

The Italian Affair

Uprooting.

It's like being a plant
that you move
from one soil to another.
I think I'm a robust weed.
I like the idea of being a hardy little thing:
a hardy living thing.
I'm always being uprooted
and planted in new soil.
When I came to Italy, I was
a very young and tender thing.
And my roots sank easily
into this new and strange terrain
and I didn't really worry
about the uprooting and
moving backwards and forwards.
I was young and easily plant able.
Now I'm getting older -and older-
and my roots are firmly stuck
in the clayey Italian soil.
So, water me well before
you take me with you
back to England.
Prepare the Suffolk soil
- it's sandy and my roots sink easily in
but they yearn for the clay
and back in Italy they miss the sand.
I am a plant
that you move from
one soil to another.
I think I'm probably

the robustest of weeds by now
- a little bit prickly perhaps.
I like the idea of being
a hardy living thing
but the uprooting is getting so hard.
What with my girls in London.
My ever-older mother in Suffolk.
I am continually being uprooted and planted in new soil.

The Italian Affair

Part One

Chapter 1: Let Me Introduce Myself.

Hello there.

My name's S.N. 34605 V3. I'm nearly three years old and I belong to a particularly smart navy-blue Range Rover, and very proud of it I am too. I'm speaking in English because it's my Mistress's original language and my Master's isn't bad either. I've got the voice of a responsible lady in her 40s. One that would know how to read a map the right way up and get you to your destination. You might have thought there's not a lot to me. Well, then you'd be surprised.

You know when that voice you've got in your car gets a bit hysterical, let's say when you miss a turning. It's natural that we get a bit irate when you don't listen to us. And what actually happens when the voice disappears for a while? Gone for a break, a cup of something. I am not just a machine, I'm a lot more than that and I'm very intuitive so when you type in half a name, I can pick that up and...wham! I've got it. I'll take you there. We're not taking over, not yet anyway, but that doesn't mean we're just simply controlled. It's something there in between. It's a bit difficult to explain really.

Anyway. This is not a story about me, logically. This is the story of my Master and Mistress.

Luca and Rebecca.

Luca's Italian: Rebecca's English. And they live in the north of Italy at the family's winery, in the hills overlooking a fabulous lake. It's beautifully soft and gentle countryside with well-cultivated vineyards and olive groves all around. Although I assure you, the lane going up the hill to the farm plays murder on the car's suspension and is not *soft* at all but that's my problem, not theirs.

I see more of Rebecca and the two children than Luca who has a rather *nifty* -didn't learn that from my selective vocabulary- red sports car. But it's in fact Luca who turns me on the most, when he's taking the family somewhere because he has NO sense of direction and Rebecca is often just

ferrying the kids around, not that she actually takes the ferry anywhere. Strange language, English.

It's nice to have the whole family aboard -logically the cats don't come- and that's when we go on skiing trips or seaside holidays in the summer. How do I know about the cats? Because they totally take over the car when it's just standing. There are their muddy paw prints all over the warm bonnet in the winter and then you'll find them chilling out in the shade below when it's hot. There are two of them and they are apparently brothers, although Luca is not convinced about that. One looks like a mini tiger and the other has the semblance of a very sleek panther. Luca's not crazy about the cats especially if they decide to laze around on his shiny sports car which shows up every single paw mark. And anyway, cats are there to keep the local vermin population at bay and that's all, as far as Luca is concerned. Rebecca adores Roly and Poly and so of course do the children.

Rebecca is a really beautiful girl with lots of thick - uncontrollable she says- honey coloured hair and dark green eyes. Some people may think she's got a rather prominent nose but I personally think that's what gives her face its essential character. She keeps a comb in the car's whatsit compartment -previously known as *glove compartment*- which she occasionally drags through her hair in the hopes of getting it to do something fashionable because, *hey*, she lives in Italy: the hub of the fashion world. She also has a lip seal somewhere in the back of the same compartment, stuck behind the car's log book, which has been totally forgotten about. I like to think that it calls out sometimes in the hopes of being saved but then that's just me with too much free time on my hands, as they say, but don't worry I don't actually have any: hands that is.

Rebecca always speaks to the children in English which sometimes unnerves her parents-in-law a little as they don't understand a great deal and I imagine they feel a bit left out. Charlotte looks very much like her mother with the addition of Aunty Alice's dark glossy hair while Charlie is more like his dad.

