

Only You

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PART ONE

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Monday

ALF

The air is bright with sunshine, crisp with a lingering breath of dawn. As Alf steps out of the apartment building, his face tilting towards the clear blue sky, a sigh of contentment spreads through his body, releasing tension he didn't even know was there. This has become his favourite moment of the day. He has lived in Rome for six months, but the way the morning light gives a kind of beauty to the shabbiest of buildings still lifts him. It's a walk to the school, strolling past sites that in an hour's time will be thronging with tourists. It feels like a privilege, like being alone with a free pass in a theme park or something. First, there's the long slow climb through the posh residential area until the avenue meets a scrubby expanse of field that is the Circus Maximus, then a tree-lined road slopes up between the Palatine and the Caelian, two of the seven hills. Suddenly you're in front of the Colosseum. It never stops amazing him how it's just standing there, the colours as crude as the postcards they sell on the souvenir vans that are just opening for the day. He takes a photo and posts it on Instagram with the greeting: *Buon giorno! #Roma #Rome #colosseo #bella #beautiful.*

Alf scrolls through his feed, pausing as he sees a photo of his grandparents with big smiles on their faces. Cheryl, his gran, is wearing one of her old competition dresses that always reminds Alf of a cupcake, because the skirt has so much netting it stands up by itself without Cheryl being inside it. This one is a deep pink colour, with silver diamanté swirls on the bodice. His grandad Chris is in full white tie and tails. The caption underneath is: *Keep dancing! #slowfoxtrot #nevertoooldtodance*. Alf's never been on a cruise ship, but he knows that you stay in cabins. There are thousands of them, all stacked up like a block of flats. He can't imagine how there's the cupboard space for their dancewear. He pities the other old people who've gone on a cruise holiday fancying a gentle turn around the dance floor, and have the bad luck of finding themselves on the same ship as Cheryl and the dress that'll swish you out of the way if your floor-craft isn't up to much. And Cheryl unable to resist teaching as she swirls past.

'Let the man lead!' 'Sharper with your head!' 'Flower in a vase! You're wilting!'

Alf 'likes' the photo, not knowing whether his gran will be pleased or annoyed when she sees. He wonders if she ever looks at his posts. She never 'likes' them. She probably thinks that doing so would show approval.

Alf wonders what the weather's like in Blackpool. The default image that comes to mind when he thinks about home is a rain-lashed promenade, the water pewter, the clouds so grey it's difficult to tell where sky meets sea. But that's only because it was that kind of day when he left. When the sun shines, Blackpool can be as attractive as almost anywhere.

But not Rome. What he loves about Rome is the surprises. You'll be walking along a street – pretty enough, but nothing special – then suddenly there'll be a church with a tower and a tiled roof, so old it looks like a film set, or an even older bit of

wall, with thousands of narrow red bricks made before there was technology, that's stood there for two thousand years.

As he winds his way up through the cobbled streets of Monti to get away from the traffic on the main road, he's tempted by the aroma of espresso wafting from every bar he passes, but he has to be on time. They give you a test before the classes start to see which one you're in. You don't have to write anything, just tick the correct box, the nice receptionist told him when she saw his face at the mention of exams.

Behind him, the hoot of a car's horn warns him to get off the road, and one of the old Fiat Cinquecentos passes, its engine as spluttery as a moped as it pulls up the hill. The driver has the radio tuned to a bright morning station playing Pharrell Williams's 'Happy' to get the day off to a good start. Jive, Alf thinks, his feet automatically kicking and flicking to the beat, until the car makes a right and the music fades and he's not even sure whether he can hear it any more.

Alf has no idea about the multiple-choice grammar test, so he just ticks what sounds best to him. Then he's told to see the director of the school to assess how good his speaking is. The door to the office is closed. Inside, he can hear a man asking questions in slow Italian and a woman giving quiet, hesitant responses. Then there's the sound of a chair being scraped back and, sooner than Alf expects, the door opens, and the girl who comes out gives him a look that makes him feel as if he's been caught eavesdropping.

It doesn't help his heart rate that she is stunningly beautiful and walks towards the staircase with her feet turned out, like a dancer.

'Buon giorno!' The director waves him into his office.

Alf thinks it's all about the gestures with Italian. He's watched how Italians talk to each other. Even when they're alone and on a mobile phone, the free hand is moving to emphasize a

point, express surprise or despair. Sally and Mike, who share the apartment, have been here much longer than him, and speak much better Italian, but Alf is always the one who gets the compliments, because he puts his body into it. The director of the school isn't as impressed. He likes Alf's fluency, he tells him, but his grammar is non-existent. He hands him a piece of paper with the number of a classroom at the very top of the building.

