'What are you talking about, Nan?'

'The Italian. You know.' Her eyes were cloudy and faraway, her gaze wandering from Anna's face. 'Your father.'

Anna's stomach lurched. She must have misheard, surely. 'My *father*?'

Nora frowned. 'Didn't I just say that? Your poor mum.' She shook her head, gnarled fingers clenched around the arms of her chair. 'Nothing but trouble!'

Anna had difficulty breathing for a moment. She opened and shut her mouth, her brain fusing red hot with shocked, urgent questions. 'Was that his name?' she asked dazedly. At last, she thought. At last! 'Gino? Was that his name?'

'It's a long way to Tipperary,' Mrs Ransome started singing in the background, her voice high and reedy. 'It's a long way to go.' Several others joined in, and Anna had to raise her voice.

'Nan?' she urged when no answer came. 'Was my father called Gino?'

Nora blinked. 'Look at that rain!' she marvelled. 'I'd better get my washing in, hadn't I?'

'Nan, you don't have any washing here. We're in Clemency House, remember?'

'It's a long way to Tipperary, to the sweetest girl I knooooow . . .'

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'I did my whites this morning,' Nora said dreamily. 'Albert's shirts and the bed sheets. Meredith's Sunday school dress with pink ribbons.'

And she was gone, swallowed up by the confusing mists of the past once more. Albert was her husband, long since buried. Anna had no idea who Meredith might be.

'Nan, listen to me. Do you remember Gino? What did he look like?'

Somebody was clapping out of time, Anna registered dimly. 'Goodbye, Piccadilly – join in, Nora! – Farewell, Leicester Square . . .'

Nora wasn't listening; she was in her own parallel version of the world, her head cocked as if hearing distant voices. 'And the tablecloth! That gravy took some scrubbing to wash out, didn't it, Susan?'

Anna sagged with dismay. Susan was her grandmother's long-dead sister with whom she sometimes confused Anna. The subject of Gino was already as distant as Tipperary.

'And now it's getting soaked. Come on! Where's the basket?'

She rose from her seat but Anna caught her thin arm. 'Sit down,' she said gently. 'Mrs Eccles will get the washing in.'

Mrs Eccles often got a mention when her nan went off at a tangent; Anna still wasn't entirely sure who she was, but chucking her name into the mix now, while Nora was off on one, was worth a try.

‘It’s a long, long way to Tipperary, but my heart’s still theeeeeere!’

Nora stared at her. ‘Ivy Eccles? Are you sure?’

‘Oh yes,’ Anna said reassuringly. ‘But about Gino . . .’

‘Give over! Ivy Eccles has been stone dead for thirty years. What *are* you talking about, dear?’

‘Cup of tea anyone?’ One of the careworkers wheeled in a trolley, smiling brightly. ‘Chocolate Bourbon?’

The singing stopped abruptly, replaced by pleased murmurs of anticipation.

‘Lovely,’ Nora said. ‘Yes, please, over here, pet!’ She turned back to Anna, eyes twinkling. ‘Are you going to have one, Susan?’

Later that afternoon, as Anna drove home, her mind was a whirl of blaring new headlines.

WHO’S THE DADDY? A clue at last.

DO YOU KNOW GINO? Hunt begins for mystery Italian.

DADDY’S GIRL Long-lost daughter reunited with father.

Gino. Her father was called Gino. He was Italian. It felt as if a door had been opened and light was flooding into a dark, closed room after years of nothing.

Her mother had always steadfastly refused to speak a word about Anna’s father. His name wasn’t even on her birth certificate. ‘You don’t have a daddy,’ she’d said kindly when Anna was a little girl and becoming aware that most of the other

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children in her class had two parents, not just one. 'You've got me, and I'm enough.'

Later, as Anna grew older and discovered that, actually, technically there must have been a daddy involved at some stage in the process, her mother dug her heels in. 'Don't talk to me about that waste of space,' she hissed when Anna plucked up the courage to enquire again. 'Believe me, love, you're better off not knowing.'

Growing up in Chesterfield, just the two of them in a poky council house, Anna never felt better off not knowing, not for a minute. She hated not knowing. Was her dad some kind of psychopath? Was he a dangerous criminal? Had he hurt her mother in some way? He must have done something absolutely dreadful if nobody would even speak his name aloud. (She was pretty sure he wasn't Voldemort, but this last fact did make her wonder.)

