

Our Own Memories

By

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Chapter One

Lauren woke up to hear the faint scratching of the old record player at the finished tune. Her pyjamas tightly covering her body, she tiptoed slowly to the living room in the old bungalow. The curtains were drawn and it was dark, but she could still see the table on which the record player stood. She moved the needle to the side and turned to leave the room, but her parents were standing in the doorway. Her mother smiled.

‘You’re up early, darling,’ she told Lauren, hugging her. Lauren chuckled.

‘Not by fucking choice – please turn the record player off before you and Dad go to bed. Oh, and I’m leaving at eight, so if you wouldn’t mind driving me...’ she replied.

Her father nodded. ‘Of course,’ he told her. ‘But are you honestly sure about all this? We can cancel it all and you can stay at home with us for the holidays – we’ll go to the beach somewhere.’

‘Piss off, Dad, I’m nineteen – I need some time alone, and I’m sure I’ll find Italy more interesting than all the beaches here in Kent, for Christ’s sake – they’re all the same!’ she snapped, moving past her parents and trudging back into her bedroom, catching a glimpse of her early-morning self in the mirror that hung on the wardrobe. Her hair was matted, as it always was in the morning, her soft, freckled skin red in patches where she had slept in a strange position. Her pyjamas had no shape to them; this was because her ridiculously conservative parents had bought them for her. Her hair had been cut sensibly, just below her shoulders with no fringe, and the clothes that lurked in her wardrobe were just as sensible as her hair.

She took off her pyjamas and her vest and her sensible white pants, put her fluffy bathrobe on and made her way into the bathroom. Locking the door carefully, she took her bathrobe off and blinked at her reflection in the steamy mirror. She was fairly petite

– although not exactly small – with delicate wrists, elegant hands and small feet, size three to be exact. Her head was a reasonable size, but her watery green eyes were too large for her face – yet this was part of her endearing charm. Her nose was small but slightly hooked, with a few freckles on its bridge. Her lips were thick, the cupid’s bow sharp, and they were coloured with the remnants of last night’s lipstick that kept smudging. Her parents had given her a going-away party, although she was only going on holiday, and halfway through this, she had shouted at her parents because they hadn’t bought her alcohol. They didn’t let her buy some herself either, so they all went to bed soon after the argument, with the record player still creaking and some of the snacks still left on the window sill.

Lauren wiped the smudges off with a make-up wipe that smelled of lemon and she turned on the shower, waiting for the water to become hot before she stepped in. Today, her shower was quick, because she still needed to eat and she needed to pack her pyjamas and her alarm clock, meaning that, after another ten minutes of showering, she was changing in her bedroom, the curtains drawn and the lights dim. She eventually strolled into the kitchen, wearing a smart shirt and jeggings. She had her massive bag with her, which she put beside her as she sat at the dining table.

It was already laid, with a fruit bowl in the middle and a plate and a bowl for each of them. Her mother handed her a glass of orange juice and a toast, plastered with Nutella, just how Lauren liked it. She ate happily by herself, before her parents joined her, with their sensible and healthy muesli and almond milk. They ate in silence, not quite sure what to say to one another, so all that could be heard was the scraping of spoons against bowls. Her mother cleared up when they had finished eating, Lauren watching as she did so. Her mother was a smartly-dressed woman, nearing her mid-

fifties, with hair like Lauren's – thick and cut in the same way, by the same person – and she was a little taller than her daughter, moving around the place quickly as she cleared up, although without the slightest bit of elegance. She had always been somewhat clumsy, a trait that had been handed down to Lauren.

Lauren was supposed to have had a sister or brother, but her mother, Ruth, had had a miscarriage, after which she had never been the same. She was hard to read now, and she was completely closed up, in that cardboard box of a house with no room to breathe, and Lauren knew it. She knew her mother had so much more in her than she showed. Her father, on the other hand, was older, and he always had been dapper and rather uninteresting. He was often in his library, perusing all kinds of philosophical books that he never got around to reading, and her mother always said that Lauren got her intelligence from her father. He was almost sixty, and he was certainly not the dominant one in the relationship; anything that Ruth told him to do, he did, and he never dared to defy her wishes or her orders.

When they had finished eating, Lauren's father – Thomas – took her bag and put it in the boot of their Ford Mondeo. They all clambered aboard, Lauren at the back and her parents in front, her mother driving, as she always did. So Lauren said goodbye to the grey, claustrophobic bungalow and grinned, trying to hide her nervousness about having to travel alone. As they drove to the train station, Lauren mapped out, in her mind, everything she would have to do on the journey. She eventually gave up, as there was too much to remember, so she just sat there, not thinking about anything. She was leaving just before the rain, the dark clouds informed her, as she gazed blankly at the dull countryside. They eventually arrived at the train station and Lauren, anxious to go, hugged her parents ran off, not even turning back to wave.

#

Nicholas Marsh woke up beside his wife. She looked beautiful when she was asleep, her skin pale in the light from the windows, her face peaceful and motionless, less taut and wrinkled than it was when she was awake, her dark hair spread out on the crisp pillow. She was getting thinner – she took up less than half of the bed now – and her hair was too, but she had told Nicholas that she was getting older and the loss of weight was because of her diet. He had told her numerous times that she was perfectly fine, but she had insisted that she would stop eating what she called “the carbs”. She was thinner than before, but not extremely thin. She looked nice either way, to him.

He looked away and turned from her, every move he made cautious so as not to wake her. He stepped into the hallway and tiptoed into the bathroom, changing there in front of the large, slim mirror that was dangerously propped up against the tiled wall. He inspected himself, his limp arms by his side, his large out-turned feet, his thin stature, his long legs. His chest was fairly hairless – it always had been – and his large hands were clenched into fists, more in an awkward way than an aggressive way as he watched himself. His gaze moved upwards; his face was long, framed by a grey, floppy fringe that he always gelled back in the morning. His nose was long and well-sculpted, his cheeks hollow with slanting bones that made him look like he was always smiling. His thin, chapped lips, however, were not smiling, straight without a smirk or a tilt to show dimples, his chin below dappled with some light grey stubble, a fairly elegant but stubborn chin. He was an extremely elegant man, despite being fiercely masculine; it was in the way he stood up straight, the way in which every body-part was placed in alignment, regardless of his position; it was the way his tapering wrists dangled listlessly by his lithe side.

Having finished the inspection, he stepped into the shower cubicle and turned the shower on, trying not to make his gasp too loud when the ice-cold water hit his warm morning body. He jumped back and waited for it to get warmer before he ventured closer to the damn thing, eventually letting the moisture soak into his coarse skin. He knew that, unfortunately, today's shower could not be a long one, because he had to leave in one and a half hours – and he hadn't even eaten or finished packing yet, so he made sure that, five minutes later, he was done in the shower. He had taken his clothes into the bathroom so he wouldn't have to wake his wife up by changing in the bedroom. He carefully put the clothes on and strolled out of the bathroom again.

When he returned to his bedroom to pack, he noticed that his wife was awake, still lying in bed. She rubbed her eyes.

'Oh Christ, you're going today, aren't you? You're deserting me and going to bloody Italy, for God's sake. We could've at least had a second honeymoon there, but you decided to go alone,' she snapped.

'Why? Our first honeymoon was good enough – I want to keep the memories. And besides, Italy may not be much better than our first honeymoon,' he reassured her.

'Italy may not be much better? May I remind you, Nicholas Marsh, that we spent our first honeymoon in Cleethorpes?!' she cried. Nicholas shook his head and chuckled, proceeding to jump on the bed – with his shoes on – and he hugged his wife.

'What's the difference? We were lucky to get sunshine in Cleethorpes – and maybe it'll rain in Italy? Does that make things better?' he smiled. 'And now you need to get downstairs and make me some breakfast. Or watch me make some and then eat with me, because we really need to get going, Jen. Come out of bed, sleepyhead.'

He got up and dragged Jen with him, trying to be as gentle as possible,

depositing her at the dining table and starting to cook pancakes for them both. They had no chocolate chips left, so he just made plain ones this time as he whizzed around the kitchen, making sure that the pancakes didn't burn when he was making the cappuccinos. When he had finished, he collapsed onto one of the nice wooden dining chairs, a feast of toast, pancakes, coffee, orange juice and yoghurt on the table before them both. Jen smiled.

'Not bad, Nick,' she told him, taking a small bite of the toast. 'I feel terrible, though, because you just worked your arse off to make us breakfast when I'm on a diet and I'm not even hungry because it's just too early to eat. For me.'

'It's fine – you can reheat it. Just stay with me now, I want your company. It's horrible to eat breakfast alone, you know – it's just sad,' he mused, eating the pancakes with a smile. He always cooked them well. He then moved on to devouring the toast, followed by the yoghurt, using the coffee as well as the orange juice to wash it all down. No matter what time it was, Nicholas was almost always hungry, yet none of it affected his figure. He checked his shiny new watch,

'We need to go. Will you join me for a drive in the car, dahling?' he asked in a fairly accurate posh accent. Jen couldn't help smiling as he took his coat and his bags, whistling as they left.

He hopped into the car, Jen joining him in the front once she had dressed, and he drove off. The train station was only fifteen minutes away, but because it was early and there was barely any traffic, they arrived within ten minutes. The train's platform was being announced when they stepped into the building, so Jen hugged Nicholas tightly before he went through the ticket barrier and she turned away.

Chapter Two

This was Lauren's first time travelling alone. She was already nervous, even though she hadn't even got to the worst bit yet – in fact, she was in a train, experiencing the easy part. When anyone approached to sit beside her, she took a tissue from her pocket, pretending to have a cold so that they would steer clear; the last thing she wanted on her journey to the airport was a grumpy old woman sitting next to her who would probably make her miss her stop. She used her luggage to create a barricade between her and the other passengers, so her privacy and dignity could remain intact as she ate her second breakfast, rather quietly. It consisted of a lot of things that her parents had never allowed her to eat, such as bacon, which she soon discovered she hated, as well as a Dr Pepper, a Rocky Road brownie (she had chosen the one with the most marshmallows, feeling quite childish) and a chocolate crepe from the café in the station. She soon discovered, though, that – as was the case with many people – her stomach didn't agree with such a high amount of chocolate, so she put the brownie back in her bag for later, when she was hungry again.

She watched the houses as they whizzed by, and when she was tired of this, she opened the *Pride and Prejudice* book that her parents had bought for her for her fourteenth birthday. She had never liked it, to be perfectly blunt, but she still read it to look educated and grown-up, although she had been reading the same page for fifteen minutes now. She had never felt so alone, and therefore, her defence mechanism was to ensure that she seemed as strong as she could be, so she sat up straight and glanced out of the window, finally aware of her freedom, grinning like some Cheshire cat.

#

Nicholas was used to the journey from Surrey to London, because he always commuted,

every morning on weekdays. But he was excited this time; he hadn't travelled abroad without Jen in years, and now that he was about to, he seemed interested to discover how lonely he would be without her, and just how dependent he was on her when it came to house work and the like. Sure, he could cook, but he was about to find out how well he could cook with a ceramic hob. He had seen the pictures of the hotel and the rooms, and he found it all rather sweet, until he noticed the fact that it was self-catering, meaning he would have to go to the supermarket that, according to Google Maps, was just down the road from the hotel, and this meant he would probably have to speak to the person in Italian. He couldn't speak Italian.

That was the thing he was the most nervous about; he hated awkward situations, especially ones where there was a language barrier. When he realised this, he considered cancelling and booking a flight to America, but he thought it wouldn't have such nice food, beautiful landscapes or delicious wine, so he decided that he was going to have to make a compromise when it came to the language. He would try to learn, but then again, when he had tried to pronounce food in the 'Italian way' in Italian restaurants, nobody understood him anyway, which was even more embarrassing and awkward than not trying.

So he just decided to let it be, sitting back in the uncomfortable train, gazing out of the window, the view hazy from the dust on the glass. After a while, he arrived at the airport and stepped cautiously off the train and into the imposing building that loomed above him, as he made his first step in his journey.

He checked in, which took a while because the computers weren't working for some reason; but it was fine, because the woman at the check-in desk gave him a nice smile, displaying her newly whitened teeth and tapping them with her index finger.

‘Colgate. Max White. Tell your wife to buy you some,’ she told him, still smiling as he wandered off. Nicholas rolled his eyes and walked over to security, taking the toiletries in clear bottles from his bag and putting them on the big tray. He had only been abroad once before this; he had to treat a patient who lived in France, and Nicholas had gone in the peak of summer, and returned with enormous pomegranate-coloured splotches of sunburn on his arms and legs. He shook the image out of his mind as he emptied his pockets of all those old coins from the change after going to the off-license to buy some supplies for himself and his wife. He went through the scanner, then collected his bags and sat near the gate, waiting for the plane to arrive.

#

Lauren took her bags from the luggage rack and stepped off the train, making her way over to the check-in desk. An attractive woman with a charming smile and freshly whitened teeth greeted her.

‘There might be a bit of a delay with checking you in. Computers aren’t working, you see,’ she told Lauren, watching her as she smiled back. ‘Nice teeth. I use Colgate Max White.’

‘Colgate teeth?’ Lauren frowned. ‘They’re nice ones. Your teeth, I mean.’

The woman chuckled. ‘No, I use Colgate Max White toothpaste. What do you use?’ she enquired, grinning.

‘My parents make me use some silly organic shit. It works, though. Not literally shit,’ she stammered, smiling and shaking her head at the fact that they were having a conversation about toothpaste.

‘Computers are working now. Sorry about the conversation, I was trying to distract you so you wouldn’t complain. We’ve had a lot of complaints about the

computers not working, you see,' the woman informed Lauren, glancing up at her from the computer screen and grinning.

Lauren left after she was checked in, and went through security quickly, and into the waiting area near the gate. She sat, a little nervous about the flying part of the journey, but then she reminded herself that this was her chance to be independent, and she wanted to enjoy every minute of it. She considered going to Duty Free to buy a vodka and coke or something, but at the same time, she wanted to remember the flight, for some reason, so she ended up buying a coke, promising herself the vodka for later on.

She sat down again and drank it awkwardly, glancing around her to ensure she wasn't spotted by anyone; she didn't look old enough to be drinking alcohol, although it didn't look like vodka and coke and, and she was nineteen. Despite this, she had been baby-faced for most of her life, and the freckles didn't help either.

After a while of drinking her coke and sitting there watching flights take off, Lauren realised that the staff were starting to let everybody on the plane, and, her boarding pass clutched tightly in her left hand – the one she wrote with – she joined the rapidly growing queue. She was soon making her way towards the plane on the bridge, following what looked like hundreds of people to her, and she grinned, knowing that her holiday was about to begin.

Nicholas had already found his seat, and he hoped that there wouldn't be anyone sitting beside him. He knew someone would eventually have to sit beside him, but for the moment, he was simply enjoying his own company. When he was on the flight to France, he had been placed next to an elderly woman who kept talking to him about a film she had seen, although he kept telling her that he hadn't seen it. Then she had

moved on, starting to discuss her sex life with all kinds of millionaires, at which point, Nicholas – who was an extremely if not ridiculously polite person – put his phone on and plugged his earphones in. It hadn't helped, though; she had talked for the whole journey, but thanks to his new earphones, her voice had become background noise.

For this reason, Nicholas was a little apprehensive about who he would have to sit next to; he hated anyone who talked too much, although he didn't mind a nice, relaxed conversation. In fact, that was exactly what he needed for a journey that was less than four hours – anything over four hours, and he hated talking. He had the window seat, meaning he only had to sit next to one person, which he found a positive thing, as the man on the end of the row seemed to be quite interested in him, so having a barrier between Nicholas and the man would be essential.

The barrier did eventually arrive, but it was not a barrier, it was a woman who Nicholas' admirer seemed even more interested in. She didn't notice the eyes of both men on her as she sat, doing her seatbelt and flicking through the travel magazine. She glanced up at Nicholas with a tinted half-smile.

#

Lauren smiled at the man to her left, a little nervously.

'Hi. I'm Lauren,' she said, and looked back at the magazine again. Nicholas smiled.

'I'm Nicholas. Not Nick,' he told her. 'I hate being called Nick. It's not professional, and... well, I just hate it. So if you're going to talk to me, don't call me Nick.'

Lauren nodded, smiling and putting the magazine back into its slot. 'Well... the only really safe name is Nicholas,' she said.

‘What?’ Nicholas frowned, running a large hand through his hair self-consciously.

‘It was a joke – a play on words. It’s an Importance of Being Earnest quote. When Gwendolen tells Jack that the only really safe name is Earnest. Sorry, I didn’t explain that too well,’ she stammered, looking at the floor.

‘No, no, I get it. I watched The Importance of Being Earnest in the theatre once. Long time ago now, but I still remember it. It’s a great play,’ he chuckled, smiling at Lauren. He couldn’t quite figure her out yet.

‘Oh, Okay, well, that’s good. It really is a good play, you’re right – it’s very witty and the writing is simply incredible. This may sound terrible, but I prefer it to Shakespeare. God, I sound so fucking posh,’ she chuckled. Nicholas was about to reply when the plane started to accelerate.

He grinned. ‘This is the best bit. When the wheels are skidding against the floor and when it accelerates – it’s so thrilling.’ As the plane took off, Lauren grabbed Nicholas’ knee almost automatically and squeezed it until they were safely in the air and all they could see was Britain’s famous clouds.

‘You’re right – that was thrilling. Scary but thrilling,’ she sighed.

‘Do you ever stop smiling?’ Nicholas asked, rolling his eyes slightly at her enthusiasm.

‘I do, usually. But now I can’t stop,’ she answered, giving him a sarcastic grin. ‘I’m going to have some antipasti!’

‘What antipasti?’ Nicholas enquired, flicking through the plane’s slightly limited menu.

‘I don’t know – something I’ve never tried before. I’m going to have that pizza

thing with the fish – the small, pungent ones. Anchovies,’ she decided, getting a hostess to take the order. The hostess nodded and wandered off in search of the food.

‘Antipasti doesn’t mean pizza – and you’ll hate anchovies,’ he told Lauren.

She took the food when it arrived and ate an anchovy first, just to prove Nicholas wrong. When she took a bite, the saltiness of the fish filled her mouth. She struggled to swallow it, her hand clamped firmly over her mouth.

‘I said you wouldn’t like it,’ he muttered. She finally swallowed and glanced up at Nicholas. They both burst out laughing. Lauren continued to eat what she could of the pizza, and they talked throughout the journey.

‘You didn’t tell me my ears would be killing me because of the pressure!’ Lauren hissed at him, trying not to draw attention to herself as she sat, her fingers in her ears as they landed.

‘Mine hurt too, it’s fine – we’re in pain together, okay?’ he replied.

They got off the plane a while later, ears still ringing.

‘It was nice to meet you, anyway. Perhaps I’ll see you, yeah?’ Nicholas said.

‘Yes. Perhaps.’

Chapter Three

The passengers made their way out of the airport, with some difficulty because the place was so crowded and confusing. Many of them were dressed for English weather, wearing corduroys and flannels and, in some unfortunate cases, clothes made out of wool. This meant that, as well as being annoyed, confused and grumpy, they were also sweating profusely. The same could be said for Nicholas, who was wearing a knitted jumper and thick trousers. He stumbled over his laces a few times, cursing under his

breath and muttering at people as they pushed past him. He flicked his hair out of his face a little angrily and wiped his brow with a tissue. Looking up at the signs in Italian, he frowned and stood there for a while, trying to figure out where the hell he was and where the hell he was supposed to go. He eventually found a map of the airport nearby, but this didn't help, so he approached the man at the information desk.

‘English?’ Nicholas asked, and the man nodded. ‘Oh, thank God. How the hell do I get out of here?!’

‘Through the exit,’ the man told him.

Nicholas sighed. ‘No shit, through the exit – but where is the exit?!’ he cried.

‘Just keep walking and you’ll see two doors, above which is a sign saying exit. This is the exit,’ the man replied.

Nicholas nodded and made his way to the exit, dusting himself down and mopping his face with another tissue. Right outside the double doors, parked at a strange angle, was the bus shown in the advert for the tour, only it was far less photoshopped, being far smaller and dirtier. Its windows flecked with mud and the exterior painted in a bright yellow colour, it stood there looking completely out of place compared to the spotless taxis by its side. A group had already congregated around it, some of the people having talked to Nicholas on the plane. One of the men walked up to Nicholas and shook his hand firmly. The man was fairly short and thin, with rather small hands.

‘I am your tour guide. Welcome to the journey,’ he smiled. Nicholas nodded.

‘I see,’ he replied. ‘And when will that journey start exactly?’

‘I am sorry, Sir, we are only waiting for one more person, and then we will drive you to your hotels,’ he explained. Nicholas glanced back at the airport, watching the last

passenger, the girl who had sat next to Nicholas on the flight, as she strolled over to the bus. She blushed.

‘Shit, sorry, it took me years to find my suitcase,’ she said, and turned to Nicholas. ‘Hello again.’

‘Hello,’ he smiled.

They eventually got onto the rickety old bus, once all the passengers were introduced to one another, and then to the tour guide and to the driver. After a while, following a series of concerning noises from the engine of the bus, it began to make its slow but steady way down the road. The passengers were all in groups, apart from Nicholas, who was looking out of the window, counting the flecks of mud on it.

They drove for half an hour before they reached the first hotel. Recognising it, Nicholas hopped off the bus and walked up to the large double doors, followed by that girl from the plane. Laura or something, her name was.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked.

‘Lauren,’ she told him. ‘My name’s Lauren. I thought I told you that on the plane.’

‘Right, yes, of course. I’m Nicholas. Not Nick. But you already know that,’ he stammered.

‘I know, Nicholas Not Nick,’ she smiled. He chuckled half-heartedly.

‘Right, let’s check in then, shall we?’ he said after a while, leading the way into the hotel’s lobby.

It was fairly small and modest, a few chairs dotted around the room, all of them occupied by men who appeared like clones, all old, tanned and wearing glasses. The windows that looked out to the garden and the street beyond it were big, the frames

spotless but the sill cluttered with ornaments. From the ceiling hung a chandelier, small but very beautiful, the crystals catching the sunlight, throwing rainbows onto the dull white walls. The floor was carpeted, a bright red colour, rustic but clashing with the paintings of a calm, turquoise sea that hung on the wall. Lauren focussed her gaze on the desk and walked up to it.

‘Checking in. I’m Lauren,’ she smiled. The receptionist checked her laptop.

‘Ah, yes,’ she said, and handed Lauren a key, ‘Room 207.’

‘I’m Nicholas Marsh,’ Nicholas told the receptionist. She nodded, and handed him a smaller key.

‘Room 203. Very nice view,’ she grinned.

He smiled back, noticing her very white teeth, glinting under the light from the chandelier. Lauren nudged him and collected her bags, making her way to the steely, industrial-looking lift. Nicholas frowned.

‘Room 207 – that’s only on the second floor,’ he said. Lauren sighed.

‘Look, I don’t travel light enough to be able to survive walking up those steps. I’ll see you up there,’ she replied.

Nicholas nodded and glanced up at the spiralling staircase that loomed before him. It looked quite rickety and dangerous, the banisters wobbly and the stairs narrow and steep. But still, he decided to take the stairs, his first steps shaky and the next few stronger and braver. The metal of the banister was cold against his rough hand, his feet aching after the long journey of finding the airport exit.

It was quiet upstairs, apart from a cleaner who was whistling happily as she went from room to room. He had another flight of dodgy stairs to go before he reached his floor, where he found Lauren, standing in the middle of the corridor, looking very smug.

She grinned at him as he approached her.

‘I beat you,’ she giggled, almost childish in her glee as she teased him. ‘The lift was so clean – it was brilliant!’

Nicholas smiled and went into his room, as Lauren watched him. When Nicholas disappeared, Lauren reached into her pocket and took the key, slipping it gently into the lock and twisting it, making sure to remove it when the door opened. She shut the door behind her and stood in the corner of the room, taking it all in.

It wasn't a big room, that was for sure, although the light that flooded in from the large windows made it seem bigger. To the left was the door that led to the bathroom. Lauren pushed it open carefully and glanced at the bath and the shower and the sink with the hotel's own brand of shampoo and shower gel on top of it. This was the first time she'd had her own room in a hotel. After a while, she ventured further into the room. The bed was a double with beautiful covers, folded perfectly. She wandered over to the window, running her small hand down the silk curtains and watching the street below. The view from the window was great; she could see the sea in the distance, as well as the small square in the centre of the village. The street that the hotel was situated on was fairly quiet, despite the fact that a few tourists passed by on their way to the square and they took a few pictures of the traditional buildings. There weren't that many cars in the village, apart from closer to the beach, as many of the roads and streets were narrow, and a few of them were cobbled.

Lauren glanced up at the ceiling, with its spiralling pattern and its worn, rustic cracks that made the room feel more loved and more homely. She took a step back, smiling, and sat on the bed. The mattress was firm, just as she preferred it, and the pillows were soft and silky. She lay back, a little tired after the whole journey. She

closed her eyes and felt her muscles become less tense; although she loved travelling, she did sometimes feel the negative effects it had on her body and on the amount of energy she had. She was fully enjoying her independence and her freedom, and just lying there without her parents talking in the background, without always feeling their presence, made her feel so happy and so relaxed. She had the time to find herself now, and she couldn't wait to start. Closing the window first, slightly awkwardly, she slowly undressed and lay on the bed again, the sheets crisp and refreshingly cold on her bare skin, the cool air that surrounded her soothing. After a while of lying there and doing nothing, she became a little bored, and reached for her mobile phone. She dialled her home number and her father answered.

‘Hello? Lauren, is that you?’ he enquired.

‘Of course it’s me, Dad – this is my phone,’ Lauren replied.

‘Where are you right now?’ he asked.

‘Aren’t you full of questions,’ she remarked. ‘Well, I’m in my room now. At the hotel, I mean. It’s beautiful, Dad, it really is. And I enjoy having time on my own. It’s fun, actually. Pretty liberating.’

‘I see. Well, I’m glad you arrived safely. Would you like to talk to your mother?’ he asked.

‘Yes, put her on if you want. I’m not too fussed,’ Lauren replied, running her hand through her hair, frowning a little at how matted it was.

‘Hello, darling! Your father told me you’d arrived,’ her mother exclaimed.

‘I have, actually. I’m in my room now, all naked and exposed,’ Lauren giggled.

‘It’s not funny, young lady. Anyone could come in,’ her mother snapped.

‘But I locked the door, mother dearest,’ Lauren grinned.

‘What about the staff?’

‘I’m sure they’ve seen worse,’ Lauren told her. ‘Anyway, I need to go now. I’ll call you when I can. Have lots of fun in England and give my love to Dad.’

‘I’ll see you, darling,’ her mother said. She hung up. Lauren put her phone on the bedside table and closed her eyes again.

#

Nicholas had already settled into his room. He was putting his clothes into the wardrobe, puffing nonchalantly on a cigar he had found in a cabinet in the kitchenette, along with a lighter, although he didn’t smoke. He glanced at his shirts, a few Hawaiian ones and a few blue ones. Taking off his jumper and his trousers, he stood in the middle of the room wearing only boxers, the cigar hanging from his mouth, smiling. He lay on the bed and laughed, putting the cigar on the ashtray that stood on the bedside table. He laughed again and coughed a little, staring up at the spiralling patterns on the ceiling. He got up after a while and checked the mini-bar; there was a whole variety of alcoholic beverages, from well-known Italian wines to vodka and coke cans. He decided to wander away from it, having been unhealthy enough, what with his cigar. His phone rang loudly.

‘Hello?’ he said, sitting down on the comfortable bed and fiddling with the covers.

‘Hi, darling! Are you in the hotel right now? Was the journey alright?’ his wife enquired.

‘I’m in the hotel, yes, and the journey was great! How are you, Jen?’ Nicholas asked.

‘I’m alright, actually. Thing is, dumb and mushy as this may sound, I miss you,’

she replied.

‘Really? Christ, that really is dumb and mushy,’ he smiled. ‘No, I’m only joking.’

‘It’s nice to hear your voice again. Not that we’ve been apart for more than a day,’ Jen said.

‘It’s fine, Jen, I understand,’ he told her. ‘This place is absolutely beautiful, though. There’s a mini-bar in the room and I found a cigar in the cabinet.’

‘But you don’t smoke,’ Jen smiled.

Nicholas lay back against the soft pillows. ‘Guess what I’m wearing right now?’ he smiled. There was a pause before his wife answered.

‘I don’t know... the hot pink shirt I bought you? Or a Hawaiian shirt?’ she guessed.

‘Err, no, I’m wearing my boxers actually. The grey ones you like,’ he replied.

‘Nicholas, what’s wrong with you? Italy seems to be having an influence on you already!’ Jen cried, and Nicholas knew she was smiling.

‘I have to go now, but I’ll talk to you soon,’ he told her.

‘Have a good time and sleep well. When you sleep, I mean,’ she said.

Nicholas hung up and closed his eyes, smiling gleefully.

Chapter Four

The next day

At eight o’clock, Lauren’s alarm went off. She hit the clock angrily, grumpy and tired; last night hadn’t been amazing, what with the hot room and the street light directly below her window. She wasn’t used to the weather, and her hands were clammy, her bed

too warm. She stood up, naked, and checked her wardrobe for something appropriate to wear, but her hands slipped and fumbled and she was all fingers and thumbs. Wandering into the bathroom, she took a look at her reflection in the mirror and sighed. She was already a bit sunburnt, or at least her cheeks were more rosy than usual but not in a healthy way, and her hair was all over the place like it always was when she got up.

There was a towel near the shower unit, very white and clean, with the hotel's logo on it. She got into the shower unit and turned the shower on, feeling the water turn hot as it covered her body, the satisfying feeling making her smile. She spread the hotel's shower gel over her skin, watching the bubbles pop in her hands as she rubbed the gel into her soft arms. After a while, she stepped out of the unit again and dried herself off using the warm towel, walking slowly into the room. She took the first outfit she could find from the wardrobe; a blue dress and small beige sandals. She put them on and tied her hair back, deciding she couldn't be bothered to wear a bra today. Grabbing the keys, she left the room.

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Nicholas' alarm had gone off at quarter past eight, because it took him less time to get ready to go out. When he woke, his mouth was dry and his pyjamas clung to him with sweat. He ran his hand through his hair and walked slowly into the bathroom, undressing as he did so. He stepped into the shower unit and turned the water on, waiting for it to become warmer before he went closer and let the water wash away the sweat on his body. He used the shower gel that the hotel had provided, washing it off after a while and leaving the bathroom, a towel tied around his waist. He took a shirt from his wardrobe and put it on, the material absorbing some of the moisture left on his back. Selecting a pair of clean boxers and jeans, Nicholas put them on and, snatching

his keys from the bedside table, he left the room.

The tour bus was already waiting for them outside the hotel, and it made all sorts of dangerous noises as they pulled out of the narrow street. Lauren joined Nicholas, who was looking out of the window at the rows of houses as they passed by. They left the beach, long and covered with smooth golden sand, the sea a magnificent shade of blue, the waves smooth and gentle as they rolled onto the shore. Nicholas looked forward; the driver was listening to some 70s music, and the tour guide was sitting beside him, alternating between looking at the driver and looking out of the window at the passing countryside. He turned around, facing the passengers. He paused before speaking, smiling in what he thought was a friendly manner.

‘Today we will be looking around one of the biggest manor houses in Italy. It has over ten acres of land surrounding it, and it’s an incredibly popular tourist attraction. It may be quite crowded, just to warn you. There will be a guided tour of the place for those of you who would like that – otherwise, you are free to roam around by yourselves,’ the tour guide explained, then turned around again, watching the pretty countryside before them, taking in the little details like the small villages to the left or to the right, as well as the smaller lanes that some cars drove down.

Lauren leaned forward, looking out of the dusty window. ‘There’s so many roads – I wonder where they lead to, and where everyone in all those cars are going to and why,’ she said, glancing at Nicholas to see if he was listening.

‘That’s the beauty of it – I suppose we never will know, so we can make up situations. For example, the man over there in that silver car there may be going to work because he’s wearing a suit – or he’s attending church,’ Nicholas suggested.

‘I think you’re right! Perhaps he’s going to his daughter’s wedding,’ Lauren

replied.

‘Not all old people have children, you know,’ Nicholas chuckled.

‘In that case, he must be very lonely,’ she said, looking out of the window again.

‘And that small car. I think the driver is a teacher, because only teachers have such depressingly small cars. She’s off on a holiday to escape from her horrible job and her annoying pupils.’

‘Or she’s a hippie, on holiday with all her hippie friends, and they’re all crammed in the car, barefoot and singing happily,’ Nicholas laughed. Lauren glanced out of the window again, about to comment on the driver of another of the cars, when she noticed the manor house in the distance. She elbowed Nicholas.

‘Christ, it really is big, isn’t it? Look at all the land!’ she cried. Nicholas smiled.

‘The tour guide said it’d be big,’ he replied, attempting to hide his own excitement.

‘I suppose so,’ Lauren smiled, a little embarrassed. ‘But it’s just so magical, isn’t it?’

‘It really is,’ Nicholas answered, looking at the house as they drove closer. ‘It’s beautiful.’

Lauren looked at Nicholas for a while and smiled.

‘It is, it really is,’ she said, facing forward as the tour guide cleared his throat.

‘We’re about to arrive at the house. You can go wherever you want, and the bus departs at 1pm. Have fun, guys!’ he cried as they parked near the house, at a slightly awkward angle.

Lauren undid her seatbelt and sauntered up to the house, followed by Nicholas. There were already a few tourists milling around outside, taking a few pictures of the

house. Lauren and Nicholas wandered into the house, Lauren's camera poised as she surveyed the grand staircase. She took a picture on her small polaroid camera; one of the staircase and, at Nicholas' request, one of him sitting on the stairs. The pictures came out perfectly clear, and Nicholas slipped the one of him into his pocket once it had dried, so that it could be a memory he'd always have, proceeding to follow Lauren into the lounge as she beckoned.

It was furnished just as it would have been in the 19th century, quite similarly to some of the manor houses in England. There was a light, mint-green coloured fabric couch, which visitors could not sit on – naturally – as well as a writing desk, complete with paper and ink. In the corner of the room was a small piano with delicate keys, each covered by a layer of dust. It was the piano that Lauren decided to take a picture of, waving it in the air a little madly to make the photograph dry. She giggled as she took another photo of Nicholas, who was pretending to play the piano.

They then moved on, strolling into the dining room, in the centre of which was an incredibly large table, each place set meticulously with a range of cutlery in numerous sizes, as well as appropriate crockery. This time, Lauren decided not to take any photos. They made their way to the hall again, and then upstairs, to the first bedroom. There was a tour guide in the room, and he was explaining to the tourists that the room wasn't the biggest – although it seemed big enough, Lauren figured. It was the biggest room she had seen, with a four-poster bed, a small grey couch, a large fireplace and pretty pink curtains. Lauren held her camera near the window, capturing the curtains as well as the picturesque view of the gardens below. They followed the group of tourists with the tour guide, and were led into the biggest room in the house. It was truly magnificent, painted white to make it seem even more spacious, the bed taking up

less than a quarter of the room's space. Lauren glanced at Nicholas.

'I would never be able to fall asleep here, would you? It's just too bloody big,' she frowned. Nicholas nodded sagely and stepped out of the room again. Lauren led him to the next door to the right. It opened to a bathroom, an incredibly big one, with a beautiful modern bath and shower unit. Nicholas smiled.

'I think this part is private,' he said.

'Should we go and see the gardens?' Lauren asked Nicholas. He shrugged.

'I'm not really fussed.'

'Sorry... this isn't really your cup of tea, is it? You don't like this?' she frowned.

'No, I do, I really do – I go to manor houses all the time back in England – I just really don't mind what we do or what you want to do,' he assured her.

'Oh. Okay then, let's go to the gardens,' she smiled, skipping down the corridor, then turning around and waiting for Nicholas. He caught up with her quite quickly. Soon enough, they were in the hall again, looking down at the other tourists as they muttered and murmured to one another, taking what was probably too many photographs on their large cameras. Nicholas leading this time, they walked through the kitchen garden, stooping to inhale all the aromas of the herbs and everything there. Lauren turned to face Nicholas.

