

The Previous October

They have been searching for two tense hours. Laura blames Nick for this. He probably blames her. She has lost count of their false turns: wild tracks of pale rubble that narrow to nothing. She has a headache from squinting at the map that bears no relation to the landscape around them.

The afternoon is overcast. Bottom-heavy clouds bear down on them as they skirt the hills in their little rented Fiat. It's late October and the night swoops down fast here in autumn. Tomorrow they fly home, back to London.

She's worried that none of this augurs well for their grand plan, that this house they're trying to find – which the agent has assured them is *molto bella*, The One, a rare treasure no one else has even seen yet – will be another disappointment: either dark and forbidding, without floors or running water, or becoming wildly expensive as soon as they register any proper interest. Signor Ricci's manner, languid as a Sunday afternoon, has begun to grate. She doubts he has the English to comprehend it, and she certainly doesn't have the Italian, but she wants to say to him, *Do you know how important this is? We're not looking for a holiday home. We need a new life.*

They turn off the road and start bumping down yet another *strada bianca*. It's crowded with misshapen olive trees, whose arthritic fingers reach out to scratch the Fiat's

paintwork. That they're probably a thousand years old, that the rough road beneath the wheels was probably laid down before the birth of Christ, no longer feels romantic.

She rests a hand on her stomach and Nick, glancing over, slows down slightly. It's flat but it would be, at eight weeks. That's the thing about IVF. One of the many *things*. You know virtually from the second you're pregnant. Last night, at the guesthouse they're staying in, run by a smiling octogenarian who insists they call her Nonna, she had been kept awake by strange stretching pains in her abdomen. Was this good? A sign of healthy growth? Or would it herald her third miscarriage? In the dark room, she picked up her phone.

'Don't do it,' Nick mumbled, still half asleep, as the screen lit up. 'Don't go in those chatrooms.'

Then he'd pulled her in to his warm body and she had let the phone drop silently onto the soft rug beside the bed.

The lane goes on and she's just about to say they should give up when the trees abruptly part. They are in a clearing that ends in a tumbled wall, beyond which is a sheer drop to a valley, vast and green-swathed. Nick brakes so hard that the car shunts them forward in their seat belts. His arm goes out to hold her back. The whole thing is so unexpected that it feels like a bribe, offered up just as they were losing patience. As if Italy herself had spoken: *Aspettate, Signore!, Signora! Wait!*

They get out, blinking. While they've been driving, eyes sore from looking out for fallen signposts and speeding drivers on the wrong side of the road, the sun has broken through, sinking low enough to light the undersides of the clouds, burnishing them gold in a way that looks celestial.

‘Jesus,’ says Nick, ‘it’s like a bloody fresco. All we’re missing is a couple of angels.’

‘Do you think someone went over that?’ She points to the ruined wall, the car’s-width gap in the stones.

‘Some *capo* getting whacked for turning informer, probably,’ says Nick. ‘Had his brake cables cut.’ He scissors his fingers and she laughs.

The house is just visible beyond a large cypress at the far edge of the clearing. The land falls away so steeply beneath it that the front façade appears to float over the valley. As they approach, the house’s stucco blushes rose-gold. In places it has cracked and fallen, revealing the stone beneath, but this decay only contrives to make the place lovelier. Black iron balconies curl and twist beneath the upstairs windows. The largest pair, centrally placed, must lead to the master bedroom, or perhaps even a suite. She imagines a claw-foot bath from which she could watch summer showers move across the valley, shadowing the green velvet draped so artfully over ancient rock. At that moment, a hill-top village in the distance is spot-lit by the sun, grey walls and terracotta roofs dialled up to ochre and carmine.

For years, she had browsed Italian property online, sending Nick links, fantasizing about a new life in a new country; a rambling old house of a size they could never afford in England made beautiful and rented out to guests. But it had been little more than a game until the second miscarriage. After that, relocating became Laura’s alternative, an actual plan B. She knew Nick wasn’t sure, but they struck a deal: if the third round of IVF didn’t work, he would seriously consider it.

Her heart has begun to beat fast. She feels a sort of

desperation that Nick won't see what she's seeing, that he won't get that this place is *it*. I'll die if I lose this house as well, she thinks, in all seriousness. *As well*. She already feels certain she will miscarry again. It's just a matter of when. She glances at her husband, who is already at the front door, fitting the enormous iron key Ricci gave them into the lock.

You owe me this, Nick, she thinks, one of those hard little thoughts that come unbidden now, but then the door swings in and he turns back to her with a smile. She can see her own excitement reflected in his face. It's still a beloved face. Softening, she goes towards him, and towards Villa Luna Rossa.

