

‘Do you want to dip your finger in Dad?’ my older sister, Elyse, asks, holding out the small clay pot containing her share of our father’s ashes.

‘God, Elyse!’ I shriek, jumping backwards.

‘Elyse, no one wants to do that apart from you,’ my younger sister, Leonie, says. She’s got the same expression on her face as I imagine is on mine. ‘It’s sick and wrong,’ she adds.

Elyse shrugs, screws the lid back on and puts the pot back on her bookshelf. ‘I thought it might help.’

‘Help how?’ I ask.

‘I don’t know. It just makes me feel better and since you’re all worked up about the flight . . .’

‘I’m not “worked up” about it,’ I say, as I look along Elyse’s shelves for a book to take with me, but I can’t see anything that’s not about fashion or design. Partly for her degree – she’s in her second year – but mostly because she’s obsessed with it. ‘I’m just not looking forward to it.’

‘You didn’t used to be bothered about flying,’ Leonie says.

She's sitting on the floor next to Elyse's bed and painting her toenails black.

Now it's my turn to shrug. 'It's not the flying. It's everything. It's just . . . different this time.'

'First time without Dad,' Elyse says.

I nod. 'It's going to be weird.'

'We could take a photo of him and put it on the seat,' Leonie suggests.

'And that wouldn't be weird at all,' Elyse says.

'From the girl who sticks her finger in his ashes for luck?' I say.

'Do you think I'll be able to draw on these with chalk?' Leonie asks, wiggling her toes in the air.

'Maybe,' Elyse says.

'But why would you want to?' I ask.

Leonie shrugs and then lies flat on the floor with her feet still up on Elyse's bed. 'I can't believe it's tomorrow. It's come round so fast.'

'I can't believe Robbie's not coming,' Elyse says, throwing herself back against her huge pile of pillows. She sleeps practically sitting up.

I stand with my back to the bookshelves, my hands behind my back with one hand holding onto one of the shelves. I look at my sisters: Elyse on the bed, Leonie on the floor, both of them staring up at the ceiling, which I know without looking features a constellation of glow-in-the-dark stars.

'I think it's better that Robbie's not coming,' I say, knowing full well Elyse will strenuously disagree. 'I think it's nice that it's just going to be family.'

Also Robbie gets on my nerves, but I know better than to say that to Elyse.

'And Luke,' Leonie says and tips her head right back so she's looking at me upside down. She waggles her eyebrows; it looks extremely weird. Luke. Our cousin Toby's best friend, who's out there working with Toby for the summer.

'Oh, yeah,' I say. As if I'd forgotten.

'As if you'd forgotten,' Elyse says and laughs. 'Fine for you if my boyfriend stays at home. Meanwhile you'll be all heart-eyes at Luke.'

I roll my (non-heart) eyes. 'Yeah, okay, I made a total arse of myself over Luke. Can we all get over it?'

'You didn't make a total arse of yourself,' Elyse says.

'Just a bit of an arse,' Leonie finishes, swinging her legs down and clambering up on the bed next to Elyse.

'Well, I won't be doing it again so we don't need to think about it any more,' I say.

And they don't know the half of it. I head for the door, but out of the corner of my eye I catch my sisters exchanging a glance.

'What?' I say, stopping with my hand on the door handle. 'Why are you looking like that?'

'We're just a bit worried . . .' Elyse starts. She stops and looks at Leonie.

'About Mum?' I ask, twisting the door handle in my hand.

'Well, yeah, obviously,' Elyse says.

'But about you too,' Leonie adds.

'Me? Why?'

'You're not yourself,' Leonie says. She's all tucked up with her chin on her knees and she looks closer to six than sixteen.

I sigh. 'I know. I know I've changed. But we've all changed. Since Dad . . .' I don't finish the sentence.

'We have,' Elyse says, nodding. 'Of course we have. It's just that you don't seem to be doing so well.'

'I'm fine,' I say.

They're both looking at me with the exact same expression of concern. They've each got the little line between their eyebrows just like Dad used to get. Most of the time they don't look that much alike – Elyse's face is round and her blonde hair is long and wavy, while Leonie's face is more angular and her dyed red hair is short and blunt – but they do when they frown.

'But you've stopped singing,' Leonie says.

I feel a clench in my belly. This again? 'I haven't stopped,' I say. 'I still sing. You've heard me sing.'

'Yes, but you quit the band and now apparently you're not going up to Liverpool . . .'

'I haven't decided that yet,' I say. 'Just because I haven't sent the acceptance back doesn't mean I'm not going.'

'Mum said you got a prospectus for UWL,' Leonie says.

'I did. But I haven't decided anything yet. I'm just being practical. Things are different now.'

'They don't have to be,' Elyse says. 'Not that different, anyway.'

'Do we have to talk about this now?' I say. 'It's my turn to make dinner.'

They look at each other again and then Elyse says, 'Fine. But we will talk about this again.' She takes her phone out and holds it right up to her face because she's not wearing her glasses.

‘Are you setting a reminder?’ I ask, appalled.  
Elyse laughs. ‘No, you stupid cow. I got a text from Robbie.’  
‘You’re done then?’ I ask. ‘I can go and do dinner?’  
‘Yeah, go on,’ Leonie says. ‘I’m starved.’  
‘Good,’ I say. ‘And I am fine. Really.’

## 2

Mum's on lates this week at work – she's a doctor – and so we have a rota for making dinner: one night each for the three of us and then we can go out or get a takeaway. It works pretty well, even though we don't have that big a range. Elyse got a Jamie Oliver book out of the library so we can try to expand our repertoire a bit, but I'm sticking with turkey chilli for tonight. I can't face trying something new.