Her mum was a midwife and it had occurred fleetingly to Anna that she might have snatched Anna as a baby from a maternity ward somewhere, hence the impenetrable secrecy. Maybe this stuff about her dad being a waste of space was all a smokescreen, because her mum wasn't even her real mum. But no, she must be, because they both had the same curvy bum and big boobs, and the same laughably small feet. Different colouring, though – her mum had blonde wavy hair and blue eyes with porcelain-pale skin, whereas Anna was dark-haired with brown eyes and an olive complexion.

'Gino,' she murmured under her breath as she navigated the roundabout to leave the ring road. An image appeared in her mind of a swarthy man with eyes like glossy brown dates. *The Italian*, Nan had said, and new questions formed like scrolling tickertape. Did Mum meet him on holiday in Italy, maybe? Had it been a summer fling that ended acrimoniously? Where was her father now?

She flipped open the mirror in her sun visor and peered at her reflection as she waited in a queue of traffic, the cars stop-starting their way towards the city centre. She looked Mediterranean herself, didn't she? She'd always been the fastest to pick up a tan on girls' holidays, much to her friends' envy, and had wondered previously if some small slice of her genetic make-up was Greek or Persian or even Indian.

Now she had an answer, a fact for the very first time. An Italian father, adding an exotic dash to her mother's solidly Yorkshire stock. It made her feel different: more interesting, more attractive. '*Mamma mia!*' she said aloud, turning into her road and backing inelegantly into a parking space.

Excitement and intrigue coursing through her, she ran up the stairs to her flat. Anna had come to Sheffield as a student fourteen years ago, and never left. She'd graduated from uni accommodation through to shared houses in Broomhill and Crookesmoor to her own small first-floor flat near Ecclesall Road. She hadn't intended to stay long in the flat; just a few

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months while she saved up enough to do something exciting like live in London or go travelling. But then she landed a job at the local paper, and somehow, six years later, hadn't moved either job or home. Her dreams of working in the newsroom of one of the nationals, or backpacking to far-flung beaches, remained mere dreams, less likely with every passing year.

Returning to the flat now, she found herself eyeing it anew. It was cramped and cluttered, with persistent damp in one corner of the ceiling where the roof leaked. A plant was in its death throes on top of the TV and a grey sprinkling of dust lined the skirting boards. It definitely looked like a 'Before' picture in the 'Clear Out Your Clutter' features the newspaper ran every spring. She was totally going to make it amazing and chic one day, though. Definitely. It just hadn't quite happened yet.

Impulsively she dialled a number on her phone and sank into the ageing red sofa. Her mum picked up after three rings. 'Hello?'

'Mum, it's me. Listen, I saw Nan today and . . .' The words suddenly tangled together in her mouth and she hesitated, unsure how to go on.

'Is everything all right? Is she okay?'

'She's fine.' Anna swallowed. 'The thing is, she said . . .' Again, her voice faltered at the crucial moment. *Ask her! Just ask her!*

'This is a terrible line. You keep breaking up. What did

she say? Is she having one of her turns? Only nobody's told me anything about it.'

'No, she's fine, it's just . . .' She ran a hand through her long hair helplessly, then her eye was caught by a photo on the dusty mantelpiece. Her and her mum on holiday in Rhyl one summer, back when she was about nine, both of them tanned and wearing sunglasses, smiling into the camera. It was one of her favourite photos, conjuring up memories of sandcastles, ice cream, and a ride on a sandy, hairy donkey. They'd gone through a lot together, she and her mum. Could she really do this, now, over the phone?

'It's nothing,' she mumbled. 'I just thought I'd let you know that she's fine. Everything's fine.'

'Oh good,' Tracey replied, sounding slightly confused. 'Great. And you're all right, are you? Has that cough gone yet?'

'I'm fine, Mum, yeah. I'd better go. Love to Graham. Bye.'

She ended the call, feeling like a coward. Talk about bottling it. Now she was none the wiser, no further along at all.

Abandoning her phone, Anna hunted through the books and folders heaped randomly on her shelves until she found her old school atlas, then leafed through the pages. Italy, Italy, Italy . . . there it was.