The Following May

Luna Rossa is theirs. They live here in Italy now. Whenever Laura thinks about this fact, she gets a jolt, a tiny electric shock that they have so thoroughly abandoned their old lives for this new one. The audacity of it makes her like herself more than she has in years. Perhaps ever.

It was two weeks after finding the villa that a sonographer told her the pregnancy had failed. There hadn't been any bleeding: it was a *missed miscarriage*. In its eagerness to prepare for pregnancy, her body had failed to realize that the embryo had stopped developing. Distracted by the hum of its own industry, it hadn't noticed the tiny heart slowing and finally stopping.

She has thought a lot about that last beat. Judging by the measurements, the heart had stopped when they were in Italy. Probably it was just in the night, when she was fathoms deep in sleep, but maybe it was as she climbed the metal steps to board the plane at Ancona airport, nervous because she never liked flying but pleasantly taken up by thoughts of the villa which had already entranced her.

She had expected the pregnancy to go wrong, like the others. Of course she had. Simultaneously, she had also believed this one would stick. Partly because she'd felt more nauseous and exhausted than the other times, but also – absurdly – because *third time lucky*. Instead, and

because she hadn't miscarried in the proper way – the kind Nonna's beautiful white sheets spared – she would have to take pills to make her uterus contract so hard that what the nurses called the *pregnancy material* would *come away*. Such tidy euphemisms. It was either the pills or a D&C under general anaesthetic and she'd decided she'd rather be at home.

'Do you want a picture?' the sonographer said after that final scan, while Laura got dressed. 'Some do. But you don't have to.'

She had never said yes before. She only nodded this time because it was the end of the road. The sonographer pressed a button and a glossy monochrome square, like a Polaroid, was spat out. There, in the dark and strange terrain of her womb, was something small and white. She couldn't remember when an embryo officially became a foetus. Whatever it was called, it wasn't a baby, not yet. Lots of women thought of it like that, of course, and she totally got it. She just couldn't do it herself. The heartbeats, though. They were difficult to get past. The associations with a beating heart and life, a stopped heart and death, were very difficult to sever.

As she tucked the photograph into the inside pocket of her bag, it occurred to her that she alone knew she wouldn't be a mother – she and this kind sonographer whose badge said Mila. No one else in the world.

'Your name,' she'd said vaguely, as she zipped up her boots and reached for her coat. 'It's pretty.' And Mila had smiled sadly.

Nick knew soon enough, of course. She'd rung him once she left the windowless room of pale plastic and

scuffed walls. But even then her body hadn't known, not as she got into an Uber and was taken home by a blessedly silent driver, and not when she discovered what was on Nick's iPad while she waited for him to come back from work. And perhaps that was the strangest thing of all. She felt obscurely sorry for her body as it continued to prepare for the pregnancy: the hormones ramping up, the uterus walls thickening. That all of it was continuing, entirely pointlessly, seemed pathetic in the gentler sense of the word no one really used any more: *to be pitied*.

She and Nick haven't talked about any of this since they took possession of Luna Rossa. In truth, she doesn't even allow herself to think about it, or at least not in the house. She goes outside, if she needs to: there's a quiet corner by the linden trees, which you can't see from the villa. Sometimes, she takes the scan picture with her, only bringing it out when she's sure she's not being observed.

A superstitious little voice in her head likes to tell her that falling in love with the idea of another life abroad made it happen – that her and Nick's deal somehow signalled to the gods that she wanted Italy more than she wanted a child. She's getting better and better at silencing it, though. As the days get hotter, the awful winter before they left London more distant, she hardly lets it speak at all.

It's her favourite time of day now, mellow, soul-soothing dusk, the garden cooling fast because it's still chilly once the sun has gone. This is when the voice is quietest, and also when she and Nick get on best: the never-ending list of jobs that need doing on the villa abandoned, a bottle of wine opened, plans for dinner vaguely coming together.

She tucks the picture into the back pocket of her shorts and sets off towards the kitchen.

Tonight they can't be bothered to cook properly. Laura rubs garlic into long slices of toasted ciabatta and douses them in the olive oil they buy down the road, in big tins like petrol canisters. Even the precious first press, a delicate pale green but tasting of peppered sunshine, is a ridiculous bargain here in the Marche region. Squeezed between the knobbed spine of the Apennines and the Adriatic, no one at home had ever heard of it. 'It's east of Tuscany but cheaper,' she'd ended up saying, as short-hand. She piles the burnt-edged bread with tomatoes chopped up with tiny black olives, anchovies and basil. Her shoulder muscles ache from decorating the smallest guest room, but in a good way.

They sit at the inherited kitchen table, too big to remove, the wood pale and silken from decades of scrubbing, and remind each other of what they would be doing if they were still in London – what their friends are still doing in this very instant, trapped on the tube in the tunnels beneath the city, breathing in the stale heat of strangers, teeth gritted against wheel-shriek on the bends. What she would be doing: sitting through an overrunning staff meeting, maybe, or wading through a pile of year-ten essays on *Macbeth*.