I've got the recipe stuck to the fridge with the letter magnets we've had for as long as I can remember. Dad used to leave messages for us with them. Sometimes just 'LOVE U', sometimes something daft that only we'd find funny. Mum doesn't do it. She occasionally leaves us notes on the fridge, but not with the magnets and not usually jokey. She's all practical these days.

I'm chopping onions and wiping at my teary eyes when I hear one of my sisters thundering down the stairs. I realise as the kitchen door bursts open and bounces back against the wall that it's Leonie. She's been doing that her whole life.

'That was Mum on the phone,' she says as she opens the fridge.

‘Don’t eat anything!’

‘I’m not going to, I’m just looking!’

I scrape the onions from the chopping board into the pan before turning to Leonie. ‘And?’

‘And what?’

She’s eating a chunk of cheese. I knew it. ‘And what did Mum want?’

‘Oh, right. She’s going to be late. She said not to wait for her for dinner.’

I sigh. Mum’s been working so much more since Dad died, which I do understand – we lost his wage and even though Mum always earned more, this house isn’t cheap to run – but we’re going to Italy tomorrow; I thought she’d get home in time for us to have dinner together and get an early night before the flight.

Leonie nods towards the stove. ‘How long’s this going to be?’

I look round at it, as if that’s going to tell me. ‘Twenty minutes?’

“Kay,” she says and then opens the fridge for more cheese before going back upstairs.

While the rice cooks, I tidy round the kitchen a bit and then look through the ‘important papers’ drawer for our passports. I find Mum’s and Leonie’s, but the next one I find is Dad’s. The corner’s cut off from where Mum had to send it away after he died. She must have put it back in the drawer when they returned it. It’s a terrible picture of him, but I love it because it reminds me so much of going on holiday and him making jokes about how awful the photo was. I remember one time he said he looked like a Beatle and when Mum

asked 'Ringo?' he said, 'No, an actual beetle' and then did antennae with his fingers.

I laugh out loud picturing it and it's only when I do a massive snotty sniff I realise I'm also crying.

I put the chilli and rice in bowls in the middle of the table and set three places before shouting up the stairs to tell my sisters dinner is ready. I sit down where I've always sat – far side of the table on the left, the seat that used to be next to Dad – and dish out my own chilli and rice. Leonie and Elyse still haven't come down. I get up, go to the bottom of the stairs and shout them again.

'Just a minute!' Leonie yells back.

'I'm on the phone!' Elyse calls.

I sit back at the table and start on my own food, glancing up at the clock to see how long before Mum might realistically be home. She used to get back from late by ten, but not any more.

I'm halfway through my dinner and scrolling through Tumblr on my phone when Leonie comes in, flops some food on her plate and heads for the door.

'Where are you going?'

She doesn't even turn round. 'Hmm?'

'Sit down and eat with me!'

'I'm watching Netflix,' she says, half-turning. 'Come up with me.'

'I don't want to come up with you,' I tell her. 'I want us to eat together.'

She rolls her eyes. 'Elyse isn't even here.'

'She will be.'



‘Well, call me when she is,’ my sister says. And leaves.

I keep eating, but my throat feels tight. It’s not that big a deal, I know. And we’ll be eating together in Italy. And it’s not the same when Mum’s not here anyway. But still.

Elyse doesn’t come down at all. I put her share in a Tupperware box in the fridge.

Mum doesn’t get back until almost eleven. Elyse, Leonie and I are flopped around the living room. We’ve pulled the cushions off the sofa, watching *Friends* repeats, eating toast and ignoring each other.

‘Oh, you’re still up,’ she says, leaning against the wall in the doorway. She looks tired. She always looks tired these days.

‘We were just about to go to bed,’ Leonie says. ‘We’ve got to be up at half-five.’

‘I know we have!’ Mum snaps.

Leonie looks at me and I see the hurt in her eyes before she looks back at Mum and says, ‘All right, no need to bite my head off.’

‘Sorry,’ Mum says. She pushes her glasses up on top of her head and rubs one eye, before saying, ‘Shit.’ And then, ‘Sorry, girls. Forgot I had make-up on.’

‘Come and sit down,’ Elyse says, standing up and putting a couple of the cushions back onto the sofa.

‘No, I’m going to go up to bed,’ Mum says.

‘There’s still some toast,’ Leonie says. ‘It’s not totally cold.’

‘I don’t want toast,’ Mum says. ‘I just want my bed.’

The three of us look at each other and then Elyse says, ‘It’s just . . . we’ve hardly seen you.’

Mum frowns and then her face seems to crumple a little, but she says, 'We're going to be together all the time in Italy.'

'With everyone else, though,' I say. 'It won't just be us.'

She nods then. She's not looking at me and I don't think she's looking at Leonie or Elyse either. She seems to be looking just past us and I know where without even turning my head. She's looking at the corner of the room where Dad used to sit.

'Okay,' she says, almost to herself. She crosses the room and sits on the cushions Elyse has just picked up. 'So. What have you girls been doing?'

'Milly made turkey chilli,' Leonie says. 'It wasn't entirely gross.'

Mum smiles.

'I found the passports,' I say.

'Oh good,' Mum says. 'I hadn't even thought about that.'

'I've put everything in The Folder,' I tell her and I see her flinch.

The Folder was Dad's thing. All the paperwork for holidays went in there, in order of how we'd use it. So there'd be the confirmation of the airport parking, then the flight tickets, car hire, hotel details, etc. And then the insurance information and European Health Insurance cards would be at the back. He was constantly checking it in the run-up to any trip away and then while we were away, receipts and confirmations went straight into The Folder. And then once we were home, he'd go through The Folder again, chucking stuff out or pinning tickets up on our bulletin board. It was only when The Folder was empty that we really felt like the holiday was over. And all holiday planning began with The Folder.