What about Luca? What does my Master look like? He is a classically tall, dark and handsome type; well, that was logical, wasn't it? And although he broke his nose when playing football as a kid, the slightly crooked nose and scar on one cheek just adds to his attractiveness. Luca goes berry-brown in the summer when he's working out in the vineyards, whereas Rebecca is

cursed with a fairer, English, complexion. She has two or three tatty-looking straw hats lying around the place which she wears when she's helping out in the vineyards. The hats are truly appalling and she should look terrible in them but of course she doesn't. They really are two beautiful people.

There are a lot of good and positive vibes running between the two of them when they're going somewhere together. Rebecca often strokes the back of Luca's neck when he's driving which is so tender and so sweet: quite puts me off my navigating. Talking of which, I really wish they would stop building roundabouts because it's not *turning* anymore, it's *leaving*. As if you'd stay long at a roundabout.

Now, as I was saying, Rebecca and Luca live in the sleepy hills overlooking, at a suitable distance that is, the frantically busy-in-the-season lake side town of Desenzano. Rebecca seems to appreciate the scenery and surroundings more than Luca and that's probably because she wasn't born and brought up around here. She's always oohing and aahing at the spectacular sunsets -sunrises too if she's up in time- and we are blessed with amazing blue skies and sunshine for about 80% of the year. Luca is obviously much more tuned in, and I mean that literally, to the nitty-gritty facts of the weather which means: hail storms (VERY BAD news as it can destroy the whole crop), frosts (good in winter but bad early spring when the vines are budding), cloud bursts with water running down the hill (worrying to say the least) and droughts which bring on the headache of continually watering.

The couple live with the kids in the old stone farmhouse on one side of the courtyard while Luca's parents, sister and younger brother are on the other. I don't have a garage but a wooden pergola with wisteria that covers it during the summer and it suits me just fine. It's just one big happy extended family here and Rebecca quite often takes her mum-in-law shopping and sometimes Luca's sister Alice, tags along. Alice has that effortless elegant Italian way about her, she's almost as tall as her brothers and just as slim with a lot of super glossy black straight hair. The only thing that Rebecca's really jealous about, is Alice's wonderful sylphlike ankles. Most Italian women seem to have them and they logically go with slender beautiful long legs. It was the first thing she checked when Charlotte was born: did she have the Italian ankles or those horribly sturdy English ones?

Becky had been delighted to see two very beautiful Italian ones, although I would say it's difficult to see something like that at birth. Anyway, getting back to the slim and beautiful Alice, she's studying law at Milan University but seems to spend most of her time at the farmhouse or down at the lake-side town where all her old school buddies live. Luca's mum, who's called Franca, and Alice are always extremely polite to Rebecca but often look a bit puzzled when she's around. This could be because when Rebecca's a bit nervous, as she often is around her super cool and elegant in-laws, she talks too much. I think the right word is *prattle* and it gets really interesting when she makes an Italian clanger which sets her off giggling uncontrollably and positively stumps Franca and Alice. There's no getting away from it, there is a void between the two nationalities but they all seem very fond of each other and of course everybody absolutely adores the children.

There have been a couple of occasions when Rebecca has had to go back to England suddenly and leave the kids behind with their Italian family and she knows that Charlie and Charlotte just get spoilt rotten. Rebecca is always amazed at how the kids are almost glowing, and definitely looking cleaner, when she comes home. They're both a bit chubbier, pasta for lunch AND dinner, definitely better coordinated dress-wise and with freshly cut hair - Rebecca usually does it herself- and it always slightly unnerves her to find two different, a more Italian version, of her kids. And for some reason this miffs her a little and she wants Luca and his family to leave Charlotte and Charlie in their befuddled, slightly foreign state. I don't think she has to worry much because it would take a lot to change those two delightfully messy and slightly scruffy children.

But all in all, I can tell she's one very happy lady who's in love with the whole Italian experience.

Of course, time just flies by with a thriving family-run business (the production of local wine has really taken off in the last 20 years or so) and two lively children; there is the charming farmhouse to clean as well, although Rebecca's part doesn't sparkle quite so much as the part on the other side of the courtyard. Then let's not forget the cooking which Rebecca has thrown herself into and she's not bad at it either. She's learnt a lot from her mum-in-law and absolutely insists on cooking for Luca and the children, and refuses to have Franca traipsing over with pots and pans every meal time.

‘If Franca could, she’d feed the whole world’, ponders Rebecca as she smiles to herself.

