

madeleine
reiss

Live A
Little

ZAFFRE

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ZAFFRE

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*To my dear sisters Tania and Thomasina,
with love and gratitude for all the ways they enhance my life.*

her toes over Lottie's and her sister jerked away as if she had been burned.

'Keep your feet away from mine!' Lottie said, shuddering. 'It's bad enough having to share the bowl with you. You probably have verrucas.'

Beside them, Mia sighed. She was fourteen and well beyond the age when she should be sitting with her two younger sisters in a bunker with her feet in a washing-up basin. People with proper lives were seeing out the heatwave under umbrellas by stretches of water and drinking from tall glasses brought out to them on trays. Mia imagined the drinks sweating and misty from the fridge and the way the cubes of ice would ring as they hit the sides of the glasses, the sound prompting the women to tilt their sleek heads and suck from white straws.

'Stop arguing about stupid things, and please don't say arse and tits and boobies,' she said. 'It's very immature, not to say derogatory to women.'

'Yes, Tina, stop being so childish,' Lottie said triumphantly. Tina frowned. 'I actually *am* a child.'

'I was a lot more mature than you are now when *I* was ten,' Lottie answered, pulling up the neck of her T-shirt to wipe her forehead. She was a whole twelve years old.

Although it was far cooler in the bunker than it was outside, where the sun was merciless, the air was thick and heavy with the scent of the earth. It wasn't sweet the way soil could be when you dug into a new patch, but smelt as if there was stuff mixed up in it that was rotting.

'It's a bomb shelter,' their father had said, when they had moved into the house the year before and walked the length of the garden together. It had been built a long time ago in the dusty, crumbled world they had seen on TV. They imagined London with hollowed-out houses and men in drab uniforms, their chests strapped across with webbing, and women with a battling look piling up the bricks and pulling the corrugated metal roof across, then covering the whole in rubble and turf so that it couldn't be seen from above.

'It's probably best we get the shelter checked out before you go in,' their father had said, although to their knowledge he hadn't and they had used it as a refuge almost from the beginning.

'Do you think that place is safe, Joe?' their mother Lynne had asked once. She had been jolted out of her disinterest by the fact that her own children had invited the twins from next door into their den and she knew she was supposed to be *in loco parentis*.

'It would have fallen down by now, if it wasn't,' their father had replied, shrugging. She had smiled the special smile that she only used when she was talking to him, the one that made her look softer and younger.

'Do you think we can go back in yet?' Lottie asked Mia. 'The water in the bowl's getting warm and I'm sure it's riddled with germs from Tina's feet. I want to fill the bath up as cold as it will go and sit in it up to my neck.'

‘I’ll go and check.’ Mia padded along the pathway to the back door of the house. Her wet footprints were sucked into the thirsty stones as soon as they were planted.

She opened the door a little way and listened. It seemed quiet at first, but she had long ago become accustomed to the deceptive silences that seemed to mark an end but turned out to be only interludes for regrouping and rearming. Sure enough, it seemed the hostilities were not yet over. There was the sound of something smashing against a hard surface and then a screeching sentence – the words loud but difficult to make out – then the sound of agitated panting as if something was being gathered and marshalled before the next volley. Mia shut the door quietly and went back the way she had come.

This time the stones burned the soles of her feet, but she barely noticed.

‘I think we should give it a bit longer,’ she said. She rolled up her jeans and placed her feet once more into the basin next to Tina’s wide toes, tipped with chipped pink varnish, and Lottie’s narrow, slightly bent ones, webbed on one foot between the first toe and the second. It was better here than it was inside the house, and at least they had each other.

‘We’re sister soup!’ Tina said, smiling.

Chapter 1

Present day

TINA WAS IN THE WINDOW seat and Lottie had to bend across to get her first view of America. The bay was the colour of pewter and there was a dull, intermittent sheen on its surface. She could see the dense column of a rainbow, its arch hidden by low cloud, rising out of the water.

‘It’s a sign our trip is going to be incredible,’ Tina said.

Lottie was less sure. ‘It’s the wrong sort of rainbow,’ she said, ‘you can’t see its curve.’

Tina laughed derisively. She always got a little mocking when she’d been drinking, and she had started early at Gatwick Airport.

‘We’re on holiday,’ she had almost shouted when Lottie had tried to dissuade her from having a fourth glass.

‘You can multiply the effect of alcohol by at least five when you are on a plane,’ Lottie had said, and looked aghast as her sister grabbed the flight attendant’s hand to get his attention.