There are seven others in the class. Six of them are trying to chat using the fragments of Italian they already know, but the girl he saw downstairs is sitting alone, concentrating on an Italian-English dictionary. She is wearing a long-sleeved grey T-shirt that could have cost two pounds or two hundred, because she's got the sort of body that makes cheap classy, and jeans with horizontal distressing – not tight like the girls back home, their pale flesh bulging through the gaps in the denim, but loose, held up only by her pelvic bones, the slashes giving glimpses of slim bare leg beneath.

The only chair that is empty is next to hers. When he sits down, she shifts slightly away.

The teacher, whose name is Susanna, is holding four lengths of narrow gold ribbon, the type that *pasticcerie* use to wrap the trays of tiny cakes Italians take along to Sunday lunch with their families. She bunches them in her hand, indicating for all the students to come up and grab an end, and then she lets go, leaving them each connected to another person.

'*Introduzioni!*' she says, pointing to useful Italian greetings she has written on the whiteboard.

The pairs stand smiling nervously, still obediently holding their ends of ribbon, until Alf decides to break the silence.

'*Ciao!*' he says to the beautiful young woman he has lucked out with. '*Come ti chiami?*'

As if given permission, the others peel away from the huddle, echoing his greeting and, amid little coughs of half-embarrassed laughter, the classroom stutters to life.

'Mi chiamo Letty,' the girl responds.

'Letty?'

'Short for Violet,' she says.

'Piacere,' he says.

'Come ti chiami?' she asks him.

'Alf,' he says. *'Just Alf.'*

She asks where he is from.

'Inghilterra,' he replies.

'Two English people! Not a good idea!' says the teacher.

She tells them to change partners.

LETTY

There are eight in the class, and they continue swapping partners until they have all met each other. Masakasu is Japanese, Paola and Carla are Colombian, Jo is Norwegian, Angela is Austrian, Heidi is Swiss, and Alf is English. From the North, judging by his accent, Letty thinks.

She wonders if her Italian will ever be fluent enough to discover how these disparate people washed up like flotsam and jetsam in Rome, in April, in a dim classroom, in a virtually empty language school.

What stories brought them here? And will they want to know hers? If so, what will she tell them?

It occurs to her that she could construct a completely different version of herself if she wished.

Letty looks towards the window. The brilliance of the sunshine, which has not yet found its way into the classroom, makes the view seem as remote as a postcard: a splash of purple bougainvillea; a soft geometry of slanting terracotta roofs and bulbous black-green treetops; a flat blue sky.

I am here in Rome, she thinks. I know no one here and nobody knows me.

She sees that she has twisted the gold ribbon into a ring around her finger, almost without realizing.

The teacher switches on a recording of random Italians asking for each other's telephone number. The students have to compare what they hear with the person next to them.

Letty is paired with Heidi, a friendly Swiss woman in her thirties. Letty thinks ahead. Will they have to practise asking each other for their details? She has a new phone, a new contract. The only contacts in it are her family. She's not even sure she knows what her number is or whether she wants to give it out to strangers. She could just make one up, she thinks.

But making stuff up can get complicated.

Wafts of warm pastry rise up from the cafe in the basement, as the class traipse down the circular staircase for morning break.

Letty orders a cappuccino, checking her watch first as she remembers her grandmother Marina telling her, in that categorical way of hers, that no Italian drinks coffee with milk after midday. Ragu – never 'bolognese' in their house – must be simmered for three hours and served with tagliatelle, not spaghetti. Cheese and fish do not go together.

She sees that her class has divided itself by gender. The men are sitting at one table eating croissants. The women have not bought food, only coffee or fresh orange juice. After a few faltering attempts to speak Italian to each other, they revert to English, which they can all speak fairly well.

Back in the classroom, the teacher splits them into two different groups for a discussion about their home countries.

Letty isn't sure she's been placed in the right class. Perhaps it's the wrong teaching method for her? She finds it difficult to form sentences in Italian unless she knows them to be correct. In the level test she will have made very few mistakes in the grammar paper, but she struggled to say anything in the oral

exam. She suspects that most of the others in the class would have been the other way round. Masakasu, for example, has a way of holding the floor because he has learned various Italian linking phrases like *in fact* and *however* that make it difficult to interrupt.

‘Tokyo is beautiful but it has a lot of motorways.’ ‘Japanese food is good.’

Everyone seems very positive about their home country, Letty thinks. Perhaps it’s just because they don’t know each other yet. It wouldn’t feel polite to say that she doesn’t like her country very much at the moment. And it would be beyond her linguistic capability to justify the statement, should anyone attempt to ask follow-up questions. So, when it is finally her turn, she contributes that London is beautiful. There are lots of museums. There is a big river.