She stared at the outline of the country as if it could reveal secrets to her, running a finger down the Alps, tracing a path along the wild eastern coastline. There was a pull in

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her stomach as she whispered the names of towns and cities to herself. *Naples. Florence. Siena.* ‘Where are you, Gino?’ she murmured under her breath.

She knew virtually nothing about the place, she realized in shame, other than pizza and Chianti and the Romans. Pathetic. And to think this was the land of her father!

Well, then. High time she started swotting up, wasn’t it?

In all the drama, Anna had completely forgotten about Pete and the roast she was meant to be cooking until the doorbell rang at six o’clock and she jumped, startled out of her day-dreams. Oh shit. *Dinner.*

Pete was not exactly the hunk of burning love Anna had always imagined herself with – it was more of a ‘he’ll do’ arrangement if she was brutally honest, a Cornish pasty of a man rather than pure beef steak. That said, he was a decent bloke who had never cheated on her, ripped her off for thousands of pounds, or turned out to be gay – all of which had happened to her friends. Okay, so he might not be the most dynamic or passionate man in the world – she had wondered in the past if he even knew the word ‘romance’ existed – but he was good enough. They had a laugh together. Not that he was laughing now, mind.

‘What do you mean, you forgot?’ he moaned plaintively as she let him in. ‘All the trimmings, you said. I’ve been looking

forward to it since breakfast!’ His whole face drooped with dismay, like a bloodhound having a bad day.

‘Sorry, Pete, I lost track of time. Something really amazing happened, you see,’ she began, then blurted out what her grandmother had let slip, the tiny shining fragment of truth. ‘I’ve not been able to think about anything else all afternoon.’

He gazed around the grubby, food-free kitchen area where no bronzed roast chicken sat waiting to be carved, no thick bread sauce bubbled volcanically on the hob, and no roast potatoes sizzled golden and crunchy in the oven. ‘Shall we go to the pub, then?’ he sighed, one hand on his belly. ‘My stomach thinks my throat’s been cut.’

It was all right for him, Anna thought sourly. Pete knew exactly where he was from, with his china-cat-collecting mum and dad in their spotless semi (aptly named Wits’ End), and his two sisters, married with kids elsewhere in Sheffield, both of whom had lives as thrilling as a pair of socks. He had a family, roots, he was certain of his place in his world. He had no idea how lucky that made him.

‘Pete – here’s me telling you I’m on the verge of tracking down my dad, and all you can talk about is your stomach? Can you not show a *bit* more interest?’

Her voice came out sharper than she’d intended and a look of bafflement crossed his face. ‘Love, with the greatest respect, you’ve hardly “tracked him down”, finding out his

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name and nationality,' he pointed out with his usual annoying pedantry. 'There's probably quite a few blokes called Gino from Italy, don't forget.'

She gritted her teeth. 'Yeah, you're dead right there, Pete,' she replied sarcastically. 'Might as well give up already.'

He nodded as if that was the end of it. 'Shall we go, then?'

Oh, what was the point? He didn't have a clue. 'I suppose so,' she muttered, rolling her eyes.

She wondered where her father would be having his Sunday dinner. You could bet your last penny it wouldn't be in some noisy dive where the toilets didn't flush properly and the landlord was always trying to look down your top. No way. He – Gino – would be holding court at a large outdoor table on a sunny Tuscan hillside, with olive trees shimmering in the fields below. There would be fat scarlet tomatoes, creamy mozzarella drizzled with olive oil, rustic red wine in a carafe. Bambinos scampering barefoot on the hot dusty ground, a dog lifting its head drowsily and barking at them from time to time . . .

Did he know he had a daughter here in drizzly Sheffield? Had he ever even *seen* her before?

'You're not listening, are you?' Pete said, sounding exasperated as she locked the flat and they traipsed downstairs. 'You've not heard a single thing I've just said.'

She was still in Italy. It was so much nicer there. 'Sorry, no,' she confessed. 'What did you say?'

‘I was asking if you saw the United result. I watched the match at my dad’s, you know he’s just got Sky Sports? Bloody amazing. That new striker is gold, I’m telling you . . .’

‘Great,’ she said, but she was already slipping away, flying back to her father and his sun-drenched life. She had to find him. She simply had to.