‘Thank you,’ she says. ‘For doing that.’

‘Of course,’ I say. I mean, I don’t even know how she thought we’d travel without The Folder. None of us ever has.

‘I can’t wait to get to Italy,’ Leonie says. She picks up the plate of toast and puts it on the table next to where Mum’s sitting. Mum immediately picks up a piece and starts nibbling.

‘I actually need to talk to you about that,’ Mum says.

I immediately feel like I’m about to cry. It’s not even so much what she says, but the defeated way she says it. It makes me want to curl up in a ball and put my hands over my ears, the way I used to when I was little and didn’t want to go somewhere or do something.

‘How would you feel about flying out without me,’ Mum says.

It’s actually not as bad as I was expecting. I was half thinking she was going to say the trip was off. But still. We’ve never flown without her. And we’ve all been looking forward to getting away as a family. Even if we’re not the family we used to be.

‘Why?’ Elyse asks.

‘I’ve just . . .’ Mum starts to say, but then she puts down the piece of toast she’s been eating and picks up a different one. ‘I’ve just got so much to do at work. It’s not a great time for me to go away.’

‘But you have to come,’ Leonie says. ‘It’s your sister’s wedding!’

‘Oh, I’m still going to come!’ Mum says and she actually looks directly at Leonie, before looking back down again. ‘I just don’t think I can come tomorrow.’

‘No,’ Leonie says. I can see red patches on her cheeks and I know she’s about to either shout or cry. ‘No. Work can wait.’

Someone else can cover for you. You have people to cover for you, I know you do. We're going tomorrow. All of us.'

'Leonie,' Mum says in a warning tone. 'My job is important. I don't think you understand –'

'I do understand,' Leonie says, standing up. 'We all understand. We're not babies. We're not idiots. We all understand. But you . . . Since Dad died . . .'

Mum looks up at her then and the pain on her face is so clear that I have to look away. Leonie carries on, but her voice is breaking and I can feel the pain in my throat that I know means I'm about to cry too. 'Since Dad died,' Leonie says again. 'It's like you think work is more important than us. And it's not. It's just fucking not.'

'I know it's not,' Mum says. 'Of course I do.'

'It's like,' Leonie starts as she heads out of the room. 'It's like we don't know how to be a family without Dad.'

As she leaves, Leonie kicks one of the cushions out of the way and I pick it up and put it back on the sofa before sitting down next to Mum. I want to curl into her side the way I did when I was little. I want her to stroke my hair and kiss my head and pretend to bite my fingers. But then I remember it wasn't her who did the pretend finger-biting, it was Dad.

'It hasn't been that bad, has it?' Mum asks.

'It hasn't been that good,' Elyse says.

‘You’ve got everything,’ Leonie says as I open The Folder and flick through the documents. ‘I’ve seen you check it at least five times already.’

‘I know,’ I say, pulling out my phone and tapping on the airline’s app to double-check the online boarding passes. ‘It just feels weird not having much stuff printed out. I mean, what if my phone broke?’

‘It’s more likely to break with you checking it every two minutes,’ Elyse says. ‘It’s all fine. If anything happened to your phone, I could access the app on mine. Stop worrying.’

I stare out of the taxi window, but it’s early and still dark and there’s no one on the street. I look at the back of Mum’s head – she’s in the front with the driver – and think she must be asleep because she hasn’t said a word since we got in the car. Actually, she didn’t even say much before we got in the car. Just drank some coffee and grabbed her bag and followed the three of us outside when the taxi arrived.

I open The Folder again and Leonie nudges me. ‘Give it a rest, Mil. You’re stressing me out.’

I close The Folder, but run over its contents in my head again instead.

We check in with no problems. I was worried about the weight of our bags, particularly Leonie's, but it's fine, and then head to security. We have to stand for a couple of minutes while Leonie drinks the rest of the bottle of water she's brought with her, so she can throw it in the recycling, and then we head for the gates.

'Boarding passes?' Mum says, turning to me.

'They're on my phone,' I tell her, taking it out of my pocket for what feels like the fiftieth time this morning.

I tap on my boarding card, hold it over the scanner and pass through the gates. But then I'm on the far side with my phone and everyone else's boarding cards.

'Um,' I say.

'Pass the phone back over and one of you scan everyone else through,' a guard tells me. I pass my phone to Mum, feeling a flicker of anxiety in case she drops it.

Mum tries to scan the boarding card but nothing happens.

'Give it to –' I start to say, but then realise I can't do anything because I'm on the wrong side of the barrier.

'I can't . . .' Mum says. 'It's not . . .'

'You need to scroll it!' I say. 'That'll still be mine.'

Mum pokes at my phone and the urge to reach over and grab it is so strong.

'Scroll it!' I say.

'I'm trying,' she says, through her teeth.

The security guy reaches over and takes the phone and

scrolls before letting the three of them through and then giving the phone to Mum.

‘Give it to me,’ I say, almost snatching it out of her hand.

‘Jeez,’ Leonie says. ‘You really should’ve had a coffee before we left the house.’

I shake my head. ‘Sorry. I just . . . it’s not hard.’

‘It’s fine,’ Leonie says. ‘We’re on the other side. Now you get to pull the stick out of your ass and relax.’

But first we have to go through the security check, which I’ve always hated. I feel guilty even though I know I’ve done nothing wrong. When I can see my bag on the scanner I always expect to see the X-ray of a gun or a shitload of cocaine. I hold my breath as I walk through and then pick up my bag, put my shoes back on and breathe a sigh of relief.