‘Are people in London friendly?’ Paola asks her.

Letty doesn’t know how to say, ‘Not as friendly as Italians.’ So she just says, ‘Yes.’ She wonders why Paola giggles at this response, then realizes it’s because she doesn’t sound very friendly. She’s aware that people often think she is stand-offish even though she doesn’t mean to be.

At the end of the morning lessons, the English guy, Alf, takes his time collecting his pencil and notebook, pulling on a jumper over his white T-shirt, and picking up his backpack from the floor. Letty senses that if they are left alone together he will want to speak to her, perhaps even suggest lunch. He is about her age and oozes confidence with his tousled-surfer looks and open smile, but his attention is the last thing she wants. She gathers her stuff together quickly, looking at her watch as if she has an appointment to get to, then hurries out of the classroom and down the stairs.

It’s gloriously sunny outside, although there is a bite in the air. She has been in Rome just a day, but she has already been told three times – by her landlord, the reception staff at the

school and her teacher – to beware of bad people in Termini station. As she crosses the concourse, she is offered tours by two unlikely looking guides, and is approached by several gypsy women clutching babies and holding out their hands woefully. She doesn't feel good ignoring them but, alone in the city, she knows she must take care of herself. They back off when she walks determinedly by, possibly mistaking her for an Italian.

Outside in the square, buses and trams seem to chase her from all directions, but the side street she chooses is suddenly, almost scarily, quiet. She passes several restaurants offering a menu of the day for a reasonable price, but she doesn't want to sit alone and be fussed over by too-eager waiters, so instead she buys a banana and a bottle of water from a fruit stall, feeling a little flip of triumph at making the transaction in Italian, including handing over the correct coins.

Vittorio Emanuele square is flanked by once-elegant colonnades, now spray-painted with graffiti. Where rich people used to promenade in the shade, the homeless now sleep on flattened boxes and filthy sleeping bags. Letty crosses the busy road to the park in the middle, where there are tall trees with lime-green leaves fluttering against the pure blue sky. A dilapidated bit of Roman ruin fenced off in one corner has become a campsite with bright blankets draped over rocks to catch the sun; groups of teenage boys perform clattering skateboard tricks on the steps and paths. Letty sits on a bench and peels her banana, then eats it slowly, sipping her water, alert to everything going on around her.

In her pocket, her mobile phone buzzes. She knows that it will be a WhatsApp message from her mother wanting to know how she is, but she doesn't want to send back the two blue ticks that show she's seen it yet. Not until she feels more settled. She glances at her watch. Not yet three o'clock. Two o'clock in the UK. She's surprised Frances has managed to restrain herself for so long.

Time passes slowly when you are alone, and it feels much longer than thirty hours since she arrived in the city. Letty can't decide whether that is a good thing or not. A whole month stretching ahead seems like a sunny eternity in which to sort her life out, and yet she dreads happy solitude turning into the cold ache of loneliness.

At the end of the square she chooses a route back to her apartment down a tree-lined residential street. Having lived most of her life in London, she's alert to a city's sudden changes in atmosphere. The street is quiet but it doesn't feel threatening, though she glances occasionally behind to check that no one is following her.

In a small supermarket, Letty buys an individual chicken breast clingfilmed to a yellow polystyrene tray, a bag of salad and a lemon. She thinks she remembers seeing a bottle of olive oil when she arrived at the apartment the previous evening, and her landlord gave her a cursory tour of the kitchen, opening cupboard doors and saying, 'Here, everything for cook, yes?'

The end of the avenue intersects with a busy dual carriage-way. Opposite stands the imposing Baroque frontage of a church, set back from the boulevard. There is a tour bus parked outside. Letty hovers on the edge of a group of Americans listening to their guide telling them that this is Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, one of the seven pilgrimage churches of Rome.

Letty follows the group in, then sits down alone in front of the altar and gazes up at the almond-shaped mosaic of Christ in the dome of the apse. She wonders what adjective would best suit the brightness and clarity of the blue background. Is this cerulean blue, a description she has only ever seen written down? Celestial sounds better, but is that even a colour?

An image of her grandmother's face, on hearing that the first thing Letty has done in Rome is go to a pilgrimage church, crosses her mind. She pictures Marina sitting up in bed in her

silk dressing gown, with her four beloved Victorian prints of Roman ladies on the wall behind her.