Guilt for the roast dinner debacle along with most of a bottle of red wine meant that Anna didn’t protest when Pete pawed at her later that night back at her flat, despite feeling about as amorous as an oven glove. It was an in-out, in-out, breast squeeze, grunt and collapse sort of event, and she felt unsexy and distracted for the entire three minutes.

‘Cor,’ he said afterwards, rolling off her. ‘Reckon that was a seven and a half.’

Anna had thought he was joking the first time he gave their sex sessions marks out of ten, but he was apparently deadly serious. Much to her horror she had then discovered that he actually charted the scores on a spreadsheet on his laptop. Seriously. She hadn’t been snooping but he’d left the page open accidentally one day and the title ‘Sex With Anna’ had leapt out at her. And there it was in black and white: the date, score and a brief description of each act.

A on top, baby oil, light on – that had scored a ten. But *A in strop, too pissed, bit of rush* merited a measly six.

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‘Oh my God,’ she’d said, aghast, eyes boggling. ‘Pete – what the hell is this?’

‘You don’t mind, do you?’ he’d replied, looking shifty. ‘I thought it was kind of sexy.’

Kind of sexy? A bit nerdy, more like. It was hardly love letters on scented notepaper, or a passion-filled journal. She wished she’d never seen it, that she could erase it from her brain. ‘You’re not going to . . . show it to anyone else, are you?’

‘Course not, babe. This is private. Password protected. For our eyes only.’ He scrolled up the page. ‘Look, you got a ten here. Remember that night? Hell-o, Nurse.’

And hell-o, Doctor Perv, Anna thought with a queasy lurch, but he seemed so boyishly pleased with himself that she didn’t have the heart to argue. From then on though, she couldn’t help wondering – often during the act itself – how he’d describe each sexual encounter. Talk about killing the moment.

‘Pete,’ she said to him now, ‘maybe keep the scoring thing in your head? Like, just in your head? It makes me feel under pressure, like I’m a performing seal or something.’

He reached out and twiddled one of her nipples. It was extremely irritating. ‘I don’t want to have sex with a seal though, babe,’ he said, snuggling up to her. She could feel his warm alcoholic breath on her neck.

‘I know, but . . .’ *And don’t call me babe*, she wanted to say.

That just made her feel like a pig. A bad-tempered pig who didn't want to be marked out of ten each time she spread her trotters. 'I just don't like it, all right?' she said after a few moments. 'Pete?'

But his hand had fallen slack on her chest, and a guttural snoring started up in his throat. Now who was the pig? she thought, turning away from him crossly and putting the pillow over her head.

WOMAN SUFFOCATES CRAP BOYFRIEND spooled a new headline in her brain. But just then he rolled over and flung an arm across her. 'Night, gorgeous,' he murmured in his sleep, and she felt herself softening. He loved her really. She knew that. And being with him was a damn sight better than being on her own, surely?

She shut her eyes, hoping she'd dream of Italy. Her quest would continue in the morning, she vowed. Whatever Pete said.



Chapter Two

Arrivederci – Goodbye

Catherine Evans gazed out of the window as rain speckled the glass, and knew that a chapter was closing.

Matthew and Emily were down in the driveway with Mike, who was helping them load the car, cramming in all those student essentials like hair straighteners and iPod speakers. She'd come up here on the pretence of a last check around their bedrooms, but really so that she could gulp back her tears in private and delay the inevitable moment of parting. What would she do without them?

Last night they'd had a takeaway from Hong Kong Garden and popped open a bottle of frothing cava. Like spokes in a wheel, they'd each stretched an arm in to clink glasses across the table, all giddy with excitement. Well, except for her. She'd barely tasted a mouthful of the food, the noodles slithering like cold worms down her throat, the smell of alcohol and soy sauce turning her stomach. *I don't want them to go.* Mike had made a toast ("To Matthew and Emily: happy times ahead. Thank goodness you inherited your father's

brains, eh?') and it was all she could do to stop herself from bolting the doors and refusing to let them leave.

Her heart was being ripped out. Her lungs felt as if they were contracting. *I don't want them to go.*

'Oi, sod off, that's my charger,' came an indignant voice from below just then. It was Emily, hands on hips, the fur-edged hood on her gilet pulled up to protect her long hair from frizzing in the rain. 'I *knew* you'd try to sneak it in with your stuff, just because your one's crap.'