Laura doesn't miss much about their old life, but it's at the end of a day of physical work on the villa – cleaning paintbrushes, switching off the sewing-machine – when she feels most exultant, most certain they've done the right thing. These enchanted hours are when it's possible to banish all her doubts, even if it's just for a little while.

‘We’re buying a villa!’ they’d said to friends invited round for dinner at their poky Balham maisonette, as the purchase inched painfully through Italy’s predictably arcane system. It wasn’t all showing-off. Both of them had been half fearful, half hopeful the other would bottle it; repeating it aloud in public was a kind of test. ‘Four hundred grand,’ Nick could never help adding, though Laura thought it was a bit crass. ‘Seven acres, outbuildings and a bloody olive grove, and it was less than our two-bed. We’ve basically bought a hamlet.’

None of their friends, to their eternal credit, asked if they were going to keep trying for a baby. They must have gathered that three failed rounds of IVF were enough for anyone. Still, she had wanted to make clear that Italy wasn’t about running away. Laura viewed it as the very opposite, actually: a massive *fuck-you* to the whole fertility ‘journey’. *No, we can’t have kids but look what we get to do instead.*

‘That little store at the back of Giuseppe’s House is full of scorpions,’ Nick is saying now, mouth full of bruschetta. ‘I just smack them, these days. I couldn’t give a shit. Remember the first one?’

She laughs. They don’t mention the scorpions in their email updates to family. She hadn’t even known Italy had scorpions. They don’t mention the earth tremors either, though they’ve experienced a few small ones now. The region is prone to them. They knew this before they bought. In 2016, the town of Amatrice – just over an hour to the south-west – was more or less flattened. They’d seen the footage on the news in London when moving to Italy was still an idle dream: medieval rubble and

survivors being pulled out from under it. The mayor said, 'The town no longer exists,' and was quoted everywhere. Laura tells herself she'll eventually get used to the idea that this could happen again, anytime.

Giuseppe's House is a one-up, one-down that is part of their parcel of property. 'Part of the estate,' says Nick, only half joking. Unlike the two dwellings adjacent to it, which are missing their roofs, Giuseppe's is in surprisingly good condition.

Giuseppe isn't a real person. Laura invented him when they opened the door and discovered a 1970s time capsule, as though someone had simply walked out forty-odd years earlier without a backward glance. It was all Formica, deeply varnished wood and swirly wallpaper in yellow and brown. Even the crucifix above the bed was a lurid burnt-orange. There were rusting tins of plum tomatoes in the cupboards, and a cutthroat razor on the bathroom sink, tiny black hairs still clinging to the blade, like iron filings. She pictured Giuseppe shaving there in the morning light, white vest stretching over a paunch and braces holding up his trousers.

'Maybe Giuseppe broke the Mafia code of silence,' Nick had said, pulling his fingers across his throat. 'You know . . . What's it called?' He taps his head, frustrated, before his face clears. '*Omertà*.'

Now, she watches as he takes another enormous bite of ciabatta, garlicky oil running down his chin. He's hunched over his plate with both elbows on the table.

'You eat like a peasant these days,' she says.

'I am a bloody peasant, that's why.' He holds up his free hand, which is calloused and paint-flecked. Two of the

knuckles are freshly skinned. ‘All this hard labour makes me starving.’

‘Well, you’re not the only worker. I finished the Nun’s Cell. The ceiling is deep blue now, like Heaven. I’m going to paint some gold stars on it.’

They have names for all six bedrooms. That they are so numerous they need to distinguish between them still seems incredible. In London it was just the main bedroom, the box-room they used as a study and the loft conversion they had never managed to finish.

They’re in bed by ten, the lazy supper eaten and night draped softly around the house. She’s propped up with the iPad, while he’s lying on his back looking at the ceiling, apparently stupefied by tiredness.

‘Oh my God, I’ve found her Instagram account.’

‘Who?’

‘Madison, obviously.’

Last week they’d had their first booking since getting the keys to the villa. Madison is the name of the American woman who wants to come with her husband to stay in their most expensive room. The relief of it is profound. Within twenty-four hours of receiving the email enquiry, Laura felt as though she’d lost two stone off her shoulders.

There are plenty of things she and Nick don’t discuss here. Along with the miscarriages, money is one of the most strenuously avoided. She’s had to come to terms with it: the various ways the move to Italy hasn’t fundamentally changed things between them. Perhaps she had been naive to think it would. But the booking – three whole weeks at the high-season tariff – has saved them. This is

no exaggeration: they are down to their last fifteen thousand euros, all the spare cash from the sale of the London flat simply absorbed into the villa's refurbishment. Now they'll be able to pay six months' worth of bills, if they're careful. It means they aren't going to fail. Not at this. Not yet, anyway.