'Let's go to the real gardens to see if there's a forest or something,' she suggested, running over to the gate that led to the ten-acre plot. They sprinted across the open field, until Lauren spotted a clump of trees, not too far away.

'Does that look like a forest?' she asked Nicholas. 'I think it does.'

'A small one, perhaps,' he answered. 'But why do you want to find a forest?'

'I don't know. I've never been in one, but they look so nice,' she replied, making

her way over to the trees. It was a forest, a small one, but big enough for Lauren. She ran in between the trees, laughing and giggling like a little girl. Nicholas followed a little reluctantly, smiling at the Lauren's laughter. They stayed there for over two hours, trying to climb trees and playing hide and seek and taking hilarious pictures of one another, including one of Nicholas hugging a tree, until he checked his watch. He sat on a tree trunk, out of breath.

'We should make a move if we want to get the bus on time – it leaves in ten minutes,' he informed Lauren, who jumped down from her high position in one of the sturdy trees.

'Let's go, then,' she smiled, taking a final picture of the forest before she left with Nicholas. They reached the tour bus on time, and stood beside a couple of businessmen who were chatting quietly between each other. A few of them glanced at Nicholas.

'You from England too? London?' one of them enquired, nudging Nicholas.

'No, I'm from Surrey, actually. Sorry. Are you from London?' he asked.

'I am, yes. And so are they,' the man replied, and gestured to the other businessmen. Nicholas smiled and nodded, not quite sure how to reply. He glanced over at Lauren, who was standing in the same place as before, looking at the ground and holding a newspaper, trying to appear posh. After a while, they all clambered onto the bus and Nicholas joined Lauren, who had claimed the window seat this time.

She was silent when he regarded her, taking in everything about the way her messy hair fell upon her shoulders, the way her polaroid pictures hung halfway out of her pocket, the way she smelled of apples and fresh raspberries. Her camera was sticking out of her canvas rucksack, the bag covered in stickers and tie-dye patterns.

Lauren noticed him looking at it.

‘I’ve had it since I was nine. That explains the stickers,’ she informed him, dimples appearing as she smiled.

Chapter Five

The tour bus arrived at the hotel at half-past one, when many of the passengers had worked up an appetite and, with a little coaxing, the tour guide agreed to drive them all to a restaurant of his choice. He chose well and with knowledge, being a local in the village, so he ordered the driver to transport the group to a rather small, traditional looking place near the beach. The menu looked fairly simple, but the food smelled so delicious. Nicholas sat opposite Lauren, and was sandwiched between two burly, enthusiastic businessmen. Lauren smiled, noticing Nicholas’ awkwardness at the intimacy between him and the two men. A waiter approached them

‘May I take anyone’s order?’ he enquired, once the tour guide had informed him that most of the people on the tour were English. The businessmen went first, ordering a range of wine and cheeses, followed by a selection of pizzas and pasta dishes. They were probably aware that the price would be inevitably high, but none of them seemed particularly phased. Lauren then ordered the same wine as the businessmen and penne carbonara, Nicholas following with a coke and a traditional calzone pizza. Lauren laughed.

‘You’re so boring! We’re in a restaurant in Italy, with the best selection of wines I’ve ever seen, and you’ve decided to get a coke!’ she exclaimed, thanking the waiter as he poured a rather large amount of wine into her glass.

‘I just didn’t feel like drinking wine today. It’s not like I always like eating fish

and chips in England because we're famous for it. It's the same with haggis in Scotland,' he smiled.

'Sorry, you lost my interest when you went off on a tangent and started talking about England. I don't want to talk about England – it's boring, and we're not there now,' she told him.

'Fine – Italy it is, then, and enjoy the wine,' Nicholas replied. Lauren raised her glass and cleared her throat.

'A toast. To Italy, to this holiday, and to trying new things!' she cried, taking a sip of the wine. Everyone on the table, including Nicholas with his coke, repeated the toast and drank, in some cases, a little too much. A while later, the pizzas and Lauren's pasta arrived, as well as Nicholas' calzone. Lauren and Nicholas ate in silence, while the other tourists muttered and mumbled and discussed things amongst themselves.

When they had finished eating, they all wandered back to the bus and stepped onto it. One of the younger businessmen managed to grab a seat beside Nicholas before Lauren did, so she sat alone, on the other side. The man smiled at Nicholas.

'Hello. I'm Jeremy,' he said, extending a rather small, bony hand.

'I'm Nicholas. Nice to meet you,' he replied, shaking the man's hand.

'Sorry if I'm being a bit strange by sitting next to you, it's just that you seem quite interesting,' Jeremy replied. 'You live in Surrey, right? You're a psychologist?'

'I am, yes. You've done your background check,' Nicholas chuckled.

'Not really, I was just interested in how you find work; is there prejudice or discrimination or anything like that? I mean, especially since Surrey is such a conservative place,' he said.

'Excuse me?' Nicholas frowned.

‘Is it hard to live in Surrey, being a gay man? An openly gay man?’ Jeremy enquired.

‘Gay? Erm... sorry, I think you’ve got the wrong guy...’ Nicholas replied, smiling.

‘Oh, shit, I... I just assumed because of the LGBT flag on your bag,’ he stammered.

‘Ah, that’s my sister’s bag, you see. She’s the gay one. Lesbian, I mean,’ he explained. ‘So what do you do? Let me guess – are you a banker? Or a young entrepreneur?’

‘I’m an entrepreneur. An openly gay one. If I get my business out there, I’d love to get an investor. Anybody rich, really,’ Jeremy replied.

‘This place is full of rich businessmen, or so it seems. Apart from that, none of us are particularly well-off. We all get by, I suppose, but we’re not rich. It’s a bit mundane,’ Nicholas said. Jeremy nodded, undoing his seatbelt as the bus parked outside the hotel.

‘What room are you in, then, Nicholas?’ Jeremy questioned.

‘Room 203, Jeremy,’ he replied. ‘And you?’

‘Room 109. Downstairs. I suppose I’ll see you?’ he smiled. Nicholas nodded and left. Lauren soon caught up with Nicholas, who was making his way up the stairs.

‘He thought you were gay,’ she chuckled, poking his bag. He laughed.

‘Oh, well. It doesn’t happen all the time... and this is a holiday – an opportunity for new experiences,’ he grinned. They reached Room 203 and Lauren didn’t move.

‘Do you mind if I join you? I’ve got nothing to do and you’re the only person here who I know – just a little, of course, I’ve known you for a few days – so I was

hoping... well, I don't really know,' Lauren mumbled.

'Of course you can – there's no law against it or something,' Nicholas smiled. Lauren frowned.

'No law against what?' she asked, watching him as he carefully unlocked the door.

'Against a respectable man showing a woman around his room,' he answered, opening the door and gesturing for Lauren to enter first.

She did so, looking around the room quite intently. She then sat on the bed, smiling up at Nicholas.

'It's nice – pretty much the same as my room. But it's neater,' she informed him, glancing at the bedside table, which was set with an alarm clock, an eye mask and sleeping tablets. Lauren picked them up.

'Ah, those,' Nicholas muttered. 'They help with the insomnia. I find it hard to sleep – that's why I envy people with narcolepsy.'

Lauren looked at Nicholas blankly.

'It was a joke. Sorry. A rude and quite offensive one,' he sighed, sitting beside Lauren on the large double bed. 'Narcolepsy is a condition where people fall asleep at random times.'

'Oh. Right,' Lauren murmured, attempting to sound vaguely interested.

'Would you like something to eat?' Nicholas enquired. Lauren shook her head.

'Definitely not. I've got food babies right now, you see,' she answered. Nicholas laughed and lay back, his head resting lightly upon the soft, smooth pillows.

'So,' he began, smiling at Lauren. 'I was just wondering what it was that made you book this holiday. Especially considering the fact that it's your first holiday alone.'

‘Well... I’ve always wanted some time to myself – I knew that I wanted to go on holiday at some point, but I didn’t know when and where. So I subscribed to this online travel-thing that made me pay a ridiculous amount of money every month and then I found this holiday and I booked it instinctively and there you go. Here I am, with you now,’ she answered. ‘And how about you? How is it that I find myself beside you today?’

‘I just wanted to get away from... well, from normal life, actually. It’s too mundane. And I’ve never been to Italy before, so I checked it up, saw this place and booked it straight away. And, because my job is pretty flexible when it comes to holiday, I just picked a random time to leave. So here I am, beside you today,’ Nicholas explained.

‘Wow. So we’re both essentially here because we wanted to escape real life,’ Lauren mused.

‘Yes. Yes, I suppose you’re right. And don’t say it’s fate or something like that,’ he chuckled.

‘It’s fine, I’m not really one for clichés either,’ she laughed, tucking her hair behind her small ears.

They both smiled, an awkward silence between them.

‘Why did you want to see my room? Not that I want you to go, I’m just curious,’ Nicholas said.

‘Oh, I’m not really sure... I just didn’t want to spend the afternoon alone, you know? I’ve never spent the afternoon just talking to one person, about anything. So, as going on holiday is an opportunity to try new things, I decided that you should be the person I’m going to spend the afternoon with. Just... you know, talking,’ she explained.

‘Well, in that case, I’m flattered. Thank you for choosing me. Although I’m sure you’re regretting having made that decision – I’m afraid I can’t hold up a very good conversation,’ Nicholas replied.

‘You’ve been holding up this conversation pretty well so far, I’d say. But then again, I chose you because I know you. A little. We talked on the plane, I mean. Does that mean I know you?’ Lauren frowned.

‘I suppose so. Although you don’t know much about me, and I don’t know much about you,’ he answered.

‘I’d like to know more about you, though. If that’s okay?’ Lauren stammered, smiling at her awkwardness, and blushing a little.

‘Of course! And likewise, naturally. So? What is it that you want to know?’ he enquired.

‘You’re a psychologist, right? Do you like your job?’ she questioned.

‘I am a psychologist, yes. And I’m quite a stubborn person, meaning that if I ever had a job I hated, I’d quit straight away. In other words, yes, I like my job. Sorry, that all came out a bit muddled,’ Nicholas answered. Lauren smiled kindly at him.

‘It’s fine, I understood what you meant. I’m afraid I don’t really know what I want to do with my life yet, so I admire people who are so focussed about what they really want to do in life – I admire stubborn people like you,’ she explained.

‘Shouldn’t you be at University at your age?’ Nicholas frowned.

‘I should be,’ Lauren replied. ‘But my parents didn’t allow me to go. They said I wasn’t ready and I wasn’t independent enough yet. I suppose that sums my parents up, really.’

‘But you have no idea what you’d like to do if you could go to University? What

A-levels did you do?' Nicholas asked. Lauren shrugged.

'They were so boring that I can't remember, at the moment. But I hated them, all of the subjects I did, because my parents chose them for me,' she replied.

'Have you ever made your own decision about something in your life?' he questioned.

'I have, and so far, it's been the best decision for me,' she answered.

'What was that decision, then?'

'To come here, to Italy, of all places. To go on holiday, alone, for the first time. It may seem like such a small thing, but for me, it's massive. It took a lot of fighting for me to be here with you now, in Italy. First time I fought for myself, too,' she explained.

'In that case, thank you for making that decision – the first decision – for yourself,' Nicholas said. Lauren frowned.

'What?'

'Thank you. Because if you hadn't made the decision to come here, I wouldn't have met you, and that would have been extremely sad and boring, if I'm being honest,' Nicholas replied.

'Oh,' Lauren grinned, blushing. 'Well, I suppose you're right. Thank you.'

'We're so fucking British, aren't we?' he chuckled. 'We're painfully awkward and we seem to keep apologising and thanking each other. It's a bit tedious, don't you think?'

'I suppose so, but at the same time, it's part of our culture. So why don't we embrace it? Tedious as it is, it's part of what makes Britain different. Don't you think so?' she argued.

'Probably, yes. God, you're good at arguing, has anybody ever told you that?'

Nicholas smiled.

‘Yes. My parents always tell me that they can never win an argument against me,’ Lauren replied.

They lay beside each other for a while, silent again, but not awkward. Then Lauren turned to Nicholas and hugged him so tightly that he could feel her heart pumping against his chest. She smelled of wine and of pizza after the meal. She let go and started to leave the room, but before she left, she turned and waved to him as she stood in the doorway. Nicholas smiled, his head propped up on his right hand as he used his other hand to wave back. She smiled and turned around again, closing the door gently as she left.

Chapter Six

Both Lauren and Nicholas had managed to wake up in time for the tour, but this meant that they were somewhat groggy as they stepped onto the bus again, breakfast-deprived and abhorrently grumpy. Nicholas glared at the driver – probably without meaning to – as he sat beside Lauren, who seemed to be catching up on some lost sleep, her head tipping in the direction of her chest, her hair still messy, her eyes still closed. Nicholas glanced at her and couldn’t help smiling at her rather placid expression, ruined when the bus backfired and they set off. She opened her eyes and grumbled, frowning.

‘I was sleeping,’ she sighed, squinting at Nicholas in the bright morning sun. He smiled.

‘I know – I didn’t wake you, we just started to drive. I’m guessing you didn’t sleep well last night?’ he asked.

‘I don’t think anyone did – we all look so tired and annoyed and fucking

grumpy,' Lauren replied.

'I love it how we never know where we're going to go on a tour – it's rather mysterious and exciting,' Nicholas grinned.

'Exactly! Keeps the element of surprise in the whole experience, right?' she laughed, looking out of the window now that her eyes had adjusted to the harsh light. They were in the countryside now, driving past some fields that didn't seem all that different to the ones in England. Beside the fields – to the left, specifically – the horizon was blue, telling the passengers that they were travelling further along the coast. They weren't far away from the hotel, as they had only been driving around for ten minutes. However, the promenade couldn't be seen, meaning they have covered a lot of ground in the short amount of time.

'So? Where do you think they're going to take us this time?' Nicholas asked. Lauren shrugged.

'I don't know... some sort of special site. I've never used sibilance this much, you know,' she chuckled.

'I don't think anyone has,' Nicholas grinned, watching the small clouds pass through the sky.

'You know, I'm glad that I booked this holiday – we're not even halfway through it yet and I'm already having the time of my life!' she cried, starting to rummage around in her rucksack and pulling out a polaroid camera. 'I bought this especially for the trip – it's such a cute camera, but it was bloody expensive. It might be a bit of a cliché, but I think it's really nice.'

'It looks like it serves a purpose... that's all that matters to me, really. I can understand that it might look aesthetically pleasing, but as long as it takes photos, I

don't care what it looks like,' Nicholas explained.

'Yes, but you're a man – you're logical, not heartfelt. I'm just making assumptions, though – I don't know you that well yet, but that's how it seems to me,' she informed him, smiling.

'I am heartfelt with some things; I'm just not very nostalgic, I suppose. There's no point in getting all sentimental about the past, because it's all gone now, and if I do think about the past, I think about it too deeply, and that makes you depressed – so you're right, I might not come across as all happy and nice and nostalgic. But I am heartfelt,' he said.

Lauren nodded and glanced outside; they were driving through some fields that were identical to the ones they had passed before. She frowned and looked closer, finding that the sea was no longer in view, and from this, she concluded that they were not in the same place – they had made significant progress, in fact.

'Wherever we're going, it seems to be far away,' she mused, still gazing out of the dusty window.

'Far away?' Nicholas frowned. 'Lauren, we've been travelling for fifteen minutes – it's not that bad.'

'That feels like a long time – hours feel shorter than this,' she muttered.

'Oh. Must be my atrocious company, then,' Nicholas smiled. Lauren elbowed him fiercely.

'Shut up! I like your company a lot, it's not atrocious, for God's sake! And I do enjoy talking to you, I just don't like travelling that much. It's a bit boring. Especially in cars or buses or coaches. I can deal with planes and trains, though,' she explained.

'Fair enough – I understand where you're coming from, I mean. I don't find

going anywhere by car particularly interesting, unless it's with a fast car,' Nicholas said, watching the fields as they passed, the sun slowly getting hotter and more intense.

'Time seems to go by so fast here, though. I know it does that when you're having fun, but here, it's different – you have to have slow, beautiful moments that are soft and quiet, but at the same time, you need to have the ones that go by too quickly, the ones that you don't get to savour.'

Lauren nodded, but her attention began to focus on what she could see outside. Nicholas eventually looked too and saw an art gallery with tall pillars and regal stairs; it was such a beautiful palace, almost, that celebrated and paid respect to art, both classical and contemporary, as well as everything in between. They stopped in the car park, which was full of sports cars as well as a few Rolls-Royces and a couple of convertibles.

The passengers of the tour all stepped out, feeling a little ashamed of the bright yellow, dirty bus in comparison to the expensive cars; yet nobody really dwelled on it, being too preoccupied by taking pictures of the building itself, as well as its grounds. Even Lauren succumbed to its subtle charms, forcing her to take the polaroid camera from her rucksack. She ended up taking five photographs – all from different angles – before joining Nicholas as they entered the building.

It was grand and open, a little intimidating.

'Let's walk arm in arm,' she told Nicholas. He smiled at her.

'Why?' he asked.

'I want to look posh. And besides, this place is overwhelming,' she answered.

'Fine,' he said, and they walked arm in arm, inspecting the artwork. There was nothing specifically well-known in the collection, but that didn't mean the artwork

wasn't beautiful. In fact, some of it was better, Lauren found, than the works of Picasso and the like, but then again, she never did understand the point of cubism. Art didn't particularly interest her, but she knew beauty when she saw it – and it was present in all the paintings. There were some of landscapes, as well as some incredible portraits, and then there were a few absurd collages that weren't as impressive as the other pieces.

They continued to stroll past the exhibitions, both in their own world, yet still arm in arm. Nicholas finally nudged Lauren.

'Look, over there – it's magnificent,' he said, nodding in the direction of one of the larger paintings, the one with the grand, golden frame. They moved closer, and Lauren could see that it was one of the more classical paintings, of a small boat out at sea during a storm. The man on the boat was still out on the deck and, having abandoned all hope of steering successfully, he was sitting there with his legs crossed, calming his frightened dog. Lauren frowned.

'Magnificent?' she asked. 'It's powerful and realistic, I'll give you that, but a photographer could easily recreate that with photoshop. I get the message, I mean, but that's all there is to it.'

'Fine – in that case, show me something that couldn't be recreated at all,' he ordered.

She smiled and led him over to another of the paintings in the golden frames. It was of an Italian seaside village, similar to the one they were staying in; it was quite hilly, and the buildings were brightly-coloured and idyllic. But in the corner of the painting was a ship, letting off an enormous amount of steam, and the pollution that it created was spreading through one side of the landscape. Half of the village was peaceful and the other half was in danger, hidden.

‘It’s interesting,’ Nicholas commented. ‘But I’ve got something better to show you.’

He led her to another painting, further down the line of artwork, in a place where it looked rather inconspicuous, yet it was the best one. Lauren looked at it, and then at Nicholas.

‘It’s beautiful, Nicholas – honestly, it’s incredible – you have such good taste,’ she said, watching it again. ‘I didn’t think you liked this kind of thing, though.’

‘Then you don’t really know me that well, do you?’ he chuckled, walking away as the tour guide called them back to their silly yellow bus; they had spent more time than they were aware of in that gallery, so they left it, and the painting of the woman in the overgrown vineyard, the one that Nicholas had liked so much.

They got on the bus and re-claimed their seats.

‘We’re going to get some breakfast soon, so don’t worry,’ the tour guide announced as they drove off.

‘I didn’t think you were that kind of person... I thought you’d prefer the deeper things like the painting of the boat that you showed me, or the painting I showed you,’ Lauren said.

‘I like the deep ones, but you need a balance. Things can be deep and beautiful at the same time, is what I’m trying to say, and this painting was. It was mesmerising,’ he explained.

‘Don’t worry, I understand. You just surprised me, that’s all,’ Lauren smiled, watching the landscape roll by as they continued to search for a place to eat a belated breakfast.

‘What are you doing tonight? Because I want to see the best of Italy while I’m

here, and I don't want to see it alone. I don't know where to go,' Nicholas stammered.

'I'm not doing anything tonight, actually, but I have no clue what to do either,' Lauren replied.

'Just think of something you've always wanted to do in Italy. That's what I told myself, but now I'm too overwhelmed by this place to think straight,' he sighed.

'I know something! I've always wanted to get ice cream from a really nice ice cream shop or parlour or whatever it's called. Sorry, not ice cream – gelato,' she suggested.

'That sounds incredible, but we can't spend a whole night eating gelato – we can get some, but we need something else to do. Something we wouldn't be able to do in England. Something... unique and specific. Only I don't know what,' he replied.

They were silent for a while, both thinking about what they would do tonight. Nicholas came up with completely random ideas such as going swimming or watching a film, but he eventually concluded that they were things you could do in England, so he dismissed both ideas. Lauren, however, was thinking things through quite logically, which was unlike her, and she managed to come up with three ideas; watching a play, gate-crashing a party or having a picnic on the beach, but she couldn't choose because she liked all three options. She listed her ideas to Nicholas.

'I like the idea of a play...' Nicholas began, before gently tapping the sleeping tour guide on the shoulder. 'Are there any theatres near the hotel that you know of?'

'There's one that's a fifteen-minute walk from the hotel actually, a country house that has been revamped as a theatre – it's showing La Traviata, you know, the opera – is that your cup of tea, as they say in England?' the tour guide said. Nicholas turned to Lauren.

‘An opera sounds amazing – I’ve never watched one,’ Nicholas grinned.

‘I never thought I’d say this, but it does sound fun – and why not? We’re in Italy, the country that produced Pavarotti,’ Lauren replied, smiling.

‘Right then, we’re going to watch an opera. When we get back to the hotel, you can come to my room and we can book the tickets – I brought my laptop here, you see. I know, I’m a workaholic, but I haven’t even switched it on yet. So? Is that a yes?’ he checked.

‘Of course!’ Lauren cried. ‘As long as we can have some gelato.’

Chapter Seven

Once she had finished booking her ticket on Nicholas’ computer, Lauren returned to her room. She had one hour to decide what to wear; she knew it had to be smart, but it had to be beautiful at the same time. Searching through her wardrobe, she found nothing that would suit the occasion, until the glimmer of the sun on something folded in the corner of the wardrobe caught her eye. She unfolded the dress; it was a light gold colour, reaching her ankles as she held it against her body. It was the dress her mother had worn to prom, yet it was still beautiful today, now that it finally fitted Lauren. She put it on carefully so as not to damage it, and with her feet still bare, she tiptoed into the bathroom and watched her reflection. She looked nothing like her mother; she was younger and she was free – but she did look captivating in that dress. It even came with a small jacket that matched the colour, and she remembered suddenly, as she gazed at her reflection, how she used to try on her mother’s dresses and she used to feel like a princess. Today was no different.

She tied her hair back neatly, into a tight bun, but when she looked back at her

reflection, it didn't suit the dress, so, with her nimble, thin fingers, she took her hair down again and pulled it to the right, so that it cascaded down her bare shoulder. She smiled, satisfied, then set about the task of searching for some appropriate shoes to wear; the gold sandals caught her eye, but they were not formal enough, she decided, which made her think of the kitten heels she had brought with her. They were not gold, but they still worked with the outfit, so she put them on and moved back into the bathroom to do her make-up.

#

Nicholas was doing his tie in front of the mirror in the bathroom when he glanced at his hair, suddenly remembering that he needed to look as smart as possible. One hand fumbling around his head and the other trying to undo his tie, he fretted and fussed over his appearance as he grew quite nervous. He took a black bow tie from the wardrobe and tied it as carefully as he could, having forgotten about his hair. Finally, he grabbed the keys, ran a hand through his neat silver hair, and left the room, smiling. They were supposed to meet in the lobby, so he skipped downstairs and sat on one of the regal armchairs, waiting for Lauren to join him. Blinking anxiously, he glanced at his expensive watch; fifteen minutes before the time they had arranged to meet – but he always liked to be early.

Yet, when he looked up, there she was, looking incredible in her golden dress and kitten heels. He couldn't help but smile at the thought of accompanying her to the opera. She immediately took his arm as they left through the double glass doors of the hotel. Nicholas looked at the floor.

'I'm lucky to be able to spend the evening with you,' he told her. 'And I'm glad the place is fifteen minutes away. In fact, I wish it were further away.'

‘What makes you say that?’ Lauren chuckled, shaking her head at his absurdity.

‘I’m trying to tell you that I like spending time with you,’ he sighed, his eyes still focussed on the floor.

‘Oh,’ Lauren said, smiling. ‘Thanks.’

They chatted casually as they walked, until they reached the theatre. It was surrounded by a pretty garden with trimmed grass and flowers growing in rows and numerous other formations. The theatre itself almost looked like a manor house, with a large, inviting entrance and windows with white lace curtains. In the dull light of the later afternoon, a few lamps were lit slightly beneath the building, making it glow enchantingly. There were lots of people milling around outside, presumably tourists – as they had cameras – whereas locals and a few journalists had formed a queue in front of the entrance. The queue moved quickly and they were soon in their seats – the last two they could find beside one another. The inside was even more astounding, with its bold, bright red décor and the different rows and levels where the audience sat; it was so magnificent, more so than anything either of them had seen. From the ceiling hung an enormous, majestic chandelier, in the middle of an incredible classical painting, with clouds and cherubs. Lauren squeezed Nicholas’ hand, trying not to utter a noise in appreciation of how utterly beautiful it was. She looked around, watching as the rows quickly began to fill up and the room became more and more crowded. The orchestra began to tune up and Nicholas grinned, turning to Lauren.

‘This is my favourite part of a musical performance – but it’s the most underrated part. It’s such an incredible noise, when an orchestra tunes up; and it brings a promise of so much more to come,’ he explained.

Then suddenly, the doors all closed at the same time and the lights went down, a

light going up on the orchestra pit. The conductor came on and the audience applauded as he turned and picked up his baton. Slowly, the music came to life, quiet and gentle at the beginning, but always beautiful. It soon grew in tempo and volume, yet it still remained mesmerizingly gentle. It then slowed down and came to an end, sending the audience into a triumphant chaos of cheering and clapping. The conductor remained still amidst the uproar, and it was only when they had finished that he began to conduct again.

This time, however, his movements were different, more enthusiastic and stronger, as the melody was quick and powerful as the curtain rose and the audience clapped again. The stage was incredible, with so many people milling about on it, a few of them sitting at tables. The costumes were impeccable and all spotless, with the men in suits with white bow ties, the women wearing enormous dresses. They soon began to sing, the notes and the melody light, just like the music that seemed to remain in the background now. The music suddenly changed again, the tone more triumphant and the tempo faster. Lauren and Nicholas watched intently as one of the male singers moved forward, holding a glass of champagne. His voice was deep and rich with a surprisingly strong vibrato. The rest of the singers joined in, followed by a solo from one of the female singers.

It was a joyful celebration of talent and ability in every way, as they sang and laughed and paraded around the stage, sometimes doing all three at the same time. The song ended with a bang, and the audience applauded yet again. They began to sing again, but then the main female character almost fainted and began to cough, as her guests at the party left the room. This was followed by a duet between her and the main male character, at the end of which they kissed and the audience broke out into

tumultuous applause again. The guests filled the stage once more, and they all sang in unison. Then the woman was left alone and performed a truly amazing and well-sung aria, with an unbelievable amount of powerful emotion. Her vocal range was so impressive, for she could perform both the high notes and the low notes with equal skill, all while moving around the stage and making her job seem perfectly easy. When she had finished, the curtain went down to signal the end of the first act, and the lights came on. Lauren turned to Nicholas, grinning happily.

‘It’s great!’ she cried. ‘I have no idea what’s going on, but it’s great – I like it! Do you?’

‘I’d be a fool not to like it – anyone would. Their voices are incredible, and the orchestra is brilliant, just like the conductor,’ he replied, smiling fondly at Lauren’s sheer excitement.

They sat for another fifteen minutes before the conductor got the orchestra started again and the curtain went up. There was only the male lead on the stage, and he sang a powerful song, looking quite decent, Lauren thought, in his dressing gown and carrying a glass of champagne. He finished with a strong high note, and the audience clapped and cheered loudly. He was then joined by the female lead, also in a dressing gown, as well as a man in a suit and a top hat. He left and the female lead rang for a servant, whom she gave a letter to, before continuing with her solo. She was joined by the male lead again, who was left alone and given a letter. This led him to sing an incredibly emotional solo, then the man in the top hat returned. They sang together for a long time, and the curtain went down again.

This time, Nicholas and Lauren were too captivated by the performance to discuss anything. When the opera continued, the women were dressed in red, the men

wearing the same white bow tie suits that they wore in the first act. They all sang, and a few of the women – the ones dressed in tight-fitting black costumes – danced and played tambourines. The female lead was wearing a large black dress. Then the guests started to exit, and the lead was taken out of the room by another man. She ran on stage after a couple of seconds and sang a duet with the male lead, who had followed her onstage. Lauren and Nicholas watched, in utter awe of the singers and of the opera, until the curtain went down and the act ended.

When the curtain came up again, the female lead was lying in bed, and the music was melancholy, the lighting blue and dim, a candle beside her bed. The story progressed and it was easy to understand now, as they sang and cried and handled their songs with such subtle and carefully crafted emotions, tempos and dynamics. By the end, when Violetta, the female lead, was dead in Alfredo's arms – Alfredo being the male lead – Lauren was sobbing, and even Nicholas was sniffing rather quietly. The lights came on and everybody started to get ready to go. Nicholas stood and nudged Lauren, who was frozen to the spot. She looked at him, her large eyes welling with tears.

‘Why do so many people in these stories have to die for love?’ she asked Nicholas, still sitting.

‘It's a tragedy, Lauren – and it's just a story. Things like that don't always happen in real life,’ he assured her, grabbing his jacket and putting it on. ‘Now, then. Come on, let's get that gelato.’

Lauren nodded, smiling and dabbing her eyes with a crumpled tissue. Nicholas took a clean handkerchief from his breast pocket and handed it to her, smiling as they left the theatre.

‘Now that’s something that does happen in real life,’ he grinned, watching as she wiped her face and gave it back to him. ‘Keep it, please. I never see anyone under forty with a handkerchief... I’d like to think I’ve made some difference to that.’

They found a gelato shop and Lauren got stracciatella gelato, and Nicholas got tiramisu gelato, something he had never tried before. He liked it, fortunately, and he ate it hungrily as they walked back to the hotel. Lauren seemed to greatly enjoy hers too, so neither of them talked until they had finished eating, and when they had, they were just happy to stroll along casually, in silence, but a comfortable one. They soon reached the hotel again, and were greeted by those glass double doors. Nicholas made sure that Lauren went in before him, as he wanted to be the perfect gentleman, and they made their way upstairs. Lauren stood with Nicholas, outside her room.

‘Thanks for tonight. It was amazing, honestly. And we had gelato,’ she smiled.

‘No problem. And sleep well,’ he said. and hugged her.

She took the key from her pocket and opened the door, watching Nicholas walking down the corridor before she went into her own room.

Chapter Eight

Nicholas had managed to wake up before eight in the morning, now standing in front of the mirror wearing his swimming trunks, holding a waxing strip and glaring at his chest. After a while, he put down the strip and ran his hands through his hair a little self-consciously, trying to flatten it. He strolled over to the wardrobe and threw on the first shirt he could find, considering that he’d probably take it off as the day went by and as the air became hotter. Taking a towel from the bathroom, he began to dab his hair dry, sitting on the double bed and flicking through the channels on the old-fashioned

television. When his hair was drier, he opened his fridge and peered inside, finding a small carton of tropical juice, a block of cheese of some sort, while the olive oil and the ciabatta bread could be found in the cupboard. He took the cheese, the bread and the olive oil and constructed a slightly makeshift sandwich for breakfast, deciding to eat it while watching an Italian talk show. There were numerous celebrities on the show, the women all beautiful, which somewhat delighted Nicholas as he sat there, staring in awe at the jittering screen.

He smiled, running his hands through his dark grey hair again, glancing at the small droplets of water on his large, pale hand. He found that he rarely tanned, usually burning more than anything, so he was always either pale or bright red. He checked his watch – it was only quarter to nine, but the heat from the sun made it feel like it was noon already. The beach was fairly empty today, the sea a perfect turquoise colour, not polluted with anyone this time, the small fishing boats bobbing on the calm waves, the wind quiet and gentle. Nicholas looked at his sandwich again and continued to eat it.

#

At half-past eight, Lauren was still showering. She had decided to use the hotel's expensive-looking shampoo to wash her hair with, and was now just enjoying the feeling of the hot water against her tanned body. She checked her hair for traces of shampoo that she might have forgotten to remove, but finding nothing, she turned the shower off and stepped out of the bathtub, wrapping a towel around her chest before making her way towards her wardrobe. She put her bikini on, covering it with a loose shirt which was too big for her and a small pair of denim shorts. Patting her hair dry with the towel, she put on her flip-flops, slightly threadbare what with all the walking she had been doing.

She sat on the bed, her feet dangling and swinging as she whistled a silly tune, glancing at her hair and realising that it certainly wasn't dry yet. Deciding to let it dry naturally, she wrung it out a final time, before letting it loose on her shoulders. She walked into the bathroom and put the towel back on the shelf, stopping to glance at her blurred reflection in the mirror. Embarrassed about her vanity, she tucked her wet hair behind her ears and sat down on the bed again. She reached for the remote control and turned on the television, flicking through the endless channels. Finding nothing of interest, she turned it off and lay back against the pillow, taking the opportunity to catch up on some sleep before nine o'clock, when the tour bus arrived at the hotel to take them to the beach.

But the sunlight was glaring at her, so she got up, with some difficulty after falling asleep and closed the curtains, collapsing onto the bed again when she had finished.

#

At nine o'clock exactly, the tinny honking of the tour bus greeted Nicholas and woke up Lauren. She grabbed her bag and sprinted out of the hotel, panting as she made her way to the empty seat, which amused a few passengers, who became awkwardly quiet when she turned to face them. Nicholas followed shortly, seeing her and immediately sitting beside her. She glanced at him.

'Oh, it's you again,' she said. 'You're the psychologist. Nick, wasn't it?'

'Nicholas. And yes, it's me. How are you?' he asked.

'After last night? Well, my eardrums still haven't quite recovered, but I slept really well,' she grinned.

'It was amazing, though, wasn't it? Last night?' Nicholas smiled.

‘It was brilliant. I’ve never experienced anything like it before,’ she smiled.

There was a pause before she sniggered quietly.

‘What’s so funny?’ Nicholas frowned.

‘God knows what people think we’re talking about when we refer to “last night”,’ she giggled.

‘Shit, you’re right, actually,’ Nicholas chuckled. The engine of the bus began to hiss and backfire before the bus pulled out of the tiny street and began to cruise down the road at top speed.

‘Now, this beach may not be famous, but it is most certainly beautiful,’ the tour guide explained, ‘and I know many of you are British, so you love a day at the seaside. So that is exactly what we’re going to have! We will meet at 1pm to walk to a nearby restaurant. And just remember to have fun!’

‘I’ve always seen the beach in the distance, and I’ve always wondered what it’s like,’ Lauren said, looking out of the window. They were turning into the road next to the beach. The driver parked at a strange angle, making a few pedestrians on the pavement scatter, looking quite terrified.

The passengers disembarked, picnic blankets and cameras in hand, the sun in their eyes as they stumbled closer to the sea. Nicholas found a place to put his beach towel, quite far away from the sea but not too close to the road at the same time. Lauren placed her towel beside his and set her bag down on the smooth sand, taking her shirt and shorts off to reveal her bikini, spreading sun cream on her arms and on her legs. She handed Nicholas the sun cream.

‘Could you do my back, please?’ she asked.

He squeezed some of the cream onto his hands and began to spread it across her

back. Her skin was already hot under the intense sun and soft, and he found his hands lingering slightly once the sun cream was evenly spread. She was fairly tanned, and he could see, for the first time, the birthmark on her back where her skin was darker than the rest of her skin. She noticed his warm hands lingering on her back, so she turned to face him.

‘Thanks,’ she said. He looked away, embarrassed.

