

Messy,
Wonderful
Us

Prologue

There were certain scents that could whisk her back to that sultry night at any moment. It would happen for months afterwards. She'd be getting on with her life, trying to keep her head down, when she'd breathe in and a rush of memories would follow. Of hot skin and the spike of perfume. The fug of cigarette smoke and hairspray. The musky aroma that had clung faintly to his neck, as he'd slipped his hand around her waist and whispered to her. And the pollen-rich grass that infused the darkness as she'd followed him, until the boom of music grew faint and they were out of sight, heading towards a tangle of woodland.

She hadn't set out to be reckless that night. But then, she hadn't set out to tell all those lies so she could be with a boy – no, a man – she shouldn't have been with. In the preceding weeks, she'd found herself floating towards this point, unable to stop herself. Unable to think about her betrayal and the pain she had the capacity to inflict on the one man who really loved her.

From the moment this stranger had swept into her life, everything

Catherine Isaac

about him had bewitched her. The lilting way he spoke, in an accent that captured the intrinsic beauty of words. The muss of hair around the nape of his neck. The way he looked at her, as if every other girl was invisible. She'd glanced up at the shadows on his face as the moon glowed behind him, trying to pretend she was more experienced than she was. But he can't have failed to notice that she was trembling.

His features were unusual, striking rather than handsome. But this wasn't about his looks. It was about what she saw behind his eyes, the antidote to every humdrum thing in her life, a world of adventure, a foreign land. He was leading her to a new place inside herself, away from the person everyone thought she was.

They followed a secluded path beyond the trees and found a spot where the air had stilled. Nobody could see them or hear them. She knew what was about to happen and it made her chest burn. His lips felt like velvet as his mouth travelled along her jaw, her temple, the stretch of her collarbone. Bark scratched through her dress into the damp flesh on her spine and her hem rose to the top of her thighs. All she could do was abandon herself to the exquisite ache in her belly. The weightlessness of the moment. The sky-high feeling of being a woman.

Chapter 1

THE PRESENT DAY

Allie

The lobby is uncompromisingly fashionable, with a glass staircase that sweeps onto an airy mezzanine, a gleaming grand piano and an architectural approach to flower arranging. I stand amidst a sea of tuxedos and cocktail dresses, of chatter and clinking glasses, and seek out a familiar face.

‘Would you care for a rosemary-infused martini?’ A waitress appears next to me with a tray of drinks, her slender frame neatly contained in a black minidress.

‘Thank you,’ I reply, taking one. I sip the drink, wondering if it’s the floating twig that distinguishes it from a G&T, and crane my neck over the crowd.

I know there are others here from the university: Petra, my boss Alistair and his wife Maureen, all work alongside me in the department of Cellular and Molecular Physiology. I know I shouldn’t, but part of me hopes that I’ve been seated next to one of them, rather than a stranger. It’s not that I’m incapable of small talk, on the contrary. But I enjoy being

Catherine Isaac

surrounded by like-minded people, even if it's just to gossip about the affair between our new senior lecturer and the Ukrainian postdoc.

Wherever I end up sitting tonight, a glitzy charity ball is, undisputedly, a change of scene from my last few Friday evenings, which I spent in the lab looking down a microscope, taking photographs of fluorescent proteins. Given that Petra likes telling me this is not how a thirty-three-year-old single woman *should* spend her weekends, this will at least satisfy her.

'Well, don't you scrub up well? *Love* the heels.' I turn around to find Petra grinning at my feet. 'They *can't* be comfortable.'

'I'm not exactly walking on air, no,' I confess.

The round apples of Petra's cheeks are enhanced by a complicated, serpentine up-do and she's wearing a pretty yellow dress I can already tell she regrets bitterly, judging by her determination to tug her pashmina over her cleavage.

'That's a beautiful gown,' I say.

'Do you really think so?' she replies, hoisting up the front a little higher. 'I bumped into the vice chancellor on the way in and I don't think he was a fan.'

'Well, I'm not sure it would suit *him*, but on you, it's a winner.' She snorts.

But I'm telling the truth, and not simply because in the days when we were working on our joint project about CFTR protein abnormalities in airway smooth muscle, I was more used to seeing her arrive at the lab brushing Coco Pops out of her hair. It was an important and high-profile piece of work, which meant constantly working late and, while this is no terrific sacrifice to me, I know Petra hated missing bedtime for her two young daughters.