She turns round the iPad so Nick can see the screen. Madison's posts reveal a self-consciously covetable life at home in California.

'She's, like, *totally* perfect,' Laura says, in her best Valley Girl accent, as she scrolls down.

Madison's Instagram is as irritating as it is envy-making: a chequerboard of yoga, hiking, plates of clean food and a rescue pit-bull that balances pretzels on his nose. At least half the squares are blue: dark ocean, bright chlorine and faded denim cutoffs. She and her 'hubby' (Nick snorts at the endearment) live in one of the canyons, forty minutes from downtown LA when the freeway is clear. Madison imparted these exotic-sounding details in her second email.

It doesn't take much sleuthing on Laura's part to find out what Madison and the hubby do. She is on every platform going.

She nudges an almost-asleep Nick. 'You'll love this. She's a wellness coach and he works in film production. Fancy that, in LA. What a shocker.'

Without opening his eyes, Nick raises an eyebrow. 'Do you think they're making them somewhere, in Silicon Valley? These perfect Californian specimens?'

Most of the posts feature Madison pulling the same expression and pose, her head tilted down, her hips

twisted slightly. She prefers her right side, clearly. She is good-looking in a generic kind of way, with the glossy, streaky mermaid hair and long bones privileged American women always seem to have. Both Nick and Laura have put on a little bit of weight in Italy, despite the relentless chores. Too much pasta and bread and cheese. Way too much wine.

‘How do you think we should play it, when they come?’ She turns to look at him.

‘What do you mean, play it?’

‘Like, with meals and stuff. The website goes on about guests feeling as though they’ve found their second home, but what does it actually mean? We eat with them or we serve them? Do they think they’re getting full-board or what?’

Nick yawns. ‘I thought you’d figured this out already.’

‘Well, I wrote some enticing copy. It was pretty vague.’

‘I think the home-from-home thing is good. It means it doesn’t have to be hotel-tidy all the time. I reckon they eat with us.’

‘Like friends.’

He kicks off the sheet so his feet are poking out. ‘Yeah, exactly. Nice and laid-back.’

‘But they’re not friends. They’re total strangers. It’s a really weird concept when you think about it. They could be anyone.’

Nick laughs. ‘Like inviting vampires over the threshold. Anyway, it’s a bit late to freak out now. How old, do you think?’ He’s squinting at the screen again.

‘God knows. Mid-thirties? Early forties if she’s had work? Or is handy with the filters.’

‘No kids?’

‘No. Unless they’re too un-photogenic to be seen.’

‘Where’s he, then? They’re all of her and the dog. I’m thinking someone in Wayfarers and white T-shirts. *Top Gun* but with tattoos.’

‘He’s probably the one taking the photos. This is clearly The Madison Show.’

‘Well, I don’t care who he is. Him and the blessed Madison have saved the day.’ Nick turns his head to grin up at her, mouth still purpled from the evening’s wine, though he’s brushed his teeth. ‘What a fucking relief. We have this amazing place and now we’ll earn some money off it too. I’m so glad we did this, Laur. I know I was resistant at first but you were right. You’re always bloody right.’ He stretches his arms above his head, sighing contentedly. ‘How sorted are we?’ he says. The emphasis is on the ‘we’.

Instead of replying, she nudges him affectionately with her elbow. Now that the enchanted hours have slipped away the question becomes literal in her head, the stress moving to ‘are’. How sorted *are* we?

She scrolls on as Nick begins to snore lightly, his arms flung over his head like a child. She turns off the bedside lamp. The shutters are open and, outside, the stars have come on. The night sky here is of a different order from anything she’s ever seen in the built-up south-east of England. You can see actual galaxies here, milky eddies and swirls that make her dizzy.

Carefully, so she doesn’t wake him, she gets out of bed, the iPad tucked under her arm. She wishes she could go outside with it, do what she’s planning under those ancient flickering lights, but it’ll be too chilly by now. She creeps

downstairs and, still in the dark, curls up in the armchair she bought at a roadside sale and reupholstered herself.

Clicking off Madison's Instagram, she opens a new window. A memory of London comes then, rain thrumming on a glass skylight. She'd just got back from the clinic for the last time. The recollection stops her. She reaches for her laptop instead. She and Nick have taken to sharing his iPad here. The laptop is hers alone.

LinkedIn makes her paranoid. She's barely ever used it before – it's always seemed so clunky and corporate. Yesterday she'd set it up to search privately, but hadn't quite trusted it. She'd emailed Lou, her best friend, the person she misses most acutely in Italy.