‘No problem,’ he replied, dragging his left hand through the smooth grains of sand that surrounded his towel. Everything was so warm under the sun, the sea sparkling and inviting, but Nicholas was purely captivated by Lauren as she lay there, delicate beads of sweat forming on her motionless eyelids, her fingers running up and down her towel. He watched her turn to him, frowning as she noticed his smile as he watched her.

‘What are you grinning at?’ she smiled, adjusting her bikini a little. He chuckled.

‘Nothing – I was just smiling. It’s a beautiful day, right?’ he replied, dusting a few grains of sand off his arm. She shook her head, still smiling and watching him as he began to relax, leaning back with his arms folded beneath his head, closing his eyes.

When it looked like he was asleep, Lauren took her sunglasses off her head and tickled Nicholas’ nose with them. He scratched his nose and sneezed violently, glancing at her as she giggled childishly.

‘You’re the one grinning now,’ he chuckled, scratching his nose again. She buried her face in her hands, still laughing. He smoothed out the creases in his towel, feeling its heat on his coarse hands, its material rough but comfortingly soft. He glanced at the horizon for a while, watching the small boats bobbing gently on the sea, the fishing nets having disappeared, being used mainly in the early morning, when the sea

was emptier and calmer.

There were a few people swimming in the deeper part of the ocean, not shallow enough to stand up in, but not so far out that the water was dark blue – where they were, in fact, the water was a perfectly light turquoise colour, just like the shallower water. The sun was hot for the morning, the breeze not as prominent as it had been the last couple of days, but it was fine because it meant that it was hotter, so Lauren could tan more.

Nicholas ran his hand down his arm, a twinge of stinging pain making him turn to check his rough skin. His arm was slightly burned by the hot sun, an alarmingly bright red colour, so he proceeded to dab it gently with the aloe vera gel his wife had forced him to pack ('if you get sunburned in Wales, you'll get sunburned in Italy') and checked for any other signs of sunburn on his body. Finding nothing, he seemed to relax again, glancing at Lauren, who had been watching him for a while.

'Looks like you don't burn very easily,' he told her, covering his face with a small wet towel.

'You look like you've got fever, with that stupid towel on your face,' she chuckled, swiping it off his forehead. It fell to the ground quite unceremoniously.

'Now the bloody sun's in my eyes,' he snapped, using his rucksack to keep the sun away from him.

'Then bring sunglasses,' she told him. He nodded.

'I should... they're in the hotel you see. I don't look as sexy as you do when I'm wearing them,' he explained.

'It's the beach... nobody has to look sexy – just enjoy it, Mr Marsh,' Lauren shrugged, standing up in front of him. 'Let's see how cold the water is!'

She began to sprint towards the ocean, looking over at Nicholas who was strolling behind her at a leisurely pace. The sea met Lauren with a high wave, spraying her with salty water, making her jump back a little. Nicholas eventually joined her as the waves lapped gently at the shore. The water was refreshing, but it certainly wasn't cold. Lauren began to wade in deeper until the sea surrounded her waist. She called to Nicholas, then went under the water, appearing a few seconds later, flicking her hair back and striding towards the shore. Nicholas chuckled as she tripped over a spade that had been buried in the sand, and she limped back, embarrassed but smiling. They walked back to their towels, Nicholas checking his watch.

'We need to get to the bus – it's almost one o'clock and they said they'd find us a restaurant,' Nicholas explained, beginning to roll up his towel.

Lauren nodded and began to pack up her towel, too. She looked over at the road; the bus was still parked there, and a few people were already standing outside it. She waved to them and one of the businessmen beckoned to her. She turned back to Nicholas.

'Come on, let's go,' she said, beginning to jog over to the bus, Nicholas sauntering behind her. The tour guide greeted them.

'We'll walk to the restaurant – it's not far and we all need some exercise,' the tour guide explained, beginning to walk, very slowly, down the road. The houses were all so charming, with high balconies and brightly coloured doors and window frames. As they walked further down, the beach became thin until the road turned into a promenade, the pavement lined with trees and benches where a variety of people sat, from tourists to locals themselves. Nicholas put on his shirt again, doing up all the buttons with the utmost precision, making sure that not a thread was loose. A while

later, they crossed the road and turned right, into another fairly wide lane, at the end of which stood the restaurant, an enormous building with a balcony and a large front garden, where many of the customers sat. It looked more like a villa than a restaurant, but it really was stunning.

Chapter Nine

They went in and the businessmen found a table for themselves, as well as Lauren and Nicholas. The menus were large and elegant, furnished with a red bow on the front. Nicholas scanned the list of dishes, glancing at Lauren to see if she had decided yet. She smiled at him and shrugged, trying to decide what to order. When the waiter came with his smart suit and his small notebook and fountain pen, one of the businessmen ordered a bottle of the best wine for all of them. He looked over at Nicholas and Lauren.

‘Are you okay with that? The choice of wine, I mean?’ he asked politely.

‘Sure – I’ve never heard of whatever it was that you ordered, but then again, why are we on holiday, if not to try new things?’ Lauren replied. Nicholas chuckled softly to himself, watching Lauren as she attempted to translate the menu into English. Her eyes flickered around the pages for some sign of a cognate and for any sign of a dish she actually knew. The traditional food was there; the bruschetta and the garlic bread, as well as the spaghetti Bolognese and the lasagne, but she wanted to try something she’d never get in England. Eventually, she found a starter.

‘It’s an Italian meat sharing dish – there’s some pasta, some bread, different types of ham and bacon and different dishes, all very small, including lots of different types of meat,’ the waiter explained, smiling at Lauren. His youthful handsomeness annoyed Nicholas a little, especially now that Lauren was frozen to the seat, staring up

into the waiter's big eyes.

'Is... is it a main meal, then? Not a starter?' she stammered, still looking up at him, grinning.

'It is a main meal, yes,' he replied, taking the menu from her, smiling as she made sure their hands lingered for a little too long. Nicholas scowled at the waiter as he ordered a pepperoni pizza. He took a sip of the wine, letting it stay on his tongue for a while before he swallowed, his mouth filled with its beautiful bittersweet flavour. He sat back in his seat, closing his eyes and relaxing before the waiter trudged over and slammed Nicholas' food before him. Lauren's dish arrived a few minutes later, on numerous plates and in numerous bowls. There was so much more food than she had imagined, but one of the businessmen, a younger and quieter one, offered to share with her because he was hungry, but mainly because he found her to be the prettiest human being he had ever seen. Nicholas, feeling a little left out, chomped aggressively on his pepperoni pizza, keeping a lookout for any beautiful waitresses. Lauren, halfway through a miniscule carbonara dish, noticed Nicholas' sulky pout and stabbed some of the pasta with her fork, holding it in front of his mouth.

'Try some!' she grinned. 'It's so good.'

He leaned forward, still slowly, and took a bite. He chewed carefully and thoughtfully.

'Not bad,' he said, washing it down with another sip of wine. She smiled at his grumpiness and ate more of the carbonara, before taking a tentative sip of the wine.

'Well?' Nicholas enquired. 'How is it?'

'Bitter... but not terrible,' she replied, taking a sip. 'It's growing on me, actually.'

Nicholas chuckled, placing his knife and fork on the plate as he finished the pizza.

‘Does anyone want dessert?’ he enquired, but everyone shook their heads, too full to even begin to think about ordering more food. Lauren started to stack up the plates.

‘Should we go, then?’ she asked. Nicholas nodded, so they all payed and left. By the time they had reached the bus, the rest of the passengers were already standing outside the bright yellow vehicle, the tour guide sharing a cigarette with the driver on a bench. The driver stumbled over to the bus and opened the doors, letting the passengers and the tour guide clamber on before him.

The journey back to the hotel was ridiculously short, a fact which the driver kept repeating as he moaned about the effects of what he called ‘this sodding bus’ on the environment. Of course, he was saying this all in Italian, but the tour guide had nothing better to do than to translate what the driver was saying. They soon arrived at the hotel, Nicholas saying goodbye to the businessmen who were in the more expensive suites downstairs, leaving him and Lauren alone together. Lauren frowned at him as they walked.

‘You know, I can’t quite figure you out,’ she told him, as they began to climb the stairs. Nicholas glanced at her.

‘Who, me?’ he asked. ‘I suppose that’s because you haven’t got to know me that well yet.’

‘Hmm. Yes, I suppose you’re right. You just seem a bit reserved, that’s all,’ she said.

‘It’s not like you’re an easy book to read either,’ he replied, finding himself

following Lauren into her room. She sat on the bed and patted the pillow next to her. Nicholas sat beside her.

‘You’re a psychologist, right?’ she enquired, frowning a little and trying not to sound stupid.

‘I am, yes. Not a therapist, not a psychotherapist or a psychoanalyst. In fact, you’re the first person to actually get my job title correct. Apart from my colleagues, of course,’ he chuckled.

‘Is it interesting?’ she asked.

‘Well, I think it is, yes,’ he replied. Lauren nodded.

‘I had the option to study Psychology at A-Level, but I just never really considered it, I suppose. It was one of those subjects that only the really smart students did,’ she explained.

‘You seem pretty clever to me,’ Nicholas frowned.

‘I was fucking dumb in high school,’ she told him.

‘I’m sure you weren’t,’ he reassured her. She watched him for a while as he watched her, and she sat back against the cold wall behind her bed.

‘You know, this is the first holiday I’ve ever been on by myself. All the other times, I went with my parents... Barcelona, Munich... Paris,’ she explained.

‘What’s your home like? Is your room the smallest in the house?’ Nicholas asked.

‘It’s quite a big house, actually – we have three bedrooms. The biggest one belongs to my parents and the smallest room is Dad’s study, where he goes to get away from Mum, sometimes. Then there’s the medium-sized bedroom – it’s en-suite – and that one’s mine. I never use the main bathroom, you see. The house is really divided,

actually; I have my own rooms and my parents have their rooms. The only room that belongs to both of us is the living room, because that's where the television is. My parents are addicted to watching TV, you see,' she told him, tucking her hair behind her ears.

'What about the garden?' Nicholas asked.

'Oh Christ, that thing. I'd say we've got about half an acre of tangled, high grass, dead plants and bare trees. There's a shed at the bottom of the garden, too. Only nobody goes there because the last time someone did, the shed nearly collapsed. My Mum used to care about gardening, you see, but then she just gave up, I suppose,' Lauren answered.

'Are you hungry?' Nicholas enquired. Lauren frowned slightly.

'I am, actually, yes. Although I did eat like a fucking pig, less than half an hour ago,' she admitted, wandering over to her fridge and opening it. 'Would you like anything?'

In response, Nicholas walked over to her and looked into the fridge. It contained an egg, some cheese, ham, and orange juice. She shut it again and opened one of the cupboards, to reveal some bread, olive oil, some biscuits, and a half-empty packet of crisps.

'What would you like?' she asked.

'I think I'll have some biscuits and some crisps,' Nicholas replied, taking the food and sitting on the bed again. He opened the packet of biscuits carefully, so as not to get any crumbs on the sheets, and he took a tentative sniff of them. They smelled warm and spicy, like Christmas, to him. He took a small bite of the biscuit. It was sweet and buttery and full of cinnamon. Lauren stood in the kitchenette, drizzling some olive oil

on the bread and filling the sandwich with the ham and the cheese. She put it in the middle of a plate and joined Nicholas on the bed again.

‘The food is so good here compared to England. I mean, I’ve gone to so many Italian restaurants in Britain and even the best ones aren’t nearly as good as the ones here. It’s probably something to do with the earth – I’m guessing it’s just not as polluted here, so the earth and the soil is more fertile here and that’s why the food, especially the fruit and the vegetables, taste so much better,’ Lauren suggested.

‘You’re right – that makes perfect sense. I guess it’s also the fact that the food is part of Italian culture – it’s an art, an occupation, rather than just a means of living, and that passion really shows in the quality of the food here,’ Nicholas replied, taking another bite of his biscuit. Lauren continued to eat her sandwich.

‘This is pretty good. I know it’s not proper cooking, but it’s as close to cooking as I’ve ever got, and it’s not half bad!’ she remarked, taking a bigger bite this time.

‘See? With simple ingredients – but beautiful ones – you can create a masterpiece,’ he grinned. Lauren raised her eyebrows.

‘Christ, that was deep!’ she chuckled.

‘I know,’ he smiled, nibbling at the biscuit. ‘I should have become a philosopher.’

Lauren nodded, watching Nicholas as he ate ever so slowly.

‘You make me feel like some kind of pig because you eat so quietly and delicately!’ she laughed, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and feeling the olive oil from the sandwich coat her tanned skin. He laughed and bowed his head as he ate, a little embarrassed now. He could smell Lauren’s sandwich, the smell of the ham and the cheese reaching his nose alongside the smell of the fresh bread, and so he

reached over and ripped a piece off her sandwich, for himself. He cupped his hand beneath his chin as he ate, just to make sure that nothing got on the bed. He glanced at Lauren, noting her surprise at his actions, as he took a large bite of the sandwich. It was light and refreshing with just the right amount of olive oil and the right amount of ham and cheese. Christ, he thought, everything really did taste good here. Lauren smiled at him.

‘Is it good?’ she asked, taking another careful but large bite of the sandwich.

‘Good? It’s fucking amazing!’ Nicholas cried. ‘I’m surprised you don’t cook!’

‘I’ve never had the need to learn how. Thing is, if I went anywhere near a hot pan or a kitchen knife, my parents would have a fit,’ she explained.

‘You should fight for your independence, then – you have so much potential,’ he told her.

‘You think I haven’t tried to fight? I’m sorry, but I don’t need your advice in everything. And my potential is my problem,’ she snapped, putting the plate on her bedside table.

‘Of course. Sorry,’ Nicholas said, putting the biscuits back in the cupboard and standing in the kitchenette, feeling that it would be wrong to sit beside her again. She looked at the sheets, at the patterns, not willing to look at Nicholas. After a while, she looked up at him, her jaw clenched as she gritted her teeth.

‘I’m sorry. I just get quite defensive about these kinds of things,’ she said.

‘It’s fine, I had no right to say what I did anyway,’ Nicholas replied. ‘I mean, I’m sorry.’

Lauren nodded and smiled, patting the covers beside her. He joined her on the bed again and they watched the sun cast shadows onto the walls and onto the pattered

ceiling, the light dancing from one embossed spiral to another. It was a stunning sight, as they sat and watched the light show upon the pretty ceiling.

Chapter Ten

It was later on that Nicholas got up and said,

‘I think I’m going to go and take a bath. I feel dirty.’

Lauren smiled, kissing him on both cheeks before he left. He made his way along the corridor to his room and unlocked the door. There was a cleaner making his bed, and she scampered away immediately, apologising repeatedly.

‘Grazie,’ Nicholas smiled. As soon as the cleaner was gone, he closed the curtains and stripped awkwardly, kicking off his shoes and tiptoeing into the bathroom. Once the tub was three-quarters full of hot water, he climbed in. He felt the soothing bubbles from the shower gel he had used as they popped gently against his skin, which was soft and warm like Lauren’s now. He grabbed a handful of the sweet-smelling bubbles and threw them at the wall in front of him, watching and smiling as they hit the old tiles. He took another handful and constructed a beard for himself, grinning and feeling like a child again. The bubbles tickled his chin, so he swiped them off and placed them, almost carefully, back into the bath, lying back and closing his eyes, not thinking about anything, just completely motionless but really quite content. After fifteen more minutes, he stepped out of the bath and pulled out the plug, making the water level begin to decrease. Taking a towel and wrapping it around his waist, he left the bathroom and began to dress again, deciding to wear his tartan pyjamas, as he knew he wasn’t going to go out that night. He sat on the bed and turned the television on. Finding nothing of interest, he switched it off again and picked up his phone. He dialled

his landline number. It rang a few times before his wife answered.

‘Hello?’ she said. Nicholas smiled, pleased and relieved to hear her voice again.

‘Hello, Jen. I’m in the hotel so I thought I’d call you and talk to you. I’ve been missing you,’ he explained. There was a short pause before she replied.

‘I’ve been missing you too. I was quite surprised about that, but there you go,’ she said, and he could feel her smiling as she spoke. He smiled back.

‘How are you? What have you been doing recently, I mean?’ he asked her.

‘I’ve been fine, actually. I’ve been great. I went out to a few restaurants with some friends, and yesterday I invited our neighbours over, Mr and Mrs Murray, the couple you hate. I took the opportunity, you see, because you weren’t there,’ she informed him.

‘I hope you gave them bitter coffee and some of those boring cheese crackers,’ he grinned.

‘I did give them the crackers, actually – but they seemed to like them. Unfortunately,’ she smiled.

‘Damn,’ Nicholas smiled, fiddling with a loose string that hung from the seam of the covers. There was a pause before Jen spoke again.

‘I need to go, darling. It’s an early start for me, you see – I’ve got to babysit Mrs Smith’s annoying four-year-old from eight-thirty onwards because she has to do an extra shift,’ she told him.

‘Okay. Goodnight then! I’ll call you when I can,’ he said.

‘Goodnight, darling,’ she replied. There was another pause before she hung up. He put his mobile phone back on the bedside table and lay in bed for a while.

#

Lauren sat on her bed again, having taken a swig from the carton of juice that she had bought from the shop down the road, a while ago. She reached for the receiver of the phone and dialled her landline number. Her mother eventually answered.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi Mum, how are you?’ Lauren smiled. ‘I’ve been missing you, actually, I have.’

‘Wow, well that’s a compliment and a half. I’ve missed you too. The house is quiet without you,’ her mother replied.

‘It’s so nice to have some time to myself, though – and I’m sure you feel the same,’ Lauren said, fiddling with her hair and twisting it around her index finger.

‘It is – your father is much more animated, too. I hope he stays like this,’ her mother told her.

‘Oh yes? He probably doesn’t miss me that much. Which is understandable, of course,’ she said.

‘Don’t you dare say that, young lady. You know he loves you. We just haven’t had much time alone, with each other, I mean,’ her mother explained.

‘Of course I know. I’m sorry. I’m having the time of my life, you see,’ Lauren informed her mother. She could hear the painful silence as her mother thought of something to say.

‘Are you having a good time too?’ Lauren asked.

‘It’s not that bad... fairly normal and run-of-the-mill. I don’t think that much really happened, though,’ her mother replied.

‘Sounds like you need to have a bit of fun,’ Lauren smiled.

‘That sounds like an advert for a cheap nightclub, Lauren,’ her mother told her.

‘But you do need to have some fun. You and Dad should book another honeymoon abroad or something like that,’ she suggested, still fiddling with her silky hair.

‘You can go off if you want to, but I don’t want to go out and make a fool of myself, and I’m sure your father doesn’t want to either,’ she snapped.

‘I’m not making a fool of myself – I’m just having a good time,’ Lauren said.

‘I know you are, but I wish you’d just come home. We need to take care of you and you need to be safe,’ her mother said. Lauren frowned.

‘What?’ she asked.

‘You heard me,’ her mother replied.

‘I’m not a child anymore. I’m safer here and happier here than I am at home. And I’m sorry if you haven’t noticed this, but I’m nineteen. Not ten,’ she said, hanging up. She waited for a while, sitting on the bed, not really looking at anything in particular, before she grabbed her key, unlocked the door and made her way to Nicholas’ room. She knocked loudly. After a few seconds, he opened the door with a kitchen knife in his hand.

‘Are you okay...?’ she frowned, letting herself into the room. He followed.

‘Oh yes, perfectly fine – I was making a sandwich. Sorry,’ he smiled, putting the knife back in one of the kitchenette’s drawers. Lauren sat on the bed.

‘How’s your evening going?’ she asked Nicholas, watching him as he joined her on the bed, holding an olive oil and cheese sandwich, with thick bread.

‘It’s pretty good, thanks. I was planning to find a sad Italian movie or something to watch – something on TV – but now you’re here,’ he explained, still smiling.

‘Don’t let me get in your way, then,’ Lauren chuckled.

‘How is your evening going?’ Nicholas enquired, biting into the large sandwich and covering his mouth as he ate. Lauren frowned and shifted from side to side a little before she spoke, almost as though she was preparing what she was going to say.

‘Not that amazing, actually,’ she replied. ‘I called my Mum. Which was eventful.’

‘I can imagine,’ Nicholas sighed. ‘So? What did she say?’

‘She said I should come home and that she needs to take care of me and that I need to be safe. God, she annoys the hell out of me. Which is sad, you know? Because she’s my mother – she’s done so much for me, and yet I hate her,’ she said. ‘And then I told her I’m safer here than I am at home. And I hung up.’

‘She’ll call back, surely?’ Nicholas asked.

‘I don’t think so,’ Lauren answered. ‘She knows that I need a bit of space after our arguments. Space before we talk again, I mean. And besides, I don’t need her to call back; I’m having a fucking grand time here.’

‘Of course,’ Nicholas said, taking another bite from the sandwich.

‘Christ, my parents are such conservative assholes,’ she sighed, snatching the sandwich from Nicholas and taking a bite, almost aggressively.

‘But you said they annoy you? Surely they’re just trying to do a good job as parents and they’re just trying to look after you,’ Nicholas frowned, taking the sandwich from Lauren. She glanced at him.

‘That’s exactly what they are trying to do, Nicholas. But I don’t need that anymore. I’m an adult now, and the time to spoil me and to take care of me is over – it’s the past now. But at the same time, I let it all happen. I sat there and I let them spoil me and I listened to them, I did what they wanted. If I had said something, just one thing

about moving, if I had stood my ground about my independence, then my life would have been so different,' she explained. 'Christ, I've never said that to anyone before. At least, not in this much depth.'

'Well, in that case, thank you for choosing me to tell this to. I'm honoured,' Nicholas smiled.

'I didn't choose you, though – I just said it all spontaneously. As soon as I hung up, all I could think about was going to you to rant about the phone call,' Lauren grinned.

'Anyway, thank you. For confiding in me,' he repeated. Lauren nodded, smiling.

'Don't worry about it,' she told him, putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

'Likewise,' Nicholas replied. He glanced at her small hand on his large shoulder until she smiled awkwardly and blushed, her hand returning to her side. He smiled.

'I could be in university now, doing something I love,' Lauren said.

'Something like what? Drama or music, perhaps? What do you really love doing?' Nicholas enquired, putting the plate he had used for the sandwich on his bedside table.

'You know something? I have no idea. But maybe music... I love singing, but I hate all the theory... minims and quavers and some shit like that,' she replied.

'Then maybe having a break before you go to university is a good thing for you – it's a time to find out what you love doing and whether it's worth pursuing at university or not,' Nicholas suggested.

'I suppose so,' Lauren said, 'but this is the only time I've got on my own – this holiday. It's the only time I can be independent, and it's my opportunity to reflect on things and to think about the future, I guess.'

‘At least you have the opportunity, in that case. It seems your parents are taking their first steps in terms of letting you be independent,’ Nicholas said.

‘No, it was my idea. They hated it at first, and they still hate the fact that I’m here, alone,’ she told him.

They sat in silence for a while, before Nicholas checked his watch.

‘I’m so sorry, I don’t want to chuck you out or anything like that, but it’s getting late and I am really fucking tired, I don’t know why,’ Nicholas explained. Lauren nodded, smiling.

‘Will you at least walk me to my room?’ she enquired.

‘Of course I will. Nicholas replied, guiding her over to the door. He opened it for her and they tiptoed down the corridor. Lauren looked at Nicholas.

‘Why are we tiptoeing?’ she frowned.

‘It’s late and I don’t want to wake anyone,’ he whispered, stopping as they reached Room 207. She kissed him on both cheeks, her dimples showing as she smiled.

‘Goodnight, Nicholas,’ she said, and closed the door. Nicholas smiled and shook his head, starting to make his quiet way down the corridor and back into his room. He closed the door and lay on the double bed, watching the patterns on the ceiling dance as the lights of cars driving past moved hypnotically. The noise from the street died down until it was silent, and Nicholas fell asleep.

Chapter Eleven

Still wearing her thin, see-through pyjamas and her oversized, fluffy slippers, Lauren padded across the corridor to Room 203. She knocked on the door and waited there, leaning against the white, smooth wall. Having had no response, she knocked again,

louder this time. He opened the door, his hair messier than she had ever seen it, his pyjamas revealing a small amount of wispy chest hair. He yawned and invited her in, trying to smooth his wild hair at the same time as ushering her to the bed. She sat down, and he joined her, his eyes watery and red. He was still squinting in the harsh light that the curtains hadn't managed to block and, as he sat opposite her, he glanced at her long hair and her rosy cheeks, and he wondered how the hell she managed to look so good in the morning. He shook his head, embarrassed.

‘Sorry, I’m so bad mannered,’ he sighed, extending his hand to her. ‘Good morning.’

She took his hand and put it back by his side.

‘Good morning,’ she smiled, neatly dragging her hair behind her petite ears.

‘Well, it was nice of you to come all this way – down the corridor, I mean – just to say good morning,’ he told her, ‘and thank you for waking me up. Not sarcastically, I mean. It is genuinely late, is what I’m trying to say.’

‘It’s fine, I understand. But that’s not all I came for,’ she explained.

‘I knew there would be a catch.’

‘Just let me explain the situation first. After the argument I had with my parents last night, I decided something.’

‘Oh?’ he frowned.

‘I need to start learning how to live without them – I need to learn how to be independent,’ she told him.

‘So the first person you came to was me?’ he asked.

‘You’re the only person I know well enough who’s actually in Italy – and the kitchenette in your room works, unlike mine. I need to learn how to cook, you see. I’m

guessing you can cook, right?’ she checked.

‘I can certainly cook. The question is, can I cook well?’

‘Can you?’ she enquired.

‘You'll have to find out! I need to go and shower and get dressed. You should probably do the same so we can make this whole thing hygienic,’ he informed her. She giggled quietly.

‘What?’ he frowned.

‘Never mind, it's not really that funny,’ she smiled, trying to laugh as quietly as she possibly could.

‘Well, it did make you laugh.’

‘You said that we should make the whole thing hygienic. I just took it the wrong way,’ she explained.

‘Oh. You're right, it isn't really that funny,’ he replied, ambling into the bathroom to shower. She made her way back to her room, attempting to catch a glimpse of Nicholas in the shower, but her efforts were in vain, as the bathroom door was shut and bolted. She shrugged, smiled and strolled off, singing 'La Vie en Rose', blissfully unaware that it was in French. She reached Room 207 and stripped, uncompromising and unabashed, without closing any curtains or any doors. She loved the privacy and the freedom that came with being alone, especially at times like this. She felt like giving herself a treat, so she filled the large bath with hot water and poured the whole bottle of complimentary shower gel into the water, filling the bath with sparkling bubbles. She took a champagne bottle from her mini-bar and popped the cork, setting the bottle down next to the bath for later consumption. After tying her hair back in a loose ponytail, she finally got into the bath and, feeling the hot water and the bubbles surround her, she

immediately relaxed. The bathroom smelled of a mixture of toothpaste, expensive champagne and shower gel, which smelled posh. She rested her head against the back of the bathtub and took a swig of the champagne. It was bitter and almost too fizzy. She scrunched up her face and burped a few times before she realised that she didn't like champagne. She began to blow at the white bubbles and she giggled like a little girl as they were flicked into the air before slowly falling down again to re-join their friends. She took a handful of bubbles and spread them across her tanned arms, grinning as a few of them popped when she touched them. She guessed that Nicholas would probably be waiting for her for a long time this morning.

#

Nicholas was taking a long shower, using the shower gel that had come with the bathroom, it seemed. He was using an extra squirt of shampoo this time because, although he didn't know much about the brands in Italy, it looked fairly posh and expensive, meaning it would surely be much better than the one he used at home, which had the colour and consistency of another, somewhat inappropriate substance. So he ran the hotel shampoo carefully through his hair with his large, elegant hands, the shower still running, hot against his thin chest. He saw short hairs coming out as he showered, and he was reminded again of his age as he picked up one of the many white hairs from the bottom of the bathtub. He held it between thumb and forefinger, almost glaring at the sodding thing. He eventually put it in the sink and continued with his shower, trying to ignore the burning itch in his right eye that had been there since the shampoo had dribbled down from his hair, most inconveniently, into his eye. When he was finished, he stepped out of the bathroom with a towel tied around his waist. He closed the curtains awkwardly and began to dress, wondering what the hell he was going to teach

Lauren to cook. Pancakes were always a good choice, he felt, because everyone loves pancakes, and they're not too hard to make, he figured. He wondered where the hell she was, worried that he was taking too long and that she was already standing outside, waiting for him to open the door for her. As he pulled his black socks further up, he considered going to the door in his current state, wearing only boxers and socks, but he eventually decided that it would be best not to do so – he had to hold on to some sense of modesty, although Lauren had seen him bare chested at the beach already. But he couldn't let her know that he put on his socks before he put on his trousers, that was for sure. So he continued to make himself look presentable, smoothing out his hair and applying aloe vera gel to every part of his body that was burned, trying his hardest not to look like a tomato. There was a knock at the door.

‘Sorry I'm late,’ Lauren sighed, walking in. ‘I thought I'd treat myself to a bubble bath.’

‘You're not late – I was actually taking a long shower myself. You know, getting ready for the day and all that,’ he smiled.

‘Of course. So, have you thought about what you're going to teach me to cook?’ she enquired, sitting on the bed.

‘I thought we'd start by making pancakes for breakfast. Only problem is, I don't think I have all the ingredients in the fridge,’ he replied, joining her on the bed, smiling at her quirky clothes – a brown leather jacket, a pink t-shirt with 'Hakuna Matata!' written on it, red chinos and baby blue ankle length boots. She looked flawless. Smiling, she noticed him looking at her.

‘Then we'll go to a shop. Grab some paper and make a list,’ she ordered, sitting back against the wall. He got his notebook and pencil from the breast pocket of his

smart white blazer, the pencil hovering above the notebook as he waited for her to dictate.

‘Well, you're supposed to teach me to cook, so you should know the ingredients,’ she told him, tucking her hair behind her ears.

‘Okay, plain flour, baking powder, salt, sugar, milk, eggs and butter. Probably some maple syrup too,’ he said, noting down every word.

‘You don't have any of those things?’ she frowned.

‘I planned to eat out for breakfast every day. But it's fine, we can find a supermarket somewhere nearby,’ he assured her.

‘Should we go, then?’ she urged, standing up and making her way over to the door. He followed, with the notebook and pencil. She turned to him as they walked side by side.

‘Your hair looks different. Cleaner, I guess,’ she told him.

‘It's the hotel's shampoo. I think I might steal some more. Are you going to use yours?’ he asked.

‘I already have, I'm afraid. But we could see if there's anyone on the tour who doesn't want theirs, you know, we could get a bit of a collection going,’ she suggested. He smiled and, as they walked down the street, he had to stop himself from reaching out to grab her hand.

‘Do you know where any supermarkets are?’ Lauren asked.

‘I haven't been down this side of the road before, so I have no idea,’ Nicholas admitted, putting his notebook and pencil into his pocket, guessing that the journey would probably be a long one. She turned to him, smiling, and started to run down the street, her arms opened wide, her light leather jacket billowing out behind her in the

gentle wind. He followed at a distance, strolling calmly and smiling as he watched her. A couple of minutes down the road, they managed to find a shop, a terraced building and small, with a bay window which revealed a display of different types of sausages, breads and other various food items. It was so small and idyllic – there was even a bell which rang as they opened the door. They looked around, trying not to attract attention, so that the shopkeeper wouldn't waltz over to them and start babbling in Italian.

Although neither spoke much Italian, they could guess what the different products were, so before long, they had managed to gather the ingredients that they needed for the pancakes. Preparing himself for the awkward 'do you speak English' conversation he felt sure he was about to have, Nicholas brought the products over to the till. The shopkeeper looked him up and down, and did the same with Lauren, who was lingering behind Nicholas, happy to let him do all the work.

‘You English, eh?’ the shopkeeper asked.

‘Yes. How did you guess? And may I say, you speak the language very well,’ Nicholas commented.

‘It's twenty-five degrees and you're wearing a suit. You're English,’ the shopkeeper informed him.

‘Yes. I'm also hungry,’ Nicholas added. In reply to this, the shopkeeper nodded his round little head earnestly, and began to add up the costs of the individual food items, using his large, old-fashioned calculator.

‘Twenty euros,’ the shopkeeper told Nicholas. He gave the shopkeeper the money, in cash, and exited, Lauren following.

‘Do you think we were rude?’ she asked.

‘Why? How?’ Nicholas enquired.

‘He obviously wanted to talk to us more. We didn't even say goodbye,’ she replied, stopping to tie her dark blue laces.

‘I'm sure he'll get over it. He'll probably end up getting a lot more English customers, seeing as the shop is so close to the hotel, and some of them will undoubtedly babble with him, and they will probably also say goodbye,’ he said dismissively as they continued the short journey back to the hotel.

#

‘So you pour it into the pan’

‘Are you a tosser or a flapper?’ she enquired earnestly.

‘You're losing focus,’ he snapped.

‘Oh, yeah. Sorry,’ she sighed, watching him intently as he turned the pancake onto its other side, rather neatly.

‘You're a tosser, aren't you?’ she asked, still watching as he deposited the pancake onto a plate.

‘I've just made breakfast for you and you're calling me a tosser?’ he grinned, tearing the pancake he had just made into two and eating the slightly larger half. She took some and nodded, satisfied with its quality.

‘Your go,’ he told Lauren, standing behind her as she clumsily poured the mixture into the sizzling pan. She scraped at the pancake with the spoon and watched as it came apart.

‘Well, you've made scrambled eggs,’ he smiled, allowing himself a moment to collect himself before he spoke again. ‘Sorry. Try again.’

‘I'm sure your first attempt was worse,’ she snapped, pouring it into the pan again, being sure this time to do exactly what he had told her to do. Sliding the spoon

beneath the pancake, she tossed it onto its other side. It stayed in one piece.

‘Bet you didn't get it right on your second attempt,’ she teased, dumping the pancake onto the plate. He took a bite and frowned, pretending to be serious.

‘Not bad,’ he grinned, taking another bite, ‘now all you need to do is make three more, just as good.’

Chapter Twelve

The next day

He stood in the doorway of her room, his lithe body slanted against the wooden frame, his big hands gripping the smooth, varnished material. The breeze from the ceiling fan ruffled his greying hair, the light that seeped through the gaps in the curtains creating a thin spotlight which fell upon his ivory face, casting shadows beneath her high, sloping cheekbones. He watched her as she slept, just a small lump in the middle of her double bed, the covers rising and falling in time with her breaths. He tiptoed awkwardly into the room and sat on the bed, trying not to wake her. Her head was under the soft covers, but he could still hear her snoring loudly. The bed was warm and comfortable. There was a rustling noise as she struggled to pull them away from her head, until she finally looked up at Nicholas, squinting. She raised a small, delicate hand to her mouth and let out a small, strangled cough.

‘Oh, fuck, I don't feel well,’ she whispered, frowning up at him.

Her tanned face was blotchy and paler than normal, peeling in some places, and burdened with a few pimples that had appeared on her forehead, but her face still pure and incredible. Her thick lips were dry and chapped, but they were still full and perfect. Her hair was wispy and wild, but still completely stunning. Her thin, translucent

nightgown hugged her mesmerising body and complimented her soft curves. He hated it that she found her wonderful, even when she was ill. She sat up against the pillows and looked at him quizzically.

‘What's the time?’ she asked, twisting her hair around the index finger of her right hand.

‘Ten. We were supposed to be on a tour at nine, but you hadn't come out of your room so I wondered what was wrong,’ he explained.

‘Why didn't you go alone?’ she asked.

‘I don't really know. I just like your company, I guess,’ he replied truthfully. She cocked her head and smiled at him.

‘Or maybe you hated the idea of being without me, on the coach full of random people you don't know, just alone, completely alone in this harsh world, a bit lonely,’ she grinned.

‘I'm not so sure about that,’ he frowned.

‘No, you're right – I'm sure you would have found a like-minded, probably middle aged woman who would have been perfectly willing to start up a platonic relationship with you!’ she assured him.

‘Oh. Well, thank you for that confidence boost,’ he smiled, watching her as she fiddled with the cotton threads that hung from the bottom of her nightgown.