Messy, Wonderful Us

Still, research is the most rewarding part of the job, for both of us. It's what took me halfway across the UK, then boomeranged me back to the Russell Group university that has been thriving in my home city since 1881, leading the way in key areas of scientific research and turning out nine Nobel prize winners. It's also the focus of this evening's festivities. Every penny of the money raised tonight will go to cystic fibrosis research, and at least some will be channelled into my area of work. So I definitely *should* prepare myself for small talk.

'I see your friend Ed is doing the keynote speech,' Petra says. 'I get the impression that there's a lot of money in this room, so I hope he's persuasive.'

'I hope so too.'

'From what I hear, the CFA love him,' she continues. 'So we can only hope he dazzles the crowd.'

I smile at the thought, not because I don't think Ed can be dazzling. I've seen with my own eyes the effect of his presence on both sexes, the way the most unlikely admirer will soften around him. Yet, no matter what my friend achieves, to me he's still the skinny kid I'd sit next to on the top deck of the 86 bus, its windows misted with condensation as we doubled up with laughter.

'Couldn't you tempt Simon out tonight?' As I say it, it strikes me that I can't remember the last time Petra brought her husband to an event like this.

'Couldn't get a babysitter. Besides, he can't stand work dos. There's a reason so many scientists marry other scientists, you know. We bore everyone rigid.'

'Speak for yourself.' She laughs.

The toastmaster calls for attention and invites everyone to take their seats. It's a large room, atmospherically lit with a rosy

Catherine Isaac

glow pooling on each table centrepiece. I take my seat next to a man who immediately offers me his hand to shake. ‘Good evening! I’m Teddy Hancock.’ I’d place him in his early sixties, American, with a jovial face and heavy-lidded eyes.

‘Oh, I think I recall Ed mentioning your name. I’m Allison Culpepper.’

The corner of his mouth turns up, betraying his satisfaction. ‘We’re trying to put a deal together right now. Do you work for him?’

‘Oh God no. I’m sure he’s a lovely boss, but we’re just old friends. I work at the university, as an academic research scientist.’

‘So, you’re *Professor* Allison Culpepper?’

‘Doctor.’ Blowing my own trumpet has never come easily to me and I sometimes have to remind myself that I earned that title and the authority that comes with it, so I really shouldn’t be shy about it. ‘But give me time.’

‘What do you specialise in?’

‘Physiology,’ I reply. He makes an expression of vague recognition that reminds me a little of my six-year-old nephew, who remains convinced I am undertaking vital work in the field of fizzy drinks.

‘You have some connection with the charity?’ he continues.

‘They funded a research project of mine a couple of years ago – my primary interest is in the pathophysiology of the airway associated with cystic fibrosis. Also, it was me who persuaded Ed to get involved. He ran the London Marathon for charity a couple of years ago, so I thought I’d twist his arm into devoting his energies to this instead. Keeps me in honest work.’

His eyes narrow momentarily. ‘You know, you don’t *look* like a scientist.’

Messy, Wonderful Us

‘Really? Well, between you and me, they let scientists wear lipstick these days. At least on our days off.’ He guffaws with laughter.

Truth is, I’m wearing more lipstick than I ordinarily would tonight. A small gap in my teeth earned me some character-building nicknames at school so it’s still rare that I draw attention to my mouth, but this felt like a suitably grand occasion on which to change that policy. And somehow it compliments my dark hair and the emerald green dress that pulls in my wobbly bits and made my heart soar a little the second I saw it.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please.’ The marketing director of the charity is at the lectern. He has a slight face, with thinning ginger hair and a surprisingly basso profundo voice.

‘The man I am about to introduce is someone many of you know professionally and some of you know personally. His company, *Spark*, was a success story of the dot.com boom and became one of the UK’s fastest-growing business-to-business retailers. We were delighted to announce earlier in the year that he and his wife Julia are now official ambassadors for our charity and have since worked tirelessly to raise both funds and awareness for cystic fibrosis. Without further ado, please put your hands together for Mr Edward Holt.’

Applause cracks through the room, as I spot Julia at the top table, not far from where I’m sitting. Her cool beauty is unequalled tonight. She is a goddess in Valentino, the pale blue fabric of her dress cinched at her slim waist. Her blonde hair is swept into a soft chignon, drawing all the attention to her face, with its slender nose, faintly dredged with freckles and wide, ingénue eyes. She glances up and we exchange a friendly smile as a hush descends on the room. Ed steps up to the lectern.

Catherine Isaac

Despite being a child with plug ears, permanently bloody knees and filth that clung to him like treacle, he grew into a striking adult.