I went on your LinkedIn profile just now. Have a look and let me know if it comes up anonymously or not.

Shit, was that you? came the reply. I was hoping it was that bloke from Bumble. I think he's ghosting me. God, what a life.

So the privacy settings worked, but she was still worried. If he sees it's her, she'll die. Or will she? Isn't it just flattering for him rather than embarrassing for her? He'd looked her up once on Facebook, years ago, when she was still content enough with Nick, and though it had thrown her, made her dream about him that night even, she hadn't done anything about it. It was enough to know he'd thought of her, then searched for her. She'd carried that little ego-stroke around, a hot flutter inside her, until it receded into nothing again.

Nerves stir within her now, making her restless. She goes through to the kitchen to get the wine from earlier and pours herself a glass, finishing the bottle. Tomorrow she'll try to have a day off the booze. She can feel the

alcohol swimming inside her almost immediately, mingling with her blood, thinning and corrupting it. She feels hyper-aware of everything: the fridge's off-key hum, every grain of grit pressing into the soles of her feet. The cool eye of the moon regards her through the window as she drinks.

She and Nick are getting on better, now that they have a booking. They'd always pitied couples who bickered and sniped as a matter of course; they had always believed themselves above this, much too respectful of the other to point-score like irritable siblings. And then suddenly they were doing just that, and once they'd fallen into the miserable rhythm of it, it seemed impossible to stop.

She'd watch him abandon one job on the villa to start yet another, and wonder how she'd got through the last twenty years with him when everything he did annoyed her so profoundly. She believed she was totally justified in this, while simultaneously hating her own pettiness – the way she would snatch up his sweaty socks and T-shirts and hurl them into the drum of the washing-machine. She suddenly understood why resentful women took scissors to their husbands' suits.

So she's perfectly aware that it seems perverse to do what she's about to do, when things are looking brighter. But perhaps that's exactly why she's doing it now, the lift in spirits from the booking giving her a taste for more, another hit of life. Though she's been playing with the idea of sending *him* a message for a while, she's not sure when it tipped into a real possibility. Her old diaries haven't helped. Some days, sequestered in this beautiful place where she knows no one, where she feels like she's

living in a painting, the past trapped between their scuffed covers feels more real than the present.

She sits down at the laptop again, the room shrinking to the rectangle of the lit-up screen. She goes to Settings, turns off privacy mode and types in his name, clicking on it before she can change her mind, the wine egging her on. Quick as a flash, as though it's burnt her, she clicks into a different window. It's BBC weather, set for Urbino, the nearest city. She stares at the row of yellow sun symbols without seeing them. Her heart thumps.

She glances at the clock in the corner of the screen. Ten minutes and then she'll check. She'll go back up to bed after that. Nick will have slept through her absence. Sometimes, when he's out of it beside her, exhausted by the kind of manual work he's never done before, she touches herself. Her movements are slight so she doesn't wake him, her breathing kept silent and shallow. It isn't forbidden, of course – Nick would probably love it if he caught her – but it feels like it. That makes it stronger when she gets there, back arching and eyelids fluttering in the dark. Sometimes, afterwards, her heart still racing, she cries, and she does that silently too.

She glances at the clock again. Only four minutes have passed. At that moment, twin beams of light swing across the dark room. Still unused to the villa's isolation after years in London, it takes her a second to remember they're not near enough the road to see any lights from passing traffic. Someone must be coming down the drive. She stands, her first instinct to run upstairs and wake Nick. Instead she unbolts the heavy front door and tiptoes barefoot to the cypress tree that guards the gate. She can't hear

the engine over the rasp and saw of the cicadas. The headlights, veined by olive tree branches, begin to grow smaller and she realizes they're reversing. Just a wrong turn, then.

She remembers the waiting laptop and rushes back in. Eight minutes, but she can't wait any longer. And there it is: a new view. There's also a message waiting.

Hello stranger x

She slams the screen down. Then she opens it again, to check that the prompt for the password comes up.

As she tiptoes silently upstairs, the stone steps chill underfoot, she tells herself she won't touch herself tonight: punishment for her tiny infidelity, and the possibilities she's lifted the latch on. Still, she can't help thinking about him as Nick slumbers on beside her, his body turned to hers while she faces away, his breath between her bare shoulder-blades making her skin goose-pimple. Too abruptly alive to switch off, she doesn't sleep until pale grey dawn outlines the shutters.

The next morning she lurches into consciousness, eyes snapping open when she remembers the message. She usually takes a long time to wake up properly but not today. She doesn't want to hang back from today.

Hello stranger.