‘You twit, Nicholas – you should have gone on the tour. You would have enjoyed it!’ she sighed.

‘Then you should have told me before nine o'clock that you were ill,’ he told her.

‘But I wasn't awake until ten!’ she cried.

‘Exactly. So it wasn't anyone's fault,’ he explained.

‘I wasn't blaming myself. I was blaming you,’ she snapped.

‘Okay, but I think we figured out that it wasn't anyone's fault,’ he reasoned with her. She pursed her lips at him with mock-sassiness.

‘I was just putting my point out there,’ she grinned, covering her mouth as she coughed again. Her nose was red and swollen and there was a pile of used tissues on the floor next to her bed. Nicholas bent down to collect the tissues and, handling them carefully, he manoeuvred them to the bin and deposited them there.

‘Thanks, Nick,’ she smiled, leaning forward and plumping her pillows again.

‘Don't call me Nick,’ he snapped, returning to his seat at the foot of the bed.

‘And why is that? Am I not being professional enough with you, Nicholas?’ she grinned, sitting back again.

‘You know, now that I've seen you in your nightgown, I'm not sure that whatever we're having can be platonic anymore,’ he sighed.

‘Oh, shut up, Nicholas, stop ruining it by saying things like that,’ Lauren snapped, glaring at him through watery, puffy eyes.

‘What am I ruining?’ he frowned.

‘Our friendship, of course! You're just making it awkward and complicated. It needs to be platonic, remember?’ she checked.

‘I remember,’ he sighed. ‘Sorry.’

‘Do you really think the nightgown is nice, though? Platonically and normally, I mean, does it suit me?’ she asked.

‘It does suit you, yes. It hugs your figure. Perfectly platonically and as a total, definitely, friend,’ he stammered.

‘That didn't really make much sense. The second half of what you said, I mean.’

Lauren admitted.

‘It suits you, Lauren, that’s it,’ Nicholas explained, making her smile.

#

Even though the ceiling fan made the room cool, it was stuffy as a room usually is in the morning, so Nicholas stood up and made his way over to the window, feeling the luscious smoothness of the velvet curtains. Slowly, so as not to make Lauren squint, he let the light into the room, as he watched the vibrant scene on the streets below. The town square was packed with tourists who were photographing and touching everything they saw. The restaurants were selling breakfast as well as lunch, and they were as crowded as the square. The people here were so much happier and free in comparison to the people in England. There was such a welcoming hospitality in everything that the Italians did for the tourists, such as putting on concerts for them as well as letting them take photographs of places that can only be experienced in real life. They didn’t seem to hold back on anything, relying on intuition instead of planning every time something had to be done. The food was earthy and showed the utter respect for nature that they had, and that was what made it so good. They were proud of their country and of their land, and that was what Nicholas found so incredible. He shook his head, clearing his brain of all thoughts, opening the window and sharply inhaling the fresh air from outside.

Lauren sank deeper into the soft pillows and looked over at Nicholas, who stood by the window, looking out at the empty horizon past the sea. The air was already warm, the wind sweeping around mouth-watering smells of an early lunch. The gentle gusts made the tangled lace curtains billow out, past the wooden sills and into the cool, comfortable room. There were a few buskers in the town square; a barbershop quartet

singing in Italian, of course, and an old man who clutched a ukulele to his chest, crooning contentedly. Nicholas stood there, not really looking at anything in particular, just taking it all in.

‘If you've got good vision, you'll be able to see the fishing boats in the distance,’ Lauren explained. ‘The fishermen are up before six in the morning to make sure that they don't get distracted by tourists – they usually ask for photos, you see – and they try not to get in the way of the tourists. I think it's so quaint but it's also interesting – if I could speak Italian, I'd love to talk to the locals.’

‘Yes, it is quite pompous and arsey of us to stomp into a country without bothering to learn the language – and then, when people come to England without knowing English, we get completely pissed off with them,’ he sighed, moving away from the window and sitting on the end of the bed, resting his feet on the covers.

‘Shoes and socks off, Mr Marsh,’ Lauren ordered, flicking his patent lace ups with her thumb and index finger.

‘Are you sure about this?’ he checked, beginning to untie his laces.

‘How bad can it be?’ she grinned, watching him obey her commands. He wiggled his toes at her. She ran her hand against her forehead, feeling the sweat beads coat her hand.

‘Christ, I'm not used to this kind of weather,’ she groaned, grabbing a tissue from her bedside table and dragging it unceremoniously across her brow.

‘Well, you could try showering...’ he suggested.

‘Is that what Freud would recommend?’ she teased. He shook his head.

‘Probably no, but hygiene, in this case, is more important than psychology,’ he replied, making her smile a little. She strolled into the bathroom, beginning to undress

before she remembered to close the door. He smiled to himself, and took his phone out of his pocket to pass the time, trying not to grin at Lauren's croaky, almost hysterical singing. He had nine missed calls and a text from his network provider saying "Welcome to Italy". Welcome to Italy indeed – he was stuck in a hotel with some girl he barely knew, playing some sort of weird game of patient-and-doctor while everyone enjoyed themselves in restaurants and at the beach and that sort of thing. But when he thought about it, he wouldn't have had it any other way. Something suddenly dawned on him.

'Shit! Breakfast!' he cried, almost dropping his phone. He sprinted down the stairs and into the lobby, where the same opera song that had been on a loop for the last couple of days met him. He strolled calmly over to the receptionist attempting not to pant, and asked her if she could please send up a breakfast in bed to Room 207.

#

'Nicholas! Nicholas, where the fuck are you? And where's my towel?! I swear, if you stole it.'

'I arranged for breakfast to be sent up,' Nicholas smiled.

'Great, that's bloody dandy, but where the hell is my towel?!' she cried.

'In the cupboard, I guess,' he replied, beginning to search for the darned thing.

'It's fine, I just found one near the shower,' she told him.

'How was it?' he asked.

'It's just a fucking towel, Nick, that's how it is! Do you have to analyse everything?!' she frowned.

'I was talking about the shower,' he replied.

'Freud couldn't have done better himself! My throat does hurt, though,' she

rasped, exiting the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her voluptuous body. ‘And look away now, I’m dressing.’

‘You’ve been singing and screaming your arse off, Lauren. Of course your throat hurts,’ he sighed.

‘Do you know any Italian?’ she asked, pausing halfway through fiddling with her bra to glance over her shoulder at Nicholas. He wasn’t watching. She smiled, looking away again.

‘I know three words: “si”, “amore” and “ciao”,’ he replied.

‘Oh, well, everyone knows “amore”. You should learn more Italian, though. It is the language of love after all,’ she smiled.

‘Then why don’t you learn it?’ he enquired.

‘Me?! I’ve got so much more of my life left before I get into a serious relationship – I don’t want to spend my best days with some old git who looks at me about once a day as he goes to work and shags all his secretaries,’ she explained.

‘That’s marriage, not a relationship. It’s also a ridiculous cliché – it doesn’t even happen that much anymore. In the 60s, sure! But women won’t stand for it now. The secretaries and the wives are strong,’ he told her.

‘Oh my god. You’re a feminist, aren’t you?’ she cried.

‘No, I’m just a realist,’ he replied.

‘What does that mean?’ she asked, fiddling with her bra again, now underneath her pink top.

‘It means that I see things as they are. Not as I want them to be,’ he answered, and she nodded, face scrunched up in annoyance at how shaky her long, thin hands were. She turned to him, finally.

‘Could you do my bra up for me?’ she asked.

‘I wondered when you would say that,’ he grinned, sauntering over to her. His hands were warm against her cool, soft skin, and he could feel the tension in her back as he touched her. Her spine was well-formed, the skin pillowy, her shoulders small and square, blades prominent. He couldn't help lingering a split second too long before he fastened the clasp and someone knocked on the door.

Chapter Thirteen:

‘So it's not all to do with Freud?’ Lauren frowned, taking a sip of her cappuccino.

‘See, that's a common misconception – that it's all to do with mental health or Freud and Jung, when it's really not – it's probably one of the most useful subjects you can study because it teaches you so many skills. It's really much more expansive than you think,’ Nicholas explained, snatching a toast from Lauren's plate and taking a bite. She took it from him and smiled.

‘You're so cute when you talk about something that you're passionate about,’ she grinned, spreading the sweet, unctuous jam onto the toast.

‘That's something I haven't heard before, I think. But thanks anyway,’ he stammered, frowning a little at the slightly unusual comment.

‘In a good way, I mean – your eyes completely light up and you speak really fast,’ she explained, fiddling with the handle of her cup.

The breakfast was nothing fancy; just a cappuccino for her and an espresso for him, as well as three slices of toast (two for her and one for him, as he had already eaten), some jam and butter, and a peach yoghurt for her. She began to eat the yoghurt, swallowing tentatively, frowning from time to time, constantly aware of her sore throat.

‘You should have some water,’ he said, walking over to the white porcelain sink in the bathroom and collecting the cold water, from the tap, in Lauren's water bottle.

‘Oh, and could you put my towel in the bathroom? Just hang it somewhere so it can dry,’ she asked, swallowing again and squinting as the pain came again. Nicholas took the white towel from the side of the bed and began to make his way back to the bathroom. The towel was soft and warm, and Nicholas found his hands stroking the comfortable material, aware that he most likely looked like a total idiot. Damn it, everything was so magnificent here. It was as though every day was celebrated by the sky at sunrise, as well as by the people who lived here, often up early, just to appreciate the potential that the days had, despite the weather. There was a kind of joyfulness and gratefulness that everyone here had at being blessed to live in tune with nature, to be blessed to live at all. It was not a heavy, debt-like gratefulness that the locals had; in fact, it was more of a celebration of nature and day-to-day life, something rarely found in England. Everything, from the expensive, noble chandelier that hung from the ceiling, to the bug that skittered around the window sill in Lauren's room every night, had this sense of beauty and of luxury about it that made England feel like a parallel universe. And oh God, the food was good – both of them had hoped to make it back from the holiday without gaining much weight, but Nicholas felt sure that his two breakfasts would make some sort of difference. Lauren just hoped that her illness might help her to burn calories, or even to lose weight.

‘Nicholas? Nicholas,’ Lauren called.

‘Yes?’ he frowned.

‘My towel. You stroked it and then froze for about a minute. It needs to dry or I'll get another cold on top of the cold I already have,’ she replied.

‘Of course. Sorry,’ he said, continuing on his way to the bathroom.

‘You have already showered, right?’ she checked, finishing the delicious fat-free yoghurt and throwing it at the bin with no consideration of aim whatsoever. It landed a meter away, causing Nicholas to blink at her in confusion as he ambled out of the bathroom.

‘I showered before I came. To your room, I mean,’ he replied, picking up the yoghurt pot and staring at it quizzically, ‘and I hope that wasn't aimed at me.’

‘My aim isn't that bad, Nick – my throwing skills just need working on, that's all,’ she snapped.

‘Your memory skills need working on too – you know I hate being called Nick,’ he replied.

‘I know, it's just funny to see you annoyed,’ she giggled, swallowing again.

‘You shouldn't talk this much if your throat hurts,’ he advised, walking over to the bed again and sitting down.

‘I know, it's just that I'm not a very good writer, so speaking is my main form of communication,’ she explained.

‘What about texting?’ he enquired.

‘Texting counts as writing. And plus, I've only got a shitty little flip-up phone that lets me call 999 or my parents,’ she replied.

‘Oh, right, don't your parents like modern technology?’ he frowned.

‘Honestly, Nicholas? They've never liked any kind of technology, let alone all the modern shit,’ she answered.

‘And what about you?’ he asked.

‘What do you mean? What about me?’ she questioned.

‘Do you like modern technology?’ he enquired.

‘Yes, as long as it's fast and as long as it does what it's supposed to do – the other random options they put into modern technology is just pointless, though,’ she explained.

‘And have you ever told your parents that?’ he asked.

‘No,’ she answered.

‘Why not?’

‘Can you stop talking to me like I'm your bloody patient, please? Christ, you can be really bloody intimidating when you get into your Psychologist Mood,’ she sighed.

‘And you can put the yoghurt into the bin, too.’

After doing so, he looked out of the window.

‘It's busy outside. We're missing all the fun,’ he sighed. She huffed moodily.

‘I never told you to stay with me forever or something,’ she snapped, pursing her dry lips at Nicholas.

‘Right, don't thank me for being a gentleman or anything, then,’ he smiled, still looking out of the window. The sea was full of boats, the shallower parts occupied by the braver tourists who, tired of taking photographs, were attempting some rather extreme water sports, and, a lot of the time, failing. The slightly more timid tourists were lying on their brightly coloured beach towels, smothered in sun cream and taking random photos of each other's semi-nakedness. The heat in the air told them that it was coming close to midday, meaning that the restaurants would be opening their doors and spreading warm smells of mouth-watering lunches to the surrounding areas. But they would not be enticing to Nicholas, who was beginning to experience the consequences of two Italian breakfasts.

‘I know psychology isn't all to do with mental health and things like that, but what's that side of it like? Do you find it enjoyable?’ Lauren asked.

‘It's the part that I find the most interesting, but it depends on the person, really. It's not easy, I can tell you that – nothing in Psychology is really easy – but if it's something you enjoy, you'll do well in it,’ Nicholas explained.

‘Doesn't bloody sound easy either,’ Lauren exclaimed, ‘but I think that kids who don't know about mental health disorders need to be educated about those kinds of things. You see, my Mum's friend grew up in India, and in her school, they had a day dedicated to learning about mental health disorders every year. I mean, we should have something like that in the UK instead of those pointless internet safety lessons from the very 'cool' police.’

‘So you'd like to be involved in something like that?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, I guess, it's just an idea, though. Unlikely to happen,’ she replied, inspecting her hands and, deciding to wash them, she made her way to the bathroom.

‘Don't leave any germs on the taps for the next guest to inherit!’ Nicholas called to her, sauntering over to the bed again and sitting down, smiling a little at his own joke. He called to her.

‘You were saying?’

‘That's all I wanted to say, really. It just annoys me that schools tell off their pupils for using offensive language like 'spaz' and 'retard' when they haven't bothered to educate those pupils about mental illnesses and things like that,’ she cried, emerging from the bathroom fairly red-faced. Nicholas smiled.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked.

‘Fine, yeah. Sorry, I just get really passionate about things like that,’ she smiled,

blushing a little, adding to the red tint that she already had on her cheeks. She sat down on the bed, directly opposite him.

‘If I want to teach people about those things, I need to learn everything first, though,’ she explained.

‘Then go to University. Or, better still, just use the internet,’ he suggested.

‘Just because I'm under twenty-five, it doesn't mean that I'm used to using technology, or that I even like technology,’ she snapped.

‘Okay, I'm sorry. It's just another option, you see, you could always get a tutor or something,’ he replied, but she shook her head.

‘They're too expensive,’ she frowned.

‘Get one to do a bit of pro bono work,’ he grinned.

‘What?’

‘Pro bono. It's where a lawyer helps someone for free,’ he explained, ‘it was a joke.’

‘Oh. I see,’ she sighed.

‘So you really are interested in psychology?’ he questioned.

‘Yes, it would seem so,’ she answered, ‘so what's your job like?’

‘It's quite fun, actually – I help psychoanalysts and psychotherapists and the like from time to time, as well as helping out in a few hospitals. It's not a regular person's idea of fun – but it's interesting, and I love it. It's helped me to understand people so much more and it's enabled me to find out what really makes us all tick. It really is a lot more fascinating than I'm making it sound, I swear. I've worked with all kinds of people, from fellow psychologists and psychoanalysts and the like, to patients with a large variety of imperfections, as it were. But even though I've been looking for ages,

throughout my career to be honest with you, I've never found a person whose imperfections couldn't be solved. Not one. And a lot of the time, especially in terms of psychoanalysis, most problems link back to childhood. That's the most important part of someone's life, because they're at a point where they are the most impressionable and most vulnerable. That's why I agree with what you were saying about teaching children about mental health – because if a child is used to using offensive language like 'spaz' or 'retard', without knowing it's offensive, that child is far more likely to grow up using the same language because they have never been taught that it's bad. But, if they're taught about it, children can realise that it's a bad thing, and they can stop using the offensive language, both when they're young and when they grow up,' Nicholas explained. 'And I'm sorry if I've been waffling on for too long.'

'You are a fascinating man, Mr Marsh,' Lauren smiled.

'Really?' he frowned, running a large hand through his straight hair, somewhat self-conscious. 'I thought I was just being boring.'

'No. What you said – it made sense. Can you teach me psychology, Nicholas?' she asked.

'But I'm not even a qualified teacher.'

'No. But I understood what you said – I understood it the first time you said it. So, unqualified or not, you're a good teacher,' she told him.

'I'm sorry, Lauren, but you know I can't do something like that. I can tell you about the things you might learn if you end up going to university or something, and I can step in if you need any help with your work, but that's as far as I can go,' he explained.

'Do you think I'd be clever enough to get into a University?' she enquired.

‘Only you can say that. So? Do you think you're clever enough?’ he asked. She cocked her head and pretended to think.

‘I got two A*s and a B in my A-levels, so I suppose I am fairly clever,’ she replied. They sat there in silence and Nicholas smiled at her. She started to giggle and hit him over the head with one of the pillows. He coughed and spluttered hysterically, and they laughed the morning away as the clock in the town square hit twelve o'clock, post meridiem.

Chapter Fourteen

Two days later

They were at the beach again. He was uncharacteristically awkward under her gaze as he cowered by the side of the lukewarm sea, half naked and sunburned. She was playing in the ocean, her girlish pink bikini framing her attractive figure as she swam in the clear blue water like a swan. Unlike him, she was tanned instead of sunburned, and her whole face was alive and radiant as she had genuine and innocent fun for the first time in such a long time. Seeing her so happy and uninhibited made him wonder what he was doing, standing there with nothing to do other than to look at a girl, well, woman, really, who was twenty-six years younger than him. He was watching her enjoy herself, and that was his only means of having fun. She looked over at him and beckoned mock-sexily. He smiled and, drawing his breath in sharply, he joined her in the water. The breeze made the waves higher and more frequent, and as he attempted to swim, he was caught up in the current. He struggled back, wet and bedraggled, finding himself laughing, genuinely, for the first time in years. He grinned at her and waded in deeper, letting the waves carry him. There was something so utterly freeing about putting trust

into Mother Nature and being one with her, and at peace, the idea of nature always being by your side. And he cried out in joy, once, then twice, loudly. She just watched him, overwhelmed by his happiness. It was as though his thoughts were being swept away by the ocean, and he was left there, just completely free of everything, and ecstatic. After a while, he returned to the shore, smiling, and he joined Lauren again.

‘Was that fun?’ she enquired.

‘That was fun,’ he sighed, panting and tired.

‘Never seen you like that before,’ she remarked.

‘Neither have I.’

‘You know something?’ she began.

‘I know a lot of things, but do go on,’ he replied.

‘I’m glad I met you,’ she told him.

‘What?’ he frowned.

‘I’m glad I met you, Nicholas. I’m also glad that I went on this holiday in the first place. Thing is, when you grow up with the same people who are around you now, you just get lonely. Because you know every millimetre of them and you do love them, of course you do, but you’re yearning for another person who you can get to know and another person who you can eventually come to love, as a friend or maybe more. I could have met, known and loved so many people if I had fought against my parents for once – they said I wouldn’t be able to handle going to University, that I wouldn’t be able to cope with it. I should’ve told them that they can’t cope with it, that they wouldn’t have had anyone to boss around when I was gone. But they’re the lonely ones – their only friends are from school, the same school that they met in – there’s nobody in their friendship group who didn’t grow up with them. And I was exactly the same. And then

you were the first person, Nicholas, who I got to know really well, although we've only just met and you didn't go to my school and I don't know where you live or what you do on Friday evenings. I just know you as you've been for the past couple of days,' Lauren explained.

'Sorry to interrupt your deep, philosophical ramblings, but we might want to go back to the sun loungers – I think we have a bit of a crowd,' Nicholas suggested, and Lauren laughed the seriousness of what she had said off, following him back to the sun loungers to work on her tan.

'I completely understand, though, and, well, I'm flattered. I haven't meant that much to someone in a long time,' he told her. 'And you're the first person who takes me seriously – I know we both joke a lot, but you respect me – other people just think I'm a scatter-brained idiot who doesn't know what he's talking about, but you take in and accept and really think about anything I say.'

'I'm just bloody gullible,' Lauren grinned.

'Perhaps,' Nicholas replied, 'but respect has got nothing to do with that.'

'I guess,' she smiled. 'You looked really happy out there.'

'The only time I get to let go is when I go on holiday,' he explained.

'Well, then you should go on holiday more often. Being happy really suits you,' she told him.

'Thanks. Do I really mean that much to you, though?' he asked. She sighed, spreading more suntan lotion on her arms.

'Now you're being a scatter-brained idiot,' she grinned, squirting the lotion in his direction. He ducked and took the bottle from her, dragging it across his bright red shoulders. She lay on the lounge like a model posing in a Grecian temple. Her olive-

coloured legs rested on the soft green towel that lay on the lounge, her pedicured toes just about reaching the end of the chair. There was an awkward silence between them before Nicholas spoke.

‘Lauren?’

‘Yes?’

‘Can I ask you a question?’

‘Today at eight in the evening, that's when you can ask me a question. We'll meet outside my room and find a place to eat.’

‘Sure.’

#

He stood in front of the small bathroom mirror, his eyes fixed on his reflection, eyes calculating every inch of his own potential. He was wearing a dark blue suit with his cleaner pair of lace-ups, his hair gelled back neatly, cleaner than before after another wash with the hotel shampoo. He wore his usual watch, having made sure to remove the dust from it using a lens cleaner, which he also used for the smart glasses which he wore today. His shoes were well polished, the laces done with utmost precision, his trousers spotless, his shirt smooth and his cufflinks spotless and shining in the bright light of the bathroom. He smoothed his hair back again with his left hand and pushed the glasses higher on the bridge of his nose, frowning at himself and wondering if he looked too cold and professional. He took off his glasses and put in his contact lenses, shaking a couple of strands of greying hair to make himself look more casual, turning down the collar of his blazer and yanking his tie closer to the top button of his ironed shirt. He looked at his reflection again, sighing, and shrugged, exiting.

#

Her room was cool and fresh as she changed, and she couldn't help shivering slightly in the wind that came in through the window. She had planned to wear a blue dress, lacy and quite revealing, one that she had bought without her parents knowing, cut low at the front and barely reaching her knees. But in hindsight, it was cold outside and she'd rather look terrible and be warm than look sexy and freeze to death in front of Nicholas. So she chose her dark red dress, long and flowing with long, silky sleeves. It was modest but it looked lovely on her – as anything did, really – because the colour looked great on her, and it matched with her dark lipstick and her red kitten heels. She tied her hair into a bun, hoping that she didn't look too conservative for the date, choosing only a Pandora bracelet and a choker necklace for jewellery, leaving a few strands of her hair loose from the bun, attempting to look more casual. She had plucked her eyebrows and was now trying to hide the red blotches with concealer as she stood very close to the bathroom mirror, looking at her reflection with a cynical frown. Finally happy with her appearance, Lauren went to the door and opened it, poking her head around the doorway to see Nicholas striding down the corridor, looking awkward in his somewhat tight trousers. She dodged behind the door and closed it again, not wanting to look as though she was waiting for him. She sat for a couple of seconds before he knocked on the door. She opened it.

‘So.’

‘Hi,’ she smiled.

‘Where are we going?’ he asked, stepping back as she locked the door.

‘You'll see,’ she said, taking his hand gently as they made their way down the stairs and out of the hotel.

‘Have you ever been out with a girl before?’ she asked.

‘Come on, Lauren, I’m forty-six – you need to credit me with something. Just because you might consider me ‘an academic’, it doesn’t mean I’ve been living in a hole all my life,’ he replied, a smile playing on his dark lips.

‘I don’t think you’re an academic. I just find you a bit quiet and withdrawn, at first, but when you got to know me more, you opened up, I guess,’ she explained, squeezing his hand reassuringly.

‘The restaurant isn’t too far away, is it?’ he asked.

‘God, you’re so unfit!’ she cried. ‘But don’t worry, we haven’t got long to go.’

She pointed to a building in the distance, small and quaint, covered in twinkling lights. It didn’t look like anyone was in there apart from waiters and other staff. As they moved closer, they could see that the large window to the front of the building face the town square where the buskers still stood, playing music and singing for the tourists who milled around, taking photographs of everything they saw, joyful and truly happy in their surroundings. Nicholas and Lauren eventually walked in and sat at one of the tables. A waiter came over.

‘English, please?’ Nicholas asked.

‘Si. What can I get you?’ the waiter asked.

‘Which wine would you recommend?’ Lauren enquired, taking a look at the menu.

‘The 2005 Canaletto Montepulciano d’Abruzzo is a personal favourite of mine,’ the waiter replied, pleased that he had been asked his opinion.

‘We’ll have that, then. And we’ll share a bruscetta for a starter,’ Nicholas told him.

‘And for the main mean?’ the waiter asked.

‘I’ll have the penne arrabiata and the chocolate gelato for desert,’ Nicholas answered.

‘And I’ll have the bolognese and the chocolate gelato for desert,’ Lauren informed him.

‘It should take about half an hour,’ the waiter told them, collecting their menus and walking away.

‘That wine had better be good,’ Nicholas smiled.

‘It will be,’ Lauren smiled. ‘I fucking hate wine, though.’

#

The bruscetta arrived fifteen minutes later, freshly made, the bread still hot with dark brown lines where it had been seared by the griddle pan it had been toasted on, the chopped tomatoes oozing with juice, plump and firm. A few drops of olive oil had seeped through the bread, giving it moisture but not making it too soft. They both took a bite, the juice from the tomato and the olive oil escaping from the corners of Lauren's mouth. Noticing, she smiled and swallowed, dabbing her lips with a napkin. They were both hungry, and finished the bruscetta quickly, washing it down with the wine, which Lauren had found she actually quite liked. The waiter then brought the main courses to the table and they began to eat again. The food was so good that neither of them felt the desire to talk, and that was fine for both of them, because they had grown used to each other's silences.

‘So,’ he smiled, looking her in the eye. ‘has the wine converted you?’

‘Unfortunately, it has. I am now destined to become an alcoholic,’ she grinned.

‘The chocolate gelato,’ the waiter announced, handing them their desserts and wandering off.

‘It's a really nice restaurant, isn't it?’ she said, taking a small spoonful of the gelato.

‘It's brilliant; I'm surprised none of the tourists go here – this is authentic Italian cuisine at its best!’ Nicholas exclaimed, taking a sip of the wine.

‘The gelato is great,’ Lauren smiled, taking a bigger spoonful this time.

‘You know something?’ he asked.

‘What?’

‘I had you down as a strawberry gelato person. You know, sweet, light,’ he told her.

‘Hell no. It's far too sweet,’ she replied.

The bill arrived five minutes later.

‘I'll pay,’ he said, grabbing his wallet.

‘I don't think so, Mr Marsh. I'm independent and I'm not broke,’ she informed him, grabbing her purse.

‘Should we split it?’ he asked.

‘I can live with that,’ she replied.

They paid and left, Nicholas taking her hand and guiding her back up the street, his hand on the small of her back, reassuring her. Her lips looked soft, still shining with the trace of olive oil, and as soon as they reached the corridor, he kissed her softly, quickly, leaving them both longing for more. He kissed her again, longer this time, letting it linger for perhaps too long. She drew away and unlocked her room, leaving the door open. When he entered, she was lying on the bed wearing only her underwear. He took her nightgown from the wardrobe and draped it gently around her shoulders as she kissed him, tasting the wine on his lips. He held her as they kissed, and she began to

remove his blazer and his tie, running her hand down his chest as he continued to kiss her, tasting the olive oil on her soft lips. He slowly removed her nightgown, feeling her body pressed against his as she clung to his lips, eyes tightly shut, her hands grasping his thin back, smiling as he stroked her face so gently, noticing the sweat on her forehead as he moved closer to her, both of them completely bare and, their touches filled with more desire every second, having seen every inch of one another in that night.

Chapter Fifteen

The room was already warm and the window was open still from last night, the late morning sun shining in all its buttercup-shaded glory. They were both still asleep, dewy eyed, her head still lying on his chest, both still bare and the covers twisted into a makeshift shape above them. Her mouth was letting loose the smallest drop of saliva, pressed against him almost aggressively. Although he was bony, he seemed to be quite a comfortable pillow for her. His left arm was hanging limply off the end of the double bed, lightly swinging back and forth. The hairs on his arms were standing on end in the breeze from the open window, his eyes closed, not tightly, his hair tousled and brushing his cheeks gently. The wind made his hair fall into his eyes, and he blinked a few times, frowning in the bright morning light. He made sure not to make too many sudden movements so that she wouldn't wake up, and he looked down at her fondly, seeing her peaceful face as she slept, her long eyelashes unmoving, her beautiful, soft body resting gently against the starched white sheets of the wooden bed. She breathed quietly and ever so gently, her side rising and falling as she did so. He looked at her with no expression and no movement, just looked at every inch of her and watched her beauty,

prominent to him even when she was asleep. The rouge of youth and fun was still on the apples of her cheeks, her face without wrinkles yet, her eyes young. Those eyes began to flicker as she stirred, her smile growing wider as she glanced up at him. She leaned over and kissed him, softly and quickly.

‘Good morning,’ she said, bunching the covers and drawing them up to her shoulders, sitting up.

‘Good morning,’ he replied. Using her index finger, she removed the saliva from the corners of her mouth, bowing her head, embarrassed.

‘How long have you been awake for?’ she asked, facing him again, noticing how his sexy he looked with his tousled hair and his bare chest.

‘Only a couple of minutes,’ he told her.

‘I feel like being really lazy today,’ she grinned, ‘do you?’

‘Well, we did go to sleep pretty late last night, so I'm fairly tired,’ he smiled, kissing her cheek gently. Her skin was so delicate and smooth. He sat up next to her, seeing the today's sun for the first time from the window, seeing the beach in the distance, already quite full. It was a warm day, inviting and exciting, but all he wanted was to be with her. Nothing else seemed to matter, really. He kissed her again, on the lips this time, feeling her velvety skin against his, the kisses sweet and gentle and loving. She smelled so sweet, of something he couldn't quite place – not a perfume, but a smell that was just of her. He ran his hand against her, feeling the downy white hairs on her tanned back, seeing her birthmark where her skin was slightly darker than the rest of her skin, where the darker skin spilled out and mixed with the normal colour of her back. He watched wisps of her hair float to and fro in the warm breeze, running his hands gently through her hair, every move he made cautious as though she was made of

porcelain and as though he didn't want to break her. She was such a wondrous thing to him, faultless although she had cracks and wounds inside of her, things which, although she loved him to the moon and back, she would never be able to tell him because they even confused and frightened her. She took his hand in hers and kissed it, feeling its leathery, coarse texture upon her lips, her hand tiny in comparison to his. She held him gently, feeling his heart pumping steadily, watching his stomach rise and fall as he breathed, running her thumb along the hairs on the bottom of his hand and on his fingers. He looked at her for a while.

‘Should we get breakfast in bed?’ he asked, reaching over to the old-fashioned phone that lay on the bedside table.

‘Of course!’ she smiled. ‘What should we get?’

‘Full English breakfast?’ he asked.

‘Nicholas, we're in Italy! We can be depressing and British with tea and things like that when we get back! But we're here now, so we should embrace it. Embrace the cuisine,’ she snapped.

‘So what should we get, then?’ he frowned.

‘Two cappuccinos, two pastries, five slices of bread, some butter and some jam,’ she informed him.

‘Christ, they're going to think I'm pregnant, eating all this,’ he sighed, picking up the receiver.

‘Tell them it's for two,’ she said. He dialled the number of the hotel reception, and said,

‘Can I have two cappuccinos, two pastries, five slices of bread, some butter and some jam?’

‘You must be hungry, signore,’ the woman at the other end remarked.

‘It's for two. Room 207, please. Grazie,’ he smiled, putting down the receiver.

She reached over, hands poised above his chest, grinning. He frowned.

‘What the hell are you doing?’

She finally pounced, tickling him and watching him squirm, hearing him chuckle. She finally stopped when someone knocked on the door.

‘Shit,’ she sighed.

‘What?’

‘We're not wearing anything,’ she replied.

‘Go to the door. It's fine, they'll understand,’ he smiled. She punched him on his arm, quite hard, and wandered awkwardly over to the door, not sure where to do with her hands. She opened the door, slightly, and popped her head round it.

‘Hello?’

‘The breakfast in bed,’ the woman told her.

‘Could you leave it outside, please?’ Lauren asked.

‘Of course,’ the woman replied, marching off. Lauren darted out into the corridor and grabbed the breakfast tray, exiting in time to see a man looking at her from the lift.

‘You made me look like a fucking idiot,’ she grinned, dumping the tray onto the bedside table and sitting on the bed again.

‘That was the general idea,’ he smiled. ‘I had to get revenge after you tickled me, you see.’

‘You're still a fucking twit,’ she snapped, but he could tell she was joking by the hint of a smile on those lips. He glanced at the tray that Lauren had unceremoniously plonked onto the bedside table. Sure enough, there were two wide, deep cups filled with

cappuccino, the white froth at the top dusted with coffee powder, the cup resting on a saucer. Spoons for stirring were included, of course, as well as sugar and milk. The bread was toasted, dark but not too, the crusts still soft, the middle a golden colour. The jam was raspberry-flavoured, served in a pretty little jar. There were other jams, of course – strawberry as well as blackcurrant, and orange marmalade. The jars they came in were no larger than Lauren's index finger, and they were made by the hotel's neighbour with the utmost care and precision. In the morning light, they glinted and cast rainbows onto the walls and onto both their faces. He took the jar of raspberry jam – a personal favourite of his – and opened it, sniffing its contents tentatively as though he were some sort of connoisseur. Using the spotless butter knife, he spread a thin layer of the rich butter they had been served, and once it had melted, he topped it with a thick layer of raspberry jam. She watched him take a bite, seeing him smiling.

‘Is it good?’ she asked gently, moving closer and taking one of the cups. She took a sip.

‘Is that good?’ he smiled, taking another bite.

‘It's not bad,’ she replied, ‘you should try it sometime.’ In reply, he took a sip of the frothy cappuccino. It was just the way he liked it – strong and unsweetened – and it was at the right temperature for drinking.

‘Not bad?! I'm afraid you're mistaken,’ he frowned, taking a longer sip.

‘So? How was the toast?’ she repeated.

‘Delicious! Should I give you some?’ he checked.

‘Very kind of you, Mr Marsh. A thin layer of butter and a thick layer of strawberry jam, please,’ she informed him politely. He smiled, and began.

‘It's the only way,’ he said as he waited for the butter to melt before he spread the

jam onto the thick, crisp toast. He handed it to her finally and sipped his coffee, watching her as she ate.

‘You're right, it is delicious,’ she smiled, taking another big bite. She hated how clichéd this all was – breakfast in bed after last night, coffee, toast – but at the same time, she was hungry and fairly satisfied. They finished all five slices of toast quickly, so they moved onto to the pastries. They were flaky and crisp, still fairly warm, and they went so well with the cappuccino. Just like last night, they found themselves in a situation in which neither of them needed to speak because they were enjoying the food so much. But God, it was so good, and they knew they'd never find anything like it in England. Nicholas finally spoke.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked Lauren.

‘Yes, why?’ she frowned.

‘You just seem a bit quiet,’ he said.

‘The food's really good, that's all. I never get to eat out much when I'm in England, you see— just good old home-cooking—this makes a change, though. It's nice,’ she explained, placing the cup and saucer back on the tray. She stood up, still naked, and took his hand, gently leading him to the bathroom. She turned on the taps of the bath.

‘I guess it's impossible to look sexy and all that when you're turning taps on,’ she giggled, sitting on the edge of the bathtub.

‘You look sexy anyway,’ he smiled, kissing her. ‘Oh, and do you want some champagne from the mini-bar?’

‘I've already had too much coffee – I don't want to piss in the bath, Nicholas,’ she informed him.

‘Okay, now that's slightly less sexy,’ he smiled, dipping his hand into the water.