‘Definitely not gay,’ Tina had whispered when he had moved on, just a shade too loudly – and then, just like that, as if he had caught a virus from her red-wine breath, the blond, soft-bellied attendant was in her thrall. He brought her iced water and nuts she hadn’t asked for and then, with an agonised glance at his tight-haired colleague at the other end of the aisle, he slipped Tina his number on a napkin.

‘I shouldn’t really be doing this,’ he had said. His voice had an eager sibilance that was off-putting, but Tina had laughed as if she was delighted.

Later Lottie noticed that Tina let the number fall from the table and didn’t bother to retrieve it.

Lottie thought that maybe the secret to attracting men was not to want them – that and having long legs and wide, deceptively limpid eyes and a delicately freckled face. Everyone always said that the sisters were very alike to look at, but Lottie knew herself to be a smaller, less glossy version – the freckles not quite as captivatingly spaced, her eyes set a little deeper in a narrower, less open face. They shared the same mouth – a narrow top lip that curved upwards so that even in repose they looked as if they were smiling.

‘Valentina’s the beauty of the family,’ their mother had announced once. Tina had just bounded into the living room, her cheeks flushed by the wind and an hour of vigorous kissing. One of the twins from next door had turned from blotchy and silent into pale and enigmatic, seemingly overnight, and

had become the object of Tina's almost clinical attention. Even though she had only been about fourteen at the time, the youngest sister had launched herself firmly into the mysterious world of love – much to the disgruntlement of both Lottie and Mia, who felt that by rights she should have waited her turn.

‘Valentina has the unpredictable nature that all truly beautiful women possess. Carlotta, you're the clever, grounded one. You will never take risks and no one will ever make a fool of you, and Mia . . . well, Mia combines the best of all of us. She gives herself to others. She's my good, incorruptible girl.’

Lynne Ward had spent an important year of her life in Perugia – *I found my true sensuality there* – and ever since had espoused all things Italian, even in the selection of her daughters' names. The younger girls had shortened them so they sounded less conspicuous, but Mia's name didn't lend itself to diminutives. Lottie often thought that ordinary Sunday afternoon, the fug of sweatshirt uniforms drying on radiators and the clock ticking down to Monday, was when who they were and who they were going to be had been laid down for all time. Tina made a virtue of her unpredictability, which often manifested itself as a kind of selfish disregard for other people. Lottie was aware of her own, often craven, cautiousness that she sold as being sensible. Right to the end, Mia too had remained in character.

Tina wobbled slightly as she pulled her bag from the overhead locker. ‘I think I'll need a nap this afternoon.’

‘I expect *I’m* going to have to drive,’ Lottie said.

‘Well, that’s just the price you have to pay for not knowing how to have fun,’ Tina answered, not bothering to pull down the top that had ridden up during her exertions to reveal a taut stomach adorned at the belly button with a ruby stud.

‘What would have happened if we’d both got pissed?’ Lottie asked.

But Tina either didn’t hear or had decided not to answer. She was already shouldering her way down the plane, people automatically moving aside to accommodate her. The smitten attendant’s smile faltered as she passed him without a glance.

At the airport car hire, instead of the white Ford Mustang convertible that Tina had booked, they were offered a lurid yellow one.

‘I booked a white one. It absolutely *has* to be white,’ Tina said, drawing herself up to her full five-foot-ten-inch height and sounding more British than Dame Maggie Smith.

‘The yellow’s not so bad,’ Lottie muttered. She felt sorry for the young man with bitten nails and a face shaped like a spoon who was clearly struggling to maintain the appropriate American cheer in the face of such obstinacy. Her sister shot her a furious look. Lottie knew that Tina had set her heart on this particular car.

‘It’s the only vehicle suitable for a road trip of this kind,’ she announced.

Tina could be a pain in the arse.

'I'm staying here until the car I booked is found for us,' she said with such decisiveness that it was futile to protest.

Sure enough, after another ten minutes, the right car miraculously appeared. Tina was gracious in her triumph.

'I knew there must have been some mistake,' she said, smiling warmly at the young man. By then he had the softened, relieved look of someone who had been unexpectedly released from a pair of constricting shoes.

'Enjoy your trip, ma'am,' he said, as if he meant it.