She hugs her knees to herself, thoughts tumbling over each other. The bed beside her is empty, Nick already up. It's late, maybe ten. She can tell by the light behind the shutters, white with mid-morning intensity. Suddenly hot, she kicks off the sheets. Her legs in pale blue chambray shorts look brown and smooth. She eases the shorts down over her hips, pulls off the matching top and inspects her

naked self: the thighs that are a little fleshier than she'd like, but still quite toned; the stomach that's always pretty flat, even when she puts on weight elsewhere. She stretches out T-shaped across the expanse of the bed, arms spread wide enough to touch the sides, toes pointed, and runs her hands down the mounds and dips of her body. She closes her eyes, just for a moment. *Hello stranger*. Her heart beats hard in her chest.

She finds Nick in his usual spot at the kitchen table, head bent over the iPad, reading the news. She loves him more today, in spite of the message. Because of it. There's no lasting guilt. Not yet. She's not sure there will be. Not after what he'd done to them in December.

'Morning,' he says, without looking up.

She kisses the top of his head and begins to massage his shoulders.

'That's nice.' He can't keep the surprise from his voice.

He reaches round to squeeze her hand. It's one of those suspended moments when she could tip it into more or walk away without offending him. She pictures herself leaning over him, pressing her breasts into his shoulder-blades, hair falling like a sheet in front of his face. He would pull her into his lap and they would start to kiss. He would taste of slightly stale coffee.

She straightens instead, walking over to the counter to pour herself a cup. The door to the garden is wide open and the air is already warm enough to prickle the skin. The sun falls in a broad stripe across her bare feet, which look pretty against the old terracotta tiles, toenails glossy because she only painted them yesterday, the exact shade of pistachio ice-cream.

‘Do you want some breakfast? There’s leftover pastries.’
She shakes her head. ‘Not hungry.’

And she does feel full, the word *replete* arriving in her mind. Lou’s voice echoes in her head, as it often does here, now she doesn’t get to see her in real life. *You always get thinner when you’re into someone*, she says in her wry tones. *You’re getting down to your hunting weight.*

‘What are you smiling at?’ Nick has turned to watch her flexing her feet in the doorway, his expression half quizzical, half affectionate. He stands and opens his arms. ‘Come here.’

She burrows into his embrace, her nose tucking into the cleft between his arm and chest, glad to hide her face. He smells more familiar than anything else she can imagine, of toast and sleep and, somehow, his parents’ house. A surge of emotion eddies up through her body to swell behind her eyes. She waits until the tears have retreated, then takes his face in her hands, kissing him quickly and chastely on the mouth before stepping away.

‘Love you,’ she says.

‘Yeah, cheers.’

They both smile at the old joke. When they were first together he’d found conversations about feelings as embarrassing as she’d found them stimulating. She never minded, though – it was touching. Besides, it was so obvious he loved her that she didn’t really need him to say it. From the very start, even in this difficult last year, she had never, not for a second, doubted that he loved her.

It was she who had asked him out the first time, though admittedly in the knowledge that he already liked her. It was the summer she’d graduated and they were both

working at a pub in the Warwickshire town where they'd grown up. He worked behind the bar and she was a waitress. They'd gone to different schools and had never crossed paths before. Like her, he'd just finished university, though he'd stayed at home to save money on accommodation. Both of them were on the cusp of proper adulthood. Neither felt entirely ready for it.

Every time they coincided in the pub's kitchen, the chef would tease them about when they were going to get together. He did it with the barely contained aggression he showed to the food he cooked, and to the customers who didn't like his hunter's chicken or pie and mash.

Nick had the sort of skin that flushed easily. He wasn't really her physical type. But then, after a while, she found herself hoping they would be working the same shift. Whether it was him she liked, or how much he liked her, she wasn't sure.

One Saturday night, they had a lock-in to celebrate a week of high takings and excellent tips. After a few drinks, Nick began to reveal a different side. He was quick and funny; he could run verbal rings round Danny the chef. She observed him across the table and thought, *Oh, why not?*

It was she who had kissed him after their first date, she who had led him to bed with a smile after the second. Oh, and the power that conferred on her, a total self-assurance that only made him want her more. Love like a warm bath in a safe house, door locked against dark night. Such a relief after what had come before, during her final term at university.

Hello stranger.

As she swims laps in the new pool that's only just become usable, the butter-coloured stones around it still waiting to be cemented into position, she thinks about what she's going to write in her reply. She has already brushed away the possibility of not replying.

For the first time, she forgets to admire the view towards the hills that change colour throughout the day but are richly green now, the air so clear that she could pick out every curving line of the millennia-old terraces if she bothered to look. Instead, her thoughts are turned inward. She gives up the lengths and floats on her back, hands circling slowly. High above is her favourite pine, the one with the cloud-shaped canopy that perfectly frames any photograph taken of the view. Beyond it the sky is turning a deep, hard blue.