‘Christ, that's hot!’ he yelled, retrieving his hand and nursing it sorrowfully while she laughed at him, but in a fond way. He turned the cold tap on and gently swirled the water with his right hand, putting some of the shower gel into the bath to fill it with bubbles. He eventually ventured in, Lauren following.

‘It's at a decent temperature, right?’ she asked. He nodded, fumbling around underwater, finding her hands and holding them, squeezing gently. He leaned over and kissed her again, feeling her lips widen into a smile while they were against his. He just sat there and kissed her.

#

The harsh sound of her hair dryer met him as he wandered out of the bathroom, wearing a fresh shirt and jeans.

‘I can't believe you fell asleep!’ she exclaimed. He sighed, sitting on the bed.

‘I was tired – it was a bath, I felt relaxed!’ he protested, stroking her damp hair. She was brushing one side of it in a way that was almost furious.

‘It was supposed to be romantic, Nicholas,’ she snapped, ‘but still, you look sexy in those jeans,’ He could see a vague smile playing at her lips and he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

‘Would you like me to brush your hair?’ he asked.

‘Fine, but don't yank it,’ she told him. He took the brush and sat behind her, running it through her smooth, silky hair as gently as he could as she continued to dry her hair and the seconds ticked by.

Chapter Sixteen

The television blared as Lauren fumbled around for the remote, having rolled onto it and turned it on when she was asleep. Her eyes were still closed because her alarm hadn't gone off yet, but as soon as she found the remote control and turned the television off, it started to beep. She sighed and lay there for a while before she hit the alarm furiously and started to get up. Even though it was early, the room was fairly warm, so she took her nightgown off and opened the window, feeling the coolness of the air outside on her morning skin. She glanced out of the window, watching the early tourists as they milled about from street to street, looking confused and somewhat lost. The sky was clear and blue, the ocean translucent in the morning sun, the surface of the water glinting in its delicate rays. She stood for a while until she was spotted by a tourist on the street below, a middle-aged man who did a double-take and then looked at his wife again, shaking his head, evidently offended by the display. She couldn't help smiling at his reaction as she tiptoed over to the bathroom, waiting for the water to turn warm before she showered. When she stepped into the shower, the water was at an ideal temperature; enough to send clouds of steam to the ceiling, but not boiling. She spread the sweet-smelling gel over her skin as she hummed some vague tune. After a while, she stepped elegantly out of the shower and, after drying herself off, she walked back into the room again, and over to the wardrobe. Leafing through the various outfits, she searched for something that wouldn't be too warm, turning down shirt after shirt until she came across her maxi dress. It was stunning and tight-fit, the material silky and decorated with yellow floral patterns, the sleeves short and the back fairly low. She smiled as she put it on, her tanned back exposed, her hair still a little wet from the shower, her small feet bare.

#

His alarm hadn't gone off, and now he was struggling to change quickly enough, hobbling slightly as he tried to put on his socks while buttoning up his shirt. His shower had been an utter disaster, lasting barely five minutes and freezing cold, and now he was hoping that she didn't think he had stood her up. He hobbled over to the bathroom mirror and ran his hands through his hair to make sure it was smooth enough. He glanced at the shower for a while before swearing at it and he sat on the bed, which was still messy and tousled. He hoped she would appreciate his attempt at dressing casually – it had taken a lot for him to decide to go out wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a small pair of shorts. She had never seen him in shorts before. Or in a Hawaiian shirt, for that matter. He considered wearing jeans, but at the same time, he didn't want his legs to fry in the heat of the morning. Eventually content with what he was wearing, he made his way to Room 207. Lauren opened the door after his first knock.

‘Let's go!’ she smiled, exiting with her bag.

‘So have you got any ideas for breakfast?’ he frowned as they walked down the corridor.

‘There's a quaint little cafe down by the beach and I hear they do really good breakfasts,’ she suggested. Nicholas nodded and took her hand in his, letting her warm his rough skin, cold after that damn shower. She looked so pretty in her dress – the bottom of the dress hid her shoes so she looked like she was floating, and he noticed her bare back, smiling at how thoroughly beautiful she was. Time seemed to go by so quickly, and soon enough they reached the cafe. It was ever so small and idyllic, the window sills and the door both painted dark green, a sign on the door reading what Nicholas guessed was Italian for 'open', as there were quite a few people who seemed to

be eating there. They went in and were seated at a table for two, before being given small menus. They ended up choosing to order the pancakes, in memory of the time Nicholas taught her how to cook, with maple syrup for her and with blackberry sauce for him. The pancakes finally came, soft and fluffy, the sauces sticky and sweet and unctuous, drizzled generously down the side of the stack of small, round pancakes. Lauren smiled.

‘I bet I can finish them before you,’ she told him, her knife and fork poised, but he was already halfway through the stack, chomping quietly and making soft noises of contentment, the blackberry sauce smeared, quite neatly, around his mouth. She smiled again and took a big bite of one of the pancakes, the sauce literally melting in her mouth, the pancake brilliantly sweet and soft. They both finished rather quickly, satisfied and no longer hungry. Nicholas checked his watch.

‘We're early,’ he said, wiping his mouth delicately with a napkin.

‘Should we walk to the bus then? Slowly, I mean?’ she asked. He nodded, leaving the money near the bill. When they left, Lauren nudged him in the ribs.

‘You didn't tip the waiter, did you?’ she snapped as they made their way further down the road parallel to the beach.

‘I did,’ he protested, ‘just not much.’

They reached the tour bus a couple of minutes later, finding the tour guide smoking and arguing with his wife over the phone, in Italian of course. They sat on a bench nearby, not wanting to interrupt or interfere, exchanging suggestions about what they might be arguing about.

‘She found out about his night with a man named Roberto,’ Lauren guessed.

‘How did you come up with a name like Roberto?’ Nicholas smiled, taking her

hand again.

‘He keeps saying Roberto,’ she told him, smiling at his uncharacteristic absent-mindedness. The tour guide shouted one last thing at his wife, then hung up and wandered over to the bench, glancing at Nicholas and shaking his head.

‘Women, eh?’

He joined them on the bench and glanced at them both.

‘Is this your honeymoon?’ he frowned.

‘Oh no, we met on the tour. We only had our first date the day before yesterday,’ Lauren explained.

‘Ah! First date and afters?’ the tour guide asked.

‘Well, that is personal, but yes, pretty much,’ she smiled.

‘Ah, young,’ the tour guide said before glancing at Nicholas, ‘erm, love.’

‘Are we ridiculously early or something?’ Nicholas frowned, not bothering to glance at the watch that was strapped to the wrist of his right hand.

‘It's only fifteen minutes until we go,’ the tour guide informed him, checking his own wristwatch. It was quiet for a while, as they watched the azure waves lap against the smooth sand. The beach was already quite full, and the tourists who had been in Italy for a while now knew to arrive in the earlier hours of the morning, as it always got too full later on. The weather was marvellous at this time too, in terms of enjoying a day at the beach; the sun was strong but not unbearably, and it was fairly warm, the air cooled by a soothing breeze.

After a while, everyone else arrived; the two old women, the honeymooners, the teenagers, the retirees and the businessmen, who ambled straight over to Nicholas as soon as they spotted him.

‘Congratulations,’ one of them said, nodding in the direction of Lauren.

‘Well, err, thank you,’ Nicholas smiled, shaking the man's hand a little awkwardly. Lauren was standing a few steps behind him, trying to suppress her giggles. She seemed to find it positively hilarious that the businessmen got on so well with Nicholas. She had no idea what they were talking about, though. They were like a completely different species, all shaking hands with one another and patting each other on the back and talking about playing golf. She didn't even know Nicholas played golf. He probably didn't, she thought. They all stumbled into the bus and Nicholas joined Lauren again, just in time to see the trace of a smile on her lips. He grinned.

‘What's so funny?’

‘All those businessmen,’ she whispered, ‘they seem keen to accept you as part of their species. You don't even play golf!’

‘Well,’ he sighed.

‘Hang on, are you saying I've shagged a guy who plays golf?’ she exclaimed.

‘I wouldn't quite put it like that—but yes,’ he admitted. She smiled a little and rested her head on his shoulder. The engine of the bus spluttered and backfired and they were off. The tour guide had fallen asleep and was now lying across two seats, mouth wide open. Lauren had the window seat, but Nicholas could still see out of the thick glass. They had reached the more rural area of the place filled with slopes and long twisting, dipping roads with vineyards on both sides, the distance covered in tall, healthy-looking trees. With no tour guide, they were essentially driving aimlessly through the countryside, but the tour guide looked so peaceful that nobody wanted to wake him. So they sat there calmly, looking out at the delightful landscapes and just enjoying the view. As he looked down at Lauren, Nicholas realised that she was asleep,

her gentle breaths blowing the wispy hair from her face. He smiled and looked back out of the window again. The driver seemed to be going round in circles, as Nicholas was sure he'd seen that vineyard before. They were evidently lost, but nobody seemed to care about it. Nicholas looked at the seats behind him; they were occupied by two of the businessmen, one wearing a blue Hugo Boss suit, in which he was sweating profusely, the other wearing a pair of shorts which were too small for him and a tight pink polo-shirt. They were obviously not holiday people. The one wearing the shorts noticed Nicholas' gaze.

'My wife chose this outfit for me,' he explained, looking extremely embarrassed as his friend sniggered quietly.

'It's fine, I don't particularly like this shirt either,' Nicholas smiled, gesturing to his colourful Hawaiian shirt.

They were still driving, the landscape looking the same as it did half an hour ago. Nobody had any idea what the time was, yet they were all sitting there placidly, not really caring about anything or anyone but themselves, the honeymooners (slightly behind in terms of brain cells) singing that song about wheels on the bus, the businessmen trying to join in so that people wouldn't find them boring. Lauren was still asleep, evidently having found the early start to the day a little too early. Nicholas was looking out of the window at the endless trees that the sun kept diving behind, watching and waiting for some sign of life. He tried to eavesdrop on the conversation the two elderly women were having, but they were completely incomprehensible, most likely giggling at an inside joke. Then the driver suddenly turned left, in the direction of a tiny village in the distance. It was smaller than the village the hotel was in, with only a couple of hundred houses and a small town square. As the bus drove closer, they could

see that it seemed barely populated, the doors shut and the curtains closed, the town square empty apart from an elderly man sitting in the middle of the square, quietly playing an ancient-looking guitar. The roads were empty as the bus parked awkwardly in the village, the only sound being the gentle playing of the guitar, echoing through the streets. They dispersed, Lauren following Nicholas and holding his coarse hand, squinting up at him and smiling, just happy and less tired after her nap.

‘Did I miss anything interesting?’ she asked Nicholas, guiding him to the pavement as an extremely small car sped past.

‘When you were asleep, you mean?’ he frowned.

‘Yes,’ she replied.

‘Nothing interesting, no. Although we were all singing The Wheels on the Bus go Round and Round. I was surprised it didn't wake you up,’ he informed her.

‘I'm a sound sleeper,’ she replied. Nicholas grinned and reached into his rucksack.

‘Should we be real tourists?’ he asked, taking out his camera. She nodded and took it from him, running off in search of something to photograph. He stayed where he was for a while, watching her run about giddily, almost envious of her youthfulness.

Chapter Seventeen

In the centre of the village, beside the square, lay a dead-end street, one of the widest in the place, and at the end of it stood a wishing well. It was old, an off-white shade of paint covering the rough concrete edges, the water a rusty colour from the money that had been dropped into it throughout the years. But it seemed abandoned now, none of the coins new and shiny, the concrete worn down and scratched, the fountain spluttering

and spitting water everywhere. In its ancient, rustic state, though, it was still so exquisite and regal, just standing there as Nicholas wondered how many wishes it had heard. The sun was glinting on the murky water, making the whole place look so much more magnificent than it was. Lauren ran up to the well, sitting on the edge and glancing in at the thousands of coins below, trying to count them. She sighed and looked back at Nicholas, who was standing a few metres away.

‘There's so many coins!’ she called, beckoning to him. Obediently, he wandered over and sat beside her on the rough, warm concrete.

‘I wonder if anyone takes out any of the coins,’ he grinned.

‘By sticking their hands into that mess?’ she frowned, ‘I should hope not.’

‘Do you have any coins?’ he asked, having checked his own pockets and found nothing.

‘Why?! You're not a charity or something. And besides, if it's my money, it's not technically your wish – it's mine,’ she explained, taking a penny from her pocket. ‘But I'm going to make a wish.’

She smiled and closed her eyes, pausing as a couple of seconds passed, then opening her eyes and tossing the coin into the well.

‘Don't ask me what I wished for – it's cheesy and besides, if I tell you, my wish won't come true,’ she told him, facing him again.

‘It can't be that cheesy,’ he smiled. Lauren checked the water again.

‘I think it hit the bottom,’ she said, still looking at the bronze-tinted liquid.

‘Hopefully – otherwise it's deeper than it looks,’ Nicholas replied, sitting closer to the water.

‘You're not scaring me – it's really shallow,’ Lauren told him, looking up at him

again. He looked so awkward in his shorts and the tight-fitting Hawaiian shirt – the 'tourist style' didn't suit him at all. Although, she had to admit, she was a tourist too. She was on a tour at the moment, abroad, taking pictures and being carted around by a hippie in a bright yellow bus.

'Nicholas?' Lauren frowned.

'What?'

'You've never really talked about your childhood. I was just thinking about that,' Lauren explained, taking her vintage sunglasses from her handbag and placing them on her head.

'It's a topic that's never come up, I guess. And it's not like you've talked about your childhood,' Nicholas replied. 'Oh, and where's my camera? You ran off with it a while ago.'

Lauren smiled and took his camera out of her bag, handing it over to him, making sure that their hands touched for a lingering moment. He finally took it and put it back in his rucksack, watching her as she gazed into the murky water.

'It's pretty much opaque,' she remarked, barely able to see the coins at the bottom of the well.

'Well, combining metal with water never was a good idea,' Nicholas said.

'I bet you were really quiet and studious when you were at school,' Lauren mused.

'What makes you say that?' Nicholas smiled, a little embarrassed.

'You look like the type who'd be studious and reserved and quiet. You probably went to Harrow or something fancy like that,' she muttered, looking Nicholas in the eye. He didn't blink.

‘Dover Comprehensive, actually,’ he replied, trying not to smile at Lauren's surprised reaction.

‘Okay, but you probably were studious. Always walking around with your arms full of books – mainly Biology and Psychology – and achieving perfection in everything you did,’ Lauren said. Nicholas grinned.

‘Almost, only I was never that perfect. I kept tripping over my own feet and I was never on time to any of my lessons. My teachers thought I was rebellious when really I was just a bit absent-minded when it came to real life,’ he explained.

‘Ah! Did you get picked last by all teams when it came to PE?’ Lauren smiled.

‘That happened a lot, actually. I can't think why, though – I was probably the only one who could reach the basketball hoop, with a table. And a little jump just for added height,’ he said, making her chuckle softly.

‘Did you have lots of equally studious friends?’ Lauren asked.

‘I didn't, no – I was so quiet and awkward, I guess nobody really wanted to talk to me. Christ, you must think I'm pathetic,’ he sighed, still smiling but sarcastically now.

‘I don't think you're pathetic,’ she snapped, hugging him a little aggressively. She pulled away and looked at him for a while.

‘What else do you want to know?’ he asked.

‘Prom. Tell me about prom,’ she said, leaning in closer, more interested now.

‘I didn't go. I had a bit of a breakdown a few minutes before it started, so my mum took me home and let me watch TV all night. She ordered me a Domino's, too. Said we could have our very own prom in the living room of our house,’ Nicholas explained, a nostalgic smile playing at his lips.

‘That sounds so much better than my prom,’ Lauren grinned, sitting back again.

‘Why? What happened?’ Nicholas frowned.

‘Well, unlike you, I did go. Big mistake. I went alone because my parents didn't allow me to have a boyfriend and I had to wear a completely conservative dress with these ugly long sleeves. It was green and there was a massive bow right near my arse. Then my mum decided to drive me there in her bright pink fiat car and I got there half an hour early. I had to talk to all the teachers and then someone came in and thought that my maths teacher was my prom date. On top of that, I spilt coke down my dress and got pizza sauce all over my face. I then sneaked out with some people in my year who randomly started talking to me and we ended up getting pissed and high. I stumbled home and my mum said she was going to make me see a counsellor. I cried all night, and the next morning I was sick. Literally,’ Lauren explained.

‘Did you end up seeing the counsellor?’ Nicholas asked.

‘I said I did, but I just sat on a swing in the park, watching people from the school smoke and play football,’ Lauren replied

‘What were you like as a teenager?’ he asked, sitting back, closer to the rusty water.

‘I was quiet, just like you – but I wasn't clever. I knew about things, all kinds of things that I probably shouldn't have known about at that age, but not the important things, not the things they test you about in school. I was rebellious, too – I was so restricted by my parents that every opportunity I had to defy them, I took. And most of the time it affected me more than it affected them, and not in a good way,’ she told him, tucking her curly hair neatly behind her small ears.

‘Was there a subject that you really liked? So much that it was something you could turn to when you weren't feeling that good?’ he enquired.

‘Not a subject as such: they had this club after school, though. It was a choir and most of the people who were in it were sixth formers – I started when I was about fifteen and they were all so nice to me. The teacher who led the choir was really quirky and fun. I remember he kept turning up in his pyjamas and he always used his chewed-up pencil for conducting. I guess it was my way of channelling all the anger I had in me then,’ she explained. ‘Christ, his feels like therapy.’

‘Shit, I’m sorry, I was interested, that’s all,’ he sighed, blushing slightly. ‘But that actually sounds great – I guess Psychology was that thing for me, that helped me through school.’

‘You know something?’

‘What?’ Nicholas frowned.

‘You’re one of the only people in my life who talks to me like an adult,’ she said.

‘But you are an adult,’ he said, running a hand through his hair.

‘Not to some people, I’m not,’ she replied.

‘Their loss, evidently,’ he smiled.

‘I guess,’ she said, looking at Nicholas for a while, at his eyes as they flitted around, trying to find something to focus on. He smiled.

‘What would you do if I splashed you?’ he grinned, his hand poised just above the surface of the water.

‘Before dying from numerous diseases? I’d probably punch you and kick you in the balls before splashing you so we’ll die of the same diseases. Or I’d walk off and you’d be very sad,’ she informed him, smiling as he leaned over and kissed her.

‘Do your parents still not allow you boyfriends?’ Nicholas asked, taking a few strands of Lauren’s hair between thumb and forefinger, feeling its smoothness and its

softness.

‘They don't really talk about it anymore. They know I'm not a virgin and I guess they've learned to live with that, but I'm not allowed to take any boys home until I'm twenty-two. Don't know how they decided on that number, but there you go,’ she replied, glancing at Nicholas. ‘And what is your obsession with my hair?!’

‘Sorry, it's just really soft and smooth. See? I'm still absent-minded!’ he chuckled, letting go of her hair, finally. She smiled, grateful to have it returned, dimples forming on her cheeks. Nicholas checked his watch.

‘Shit, we need to run if we're going to be in time for the bus. We've got two minutes until it's supposed to leave!’ he exclaimed, grabbing his rucksack and taking Lauren's hand as they began to sprint in the direction of the bus. It seemed like such a long way, and the sun kept getting hotter. By the time they arrived, the bus was starting to leave. They got on just before the engine backfired, and then they were off again. The tour guide was awake now, and apologising enthusiastically to everyone on the bus. The businessman wearing the pink polo-shirt seemed to enjoy complaining, and used the tour guide's lack of competence as an opportunity to complain to his heart's content. Nicholas and Lauren had the same seats as last time, Lauren still by the window because she liked it that way. The tour guide was too busy arguing with the businessman to care about the tour, so they were once again driving through the countryside, the only point of the journey being to return to the hotel. Lauren turned to Nicholas.

‘We're pretty lucky, aren't we?’ she mused, sitting back in the uncomfortable leather seat.

‘How do you mean?’ he frowned.

‘Well, we met each other – that's lucky. If neither of us booked this holiday, we

would never have met,' she explained.

'That's a bit cheesy,' he scoffed, running his hands through his hair again. It seemed more matted than it was in the morning.

'We're the fucking definition of cheesy, Nicholas,' Lauren smiled, fiddling with the seat belt.

'This place is mesmerising,' Nicholas said, glancing out of the window at the brilliant blue sky and at the rugged landscape.

'Of course it is,' Lauren smiled. She rested her head on Nicholas' shoulder and closed her eyes, the hint of a smile on her pretty lips.

Chapter Eighteen

For the rest of the journey, they slept side by side, the spluttering engine just a murmur in the background, the conversations of everyone on the bus merging into a peaceful silence. When Lauren woke up, they were still driving in the countryside, the sun reaching the intensity it only reached at noon. The sky was still a brilliant blue colour, and the driver of the bus was whistling some jaunty tune that Lauren didn't know. The tour guide was still asleep, because last night he didn't get much sleep on the couch, after arguing with his wife. Or at least that was what Lauren liked to think had happened. The bright sun shone on the windows of the bus, making the specks of dust and the small splatters of mud that clung to the window far more obvious. Everything on the holiday had had this sense of rustic beauty about it – nothing was faultless, as nothing is, but it was bold in that fact, and it was still the most incredible holiday either of them had ever been on. And she smiled to herself, comfortable in the uncertainty of what the rest of the holiday would bring, letting nature lead her to wherever it wanted

her to go. She could hear Nicholas' heart beating, steady and strong, his chest rising and falling as he breathed deeply. She knew he wasn't fully asleep because his eyelashes were moving a little and his eyelids were twitching. He smiled a little and opened his eyes.

'Would you like a stethoscope?' he whispered, glancing at her ear, which was pressed against his chest. She blinked.

'What?' she frowned, sitting up again.

'Just a joke. How does it sound, Doctor?' he asked.

'Healthy. Which is good. Sorry, I just care about you, that's all,' she replied.

'I know,' he said. 'I know.'

'I hope we're almost there,' she said, squirming awkwardly. Nicholas tried not to grin.

'Do you need a piss?' he smiled. Lauren glared at him.

'It was the wishing well. So much water there,' she sighed.

'The country roads seem to be endless around here, so I have no idea how close we are to the hotel,' he explained, finding nothing but trees and vines beyond the windows.

'No, the hotel's far away from the beach, which is where the bus stops! And we haven't had lunch, so we go to a restaurant, we eat and I pee? I mean, we might as well kill two birds with one stone,' she suggested.

'Sounds pretty good. I'm hungry already, and I bet you're thirsty,' Nicholas grinned, 'you can't stop thinking about all that water...' In reply, she hit him on the arm, twice, first with her handbag and then with her hand, but she was still smiling, even though she was trying to be genuinely angry with him.

‘Go to sleep again and you’ll forget you ever needed to piss,’ Nicholas suggested.

‘It can’t possibly take that long. The journey here was only half an hour. So I’ll be fine,’ she told him. ‘And I’ll try to sit still now. Sorry.’

After a few minutes, the village could be seen in the distance, and ten minutes later, they arrived by the beach. Lauren ran off the bus and into the nearest restaurant, Nicholas following.

‘Where is the toilet?’ she asked one of the waiters. He looked at her blankly.

‘Erm... toiletto? Err... pssssssss...’ she tried to explain, blowing a raspberry and imitating a constipated person squatting on a toilet. The waiter finally nodded and gestured over to a door to the left of the bar. She sprinted over to the door, kicked it open and ran in, while Nicholas found them a table. After a while, she returned.

‘Sorry about that,’ she said, joining him at the table and glancing at the menu.

‘What are you getting?’ he asked, looking through the drinks menu.

‘Should we have a 2000 Sassicaia Cabernet? To celebrate such a brilliant day?’ she suggested.

‘That’s not a bad idea, you know!’ he grinned. ‘And to eat?’

‘Let’s get the same thing as each other! What would you like?’ Lauren asked.

‘Garlic bread as a starter? And a margarita pizza, of course!’ he replied, putting the menu down again.

‘And for dessert?’ she enquired.

‘I think I’m going to have an espresso instead of a proper dessert,’ he explained.

‘Oh. I’ve never had an espresso before,’ she admitted, putting the menu down on the wooden table. One of the waiters wandered over.

‘Are you ready to order?’ he asked.

‘A 2000 Sassicaia Cabernet, garlic bread as a starter, two margarita pizzas and two espressos instead of dessert,’ Nicholas said.

‘As you wish,’ he smiled, swiping the menus from the table and walking back to the bar with them tucked under his arm.

‘He’s the one I shouted at about the toilet, right?’ she smiled at Nicholas.

‘I think so, yes. He seemed really offended,’ Nicholas grinned, smoothing out the creases on his Hawaiian shirt. After a while, the waiter returned with the wine and poured it into their glasses. Lauren took a sip.

‘It’s not bad, I suppose,’ she smiled, the tip of her tongue touching her upper lip slightly as she tasted the fruity flavour on her lips.

‘Not bad? It’s fucking expensive,’ Nicholas remarked, taking another sip. ‘It’s bloody gorgeous.’

‘I’m joking, Nicholas! God, I do have some taste! Of course it’s bloody gorgeous,’ she grinned. The waiter returned again, carrying a plate stacked with garlic bread, drizzled with a little bit of olive oil.

‘Grazie,’ Lauren smiled. She took a big bite of the bread, still smiling. He watched her eat.

‘Is it good?’ he asked when she had swallowed.

‘Why don’t you try some and tell me?’ she asked, moving the plate closer to him. He smiled and took a bite, the bread crunching loudly as he chewed it, a little olive oil escaping from his mouth.

He took a napkin and dabbed it.

‘Well?’ Lauren enquired. ‘Is it good?’

‘Of course it is,’ he smiled. They continued to eat, until the pizza came, and then the espresso. Lauren sniffed hers suspiciously.

‘It smells strong,’ she decided. Nicholas smiled.

‘That’s why it’s served in small amounts. It’ll wake you up for sure,’ he told her.

‘I don’t need waking up – I’m fully awake, thank you,’ she replied, taking a tentative sip.

‘Well?’ he asked.

‘Well, what?’

‘Do you like it?’ he enquired, taking a sip of his.

‘It’s strong and quite rich... but I like it,’ she informed him, taking another sip.

‘Good,’ he smiled, finishing his. They got the bill, paid and left, starting to wander down the road by the beach,

‘Should we do some sunbathing? You know, near the sea,’ Lauren asked, taking his hand.

‘Do you want to?’ Nicholas enquired. She nodded, so he led her onto the beach, finding them a spot close to the gentle waves.

‘Shit, we don’t have any beach towels,’ she sighed, using her hand to shield her eyes from the sun.

‘I could get them from the hotel for you,’ he offered, but she shook her head.

‘It’s too far away. We could just ask someone for spare towels,’ she said, scanning the beach for anyone who looked English, but finding nobody.

‘Well, err, feel free to ask anyone,’ Nicholas said. Lauren put her hands on her hips.

‘Has anyone got two spare towels?!’ she shouted, turning quite a few heads, but

all she got was a series of blank looks. Until finally someone spoke.

‘I have one! You can share?’ a voice called back. It was a man’s voice, an Italian man. Lauren frowned, searching the beach.

‘Over here!’ the man cried. She finally spotted a tanned man who was looking in her direction, waving wildly. She jogged over, Nicholas following at a leisurely pace.

‘I’m so sorry for being such a nuisance,’ she told him. He smiled at her gently.

‘It’s fine. I always bring a spare towel to the beach. You never know who might need one,’ he told her. She extended her hand.

‘I’m Lauren,’ she said, and, gesturing in the direction of Nicholas, who had caught up with her. ‘And this is Nicholas.’

‘I’m Victor,’ the man said, shaking Lauren’s hand firmly, and, gesturing in the direction of the man who was standing behind him. ‘And this is my fiancé, Giovanni,’ Giovanni waved.

‘Are you guys from England?’ Giovanni asked, squinting against the sun.

‘Yes, unfortunately, we are,’ Nicholas replied, putting on his sunglasses.

‘Do you mind if we join you?’ Lauren asked, glancing up at Victor.

‘No problem – feel free, please,’ Victor smiled, laying a towel down on the sand for Lauren and Nicholas to share. They sat, Nicholas unbuttoning his shirt as the sun grew hotter and stronger.

‘I’ve been to England before. The first time, I was alone, the second time with Giovanni. It’s cold and very rainy. I didn’t like it,’ Victor admitted, smiling.

‘Nobody really likes it,’ Nicholas replied. Lauren elbowed him in the ribs, quite hard.

‘It’s a decent place, but we’re not blessed with amazing weather, you see. This is

pretty much some sort of tropical paradise for us,' Lauren laughed. 'So do you live locally?'

'We do, actually. You see, as traditional as this place may look and seem, it's quite diverse. There are two LGBT cafés and there's a pride parade down this street every year in the summer. You missed this year's one – it was about a month ago, I think,' Giovanni explained, turning over to let his back tan.

'Oh, really? That's great! You'd never guess, what with how old-fashioned the village looks,' Lauren grinned, putting her sunglasses on.

'I know!' Giovanni exclaimed. 'So how did you two meet?'

'On this holiday, actually. It's supposed to be an exclusive tour, but instead we get carted around in a yellow bus which is falling to pieces, driven by a hippie. And the tour guide keeps falling asleep. But apart from that, it's going so well. The food here is great, too,' Nicholas explained, taking Lauren's hand and running his thumb along her smooth skin.

'Wow! So you haven't been together for long?' Victor frowned.

'No. And if one of us or neither of us didn't book the holiday, we wouldn't have met,' Lauren replied.

'Fate,' Giovanni smiled, glancing up at Lauren.

'No. Coincidence,' Victor said, grinning at Giovanni as he shook his head. 'You can probably guess which one is the romantic.'

'Are you the romantic one, Lauren?' Giovanni asked.

'I think we're both romantic. You see, Nicholas is a really deep person, and when he loves someone, he does so with all his heart and with every inch of his being. I guess not many girls or women like that because they think it's too serious and they feel

caged, but I love him just as much as he loves me. I just love him. Every millimetre, every centimetre, every hair and every dip and bump on his body, I... I just love him,' she explained. Giovanni smiled and pretended to wipe away a tear.

'Where's your speech?' Giovanni asked Nicholas. He shrugged.

'She said it all, really. I just love her, and I still can't believe how lucky I am,' he said, squeezing her hand reassuringly. She smiled.

'He doesn't need a speech to win me over,' she said.

They lay in silence for a while, tanning in the strong afternoon sun, watching the waves as they splashed and spat tiny droplets of salty water into the unpolluted air. There were a few people swimming further out, the smaller children playing in the shallower parts, throwing buckets of water at one another.

'See, why can't children stay like that? After the age of twelve, they all play on their phones – there's no contact with nature, no relationship,' Victor sighed.

'It's worse in Britain, because there's not as much nature anymore. That's just all these endless roads and the high streets and the parks we have are usually full of rebellious teenagers smoking god-knows-what – the only place left is the beach, the seaside, and not everyone is close to the seaside,' Nicholas explained.

'I guess we're lucky in that way – there is a lot of nature in Italy, and there is a lot of beauty as well,' Giovanni said, checking his back to make sure he was wearing enough sun cream. They all nodded and lay in silence again, watching the azure waves.

Chapter Nineteen

It was later on in the day that Nicholas started to feel a bit thirsty. He fumbled around in his rucksack, hoping that he had packed a bottle of some sort, but he found nothing.

Lauren glanced at him, frowning.

‘What have you stolen now?’ she asked, elbowing him in the ribs.

‘Nothing!’ he protested. ‘I can’t find my bottle, that’s all.’

‘You don’t have one, Nicholas – in fact, I’ve never seen you drinking water before,’ she told him, smiling a little. There was something about the way her dimples seemed to dance when she smiled that made him want to kiss her. And he did, this time. She grinned and bowed her head as passers-by began to smile at them.

‘Are you embarrassed?’ Nicholas asked her.

‘I’m not embarrassed. I’m just trying not to cry because it’s an important thing, you see, Nicholas. That’s the first time you’ve kissed me. On a beach, I mean,’ she explained.

‘You’re allowed to cry,’ Nicholas smiled, running his fingers through the soft, small grains of sand beside him. He glanced at Victor and Giovanni, who seemed to be asleep, their faces covered by hats. Lauren, winking at Nicholas, crawled over to Giovanni and gently took his hat off. He twitched slightly and blinked a few times before facing Lauren.

‘Sorry, did I fall asleep?’ he frowned, struggling to sit up. Lauren helped him. Victor sat up too, having been woken by the commotion. The sun was almost getting too hot, and Nicholas found himself beginning to sweat a little, so he used the towel to sort it out, running his hands through his hair to make it remain flat.

‘It’s getting a bit too hot, isn’t it?’ Nicholas frowned. Lauren nodded.

‘I think we should go,’ she agreed. ‘But it was nice to meet you, Victor, and Giovanni.’

‘If you’re not busy, you see, Victor and I are going to my grandmother’s house,

and she owns a vineyard, so you could come... if you want?' Giovanni suggested.

'That sounds great! We'd love that. Will we get to taste some wine?' Lauren enquired.

'Some?! My grandmother wouldn't let you get away with drinking some wine. If you're going to drink wine, you're going to drink tons of it!' Giovanni cried, finally standing up and beginning to tidy away the towels and the rest of his and Victor's belongings. Nicholas and Lauren copied, until there was no trace of them having been on the beach. Victor led them over to his favourite possession – his bright red car, the one he had improved himself, with awkward doors and not enough leg room, but it was ideal for him. They put their luggage in the boot and got into the car, with some difficulty on Nicholas' side, and drove off.

The roads on the way to the vineyard were narrow and everyone kept honking as they overtook one another and turned into smaller roads. There were dips and potholes and sometimes a few small bumps, and one time, they had to swerve around a tree that had fallen into the road. The countryside was extremely rustic, especially in the full bloom of summer, the fields with so many crops, the trees so tall and majestic and the flowers by the roadside so vibrant. Nicholas could smell them as he thrust his head out of the open window, letting the breeze make his hair look messy, for once, completely letting go, a wide smile on his long face. Lauren could see his happiness, and she smiled to herself, genuinely happy for him and proud of him. She glanced out of the window.

'It's not too far away, is it?' Lauren asked, looking nervously at the countryside.

'Not too far, no – just another two or three minutes to go,' Victor replied.

'Why?'

'She has a tendency to need the loo during journeys,' Nicholas told him, smiling.

‘That was just that one time!’ Lauren protested.

They finally stopped outside a white electric gate. Giovanni stepped awkwardly out of the car and pressed a few buttons beside the gate. It opened and Victor began to drive up the long driveway, Giovanni clinging to the door and laughing his head off. Nicholas glanced out of the window, grinning at Giovanni and looking at the rows of vines as they swept by. The house came into view, a large farmhouse-style building in white, with a lilac-coloured front door and potted plants lining the path. Giovanni, followed by Victor, Lauren and Nicholas, made his way to the entrance. A woman in her mid-eighties opened the door. She exclaimed happily in Italian, grabbing Giovanni and hugging him and kissing him. She did the same with Victor, and kissed Lauren and Nicholas on both cheeks when Victor had told her who they were. She smiled at them both.

‘I don’t know much good English,’ she explained, ushering them in. The hall itself was grand, with a rustic spiralling staircase and a pretty embossed glass door that led to the kitchen. She opened the glass door and followed them into the kitchen. It was really a work of art, the cabinet doors carved by hand, the workspace massive, the dining table long and set with sparkling cutlery and crockery. The silk curtains were swaying in the wind from the open window, making specks of light flit around the ceiling. They all sat at the table.

‘Nicholas and Lauren wanted to take a look around the vineyard in a while, is that okay?’ Giovanni asked. His grandmother frowned.

‘Ah, scusi,’ he apologised, and translated what he had said into Italian. His grandmother nodded, smiling again.

‘No problems,’ she said.