I don’t often get the pleasure of taking Luca and Rebecca somewhere on their own. I wish they could get away more often for an evening out, just the two of them, but they’ve got far too much to do and if they can slip away, Luca prefers to take the sports car. So normally it’s Rebecca, with or without the kids, in the car with me. It’s weird, I know, but I like to think of us as a team, fighting our way through the traffic and on a mission to somewhere. And once when she actually turned me on and we got there safe and sound, Rebecca thanked me. Silly really, thanking a machine and I very, very quietly batted back, ‘you’re welcome’. You should have seen her face. But then she decided she’d just heard it in her head. Fancy that!

Chapter 2: Driving on the Other Side.

Becky, let’s call her that because everybody else does, is fine when everything’s running smoothly back home. *Home* for Becky is two very separate places so I have two home addresses memorized, one is with the capital H and the other one without.

But when Mum phones saying Dad’s got prostate cancer and not to worry because they’ve caught it well in time, that is exactly what Becky does: she starts worrying. The distance between her two homes suddenly gapes wide open and all she wants to do is spend some time with her parents. After a couple of restless nights, she has a plan and that is to drive over to England with me and the kids. She doesn’t want to leave the kids behind because they will get so thoroughly spoilt while she’s away, and they’ll be impossible when she comes back. Charlotte who is 7 goes to the local primary school and Charlie is still at nursery and with the never-ending summer holidays looming, there’s no reason why they can’t come. Luca’s all for it, as having the two kids with him, even with a lot of willing hands ready to take over, is difficult when concentrating on the serious matter of wine-making. So that’s settled and I’m really excited because, at long last, Becky might actually turn me on and use me.

Have you ever driven to London from Northern Italy? Oh yeah, it’s a long way but not impossible. It is decided to leave at some disgustingly uncivilized time in the morning, on a startling clear sunny May day. There

are tearful farewells and sleepy kids settled in the back and I am just so excited: a real journey! And as we're about to start bumping down the dusty lane towards the motorway, Becky brakes abruptly. Yes, she's forgotten something as usual and so she dashes back up the hill and comes back with -surprise, surprise- her diary. Takes it everywhere. It strikes Becky that this moment is perfect: the light, the clear blue sky, the stunning scenery. She really has got all she wants in life: she's a positive girl, my Becky.

Like all young women these days, Becky's a confident driver and she's adopted some very irate, if I may say so, rude Italian ways. I personally find it nerve-wracking to be in the middle lane of the motorway and to have an articulated lorry cutting me up as it overtakes something big and heavy on the inside. But Becky just presses down hard on the horn, swerves neatly into the outside lane and sticks up her very pretty middle finger as we speed by, with at least one very colourful Italian swear word that refers to the offending driver's testicles. It leaves me in tatters! Don't worry, it's just an expression, I'm still working.

I wish I could say we took the pretty way through France but Becky stuck to the motorways and stopped only twice and when I say stop, it literally was just stopping very quickly and then starting again. The kids went into a travelling stupor and were no problem at all. We were crossing the Channel by early evening.

Crossing the English Channel is really quite strange, I've done it a few times before with family holidays and whatnot, but it still takes me totally by surprise. The English talk about *going over to the continent* but you wouldn't think that crossing over such a piddly stretch of salt water would make any difference. It does. It really does! It starts with some very impressive white cliffs which as you get closer to, take over the whole landscape. Big white pillars of chalk with this vivid green on the top. It looks as if they've been daubed with a fluorescent green paint. The colours on the other *continental* side are softer, whereas this green is just so... green, if you get what I mean. And once we're on the road - the wrong side, I must add - there's a very stiff breeze or let's just say: wind. *Breeze* is what delightfully picks up in the evening over the vineyards back in Italy, so let's be honest here: this is a cold, strong wind. In May!

Becky's stopping overnight with her brother on the south side of London. Good job too because she's about to drop. And then she'll drive up to her parents' in Suffolk the next day.

'End of journey.'

Chapter 3: The Stage Door.

Becky's parents live in a rather ugly looking pebbledash house on the East Coast whose only gracious features are the surprisingly pretty stained-glass windows on the two landings going up the stairs. They moved there when Becky's father retired and they fell in love with the location more than the house. It's set in that sandy countryside that's often to be found near the sea. There is a very generous-sized garden with a rather vague boundary made up of the native gorse bushes that surround it. Becky's mum could have been stricter with the gorse but she loves its wonderful almond scented lemon-yellow flowers and it gives the garden so much privacy. Not that there's much else around the property. Luca has renamed the place: *pure desolation* which is strange for somebody who lives in the country, although this is definitely another type of countryside. I am not going to tire you with a description of the numerous pot holes and the sand everywhere that leads up to the house. But believe me, it's quite terrible on the suspension and so I seem destined to always live at the end of a badly made-up lane.