She doesn't register those, either. She is thinking about his hands, strong and square rather than elegant. Large enough to encircle both of her wrists and hold them fast. She dives underwater and away from the memory that makes her insides contract, kicking hard to the bottom. Letting out her breath, she sinks. When her knees bump the tiles, she opens her eyes. They hate chlorine but she keeps them open, even when they start to sting.

She waits until the men who are finishing off the pool arrive before she opens the laptop. She doesn't know these two: they're not Massimo's usual men. Nick has joined them outside, ostensibly helping, though they would probably rather he didn't. She's noticed that when he inevitably leaves any of the builders to it, once the sun gets too fierce, they resume talking easily, the staccato

rhythm of the language she still can't penetrate curling in through the open windows, like the heat.

All that signing and gesticulating with the locals, the linguistic long-way-round you have to go when you know only a few dozen words, she finds it exhausting. She hasn't said so to Nick but she doesn't think she will ever be good enough to convey or understand any nuance here. She misses being quick and finding the perfect word to describe something; she misses silly puns. In Italy, she feels slow and stupid much of the time. She suspects it's the same for Nick and that's why she doesn't want to bring it up. If they start admitting to these little failures, where will it end?

She'd wanted to live in Italy for so many years that she had long ceased to unpick the urge and examine the component parts. Whenever it came up in conversation she always sighed dreamily and said, 'One day I'm going to live there.' A fortnight's holiday never felt enough. As soon as she'd settled into the rhythms of it, it was time to return to London, which always seemed so colourless and chaotic by comparison.

But if she could actually *live* in Italy, it would be totally different. She imagined herself speaking the language fluently, and striking up awkward but meaningful friendships with eccentric local characters. She would get up in the rosy dawn to walk to market, a basket on her arm, her body brown and lean. *But you hate getting up early*, Nick would say. *Basically you're expecting Italy to turn you into a completely different person.*

But then came the miscarriages, and the rest of it, and suddenly Italy was going to happen. She knew Nick was

privately worried she was pinning too much on it but what could he say in the circumstances? Nothing.

She doesn't know what she's expecting, but when there is nothing new in her inbox, an obscure disappointment washes over her. She clicks on the message that followed her through the night, then goes to email Lou about it. But she finds she doesn't want to. She tells Lou everything but she doesn't want to tell her this. She wants to keep it close. She doesn't know what she thinks about it yet, and doesn't want Lou's opinion to darken the outline of it, to colour it in before she's had the chance.

She starts typing him a reply but she's so nervous she's going to hit the send button by accident that she opens up a Word document instead, starts again in that. The liberation of that blank, unconnected page turns it from a cool, witty little rejoinder into something much closer to the truth.

I thought of you all night after your message. I thought about how it was when we slept together the first time. Do you remember? You were only my second but I was your fifth. I thought it would be awkward – I thought it was always going to be awkward – but it wasn't. It was late morning in your room, rain loud in the gutter above your window, and we were both hung-over from the night before. Your housemates were in and playing Goldeneye in the living room below and you didn't have a lock on your door but we did it anyway. I think I can even remember what I was wearing: a short denim skirt that rode around as I walked so that I was always twisting it to get the zip at the front. You hooked my knickers off with one hand, the other in my hair at the back of my neck, but I kept the skirt on

and it was so tight that the hem made marks around the tops of my thighs from where you pushed them open.

She deletes the words, the cursor speeding up as she holds down the key. Outside, she can hear Nick laughing slightly too heartily, probably at some painfully mimed joke because his Italian is even worse than hers.

Hello you, she types. *It's been a while. Is it normal to miss someone you haven't seen in so many years?* She deletes the last sentence, writing instead *How's life treating you?*

She copies and pastes it into the box and presses send before the inner debate can start up. She realizes almost immediately that she forgot to put a kiss to match his, but then decides that's better. It seems cooler, more aloof. It's such an old game, the advance and retreat of who's keenest, who's chasing hardest. In and out like those German weather clocks, the wooden figure of the man coming out, then backing away as soon as the woman approaches. In and out. Back and forth.

She's fast approaching forty now and he has just turned forty-one but she knows, even from the few sentences that have joined them, like a narrow rope across the ether, that it would be exactly the same. She would never quite know where she stood or what he was thinking – she never had. Except for those times when he'd muttered her name over and over into her ear, into the tender nook between her neck and collarbone, into the gap where the bottom rungs of her ribcage met, and she'd known that right now she had him.