‘Where are we going to have breakfast?’ Leonie asks, once we’re all through.

‘That place looks nice,’ Elyse says, pointing at a cafe, half open to the departures lounge, with white subway-tile walls and pale wood tables.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Mum says, looking across at the Starbucks. ‘I don’t want anything to eat, just a coffee.’

‘I’m pretty sure they do coffee,’ Elyse says, pointing at the blackboard menu.

‘Do they do takeaway?’ Mum says. ‘I think we probably need to be at the gate.’

‘We’ve got plenty of time,’ Leonie says, looking up at the flight information screen. ‘The gate hasn’t even been announced yet.’

Mum nods and follows the three of us into the cafe. We sit down under a huge mirror, Elyse and Mum with their backs to it, Leonie and I opposite.

'I'm having a full English,' Elyse says, holding up the huge white menu. 'I'm starved.'

I'm not at all hungry, but know that if I don't eat anything I'll be hungry on the flight. I scan the menu, but nothing appeals.

'I might just have a pastry,' I say. 'I'll go and order. Then I can have a look. Mum? Do you know what you want?'

'Just a cappuccino,' she says. 'No chocolate.'

'I'll come with,' Leonie says.

We shove our chairs back and I take a menu with me.

'I don't want anything,' Leonie says, as we stand in front of the chiller, looking at the various fancy juices.

'You have to get something,' I tell her. 'Get a chocolate croissant. Or a pain au raisin.'

'Did you sleep okay?' she asks me.

I frown. 'It took me a while to go off, but then I did, yeah. Did you not?'

'I don't think I slept at all,' she says. 'I'm just going to get a massive coffee.'

'And a banana,' I say, picking one out of a basket on the top shelf of the chiller.

She smiles. 'Okay, Mum.'

'Go and talk to her,' I say. 'I'll sort this out.'

'She's quiet, right?' Leonie says, dipping her head. 'Was I too horrible last night?'

I shake my head. 'I think it needed to be said.'





She grabs my arm, her fingers digging in, and she suddenly looks really young. 'Do you? Because I wasn't sure if it was just me. I mean –'

'What can I get you?' the woman behind the counter asks. I order for Mum and Elyse and I get toast for myself.

While we're waiting for the coffees, Leonie says, 'I'm going to go and apologise.'

'You want to wait for me?' I ask her.

She shakes her head. 'I'm a big girl.'

I grin at her. 'You're really not.'

By the time I get to the table with a tray of coffees, spoons and sugar sachets, Mum and Leonie are looking a bit pink and Elyse is looking at her phone.

I sit down. 'Is everything okay?'

'I'm sorry,' Mum says. 'I'm sorry I've been a bit –'

'It's fine,' I say, shaking my head and passing everyone their coffees. 'Can we just forget about it?'

Mum nods, pressing her lips together. 'But if you ever want to talk . . .'

'Yes,' I say, picking up a sachet and shaking it so the sugar gathers at one end. 'I will. I promise. It's fine.'

She stares at me, nibbling on her lips, so I know what she's going to say before she says it.

'Did you post your acceptance?'

I look down at my coffee and then back up at Mum. 'Yes.'

'You did?' she says, her eyebrows shooting up.

I nod.

'When?' Leonie says.



‘Last night.’ I say. ‘While you were painting your toenails and eating all the cheese.’

‘That’s fantastic,’ Elyse says. ‘Well done.’

‘I’m so proud of you!’ Leonie says, flinging both arms around me and squeezing me so hard that I feel something crack in my neck.

‘It doesn’t mean I’m definitely going,’ I say.

‘Of course not,’ Elyse says. ‘You can change your mind at any time.’ She’s taking the piss, but I decide to let her get away with it.

‘This is so wonderful, Milly,’ Mum says and she looks almost tearful. ‘He would’ve been so proud of you.’

I nod, swallowing around the lump in my throat.

‘Ugh,’ Elyse says. ‘Enough of this. Can we just get into Holiday Mode now?’

Holiday Mode was another of Dad’s things – once we were at the airport, we had to forget all our problems and responsibilities at home and focus on enjoying our time in Italy.

‘Sounds like a plan,’ I say.

As I stir my latte, I look up at the mirror behind Mum’s head. I look tired and pale, but that’s not surprising for this time in the morning. And then I notice something I hadn’t seen when we first sat down: at the bottom of the mirror are the words ‘Pack up! Leave your troubles behind. Let’s fly away.’

I think about the acceptance letter, not posted at all, but packed in a zipped pocket in my suitcase and I think, chance would be a fine thing.

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Mum sleeps for most of the flight, while Elyse, Leonie and I read magazines, eat the in-flight meals (out of boredom rather than hunger) and talk about the wedding. Our Aunt Alice was married before, when she was pretty young. She and her husband had our cousin Toby and then split up when he was only a few months old. Toby still sees his dad every now and then, but I don't think anyone else in the family ever does.

Alice and Stefano have been together for years, but they didn't decide to get married until recently. It's been mainly a long-distance relationship too – Alice didn't want to take Toby out of school and Stefano runs the family restaurant in Rome, so there's been a lot of back and forth and Toby working there in the holidays. They moved out there permanently the year before last, after Toby did his GCSEs. Stefano had proposed loads of times over the years, but Alice only accepted after they'd been living together for a while.

'I still don't know why they're bothering to get married,' Leonie says. 'But I'm glad they are. I love a wedding.'

'I think it's nice,' Elyse says. 'They want to commit to each other. In front of everyone.'

'But they were already committed,' Leonie says. 'Alice and Toby gave everything up and moved to Rome. That's pretty committed.'