He has strong cheekbones, but there's a softness to his mouth. He keeps his light brown hair closely cut and his skin retains the ghost of last summer's tan. But it's his eyes that are the most arresting: ocean blue and framed with black lashes, with straight brows that make him appear more intense than he is.

'If I'd known I'd get a reception like that I'd have spent longer on my speech,' he says. Then he smiles that smile, the one caught somewhere between charisma and self-deprecation, and that's all it takes. He already has the audience in the palm of his hand.

Chapter 2

‘How much did the event raise?’ Granddad Gerald takes off my coat and hangs it on the bannister of the narrow hallway, before wrapping me in one of those bear hugs that grandfathers do best, all love and fabric conditioner.

‘They’re still totting it up, but *a lot*. Ed wrote a hefty cheque himself, though, so I’m not sure if that counts as cheating.’

Granddad shakes his head as he loosens the collar of his maroon jumper, his bald patch still shining from the heat in the kitchen. ‘He’s done well for himself that boy, hasn’t he? Mind you, I still can’t believe I’ve got a granddaughter who’s a *doctor*. Speaking of which, will you just take a look at these bunions for me . . .’

I laugh, as ever, at his standing joke; last time he asked me to check his temperature. Granddad never changes and neither does this house. There’s still the same Christian Aid collection box on the sideboard, the family photos fighting for space on the textured walls, the blue carpet with tiny

Catherine Isaac

Fleur de Lys emblems that I thought were ducks when I was little. It's always spotlessly clean and often smells of new paint, though the fundamental look of the place hasn't been updated significantly since my mother lived here.

'Gerald, could you come finish setting the table?' Grandma Peggy pops her head around the kitchen door. 'Oh, hello Allie. I didn't hear the doorbell.'

I walk towards her and give her a kiss on her cheek. 'Lovely perfume, Grandma,' I say, breathing in the scent that clings to her blouse.

'It's just lotion,' she protests, waving me away, as if she'd never bother with anything as frivolous as perfume.

Grandma Peggy is not a frivolous woman. She is generally intolerant of nonsense, loudmouths, cold callers, people who leave lights on around the house and anyone who sings hymns in church with a two-second delay. Still, she's also the woman who knitted my favourite jumpers as a child, gave me my prized jewellery box from Paris that she'd had since she and Granddad briefly lived there and relinquished a coveted slot in the local bowls team to take me to ballet classes when I was seven. I also reserved a special admiration for her more recently, after she scolded her friend Dorothy for being 'a silly bigot' when she blamed her Indian GP for everything from a rise in unemployment to the stubbornness of her haemorrhoids.

'What's for dinner?' I ask.

'A feast,' she replies. 'We'll have leftovers until Easter at this rate.'

'Sounds wonderful.'

'I can't claim credit. Your dad's done everything except the roast potatoes.'

Messy, Wonderful Us

Dad and Grandma join forces to cook for the whole family one Sunday a month. This is usually at her house, where there's a slightly bigger dining room and the boon of a hostess trolley, though it's Dad who does most of the cooking.

'As long as he left the roasties to you. He knows better than to encroach on your domain.' She purses her lips into something that resembles a smile. Grandma's skin has slackened with age, but she retains her classically handsome features, even if she does virtually nothing to enhance them. There is never a hint of lipstick, nor a whisper of eye shadow; her slate-grey hair has been cut into a short elfin crop for as long as I remember.

I step inside the kitchen, a neat and functional space in which everything is tucked away behind stained pine cupboards with brass knobs, except a collection of Delia Smith cookery books next to the spice rack.

Dad is at the hob, stirring one of three bubbling pans with a look of intense concentration on his face. He's wearing the apron I bought him for Father's Day, with the words 'Executive Chef' on the front.

He looks up and wipes his hands on a tea towel. 'Hello love,' he says brightly, pausing to give me a kiss, his skin warm from the heat of the stove.

'How have you managed all this, Dad? I thought you were at work this morning.'

'I got most of it done during the week.' My dad is big on batch cooking. It's how he seems to spend most of his days off, stuffing the freezer, so that by the last Sunday of the month he's always ready to serve some posh starter – little salmon soufflés or a watercress soup – followed by a huge, traditional roast complete with a selection of spiced accompaniments and

Catherine Isaac

home-made sauces. 'It was a good job as well. I didn't get out until late today.'

'Nothing serious I hope?'

He shakes his head. 'One of the staff at the Royal left the toast on too long and set off the fire alarm.'