Outside, louder and higher-pitched than the rumble of the builders' tones, Nick laughs again. Perhaps all that

bickering they do about the house is just a distraction from the bigger stuff. It fills up the silences so that there's no space left for her to say what she's really thinking now that she's got time to, now that there's no teaching or commuting or friends to meet for dinner. *Is this marriage it? Is this all we get, for ever, until we're dead?*

Lately, she's been rereading her old university diaries and there's one entry she found the other night that she vividly remembers writing on the little flat roof of the kitchen extension in her third-year house. They weren't supposed to use it, not least because it involved a precarious climb out of the bathroom window to get to it, but did anyway. Three nights earlier, she had kissed *him* for the first time.

'What are you writing today?' Lou had said. "'The beautiful young woman sniffed the evening air. It was pregnant with possibility. All of life was before her.'"

She laughed. 'Yes, I always refer to myself in the third person. Lends the whole thing some gravitas. What's the word for this smell again? You know, after it's rained.'

'Petrichor,' said Lou. She pulled her sleeve down over her hand to twist the cap off a bottle of supermarket lager.

'I can never think of it.'

'My ex I met doing Duke of Edinburgh was in a band called Petrichor.' She took a swig of the lager. 'He was such a pompous twat.' She started laughing, choking on the fizzy beer she'd just swallowed.

Laura took the bottle while she recovered, drank some herself. 'I can't imagine you orienteering.'

'I didn't even get my bronze, to be honest. The

expedition went spectacularly wrong. We ended up trying to cross the M1 and a lorry driver called the police.'

They were both laughing now.

'So,' said Lou, when they'd calmed down, 'would you say you're making an accurate record of our supposedly halcyon days? Or are you doing your usual romanticizing?'

'It ends up being a bit of both, like a slightly shit *Brideshead*.'

'I'd just write down everything as I hoped it would be, regardless of how it actually was, so that when I found it again, aged eighty, I'd be pleased to see I'd had such a bloody great time being so popular and funny and sexy.'

Laura had felt so happy and hopeful that early autumn night, like she was brimming over with it. There really had been a sense that everything was ahead: endless doors ajar, each one inviting her to push it open.

'Remember this,' she'd said to Lou. 'This is where it all begins.'

When she'd lifted her head from the diary and remembered she was almost forty, that the night on the roof was literally half a lifetime ago, the realization was so jarring that it had made her catch her breath.

Now she studies the profile photo of the man she hasn't known for twenty years, who was still a boy when she was up on that roof, just as she was still a girl. She reads again the words he typed to her last night. Something lithe and dark swoops inside her.

You've seen him four times on campus now, twice today. You first locked eyes on the steps outside Devonshire House, and again in the library last week. Then at lunch-time he'd been behind you in the refectory queue. You had been about to pick up a clingfilmed turkey salad, but knowing he might see and think it unsexy, perhaps even neurotic, you asked for a burger and chips instead. Boys love girls who eat.

'Eight and a half,' you had muttered to Lou, as you passed him an hour later. The two of you were on your way to the campus bar for a pre-presentation vodka – you always paired up in seminars for these, and always did them half cut. It had become one of your traditions. Of course it was a fine balance, that sweet spot between lucid confidence and pissed rambling: two vodkas for you, three for Lou. Just like being good at pool.

'Nine,' Lou replied loudly, so he'd hear. 'Though I think he might know it.'

This game is a recent invention. You rate every boy you see out of ten. A bloke called Dave compiled a list of the fittest girls in halls in the first year, so it seems fair enough. You had made the top ten for your 'eyes and tits' and were secretly delighted, which you know is pathetic. It doesn't make you any less pleased. You have taken on a different persona at university, quite by accident. You hadn't felt

particularly pretty at school. Not ugly at all – but maybe just the plainest of the prettiest girls. Here, though, where they hadn't known you in those awkward years when almost everyone looks half cooked and oddly proportioned, you are considered good-looking. *Fit.*

In the sixth form, everyone had talked about university as somewhere you could reinvent yourself, and you'd thought about this in literal terms. Like you could randomly call yourself by your middle name, or stop listening to the R&B you knew was a bit questionable if you also claimed to be a feminist – the songs by Blackstreet and Jodeci that Lou called 'that shit shagging music' – and listen instead to Radiohead and Skunk Anansie. You hadn't done this, though you still liked the idea of being someone who listened to indie music, going to the Cavern club on Fridays with the working-class kids from the valleys and up north, instead of the Home Counties public-school types who owned Wednesdays, which was AU night, as in Athletic Union. It was all hockey, rugby and lacrosse there, and they liked R&B too.

You still feel like an idiot for having had so little clue of what you were getting into at this particular university. You're reading English and the course is reputed to be one of the best, with loads of film and American literature, and very little Chaucer or Beowulf. It had really high grade requirements – your offer had been two As and a B – and that was all you'd thought about. That, and the fact it was near the sea. You'd fondly thought it would be sunny in the summer and that some boy you hadn't met yet would take you to the beach in his convertible Golf. You'd have sex there, and he'd take you home to meet his