Lottie had little experience of driving on the right, nor of automatic cars. She was terrified as she navigated her way out of the airport with Tina issuing instructions from the satnav on her phone – often a little too late, causing Lottie to have to make sudden, sweating turns. She drove tentatively down Highway 101, ignoring the cars that overtook them with horns blaring. Tina stuck her finger up and grinned ferociously as they went by, which made Lottie feel even more anxious. After a while Tina got bored of glaring at the other drivers and put on the Spotify list she had created for the road trip. She started singing along to the San Francisco section – Chris Isaak's 'San Francisco Days' and 'Don't Marry Her (Fuck Me)' by The Beautiful South. She delivered the title line of this song with such enthusiasm that Lottie told her to shut up or she wouldn't drive a moment longer.

Lottie was so intent on the road that she barely dared look to the right or the left – but she could feel the sea alongside them. Then, in the far distance, there was the Golden Gate

Bridge, with its epic, rusty stretch. She saw the word 'DREAM' made out in blocked, glittering letters against a hillside and thought perhaps she had imagined it. The sky was patched with cloud, brighter now than it had been on their arrival, but still shifting and unpredictable.

With the roof of the car down, Lottie's first impression of San Francisco was of its many odours – coffee, incense, cedar, spicy meat, garlic, weed, shoe leather – and the constant shifts of perspective, hill and then slope and sudden views of sea.

'I remember it more than I thought I would,' Tina said, looking around her as they drove.

Lottie sighed inwardly. She knew Tina was enjoying the fact that she had been to America before and knew more about it than Lottie did. There had always been this rivalry between them – a kind of jostling for attention, a determination to make the other aware that they were in possession of greater knowledge or deeper feeling. She wondered whether it was what all sisters did. She couldn't remember having ever felt it with Mia, but then Mia had been different.

Lottie had a sudden memory of another trip: the three of them in the back of the unreliable family car. She couldn't remember where they had been going – all the journeys that took them from one barely known place to another had merged in her mind. Their parents had been shouting at each other; being in a car had been one of their many triggers into acrimony. She had been scared that they were going to crash and Mia had taken her hand under the ragged

travelling blanket. She, in turn, had held Tina's sweaty little palm. They had been comforted by the touch that linked them, knowing they were strong enough to withstand anything as long as they had each other.

Lottie stole glances out of the window as she navigated the roads. There was a sign announcing a yard sale – a great number of dusty velvet lampshades were lined up on some porch steps, watched over by a man smoking a joint on a battered leather sofa. There were girls with tight bottoms and loose, sun-kissed hair, and houses painted the pastel colours of nursery bedrooms. Gaudy bougainvillea arched here and there, and small trees filled the fronts of houses in smoky clouds of gauzy pink. Shops advertised cures for all ills – indigestion, acne, menopause and heartbreak.

'Were you happy here?' Lottie asked.

'Yes,' Tina said. 'I had a great year.' She had put on an enormous pair of sunglasses so it was hard to read her expression, but she seemed suddenly subdued. 'It's the perfect city to set off from. This time tomorrow we'll be on the road.'

'When are Tim and Rachel expecting us?' Lottie asked.

'Around about now.'

Lottie stopped rather too suddenly at an intersection, to let a group of men in red dresses and pigtails cross the street in a great whooping rush. Tina clutched the handle on her door with an exaggerated intake of breath.

‘Feel free to take over if you think you can drive so much better,’ Lottie snapped. She was tired from the journey and was experiencing the unpleasant, muffled feeling in her ears that flying always gave her. She thought longingly of tea and her bedroom at home, with its peaceful shades of grey, and wondered again at the impulse that had made her agree to this crazy expedition. It wasn’t as if she had the time to spare. She was getting married in three weeks and there were a thousand things that needed her attention. She began to itch at the thought of the wedding favours as yet unselected and the honeymoon outfits she hadn’t packed.

‘Keep your hair on,’ Tina said, flicking up the mirror in the visor to check her face. ‘We’re almost there. I think it’s a left turn after that warehouse-type building.’

They drew up at a house painted cream and brown with steps up to a railed veranda. They pulled their cases from the boot – Lottie’s neat and black with efficient wheels, Tina’s grubby and straining at the zip, making a great rattling sound as she pulled it along the pavement.

‘Do you think it’s all right that we’ve left her in the boot?’ Lottie asked.

‘We can’t schlep around with her every time we stop anywhere.’

‘But what if someone steals the car?’

‘I’ve decided it’s OK and so you have to, too,’ Tina said loftily.

I must have been stark raving mad to agree to this trip, Lottie thought. It’s going to be a slow, agonising torture. They

barely had time to knock on the door before it was opened and a tiny woman dressed in blue hurled herself at Tina.