So, when they had finished catching up, they began to make their way to the vineyard. Most of the grapes weren't ripe yet, although there were a few bunches that were just about right. Giovanni's grandmother (whose name, Nicholas had deduced, was Rosa) found a basket to put them in, saying she'd use most of them, sparing a few to let Nicholas and Lauren bring back to the hotel. They walked in between the vines for a while, Rosa explaining how the whole business worked, as Giovanni translated her words into English. She was a fine-looking woman who seemed to suit old age better than anyone Nicholas knew. She held herself well, taking into account her age, and seemed to walk briskly everywhere she went. She was small too, smaller than Lauren, maybe five feet tall, and she wore a bright floral shirt and a long tie-dye skirt that reached her ankles. Her silvery hair was cut down to her strong jaw, and it was straight and a little wispy. Her eyes were sharp and intense, a blue that made her eyes look like rivers, focussed and curious. Her nose, like Giovanni's, was pointed, with small nostrils, her lips thin and enhanced with just a touch of colour. She nudged Giovanni quite hard, and whispered something in his ear. He nodded.

'My grandmother wants to know, why are you looking at her?' he said.

'Because she looks so young! I need her secret, because I'm starting to get older and wrinkly!' Nicholas grinned. Giovanni translated this to Rosa, who smiled, embarrassed and shaking her head in denial of what he had told her. Nicholas smiled, looking at the floor and at the roots of the vines. He took Lauren's hand and smiled fondly at her. Rosa then led them to where the wine was produced. It was an industrial building made from wood, large but pretty. The door creaked a little as they opened it, revealing the whole factory she owned. There were around ten employees as well as machines, doing all sorts of jobs, like putting labels on the bottles and the more

laborious jobs like loading the grapes onto the machines, having picked them a few minutes before. The employees looked up as Rosa entered, smiling and getting back to work after she had greeted them cheerfully. She then led her guests to the wine cellar in her house, smiling as Nicholas looked at all the wine before him, eyes wide. She took a bottle from the back of the room and poured it into a wine glass for him. He took it gratefully, thanking her before he took a sip. It was strong, but in a satisfying way. He took a smaller sip this time, leaving the wine on his tongue long enough to keep the flavour in his mouth, before he swallowed. He closed his eyes, smiling.

‘It’s good. Perfect,’ he told her. ‘But why did you choose this one in particular?’

She replied in Italian. Giovanni blinked a few times before translating.

‘Because it’s like you, my grandmother says – a little dry and strong, but after a while, it’s perfect,’ Giovanni smiled. Lauren grinned.

‘That’s actually pretty accurate,’ she laughed, squeezing his hand and winking at him.

‘Your go to try some now,’ Nicholas told her, glancing at Rosa, who nodded. She searched in the same place, picking a bottle that had no label and pouring it into a wine glass for Lauren. She handed it to her.

‘Grazie,’ Lauren smiled, taking a sip of the wine. It was sparkling, bubbly and fruity at first, but it gave her a slight kick at the back of her throat. Lauren smiled.

‘Almost,’ she told Rosa, ‘but it’s too sweet,’ Rosa frowned and shook her head.

‘Oh, I don’t think so. I think it’s just about sweet enough for you,’ Giovanni translated. Lauren shrugged, smiling, and glanced at the bottle for a while, fiddling with the cork.

‘Why doesn’t it have a label on it?’ she asked Rosa.

‘She wanted you to guess who made this wine. Someone who, deep down, is bubbly but feisty,’ Giovanni answered. Rosa took a sheet of plastic from her shirt pocket and sticking it onto the bottle. It took a while for Lauren to notice it. When she did, she hugged Rosa.

‘You made it? It’s great!’ she grinned, still clinging on to Rosa.

‘Would you like to try some more?’ Rosa asked.

#

‘So... this... this is a wine tasting session? Session? Section?’ Nicholas frowned, staring blankly at the row of wine glasses that stood in front of him, all empty. Lauren was sitting next to him, giggling hysterically as she sipped some wine, a white wine with quite a high alcohol percentage. She finished the wine and put her glass at the end of the row that Nicholas had created. He looked up at her, furious.

‘That was my row!’ he snapped, picking up the glass (with some difficulty) and depositing it back into Lauren’s cupped hands. She took it over to the cupboard, almost nursing it, and put it on one of the shelves. She glanced over at Rosa, her eyes wide.

‘I’m so sorry, we’re being very bad-mannered...,’ she mused, looking sadly at the floor.

‘No! You come here – have fun!’ Rosa smiled. Lauren nodded, not quite convinced, and walked over to sit next to Nicholas again. She rested her head on his shoulder and watched him as he continued to stare at the wine. She smiled at him happily.

‘At least we’re having fun!’ she hiccupped, letting out a small, quiet burp. Nichols looked at her finally and blinked a few times. And then once more.

‘Yes! Yes, I suppose so!’ he cried. He suddenly checked his watch. ‘I think we

need to go.'

'Already?' Lauren frowned.

'Yes, now,' Nicholas replied, grabbing his belongings and handing Rosa a piece of paper with his name and number written on it. 'Phone me, dahling!'

When they arrived at the hotel, Nicholas and Lauren exchanged numbers with Victor and Giovanni, and they said goodnight, as the drunken couple fell up the stairs.

Chapter Twenty

They stumbled up the stairs, falling over their bags and over each other. When they reached the corridor, Lauren looked at it blankly.

'What room is it?' she frowned, walking up to the nearest door, belonging to Room 201.

'What, ours?' Nicholas enquired. 'I'm not quite sure. Is it in this building?'

Without replying, Lauren stepped closer to the door and headbutted it. Finding that this had no effect, she knocked quietly. A middle-aged woman came to the door, her hair tousled and her lipstick awkwardly smudged. Lauren regarded the woman for a while before she spoke.

'Hello,' Lauren said politely, 'is this our room?'

The woman looked extremely offended and began to close the door before Lauren stopped it.

'I am so sorry! I didn't realise you were sexing in there!' she exclaimed. The woman closed the door. Lauren stood in the corridor for a while before she grabbed her phone hastily.

'We need to call the police!' she cried. 'We need to say there's a s... a s... a

strange woman in our hotel room!' Nicholas snatched the phone from her.

'No, they're sexing, so let them do so. We'll just have to find ourselves another hotel... room,' he advised, pointing further down the corridor, near where the lift was.

'Let's go on a quest! Let's find our room... your room... someone's room!' Lauren grinned, sprinting giddily until she reached the end of the corridor.

'Oh,' she said, a little disappointed. 'I don't think we found our room...'

'Maybe we can find our room number! On a key...' Nicholas suggested, taking the key out of his pocket and reading it the wrong way around. 'Oh. I don't think this is in English.' And he shook his head sadly, hiccuping gently before Lauren spoke.

'It's upside down, silly!' she giggled, taking it from him and reading it. 'Well, it says Room 203, but I think it's Room 207... I remember Room 207.'

'I see,' Nicholas frowned. 'Maybe that's your room! You should get your pyjamas and you can sleep over! Go on now and don't forget, I'm in Room 203! If they're not sexing there anymore.'

Lauren nodded and set off down the corridor, struggling a little to read the numbers on all the doors. She did eventually find Room 207, surprised that all her clothes were there. She took two of her shirts out of the wardrobe and exited the room again.

'Nick! I've got my pyjamas!' she shouted down the corridor. Nicholas poked his head round the door of Room 207 and beckoned to her. She skipped over and held the shirts close to his face.

'I said, I've got my pyjamas. Top and bottom,' she told him proudly, jabbing the shirts somewhat violently with an accusing finger. He took them from her and laid them on the bed, dragging her into the room then slamming the door shut. Lauren sat on the

bed.

‘How was your day, Lauren?’ Nicholas asked, sitting beside her on the bed.

‘Well, you should know – you were there most of the time,’ she snapped, lying back against the soft, silky pillows.

‘I know, but what about the bits without me? The bits when I wasn't there?’ he enquired.

‘They were pretty good too. I showered and I shat. Not at the same time. I think,’ she informed him, screwing up her face like she always did before she burped.

‘I know that face. That face tells me you've got a burp coming, like, like a big one,’ he told her, rolling off the end of the bed dramatically as she burped. He lay on the bed again, giggling and hiccuping hysterically. Lauren smiled.

‘I don't think alcohol and you go well together,’ she grinned, yawning softly.

‘Excuse me?! I think you're pissed, that's what I think. More pissed than me, you are,’ he snapped.

‘If my parents could see me now’ Lauren smiled, glancing up at the ceiling, which seemed to be spinning at an impossible speed. Nicholas turned to face her.

‘They'd probably be very, very upset,’ he told her, putting his index finger on her nose. She screwed up her face, not burping this time, and scratched her nose.

‘I think you're most probably extremely right,’ she replied, removing Nicholas' finger from her petite nose.

‘What are your parents like? Apart from conservative?’ he asked, trying to prop his head on his hand but finding that his arm kept collapsing.

‘Well, they're pretty conservative. If I ever wore anything that showed the slightest bit of cleavage, they'd probably send me to rehab or something. They never

talk about sex. Any mention of the word and they'd run a mile, although they know I'm not a virgin. I don't know how they found out, but they definitely know,' she explained. As she became more eloquent, it was clear that the effects of the alcohol were beginning to wear off.

'Maybe they guessed that the one time you didn't come home for the night it wasn't a sleepover anymore. Your smile might have given it away,' Nicholas suggested.

'I didn't smile! Christ, that's so cheesy!' Lauren grinned, punching Nicholas on the arm.

'Come on, I bet you did!' Nicholas giggled woozily, rubbing his arm where she had hit him.

'But, as I was saying, they're really posh, too. We're not a rich family, but they always come across as so posh and snobbish. I don't mind it too much because they present themselves well and they dress well, but whenever I wear a hoodie or something that isn't presentable, they pretty much bite my head off,' she explained, frowning for a while. 'Shit, I don't think I'm drunk anymore.'

'Yeah, I'm starting to get sober again. I don't know if I like it,' Nicholas frowned, sitting up again.

'What's in the mini-bar, then?' Lauren asked, sitting up next to Nicholas.

'I think there's some Southern Comfort, some vodka and some wine in there,' he replied, wandering over to the mini-bar and opening it.

'What's Southern Comfort like?' Lauren asked, peering over at the selection of drinks.

'You're a bit of a virgin when it comes to alcohol, aren't you?' Nicholas grinned.

'Well, I am only nineteen and my parents don't allow alcohol within fifty miles

of the house, so pardon me for not being a fucking connoisseur,' she snapped, joining him as he stood by the mini-bar.

'Me too. I've only ever had wine and beer,' he smiled gently.

'So? What shall we have?' Lauren enquired, kneeling to get a better look at the drinks.

'Some sort of cider? It'll probably get you pissed fast,' Nicholas suggested.

'No, I think I'll have the vodka and coke,' she replied, taking the can from the mini-bar.

'I'm going to have a whisky and coke,' he decided, sitting on the bed again, beverage in hand, raising the drink. 'To us, to coke and to caffeine.'

'Us, coke and caffeine,' she grinned, opening the can and taking a long sip.

'Shit! There's a lot of vodka in this. A lot. Do you want to try some?'

In reply, Nicholas leaned over and took a sip, finding it a little hard to swallow.

'We're such light weights, aren't we?' he giggled, taking another sip of his whisky and coke.

'I have an idea!' she cried, draining the can after a while. She threw it into the bin with excellent aim.

'You're a fast drinker!' he frowned, glancing at his own can of alcohol, still half full.

'Don't you want to hear about my idea?' she asked, dragging the covers up over her knees.

'Of course I do! What is it?' Nicholas enquired.

'No, wait,' she began, reaching over and taking a gulp of Nicholas' whisky and coke. 'Okay. Here's the idea. When we're even more drunk than we are now, we can

phone my parents.'

'But I thought you said they wouldn't allow alcohol within fifty miles of their house,' Nicholas pointed out, taking a slightly larger sip from the can and swallowing it delicately and slowly.

'Exactly. But we're in Italy – we're well over fifty minutes from where I live. So we're not technically breaking any rules,' she explained.

'You mean you're not technically breaking any rules,' he corrected her.

'No, don't get me wrong, you are going to be part of this, Nicholas,' she informed him.

'What are your parents going to think of me?' he yelped, starting to become quite tipsy.

'You really are a bloody light weight,' Lauren scoffed, getting another vodka and coke from the mini-bar before joining Nicholas on the bed again. He frowned at her.

'Am I? Really?!' he cried, finishing the whisky and coke.

'You're pissed already!' she laughed, taking a sip of her vodka and coke. She seemed to have adapted fairly well to drinking alcohol.

'But as I was saying, what the hell are your parents going to think about me?! I'm a random guy who's randomly with their daughter!' he explained, trying to throw the empty can into the bin but failing pretty miserably.

'They'll be so confused! We could even put on voices! Speak some Italian!' she giggled, hiccuping loudly as she set the can down on the bedside table. 'That's q... quite enough of dat. Thrat. That.'

'Do you remember the number?' Nicholas enquired, lying face-down on the bed.

'Of what? Of the room where those people were sexing?' Lauren frowned, lying

back, her head against the pillow, her hair spilling off the sides of the pillow.

‘No, silly! Of your pezarents. Parents,’ Nicholas replied, now hugging the pillow.

‘Oh yes. Oh yes, of course. Silly Lauren,’ she smiled, glancing at him blankly. ‘I’m not quite sure, actually. It might be in my pocket. I’ve got a shit memory so I take it with me on paper, you see.’ She began to frantically search her pockets, throwing used tissues all around the room until she found a small scrap of paper. Nicholas looked up from his task of hugging the pillow.

‘Found it?’ he asked.

‘Found it!’ she cried, waving it around in the air. ‘Should we use the hotel phone?’

‘Probably, yes. You do know, we’re not pissed, we’re just tipsy. A bit woozy. So it won’t technically be drunk-calling,’ Nicholas explained. ‘But yes, let’s use the hotel phone.’

‘Okay,’ Lauren said, beginning to dial the phone number on the piece of paper. ‘It’s ringing!’

She took his hand in hers and squeezed it, quite hard, as she put the phone on speaker. It rang for a long time before someone finally answered.

‘Hello?’

‘Mrs Langdon, this is the Italian police,’ Lauren grinned, attempting an Italian accent.

‘Oh, yes?’ Ruth frowned, her tone of voice a little suspicious.

‘Yes. I am Polico Constable Victor,’ Nicholas told her. She coughed a few times, then there was a silence.

‘What has she gone and done now?’ she sighed.

‘Well, she was making a bit of a scene. Serenading some poor man outside his window. She was drunk, you see. Wearing a fairly low-cut dress,’ Lauren explained, trying hard to suppress her hysterical laughter.

‘Oh. Well that’s very unlike her. Yes, I think we’ll have a family chat when she comes home. Maybe get her alcohol addiction problem sorted out,’ she decided.

‘Alcohol addiction? She said this was the second time she got drunk. The first time was at prom,’ Nicholas frowned.

‘Well, the task is really to nip it in the bud before she does become addicted. And I apologise if she’s caused you any problems,’ she explained. Lauren took another sip from the can, a long one this time.

‘Hello? Mum?’ she squeaked, hiccuping.

‘You silly twit, Lauren!’ she snapped.

‘Hello? Mum, are... are you on the other side of the phrome?’ Lauren asked.

‘Phone?’

‘You’re still drunk, aren’t you?’

‘This phrome is shiiiiit! I cannot hear you, mother dearest!’ Lauren shouted.

‘You get better, Lauren, and you come home, okay?’ she said.

‘We have a nice phrome, don’t we?’ Lauren cried.

‘I’ll see you, Lauren,’ her mother said, putting down the phone.

‘That wasn’t all that fun, actually. I had to pretend to be Italian and drunk,’ she sighed. ‘Do you think she’s going to be okay? She’s not too worried about me?’

‘Don’t think about it too much.. Come on, it’s late and we should probably go to seep,’ he said, taking the can away from her and putting it back in the mini-bar. He

joined her on the bed again. She smiled a little and started to kiss him gently, a smile still on her full, red lips.

Chapter Twenty-One

They were in his room this time. It was the third time she had been there, and the first time she had actually been in his bed. He was still asleep, facing her, his body curled up, his head barely visible beneath the soft covers. God, he was so handsome when he slept. From what she could see of him, his hair seemed to be flopping into his eyes, his long eyelashes motionless, his face still and without expression. He breathed deeply as he slept, making the covers appear to be levitating before her eyes. His frame was so thin that he took up less than half of the bed, but he still lay in the centre of the bed, where the pillows touched, to be closer to her. She was sitting up now, still fascinated by everything about him as she watched him sleep. His mouth, tinted with red, was unsmiling and still, white at the sides with the hint of saliva. His nose lay against the pillows, twisted to the right and, still hooked, shining in the morning sun. His hollow cheeks refused to move as he breathed, his large, thin hands placed beneath his head as he lay there, rested and peaceful. The morning light seeped in through the dark velvet curtains, reflecting onto the embossed ceiling. It bounced off the watch he was still wearing, having forgotten to remove it in the rushed undressing that took place last night, and threw patterns of light up onto the white surface above them. A smile flickered momentarily across her face at his absent-mindedness, and she found herself really wondering if what they had right now could last. She shrugged the idea off and got up off the bed, wandering over to drink some cold water to wake her up. She drank quickly and sat down on the bed again, not feeling any better. It was already warm in

the room, warmer than her room was, she noticed, because the fan didn't look like it was about to work anytime soon and the window was still closed; she was sure that the noise from the street below would wake him. And besides, she could go on looking at him for hours on end. She reached over and delicately touched his cheek, feeling the dips and bumps of scars and ageing with her long fingers, gently stroking the short hairs that a week without shaving had brought about, moving up to run her hand through his soft, straight hair. His mouth began to twitch.

‘Didn’t have you down as the sentimental type,’ he whispered.

‘Fuck. You were supposed to be asleep,’ she hissed.

‘And this was supposed to be platonic,’ he grinned, enveloping her fingers in his, raising her hand and kissing it gently.

‘Yes, and look where that turned out,’ she replied, slipping out of his grip and placing her hand determinedly by her side.

‘Oh, come on... you have to admit, last night was great...’ he told her, sitting up, ready to argue.

‘It was... average,’ she snapped.

‘What have you got to compare it with?’ he frowned.

‘The night we spent together after our first date,’ she answered.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘not as good?’

‘No. I shall be filing a formal complaint, Nicholas. I shall have to visit your ‘psychiatrist office’ for it... and it will be necessary to test if it is better on your couch.’ she informed him, trying not to smile.

‘Is that so?’ he said, leaning over to take her hand. ‘Well, we’ll have to see about that.’

‘You don’t have one, though, right?’ she checked.

‘Unfortunately not,’ he replied. ‘I’m a psychologist, you see, not a psychiatrist.’

‘Oh,’ she sighed, seemingly disappointed, ‘well, I’m sure you could try to borrow one.’

‘Of course...’

‘You slept longer than me,’ she grinned, ‘for once.’

‘Can you blame me?’ he smiled. ‘You tire me out.’

‘Well, in that case I apologise,’ she told him, getting up and moving over to the window, finally able to open the soft velvet curtains, letting the sunlight fill the large room, spilling out onto the walls and the ceiling. She opened the window too, helping the hot air from the room escape into the breeze outside. He watched her as she gazed out of the window, her body swaying from side to side in an almost hypnotic way, watching as her thin nightgown wavered in the gentle wind. She looked almost supernatural, standing there, just a white silhouette in the harsh light outside, her body seemingly weightless as she drifted from side to side, her face completely expressionless. He didn’t say anything, merely watching her, fascinated by her beauty. Her hair was being thrown back in the wind, still wild after last night, her eyes not really focussing on anything in particular; her hands limp by her swaying side. She finally stopped and joined him again on the bed.

‘It’s a wonderful day, Nicholas,’ she smiled, putting her hand on his.

‘What should we do today, then?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know... let’s just play it by ear, see what we feel like doing,’ she suggested, tucking her hair behind her ears self-consciously.

‘Sounds good. I need to brush my teeth and shower, though. I’ve probably got

morning breath, sorry,' he sighed, getting up slowly and wandering over to the bathroom and, washing his hands first, he began to brush his teeth. She still sat on the bed, her knees touching her chest; her arms wrapped around her legs, watching a small ant make its way across the window sill, making a very small scratching noise. She turned her attention to the television that hung dangerously from the wall, searching for the remote and switching it on. She was confronted by a good looking black haired man babbling at her in Italian, holding a bowl of gunk and seeming very proud about what he had made. She switched channels to find an extremely dramatic soap opera, in which a couple was fighting, the woman screeching hysterically at the man, hitting him delicately with her small hands. She turned off the television as Nicholas came in from the bathroom.

'Non posso credere che hai dormito con lui!' she screamed, hitting him delicately on his arm.

'Have you been watching too much TV?' he frowned. She nodded, sighing.

'It means "I can't believe you slept with him"' she informed him.

'Well in that case, I think you've got the wrong end of the stick,' he told her.

'Haven't you ever kissed a guy?' she asked.

'That's personal.'

'I know. That's why I'm asking.'

'Have you ever kissed a girl?' he enquired.

'You answer my question first,' she snapped.

'Like I said. It's personal,' he told her.

'Last night was personal...'

'Fine. Yes, I have. He was a psychiatrist... happy now?' he sighed, sitting back

down on the bed.

‘Did you-’

‘Yes.’

‘On the couch-’

‘Yes. Your go.’

‘Okay... once, in high school. I was fifteen. It was only a kiss, though,’ she explained, joining him on the bed.

‘Well, it was an all-girls school...’ he began.

‘Yes, but that doesn’t have to mean anything,’ she snapped. ‘In fact, the sixth form was coed.’

‘Hmm Maybe that was when you discovered that men exist and you liked that idea,’ he smiled, wrapping his long arms around her waist and pulling her closer to him.

‘God, you really do have morning breath,’ she told him, slowly moving her face away from him so that their jaws didn’t clash.

‘Really? But I brushed my teeth...’ he frowned, checking his breath rather frantically against his hand.

‘It’s not too bad, I suppose...’ she sighed, the hint of a smile playing at her soft lips. He couldn’t help but to lean over and kiss her, their lips meeting in a tender embrace. She pulled away and grinned at him with a goofy kind of happiness, her index finger tracing the outline of his thin lips as they trembled gently. She drew him in to kiss him again, feeling his warm breath, running over the grooves on his lips, hearing him inhale sharply, moaning ever so softly on the exhale. She could feel him quivering with anticipation, his eyes tightly shut as he committed fully to the kiss. He tasted of fresh toothpaste and his sweat smelt earthy because she loved him, but his sweat did not

overpower his distinct smell of sweet orange tea, slightly musty amongst the crisp white bedsheets. She lay very close to him, watching him with a frown, wondering how the hell anyone could love someone this much. He had so many imperfections – he was just another normal person, after all – but she seemed to embrace everything, letting them both live a love that was so accepting and so complete that words themselves could not describe how they felt. And he watched her, for once not wondering about how she loved him of all people; instead, he only thought about how much she loved him, and about how much he loved her, as she lay there, plain yet so endearing and beautiful to him. She was not the ideal woman in terms of society's standards; and he was not the ideal man, but they could both be loved, and they could both certainly love. And it wasn't just looks that attracted them to each other; it was so much more than that, this incredible sense of a deeper connection between the two, something almost, although Nicholas hated words and clichés like that, almost like magic. For the first time in his life, he found himself being presented with something he could not analyse and, more importantly, something which he had no intention of analysing. This was love in a form that neither of them knew existed.

They lay there for a while, just savouring each other's company, comfortable with the silences between them as he just held her, and she held him. There was a lull in the air, like the sort that came before a thunderstorm. Nicholas sat up in the bed and, now having a decent view of the window, he noticed the rapidly darkening horizon. The birds were flying very close to the ground.

'Storm's coming,' he told her, lying back down again. The first few droplets of rainfall came before Lauren managed to close the window, and a few escaped onto the window sill. Instead of sitting down again, she grabbed Nicholas' hand and dragged him

out of the bed. She guided him out of the room and down the stairs, opening the main door of the hotel and stepping out into the rain. She ran a little further down the street, looking up into the open heavens above, her arms spread out as she touched the individual drops of rain. Still in her nightgown, she seemed to almost float as she continued to run, her bare feet light upon the cool pavement.

‘You’ll get a cold!’ he called to her, but she shook her head happily.

‘No!’ she cried. ‘But you’ll get bored!’

She began to run back up the street again, taking his hand once more and dragging him as gently as she could, back down, starting to gain speed. She finally let go and kept sprinting as she watched him run behind her, struggling to keep up. She stopped and caught him as he skidded to a halt, wrapping her arms elegantly around his waist as he held her; completely oblivious to the rain as it made their pyjamas cling to their bodies, their hair getting wet, while the air remained warm. There was something freeing about running in the summer rain, something about how it was never miserable because it was never cold; in the summer, rain was wanted and needed as a relief of the dryness and the constant heat of the season. He looked at the rain and then at her as she rested her head upon his chest. He pulled her away and they were about to kiss when the first hint of thunder came.

‘We should go back upstairs,’ she sighed, and just like that, the moment had passed.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The first time Nicholas saw her was at a nightclub. He was nineteen, a fresh face in his first year of University, vulnerable and wet behind the ears, easier for the second-years

to target. They noticed his lack of willpower in an instant, and they used this to their advantage, taking him to inappropriate places and showing him inappropriate things. But they were growing bored of his indifferent reactions to the situations that they exposed him to, so they began a new project; hunting for a partner for him. And so it was that the merciless second-years dragged him, quite literally as it was against his will, through the doors of the nightclub where most of the students went to get pissed. It was a blurry jumble of lights and music and brief flashes of faces darting in and out of his view, the sounds too loud and the lights too strong as they pulsed in the dark. One of the second-years, a sturdy, mean-looking blond who played rugby, with eyes that were set deep in his face, his expression blank and stupid, pushed Nicholas over to the bar.

‘Get my friend a vodka and coke,’ he ordered, his voice deep and rough, almost monotonous.

‘Please,’ the woman at the bar said, glaring at him. He moved forward threateningly.

‘What?’

She yanked him almost off his feet, knuckles white as she continued to hold onto the front of his leather jacket.

‘Say please,’ she repeated. He took a step back.

‘Get my friend a vodka and coke. Please,’ he said, summoning his friends to sit Nicholas down – you see, thin and vulnerable as he was, he wasn’t weak – it was certainly a team effort to pin him to the chair. The blond was dusting down his jacket, smoothing out the crinkles that the woman at the bar had caused, his expression almost like that of an upset dog with its tail between its legs. He seemed deeply wounded.

‘Ruined my jacket,’ he muttered, still dusting himself down.

The drink was eventually shoved in Nicholas' direction with anything but benevolence, and he took a tentative sip. It was strong and it burned his throat, but it didn't taste all that bad. He took another sip.

'Like it, Marsh?' one of the second-years smiled, savouring the look on Nicholas' face as the alcohol stung his throat again. He took another sip and swallowed bravely.

'It's not too bad, actually,' he replied, trying to not sound raspy.

'Right, then. Let's get you a drunk shag,' the blond one said, yanking Nicholas up out of his seat, pushing him into the dense crowd of moving bodies, closer to the blinding lights and nearer to the speakers from which the tinny music blurted. He ploughed through the swarming ocean of people he had never seen before, their intimacy confusing to him. He kept bumping into random strangers, not really aware of where he was going and where he was supposed to be. He could feel the blond's hands on his back, urging him to continue to work. He was led to the other side of the room where a tall brunette stood, her straight dark hair cut a-symmetrical, close to her chin. She wore a slinky black dress that revealed a little too much, her watery eyes staring at Nicholas blankly as she attempted to look as interested as she could.

'Tom, isn't it?' she asked him.

'Nicholas, actually,' he corrected her, extending his hand to greet her.

'Of course. I'm Natalie. Third year,' she said, ignoring his hand. She moved closer to one of the second-years.

'I thought you said he was sexy,' she hissed in a low voice, although not quite low enough.

'Look, you don't need to love him to shag him,' he snapped, not out of earshot of

Nicholas.

‘Yes, but he needs to be slightly attractive,’ she replied.

‘Look. I’ll try to find someone else for him. Just try to talk to him and try to be nice while I find someone else,’ he told her. She strolled back over to Nicholas, sighing.

‘Seems like I’m stuck with you.’

‘It’s not like I’m much happier about it than you are, okay?’ he snapped, scanning the room for any sign of someone he knew. Soon enough, the blond came over and led him to another woman. She was alone, sitting on the floor with a drink and eating the handful of peanuts she was holding. She wore a long floral skirt, a checked shirt and a beige blazer. Her hair just reached her shoulders, the same beige colour as her blazer, the locks falling into her face as she bowed her head, evidently drunk. Her large, round glasses lay on the floor next to her and she squinted at the floor almost angrily. She ate the peanuts quickly, stuffing more than one in her mouth at a time, the fingers of her other hand drumming on the dirty ground. She burped almost sadly and glanced up at Nicholas.

‘What?’ she asked, frowning at him grumpily.

‘How drunk are you?’ the blond enquired, trying to help her up but getting a rather strong punch to the groin for his efforts.

‘Who are you?’ she snapped, still only looking at Nicholas.

‘Nicholas. First year. Studying psychology,’ he replied.

‘Oh. Sorry. I thought you’d be an art student. You look a bit shifty,’ she informed him.

‘I see. You must be pissed. Everyone says I look clever,’ he frowned, helping her up. She cooperated this time and they both eventually managed to stand her against the

wall.

‘Well, I think you look shifty. I’m Jen. And before you ask, it’s not short for Jennifer or anything. My Mum is lazy. So I’m just Jen,’ she said, extending her hand.

‘I’m Nicholas. Please don’t call me Nick,’ he said, shaking her hand.

‘Right, then. Nick it is. I’m glad I met you, but I need to go home to throw up now,’ she told him.

‘Mind if I join you?’ he asked.

‘Not at all, Nick. Please hold my hair when I puke.’

And that was how Nicholas met his wife.

#

The sun had just begun to set, the orange glow of the horizon spilling out into the large room as he sat there, resting, happy for once with not doing anything. His mind had stopped racing with questions and problems and criticisms – he was just appreciating the importance of being peaceful, and of watching nature without analysing it. The hues of pinks and oranges near the sun were surrounded by the blues and the purples of the darker sky. It was such a simple phenomenon, something that happened every day, something that slipped past without people noticing, something that kept being taken for granted. And yet, without realisation and without acceptance and admiration, the sun still always set every evening, never wanting or needing recognition, always filling the sky with the most glorious of colours, beautiful in its modesty and in its sheer perfection. Some of the orange colours reflected onto the roses that stood in a vase on Nicholas' window sill, a present from Lauren a couple of days ago, making the vase cast rainbows onto the ceiling. As the sun continued to set, the sky became darker and so did the room, as the grey hint of night-time began to spill through the evening clouds.

Nicholas turned to Lauren, who was lying beside him on the bed, her eyes closed, not fully asleep yet.

‘You missed the sunset,’ he whispered, running his fingers through her smooth, soft hair. She turned to him without reply, pulling him closer to her and kissing his neck, then feeling her lips touch his. She smiled halfway through the kiss and pulled away, hugging him suddenly, and tightly.

‘You know, whatever happens, I really, really love you, Nicholas,’ she told him, not letting go of him for a while. ‘I need you to remember that. You matter to me, and you always will.’ And a tear slipped from her right eye but she brushed it away as she let go of him. He lay with her on the bed, her head on his chest, hearing his steady heartbeat, her head rising and falling in time with his breaths. The sky was completely dark now, yet neither of them felt the need to turn on any of the lights in the room; they just lay there in silence and in peace, not really thinking about anything or anyone. He took her hand in his, thumb gently smoothing the small veins on the back of her tanned hand as he almost clung to her, not willing to think about what would happen when the holiday was over, and when he would have to go home. She squeezed his hand almost as though she knew what he was thinking about. She was dreading going home too. She started to get up. She kissed him for a long time, and then said,

‘I need to go now.’

‘Bye,’ he smiled. She exited finally. He lay in bed for a while before his phone rang.

‘Hello?’

‘Nick! You promised to call me!’ Jen cried, her voice harsh and loud on the other end of the phone. She sounded excited and annoyed at the same time.

‘Sorry, I’ve just been so busy here. They’ve really packed the tour full of events,’ he told her, sitting up against the wall, his arm already aching from holding the phone to his ear.

‘You sound so happy, darling! Has it been fun?’ she asked, and he could feel that she was smiling at the other end of the phone.

‘Yeah. Yeah, it’s really been great. I should take you next time,’ he said, burying his face in his hands, overwhelmed by his guilt. She sounded so warm and loving and caring.

‘No, it’s fine! You needed a break from me, I get that! Even I need a break from me sometimes,’ she reassured him. God, why do you have to be so nice, he thought.

‘How have you been, Jen?’ he asked, his face still buried in his large hands.

‘I’ve been good, thank you, brilliant! I went to this restaurant last night, it was French or something like that, it was so good – you would have loved it. They did this incredible roast chicken breast with garlic butter. God, I’ve been having the time of my life without you!’ she grinned.

‘Good. At least you didn’t miss me too much, then,’ he sighed.

‘Tell me about it. Tell me about Italy,’ she asked him.

‘It’s honestly great, Jen, it really is. Everything there is so earthy and natural, and everyone’s so happy and joyful. It’s the kind of place where you can completely forget and let go of all your problems and all your worries. I’d honestly love for you to come over so you can see it for yourself and so you can see it with me – I wish I could stay here forever too, I really do,’ he explained, sighing as he ran his hands through his hair.

‘I bet you’re dreading coming back to boring old Surrey,’ she said, and he couldn’t tell if she was joking or if she was being serious.

‘It’ll be sad to leave Italy, I suppose – but Surrey is home,’ he told her, trying to sound sure of what he was saying.

‘Of course, darling, I was only joking,’ she smiled. He wondered what she was doing right this minute while he talked to her; whether she was pacing up and down or just standing next to the phone in the hallway; where she was in the house, and how she felt. He wanted to re-learn everything he ever knew about her as his love for her seeped back into his heart, bit by bit.

‘Well, I need to go now, it’s getting quite late and I’m getting tired, Nicholas,’ she told him.

‘Of course, darling. Goodnight.’

‘I love you,’ she smiled.

‘I love you too,’ he replied. She hung up.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lauren woke up at nine o’clock in the morning, which really annoyed her, as she felt as though she had missed the best part of the morning in Italy. It was already hotter outside, as well as in her room, and there wasn’t much of the morning left. Despite this, she didn’t have any particular plans for the day, so he was in no hurry to get out of bed. In fact, she ended up giving herself a lie in for another thirty minutes. At the end of that, she hauled herself out of bed and trudged into the bathroom, peering at her reflection in the mirror, frowning. Her hair was somewhat neater than it usually was when she woke up, and she didn’t have bags under her eyes anymore. Her skin was clearer and she generally looked quite decent, in her opinion, as she undressed and turned the shower on.

When the water had reached an appropriate temperature, she stepped in and let the warmth surround her, the water washing off sweat and such things from her soft skin. She was halfway through the first bottle of the hotel's shower gel, she noticed, so this time, less was used. A couple of minutes later, she left the bathroom with the towel wrapped around her body, clean and dry. Carefully, she browsed the outfits in her wardrobe, considering all of them and sighing at how conservative and mundane they all were. The dresses showed nothing above her knees, and they were all fairly plain, with no shape to them whatsoever. She sighed again, eventually finding a loose-fitting top that looked as though it came straight from the seventies, as well as a pair of shorts that she had only managed to obtain without her parents' permission.

She sat upon her bed with nothing to do, so she reached over to the bedside table to her right and picked up the remote control, switching on the television. The first thing that came on was the news, which Lauren had never really been interested in, especially in a language she couldn't speak or understand. She made a mental note to herself to try harder and learn to speak Italian for the next time she came here. If she did return next year, that is; she was sure she would, if she wasn't busy with anything else.