'Yeah,' Elyse says. 'I guess . . .' She turns a page of the copy of *Elle* she's flicking through and says, 'Me and Robbie are thinking of getting a place together.'

Leonie and I stare at her and eventually, after she's turned at least ten pages, she looks up at us. 'What?'

‘You and Robbie?’ I ask.

‘Moving in together?’ Leonie adds.

Elyse smiles. ‘Yeah. What’s wrong with that? It’s about time I left home, Robbie needs somewhere to live, we get on great, we can share the bills . . . I mean, it wouldn’t just be us, we’d have to have flatmates – but there’s this guy at college –’

‘Elyse,’ Leonie interrupts, putting her hand on Elyse’s arm, ‘I don’t think Robbie will like it when you bring other boys home . . .’

I laugh, but Elyse frowns and shakes her head. ‘You’re funny. But there are no other boys.’

‘Really?’ I say. I’m shocked. Elyse has generally had at least two boys on the go for years. She doesn’t go out with them both at the same time, but she always seems to have one lined up in case things don’t work out with the one she’s with. She’s always liked to keep her options open, flirt, nothing serious. The thought of Elyse settling down is, well, insane.

‘I can’t imagine you settling down with just one boy,’ I say.

‘It’s not “settling down”!’ Elyse says, flinging her long hair back over her shoulder. ‘We’re not, like, getting a mortgage or a family car or a dog or anything. It’s just more like a flat share.’

‘Yes,’ Leonie says. ‘But it’s still a commitment.’

Elyse shrugs. ‘Maybe that’s okay.’

‘God,’ I say.

‘What about you?’ Elyse asks Leonie. ‘No boys you like?’

‘Nah,’ Leonie says. ‘All the boys I meet are total dicks.’

‘Sometimes that’s good,’ Elyse says, grinning.

‘Ew,’ Leonie says, with a straight face.

They both go back to reading their magazines and I realise that neither of them asked me.

'Er, hello?' I say when I realise they're not joking, they've just ended the conversation.

'Hello,' Leonie says, resting her head on my shoulder.

I shrug her off. 'How come neither of you asked me?' I pull my elbow in as a steward rattles past with a trolley.

'Asked you what?' Elyse says, looking genuinely confused.

'If there's anyone I like!'

'Oh, for fuck's sake,' Elyse says. 'First of all, I know there isn't, because if there was you would have said. Secondly, you haven't been out for months, so unless you've totally changed your preferences and got off with someone at school it seems very unlikely. And third, we both – we all – know you're going to be mooning after Luke as soon as we get to Rome.'

'God,' I say. 'I didn't realise I was so transparent.'

Leonie laughs so loud that I hear another passenger tut. 'You're totally transparent. You're like . . .' She screws up her nose while she tries to think of something transparent. 'Cling film?' she eventually says. 'But not so clingy.' She puts her head back on my shoulder.

'Yeah,' I say. 'You're the clingy one. Knobhead. And I won't be mooning over Luke. He's got a girlfriend anyway.'

'How do you know that?' Leonie says. 'Been doing some Facebook stalkin'?'

'No.' I mean, I have, obviously. 'But he had a girlfriend last time I saw him.'

'Which was – what? – a year ago?' Elyse says. 'Come on, Milly.'

'It doesn't matter anyway,' I say.

I feel Leonie laugh against my shoulder. 'Sure, Jan.'

I spend the rest of the journey wondering if my sisters are right. They're right that I haven't been out since Dad died. I can't remember the last time. My friends stopped inviting me to things months ago and they don't even bother telling me about them any more. I just see the photos on Facebook. Occasionally I feel left out, but mostly I'm relieved not to have to get dressed up and go and pretend to have fun and be interested in some random friend of whatever boy my best friend Jules fancies. Actually, I don't even think I can call Jules my best friend any more – we barely even speak outside of school and not even in school much either. My sisters have always been my best friends really.

They're wrong about Luke though. There's no way I'm going to waste my time in Rome chasing after him. Not that I would chase after him. But I'm not going to waste my time wondering whether he likes me. Or whether he's with some other girl. Or whether he'd be interested in me if he's not. And I'm absolutely not going to think about what happened after Dad's funeral.

Luke's hot, there's no way around that. He's always been hot. And I'll probably always have a crush on him. But Rome is about family and Aunt Alice's wedding, and food and wine and sun. It's not about Luke. At all.

When the captain announces we're landing, Mum wakes up, stretches, smiles and then suddenly looks a bit confused.

'Everyone okay?' she asks us across the aisle.

Frowning, she pulls her hair out of the ponytail it's been in since she came home from work last night. The band has actually left a bit of a ring around her hair, even after she's run her hands through it.

'We're fine,' Elyse says. 'You okay? I can't believe you slept the whole way.'

'I haven't been sleeping very well,' she says, leaning forward to look out of the window as we land.

I pull everything out of the pocket on the back of the seat in front to make sure I haven't left anything. Leonie snatches the magazine out of my hand and starts flicking through it, as I put the other bits back in and then check my phone in my pocket.

'Did they say what the weather was going to be like?' Leonie asks. 'I missed it.'

'Hot,' Elyse says, tipping her head back and closing her eyes, ready for landing.

‘Good,’ Mum says and closes her eyes too.

I lean forward and look out of the window as the ground comes closer and closer and then brace myself for the bump as we land.

Stefano’s arranged for a car to pick us up from the airport. But we all stand outside for a few moments, just feeling the sun on our faces.

‘It smells different here,’ Leonie says, pulling her sunglasses out of her bag.

‘That’s jet fuel,’ Elyse says.

‘Pfft,’ Leonie says. She actually says ‘pfft’. ‘It’s Italy.’