‘Oh my God! You look exactly the same! Still absolutely stunning.’ Rachel smiled. ‘Come in, come in. This must be your sister. Isn’t she just like you? Did you have a good journey? I’m so, so happy to see you.’ All this was said without drawing breath and while hustling them inside. ‘Is it too early for a proper drink? Yes, it probably is. But who cares? We have to celebrate. Tim will be back from work soon. He’s just dying to see you. If I remember right, you were more than a little fond of a gin and tonic. Can I make you one now? Or do you want to eat? I have lasagne. I’ve actually cooked in your honour. You know I don’t do that for just anyone.’ She gave a great, rumbling laugh – a sound that was startlingly odd coming as it did out of such a diminutive person.

Rachel was made up of a series of circles – round face, wide eyes, rosebud mouth, bobbing curls, plump arms heavy with bracelets which made expansive, curving, excitable gestures. Lottie quailed slightly in the face of such uninhibited vigour. She hoped that not all Americans were prone to such excesses of energy or she would not survive the trip.

Later, when they had showered and changed, and just as the rather glutinous lasagne was about to be served, Tim arrived back. He was as quiet as his wife was voluble, but in his studious, blinking, round-shouldered way, he seemed just as pleased as Rachel to welcome the sisters to his home.

‘Tina stayed with us for a few months, while she was studying here,’ he said. ‘We had a ball.’

‘I thought you lived in San Francisco for a whole year while you did your internship?’ Lottie asked.

‘Oh, after a while she moved in with Spike,’ Rachel answered.

Lottie looked at her sister, who had got up and was inspecting the photographs on the wall. ‘I’ve never heard about a Spike.’

‘Well, it was a long time ago now,’ Tim said. ‘It’s been at least seven years since Tina was here.’

‘Was he a boyfriend, Tina?’ Lottie asked, smelling a mystery. Sometimes she thought they knew almost nothing about each other. She wondered exactly when the closeness between them had gone. Things changed when you were not watching, like a once-hefty dune diminished by the wind or a vibrant flower kept between the pages of a book, which falls out, years later, as a shadow of itself: you only noticed differences when you looked in the same place.

Tina didn’t turn. ‘Mm, kind of.’

Sensing a slight awkwardness, Tim tactfully changed the subject. ‘You’re unlucky to miss the boys,’ he said, ‘although I realise that other people might not see it that way. I sometimes forget that not everyone is as besotted as we are. They are staying with my mother for a week.’ He pointed to a picture of his progeny: two solemn-faced boys with carefully combed hair, standing shoulder to shoulder in matching purple T-shirts.

‘Which means we are child-free and carefree,’ Rachel said, ‘and we thought you might like to come along to a party we’ve been invited to this evening.’

‘If you’re too tired, don’t worry,’ Tim added hastily. ‘We’d be happy to stay in with you guys. Maybe you want an early night.’

‘Jet lag is best managed by just pushing through. We’d love to come – wouldn’t we, Lottie?’ Tina said this in a meaningful way, so even though she had a headache, Lottie nodded with what she hoped was the right amount of enthusiasm. She had, after all, signed on the dotted line. She only had herself to blame.

I, Carlotta Ward, soon to be married to Dean Fowler Watt, agree to cancel my boring old hen weekend (Denim and Diamonds . . . Seriously??) and go with my dear sister Valentina Ward on a two-week road trip in America instead. We will set off from San Francisco and fly back from Park City and hire a car for the bits in between. I confirm that I will say YES to every single challenge.

Chapter 2

LOTTIE WENT UP TO THE roof terrace to get away from a middle-aged man in a pork-pie hat and flip-flops who had demonstrated a dim grasp of the need for personal space.

‘I could listen to you all night,’ he had said, leaning towards her. His breath was musty like worn money and his face was soft and creased on one cheek, as if he had been lying on a rough surface and had just woken up. ‘British people always sound so polite. It’s real sexy.’

To be fair to him (and Lottie always did her best to be fair), there wasn’t a lot of space available anywhere in the house. The living room was heaving with bodies, and in the smaller, adjacent rooms the guests had claimed every single surface, even the floor. Pretty much everyone seemed to be drunk or high on something. They moved too quickly and said things in earnest, frantic voices that she couldn’t quite catch. Her ears were still not functioning at full capacity. The women at the party were conspicuously younger than the men, who all seemed to her to be a little predatory and yet also strangely

capering, like people who were in the grip of a desperate, unstoppable joviality.