She switched channels and found herself being confronted with two angry Italian men shouting at one another. She couldn't see how people found that sort of thing entertaining, so she changed channels again. Finding nothing of interest, she turned it off and began to think about what to cook for breakfast. Searching in her kitchenette, she found the ingredients for the pancakes that Nicholas had taught her how to make. She smiled, putting them into a bowl and mixing them just like he had taught her to. She then put the frying pan on the hob and put it on a medium heat. Slowly, she poured a small amount of mixture into the pan, smiling as she watched the puddle transform into

a pancake. She took the pan in both hands, exhaled cautiously and tossed the pancake into the air. It landed, fortunately, in the pan, with a beautiful sizzle and, pleased, Lauren put the pan onto the hob again. It was done quickly, so she put it onto a plate and started making the next pancake.

She repeated this process so many times that she only realised, as her ten pancakes stood before her, that she had made too many. But still, she persevered, telling herself that she could certainly finish them, as she sat on her bed. She devoured them quickly and with jam, as she was quite hungry that morning, but she quickly became full, with five pancakes left. So she decided to leave them for later – when she was hungry again – meaning she was struggling to find things to do.

She investigated the bedside tables, which ended up being filled with all kinds of things that the previous guests who had stayed in the room had left behind. There was a pair of bright green flip-flops, some faded blue swimming trunks and the Bible in the bedside table to her right. In the second drawer was a fifteenth birthday card, for a girl, as well as some red sunglasses, an expensive-looking lipstick and some insect repellent. In the first drawer in the bedside table to Lauren's left was some anti-ageing cream, an old pack of tissues, once scented, and some old potpourri, the smell having faded in its latter years. In the second drawer was a phone charger, an empty notebook, an old alarm clock and a set of oil paints, accompanied by an incredibly small, dainty sketchbook. Lauren smiled, closing the last drawer and sitting on her bed again, wondering what the hell to do next.

She eventually pulled her rucksack out from under the bed and searched for her polaroid camera and all her pictures. There were so many that she didn't even remember taking, but they were still there, among her collection. There were hundreds of

memories captured by that camera, happy ones, photographs in which her smile was genuine, something it hadn't been for a long time now. She flicked through the memories, grinning at the ones where she remembered she had been laughing, like the one she took of Nicholas when he was hugging a tree in the forest. That was one of her favourites, as well as the atmospheric picture she had taken of the fountain on one of the tours. She was quite proud of that one.

Then there were the ones that Nicholas had taken, the blurred ones because of his unsteady hands. He had taken one of her in the gardens of the manor house, where she was standing there watching the fountain, completely unaware of the fact that Nicholas was taking a picture of her. She loved that one; the way she looked so peaceful and calm, just enjoying nature. She had also taken lots of pictures of all the food, and as she flicked through them, she started to get hungry again. She took the plate of pancakes and ate them slowly, still flicking through the pictures. Most of them were beautiful, although a few were somewhat blurry, but she still decided not to throw any of them away. There were ones of her on the bus, on the many occasions that she needed the toilet, and she smiled to herself; she had never seen those ones before. The best ones, however, were the ones of the sunrise and the sunset, as well as the twilight and the bright moon above the illuminated village at night.

She eventually reached the end of the pictures, so, with two pancakes left to eat, she turned on the television, hoping that, now that it was ten o'clock, it would be something different and slightly more interesting than before. When she turned the thing on, she was watching the news again, with the same people as before, not particularly interested in whatever it was that they were discussing. She switched channels, taking a bite from one of the pancakes and watching the opening credits of a Bruce Lee film. She

knew it would be dubbed, and that she wouldn't be able to understand what was happening. And besides, she never did like Bruce Lee films.

So, once again, she changed channels, finding a children's television programme with some rabbits and a helicopter in a field, as well as a channel that was showing a house-hunting programme. On the next channel was a recording of an opera, which Lauren left on as she finished the pancakes, remembering the time she went to see the opera with Nicholas, and how they were both weeping when it had finished, and how he cheered her up with a gelato. When she had finished eating the pancakes, she took the plate over to the sink and, after waiting for the water to become hot, she scrubbed the plate clean, using some lemon-scented washing up liquid to ensure that it was as spotless as it could be; she took good care of everything in her room, in the knowledge of the fact that it wasn't hers, and that someone else would be using it after her. This meant that she wanted it to be as perfect for them as it was for her.

In the evening, she grabbed her keys and let the room, making that rather familiar journey to Room 203 again. She knocked on the door and Nicholas opened it quickly. He smiled and hugged her, letting her in and sitting on the bed with her.

'How did you sleep?' he asked, smoothing out the creases in the dark covers.

'Pretty good, thanks, how about you? You don't usually sleep as well as I do,' she said.

'No, you're perfectly right – I usually don't sleep that well, but last night I did. I'm sleeping quite well here in Italy, actually. I hope it doesn't change when we return,' he replied, smiling. 'Can I get you something? A drink, some wine – have you had supper?'

'No, thanks. I had supper already – and for breakfast, I made the pancakes the

way you taught me, and I watched part of an opera on TV and I thought of you,' she smiled, but Nicholas didn't reply. 'And I looked through the photos I took. There are loads of them of the landscape and of the food and there are a few with you, as well as the ones you took of me. I saw the ones you took of me when I needed a shit on the tour bus. I look ridiculous.'

She glanced over at Nicholas to see if he was listening as he hovered by the mini-bar in the kitchenette. He turned to her and smiled half-heartedly, looking quite sexy as he stood there in his untucked shirt, slouching a little, a wine bottle in his large hand. He cocked his head a little, almost as though he was trying to figure her out, before he joined her on the bed again, a significant distance between the two of them that Lauren didn't seem to notice. He took a swig from the wine bottle, still silent.

'I don't want to go home yet – I mean, we haven't got that long left. It's gone so quickly,' she sighed, running her hand across the creased patterned covers.

'We've still got a few days left, it's not too bad. And I don't know about you, but I'm certainly going to consider coming back next year,' he informed her, taking another sip of the wine.

'Of course – I just don't even want to leave,' she said, glancing at Nicholas, 'Sorry, am I boring you?'

'No, no, sorry, I'm just a bit tired. Sleepy. I had a nice lie in, you see, so I'm still recovering from that. You're not boring, Lauren, honestly. You're fucking intelligent, I'll tell you that,' he told her, his eyes flickering around the room. For some reason, he couldn't look at her.

'Of course, yeah,' she smiled, taking the wine bottle from Nicholas and taking a swig. She was surprised to see that it was the one that Giovanni's grandmother had

recommended for him; it tasted of him. He grinned, watching her realise this.

‘It does suit me. It really does,’ he said, taking it back and drinking once again. Lauren lay back on the comfortable double bed, smiling at the simplicity of everything here.

‘What did you do last night? Did you watch TV or something?’ she asked. Nicholas’ smile faltered.

‘Lauren, please don’t do this. Please stop asking questions, I can’t do this anymore,’ he groaned, standing up and taking a gulp of the wine, frowning and swaying.

‘You’re drunk, aren’t you?’ Lauren giggled. ‘You’re fucking drunk, Nicholas.’

‘No. No, I wish I was, but I’m just tipsy, Lauren, I’m sorry. We need to stop this. I’m a bastard, Lauren, I’m unfaithful and I’m breaking your heart by doing this – all of this,’ he said, the bottle still in his hand, swaying.

‘Nicholas, what are you talking about?’ Lauren frowned, getting up and backing away from him. He crept closer.

‘I’m married, Lauren. I’m fucking married and she called me last night. First time I remembered she existed in this holiday. I’m a bastard, Lauren, I’m a cunt,’ he said.

Lauren sank to the floor.

‘What?’

Chapter Twenty-Four

On the way to her bedroom, Lauren was too numb and confused to cry or to feel any emotions, really. In her life, she had never loved someone; Nicholas would always be the first, and he should be flattered, she thought to herself as she slipped the key through

the hole with a limp hand, slamming the door behind her and collapsing onto the bed. She lay with her face against the fresh covers, forgetting to breathe as her eyes watched the darkness of the patterns on her bed. She finally let out a soft, exasperated cry, muffled but almost animalistic. She sat up, eyes madly tracing the patterns of the ceiling as she wept bitter tears that fell onto the covers and smudged the happy patterns. Now all the holiday would remind her of was Nicholas, for there wasn't one memory she had in Italy that didn't include him. She pressed her soft cheek against the silk cushions; even they smelt of him, of his fucking sweat, of his fucking hair. And for a moment, as she clutched the pillows and lay there, she had no idea how she was supposed to live her life anymore, how she would bear to live without his constant support and without his company.

Because, in her silly little imagination, she had envisaged growing old with him, what their house would be like and what their wedding would be like, but now those ideas were more than ideas for some other woman out there. That woman was with Nicholas, though – that was the catch.

Lauren stood up and took a half-empty bottle of wine from the mini-bar, sitting back on the bed again and tipping the bottle's strong, red liquid into her mouth. It tasted bitter and horrible, drinking alone in the room that didn't seem beautiful anymore, the patterns on the covers blurred and the ceiling too white for her now. Finding no solace or relief in this red liquid, she tossed it across the room, for it was now empty. Her eyes were getting sticky, still in the process of drying after her endless crying. She was still trying to suppress her sobs and her tears, trying not to overthink, for she knew that doing so would upset her more. Slowly, she approached the window, looking down on the street below, remembering the time she had stood there, nude and free. The height of her

room was dizzying as she looked down, and she closed the window finally, the aromas from the restaurants nearby not quite as appetising as they had been before.

So much reminded Lauren of him, and she couldn't change that easily, which was why Italy seemed a much drearier place to her, now that she was alone again. She still loved it, of course, but it just wasn't as magical as it had been when she was in love. All she knew was that they would be leaving soon, and after that, she would never have to see Nicholas again; the memories would be hers, and she would be home again, or at least in the mundane home that she knew.

She just wished that she could have been Nicholas' first love, his only love, but at his age, that was unrealistic. She had been too nice, having told him that it was fine and that she understood, when really, she wanted to strangle him; she wanted to break his heart so it would be identical to hers. The whole fucking room stank of him, and she hoped she had made her mark on his room too, and that she was in most of his memories of the holiday. But, although she was tempted, Lauren never threw away any of the photos of Nicholas, because memories were memories, and these were good ones, no matter who they had been shared with; they reminded Lauren of her happiness when she was there, with Nicholas, and there was no reason for that to be a bad thing.

And she was beginning to forgive him. Before she left his room, she had told him. 'I swear, it'll only hurt for a few days, and then I'll be fine,' and this was true; she was quick to forgive, sometimes to a fault, but only if she didn't overthink the situation too much.

She sat down on the bed again, running her hands along the silk pillows, the one on the right also used and a little worn. The bed was starting to get cold in the fresh morning breeze, as the first signs of Autumn's chill crept into view. The breeze was

colder than it had been before, and it was far stronger, the draft from the crack in the window making the curtains billow outwards in the gust. She stood finally, dusting herself down and wandering into the bathroom, undressing slowly and leaving a trail of clothes as she did so. Without thinking, she approached the shower and turned it on, gasping as a powerful surge of ice-cold water met her bare body. She let it run, her tanned hands pressed against the clean white tiles as she leant against the wall, her back shaking as she sobbed quietly. The water gradually became warm as her tears subsided and she took some more of the shower gel from its neat little bottle, rubbing it gently into her soft, tanned skin that still smelled of Nicholas, that still remembered his touch.

She stepped out later on, the shower still on as she rubbed her skin dry with the rough towel. She turned the shower off eventually and dressed again, everything she did merely a routine, merely functional. Her face was still wet from the shower as well as from her tears, but she left it and stood in the kitchenette, glancing down at the mini-bar and at the rustic hob, wondering whether she should learn to cook a wider variety of dishes when she was at home again.

She took her phone from her trouser pocket, the trousers with butterflies that her parents had bought her for her sixteenth birthday. She dialled a number on the phone and heard it ring.

‘Hello?’

Lauren smiled at his warm, deep voice, waiting for a while before she replied.

‘Hi, Giovanni, this is Lauren! Sorry I haven’t talked to you in a while, you... how are you? And how is Victor? I’m waffling on, I know, I just need someone to talk to,’ she explained.

‘Talk to? What’s wrong? Oh, and Victor is fine and so am I,’ Giovanni replied.

‘Good. That’s good. And nothing’s wrong... really, it’s just that Nicholas has a wife and he never told me and now I feel like shit because I never asked him about his home life and I never checked to see if he wears a ring, and for whatever reason, he didn’t think I deserved honesty, until now, when honesty was all I wanted,’ she sighed.

‘I think you’re wrong, Lauren. I understand what you’re saying, but he probably didn’t think his honesty was worth losing you. Sorry, it’s at times like these when my English is really crap... he just didn’t want to lose you,’ Giovanni told her.

‘I know. I know what you mean – you’re probably right – but I’m entitled to feel hurt and upset and emotional, and it’s alright for me to cry, isn’t it, Giovanni?’ she asked.

‘Of course it is, Lauren,’ Giovanni smiled. ‘Of course it is. I’m going to miss you, when you go back to England, but make sure we stay in touch and maybe you could come again next summer? With a better person who treats you well?’

Lauren chuckled. ‘That’d be nice,’ she said, starting to smile again.

‘Well, I need to go now. We should meet up one more time before you leave, yes? One final outing, without Nicholas – we can make our own memories,’ he decided.

‘Okay, phone me when you can arrange the time and the place, and sleep well, and send my regards to Victor!’ she cried.

‘I will. You sleep well too, and don’t stress or anything like that – just go through the emotions you feel like going through – don’t suppress them, it doesn’t help,’ he advised.

‘Okay,’ she smiled, her dimples appearing again in her soft cheeks. ‘Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight, Lauren. Look after yourself, please. It’s not your fault,’ Giovanni told her. She nodded, aware that he was right, just like he was with everything, really.

She set the phone down upon the bedside table and curled up under the covers in the foetal position, her knees touching and pulled into her chest. She had lost her smile again and her mind was a blank, unable to process any emotion because they were all far stronger than the ones she had experienced. Her sadness prevented her from doing anything, so she occasionally forgot to breathe, and she hadn't eaten in hours. She just lay there, motionless and blank, her tears dry because she had already cried with everything she had in her.

Eventually, she sat up and took her phone from the bedside table. For a while, she sat there staring at the screen, looking at her contacts, most of whom she didn't speak to anymore. She found her landline number eventually, and dialled. It rang for a while, as it often did, before her mother answered.

'Hello?' she said. Her voice sounded strained.

'Hi, mum, it's Lauren! Are you alright?' she frowned. There was a silence.

'I'm fine, don't worry about me. Is Italy still as beautiful as ever?' she asked.

'Of course it is. But I'm missing you guys. Both of you,' Lauren replied.

'No you're not. You can say it, you know. I won't be offended,' her mother chuckled.

'Please believe me when I say this, because I don't say it very often. I love you, mum, and I respect you, and the same goes for dad. And I really have missed you – I went on holiday to get away from you, to be honest, but then it became more. I really became more of an individual, more unique, and I got to make my own memories, and now I can't wait to come home. Although there's still one tour left before we leave,' Lauren explained.

'Of course. It's fine, Lauren, I understand,' she smiled, pausing to cough, 'sorry,

I'm feeling a bit under the weather today, that's all. A bloody cold from the bloody English weather over here. You're lucky there, you know. Fucking tropical!'

'Not anymore – it's starting to get colder, actually. And did you just swear?!'

Lauren exclaimed.

'I did, yes. Sorry. Christ, I haven't done that it ages. Or said Christ,' her mother grinned.

'Aren't you the little rebel, mum? How does dad feel about it? Your rebellion?'

Lauren laughed.

'I don't think he's noticed yet. He doesn't really notice much, you see,' she replied. 'Would you like to talk to him? He says he misses you sometimes!'

'Hand the phone over to him,' Lauren decided.

'Lauren! I've been missing you – has your mother told you that?' he cried.

'She told me just now. She seems to be swearing more than she used to,' she replied.

'Oh. Oh, right, yes, I suppose so,' he chuckled. 'I think... it's the menopause.'

'At mum's age?! That's a bit young, isn't it? Although I know she acts older than she is,' she smiled.

'I was only joking, darling. You know I love the silly twit. But you... you sound more confident. Happier,' her father informed her.

'You think so? Well, I've changed. I'm going to be stronger, happier, and I'm going to be myself, and if people can't treat me well, I don't need them, and I'm going to stop saying things are fine when they really aren't,' she explained. 'Sorry, dad. Rant over.'

'It's fine. Congratulations,' was all he could say. 'Well, I must go now. Your

mother seems to be beckoning to me for some reason. Looks like she's got some wine. Wish me luck.'

'Good luck, dad. Sleep well. Love you,' she smiled.

'Love you too,' her father smiled back, and he hung up.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The next day, Lauren took her phone from her pocket and dialled Giovanni's number.

'Hey! Sorry, it's me again, Lauren – maybe we could meet up outside the hotel soon? I really need a new set of clothes, you see, because I want to reinvent myself, and I really need better clothes. And now I'm waffling, sorry... I just want some fashion advice, and I was wondering if you knew anyone who could help me,' she explained.

'Stop apologising! You're so British. But yes, I'll help. Victor's better when it comes to fashion, but I know a few good salons, if that's what you're looking for,' Giovanni smiled.

'That sounds great! I do need a haircut – I don't know what style I'm going to go for, but it's going to be fun! Thanks for the idea,' she said.

'It's perfectly fine. And in terms of hair, I'm thinking you should go for a really short, fresh haircut. That's my idea, though, I mean, it's your decision,' Giovanni informed her.

'No, you're right – it does sound like a good idea, actually. So I was thinking I could meet you and Victor outside the hotel and maybe we could go to the salon first?' Lauren checked.

'Of course! We'll take the car too, so we can drive to the salon and then to all the shops. Victor's a genius when it comes to fashion, you'll see,' he chuckled. 'See you.'

‘I’ll see you,’ Lauren replied, hanging up.

She opened the wardrobe and flicked through her clothes, trying to find something respectable to wear; something that her parents hadn’t chosen for her. She ended up choosing her denim shorts with a plain white camisole with beige sandals, as it was still hot. She glanced out of the window and saw Victor’s car. Lauren proceeded to make her way out of the hotel. Giovanni was waiting outside the door, and when Lauren appeared, he hugged her gently. She smiled; he smelled of vanilla and of musky perfume.

‘So?’ he asked, sitting next to her in the car and closing the door. ‘How are you?’

‘I’m better,’ she replied as they drove off. ‘I’m starting to get better – I’ve had my cry, I guess.’

‘I suppose these things take time,’ Victor said, glancing at Lauren in the rear-view mirror.

‘Of course. I’ll be fine soon, I’m sure, but at the moment, I’m just trying not to think,’ she said.

‘Trying not to think? Why’s that?’ Victor frowned. ‘Thinking helps a lot.’

‘It helps me a lot too, only in these situations, I overthink things and that makes me even more depressed,’ she answered, squinting out of the window at the pretty beach by the side of the road.

‘Well, sometimes things just aren’t meant to work out,’ Giovanni mused, smiling at Lauren.

‘He’s trying to say that you’ll probably find someone better than Nicholas,’ Victor explained.

‘Not someone better in general... he’s a good man, and he’s kind. I just need to

find someone better for me,' she said.

'You're right – he may be married, but that doesn't make him a bad person,'

Giovanni agreed, taking Lauren's hand in his. She grinned at him.

'It's so hard to keep a straight face when I'm with the two of you,' she chuckled.

'I think that's probably because we're not very straight...' Giovanni giggled, and they chuckled quietly.

After driving for a few more minutes, Victor parked in front of a large building. It stood out from the other buildings on the street, as it was fairly modern, with large tinted windows and a grand entrance with revolving doors. It looked more like a modern hotel than a salon, but when she ventured closer, Lauren could see the photos of different hairstyles in the window. Giovanni followed her in, and he walked up to the receptionist, kissed him on both cheeks and spoke with him, in Italian of course, appearing rather animated. Victor nudged Lauren gently.

'The receptionist is Giovanni's ex-boyfriend. Giovanni was too much of a drama queen for this guy,' he whispered, looking up again as Giovanni joined them.

'Follow me. Your personal stylist for the next two hours awaits you,' he announced, leading Lauren and Victor up a metal staircase to a separate room. The shelves that were dotted around the room were stacked full of hair products and make-up. Standing by a black leather chair in the corner of the room was a handsome blonde man who had chopsticks in his hair. He grinned at her.

'Don't worry, I'm not going to put chopsticks in your hair, too – unless you want that, of course. Anyway, I'm Anton, your stylist for today. I've been told to style and cut your hair and to do your make-up. Is that all right?' he enquired.

'Sure!' she smiled, sitting on the chair and glancing at Giovanni, and then back

to Anton. ‘We were thinking of going short. Really short. I was thinking... like a bob cut, but shorter at the back so it’s almost 1920s style.’

‘Well then, Lauren... let’s turn you into a flapper girl!’ he grinned. ‘Are we doing a wash, too?’

‘Why not?’ Lauren replied, tipping her head back into the dip in the basin. She could feel the water getting hot as Anton massaged and shampooed her hair gently. She closed her eyes and smiled, feeling the water flow through her hair again as he rinsed it. He used the shampoo again and rinsed.

Her hair was lank when it was wet – it always had been – and it clung to her small face. Nevertheless, Anton took a pair of scissors from one of the drawers and began to cut her hair. She could see large chunks falling to the floor, but she couldn’t see how it looked because he had decided to work on the back of her hair first. She looked over at Giovanni and Victor, who smiled, aware that she was having the time of her life. Anton finished the back of her hair fairly quickly, so he decided to work on the fringe, slowly this time. Lauren watched the haircut take shape, a ridiculously huge grin on her beautiful face.

When Anton had finished, she looked like a completely different person, prettier than before, if that was possible.

‘And now I’m going to do your make-up for you. Just a bit, though, because you’re beautiful anyway – any make-up that doesn’t look natural is for the ugly ones, okay?’ he smiled.

‘Okay,’ she grinned, closing her eyes as he applied the eyeliner and eyeshadow. She couldn’t feel much because he was so cautious, and he was so quick that when she opened her eyes a few minutes later, he was already finished. He grinned down at her

and moved backwards politely when she stood.

‘Thank you so much. I love it, I really do!’ she cried, smiling happily at Anton, ‘When do I have to pay you? Right now, I’m guessing?’

‘It’s on the house, as I think you say in England. Giovanni knows someone here, you see, and he and I are old friends – I’m always happy to help any friends of his,’ he told her honestly.

‘Are you sure about that?’ she frowned. ‘I could pay towards something if you want.’

‘You’re our guest here in Italy, Lauren – this is a present. Accept it and make Nicholas hate himself for giving you up,’ Victor told her.

‘I will. Thank you so much, honestly,’ she smiled, hugging Victor and Giovanni, and then Anton.

‘You look beautiful. Truly beautiful. Wow, I’m quite impressed – we should take a photo!’ Anton cried, taking his large phone from his pocket and taking a few pictures of Lauren. ‘I’ll send to photos to Giovanni and he can send them to you. Is that okay? Because I don’t have your phone number.’

‘Yes, that’s perfectly fine. How are the photos – do I look okay?’ she checked. Anton nodded and showed her the photos. She was satisfied with them, which was a rare thing for her. When they left, Lauren turned to Victor as they made their way to his chic red car again.

‘Giovanni said you might be able to give me some advice about fashion?’ she asked.

‘I know some good shops and I have decent ideas about what goes well with what,’ he replied.

‘Right then,’ Lauren said, sliding into the car rather smoothly, ‘let’s go.’

The car purred and the wheels spun at a ridiculous pace as they cruised down the wide, modern-looking street. The first place they stopped at was, as Victor pointed out before they parked, a shop that was famous in Italy. There was a big range of styles, from old-fashioned to incredibly modern, as well as everything in between, naturally. When they walked in, Victor went straight for the dresses, elegantly presenting one of the longer ones to Lauren.

‘Every proper lady must have a proper dress,’ he told her, ‘do you like it?’

‘It’s nice... but I’ve spent most of my life wearing long, conservative things... so let’s try something a bit more out there. If you agree, of course,’ she replied.

‘No, you’re right,’ Victor said, wandering over to the jumpsuits but walking away after a while. ‘Jumpsuits are for tall people. Sorry, but you’re just not tall.’

‘I was thinking of getting a dress for partying and nightclubbing, that sort of thing – something sexy but big enough to cover enough at the same time,’ she suggested.

Victor nodded and rummaged around for a while, until he appeared again, holding a dark red dress that was cut onto one shoulder and ended slightly above the knee. Lauren took it from him gently and hugged it.

‘I love it!’ she exclaimed, clutching it to her chest, although carefully, so as not to damage it. After a while, they found a black cocktail dress for her, as well as a small baseball cap, as a souvenir to remind her of her time in Italy. They had also found a beautiful pair of heels that went extremely well with the red dress, and some stilettos to go with the cocktail dress. By the time they left, they had found many other items that suited her. They paid for the clothes and left, holding one shopping bag each.

The next shop they went to was a lovely jewellery shop, in which they bought a pretty mood ring, a necklace with a red crystal pendant and a Pandora bracelet, for which Victor and Giovanni bought individual charms. Giovanni ended up buying himself a plaited bracelet too, which seemed to amuse Victor as they got into the car again.

‘I’m sorry, it’s just that the bracelet makes you look even more gay than you already do,’ Victor chuckled, putting his arm around Giovanni, who was in the front seat this time. He scowled at Victor.

‘And what’s wrong with that? Are you ashamed of me?!’ he cried, but from the twitch in his lips, Victor could tell that his partner was trying not to laugh.

‘So. Back to the hotel then, Madame, with your new hair and your new make-up and your new jewellery and your new clothes?’ Victor grinned. ‘Good luck with getting all the bags up the stairs by the way. Unless you want some help, that is.’

‘That’s his way of offering to help you carry the bags upstairs,’ Giovanni translated, grinning.

‘Thank you for the offer, in that, case, but I’ll be fine. I’m strong enough,’ she replied.

They reached the hotel rather quickly; Lauren stepped out of the car and hugged and kissed both men.

‘I won’t see you again, unless I come back next summer or you visit cold, rainy, boring old England. Not that you’d want to. Sorry, I keep waffling! Thank you, though. Thank you for so much. I need to go now! I’ll talk to you later. On the phone!’ she cried as she waved and entered the hotel again, proceeding to drag the bags upstairs to her room.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Lauren took her bags upstairs, counting them to make sure she hadn't left any in Victor's car. They were all there, fortunately, as she placed them carefully on the floor of her room, sitting on her large bed with her feet dangling a little. She felt brilliant; reinvented and new, with no trace of her time with Nicholas on her. Except for those photos – but they were good memories, on the whole. Incredible ones.

She ran her hand down her silky short hair, feeling the wind from the open window brush against the bare nape of her small neck. She loved the haircut, the way it framed her pretty face and the way it fell, just slightly, into her left eye. It was the sort of hairstyle she had always wanted to have, but she had never had the opportunity to go to a salon on her own. She stood up and took the black cocktail dress from one of the bags and undressed. She moved to the bathroom and looked at her reflection in the mirror. Slowly, she undid the zip on the black dress and put it on. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, because it fitted so well and it accentuated every curve and every imperfection as well as every perfection on her body. She smiled, putting on the heels she had bought and leaving her room, making sure she had her key with her.

She knocked on the door of Room 203 and waited for Nicholas to open the door. He did, eventually, and he looked good. Happier and free, for once. Lauren had never seen his hair this messy before. He blinked.

'Sorry, can I help you?' he asked. His voice was cold and unfamiliar.

'Hi, yeah, sorry. I was wondering if we could talk...' she stammered. 'Nice T-shirt, by the way.'

‘Nice dress,’ he told her, almost smiling. He finally let her in; the room smelled of him.

‘Are you okay, Nicholas?’ she asked. ‘Are you honestly okay?’

‘Well, that was intimidating...’ he scoffed. ‘I feel like I’m in therapy but I’m a psychologist.’

Lauren frowned and blushed, furiously embarrassed. She shook her head and looked down.

‘Look, I’m sorry for... whatever... I’m not the one who has a wife. But anyway,’ she mumbled. ‘I just wanted to know how you were, Nicholas. I’m sorry, I seem to be making a fool of myself.’

‘Sorry, I’m being such a dick,’ Nicholas sighed, hiding his face in his hands. ‘You can sit on the bed if you want. And I’m fine, by the way. Have-have you had a haircut?’

‘I have, actually. It’s quite drastic, I know, but I wanted to make a statement,’ she replied.

‘And you?’ he enquired, sitting on the end of the bed. ‘How are you, Lauren?’

‘Don’t worry about me, Nicholas – I’m a brave thing, I’ll recover,’ she half-smiled.

‘I’m sorry, I really am. Just please believe me when I say that my feelings towards you were genuine – and that was what scared me,’ he told her.

‘Asking me to believe you and to trust you is a lot, Nicholas. But I know you loved me. And I’m a bit glad now that I know that you still do,’ she replied. Nicholas sighed, unable to answer. He just shrugged and smiled at her. She smiled back.

‘You are a good man, Nicholas. I taught you that you are a good man, and I

don't want you to forget it. Please don't let your wife forget it either,' she said.

'I love your dress, though. It really does suit you, and it suits your hairstyle,' he grinned.

'You think so? I went shopping with Victor and Giovanni, you see. They took me to all the best shops for jewellery and for clothes. I needed to get out of the hotel room – it was so stuffy and sterile and claustrophobic. They said this dress would suit me,' she explained.

'What made you decide to completely change your wardrobe, then?' Nicholas asked.

'Everything I had was so conservative – I wanted something that showed everyone I was an individual; I wanted something I could go out in, something classy. I wanted to reinvent myself because I felt like I had been living the life of my parents all the time – and I decided to live my own life. My cocktail-dress-and-heels life,' she answered.

Nicholas couldn't even respond; he admired Lauren's resilience so much. She smiled.

'Are you okay? You look quite sad and thoughtful. Have I shocked you?' she chuckled.

'No, on the contrary – I just think it's amazing how well you're dealing with what happened,' he told her. She frowned, fiddling with the dark covers on the large bed.

'I'm not dealing with it that well – to be honest with you, I wanted to remove every trace of you that was on me. I wanted to build myself up again, much stronger this time, so that something like this won't happen to me again. Thank God for Victor and

Giovanni, because if I hadn't gone shopping, I would've still been in that hotel room, Nicholas, and God knows what would have happened then. I-I don't hate you. I don't think I ever will hate you, but I've taken so much shit from so many people, so this is me being strong. It's not all right, what you did. I loved you with everything I had in me, and you threw it in my face. You fucking hurt me, Nicholas – but I understand. I get it,' she said.

'You know, one day, as clichéd as this may sound – as much as we've both used the word cliché – you'll find someone just as incredible as you are, Lauren. Because I never was as free as you, as uninhibited, as limitless, and you knew that,' he told her, 'But thank you. Because you've made me more uninhibited; you've made me limitless. You've re-taught me how to love someone. So thank you. Honestly.'

'You're right. That was a cliché. And we have used the word cliché a lot,' she said.

'I know. But it's a nice cliché, isn't it?' he grinned. Lauren smiled and cocked her head a little.

'I suppose so,' she told him. He wandered over to the mini-bar and took the last bottle from it. He opened it carefully and poured it into two glasses, handing one to Lauren. He joined her again and drank, smiling.

'What are you going to do when you return? A job? University?' he enquired.

'University. I'm going to stand my ground, Nicholas – and somehow, God help me, somehow I will find a way to go. I don't know where to go yet. Which is why I wanted to talk to you,' she said.

'I don't have knowledge. In terms of universities, I mean. Apart from the one I went to, that is,' he informed her, taking another sip of the cold lusciously bitter wine.

‘I think you do have knowledge, actually. You see, pathetic as this may sound, you’ve helped me to realise that I want to pursue a career in psychology. It’s not because of you or because I wanted to impress you – it’s just that I have a real interest in what makes people... well, people really. What makes them tick, what makes them behave the way they do. That’s what I really want to find out about, and it’s something I’ve always enjoyed,’ she explained. Nicholas frowned and sipped the wine again.

‘Are you sure about this? Because if you don’t really love it, it can be hard or even boring,’ he checked.

‘I’m sure, I promise. I do love it, and I’m passionate about it, Nicholas, I am,’ she answered.

‘You need to be good at Biology to understand it; although I was terrible at Biology – I didn’t exactly try very hard when it came to any lesson except for psychology, which I regret, because I had a lot of catching up to do in that respect,’ he explained. ‘But that was just me.’

‘I was okay at Biology – not amazing, but it wasn’t a disaster, I suppose – I did it at A-level and I got a C, so I’m fairly proud of that. But then I did a retake and I ended up getting a B. So I think I’ll be okay in that aspect of it,’ she informed him.

‘Your Maths will also have to be impeccable; there’s a lot of data and sampling and – in my opinion – that’s the boring side of it,’ he added. Lauren nodded.

‘I’m fine with Maths – I got an A in GCSE Maths and the school wanted me to do it as an A-Level, but it’s not something I’m passionate about, and I hated it. Not doing A-Level Maths was the first decision my parents allowed me to make, following a heated argument, of course. But I stood my ground for the first time. So that’s Maths,’ she answered.

‘Wow. Well, you sound like you’re more qualified than I ever was – so you’ll have no problem getting into a good university. I can’t tell you about any of the universities, though – it’s better to just go to as many open days as you can just so you can take in the atmosphere and see if you like the buildings and what you think of the lecturers,’ he told her, putting the glass on his bedside table.

‘Okay. I care more about the course, though – I need to know that the modules will excite me and interest me. The lecturers are important, I suppose, you’re right – nobody’s going to be excited about a subject that’s taught by a really boring lecturer, if you get what I mean. Yeah, I mainly focus on the course and the lecturers,’ Lauren said. ‘And do you think I’ll fit in with University students? Will I be too conservative or too... I don’t know, quirky or something?’

‘You’re there to learn, although socialising is a big part of the experience. You’ll be fine, for Christ’s sake, Lauren, they’ll love you!’ Nicholas exclaimed.

‘Maybe. I’ve just grown up around a lot of old people, you see. I might act like one,’ she said.

‘Old people? I’m sure your parents aren’t that old,’ he chuckled.

‘Not exactly old... middle-aged, I’d say. The area is so dull and middle-aged and middle-class, and nothing happens! And I’m used to that,’ she explained, drinking the wine.’

‘Don’t be an idiot, Lauren – if they’ve got half a brain up there, they’ll love you,’ he told her.

‘What, like you did?’ she snapped. ‘I’m not being an idiot, I’m being self-conscious like you used to be, running your hands through your hair like that – body language doesn’t lie, I’m afraid.’

‘Of course. Sorry, I was the one being an idiot,’ he said, looking at the dark floor.

‘Don’t hang your head in shame now, just because I told you off,’ Lauren laughed, taking the wine bottle from the bedside table and putting it back in the mini-bar.

‘It’s empty,’ she told him, ‘apart from the wine, it’s empty. Whoever re-stocks the mini-bar will probably think you’re an alcoholic, Nicholas. Nicholas the Alcoholic.’

‘Or they think that I had some company. Somewhat drunk company. They’re going to think we’ve had a party!’ he giggled, putting his glass back in the cabinet as Lauren closed the mini-bar. They both returned to the bed again, sitting in an awkward silence.

‘I still have photos with you,’ Lauren told him, not looking up. ‘I’m keeping them. They’re god memories, Nicholas – I don’t need to forget them, and neither do you.’

‘Of course,’ Nicholas smiled, pausing before he added. ‘Can I have one? A picture with me in it?’

‘Sure. Walk me back to my room – like you used to when we were only friends – and I’ll give you one,’ Lauren said, guiding Nicholas to the door. He opened it, making sure to grab a key before they left.

Room 207 felt a lot closer than it had done previously, and Nicholas didn’t want to say goodbye yet. Lauren went into her room, closed the door, then re-appeared with a photograph of Nicholas hugging a tree.

