

A mother.

A daughter.

A secret waiting
to be uncovered



EMME

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The Authenticity Project

BETH MORREY

The *Sunday Times* bestselling author of *Saving Missy*

EM
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Autumn Term

Chapter 1

Every morning, Maman used to fling open the curtains, calling, *‘C’est le premier jour!’* Every day was the first day, a new beginning. That was how I remembered her: turning with a smile, the sun streaming through her hair, alight with expectation and possibility.

Pressed up against a cold wall, as dawn broke, I lay staring at the mould on the ceiling, pretending I hadn’t done it a thousand times before. It crept across a crack that ran along the corner above us, a blooming sphere amidst a crescent of smaller blue-black circles; my own little Rorschach test. There was a time when I loved tests. Was it a waxing moon, an apostrophe, or a bass clef? The body beside me shifted uneasily, pushing me further against the damp Anaglypta. A sickle, a fish hook . . . An elbow jabbed me in the rib as I eased myself out of bed. When it came down to it, it was just mould – mould I didn’t have the time, money or energy to get rid of. Pulling on a jumper, I heard a murmur from the ruffled head buried in its pillow.

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‘Go back to sleep,’ I said, and headed for the kitchen.

There was a pot soaking in the sink and, after putting the kettle on, I plunged my hands into the congealed water, nails scraping at the softened pasta that clung to the sides. Outside, the sun was coming up, but it hadn’t yet reached our basement flat, never really did any more. The house I dreamed of was always perched up high, in the trees, light pouring through the windows. But that was like the pictures in the mould, existing only in my head. Dad didn’t stir when I tiptoed in to give him his tea, and when I went back to our bedroom, the body was barely visible under the duvet. Grabbing my clothes, I edged towards the door, but the head emerged, round eyes fixed on me.

‘Don’t be late for school,’ I said, and backed out. No need to worry; she never was.

Le premier jour. It was mid-September, which still felt like the beginning of the year to me, even though I left school twelve years ago. On the bus to work, I squared my shoulders, ready to take the day by the scruff of its neck. That mould was a beckoning finger, a call to arms, to new beginnings.

Gio clicked his tongue in irritation when I arrived at the café, although I was never late either.

‘*Andiamo! Dai!* Giddy-up!’

‘Sorry.’

He picked up his *Daily Mail* and shook it, as I hurried to unload the dishwasher, tying my apron behind my back. The radio was playing, Elton John belting out ‘Tiny Dancer’, and my hips swayed involuntarily as I riffled through the cutlery tray, thinking of my daughter’s nightly gyration around our bed, poking and kicking

me as she turned. Picturing her tousled head, pirate smile peeking over the covers, my heart squeezed a little, the sudden lurch of love that unbalanced me, even as I was staring at my distorted face in the back of a spoon. She was getting too big, our bed too small, but, like the mould, I didn't really know what to do about it.

The day disappeared in a blur, frothing like milk around a steam wand. Grinding, stirring, chopping, spreading, wrapping, dashing. Morning rush, followed by mid-morning rush, followed by lunch rush, then a lull that made me long to slump at one of the tables and squeeze my aching feet. But Gio hated to see inactivity, so I propped myself on the counter to polish the cutlery again, surreptitiously easing my toes out of my shoes to flex them. He wouldn't let me wear trainers, said it looked sloppy. If only I could get through the rest of the day, then go home to Em for hot chocolate, and maybe a bath if there was enough hot water, and—

'Delphine Jones!'

A woman stood before me, vaguely familiar. About my age, but with the glow of good fortune draped around her like a fur stole. She had the kind of buttery highlights that can't be achieved with a packet dye, skin as shiny as the stainless steel I was holding, glacé nails clutching a leather purse she definitely didn't buy at a market stall. Staring at her, my mind did a rewind, and freeze-framed on her aged sixteen, spraying her hair and rolling up her skirt in the school toilets.

'Lexy?'

'Fancy seeing you.' She put her purse on the counter between us. 'You . . . *work* here?'