'Yeah, right,' retorted Matthew. He'd always been stubborn and steady in comparison with Emily's more mercurial, volatile nature; the rock and the firework, the tortoise and the hare. '*Yours* is the crap charger. You were the one who spilled Coke on it, which means that—'

'Let's not have an argument, guys.' There was Mike, doing his 'Whoa' hands at them. 'What's happened to your mum, anyway? Got herself lost upstairs or what?'

'I think she went to sniff Matthew's pillow for the last time,' said Emily, trying to snatch the charger from her brother.

'Don't be unkind, Em. This is a big deal for her.'

'I'm not being unkind! You're the one who said—'

'There she is, look, up in the window. Mum! We're ready to go!'

Misty-eyed, Catherine did her best to smile back at the three faces gazing up questioningly. 'Just coming,' she called.

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Sniffing Matthew's pillow indeed. Honestly! As if she'd ever do such a thing.

She straightened the bed covers before going out of the room; they'd never know.

They were off to university – 'We're so *proud*,' she'd been telling everyone, beaming fakely whenever the subject came up – Matthew to Manchester, Emily to Liverpool. Okay, so geographically speaking, neither was very far from Sheffield, but no map on earth could measure a mother's missing-you feelings. They might as well be going to Venus.

She'd been dreading this day. For the last eighteen years, they had been the epicentre of her world. They *were* her world. Both sandy-blonde like Mike, with laughing blue eyes and upturned noses, rather than red-haired and freckly like she was; they were taller than her now, and radiant with youth and beauty, spending hours in the bathroom and even longer on the phone, filling the house with music, hair styling products and friends with trousers hanging round their bums. But now they were leaving her and she could hardly bear it.

'Let's get this show on the road then,' she said, emerging from the house with her best and bravest smile. 'Everyone ready? Anyone need the loo before we go?'

'Oh, Mum,' Emily groaned, eyes to heaven.

'Sorry,' Catherine said, feeling like an idiot. She'd be trying to blow their noses for them in a minute.

'Bye then, Dad,' Matthew said.

Mike gave him a matey slap on the back. 'Bye, son,' he said. 'Go and show 'em what you're made of.' Mike wasn't coming with them today, unfortunately. As the most senior GP in his practice, he had been on a number of conferences lately, and now had a ton of paperwork to tackle.

'Come here, Em,' he said next, grabbing her and kissing the top of her head. 'Work hard, play hard, yeah?'

'Yeah, yeah,' Emily said good-naturedly, wriggling away. 'Course I will.'

Catherine dabbed her eyes. Daddy's girl, that was Emily. She wouldn't spoil it for either of them by telling Mike about the contraceptive pills she'd found in their daughter's underwear drawer, or the small bag of grass she'd come across in her jeans' pocket, and definitely not the times Emily had smuggled Rhys Blackwood up to her bedroom for who knows what. Catherine had dealt with these trespasses in her own quiet way each time; all hell would break loose if Mike discovered just how casually his countless lectures about drugs, alcohol and sexual health had been ignored.

'See you later,' he said to Catherine as she got into the driver's seat. 'Drive carefully, won't you? Don't dab your brakes on every ten seconds, you know it winds other people up.' He pulled a long-suffering face at Matthew and Emily who both laughed.

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Catherine said nothing, but started the engine and reversed carefully out of the drive. She could see him waving in the rear-view mirror the whole way down the road. Then they turned right, heading for the motorway, and he was gone.

Matthew's new halls of residence was their first port of call an hour later. 'This is it then,' Catherine said faintly as she cut the engine and gazed up at the looming block of flats.

'Awesome,' said Matthew, first out of the car. He was six foot two now, her little boy, and his hair was shaggy and shoulder-length, much to Mike's disapproval. He wore a snowboarding hoodie, battered jeans and his beloved Vans, as he stood gazing around at his new turf. Then he put his hands in the air and bellowed, 'Hello, Manchester!' as if he were on stage at his own stadium gig.