She wonders if her grandmother ever came to this church when she was a child, whether there is some minuscule fragment of her DNA left here in the wooden pew, a relic of her visit. Did Marina's eyes gaze up at golden Christ in his blue Heaven? Or does she seem somehow present only because Letty is thinking of her?

The phone vibrates in her pocket again. She does not look until she is outside.

There are now two messages from Frances. The first says simply, *Well?*

The second, *Are you OK?*

She texts back.

Fine. I'll call later.

The apartment Letty has rented looks better in real life than the photos on Airbnb. One entire wall is glass with a far-reaching vista to the west. In the foreground stands a stretch of the ancient Aurelian wall, and beyond the cathedral of San Giovanni in Laterano.

If Letty opens a window and cranes her neck to the right, she can see the dome of St Peter's in the far distance, and to the left, the soft purply shadows of distant hills. But she's tentative, standing a foot back from the glass, not quite trusting it as a barrier to the ten-storey drop to the street.

Letty lies on the sofa and gazes at the sunset. Stripes of duck-egg blue and grey intersperse with shades of pink, from the fiery coral of the horizon to the palest candyfloss of the highest cloud.

Finding herself in near darkness, she realizes she has been transfixed by the changing expanse of sky, lulled by the incessant hum of the city's traffic, for almost an hour. She is suddenly aware of a low thump of bass, and the clatter and

sizzle of cooking emanating from a neighbouring apartment. She likes the sensation of being alone, but with the knowledge there are people around her. Wafts of garlic remind her of the need to eat. She fries the chicken breast in olive oil, empties the bag of salad onto a plate, then squeezes lemon juice over it. She eats her meal slowly, chewing and swallowing methodically as she watches the last embers of light disappear from the sky. Then she washes up. Finally she calls her mother.

‘I’ve always hated the term empty nest,’ Frances declares, as if it’s a phrase Letty has greeted her with, when all she’s said is, ‘How are you?’

‘I never was that cooing, clucking sort of mother, was I? Although, of course, it was me who paid for all the feathering.’

A lifetime in advertising has made Frances arch with words, as if she’s testing copy. Or maybe she was always like that, and that is why she chose it as a career. Letty’s never known.

‘I’ve spent all day trying to make the place look presentable,’ Frances goes on. ‘I’ve got a viewing tomorrow. Ivo’s done f-all, of course. So much bloody stuff. I’m honestly thinking of buying a new-build, all glass and nowhere to store anything. What do you think?’

‘Can’t see that working for Ivo,’ Letty says.

‘No,’ says Frances.

Is her mother’s tone bitter or wistful? Would she actually like to live in a glass tower? Letty can’t tell.

Her parents are selling the house that they have lived in all their marriage. It had been informally agreed that when Marina died, the house would be left to them. But it turns out that her grandmother never changed her will, and Letty’s father Ivo, Marina’s younger son, shied away from raising the subject with her. So the house, which has always been their family home, now half belongs to her father’s older brother, Rollo. Or what’s left of it after inheritance tax, as Frances often remarks. There must be quite a lot left, Letty thinks, because

one-bedroom flats in the area are selling for over a million and their property is big enough to make five of those, but it does nevertheless seem terribly unfair that Frances has to leave the house on which she has paid all the expenses for years, including a new roof and underpinning.

The constant tension between her parents is one of the reasons that Letty needed to escape.

‘Anyway,’ says Frances, with a prolonged sigh. ‘What’s it like where you are?’

Her mother sounds so uncharacteristically defeated, Letty doesn’t dare tell her that she has a great glass window, with a view that makes her feel happy and free.

‘OK,’ she says.

There’s a long pause.

‘I’ve just had supper,’ Letty finally says. ‘Chicken with lemon and a bag of salad. There’s a supermarket quite near.’

‘A bag of salad. In Italy! Who knew?’ Frances says. Then, slowing down: ‘Good you’ve found somewhere easy to shop.’

The effort to keep the conversation going is suddenly too much for Letty.

‘I’ve got some homework to do,’ she says.

‘OK, I’ll let you go, then.’

‘OK, bye!’

Letty tastes a familiar bittersweet cocktail of guilt and relief as she presses the end call button.

2

Tuesday

ALF

Alf wakes up before his flatmates. Usually he clears up the debris left over from their after-work drinking before brewing a pot of coffee. Now, as he closes the door carefully so as not to disturb anyone's sleep, he feels guilty for leaving the stale smell of Peroni on the air.