That much was obvious, and it seemed stupid to deny it, standing

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there in an apron, holding a tea towel. What was also stupid was that I felt the need to, to claim I was just passing through on the way to my skyrise corner office overlooking Canary Wharf.

'It pays the bills.' It didn't even manage that, entirely.

'How funny.' She raked a hand through ramrod-straight hair. 'I always imagined you doing something a bit more . . . scholarly. And here you are, a coffee-maker.'

'Barista,' I said. 'Do you want anything?'

'Decaf latte with soy milk.'

I kept my back to her, yanking the filters, pretending I couldn't hear over the noise of the radio, Freddie Mercury singing about rage, the flame that burns, secret harmonies . . .

'You were always such a swot at school, I thought you'd be running the country by now, but of course you had a *baby*, didn't you. What a shame.'

My hands stilled around the hot cup, head bent to inhale the bitter scent of the beans as I pictured my crooked-toothed friend sobbing after Lexy called her Metal Marni. It seemed the years hadn't mellowed her.

'Why you dilly-dally about? Lickety-split!' Gio's voice roused me, and I turned, holding the coffee.

'Your latte. Sorry about the wait.'

She smiled, but her eyes were ice chips. What had gone wrong in her life that made her this way? There were rumours about her dad having a nasty temper. As I pushed the mug towards her, she leaned forwards and lightly circled my wrist in a chummy, confidential grasp. Up close, she smelled of jasmine and something woody. She'd need a lot of perfume, to mask the polecat.

‘Do you see Adam at all?’

I swallowed. ‘No.’

She gave a sympathetic tut. ‘What a shame. Still, I suppose at least *he* went on to bigger and better things.’

The cluster of carpal bones are what make wrists particularly flexible. Em told me that, once, after she spent an evening committing them to memory. Not an evening, really, not even half an hour; when Em sees something it shoots into her brain and lodges there instantly. I remembered them only because she taught me the mnemonic: Sally Left The Party To Take Cathy Home. Scaphoid, Lunate, Triquetrum, Pisiform, Trapezium, Trapezoid, Capitate, Hamate. The hamate is hook-shaped, like the mould on the ceiling. Keeping my expression neutral, the bones moved together in perfect formation, strong and supple.

‘Arrrrrrgh!’ Lexy’s scream brought Gio running. Grabbing a stack of napkins, he began swabbing her steaming crotch, leaving white shreds of tissue on her designer jeans. What a shame.

‘I’m sorry, it was an accident.’

Gio grabbed more napkins to dab on the wet patch, as Lexy raised her snarling face to mine.

‘She did it on purpose,’ she hissed.

My boss looked from his employee to his customer. Me, Delphine Jones, in my apron, scraped-back frizzy hair, red-raw knuckles, bitten nails. Her, Alexa Marshall, Shellacs curled to claws, white teeth bared, her tiny, pale-blue leather bag still on the counter. It was quilted, with two interlocking ‘C’s on the catch. Gio saw how it was. He was annoyed with her forcing

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him into it, but of course he couldn't show it. So he turned his anger on me, his punchbag barista.

'Why you act like a crazy woman? After all I do for you! Always causing trouble, *pigro*, this is enough! *Basta!* Go at once.'

Once he'd got into his performance, Gio started enjoying himself, reading the riot act, while I let my mind drift to a climate change protester in the street the other day, holding a placard: 'TOO HOT TO HANDLE'. Such a scorching summer, still burning itself out, everything heating up, bubbling and spitting until it boiled over . . . I could tell Gio was already having second thoughts, even as I collected my stuff, but Ms Marshall would have considered it a personal insult if he went back on his word. So he stood, holding the door open, waiting for me to leave, and I squeezed awkwardly past him, head down, out into the dense heat of that sultry September.