Her life with Dean mostly involved seeing the same people in the same places, and the fact that she was not tied to anything or anyone except for Tina made her feel uneasy. She was used to knowing exactly where she was, but here, everything was new. She wondered what Dean was doing right at this moment. Sleeping, probably, since it was gone midnight back at home. He was careful to get his allotted eight hours.

'I don't function well on less,' he always said, his neat beard well oiled, the whites of his eyes bright. She thought of him tenderly – the way he curled his body in their bed, the duvet between his legs, his fists clenched despite her continually reminding him to relax. She felt suddenly lonely. She had lost sight of her sister more than an hour ago. Tina was probably somewhere in the crush on the dance floor; she always made it her mission to be at the centre of the action, as though she needed to be held up in the movement of things, in case slowing down would cause her to falter and fall.

The city around her glittered in bits and pieces; it was dusk and the lights were not yet all illuminated. The view from the roof was cut across by a great sweep of raised road, which curved off into the distance. Beneath the pillars of the highway, a man and a woman were sitting on the bonnet of a truck, sharing a bottle of wine. The traffic moved above them in a continuous flow. In the corner of the terrace a firepit burned, fed with kindling and coal by a man in black jeans and a dark

jumper. Lottie thought he had the look, with his close-fitting clothes and compact body, of a burglar, someone athletic yet debonair like Cary Grant – who could move across roofs and slide from balcony to balcony, as comfortable in this shining landscape as a cat. Or maybe it was simply that she was in America and on a roof.

‘Are you Tina’s sister?’ the cat burglar asked, and Lottie jumped at the sound of his voice. She felt a rush of embarrassment that she had been caught staring at him.

‘Yes, I am,’ she said. As he walked towards her, she saw that he was much less polished than his movie counterpart. He looked as if he could have done with the attentions of a barber. His hair was a little too long and curled on his neck and his stubbled jaw bore no resemblance to Cary’s smooth cleft.

‘You’re so alike,’ he said. He looked at her intently and she had the familiar feeling of being compared, perhaps unfavourably, to her younger sibling.

‘I’m not nearly as beautiful,’ she said and immediately wondered why she had said something so cringingly self-deprecating.

‘I’m not sure that’s altogether true,’ he said. He smiled at her, and all of a sudden the movie-star looks were there again. He had dark, clever eyes and a way of holding himself that she recognised as confidence. She always noticed this quality in others because she lacked it herself.

‘How do you know Tina?’ she asked.

'I'm Spike. We hung out for a while when she was younger,' he said.

Tina thought that perhaps the jet lag was catching up with her after all, despite the two lines of coke she had been given by one of Rachel's friends, a statuesque woman called Fay. Fay was dressed in a boiler suit unbuttoned to the waist and when she had bent down to the table, Tina had seen that one of her nipples was threaded through with a twist of glinting copper wire.

She pushed her way off the dance floor looking for Lottie. She sighed; she was probably hiding away somewhere. The trouble with her sister was that she was just so terminally cautious. She always had been, even as a child.

Tina remembered a wood and a river. All three of them had been there. She couldn't recall now which of their temporary homes this particular wood and river was associated with. They had never stayed long enough in any one place to form attachments, and after a while she had discovered it was easier not to start things because then you wouldn't miss them when you moved on. She had once rejected a neighbour's cat that had taken a liking to her, even though she had wanted so much to pick it up and feel its body beating. I can't like it, she had thought. I can't save bits of meat from supper and feed it from my cupped hand. I can't set out a cushion for it on the deep windowsill, which catches the afternoon sun. If it starts to expect meat and sun it will mourn their absence

when I can no longer provide them. It was better that she didn't set in motion a process that could only end in loss.

In the unnamed wood a tree trunk had toppled over the river, the weight of its fall embedding it safely on either side of the muddy bank. The sturdy path over the rush of water had been an invitation she couldn't resist.

'Don't do it,' Lottie had said, her eyes anxious. 'You'll fall.'

Tina had ignored her and stepped on, enjoying the sickening way the wood gave slightly under her and the speed of the water moving below. She had turned when she reached the middle, executing a triumphant pirouette, and laughed at her sister's face, made pale by worry and the green shade cast by the trees. However many times Tina had run back and forth over the log, demonstrating its strength, Lottie had refused to attempt the crossing and had eventually walked away by herself. Mia, torn between staying and enjoying the bridge or ensuring that Lottie didn't get lost, had gone after her. It hadn't seemed so much fun after they had gone. There was something silly about teetering along a bit of wood if you didn't have someone to watch you doing it.