As he leaves Testaccio, he takes a photo of the Pyramid – so white and modern in shape you could believe it was built two years before, not two thousand – and posts it with the caption: *Buon giorno! #Roma #Rome #ancient #modern.*

Within a couple of seconds, he has his first 'like' from Stuart. It's eight thirty. Which is seven thirty UK time. So he's probably having his breakfast before heading off to work, catching up on all the stuff that's arrived overnight. Alf pictures him sitting at the table in the huge kitchen-diner that looks onto the golf course before snatching up his keys, asking Alexa to open the garage door, and giving the Porsche a rev before driving off in a swirl of exhaust.

Alf decides to take the tram up the long hill to the Colosseum, because he doesn't want to be late. He thinks she's the sort of person who will get to class early. His mind runs through

the things he knows about her. She is called Letty. Short for Violet. Violetta, the teacher calls her, which he likes the best. She is English but she doesn't sound like the usual English person trying to speak Italian, and she doesn't look like any English girl he knows. Her hair is dark and long and she uses it as a curtain to hide behind. The way she hurried out of the classroom has stayed with him, as if she had somewhere to go, but he knew she didn't somehow. Or maybe she did. Maybe she is just shy, or maybe there is a reason she doesn't want to be friendly. Maybe she has a jealous lover, or a partner.

'Buon giorno! Ci vediamo dopo!' Alf tests his Italian on one of the stallholders as he walks past the Forum.

He's on nodding terms with most of them now. They've watched him taking clients on tours. They give him a discount on bottles of water and throw in a free one for him. The other day when a restless American kid was clamouring for a plastic Roman helmet, Alf negotiated a free sword to go with it, and the tip the appreciative parents gave him was far more than the price they would have paid.

'Parli bene Italiano!' the stallholder replies.

Alf knows he doesn't speak Italian well. If he learned anything from yesterday's lesson, it was that. But it's the fact that Italians generally encourage any attempts to speak their language that made Alf decide he wanted to learn it properly. If he's going to live here, he wants to be able to hold a conversation.

If he's going to live here . . . The original plan was to go travelling, but they kind of got stuck. There are worse places to be stuck, though, Alf thinks now, crossing the piazza in front of the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore.

Today Violetta is wearing a black vest with her slashed jeans. No bra. Her hair is braided in two plaits across her head then falls loose down her back.

The teacher tells them to walk around the classroom greeting each other, seeing if they can remember everyone's name, and then asking how they are.

They all say they are well because they don't know any other words. Until you can speak, you can't express anything different or complex. It's like babies, Alf thinks. They cry because they can't tell you why they're unhappy.

The teacher tells them that today's lesson will be about personal information.

'How old are you?' is a question that he's not used since primary school, when it seemed to really matter who was five and who was only four and three quarters. With a September birthday, Alf was always oldest in his year. People said it gave an advantage with sport and stuff.

He's paired with Angela, the Austrian woman, and he feels a bit awkward talking about age. He estimates she is in her late fifties – could be early sixties because she's had Botox and fillers. You can always tell. He doesn't understand why women do it. He thinks it ages them more than wrinkles.

'Give me wrinkles any day,' he once said to Gina, and she said, 'Well, that's a relief!'

'Ho sessanta anni,' Angela says.

Alf doesn't have the Italian to say, 'You don't look it!'

And even if he did, he doesn't think it would be appropriate, because it would make it sound like sixty is really old.

Sixty is a difficult one for women to admit to, he's noticed. Forty, too. Whatever they say about life beginning at forty, all his mum's friends dread that age. Fifty doesn't seem so much of a problem – a lot of women who come to his mother's dance school have big fiftieth birthday parties. But sixty isn't good. His gran, Cheryl, has been fifty-nine for several years.

He's observed that when women get to seventy, if they're still in fairly good shape they quite like saying it, because they want to hear, 'I can't believe that!'

And weirdly, the older they get, the prouder they seem to be of their age, especially since it's often the ancient ones who can get around the dance floor really well because everyone learned to foxtrot in the 1950s.

'Eighty-seven? You are kidding me!'

He likes the feeling of making their day.

He can't stop glancing over to where Violetta is sitting with Masakasu. He thinks she is probably in her early twenties. He can't work out why he wants her to acknowledge him so much. The only thing they have in common is that they're English. It's not like it's his duty to befriend her. She's probably from London: nobody in the North would call their child Violet. It would be like your great granny's name or something.

Angela is saying she thought Alf was older than nineteen. He knows this not because of her faltering Italian, but because everyone always says it.

Even when he was a little boy, people were constantly praising him for being the man of the family, ruffling his hair, telling him he was doing a great job of looking after his mum. He remembers being terrified that he would be found out. Someone would see that he didn't have a clue how to look after her, especially when she was crying in the kitchen after doing the washing and everything when he had gone to bed. Sometimes he came down and allowed her to give him a cuddle and kiss his hair as her tears made it wet. Mostly, though, he pretended not to see, creeping back up the stairs to his bedroom and lying awake agonizing about how to make her happy.