Standing on the step, I found I was holding the long-handled silver spoon I'd been polishing, plucked from the apron pocket. It glinted as I rotated it, the inside of the bowl battered dull and grey, but the curved outer side shooting off sparks, fired up by the sun. I thought of my mother – Maman recounting how the father of one of her pupils had ordered her about like a minion; how at the time she said nothing – '*Rien de tout!*' – and only afterwards thought of the perfect retort. '*L'esprit de l'escalier, ma chérie.*' Staircase wit – you only ever think of the thing you should have said on the way out, and by then it's too late.

Gio was still standing in the doorway, accepting tearful thanks from Lexy, neither of them expecting my sudden return, brandishing my shiny talisman.

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‘Just so you know, Gio, *tesoro*, I wouldn’t work another minute in this sub-Starbucks shack, even if you offered me a raise. Which you would never do, because you’re a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone – a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner!’ *Thank you, Miss Challoner, for schooling me in Dickens.* Lexy’s turn. ‘And you. You liked Adam, didn’t you? What a shame he didn’t like you.’ Back to Gio. ‘Just in case I didn’t make myself clear, you can take your job, and your crappy espresso-maker and *ficcatelo su per il culo.*’ Back to Lexy. ‘That means shove it up your ass. Which is what you can do with your Chanel.’

It’s one thing to think of it, another to act. The spirit was willing, had the speech ready, but the flesh was weak, my legs trembling at the image, the audacity. The Lexys of this world said what they liked and left the mess behind, but I kept my head down, and cleared up. What had I *done*? Throwing away my job, the job I needed to keep our house of cards from falling, was insane, unhinged. But underneath it all, somehow, the bones had been flexing, pushing me forwards, before the rot set in.

I pivoted on the step and pushed open the door. Gio and Lexy looked at me in silent astonishment as I threw the spoon on the floor that still bore the marks of my mopping.

‘Shine your own silver.’

Not much, but better than nothing. I turned and exited once more, out into the sunshine, squinting against the light, shading my eyes against my future.

Le premier jour.

Chapter 2

With nothing else to do, I went to pick up Em from school. Hadn't been back since the first day she started, earlier that month – a shift, or shopping, or some other task had always got in the way. The truth was, I didn't want to go to her school, because it used to be mine. Brownswood High, a scruffy, sprawling state secondary run by Gerald Haynes, an ex-army officer who would have been happier running a workhouse. Now it was an Academy, with a new library and a super-head called Mrs Boleyn, who believed in something called 'co-operative learning', so Em told me. I shivered as I saw the red brick looming ahead, the scene of several crimes.

Would Em want to see me there? It was probably really shaming to be picked up by your mum, particularly one with mascara tracks down her cheeks. I thought about sneaking off, but caught sight of her talking to a woman with piled-up blonde hair and Biro marks on her cheek. My daughter's eyes widened when she noticed me, drawing a hundred conclusions, probably

the right ones. She whispered something to the woman, who turned and smiled, sparking a flicker of recognition. She had a Bic stuck in her messy bun, and what looked like a seed in the gap between her front teeth.

‘Hi, Mum, what are you doing here? I’ve got my first fast-track class.’

In the official letter, emailed by the head just a week after she started, they’d said Em was extraordinary: ‘A special class for special students.’ Extraordinary and special. It wasn’t that I disagreed, but sometimes it was better – easier – to be ordinary and normal.

‘Sorry, I forgot.’

‘Mrs Jones! Lovely to meet you. We haven’t met, have we? I’m Mrs Gill, Emily’s English teacher.’

The famous Mrs Gill, who Em went on about. She’d sent me an email, too, about a theatre trip, and I fobbed her off because I hadn’t got the money together yet. How would I get it, now? I blinked back fresh tears, because Em was desperate to go, but had made out it didn’t matter. Just last night, standing in the kitchen running hot water into the pasta pan, shrugging her skinny shoulders. ‘*If there are any issues with payment, maybe the school could help?*’ Mrs Gill had written. ‘*That won’t be necessary,*’ I’d replied. An extra shift, sell something on eBay, scrape coins off the pavement rather than admit it was a problem.

‘I’d better be going . . .’ I stepped away, but she barrelled on.