When she had discovered her unexpected windfall, her first thought was that the money could pay for a trip for her and Lottie. She had been surprised that the notion had come to her as suddenly as it had. Tina and her sister had not seen much of each other in recent months, and they had never

been on holiday as adults together before, but the more she thought about it, the more sense it made. Being away would give Lottie the opportunity she so clearly needed to work out if her upcoming marriage was really what she wanted. Tina didn't think Lottie had thought it through; she seemed to have just acquiesced to her redoubtable, but extremely dull, boyfriend's wishes. She couldn't understand why Lottie was even bothering to get married. It wasn't as if anyone in the family had made a success of the institution. Their parents' union had been a disaster, and Mia's had sealed her fate. Getting married was something to be avoided at all costs.

'Dean proposed to me at the top of the Shard,' Lottie had said, as if this was proof positive of the depth of his feelings, rather than the act of someone desperately short of imagination. Apparently some people had been doing yoga in the viewing gallery at the time of the romantic encounter. Undaunted, Dean had still got down on one knee and presented her with a ring, while thirty women doing the downward dog had cheered at them from between their legs.

'Please come,' Tina had said, when she had rung her sister to explain the plan. 'We'll have fun, just the two of us. I guarantee adventures. Just think: California, Arizona, Nevada, Colorado . . .' She rolled the names around her tongue as if they were delicious.

'I've got so much to do,' Lottie had replied. 'I can't afford the time – nor, for that matter, the money. We're spending so much on this wedding.'

‘I’ll pay for the flights, the accommodation and the car. You can buy the drinks. Live a little,’ Tina had said. ‘We’ll wear hats and take chances. You know it makes sense.’

‘It makes absolutely no sense. Besides, how can *you* afford it? Have you just got a big photography commission or something?’

‘Unfortunately not, although it can only be a matter of time. I’m expecting a call from Beyoncé any day now.’

‘Maybe you’ll be doing the triplets photo.’ The smile was evident in Lottie’s voice.

‘I’m stocking up on yards of net as we speak.’ Tina laughed. ‘No, the truth is – and this will probably make you choke, since you know how unlikely it is that I have ever paid insurance on anything – but I just got an eight-thousand-pound PPI payment. Couldn’t even remember I’d had the credit card in question.’

‘And how is it that I, who have never bought anything unless I had the money in the bank, get not a penny?’

‘It’s only money I’ve already spent, even though I didn’t realise I was spending it – because unlike you, I don’t have a ledger in which I write up every single pair of knickers and toothbrush I buy.’

‘I thought the point of this phone call was that you were trying to sweet-talk me into your hare-brained scheme to drive around America moments before my wedding. If so, you’re not being particularly successful.’

‘Don’t be so boring. I’m offering you the trip of a lifetime, gratis, free, no strings attached.’

‘There are always strings attached when it comes to your suggestions, Tina.’

It had surprised Tina that the sharpness of her sister’s tone hurt her as much as it had. She didn’t have to do this. There were a hundred better ways to spend the money.

‘What will the trip be *for*?’ Lottie had asked, as practical as ever, as if you needed a reason to have fun and see something new. She was so fatally immersed in thoughts of ribbon colours and bubble machines and garters that she had lost all sense of perspective.

‘Does there have to be a reason for everything?’ Tina had answered. ‘Can’t we just take some time out to enjoy each other’s company?’ She didn’t think Lottie would have responded well if she had said, *I think the man you want to marry is a bit of a tosser, so I’m taking you away in the hope I’ll be able to change your mind and get you to cancel your wedding.*

But Tina knew that she was not being completely honest, even with herself. There was something else she wanted from the trip beyond trying to convince Lottie that getting married was a terrible idea. There was a practical issue that needed to be resolved, of course – but she was also looking for some kind of resolution, a landing place. She couldn’t articulate exactly what she meant by that; she had never told anyone – it didn’t fit with her ‘I can leave anything behind’ persona on which she so relied – but when she was tired, or simply when a day had not turned out the way she had hoped, Mia came to her. She was often there, in the corner of Tina’s eye, conjured up on a breeze or in the half-light of the

evening. The shape she took was not her final one, but rather that of the child she had once been, with her sweet, round face with its inward, distracted gaze, as if she was standing with one foot in a dream. It wasn't that Tina wanted the haunting gone – there was comfort in it – but she wished the ghost of her sister would come to her peacefully and without blame. What she was about to say to Lottie felt like a risk. She took a deep breath.