It got better after she met Gary when he was ten, although he still remembers her saying, because he's heard the story and the accompanying shrieks of laughter so many times, 'You don't mind me having another man in my life, Alfie?'

And him confiding to her in a whisper, 'I'm not really a man, you know.'

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At break, Alf orders a cappuccino and a cornetto filled with apricot jam that erupts over his fingers and drips onto his T-shirt as he takes a bite, causing Masakasu to roar with laughter. He glances in Violetta's direction, but she isn't looking at him, and when he comes out of the cloakroom with a wet patch down the front of his T-shirt, having removed the jam, it's Heidi he bumps into. She's in her late thirties, pretty in a Claudia Schiffer kind of way, and wearing a black leather jacket with tassels and shorts with patterned tights. He imagines she is used to being the sexiest woman in the room. She's flirty in the entitled way that older women often are with him.

'Now with a wet T-shirt,' she says in English. 'What, I ask, are you trying to do to us girls?'

He smiles because she says *vet* instead of wet and *vot* instead of what. There's something about her keenness to be friendly that makes him think she is a lonely person, although he cannot see why she would be.

The teacher hands them worksheets about jobs.

They have to match words with cartoon pictures of people working. Doctor, lawyer, teacher, labourer, waiter, cook. It's all pretty obvious.

The teacher asks them what they do.

Jo from Norway says he's a doctor.

'*Vero?*' asks the teacher. 'Really?' As if Jo has misunderstood the instruction and simply said the first word on the sheet.

'*Vero,*' he says.

Then she asks Alf.

'*Sono avvocato,*' he says with a grin, choosing the next item on the list.

The two Colombian girls giggle.

'*Dai!*' says the teacher.

It's a word that Italians use all the time. It's like 'C'mon!'

Alf doesn't know which job to go with. In Blackpool, he's always helped his mum out at her dance classes, but he knows what sort of looks he'll get if he says he's a dance teacher. It's ironic, he always thinks, that although he spent his adolescence being called gay because of his dancing, he was the first of his year to have a girlfriend, the first to have sex. Women like a man who can dance.

He spent a year as a waiter in a pizzeria after school and at weekends. The summer before that he did the deckchairs on the beach. Since living in Rome, he has worked as someone who stands near a restaurant handing out flyers offering a 15 per cent discount, but he doesn't know how to say that. He's also promoted Segway tours. For a while he led the tours too, after Yuri, who owns the Segways, took a corner too quickly and broke his arm, which wasn't a great advertisement. That was what gave Alf the idea of becoming a tour guide, but he's unofficial, so he isn't sure the teacher will approve of that. She's quite strict. In the end, because it's one of the words on the worksheet, he says he's a waiter.

Heidi works in a hotel as an events manager, which makes sense. The teacher moves on to Violetta.

She says she is a student.

She doesn't look like a student. Alf wonders what the Italian word is for model.

The Colombian girls are also students, as is Masakasu – a student of lyric opera, the Japanese boy elaborates, which is why he needs to learn good Italian pronunciation. To demonstrate, he stands up and gives them 'Nessun Dorma'. He has that operatic way of singing where your face contorts with the effort of making such a loud noise, but it sounds brilliant. He'd be great on *Britain's Got Talent*, Alf thinks. He gets out his mobile phone, holds it up to ask Masakasu's permission. The Japanese boy nods, delighted, as he continues softly, then gets louder and louder until the final '*Vincerò!*'

Everyone claps when he finishes the song, and they can hear applause coming from the classroom next door.

Finally, the teacher puts a Post-it note with the name of a celebrity on each person's forehead. They have to ask each other questions, using the language they have learned, to find out who they are.

When the class finishes, Alf stays seated while the others are leaving as he posts the video of Masakasu singing, with the caption: *Cool guy in my Italian class #opera #Rome #Roma #singer #BGT #Italy'sGotTalent?*

He shows it to Masakasu as they walk down the circular staircase together, and he says, 'Cool guy!' happily.

Out in the street, Alf looks hopefully in both directions, but Violetta has vanished. The feeling of disappointment is like someone clutching his heart then letting go, although if he saw her in the distance walking up the street, he doesn't know what he'd do.

Alf's phone buzzes in his pocket and keeps buzzing. The video is the most popular thing he's ever posted. It must be the BGT hashtag. He resets the phone not to vibrate each time there's a notification.