For some obscure reason, the house is called The Stage Door. It was given this name before the parents moved in and all these house names play havoc on my searching programme. I ask, why not just a number? No. The English love giving their home a name and some seem to be quite logical. I can understand *Sunny Meadow* if the house faces onto the open countryside to the south, but *Esplanade* in the middle of a busy city centre. It doesn't make sense at all.

As we're driving down that indescribable lane, time has already warped into something much slower and longer and even if Becky was born just outside of London, this feels like coming home. She's stepping back in time and she can get up in the morning and throw on her worst jeans, which means baggy around the bum, and tattiest jumper and just not worry about it. The few times she's worn something more fashionable and more Italian,

it seems to look all wrong among the tweeds and woolies in the high street. And nobody here looks you up and down, scrutinizing what you've got on. Becky arrives at the best time of the day: tea time. Suffolk is all about cloudy mornings and fantastically sunny late afternoons and evenings. The garden faces south west – the house should be called *Sunny Meadow*- and is bathed in glorious sunshine, as they all sit outside on the patio with mugs of tea. Charlie and Charlotte are already chasing after the wild rabbits and Becky has just gone upstairs to find a cardigan. How's it possible to have 15 degrees here when it's 25 in Italy? It's always a thermal shock. The kids want to go down to the beach tomorrow and Becky shivers just at the thought of it.

Once Becky's back on the patio with a second mug of tea, she glances nervously at her father. He's looking a little tired whereas Mum is beaming. Ann's so relieved that Becky and the kids have arrived safely. She's been fidgeting for the last two days, trying to work out where Becky is along the way and it seems to get harder to stand by, her own, family motto: *no news is good news*. There is no phoning and asking how the journey's going because that's the rule.

When the shadows grow longer and there's a nasty chill in the air, the French windows are closed and they move into the kitchen. Ann's made Becky's favourites for dinner which are beef stew and spotted dick. Becky wonders if parents ever stop spoiling their children. She hopes not.

James and Ann were born in the 50s and feel really blessed to have been part of the greatest Rock scene ever -shame about the 80s- and they swung from being very hippy and free in their 20s to being tied to jobs, mortgages and raising a family in their 30s and 40s. Moving to The Stage Door to enjoy their retirement is a sign of their free and easy roots. Ann never really got over the smocks and maxi skirts of the 70s and since moving to Suffolk, she's totally given up the suits and high heels that she used to wear as a buyer at Harvey and Nichols. She's now back to anything Indian, long and floaty, and wearing her precious dungarees in the garden; she draws the line at actually going out in them. She's always admired those women who can sweep their wonderful long graying hair into a sophisticated bun but finds it much more practical to keep hers short. Ann often finds herself frowning when she catches her reflection in a window or other shiny

surface because she doesn't quite look her best anymore but then she thinks, 'who cares here in the middle of nowhere.'

Friends and family were somewhat surprised when the couple decided to move from just north of London to Suffolk. Most of them thought that Ann and James would regret it after the novelty had worn off. But no, they have loved and embraced every single moment.

Prostate cancer was a real blow for James and his big lanky frame seemed to slightly stoop overnight. Everybody knows the statistics but until... it's actually you. He has no plans of succumbing though and will fight it all the way. There will be chemo therapy and that means leaving the peace and quiet of The Stage Door. They'll be staying in James's brother's London flat which is empty, luckily for them, most of the time. But nothing is planned for the next 10 days, so they can all relax and enjoy each other's company, letting The Stage Door spin its magic. Because that's just what it always seems to do.

Chapter 4: Dear Diary.

Well thank goodness we've arrived! It's always the same... I think I can do it really easily but it's so tiring doing all the driving alone. But yeah! I'm here and I can relax now and enjoy time with Mum and Dad, until they've got to go up to town. Don't think Dad's looking bad at all... looks the same as usual in fact, just a bit tired. I'm going to keep everything crossed that I possibly can and hope it all goes well.

It's bloody cold and thank goodness I've already got a few clothes here for us all because it's still definitely woolly time: always is, really. I think my blood's thinned out with too much Italian sun. But the light! The light is amazing and it always strikes me when I come over... can't understand why artists went trotting over to Italy for the light when they've got the most perfect and vivid colours here, right in front of them. Oh well, the grass is always greener...