Being a firefighter was the only job my father ever wanted and he had joined the service soon as he was old enough. He spends most of his days dealing with house fires, traffic accidents, dogs locked in cars and, in one recent case, helping to rescue a thirty-four-year-old man who'd got his backside stuck in a child's swing. He's also had some close shaves in his time, including one incident last year in which he was caught in a flashover in a disused warehouse. The room flooded with flames and melted the shield on his helmet, leaving him with a second-degree burn that still puckers the freckled skin on his neck and gives me the odd sleepless night.

I head to the dining room and find Granddad laying the cutlery.

'Let me help you with that,' I offer, taking a handful of forks to the other side the table. 'Oh, while I've got you . . . You know it's Grandma's birthday in a couple of weeks? I'm thinking of buying her a jacket, what do you think?'

He gives me a blank look. 'I've no idea, love. I tried to ask her what she wanted the other day and she said she's too old for presents. She'll end up with a pair of roller skates if she can't be any more help.'

'The one I've seen is lovely, really chic.'

Granddad's forehead crinkles. 'You don't need to buy her designer things, Allie. She's seventy-six.'

'Being seventy-six doesn't mean you don't deserve nice clothes.'

Messy, Wonderful Us

‘She’ll tell you off for wasting your money.’

‘Tough,’ I declare. ‘Any idea what her dress size is?’

He looks up from under his eyebrows and hesitates. ‘Eighteen?’

I tut. ‘Oh, Granddad, she’s much smaller than that. Fourteen surely, maybe even a twelve?’

‘I wouldn’t have a clue. It’s been years since she let me buy her clothes. She said the last cardigan I gave her made her look like a sheepdog. Why don’t you sneak up and have a peak at the labels in her clothes?’ he suggests. ‘She’s got a wardrobe full up there.’

Chapter 3

It feels strange entering the bedroom where Granddad and Grandma sleep, even if it was his idea. I haven't ventured in here since I was a little girl, when I'd creep in to play with Grandma's soaps or hide under the candlewick bedspread.

It could be a bright room but the big mahogany dresser that sits in the window blocks out much of the light. The carpet is in a faded shade of pink and on either side of their high double bed are two small cabinets, with a Robert Ludlum novel and a tube of denture glue on one; a book of crosswords and a silver-framed photograph of Mum on the other. It was taken when she was in her early twenties, not long before she became ill.

I quietly pad across the floor, wondering how they sleep in such a chilly room, with two windows wide open. Letting in 'fresh air' is a constant preoccupation of Grandma Peggy's, as if there is a limited amount of it on offer.

The sound of laughter drifts upstairs from the kitchen as I

Messy, Wonderful Us

gently open her wardrobe door, releasing a faint scent of lily of the valley. The interior is tightly packed with dresses and suits, all in muted fabrics, some still covered with plastic from the dry cleaners. I take out a dress and examine the label. It's a size 16, which surprises me, so I put it back and check out some of the others. Only, there's a whole array of sizes, ranging from 12 to 16, and no indication as to which might be the most accurate.

I close the door and decide to look in her chest of drawers instead, where I'm more likely to find a top that I know she's worn recently. I work from the bottom up, opening the first drawer to find a stack of sweaters and the cashmere cardigan she had on when I saw her a couple of weeks ago. I take that out and check the label: Size 14, much more what I was expecting. I want to leave the clothes as neatly as I found them, so I remove the pile to refold each item. But when I attempt to straighten the drawer liner, I realise there's something underneath. I slide my fingernail under the edge and carefully lift it up. It's then that I find the envelope.

It's dry and faded with age, ripped open at the top. I don't know what it is exactly that compels me to pick it up, slide out the letter and unfold it, carefully unfurling the old newspaper page concealed inside. I do it almost without thinking, stroking my fingers against the grey print before I can even contemplate the ethics of my intrusion.

It's the date that I register first – 11 June 1983 – before I cast my gaze over a spread of pictures from a summer party held at Allerton People's Hall to celebrate its centenary. There are two rows of photographs, some of austere-looking men in cricket whites, others of women in pleated skirts and batwing sleeves. There are teenage boys in Ray Bans and polo shirts

Catherine Isaac

with popped-up collars, girls in crop tops and lace, looking sticky under the dying heat of the day. Then I spot the name on one caption: Christine Culpepper.

When my eyes settle on my mother's face, at first I don't think beyond the tug in my chest, a jolt of something sad and indefinable. But as I take in each detail, a creeping realisation begins to take hold. Something doesn't add up.