‘It’s good to be back,’ Mum says quietly, her sunglasses hiding her eyes.

And it is. We first came when we were all small. I don’t remember anything about it except that it was really hot and Leonie whinged about it the whole time. Since then we’ve come almost every year. We used to stay in the hotel Dad had worked in, but since Alice met Stefano we’ve stayed at San Georgio. At least a week every summer, longer if Mum could get off work. Which she used to. Sometimes. But not any more.

In the car, Elyse texts and Mum closes her eyes again, but Leonie and I stare out of the windows. The first half of the journey is just motorway, but once we get to the outskirts of Rome, I start to feel excitement bubbling up inside. Leonie points out pizzerias and gelaterias, while I stare at the pink and peach and cream and terracotta buildings and think about Dad. I can’t believe he’s not here with us. I can hear him talking about



the history, making up stupid facts about different buildings and stories about people sitting outside cafes or screaming past us on mopeds.

It's ridiculous, I know, but I almost feel like he's going to be here. He'll be waiting for us at San Georgio. He'll have flowers for Mum because he knows she'll be annoyed that he tricked us, but we'll be so happy to see him that we'll all grab him and hug him and the flowers will get ruined.

I know it's not going to happen. I know he's gone. But part of me just can't believe it. How can it be real that I'm never going to see him again?

I hadn't realised I was crying until Leonie reaches out and wipes a tear off my cheek with her finger – and then she licks it.

'Oh my god,' I say. 'You are gross.'

Leonie just shrugs and then rests her head on my shoulder again. I rub my face against the top of her head. She's totally disgusting, but I love her so much.

The closer we get to the square, the tighter the roads get. I can never actually believe that cars can go down some of the streets they go down in Rome. There are cars and mopeds parked on both sides, along with tourists wandering around without looking. The streets leading to Campo de' Fiori are cobbled and it's the feeling of the car rattling over the cobbles that really brings it home to me that we're in Rome. And in just a few minutes we're going to see Alice and Toby and Stefano.

And Luke. I feel sick.

We pass our favourite gelateria – Leonie got totally addicted to their cherry meringue flavour last time we were here – and

she presses her face up to the car window, making puppyish whimpering noises.

The driver stops in front of the flower stalls at the end of the square and we all clamber out of the car, waiting as he gets our luggage out of the boot. I start to look around the square, but I have to stop. It's too overwhelming. It's busy and noisy, but it's just so Rome – which is so Dad – that missing him physically hurts. My stomach feels hollow and empty and I want to curl up and cry. I feel someone's arms wrap around me from behind and then Elyse says, 'I miss him too,' into my ear.

I let out a sob and she squeezes me. Leonie presses up against my side. I look at Mum, but she's got her arms wrapped around herself and the expression on her face makes my heart hurt. Then Alice is directly in front of us, flinging herself at Mum, and I can see a blurry Stefano through my tears and I wipe my face and let him hug me hello.

For a few minutes it's all just hugging and kissing and giggling. I always forget how absolutely gorgeous Stefano is: big brown eyes, wavy brown hair, stubble, lovely lips and the accent, of course. It takes some getting used to. Plus he smells amazing, like smoke and basil and oregano. But he squeezes me and kisses the top of my head and laughs with Mum and Alice and by the time we're inside the restaurant I've stopped thinking about it. Mostly. (He really is very gorgeous.)

The terrace in front of the restaurant is crammed with tourists, bowls of olives and glasses of beer on the table in front of them. We go inside through the side door and it takes my eyes a few seconds to adjust to the relative darkness. It's

much cooler inside and much less busy. The locals – people we’ve seen here ever year, but never really spoken to – are standing at the bar with their coffees. They nod and smile at us and I see a man reach out to pinch Leonie’s cheek, but she yanks her head out of the way. I laugh. She wouldn’t have done that last year; he would’ve pinched her and she would’ve complained about it for the rest of the day. I hear her mutter ‘Back off, grandad,’ as we walk on and Mum must hear her too because she gives her a sharp look.

The restaurant is always exactly the same: bare brick walls, arched mirrors that look like windows, strings of white lights on the ceiling and red tablecloths on the round tables, white napkins folded into the wine glasses. At the far end of the room, the kitchen is open and bright with chrome and non-atmospheric lighting, but it’s empty right now.

We follow Alice and Stefano right through the restaurant and out to the back garden, which is where they’re getting married. Unlike the restaurant itself, the garden has changed a bit since we were here last year. The terrace with its white wrought-iron seating now has a pergola over the top, which is covered with vines, bunches of purple flowers tumbling down, throwing the tables into shade.

‘Sit down,’ Stefano tells Mum and Alice. ‘I’ll get us drinks. Are you hungry?’ he asks and then shakes his head. ‘I’ll just bring food.’

‘We’re fine,’ Mum says, but we all know she doesn’t mean it. Stefano’s food is amazing. None of us would dream of turning it down, whether we were hungry or not.

Mum and Alice sit at the table on the edge of the garden.



'Toby's out there,' Alice tells me, Leonie and Elyse, so we head down the two steps into the main garden area.

The willow trees in the corners of the garden have grown so much that the garden seems much more private. The highest wall is covered with a climbing plant dotted with huge white flowers and just in front of it is a stone fountain that wasn't there last year.

But the most important thing is at the far end: our cousin Toby, lying on his back in a patch of bright sunshine, his hands behind his head and feet crossed at the ankles.

'Sorry to disturb you, dickhead,' Leonie says, dropping down to the ground next to him and immediately digging her fingers into his waist to tickle him. He's always been ridiculously ticklish.

'Piss off,' he says, slapping her hands away, but then he sits up and gets her into a headlock. 'Bloody hell, Leonie,' he says, pushing her away from him. 'You look like a girl again!'