'We'll be in America on what would have been Mia's forty-second birthday,' she said. 'We'll drive through the locations of all her favourite movies. You remember the code . . . *A cowboy must never shoot first, hit a smaller man or take unfair advantage. He must be gentle with children, the elderly and animals.*'

There was a silence at the other end of the phone. Tina thought perhaps this was not what Lottie wanted. She knew herself how much easier it was to shut down all thought of Mia.

'I remember.' Lottie's voice lost its tone of resistance and became gentle. '*A cowboy must never go back on his word or a trust confided in him.*'

They were both quiet, acknowledging the gap where Mia's contribution would have been. Tina could hear her voice with its clear, earnest cadence . . . *A cowboy is clean about his person in word, thought and deed. He respects women, his parents and his nation's law.*

It had been like this ever since she had gone – the childhood rituals that had been carried on into adulthood were

now always incomplete. She was not there to lead them as they walked in single file in strict age order (although Tina had always tried to get in front). Jokes were missing their punchlines. The poems they had learnt were without their central verses. Home-made cakes lacked their secret, vital ingredient.

‘The Cowboy Commandments are a litany of misogyny and racism,’ Lottie said over the phone.

Tina ignored her. ‘We could even perhaps do what we promised her,’ she said.

Lottie didn’t answer. Tina could imagine her sister somewhere in her ordered house, that small frown between her eyes, her fingers picking something up and setting it down again in its place.

‘I suppose I’ll do it,’ Lottie said at last. ‘I’ll do it because of Mia.’

Chapter 3

‘HAVE YOU SEEN LOTTIE?’ SHE asked Tim. Unshackled from children, he had drunk deeply from the vodka luge and was looking blearily around the party through misted spectacles.

‘I think I saw her go upstairs,’ he said.

Tina looked into various rooms, most of which were piled with coats and lovers, before discovering a further set of steps up to the terrace. She was sure this was where her sister would be; the girl had always had an unhealthy interest in fresh air. Night had fallen while she had been inside, and she was surprised by the depth of the dark and the way the city showed itself in shining waves, bright at the front, falling away along its slopes into a smeared, velvety gleam.

She was right; Lottie was hiding away up here. Her tidy black dress with its white collar was unmistakably out of place in this costumed city. She was talking to a man who was leaning with her against the railings of the terrace.

‘I’ve found you!’ Tina went up behind her and put her arms around her neck in the stranglehold they had perfected

as children. That was the thing about sisters – you always knew just how to hold them and exactly where to push to get the expected reaction. Lottie hated being taken by surprise. It wasn't until Tina had let her protesting sister go that she turned to look at her companion.

'Hello Tina,' Spike said.

A sudden flare of shock took her words away. She told herself that it was simply that she hadn't been expecting to see him. He looked just the same. Slightly older around the eyes maybe, a little less hair and more forehead – but everything else was unchanged. It wasn't until this moment that she realised just how well she remembered him. He still had that slightly protuberant left ear. She had once pinned it back with a bulldog clip as a joke.

'It's been a very long time. Seven years, I think,' Spike said, sensing his advantage.

'I thought you'd moved away from San Francisco,' she said at last. She was aware of Lottie looking at the two of them with curiosity.

'I did,' he said, 'but then I came back. I missed the smugness of the locals and being freezing cold at four o'clock in the afternoon, even in summer, and the terrifying cost of renting an apartment.'

'Are you still looking for little stones?' Tina asked.

'Yep. In fact, I'm going to Mexico in a couple of weeks' time on a field trip.'

'He collects pebbles,' Tina said, turning to Lottie in explanation.

'I'm actually a geologist with a particular interest in meteorites.' Spike's voice was good-humoured. 'But why split hairs? Tina's right – basically I look for bits of old iron.'

'It sounds very interesting,' Lottie said.

Tina yawned ostentatiously. 'It is if you're the sort of person who finds crawling around on scrubby ground riveting.'

Spike smiled at Tina, and she scowled at him. 'It's good to see you haven't changed. I've been hearing about your road trip plans from your sister. It sounds as if it's going to be quite an adventure.'

'Yes, it will, actually,' Tina answered sharply. She wondered if he was making fun of her.

'I wish I could come along,' he said, ignoring the edge in her voice.

'Three's a crowd. And besides, I'm sure our little trip will seem tame since you've seen it all before.'

'Travelling without children?' he asked.

'Neither of us has children,' Tina said.