My mother is holding hands with a young man I don't know, someone I've never even seen before. Her mouth is curled up in a mysterious smile and teenage infatuation shines brightly in her eyes. The name of this unknown person, according to the caption, is Stefano McCourt. He looks to be older than my mother by a couple of years and has dark eyes, a full mouth and a gap in his teeth. I look at the date again, trying to reconcile each contradictory detail, but one in particular: the photo was taken nine months before I was born.

'Five minutes until dinner,' I hear Dad shout from downstairs. I don't answer, ignoring the rapid thudding in my chest as I turn my attention to the handwritten letter. It is addressed to my Grandma Peggy and dated December 1983. There's no address from the sender.

Dear Mrs Culpepper,

I write to respectfully ask you not to contact Stefano, myself, or my husband Michael again via his office at the Museo di Castelvecchio.

While I understand that you are in shock about Christine and Stefano – we all are – no good can come of us continuing to maintain contact. I am particularly upset about you writing to my son about his supposed responsibilities to his flesh

Messy, Wonderful Us

and blood'. This kind of emotional blackmail is very wrong when he already made his decision not to have anything more to do with your daughter before our family left Liverpool. The fact that he moved back to Italy with us should have made this very clear.

From what you said in your letter, Christine has now made amends with her boyfriend. He will no doubt make a good father to the baby. So why rock the boat by trying to bring Stefano back into the equation when nobody needs to know the truth?

He is not going to change his mind and he has absolutely no intention of returning to the UK. I am deeply sorry if this sounds harsh under the circumstances, but I'm sure you appreciate that it is not just you who has been upset by events.

*Yours truly,
Signora Vittoria McCourt*

I look again at the photograph on the newspaper cutting. At the date. At my mother's enraptured smile. But most of all, I am drawn to the young man with dark hair and a gap in his teeth that's so identical to my own that it makes my breath catch in my throat.

Chapter 4

There are eight of us for dinner once my uncle Peter, Dad's younger brother, has arrived with his wife Sara and their two young sons, Oscar and Nathan, aged four and six. While everybody else chats happily as they thread into the dining room, I am unable to concentrate on anything but the buzzing in my head, the thrum of my heart against my chest wall.

'Is this a new toy?' Dad asks Oscar, as a remote-control car hits him on the back of the ankles.

'Yes, I got it because I filled up my sticker chart.'

'Well done! You must've been a good boy,' he says, taking a seat at the table.

'I wiped my own bum every day for a week.'

'Congratulations,' Dad replies.

'Will you teach me how to play a song on your guitar again, Uncle Joe?' Nathan asks.

'Oh, sorry, Nathan, I haven't brought it with me today. It's at home.'

Messy, Wonderful Us

Dad looks more disappointed than my nephew that he's missed the opportunity to get his old Gibson guitar out and play a tune. It's his prized possession – crafted in 1979 and 'just like BB King's', as he never tires of telling us.

The table is technically too small to accommodate eight people and the amount my dad has cooked, but we squeeze round it, before Grandma says grace. 'For food that stays our hunger, for rest that brings us ease, for homes where memories linger, we give our thanks for these. Amen.'

Everyone tucks in enthusiastically, while I find myself gazing at the table wondering how I'm going to stomach anything.

'You've surpassed yourself, Joe,' Aunt Sara tells Dad, as she spoons some carrots onto Nathan's plate. 'This is tremendous.'

The talk around the table involves the kind of minor family dispatches I'd ordinarily join in with: what the kids are up to at school, Sara's plans to extend their kitchen, the fact that Grandma and Granddad's Golden Wedding Anniversary is coming up at the end of the year.

'Oh, you'll have to do something special,' Sara says.

'Hmm. We'll do ... *something*,' Grandma replies, the unspoken implication being that there will not, under any circumstances, be any *fuss*.

'Why don't you go on a cruise?' Sara suggests, unabated.

'Muriel and Bobby put us off,' Granddad tells her. 'They went on one last year and weren't keen. Bobby lost his dentures down the toilet in the first week and he was stuck without them for the rest of the trip.'

Dad chuckles into his wine.

'Don't laugh,' Granddad continues, though he's absolutely laughing himself. 'Muriel stuffed herself at the buffet, but

Catherine Isaac

poor Bobby had to eat soup while his teeth were floating somewhere in the mid-Atlantic.'

'Everything all right, love?' Dad asks and I look up sharply. My eyes are drawn to his fair hair and the way it curls around the pale skin on his neck. Then the face of another man altogether tears through my head.

'Fine. Sorry. Just a bit tired. It's been a busy week.'