3

Wednesday

LETTY

There's a border as bright as white neon around the edges of the blind when Letty wakes, telling her that it is already sunny outside. She is going to be late for class. Rolling from the middle to the side of the bed, she remembers just in time to duck rather than hit her head on the concrete beam.

The landlord was keen – a little too keen, she initially feared – to scamper up the ladder and show her the sleeping gallery. But it was the beams he was concerned about.

'You stay alone?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Maybe not so much a problem.' He winked.

She'd looked at the bed, and the ceiling, maybe a metre above. Was he saying that previous guests' rearing throes of passion had been cut short by concussion?

'It's perfect,' she told him, wanting him to go.

'Everything necessary,' he'd said, ducking expertly as he moved around the bed.

After he left, she'd found a collection of condoms in a wooden box with the word LOVE stamped on it. She wondered if the apartment was his shag pad between Airbnb bookings.

Now she pulls up the blinds on the vast window. The sky is a very pale blue, the saints atop San Giovanni in Laterano lit by the clarity of the morning sunshine. Letty finds herself thinking that she has found what she wanted, even though she didn't really know what it was she was looking for.

'What do you like doing in your free time?' the teacher is saying when she arrives at class.

'Violetta, che cosa fai nel tempo libero?'

Hearing her name spoken in Italian, as Marina always did, makes Letty panic a little, feeling slightly fraudulent for not being better at the language.

'Mi piace leggere,' she says.

And then she wishes she had come up with anything other than reading, because it makes her sound like a swot. It's the first impression she gave when she arrived at her secondary school aged fourteen, when all the social hierarchies had already been established, and she never seemed to be able to move away from it, however hard she tried to make herself look like one of the cool ones.

The teacher tells the class to ask each other questions about their hobbies.

Jo, the Norwegian, likes cross-country skiing and skating.

Does Letty like skating? he asks.

When Letty says she doesn't, he looks surprised, even a little offended. She doesn't have the language to try to explain why not.

The teacher divides them into two groups for a more general chat. Letty's pleased to be with Heidi, who likes yoga. Alf likes football. Playing or watching? Letty asks, using the vocabulary they have just learned. Both, he says. She doesn't know how to ask which team he supports, so she starts listing Premiership clubs.

'Manchester United? Liverpool?'

'Italiano!' the teacher warns, seeing that she's inadvertently put the two English people together again.

'Lago Nero,' Alf replies. 'Blackpool.' Then, in a whisper: 'Sounds better in Italian.'

Letty knows she's meant to laugh, but she doesn't. In her head, Letty can hear her mother saying, 'The furthest I ever went as a child was bloody Blackpool!'

She knows exactly what her mother would be saying about Alf now.

'Men can be too good-looking. Makes them think that life is easy.'

It's one of Frances's categorical statements that's also a side-swipe at Letty's father.

Alf's face is objectively handsome and he smiles a lot. His hair has lots of blond in it, but is more dark than fair.

Letty feels colour spreading over her cheeks, as if Alf might be able to read her thoughts. She says, *'Si chiamano i Tangerini, no?'* (They're called the Tangerines, aren't they?)

He wasn't expecting that.

One of her attempts to be cool at school was to become very knowledgeable about football and, as she has an almost photographic memory for facts, she can remember all the nicknames of the clubs as well as the grounds they play in. She's only done a pub quiz once, but the team she was in won because of it.

Letty leaves the class just in front of Alf. She knows he's behind her as she walks down the stairs and across the marble-floored lobby of the building, and she can feel that he wants to say something. Outside in the street, he catches her up, and asks, 'Do you dance?'

She stops.

'You walk like a dancer,' he says.

'Italiano!' she says, using the strict tone of the teacher, then

smiling to show she's joking. She sees him struggling to think of Italian words.

'Sei ballerina?' he asks.

'No, I'm not a ballet dancer,' she tells him.

There's a moment when they could fall into step and start a conversation, but she can see he's lost his nerve and she doesn't want to elaborate.

Instead, she smiles and says, *'A domani!'*

She walks smartly on. Looking back when she gets to the top of the street, on the pretext of checking before she crosses the road, she sees he has disappeared and wonders if he wasn't going in her direction after all, or whether he has nipped down a side street to avoid the awkwardness of walking just behind or just in front of her.

Letty's surprised how familiar the layout of Rome feels, even though she hasn't been here since she was eight years old. On that occasion, she and Frances and Ivo arrived on the airport train at Termini. Perhaps because it was her first trip to an Italian city – they'd always been to villas in Tuscany or Puglia before – or perhaps because she was at an age where she took everything in, she remembers being in the taxi to the hotel, feeling very low to the road as they bumped over cobblestones, swerved around buses, and accelerated away from traffic lights amid swarms of mopeds. It was night-time and she remembers craning to see the full height of the towering white Vittorio Emanuele monument, thinking that it looked like a model, not a real thing, and speeding past random floodlit columns and bits of temple that just stood beside the road as naturally as parked cars or newspaper stands.