'I see,' he said.

'I don't think you actually see much at all,' Tina retorted. 'You never bloody did.'

'Shall we go back inside and get a drink?' Lottie said. 'Why are you being so rude to him?' she whispered, as Spike led the way back inside.

'I've always brought out the best in her,' Spike said, without turning round.

*

Back at the party Tina disappeared with a tall woman dressed in what looked like a workman's overall. Lottie did her best to mingle. She attempted to dance a little, but she felt foolish and inhibited. She wondered why other people seemed to lose themselves so effectively, swaying with their eyes closed and their arms above their heads in a way that should have looked stupid, but somehow didn't. She could never seem to get her body to do what she wanted. The group next to her were doing moves to 'Blame It On the Boogie' in a great, grinning line, all with synchronised hand gestures. I just can't, I just can't dance, Lottie thought, and was relieved to see her sister making her way towards her.

'Shall we call it a night?' Tina shouted above the noise, and Lottie let herself be taken by the hand and pulled out of the room.

It was early October, and the city dripped slow rain from its curving metal staircases and elaborate plasterwork. Cars sparked water, the sound of their tyres like sticky tape being pulled away slowly. Lottie could smell the sea – a briny, slightly oily odour, as distinct as the spices and smoke of the daytime.

'Let's walk back,' Tina said. 'I don't think it's very far.' She was shivering a little in her tiny dress that barely covered her bottom. She fumbled in her bag and brought out a thin scarf that she wrapped around her shoulders. Lottie refrained from reminding her that she had suggested Tina should bring a jacket; even she knew she had to rein in her tendency to be pompous.

‘So what’s the story with Spike?’ she asked.

‘I met him when I was here last time.’

‘Well, I know that! I was just wondering what happened between you. Didn’t you live with him for months?’

‘Just because I lived with him doesn’t mean I was sleeping with him. Rachel was pregnant and being sick and I felt I’d outstayed my welcome at their house.’

‘Something happened between you. I could tell by the way you were talking to each other.’ Lottie might be a stiff on the dance floor but she could recognise intimacy when she saw it, and her sister had definitely had sex with the cat burglar on at least one occasion. Tina had gone into haughty hair-touching at the mere sight of him.

‘It was just a fling. It was years ago and meant very little. I had several relationships – if you can call them that – while I was living here.’

Lottie had no trouble imagining the swathe a thirty-one-year-old Tina must have cut through the local male population. A man had once driven into a lamp post at the sight of her sister marching down the street in shorts – a story their mother was fond of recounting with a kind of envious glee. Lottie herself had only slept with three men, including Dean. They were getting married on the tenth anniversary of their first kiss.

It had been autumn. The wet leaves had slid under their feet and a bonfire with a chemical tang was burning somewhere

near. In the park, the pear tree they were standing under still retained its fat, golden fruit and a girl, too old to be there, was moving backwards and forwards on a swing, bouncing her feet along the spongy stuff they put down so that children didn't hurt themselves. It had been a clumsy kiss – she had turned her head slightly at the last minute so that his mouth had landed on the corner of hers. But the second one had been better, and the heat of it had sent them home smiling and touching shoulders on the tube. In his room in the draughty shared house he had unbuttoned her coat and placed his hands on her waist and looked at her as he pulled her skirt up slowly. She had been amazed, both by his confidence and the depth of her longing. Despite the grey, unforgiving light, which came solidly through the curtainless window, and the housemate in the next room, she had forgotten and then found herself in him.

'How do you know that you'll want to sleep with him forever?' Tina had asked once, after a not particularly successful drink out which Lottie had arranged in an attempt to get her sister and her boyfriend to know each other better. 'It's not as if you have much to compare him to.'

'I just know,' she had said, and she did know, although there had been times over the years when she had allowed herself to wonder how it might be with someone else. Despite the way she loved him, there was a little tug sometimes from the things she would never now know. It was a bit like finding the perfect house and rejoicing that you can live in it forever,

but feeling wistful on certain summer days that you were never going to live by the sea.

‘I would hazard a guess that it was a little more, for him at least, than a fling,’ Lottie said now, scrutinising her sister’s profile. ‘And you looked as if you had seen a ghost.’

‘Stop staring at me!’ Tina said, with exasperation. ‘I can feel your eyes boring into the side of my head. You’re wasted at that homelessness charity. You should work for the police. You’d force people to admit to all sorts, even things they hadn’t done.’

Lottie smiled. ‘I’ll get it out of you in the end.’