'What are you working on at the moment, Allie?' Sara asks.

'Um . . . gene-editing technology,' I mumble. 'We're trying to find a cure for people with cystic fibrosis, basically.'

'Gosh, isn't Aunty Allie clever?' she says to Nathan.

'Do you still study fizzy drinks?' he asks.

As Dad and Uncle Peter begin chatting about the football results, my mind drifts to the Christmas before last, when my father sat in that same spot where he's seated now. Grandma Peggy and I handed over a gift about which we had both been apprehensive but in complete agreement: a subscription to a dating website. I held my breath as he opened the envelope, his expression changing as he read the voucher.

'We all thought it was about time,' Grandma Peggy had said, in her usual matter-of-fact way, yet the monumental implications of this gesture were clear to all.

He lifted his eyes and pressed his lips together into a smile. 'Did you now? Sounds like a conspiracy to me.' I think we all knew nothing would come of it.

To be absolutely fair, he did eventually go on a couple of dates, including one with a woman in Hull. He drove all the way over there, only to find out that she bore about as much resemblance to her profile picture as I do to a Victoria's Secret model. She'd told Dad regretfully that she didn't really think it was going to work out between them. Nevertheless,

Messy, Wonderful Us

she'd be prepared to give him a go on the basis that he was an Aquarius and she was a Leo, which meant though their chances of compatibility and communication would be poor, sex would be passably good. He finished his cappuccino and left. So we all gave up again, just like we'd done nearly a decade ago when he split up with Sarah, a nurse he'd technically been seeing for years, but who always felt more like a companion than his girlfriend. We all know the reason why he's still single and it's not because there's anything wrong with him. He's no Calvin Klein model, but he's honest, practical, caring and he makes an exceptional roast dinner.

The real issue is that he doesn't believe he'll ever love someone like he loved a woman who died nearly three decades ago. My mother, the woman in the newspaper photograph that's hidden upstairs, along with a whole load of secrets it's very clear that Dad and I were never supposed to know about.

I get tipsy over dinner. Not falling down drunk, but infused with enough of a wine buzz to agree to teach Nathan how to use his pogo stick in the street in my tights. When we return inside for dessert, Granddad appears at the table with the cake that he's tried to convince the children was all his own work, even though they saw him taking it out of a Tesco box. He cuts a piece and hands a plate to Sara first, before I notice him glance at Grandma anxiously.

'I hadn't realised it was lemon cake,' Granddad replies.

Grandma says nothing, but even Nathan senses that something in the room has shifted, as if the air circulating around us has suddenly become denser.

'What's the matter?' he asks her.

She smiles at him defiantly and pats his hand. 'Nothing

Catherine Isaac

at all. The cake looks delicious. Lemon was my Christine's favourite so it always reminds me of her, that's all.'

My mother's name silences us all. It still has an ability to do that, all these years later.

'All right, Peggy?' Aunt Sara asks.

'Of course,' Grandma replies. Then she looks up at Granddad. 'Come on now, Gerald. There are two hungry little boys waiting patiently here.'

As Granddad hands him a plate, Nathan tugs my sleeve. 'Is Christine the one who died? Your mum?'

'That's right.' I nod.

'That must've sucked. Your mum dying I mean.'

'Yeah. It was a long time ago though.'

'And at least you've still got your dad,' he says, as I look up and feel my heart flare.

Chapter 5

Watering my house plants always takes a little time. They sit on every shelf in the kitchen, a tangle of green leaves that spill over the bare wood surfaces and white metro tiles. But today I feel slower than usual, at this and everything else.

Six days after my discovery of the letter and newspaper cutting, my chest feels tight and acidic, the manifestation of repeated episodes of insomnia. The whole thing has become such a preoccupation, or an obsession, that by the weekend I know I'm going to have to do something about it. I put away my watering can and throw the dregs of my tea in the sink before washing the cup and turning it upside down on the drainer. There's nobody to silently disapprove of me not putting it away before I leave the flat anymore.

I spent four of my nine years in Cardiff living with my ex-boyfriend, Rob, a soft-spoken Geordie with gentle eyes and a love of football, Vietnamese food and science. We met while I completed my PhD and collaborated on two concurrent

Catherine Isaac

projects, which meant long hours in the lab, gathering data and listening to Etta James on a portable speaker.