The lunchtime traffic is very heavy and the air is thick with exhaust. It's not pleasant walking so she decides to get on a bus. In the crush of passengers, Letty is squashed up next to a young man in a shiny grey suit. His hair is slicked back and he

smells strongly of cologne. He is talking to someone she can't see who's sitting down. As the bus stops suddenly, the standing passengers are catapulted forward, and she sees that the young man's companion is a bride in a big white wedding dress. At the stop near the foot of the Campidoglio, the young man shouts at the other passengers to let them through, and Letty decides to get off too. The groom jumps the bride from bus to kerb. She is wearing trainers under the many layers of net skirting that have acquired a grey border from swishing along Rome's grimy streets.

The groom takes the bride's hand. In his other hand he holds his mobile phone, filming their ascent of the wide, flat steps up to the square. He's chatting all the time in Italian, too fast for Letty to understand. She tries to keep to the side of them, not wanting to appear in their video like a poorly dressed bridesmaid following on behind. There's something gloriously un-selfconscious about the couple in their finery, the way the bride keeps scolding him for the poor angle, the way he protests that his arm isn't long enough! *Mamma mia!*

At the top of the steps, the bride adjusts the flowers in her hair, using the phone as a mirror, and then she turns, smiles at Letty and asks, in Italian, if she will take a photo of them.

'Certo!'

They pose, first with Rome behind them and then the other way, with the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius as the background.

The groom checks the photos, says thank you, shakes her hand.

'Congratulations!' says Letty, wishing she knew what you say in Italian. Is it *Saluti*? Or *Auguri*? Or is that just for toasts and birthdays?

'You are English?' the groom asks.

'Yes. I hope you will be very happy!'

The bride asks what she has said. The groom translates. The

bride rushes to Letty and plants a kiss on both her cheeks. The groom shakes her hand again. They look so utterly delighted by the good wishes of a stranger that Letty wonders if it is a tradition, like first footing on New Year's Eve in Scotland is. She smiles, then with a shrug says, '*Ciao!*' and walks away, not looking back in case they decide to invite her for a drink or something. She wonders whether, if she stays in Rome long enough and becomes more fluent in the language, the Italian side of her will start to prevail over the English reserve that makes her feel embarrassed at this brush of intimacy with two strangers.

How odd that she will be in their lives forever as the taker of the photo that will sit on the sideboard in their parents' houses. She wonders if they will ever say, 'Do you remember that an English girl took that?' Or whether they will just see their smiles and remember how it felt to be newly married under a perfect blue sky with statues sculpted by Michelangelo looking down on them.

A bride on a bus is somehow much more romantic than a bride in a white vintage Rolls-Royce.

Letty decides that if she ever gets married she will use public transport too.

Not that it's likely. She has been in love twice. The first time, it was really more of a crush because she was only eleven. She had just gone to board at ballet school. Vadim, the Russian boy, was in his final year and he danced like no one she had ever seen. After the end-of-year performance, she'd hung around, trying to get up the courage to take this last chance of speaking to him. When he appeared, she knew she only had seconds alone with him, but found she had no idea what to say, even though she'd imagined the moment many times.

'You are amazing!' she blurted.

He'd smiled right at her – modest, uncomprehending, amused, she couldn't tell – but the image stayed with her for

two years as she practised relentlessly, knowing that ultimately words did not matter, dancing would be their language, and she would make herself good enough to wear Aurora's rose-pink tutu, or Odette's white feathers, and be a worthy partner for his Prince.

But then she'd got injured. After that she couldn't bear to have anything to do with ballet.

Letty's first proper boyfriend was Josh. Maybe spending her entire adolescence in a world of fairy-tale princesses made her believe Josh would rescue her from the ordeal of life after ballet school. She was fifteen when he asked her to go out with him, and she was quickly enveloped in a blissful haze of wonder that this could be happening to her. When he betrayed her, it was as if her body and her mind shattered into nothingness. The still searingly painful memory blots out the warm sweetness of her encounter with the newlyweds, like a cloud passing over the sun.

Letty blinks back tears of self-loathing that well automatically in her eyes if she ever allows herself to think about Josh and all the other mistakes she has made. If only she hadn't been so naive, so trusting, so stupid. If only she could rewind those bits of her life where she has allowed herself to think 'Why not?' instead of sticking with her natural caution.