Last year, Leonie had her hair cropped just before we went to Italy. It was very short and Toby took the piss out of her the entire time. Now her hair is chin length and actually suits her much better.

Elyse and I sit down on the grass too and Toby beams at us both. 'It's so good to see you!'

'You too,' I say, smiling at Leonie, who is trying to fix her hair where Toby scuffed his hands through it.

'Where's Luke?' Elyse asks. And I tell myself to remember to slap her for it later.

'Just coming now,' Toby says, gesturing behind us.

I want to turn around, but I can't. I won't. I look down at the grass and focus on a single blade, longer than the rest. I

tuck my hands under my thighs and feel the grass pricking the backs of my fingers.

‘Hey,’ Luke says, dropping to the ground next to Toby.

‘Stefano sent these,’ he says, holding up a cardboard carton of Coke in bottles. I think he’s even taller than last year – or maybe he’s thinner? His hair is still long; it’s tucked back behind his ears, but it’s probably as long as mine, almost to his shoulders. And he’s still beautiful. Cheekbones and dark blue eyes and full pink lips.

‘They’re cold,’ he says. ‘Just got them out of the fridge.’

‘Thanks,’ Elyse says, taking one.

My hands are still under my thighs and I’m starting to think about wriggling them out, when Luke holds a bottle out towards me. I pull one hand out from under my leg and reach to take the bottle from him, focussing on a droplet of condensation rolling down the outside of the glass, rather than looking at Luke. Some Coke bubbles over the top of the bottle and runs down the back of my hand.

‘Oops,’ I say without thinking, tipping my hand to let it run off.

‘Hi,’ Luke says, his voice low.

I force myself to meet his eyes and I feel that flip in my stomach again. The flip I always feel – have always felt – when Luke looks at me. He smiles and his smile is still the same too: slow and sexy and the flip in my stomach moves lower.

I pull my eyes away from Luke and focus on Toby. He asks us about the journey and we ask him about working in the restaurant – how busy it’s been, how much they get to go out, the wedding preparations. And then he’s off, telling us hilarious

stories about dresses and food and music and the new stone fountain Alice wanted and Stefano couldn't get right, and I listen to him and think about the first time I ever saw Luke.

It was in Aunt Alice's garden in her house in London, before she and Toby had moved out to be with Stefano full-time. It was one of those summers when it seemed to be golden and warm and beautiful every day and Alice started having barbecues almost every evening. Neighbours and friends and family would just drop in, bringing burgers and sausages and beer and wine – and Luke was there with Toby.

I saw him as soon as we walked out through the French doors and onto the raised decking. He was down on the grass, standing in front of the impromptu goal Toby had set up with a couple of folding chairs and a yard brush. He was wearing white football shorts, a black T-shirt and white socks. His trainers were on the decking, just in front of where I was standing. Even though he and Toby were just in socks, they were having a kickabout while everyone else either stood around the edges of the garden or up on the decking where the barbecue and the drinks were.

Toby and Luke had been friends for years. Luke had been at school with Toby but then his parents split up and he and his Mum moved out of London, but Luke seemed to spend most weekends round at Aunt Alice's with Toby. For a while I wondered if they were a couple and I hated that I hated the idea of it because I wanted Toby to be happy. But I wanted Luke more.

Dad was there; he joined in for a bit, messing about and showing off rather than playing seriously. I liked how Luke

joined in the messing around with Dad. Sometimes if parents get involved in something like that, people roll their eyes or act like they're embarrassed, but Luke and Toby just treated Dad like one of the lads. Before too long, other men had joined in and then some little kids and it was chaos.

I remember noticing Mum watching Dad and she looked so proud. I knew how much she loved him. He must have noticed her too because when he scored a goal – a completely ridiculous one that bounced off the shed door and knocked over a plant pot – he ran over and picked her up and twirled her round. Later on, just as it was getting dark, the solar lights hanging in the trees and dotted around the edge of the lawn glowing white, Alice put some music on and Dad sang along, pretending to use the barbecue tongs as a microphone. He didn't need a microphone – his voice was more than a match for the acoustics of Alice's garden.

'Milly,' Elyse says, bumping me with her shoulder.

'Sorry, what?'

'Are you okay?' Elyse says. 'I thought you'd gone into a trance.'

'Sorry,' I say again. 'I was just thinking about something and I spaced out.'

'Obviously,' Leonie says, laughing.

'Sorry. I'm tired,' I say, glancing at Luke.

'Why don't you go up to your room?' Toby says. 'Get settled in and then have some food when you come down later.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'Yeah, I think I will. Thanks.'

I tip my head back and squint up at the bright blue sky. A couple of seagulls squawk overhead. I always forget there are seagulls in Rome.



'I'm staying here,' Leonie says. 'In the sunshine!' She lies back down on the grass, closing her eyes.

'I'm going to stay for a bit too,' Elyse says. 'Is that okay?'

'Oh, I'll stay as well then,' I say, looking at my sisters.

'Oh, god, go,' Elyse says. 'We're only going to be in the garden, we won't go anywhere without you.'

'No, I'll –' I start to say.

'Go,' Leonie says. 'We'll stay here. Promise.'

I nod. I really do want to go and have a lie down. 'Okay.'

I stand up and brush at my leggings in case there's grass sticking to them. Leonie lies back down and says, 'See you later.'

On the terrace, Alice and Stefano fret over me a bit too – Mum's in the bathroom, apparently – but I tell them I'm fine, just tired, and manage to extricate myself and go up to my room. Elyse is sharing a room with Mum and I'm sharing with Leonie. We've stayed in this room before, but last time Elyse had to squeeze in with us too – because Dad was with Mum – so there's a lot more space this time. I close the huge window that looks out over the square, and the room is suddenly so quiet that I open the window again to test the difference. Window open: shouting, laughter, music, mopeds revving; window closed: dead silence.