‘Emily is doing brilliantly, she’s very well-read for her age. For any age, really! We’re so glad she’s joining our new group, she’ll really benefit from a bit of extra pushing.’

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She was pushy, hassling me at the school gates, gabbling away. I was overwhelmed by the day, the looming horror of job-hunting, and the memory-deluge just being here had unleashed.

‘Well, it was her decision . . .’ I dashed away a rogue tear and her eyes narrowed.

‘Of course, but if the parents are on board it’s such a . . . Are you OK?’

A tissue appeared under my nose.

‘Thank you,’ I mumbled, taking it. ‘Sorry . . . don’t know what made me . . .’

‘Emily, Mr Davidson is taking the class today – you’d better get going or you’ll be late. I’ll show your mum round for a bit. Off you go.’

Mrs Gill nodded at Em, who trailed off, throwing us suspicious glances.

‘Come with me.’ She led me through a revamped reception, along various bright corridors, both new and weirdly familiar, chatting the whole way, as I tried to ignore the influx. There was the classroom where Marni and Sheba plaited their hair together and spent the day lurching around like Siamese twins until Miss Kornack threatened them with a pair of scissors – unprofessional but effective. The dining hall where Leroy Ellis had an allergic reaction to fish, and Mr Wilsden had to give him an EpiPen injection in the middle of lunch. The science lab where Sally Barclay . . . *No. Stop it.* It was Em’s school now, everyone else had moved on.

‘I can’t tell you how brilliant Emily is. I’m sure you already know – I knew from the very first lesson. We were reading *Much*

Ado, Benedick and Beatrice arguing, and I asked for other examples of couples who argue. Of course, I was getting *nothing* – someone said Ant and Dec – I mean, I *ask* you – and then Emily pipes up from the back: “Kate and Petruchio.” Then her *Twelfth Night* speech! So, when Mrs Boleyn asked me who should join the fast-track class, I said immediately – “Emily Jones.” She opened the door to an empty unlit classroom and beckoned me in. ‘Take a seat.’

The classroom didn’t have any particular associations, and even in the dim light it was clear what a vibrant space it was – colours and thoughts and effort everywhere. There was a Word Wall between the windows, a display of paper butterflies emerging from an open book, each wing covered in synonyms for the word that spanned its thorax. *Rich: wealthy, prosperous, abundant, bountiful, productive, fertile . . .* Mrs Gill handed me another tissue, and for a second was silent as I calmed myself down. When I looked up, she smiled and picked at the seed between her teeth.

‘It’s almost impossible to cry on camera, you know. They use these drops, and some make-up artists have a tear stick they use. Sometimes they blow menthol air in your eyes. Dangerous really, because if you got any of the actual oil in your eye you could damage it. Which would mess up the scene completely, continuity-wise.’ She reached into the drawer of her desk and produced a pretty pink box. ‘Have a macaron.’

Having read the list of staff in the school prospectus, I’d been relieved to see few from my era had survived. Mrs R Gill (BA) was one of the new wave, and Em had researched her thoroughly

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when she found out who she was. She was still recognizable when she smiled – that famous gap between her teeth. More than twenty years before, as a teenager, Miss Rosalind Cartwright played Rosalie Murray in the Oscar-nominated movie *Agnes Grey*, dancing round the schoolroom, reeling in Sir Thomas Ashby with her ringlets. It seemed impossible to imagine, in this Hackney classroom. I watched the film with my dad, twelve years ago, when I'd just found out I was pregnant. Sitting in our cold living room with a dinner tray, angry because, although I was watching it with Dad, he wasn't really there; angry because I'd just given up my A levels, and would never be able to do the things I wanted to do with books like *Agnes Grey*. The anger never really disappeared, just lingered, dormant, with nowhere to go.