Heads turned. A couple of girls with long hair and skinny jeans standing nearby grinned at him then giggled together conspiratorially. A dad unloading a clapped-out old Volvo in the next row of cars gave Catherine a wry smile of recognition. *Teenagers*, his eyes seemed to say. *On another planet, aren't they?*

In the short space of time it took to unload Matthew's boxes from the Toyota and lug them up to his plain, rather utilitarian room, he'd already struck up an animated conversation with a Londoner in a BABE MAGNET T-shirt and a

guy with dreadlocks and a pierced nose. The three of them were now arranging an imminent trip to the union bar. 'I think I'm in with these girls I saw downstairs,' Catherine heard Matthew tell them in a lofty, unrecognizable manner.

Catherine cleared her throat in the background. 'Well,' she said, 'I'll leave you to it then.'

She had imagined this moment endlessly over the last few weeks, dreamed about it even. Tears, hugs, a moment of recognition and gratitude for everything she'd done for him. Matthew's lower lip might even tremble . . .

'See you then, Mum,' he said coolly.

Wait . . . was that it? He was fobbing her off with a paltry 'See you'? He could think again. She threw her arms around him and held him, but he felt wooden in her embrace. He was already looking over his shoulder, ready to move on as they pulled apart.

Oh. That *was* it. Catherine felt as if she'd been stabbed as she shakily made it back to the car. Her heart ached and she put a hand to her chest, trying to breathe deeply.

'Next stop, Liverpool!' Emily cried, clambering into the front seat as her phone beeped with the hundredth text of the morning. She glanced at the screen and laughed.

'Is it from Matthew?' Catherine asked hopefully.

'What? No. Just Flo mucking about. Are we off, then?'

'We're off,' Catherine replied.

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Her daughter would be different, she consoled herself as they drove the extra thirty or so miles west to Liverpool. Girls were better at these situations, weren't they? Emily would want her to linger for coffee and a chat; maybe they could find somewhere special for a goodbye lunch, just the two of them. Perhaps there'd be a repeat of the shyness she'd suffered from at infant school, where she'd clung to Catherine's legs, one thumb jammed in her mouth, not daring to speak to another person. Well, okay, she probably wouldn't go that far, but all the same. Em needed her more than Matthew, always had, always would.

Emily's new home was a bleach-smelling flat with heavy fire doors that slammed shut behind you. It was cold and bare, a far cry from her comfortable bedroom back home with its soft carpet and thick curtains, its ceiling still sporting the glow-in-the-dark stars and moons they'd stuck there for her as a little girl.

Catherine was seized by the impulse to grab her by the shoulders and bundle her back into the car, but Emily was already bonding with a girl wearing a blue Hollister sweat-shirt and red jeans. 'I love your boots,' she said with a winning smile, ignoring Catherine hovering behind her.

Catherine fetched and carried her daughter's belongings, huffing and puffing up the stairs with boxes of shoes and bin-bags filled with clothes. When the car boot was finally

empty save for a single forlorn pair of orange flip-flops (discarded at the last minute as being uncool), she lingered in the flat's kitchen while Emily and her new flatmates discussed festivals and awful summer jobs, waiting to be offered a drink or even an introduction. 'Anyone want a brew?' she asked finally when neither seemed forthcoming.

Emily's head spun round, eyes accusing. *Are you still here?* they seemed to say as she hurried over. 'Mum, you're like totally cramping my style,' she hissed, shooing her out. 'I'll ring you in a few days, all right?'

'Oh,' Catherine replied. 'Sure, darling. Should I just help you unpack a bit, make your room more homely? We could put up some of your p—'

'No, honest, Mum, it's fine. I'll do it later.'

'Make sure you wear your thermals if it's cold, won't you? You know how chesty you get in winter. And keep up with your homework. Remember—'

'Muuuum!' Emily glanced over her shoulder in fear of anyone eavesdropping. 'I can look after myself now!'

Catherine opened her mouth then shut it again. It seemed only yesterday that Emily would cry out in the night for her, scared of monsters lurking in dark corners of her bedroom. *Mummy! Mumm-ee!* Mummy wasn't needed now, though, that much was clear. 'Okay, then,' she said at last, chastened. 'Well . . . Bye then. I love you. Take care.'

'Bye, Mum.'

One Night in Italy

Catherine trudged back to the car and sat in the driver's seat, feeling bruised and rejected, a visceral pain in her chest. Her children couldn't wait to get away from her. They had cast her off like last season's fashions, as unwanted as the orange flip-flops.