I close the internal shutters, plunging the room into darkness, kick off my shoes and lie down on top of the quilt, staring up at the ceiling where a line of yellow light shines from the space at the top of the shutters. I suddenly don't feel as tired any more, and I know immediately that I won't fall asleep. I put on the bedside light and pick up my bag, rummaging in the internal pockets until I find the tiny pot with Dad's ashes.



I'd been worried that they might set alarms off at the airport, but they didn't, thank god. I run my fingers over the top of the pot and then lie back down, holding it in my hand.

Since I know I'm not going to sleep, I should probably go back downstairs and join everyone else, but I don't. I stay in my room. I stay and think about Dad. And Luke. At Alice's barbecue.

By the time Dad started singing I was sitting on the wooden steps, feeling a bit woozy from the heat and the one glass of wine Mum had allowed me to have, but feeling really lucky and happy. Elyse was going out with a boy called Rio at the time – he was leaning on the fence and she was leaning back against him with his arms around her waist. Leonie was sitting on the grass cuddling a little white dog someone had brought along. Luke came over and sat down next to me. He felt warm. Even though he didn't touch me at all, I could feel the heat coming off him. He said, 'Your dad's really cool.' And I laughed. It was the perfect thing to say, obviously. I think I managed to squeak out something like 'He's all right, yeah.' And then we just sat there, listening to Dad singing.

I wish I could remember what song he sang. I should ask Elyse or Leonie. Or Mum or Alice. It's the only detail I really don't remember. When whatever song it was finished, Luke stood up and as he did his leg brushed against mine. I was wearing a dress and it was like getting an electric shock. He glanced back over his shoulder, grinned and said, 'See you later.' And then Dad called me to go up and sing with him. I shook my head – I didn't even trust my legs to get me up off

the steps and across the garden – and then someone changed the CD and people started dancing and the moment was gone.

I lie there in my huge bed in Rome for a while before I give up and cross the room to look out of the window and down at the square. But all I can think of is Dad standing down there, looking up at me, singing that stupid Cornetto song.

I spend the next hour or so lying on my bed and reading a book on my phone until my eyes start to get hot. I put my phone to one side and I've just closed my eyes to try to nap again, when Leonie bursts in. She throws herself on the bed next to me and I bounce on the mattress.

'Wake up, sleepyhead,' she says, her mouth right next to my ear.

'I haven't even been to sleep,' I say into the pillow. 'I literally just closed my eyes. Why are you such a pain in the arse?'

'You love me,' she says.

'Unfortunately,' I say. I roll over and scoot myself back against the padded headboard and squeeze the satin quilt in my hands.

'So what've you been doing?' she says. 'Wanking?' She gets up and opens the internal shutters, flooding the room with light.

'Oh my GOD, Leonie!' I say, squeezing my eyes shut.

'Not my fault you're repressed,' she says. 'I thought that's what you'd come up here for. Saw Luke again, looking all hot and holding those Coke bottles with the water dribbling down them all seductively . . .' She looks at me under her eyelashes and pouts. 'I thought you were overwhelmed with lust.'

'Stop talking now.'

‘Seriously though,’ Leonie says, swinging around the bed so her head is dangling upside-down off the side. ‘He’s ridiculously sexy. And he likes you.’

I roll my eyes. ‘He doesn’t.’

She frowns. ‘He does. I bet you . . . something I’ve got that you want.’

‘You haven’t got anything I want,’ I say, smiling.

‘No? Natural charm? Black toenails? Perfect pitch?’ She grins at me.

‘You haven’t got perfect pitch,’ I say. ‘I’ve got perfect pitch.’

‘Oh, yeah,’ she says, lying back down. ‘I forgot. It’s been so long since I’ve heard you sing.’

Not that again. ‘I’m going for a shower. You lie there and think about something you can bet me.’

‘Oh yeah,’ she says. ‘A shower . . .’ And then she does an over-the-top wink.

I throw my pillow at her.

When I come out of the bathroom, wrapped in one of the amazing fluffy cotton robes Alice bought for every room, Leonie has got the window open and she’s leaning out. The room is a mess – Leonie’s literally just upended her bag on her bed. I pick up one of her dresses and hang it up in the wardrobe.

‘Stop tidying,’ Leonie says, without looking around. ‘Come and look.’

I go and stand next to her at the window and look out. The square is crammed with market stalls, selling everything from cheese and vegetables to baseball caps and handbags. Little half-van cars are buzzing around and getting held up



by the pedestrians. There's obviously a pizza stall somewhere down there because I can smell garlic and roasted tomato and someone's singing an Italian song I don't recognise – it might be a busker or it could easily just be one of the stallholders. The air is warm and I take a deep breath.

'Could you live here?' Leonie asks me.

I shake my head. 'No. I don't think so. It's too different.'

'The first time we came – remember? – you said you never wanted to leave.'

I look at her. She's still looking down at the square.

'There's a difference between saying you never want to leave somewhere when you're on holiday and actually really wanting to live there full-time. I like home.'

'I do too. But I'd like an adventure.'

I laugh. 'The idea of you on an adventure scares me.'

'Maybe that's what I should bet you. If Luke likes you, you'll agree to have an adventure with me.' She turns from the window and grins at me, pushing her long fringe out of her eyes.

'I'd need to know a lot more about the adventure before I'd agree to that.'

She threads her arm through mine and rests her head on my shoulder. 'I'll think of something.'