Missing Luca already and the farm. Typical! I don't know whether I'm coming or going. I would be an absolutely terrible traveler, you know the ones who've got the bug and are always on the move, that's not me at all. Mum cooked all my favourites tonight for dinner and it was so yummy and pudding was, as Mum calls it, a real school-dinners one: spotted dick. Suet

puddings! I love them all, no idea how to cook it though and anyway the Italian mob would hate it, so it's a treat when I'm over. And Lottie liked it, Charlie no but then he's fussy just like his Dad.

Tried watching East Enders. Used to love it and we were hooked at uni but I've missed too many episodes and don't know who half the people are. Shame really but can live without definitely, and Mum's happy because they hate it.

Looking forward to seeing a bit more of my darling pesty Big Brother and the enigmatic Sophie. She was leaving as we arrived last night for our stop over. I'd like to get to know her better but with Freddy around that's difficult, because he sort of takes over the room, the conversation, EVERYTHING! I'll just have to try to get her on her own some time...

Bath time then bedtime and don't think I'll be staying up much longer either. I am well and truly knackered! The car's already asleep or it looks like it is, aren't I a silly girl? Sleeping car!

Let the wind howl and the darkness come, I'm off to my cosy bed!

Chapter 5: Perfect Days.

Becky is always amazed at how easy it is to slip back into another, more English, routine with Charlie and Lottie doing the same. The kids get thoroughly spoilt by their grandparents here, not so much in a material way because there are no toy shops around, but in the sense of quality time. Everybody seems to want to play with them or take them out for a walk with the dogs. Ah, yes! The dogs. There are two of them as the parents thought they really needed some type of security out here in the middle of nowhere and so they went to the local kennels and found two wonderfully friendly *brothers*. At least that was what they were told and it reminds me of Roly and Poly's shaky family credentials back home in Italy. Shaggy and Silky are their names and there was a stunned silence followed by gales of laughter when Becky and Freddy were told what the two dogs had been called. Silky...ok but Shaggy! As in *to shag*... The association hadn't even crossed James and Ann's minds until their children enlightened them and then when they thought about it, they found it just as funny, so there was no scrabbling around in their heads for a new name for Shaggy. Shaggy it was. The dogs are apparently a mix between Golden Retriever and some

type of Griffon: Shaggy is definitely more Griffon and Becky sympathizes with him about the hair problem, Silky is definitely more Golden Retriever and he looks as if he spends his whole time bathing in some very luxurious bath oil. The pair of them are quite big and very soppy, they stay outside in the garden during the day -if possible- and come in to *guard* the house at night. They have two baskets in the kitchen which they don't seem to be able to decide whose is who, and tend to curl up uncomfortably together in one of the two with no rhyme or reason to which.

It's been a great day and I've just been sitting here enjoying the family and dogs as I haven't been out anywhere. I'm parked under a really splendid oak tree which as Ann says, isn't actually in the garden and so isn't her responsibility: 'thank God!' It really is magnificent with its branches spreading a suitable amount of shade just for me. Lights have just come on inside and I can see directly into the kitchen as it's on the other side of the gravel drive where I'm parked. It's a lovely, warm and cozy room in the evening. There's a very impressive Aga on one side and a big old wooden table in the middle with some very miss-matched chairs all around. A dresser is pushed up against the back wall where everything gets dumped and then there's a mirror above which is covered in so many post-its, it doesn't reflect anymore. I can see two jam jars of wildflowers, one on the kitchen table and another on the window sill in front of the sink. Ann's constantly telling herself to stop picking them because they are always wilting but it all adds to the charm of the place. Now, how do I know all these details? Because the family doesn't seem to know what a drawn curtain is, I don't think they even have them, so I can see right into the kitchen all the time.

Becky loves the house during the day but it's another story at night. She always braces herself for that total darkness outside that is quite natural but so hard to find these days. I think the right expression is *pitch black*. Evenings in Italy seem softer and more friendly somehow and what with the street lights at the bottom of the hill and a string of car headlights along the motorway, the night could never be described as *pitchy*. In Suffolk it's just so terribly dark. And let's not forget the wind. It always picks up at around supper time and starts whistling merrily around the house. Then there are all the crazy noises the house itself makes. Perhaps it's because there's more wood to creak in an English house. So yes, the house can be

a bit spooky at night, although Ann's always telling whoever comes to stay, that there are definitely no ghosts. And just the casual mentioning of ghosts totally freaks out the Italian side of the family who Becky has decided have far too many saints doing miracles and stuff, to worry about a little old ghost. But her Italian family definitely don't like the idea at all, and Ann reassuring them there isn't one, seems to have totally the opposite effect which amuses Becky no end. There are none of those dark, sinister shadows tonight though, as Becky's brother Freddy and his girlfriend are coming for dinner after work. Lights have been put on in the kitchen and the children have pushed a chair up against the kitchen sink, so they can peer out of the window and try and spot Uncle Freddy's B.M.W. coming up the drive. Becky has already told the kids not to ask for presents. But the truth is, that every time they see Freddy and Sophie, there's always one for each of them and: 'THEY'RE HERE!'.... They've arrived. With an impossibly big carrier that will hold the inevitable. Charlie and Lottie run out onto the drive with Charlie shouting excitedly.