Tears brimmed in her eyes and she sat immobile for a few moments, waves of self-pity washing over her. How ironic that she'd worried about *them* feeling abandoned in their new homes, when in actual fact she was the one pushed out in the cold, the door shut in her face. Meanwhile, her little chicks had flown the nest for new horizons and hadn't looked back. Oh, why hadn't she talked them into taking a gap year and staying at home for a bit longer?

Two cars away in the student parking area she could see another set of parents sitting just like her, staring gormlessly through their windscreen, no doubt equally shellshocked by a recent separation. They too would have to pick up the pieces and begin a new, strange life without their boisterous, shower-hogging, fridge-pillaging children. A quieter, emptier life.

She blew her nose and pulled herself up straighter in the driver's seat. She might as well go home then. There was no reason to hang around here all afternoon.

As she reversed slowly out of the parking space, with one last look up at the block of flats where Emily now lived (*Goodbye, love*), it crossed her mind that she should text Mike,

let him know she'd be home sooner than expected. Early evening, she'd told him, imagining a much more drawn-out day than this.

But a car was already behind her, the other desolate parents putting a brave face on and tearing themselves away too. She wouldn't stop now that she'd started, she decided; she'd give Mike a nice surprise by turning up early.

If only she'd known what a surprise they'd both get by her early return, she would have sat in the Liverpool Uni car park a good while longer. In fact, she might not have driven home at all.

Traffic was gratifyingly light and it seemed no time before Catherine was turning into the quiet cul-de-sac where they'd lived for the last ten years. Wetherstone was a pretty South Yorkshire village with picture-postcard stone cottages, a tree-edged village green and a close-knit friendly community. It was convenient for Sheffield, where the twins had gone to school, and a short commute to the Health Centre for Mike.

Catherine got out of the car and gazed up at her daughter's bedroom, wishing Emily was still there, sprawled on the faded pink duvet texting her mates and listening to music. Sadness cut her like a knife and she swayed against the car for a moment.

Come on, Catherine. Be positive. New chapter and all that. Besides, this could be a new start for her and Mike, too.

One Night in Italy

They could take holidays in term-time now, try to reconnect a little (he had been so distant lately). They could even be romantic again without hearing an ‘Ugh, gross, get a room’ comment in the background. Why not? They weren’t past it yet, were they?

Feeling a flare of optimism, she unlocked the front door and stepped inside. ‘I’m back!’ she called, chucking her handbag onto the bench in the hall and kicking off her shoes.

He must be in the garden, she thought idly when no answer came. She went upstairs, meaning to have a quick wash before she made herself a cup of tea and started thinking about dinner. Goodness, she’d be cooking for just the two of them now, that would be a novelty. The shopping list would shrink unrecognizably without marauding teenagers wolfing their way through the fridge. They could treat themselves to steak without Emily tutting about vegetarianism, and have a few glasses of wine together without feeling they should be setting a good example.

Music was playing from their bedroom. Ooh, excellent. It sounded like he’d finished his work already.

‘Mike, are you – ’ she began, pushing open the door.

Then she stopped dead. And screamed.

There was a blonde woman in her bed wearing nothing but red lipstick and a surprised expression. And Mike, also stark bollock naked, between the woman’s thighs, his bum

muscles clenched, eyes widening in horror. No, thought Catherine, stumbling back, stricken. No.

The woman tittered. 'Oops,' she said in a lazy drawl. She seemed amused, of all things. Amused!

'Shit,' Mike cried, wrenching himself off her. He grabbed a pair of discarded boxers and covered his privates, strangely coy. 'Cath – I wasn't expecting you. I . . .'

Catherine's brain still couldn't process what was in front of her. No way. This could not be happening.

'Catherine . . .'

Mike said, advancing towards her.

A sob escaped her throat and she backed away. Then adrenalin ricocheted through her as she ran downstairs, her heart banging in her ribcage. No. No way. Not Mike.

'Wait!' she heard Mike yelling frantically. 'Catherine!'

For the first time in years, she didn't obey him. She went straight back through the front door and scrambled into the car, her fingers shaking so violently on the seatbelt it took her three attempts to clip it in. Then she started the engine, reversed wildly out of the drive and drove away.