Rosalind Cartwright must have made a fortune, so what was Mrs R Gill doing teaching at Brownswood? Surely that kind of past was a deadly weapon for students to taunt her with. Unless Em was the only one who knew – my daughter harvested information like other children stockpiled conkers. She'd told me her teacher had married a rock guitarist and for a while they'd been one of those couples in magazines, but gradually things had petered out. Apart from some crime drama a couple of years ago, Roz Gill hadn't been in anything for a while and, in her new incarnation, she certainly didn't look like a famous person. Burnt-blonde hair greying at the roots, a network of fine lines around the startling blue eyes – an older, messier, chattier version of the screen persona. Both of us were fallen stars.

'So, is something the matter? You looked upset back there.'

My daughter's teacher bit into a macaron, using her cupped hands to catch the falling crumbs and cram them into her mouth.

'Just had a rough day. Lost my job.'

'Oh, no. How come?' Resting her chin on her hand, she fixed me with an intense stare. There were sugary specks on her lips.

'It was . . . a misunderstanding.' It was true in a way. Gio didn't understand that Lexy deserved to be drenched in coffee.

'Can you explain? Get your job back?'

'There's no point.' I traced the subtle pink ridges of the macaron with the tip of my finger. 'Besides, I hated it. My boss was awful and the pay was terrible.' I'd put up with two years of it, because terrible pay was better than no pay, an awful boss was better than no boss. On the wall behind the desk someone had written on the whiteboard: 'Can you be rich and poor at the same time?'

Poor: impoverished, needy, broke, substandard, faulty, pitiful.

'Well, maybe it's for the best. Can you get another job? What is it that you do?'

'Waitress. And cleaner.'

'I used to do bar shifts when I was studying for my teaching diploma – it's hard work, isn't it. I could ask around if you like? Still got a few contacts.'

'Thanks, but it's fine. I've got my cleaning job.' It wasn't fine but, like the money for the Shakespeare play, there was no way I would accept help. As soon as you did that, it opened the floodgates. Questions, forms, social workers, reports. Help became interference. Best just get on with it, keep your head down.

'Is there a Mr Jones?' She immediately checked herself. 'Sorry, that's none of my business.'

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I thought of Sid, my most recent ex, and Dad, the only Mr Jones in my life, and shook my head. She looked about to say more but thought better of it, squeezing my shoulder. 'Sure you'll find something.' She got to her feet, brushing off biscuit crumbs. 'Now, I'm going to have to escort you out of school, because if anyone catches you wandering round without a pass you'll probably get arrested.'

Trying to laugh, I stood up, still holding my uneaten macaron. But as we moved towards the door, someone else opened it, flicking a switch and flooding the room with light. My watery eyes adjusting, it was a second before I could focus.

'Delphine Jones!'

Another older version of a woman I remembered. But the same piercing gaze, same mannish suit, same short brushed-back hair – greyer now. So many hours spent watching her, listening to her, writing down the words she said, hanging onto every one. Until I walked away from it all.

'Miss Challoner.'

Eyes wide with surprise, she extended a hand. 'Mrs Boleyn now,' she said.

So Miss Challoner was the super-head. When she'd taught me, she'd been a lowly English teacher, struggling to get funding to refurbish the library. The library where Adam and I . . . Stuffing the biscuit in my mouth, I took her hand, hoping she wouldn't feel mine shaking.

'Delphine was my star pupil, once upon a time.' Miss Challoner – Mrs Boleyn – nodded to Mrs Gill.

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‘Really?’ Mrs Gill looked delighted. ‘And now her daughter is mine!’

Mrs Boleyn shot me a sharp glance and I tried to meet her eye. ‘Daughter? You’re a parent here?’

‘Em Jones,’ I mumbled, swallowing. How much would she guess? She taught English; how was her maths? ‘She’s . . . eleven. Just started in Year Seven.’

She frowned for a second, before her brow cleared. ‘Ah yes, Emily. Roz mentioned her. Quoting Shakespeare. Extraordinary. Chip off the old block, eh? She joining the fast-track class?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘She’s very excited.’

Mrs Boleyn nodded in approval. ‘Excellent. Just like you!’

But I was determined that Em would be nothing like me. She would succeed where I failed.