Our relationship was never a grand passion in the *Gone With the Wind* tradition, but it survived us being apart for six months during my MRC training fellowship in the United States, at Chapel Hill in North Carolina. He didn't merely understand my ambitions to lecture and have my own lab, to work independently and make discoveries. He shared them. But with hindsight, I accepted my current job in Liverpool before I thought through what would happen to our relationship, assuming that it'd all just work out like it had after my stint in the US. Only he ended things, which felt like a punch in the gut, even before I discovered that he'd spent the night with an Argentinian researcher at a CF conference in New Orleans the previous year.

Since moving back to Liverpool, I've lived by myself but don't have time to be lonely. I have a full and rich life, with my family nearby and several sets of friends with whom I go to pub quizzes, play tennis, or just share a cup of tea. It's been less fruitful on the romance front, except for a purple patch last autumn when I tried Tinder. I was on it for three and a half months, before giving up, fatigued and empty, much to Petra's disappointment as she no longer got to hear all the details on our tea breaks. At thirty-three, I'm not altogether deaf to the ticking of my biological clock but it's on snooze. My parents had me so young that I was brought up with the words *there's no rush* being drummed into me. Perhaps I'll still be telling myself that when I'm on HRT.

I head to the bathroom and unzip my make-up bag, before looking in the mirror. I mean, really looking. At my thick, dark hair. The honeyed undertone of my complexion, which

Messy, Wonderful Us

looks nothing like the pale skin of either my mum or dad. And the distinctive gap in my teeth.

I pick up my phone and click on the picture I'd copied from the newspaper cutting. Stefano McCourt has all of those features but his resemblance to the face in the mirror goes beyond that. The arch of his eyebrow follows the same pattern as mine. The almond shape of his eyes are set the same distance apart. It's as if the lines and curves of his face have been traced over mine with translucent paper and a pencil. I take out my mascara and force myself to think straight.

Did my mum lie? Did she have a baby – me – by another man and let my father believe that I was his? If that turned out to be true, if his entire family was built on deception, it would quite simply ruin his life. These issues boil inside me, until the moment I zip up my make-up bag and realise this comes down to one single, inconceivable question. Is the man I've called 'Dad' for thirty-three years really my father?

Grandma Peggy is on a small stepladder washing the window frame on her front porch when I arrive at her house. She's not tight with money, but of a generation that wouldn't dream of paying a stranger to do a job like this simply to make life easier. Instead, at seventy-six, she stands three feet from the ground, pumping her arm back and forth, until not a spec of dirt remains.

'Why don't you let me do that, Grandma?' I ask, peering up at her.

'No, no,' she says dismissively. 'I'm nearly done.'

'Are you sure you're all right up there?'

She frowns down at me. 'Why *wouldn't* I be?'

My Grandma hasn't sat still since she retired a few years ago

Catherine Isaac

from her job as a secretary at Belsfield, a fee-paying secondary school far posher than the comprehensive I went to. Her refusal to relax goes back longer than that though. If there's something to be cleaned, or organised, you can guarantee she'll be on her feet doing it. Eventually she climbs down and snaps off her rubber gloves, dabbing a faint sheen from her forehead with the back of her sleeve. 'To what do I owe the pleasure?'

'I just thought I'd pop round for a cup of tea. That's all right, isn't it?'

She looks so pleased at the idea that I wish I'd done this more often, in less difficult circumstances. 'Of course. Come in.'

In the kitchen, she refuses to let me make the drink, instead flicking on the kettle and taking out two gold-rimmed china mugs, painted with turquoise leaves and pink camellias. I sit down as she brings over the tea, trying to remember exactly how I'd planned to broach this subject.

'Is everything all right, Allie? You're very quiet.'

'I . . . yes, I'm fine. I've just been thinking about Mum.'

The light in her eyes seems to change and she sinks into her seat. 'About anything in particular?'

'A few things, I suppose.' I feel the edge of my teeth biting against the inside of my cheek as I try to just come out with it. But it feels easier to skirt around the issue first. 'Do you think Mum regretted having me so young?'

She looks surprised. Of course not. You might not have been planned, but you were the best thing that ever happened to her. It meant that she got to be a mother before she became ill. She wouldn't have had it any other way.'

'It must've been a shock though,' I reply. 'When she found out she was pregnant, I mean.'

Messy, Wonderful Us

‘I can’t deny that. She was only seventeen, after all. But if anyone thought it couldn’t work, her and your father proved them wrong. They had a wonderful life together.’

‘So they *were* happy?’

She looks confused by the question. ‘You know they were. They brought out the best in one another and your dad was her rock. He made her last months bearable.’

‘And did . . .’ But the words dry up in my mouth.

‘What?’