‘You look so free in that one,’ she whispered, moving closer. She kissed her friend on both cheeks and finally closed the door.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Lauren ended up turning off her alarm, having decided to let her body clock wake her at the most appropriate time. However, her body clock was rather rusty and unused, meaning that she ended up opening her eyes at eight forty-five. The tour started at nine and she didn't particularly want to hold everyone up, so she scrambled out of her comfortable bed and ran into the bathroom. She stripped and let the water run down her body, although it was cold and the pressure was too low. She rubbed the shower gel quickly onto her skin, washing it away soon after, the water having finally decided to become warmer. Just a little, though. She soon stepped out of the shower again and hurriedly grabbed the wrong towel, drying herself at an incredible speed. She then darted into the room again and put on her underwear, somewhat carefully. Then, she picked a random outfit from her wardrobe – it ended up being one of her more floral maxi dresses – and dressed. In the rush of the morning, she had forgotten about her hair, which she decided to attend to, once she had realised that she only had five minutes.

She ran into the bathroom again to look at her reflection, sighing about the state her hair was in; it looked worse than it usually did in the morning. She took her brush from on top of the sink and dragged it through her lank hair, smiling as it began to take shape and started to look more like it did when it had been cut. She finally put on her sandals and her sunglasses, grabbed her designated tour rucksack and placed her keys inside the bag. She sprinted down the stairs and pushed the door of the hotel open rather triumphantly. A few moments later, Lauren reached the tour bus.

#

Nicholas, luckily enough, didn't exactly trust his body clock, which was why he set his

alarm for eight in the morning. He had fallen asleep fairly quickly, making the shock of having slept through his alarm even worse. It was ten to nine, unfortunately, and there was nothing he could do about that. Yet he only got out of bed slowly and groggily, padding quietly into the bathroom. He stripped and turned the shower on, the hit of cold water against his chest certainly enough to wake him up fully. He used the shower gel and stepped out of the shower, just as the water was starting to get warm. He dried himself quite sparsely with his soft towel, before making his way over to the wardrobe to choose an outfit.

He put on his grey boxers first, followed by his khaki-coloured three-quarter trousers and his tight-fitting white T-Shirt. With a few seconds to spare, he flicked a few strands of his wet hair loose, so as not to seem too formal to anyone. He sighed as he sat on the bed, waiting for a while; it was strange to think that this would be their last tour here, in Italy, where so much had happened. This was almost the closing chapter, as it were – and nobody wanted to say goodbye.

Although he had made some good friends among the businessmen, Nicholas had essentially kept himself to himself, except for where Lauren was concerned. And yet, despite the fact that he barely knew most of the people on the tour, he was going to miss them. He was going to miss the hippie driver and the bright yellow bus with its grimy, dusty windows. He was going to miss the tour guide, who kept falling asleep and fighting with his wife, and he did sincerely hope that things on the poor man's home front did improve, because he was starting to sound desperate in the fights with her – the tour guide and his wife were beginning to run out of things to argue about.

Nicholas made his way downstairs, hoping that the bus hadn't left without him, but even in the lobby (through the glass double doors) he could see the bright yellow

vehicle, with Lauren standing in front of it. He waved to her and smiled.

‘I made them wait for you,’ she informed Nicholas as they clambered aboard and found a seat.

‘Thanks. I didn’t hear my alarm,’ he replied as they set off. Lauren shook her head.

‘No problem,’ she replied. ‘I didn’t put my alarm on, so I was late. Just a bit late, though.’

‘Well, you beat me,’ he chuckled, fiddling with a loose string on his khaki trousers.

‘I know – I’m quite proud of that, actually, as you’re normally the early bird,’ she informed him.

‘I am?’ he frowned. ‘Well, I suppose I might be – but I’ve been sleeping really well since I came here. I think it’s the beds – they’re honestly far too comfortable.’

‘Absolutely!’ Lauren cried. ‘Do you think we should steal the beds? Would they mind?’

‘Probably not – I’m sure they’ve got enough beds anyway! They wouldn’t notice,’ Nicholas laughed.

‘We’re such weirdos, don’t you think? But we’re good weirdos – we’re not kleptomaniacs or something,’ Lauren grinned, glancing out of the window but finding nothing of interest out there.

‘I think you may be a kleptomaniac, though – considering you were the one who wanted to steal the beds,’ he commented.

‘You agreed, though. So we must both be kleptomaniacs – let’s unite!’ she grinned.

‘What, kleptomaniacs unite, you mean? Kleptomaniac pride?’ Nicholas asked.

‘People must think we’re such idiots, honestly,’ Lauren chuckled.

‘Not idiots – kleptomaniac is a long word, actually, so we must seem clever,’ he replied.

‘Of course. You’re incredibly clever... and I’m just clever,’ she informed him, looking out of the window again.

‘You can’t compare – I’ve got lots of qualifications, but I’m older than you,’ he said.

‘I suppose so...’ Lauren mused, her focus shifting to the tour guide. ‘He’s asleep again, look! Don’t you think he looks really sweet when he’s asleep? So serene, compared to when he’s awake and on the phone with his wife.’

Nicholas nodded and glanced out of the window as they stopped near the beach promenade.

‘I think they’re doing a tour of this place and its best sites,’ he smiled. They got out of the bus and walked down the road in the morning breeze, watching the people playing and sunbathing on the beach, seeing the waves roll and spray as they reached the sand.

When they had reached the end of the road, where the beach faded away and into a rustic wooden pier, there was a bench with a few names engraved on it. Lauren and Nicholas sat, looking at the empty blue horizon. Lauren turned to Nicholas.

‘This is the last time we’ll get to sit like this, beside one another on a bench, and looking at the horizon in Italy,’ she mused, dimples playing at her cheeks with the hint of a smile. He nodded, also smiling. They were silent for a while, thinking about their own little things, two insignificant people in a world full of other insignificant people.

And then Lauren rummaged around in her rucksack and, upon finding her polaroid camera, she took a photograph of the pretty sky.

Once the camera was back in her rucksack, Lauren began to make her way back to the bus, along with the rest of the passengers and Nicholas. They got into the vehicle and sat in the same seats. Having heard everyone's complaints about not having had enough time to eat breakfast, the driver decided to take them all to a quaint café that was fairly close and fairly cheap. And so it was that, after less than five minutes, everyone clambered off the yellow tour bus again and marched into the small building. They all sat in a somewhat awkward line, Nicholas ending up sitting directly opposite Lauren. She laughed, looking through the menu.

'This is a bit intimidating. Sitting opposite you, I mean, I don't know why – I'm just used to sitting next to you most of the time, I suppose,' she commented.

'What are you going to have? To eat, I mean? I can't make my bloody mind up,' Nicholas huffed.

'I think I'm going to go for the crepes... and a croissant. I'm feeling French today!' she replied.

'But we're not in France!' Nicholas grinned, still scanning the menu. 'At the same time, though I would fancy eating a few croissants with some nice Italian jam. And some orange juice, of course.'

They eventually ordered, and within fifteen minutes, they were served, the food still piping hot. It was as good a breakfast as they had had in Italy; good food seemed to be an expectation, and it was usually better than just *good*. They all seemed to eat rather quickly and left after about twenty minutes. When the tour bus started to move again, the tour guide sprang into action. He began to describe the specific architectural history

of the buildings that the area was famous for as they drove past them slowly. They were beautiful and tall, built recently yet adhering to the norm of the other houses – they looked as though they had been around for a far longer time.

Although neither Lauren nor Nicholas were particularly interested in architecture, the buildings were certainly mesmerising and impressive – they were eye-catching, and the stories that the tour guide was telling about the buildings were certainly enjoyable and intriguing. There was not a large variety in the style of houses that could be found in the twisting streets, apart from the more modern shops, restaurants and malls. When the tour guide had said his part, he sat down again and their speed began to slowly increase. Lauren turned to Nicholas again.

‘It’s nice to drive around the area for our last tour,’ she said. ‘It almost wraps things up.’

‘It’s too final – none of us can be sure whether we’ll be here next year. So let’s not make it too final,’ Nicholas replied quietly, smoothing out the creases in his trousers.

‘I know. I hope I’m going to come back next year – but regardless of that, this place and this holiday have been amazing, Nicholas. We’re fucking lucky to be able to afford this,’ she told him.

After a while, the driver pulled over near a large park. It was covered in summer flowers and freshly mown grass. In the distance, Lauren could see a clump of trees, small and inviting. She nudged Nicholas, quite gently.

‘Let’s go over to the trees and take some pictures. Like we did in the forest,’ she suggested, and Nicholas nodded. She began to run, and this time Nicholas ran faster than her; he was limitless now, just like she had said. He felt the wind beating against his face and his hair as he sprinted, and when he looked back, it seemed as though

Lauren was far away, in the distance. He stopped and waited for her to catch up, jogging beside her as they made their way to the trees.

It was a small forest, much smaller than the one they had been to before, but it was much more beautiful. The ground was speckled with flowers and leaves, the trees tall and swaying in the wind. Nicholas immediately ran over to the biggest tree he could find and hugged it like he had done before, waiting for Lauren to take another photograph to match his previous tree-hugging one. She took a photograph, grinning to herself at his ecstatic expression. They laughed and skipped and ran like children, taking picture upon picture of one another, just enjoying each other's company, without questioning anything.

They laughed and climbed trees until they had to get back into the bus so that they could be carted back to the hotel; to the awkwardly patterned covers that smelled only of who they belonged to now, back to the isolation and to the mundanity that they both knew. The journey was not a long one, so they soon found themselves outside those double doors again.

They went upstairs, then hugged and said goodbye.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It felt like the end of an important chapter in Lauren's life, as she got her suitcase out of her full wardrobe; a good end, the end of her quiet, conservative life, and the beginning of her loud and colourful one. In such a short amount of time, she had learnt the meaning of life, or at least what a happy, limitless life felt like; and she had definitely enjoyed her education. Her bag was filled with polaroid memories, but the real memories were in her mind; the concepts and the emotions that photographs couldn't

show. Whatever memories they were, and whoever they were with, they were and always would be genuinely incredible ones.

As she took her new clothes from the wardrobe, she smiled to herself and adjusted her fringe, almost forgetting that it had been cut. It felt crisp and fresh. no longer lank and sweaty, her long neck now exposed and already beginning to tan, although she hadn't been out that much since she had had her hair cut. She straightened the creases in those damn covers with their beautiful patterns before moving back to her packing, folding her new clothes neatly and carefully, so she wouldn't have to iron them as soon as she unpacked at home. She put the jewellery at the top of the bag with the utmost care and concern, wrapping them in tissues from the bedside table first.

And yet, although it was sad to leave Italy behind because she had grown and developed so much there, at the same time, she couldn't wait to go home; in the end, it was where she lived and it was what she was used to, and she was looking forward to that familiarity and to seeing her parents again. But it wasn't as though she was going to forget about Italy – it would always remain a part of her emotional education, and she was so much more mature and so much wiser after the whole experience.

She finally sat on the bed, the packing done and her bag before her on the old covers. She looked at the bag and smiled.

#

Nicholas took the blue flip-flops that he had never worn from the bathroom and put them in the bottom of his suitcase. It wasn't like he was saying goodbye to Italy – in fact, he was sure he would return next year with Jen – but he was saying goodbye to the jaded person he used to be. That person had left, along with all those stupid shirts that

were either too hot or too itchy. And yet, although he would miss the hotel and all the friends he had made, Nicholas was excited to return to England as a changed man. From now on, he promised himself, he would be happier, he would be more open and he would love more.

As he gathered his two remaining shirts and folded them carefully, he ran his hand down the chipped, varnished wood of the wardrobe, feeling its grooves. He frowned at the absurdity of his actions, deciding to clear the fridge before he left. There was a small cube of cheese left, and a small slice of bread, as well as a few drops of milk. Nicholas carefully prepared a small breakfast for himself, using what was left of the olive oil. He drank the rest of the milk too. He ate quickly, washing the plates with a slight touch of perfectionism when he had finished eating, and drying them delicately, then placing them with the others in the cabinet. When he was finished, he sat, bags packed, the room looking better than it had when he arrived; that felt like a long time ago now, for so much had happened since.

He couldn't stop thinking about the girl in Room 207; how she felt, but it was none of his business anymore. The bed seemed sterile and unused again, now that it was done and no longer messy, the sheets tucked into the sides and the mattress beginning to lose Nicholas' shape.

He checked the room just in case there was anything he hadn't packed yet, reminding himself to take whatever was left of the shower gel and the shampoo. He took a wine bottle from the mini-bar, the last bottle there, and finished it, his final wine in Italy; at least for this year. He put it neatly into the bin, sighing and glancing at that damn patterned ceiling that he had become so used to, over the days. He felt the temptation to run his hands through his hair again, but it was perfectly done and he had

made a mental note to end that bad habit quickly. He realised that, when he was back in Surrey, he would probably become sickeningly nostalgic about the holiday, and, strangely enough, he didn't want that to happen. He wanted to remember it as the time he really found himself, instead of remembering it merely as "a good holiday". He had learned so much from that one country; but, most importantly, Italy had taught him love.

He finally left. He made his way down the old corridor again, and down the creaky stairs, dragging his suitcase behind him. It bumped into something hard, and Nicholas looked over to see another suitcase. He smiled, shaking his head in disbelief.

'Well, this is a cliché, isn't it?' Lauren grinned. Nicholas took the moment and hugged her. There was nothing left between them but each other's secrets and their fading friendship. Lauren smiled at him, touched his cheek gently and continued to haul her large suitcase downstairs. They checked out of the hotel and sat outside on the bench, watching the busy street. Autumn was coming; you could see it in the lower temperatures, in the lack of intensity that the sun held; in the slowly falling leaves that were beginning to turn golden, becoming crisp and ready to gather in piles that pedestrians would love walking through.

Nicholas took his phone from his pocket and called Jen. Her voice was happier and warmer when she answered.

'Hello, Mrs Marsh,' he chuckled, and he knew that she was smiling.

'You haven't called me that in ages. Although it's my name, I suppose. Ugly one, isn't it?' she grinned.

'Ugly? How is the name Marsh ugly? It's a name, Jen,' Nicholas laughed.

'It works for you – Nicholas Marsh – you sound like an author or something. But Jen Marsh? It sounds like a pipe de-clogger or whatever those things are called,' she

informed him.

‘Is that so?’ he pretended to frown. ‘Well, what do you intend to do about it?’

‘I’m going to claim compensation from the man who gave me this name,’ she replied.

‘Compensation? You’re not going to sue me, are you?’ he enquired, grinning.

‘No. I’m just going to make you hug me all day. And we’re always going to have to watch my favourite films. Like *Beaches* and *Nights in Rodanthe*. Romantic comedies,’ she explained.

‘So I’m going to be your sex-slash-movie-slave? Will I have to make you pancakes?’ he asked.

‘You will. You should be flattered – I don’t choose any old guy to be my sex-slash-movie-slave, as you call it – it’s all part of your punishment for my shit name,’ she told him.

‘How are you, though? Did you miss me? And how are the neighbours?’ he asked.

‘Wow, you’re curious. Let me see... I’m okay, I missed you, and the neighbours are still snobs. Idiotic snobs, actually – even worse. You haven’t missed much,’ she answered.

‘What about their cat? The ginger one with the silly name, I mean,’ he enquired.

‘Their cat called Catnip?’ she replied. ‘Well, it passed away yesterday, actually.’

‘But you said that nothing happened – I loved that cat! It was the only good thing about living next to those snobs. Sorry, those idiotic snobs,’ he said, frowning a little.

‘Catnip hated me. Catnip was too fat and the damn thing kept scratching me.

Just as idiotic as its snobbish owners. I'm surprised it lived that long, in its condition,' she explained.

'Aren't you just optimistic...?' Nicholas smiled. 'But anyway. I can't wait to come home.'

'Home? After sunny, hot Italy, you can't wait to come home to Surrey?!' she frowned.

'I know it might sound weird, but it's true. It's my home, in the end,' he sighed.

'I know how you feel. Oh, and I should warn you, it's going to rain when you come back. Or at least that's what the weather forecast says – you never really can tell,' she informed him.

'Right. Well, I don't have an umbrella – and are you picking me up with the Ford? Outside the train station?' he checked.

'I am. And I'll remember to take an umbrella,' she said. Nicholas smiled.

'Next year, Jen, next year you're coming with me. You're going to come here and we're going to see the beauty of Italy together,' he said.

'We'll see,' she replied.

'I'm not taking no for an answer, Mrs Marsh. It'll be our second honeymoon. A better one,' he said. She smiled, then there was a sizzling noise.

'Shit!' she cried. 'The pasta sauce is burning! I need to go, Nicholas! I love you!'

'I love you too,' he said, and his wife hung up.

#

Lauren was making her way down the promenade for the last time, her hands in the small pockets of her shorts. She took her phone from her suitcase, finally, and sat on one

of the benches as she waited for her mother to answer. She did, eventually.

‘Hello?’ She sounded free, not as hoarse as before. Lauren could hear the television playing in the background.

‘Hi, Mum. It’s Lauren,’ she said, glad to hear her mother’s voice again.

‘I know who it is, you idiot! I’d know you anywhere. We missed you and we’ve got a surprise for you when you get home, Lauren. You’ll love it!’ her mother grinned.

‘But Mum, you know I hate surprises,’ Lauren sighed, a little nervous now.

‘You’ll love this one, believe me. I know I’ve never been very good with surprises, but this one really is great. It’s different, Lauren, like you,’ she explained.

Lauren frowned.

‘Can you just tell me what it is now? So I know? And then I can act surprised?’ she asked.

‘Fine, but don’t tell anyone I told you,’ she whispered. ‘Your grandparents and other extended family members are coming over to welcome you home – and we’ve got a book for you, from all of us. It’s about psychology, Lauren.’

‘How did you know I liked psychology?’ she cried.

‘It’s something called radar... or was it something else? Anyway, I’m a mum. I know what you’re up to... it’s called antenna, that’s the one,’ she informed Lauren.

‘Thank you so much. I mean it, Mum, thank you. I’ve been such a brat,’ she replied.

‘You’re never a brat, Lauren. You can be a little bit annoying, but you’re not a brat,’ her mother said.

‘And I’m sorry for calling you when I was drunk,’ Lauren apologised.

‘It’s fine; we’re all allowed to be rebellious when we want to be,’ she smiled.

‘You weren’t worried about me, were you? You weren’t afraid?’ Lauren asked.

‘Of course not! You were there to explore Italian culture, so if you got tempted by some nice, expensive Italian wine, I don’t blame you,’ her mother answered.

‘Thank you for understanding,’ Lauren said, glancing at the wide ocean before her.

‘What’s it like where you are? Describe it to me,’ her mother said.

‘What about your antenna?’ Lauren chuckled.

‘I don’t know,’ she shrugged, ‘it doesn’t seem to go into much detail.’

Lauren smiled, running her small hand down the rough wood of the bench. She looked up.

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘I’m sitting on a bench near the beach. There are so many people there and they all look happy and grateful... just for everything. The sea is so blue and calm...’

Chapter Twenty-Nine

After another thirty minutes, Nicholas called a taxi for them both to get to the airport. They got in and sat, doing up their seatbelts and watching the promenade pass by.

‘How are your parents?’ Nicholas asked politely, glancing at Lauren and smiling a little.

‘They’re all right. They’ve been missing me, actually. And how’s your wife? How’s Jen?’ she enquired.

‘She’s fine. You know, as much as I’ve loved my time here, now I just can’t wait to come home. Because the fact of the matter is, I’m a ridiculous patriot. I’m in love with my home country and I’m in love with my home. In the end, it’s where I feel safe,’

he answered.

‘Yeah, I completely understand that. You just get this feeling of relief and familiarity when you arrive home. The adventure is fun, but it’s always just as good to come home in the end,’ she explained.

‘And that’s exactly what we’re doing now. We’re going home, and this is the end of the adventure. I am going to miss it, though. I’m going to miss the sunrises and the food and the nature, but most of all I’m going to miss the thirst for life that anyone who comes here has,’ he smiled, glancing back out of the polished, shining window at the endless twisting roads that were lined with trees.

‘Of course. I hope that’s what I can learn from this trip – to just enjoy life,’ she said.

They fell into a comfortable silence again, watching the roads and the people on the pavements. Both of them knew that they would miss the place and its simplicity, its beauty; its incredible understanding of nature. It had taught them more than they had been taught in school or anything of the like – as they drove closer to the end of the holiday, things felt almost final for them both. They were moving on from one another, from being ordinary, and more importantly, they were moving on from seeing life as mundane. They had learnt to accept nature, and to see the true beauty and the excitement in the simplicity of day-to-day life.

After a while, their journey came to an end as the airport towered above them. They got out of the taxi and paid the driver before checking in, lugging their heavy bags with them, Lauren accidentally bumping into many people and stepping on their toes. Nicholas was more used to crowds, meaning he handled the situation very calmly, snaking in between the people and always looking out for Lauren, who somehow

managed to remain within five metres behind him. He turned to her in the middle of the crowd.

‘I’m going to rush over through security so I can get some chocolates from Duty Free, so I’ll see you in the waiting-place-thing. You know, where all the chairs are,’ he said, rushing off.

He took off his shoes and took all his toiletries out of his bag, checking to see if he had put all the liquid in those clear bottles that he had bought from Boots. He walked through the scanner, which beeped a little so he had to empty his pockets and he got patted down by a rather good-looking officer, who Lauren indulged in staring at, winking at Nicholas when he glanced over his shoulder at her, raising his eyebrows. He smiled and turned back, grabbing the coins that had made the scanner beep and putting them back in his pocket.

He reached the Duty Free shop for some chocolates or some sweets to eat on the plane; he knew mints were the usual choice, but he had never liked anything related to mint, so, feeling rather childish, he went straight for the Haribo section. They were priced ridiculously, but he had enough money to spend, so he bought a pack of the sour ones and made his way to the rows of chairs. He sat, opening the pack and chewing thoughtfully.

Lauren was making her way through security when her bag had to be checked; the officer took everything out and found a perfume bottle, which he had to test, while Lauren had to take care of getting everything folded neatly and perfectly again, before putting it all back in the bag. The officer returned, with her perfume in a clear plastic bag. He handed it to her and smiled, telling her something in Italian. She nodded and wandered off, in search of Nicholas. She found him, eventually, sitting on his own and

eating Haribos. He offered her one when he saw her, shaking his head and smiling as he did so, feeling ridiculously happy, as he had been throughout the holiday; he was intoxicated by the beauty and by the thrill of life, and Lauren thought herself lucky to have been able to see the change in him.

They talked for a long time; about the holiday, about themselves, their home lives and what they would do next, and soon the plane had arrived and people were queuing up, ready to board it. Nicholas and Lauren were so caught up in their conversation that they only noticed the queue after a while, so when they did, they had to run with their bags to join the end of the line, fumbling around in their bags and pockets to make sure they had their boarding passes with them, ready for the staff to inspect.

After another fifteen minutes, they were smiled at and allowed onto the bridge to board the plane. It was a big one, with row upon row of seats, and once again – to their delight this time – Nicholas and Lauren found themselves seated beside one another. It reminded them both of the journey to Italy, only then they didn't know each other – now, they knew every millimetre of each other's minds, bodies and hearts, and neither of them regretted anything. They knew all the curves and grooves and imperfections in each other's lips; and it was strange, knowing this, to think that now they were friends again, and after that, if they decided to stay in touch, they'd just know and remember less and less about each other until they'd be strangers again. It was a sad thought.

'Nicholas, let's stay in touch. Please, I don't want to forget you,' she told him sincerely.

'I know. We will, honestly. Pass me your Nokia,' he replied, holding out his hand. He took the small mobile phone from her and added his number to her contact list

and wrote his email address in her notes section.

‘Thank you. Now it’s your turn to hand over your brick,’ Lauren smiled. Nicholas grinned, handing her his out-of-date phone that he had bought in 2004. She added her number and email address to his phone and gave it back to him.

They finished exchanging numbers just in time to see one of the perfectly composed and calm air hostesses giving the presentation about all the safety precautions. She demonstrated the life jacket that looked rather useless, as well as the oxygen masks that made everyone look ridiculous. She then demonstrated the safety positions, some of which were a little compromising, to the point at which Lauren heard a quiet snigger escape from Nicholas’ mouth. She smiled and elbowed him in the ribs, laughing as he tried to contain a yelp. The hostess finished quickly, and then everyone on the plane was informed about putting their seatbelts on as they prepared to take off.

Lauren squeezed Nicholas’ hand gently; this was the part of the flight that was their favourite, where the wheels were skidding on the runway, and the whole plane shook because they were travelling at such a high speed. Then it slowly tilted, and they were in the sky, Italy looking very small as they left it alone. Lauren smiled, as they went above the clouds and above the land that had taught them so much.

‘Arrivederci,’ Nicholas called, and Lauren echoed, grinning and laughing as they flew. Soon, the clouds were so thick that they couldn’t see anything apart from a blinding white light upon looking out of the window, a light that made the rest of the world look blue when they turned away. Nicholas smiled; it was good to see a slightly cleaner window than the ones they were used to by now; the ones on the tour bus. It seemed strange, being able to see everything beyond the window instead of half of it.

Nicholas pointed this out to Lauren, who laughed and, as the seatbelt sign was

switched off, she regarded it carefully, unsure as to whether or not to undo her seatbelt, given the fact that she wanted to be as safe as possible.

‘Do you think I should keep my seatbelt on?’ she asked, glancing at Nicholas.

‘Probably. I’m keeping mine on, but I’m making it looser so it’s not annoying,’ he replied. Lauren nodded and made hers looser too, patting it when she had finished, satisfied. Nicholas offered her a sweet, which she took, her ears beginning to ring and throb. This was the only part of flying that she hated; how it clogged up her ears. She sighed and chewed, looking out of the window again for some hope of being able to see land, but she was once again confronted by the bright clouds. She turned to Nicholas, who was still eating,

‘You look blue,’ she told him. ‘Try looking out of the window and then look at me.’ She chuckled as he blinked at the light, and then as he frowned at her when he looked back.

‘Now you’re the blue one. You look like a goddess. A blue goddess, I mean,’ he chuckled, looking back at his packet of Haribos, thoughtfully considering whether or not to give the last ones to Lauren. Eventually, he decided against it and stuffed them all into his mouth – apart from the cherry one. He knew Lauren loved the cherry one, so he glanced at her, finding her asleep. He placed the sweet in her outstretched hand, grinning as the motion made her eyes flicker open. They wandered to the cherry Haribo in her hand, and she smiled, eating it happily and feeling like a ten-year-old again.

When he had finished eating, Nicholas crumpled up the pack and gave it to the man who came by with the litter bag every thirty minutes. Nicholas gave the man his usual winning smile and the man grinned back, feeling rather moved. Nicholas and Lauren sat beside one another in silence again, feeling their friendship and their

connection slowly begin to break down, yet both of them were perfectly fine with it. It was the next step in their journey because, although they had exchanged numbers, both of them were fairly sure they would never meet again. At least, they probably wouldn't meet in England; Italy was a different matter altogether. They would both get back to their own homes, their own lives, but as changed people, and as different people than the ones they were when they had first arrived in Italy, on a similar plane.

Lauren patted her hair down, smiling as she remembered the time she had gone with Victor and Giovanni to get her hair cut. It had kept its shape brilliantly, and was surprisingly low-maintenance for a bob-cut, despite being short. In the morning, her hair was less tangled and wild these days, and now it only took a brush to adjust it slightly, rather than a trim with terribly blunt scissors and a brutal combing, a technique she had used when her hair was long.

When she glanced back out of the window, expecting to see clouds, she was confronted with a tilted view of rainy, dark Surrey. She nudged Nicholas, who looked over at his hometown and smiled. They were losing altitude quickly, and Lauren's ears were starting to hurt again, despite her attempt at a gentle massage. Before long, they were in London, having landed smoothly in the airport.

They had arrived home, smiling and laughing after their adventure in Italy.

Chapter Thirty

They waited for the train to Victoria Station for half an hour, their conversation trivial and scattered as they sat beside one another, unwilling to accept the fact that they would soon have to say goodbye to each other; to each other's hearts and minds and the grooves on their lips and bodies that each knew so well. It was frightening to say

goodbye to someone who had seen every inch of you, knowing that phone numbers would probably never be called and that emails would never be sent. But they trusted one another, because they had consciously given each other everything, and that level of intimacy, that such an act had, meant that they were comfortable with each other; they had both grown accustomed to the company of one another, and therefore, they knew that when they parted, there would be a gap for a while, but they would soon forget things, like the kind of clothes the other person wore, then their body, then the shape of their face, until all that would be left was the memory of the love they had shared, and the memories that they had together. Nothing would stop their love from being a wonderful thing, although it was merely a memory now, and neither of them would ever, in their lives, regret anything that happened on that holiday in Italy.

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The train eventually arrived, five minutes late, to be exact. Nicholas let Lauren go on before him, but she muttered something about gender stereotypes and shoved him onto the train, following him as they searched for two seats that were unoccupied, as the place was crowded and quite a few people had managed to climb aboard before them. Nicholas found two seats for them at the end of the carriage, with enough leg room where they could put their bags. Lauren glanced down at her luggage, frowning a little.

‘I came with less luggage than this,’ she mused, ‘hmm. Strange.’

‘Well, didn’t you go shopping with Victor and Giovanni? And then there’s all the polaroid pictures, as well as the souvenirs you bought, so it’s perfectly understandable,’ he told her.

‘Oh. Yes, I suppose that is a fair point,’ she said. ‘Yes, you’re probably right. You’re always right.’

‘Well, when you graduate from university with a first-class degree in psychology, you’ll always be right too. It’s a great feeling, believe me,’ he smiled, looking out of the window. They were in a tunnel.

‘If I decide to go down the whole university route, that is. You never know,’ she murmured.

‘But you said you’d love to go to university and study psychology,’ he frowned. Lauren sighed.

‘I was trying to sound mysterious! God, don’t sound so concerned!’ she chuckled, shaking her head. ‘But you’re right. Again. I will get a first-class degree.’

‘Well, I wish you the best of luck with that, Lauren, I honestly do. You’ll have to work hard, but I know you’re fully capable of doing that. And if you ever need any help, don’t hesitate to call me,’ he told her, smiling gently.

‘I know, Nick. Thanks. You don’t mind being called Nick, do you?’ she checked.

‘Oh no, I think it suits me now. It suits the new me,’ he replied, a grin playing at his thin lips.

‘Good. Now all you need to do is get a haircut and you’ll be good to go!’ she cried, giggling as Nicholas nudged her gently in the ribs and tickled her. She looked around.

‘People are staring at us, Nick! Stop!’ she sniggered, sitting up straight again.

‘I don’t care!’ he laughed, placing his hands back on the uncomfortable armrests and grinning.

Too soon, the train stopped moving and they were in Victoria station, but neither of them wanted to say goodbye. They got out of the train and just stood there, facing one another. Neither of them had anything left to say, so Nicholas extended his hand and

Lauren took it firmly in hers. The feeling of his skin against hers had lost its familiarity, and Lauren found the embrace too cold after all they had been through in that short time frame, in Italy. So she let go and stepped closer, her lips meeting his left cheek, and then his right. They hugged, tighter than before, and they both knew that it was over. It was over between them; it was just finished.

Nicholas was the first to leave; his train departed in half an hour, and he still needed to get a taxi to Waterloo Station. He walked without looking back, getting into the taxi and not even looking out of the window as they drove off. As bleak and as dull as it was, England was his home and it always would be; nothing would ever stop or limit Nicholas' love for his country. It was good to be home, although he knew that this was ridiculous – he had just been in Italy, for Christ's sake – but this was different. This was home. He knew it as he stepped out of the taxi; relieved to hear his native language again as he paid the driver and made his way up to the mezzanine floor of Waterloo Station and sitting at one of the metal tables, waiting for his train to be announced. He impulsively bought a salad, only he had to put it back in the bag when the platform for the train was announced.

He went through the ticket barrier and down the escalators, finding his reserved seat and sitting. The train left within fifteen minutes, and Nicholas continued to eat. When he had finished eating, he glanced at the countryside as it passed, yet it was nothing new; he knew this route too well, but there were all kinds of things he hadn't noticed before, things like the quaint farmhouse with the long driveway; the placid cows in their fields, chomping away happily at the grass; the little terraced cottages with hanging baskets that were filled with red and pink roses. Last time he had made this journey, he hadn't been bothered about the little details, but now, they were what made

the landscape so picturesque.

He eventually arrived at the station, stepping off the train and going through the ticket barriers to find Jen waiting for him near the car park. She had put on weight, thankfully – she later told him that she had given up the dieting rubbish – and she looked happier. Nicholas ran, instantly forgetting how tired he was and how heavy his bags were, and he embraced her. He smiled and kissed her gently.

‘Christ, the Italian spirit seems to have had some influence on you,’ she grinned, taking his bag as they made their way to the car, hand in hand. Nicholas shrugged.

‘I don’t know... it just changed me, that’s all,’ he replied. ‘But the food was so fucking good! I stuffed myself – I suppose it shows on the little pot belly I’ve developed.’

‘You and me both,’ Jen grinned. ‘But there you go – I suppose nobody can be perfect.’

They got into the car and, knowing that Nicholas was tired after the journey, Jen drove this time. The familiarity of the landscapes and the car and the houses was overwhelming, although he hadn’t been away for that long; however, in Italy, he had completely erased all memories of England and of Surrey from his mind so that he wouldn’t compare it as much to the place he had lived in for so much of his life.

But, as they pulled over and parked beside their house in the quiet cul-de-sac, Nicholas realised that he had missed the feeling of being at home, just a little bit. Jen unlocked the door and went in, Nicholas following, checking how well she had kept the house; he was pleased to see that it was just as spotless as it had been before. He sat in the front room, on their large black sofa and smiled one of his charming, genuine smiles.

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Lauren caught the train home from St Pancras, the same train she had been on when she left home such a long time ago. It felt like she hadn't been home in years, although her holiday hadn't lasted more than two weeks. To her, England was dull and cloudy in comparison with Italy, but they were two completely different countries; no matter how incredible and truly beautiful Italy was, it wasn't her home. She felt safe and comforted at home, in the country she knew, with its mundane summers and its cold and rainy winters. She didn't want to call herself patriotic, but she was someone who enjoyed being at home. When she was in Italy, she had tried not to think about home, because that would ruin the adventure – now that it was over, she sat on the train on her own again, her posture improved and no sweet treats by her side, as she waited for the train to move so she could be taken home again.

She grinned as she saw the station begin to move as it passed behind her, and she knew they were travelling again. She knew the stops off by heart, and every time they were announced, she spoke in perfect unison with the automated voice, just like she used to do when she was younger, travelling with her parents to London to meet family there. A few people glanced sceptically at her, but she didn't care; she merely ignored everyone and watched the landscape that she knew so well. There were some houses dotted in between the fields, especially when they were near stations, and they passed by a few high streets, where Lauren smiled, as people waiting for the train to pass glared at her grumpily. They soon passed her high street, where she saw her mother with her Ford Mondeo as she waited for the train to pass before parking at the train station.

Lauren smiled to herself as she got up and walked over to the door, heaving her bags off the luggage rack so that she could be one of the first to leave. She pressed the

button to open the doors and stepped off the train, having to take the lift with a few awkward people, to cross over to the other platform where the exit was. She then went through the ticket barriers and wandered through the car park, trying to find her mother's car, as well as being careful so as not to get run over by a few angry, probably drunk drivers. She found the Ford Mondeo eventually and knocked on the window. Her mother smiled at her and the window rolled down slowly. She grinned at Lauren.

'Can I help you?' she said, trying not to giggle as Lauren laughed.

'I'd like to go home, please,' Lauren replied, getting in at the back and doing up her seatbelt, after putting her bags in the boot. They drove off, Lauren watching the patches of countryside on the way home, smiling for the umpteenth time as the sun crept out from behind the clouds. It was a beautiful sight as the sky cleared and the windows reflected the glimmering light from the sun.

'You brought the good weather here,' her mother laughed. Lauren nodded, still watching everything outside so intently. They eventually arrived and went in.

Lauren stood in the middle of the hallway and hugged her parents tightly. After such a wonderful holiday, she was truly and genuinely ecstatic to be at home again. Mundane and box-like as it was, in the end, it was where she belonged. For the moment. She went into the small back garden and sat on the damp grass, then lay back and watched the clouds in the sky.

Lauren had gone back to her grey bungalow with the scratching record player, and Nicholas to his double bed and to his wife, but they had returned as changed people; their emotional education, for the moment, was complete.

The End