I feel my neck redden. ‘I just wondered if Mum ever had any other boyfriends, apart from Dad.’

There is a subtle alteration of her demeanour. It’s barely perceptible beyond the slowing of her movements, the stiffening of her jaw, the gradual whitening of the skin on her knuckles. ‘A couple of adolescent romances, but nobody you’d call a boyfriend. Nobody like your dad.’

I take a sip of tea. ‘They never had a break?’

She blinks once, her expression steadfastly blank, before she picks up her handbag and begins rustling inside, for what I’m not sure. ‘Why are you asking this, Allie?’ The words come out in a half-laugh.

I think about lying. I think about continuing this discussion in this same low-key, conversational manner, as if these are issues about which I’m mildly intrigued at most. I think, in the words of the letter, about not rocking the boat. But this isn’t something I can just forget.

‘Grandma, I need to ask you something.’ My words are clear and deliberate, but my heart is fluttering in my chest like a trapped skylark. ‘Or at least, tell you about something that I found. Something for which I need an explanation.’

She swallows slowly. ‘Go on.’

Catherine Isaac

‘On Sunday, I went into your bedroom. I wasn’t snooping about deliberately. I’d wanted to buy you a jacket for your birthday, only I didn’t know your dress size, so Granddad suggested I go and find something in your chest of drawers to check it.’

The faint glow that had bloomed on her cheeks when she came in from the cold seems to drain from her face.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say quickly. ‘I didn’t mean to intrude, but I found something that I just can’t explain.’

Her jaw seems to grind slightly, but she refuses to fill the silence.

‘It was a newspaper cutting and a letter. They were in your bottom drawer, under the lining paper. The cutting showed a picture of my mum with someone who looked . . . well, he looked like he was her boyfriend. It was taken nine months before I was born. And the letter was from someone called Vittoria McCourt. The mother of the boy in the picture.’

Her eyes dart to the table and she fixes them on the grooves in the wood.

‘I read the letter and I don’t understand some of the things that it says. Because it gives the impression, the strong impression, that . . .’ My voice trails off and I wonder if I can actually say this out loud. ‘Grandma, is that boy in the picture – Stefano McCourt – is he . . .’

‘Is he what?’ Her features have hardened into silent, stubborn shock.

‘My father?’ The two words come out in a croak and the tiniest, loaded hesitation follows.

‘What?’ she asks, incredulously.

‘Is he my father?’ I repeat.

‘Absolutely not. You’ve got it *completely* wrong.’

Messy, Wonderful Us

I wait for her to continue but she says nothing. Instead, her eyes blaze with some undefinable emotion and I can't decide whether it's fear or fury.

'Okay. Well, that's a relief,' I say, steadying my voice. 'But can you explain it to me?'

She scrapes back her chair and walks away to one of the drawers, which she starts busily rearranging with her back to me. 'There's nothing to explain.'

'But Grandma, there is. What's the letter all about? Who was the boy in the picture? I need to know. I've got a right to know.'

She spins around furiously. 'A *right*? Don't talk to me about rights. I suppose you think you had a right to go through my private things?'

'I never meant to snoop, I swear. But Grandma, you're changing the subject. Who's the boy?'

Her jaw clamps together as she fixes her eyes on me. 'He's nobody.'

'He clearly is.'

'No, Allie. Listen to me, lady. You're putting two and two together and making five.'

'Then . . . tell me the truth,' I blurt out.

Panic seems to race in her eyes. 'The truth is simple – there's nothing to it. So please just forget this nonsense. Stop jumping to ludicrous conclusions and, for God's sake, give it a rest with these questions.'

'How . . . how can I, Grandma?'

'You can. You *must*. I don't have anything to do with the McCourts any longer and, whatever you think you read or saw in that picture, you got it wrong. Your father is your father. Joe. Nobody else.'

Catherine Isaac

‘But my mum and that Stefano boy were obviously *together* in the photo,’ I argue. ‘They look like they’re in love, Grandma.’

‘Of course they weren’t in love! This is ridiculous.’

I sit silently for a moment. But I just can’t leave this. ‘Has Granddad seen the contents of that envelope?’

Her lungs seem to inflate with air, her eyes widening. ‘Do *not* say a word about this to him, or anyone in this family. Especially Joe. I’m not saying this for my sake. I’m saying it for his.’

I press my spine into the back of the chair, feeling winded. When she next speaks, her voice is lower, calmer. Somehow it has twice the impact. ‘I mean it,’ she warns. ‘Do not mention this again, to me or anyone else. I’ll never forgive you if you do.’