'Mummy told us not to ask but what's in the bag? Are they presents?'

Becky raises her eyebrows in a resigned sort of way as she follows the children outside and sneaks a look at what Sophie's wearing. Yes, she's looking super sophisticated as always. It crosses her mind how well Sophie would fit into the Italian way of life. Sophie does something that's *well worth doing* in The City. Not like Becky who after uni had found a job in the city, yes, but behind the bar at The Telegraph. It wasn't bad hours, with Saturday and Sunday off which was great for going sailing, but it definitely wasn't life-changing or record-breaking. Sophie always gives the impression she's doing both and with great ease at that. She is always turned out perfectly and although not tall, she's got bearing which gives her some extra inches, and the heels help as well. Extremely slim but not skinny, *drats*, she has her jet-black hair cut in a perfect short bob that only someone with her features can get away with. She comes across as a bit cold but Becky reckons it's just shyness and I think she could be right. She's definitely a highly competent girl in her job, totally dedicated to it - whatever it is- but perhaps she's somewhat lost when not in the office.

'Well, she's got her hands full with my high-flying brother,' thinks Becky.

Freddy works two buildings away from Sophie and does something that's even better paid than she is. Freddy works extremely hard but plays hard

too. He loves squash which says it all. The only time he managed to drag his sister along for a game, she was really shocked by the energy required and Becky's no couch potato. 'Horrible game! Heart attack time!' mutters Becky to herself just thinking about it. She reckons the game was invented by some over-active maniac. Sophie plays and apparently, she's really good at it. Becky just can't imagine Sophie getting all hot and sweaty but no doubt she looks as elegant as always. It's like some of her sailing mates who never show the strain. Becky –on the other hand- looks bedraggled before even getting on the boat or that's what she thinks anyway.

Freddy is Becky's carbon copy with a little bit of ginger and a large dollop of adrenalin on top. Once he's handed over the overly expensive gifts to the kids, with Charlie glancing over to his Mum with a told-you-so expression on his face, Freddy starts telling everybody about the great weekend they had in Cornwall. They went surfing and took the bikes as well. Becky doesn't know how Sophie keeps up with him and wonders what shoes she took to Cornwall because it definitely wasn't the heels she's wearing tonight.

Ann bustles them all inside saying it's terribly late and they need to eat. Freddy's brought a couple of bottles of very good red wine and one is opened straight away. It's become a bit of a challenge because it's just so frustrating when he and Sophie go over to Italy, that every bottle of wine plonked unceremoniously on the table tastes amazing. He's always trying to impress his sister and especially Luca.

It's lovely to see everybody seated around the table. Ann has put candles on the table and one on the back dresser. Becky's made ossibuchi and risotto with saffron which is going down so well with the wine. Freddy's already had seconds and they're well down bottle number two. I would just love to go and join them...

'Not bad Sis. You can cook!'

Becky sticks her tongue out at Freddy, 'you say that every single time.'

'Well, it's logical when you think about the stuff you used to cook before skipping over to Italy.' Freddy helps himself to some more risotto. 'I remember when you bought some fennel and put it in the punch for your birthday party...yuk!'

'I didn't know, did I? It smelt as if it should go in punch.' Becky elbows Freddy who's sitting next to her. 'I am now the perfect Italian housewife. Wonderful around the house until dusk when I turn into a rampant...'

'No, thank you!' Freddy makes a puking sound... 'that's grotesque! It's almost as bad as thinking about Mater and Pater getting down to it and making us as cute little babies...no no no no no...! Although I was cuter than you of course, wasn't I Mum?'

'Freddy, don't be silly Darling!' says Ann grinning at him. 'This is all so delicious and I'm so pleased there are no neighbours to see how many bottles I'll be recycling tomorrow. Sophie, have another glass... you're not driving anywhere tonight and red wine doesn't really go with trifle.'

'Trifle!' exclaims James happily. 'Splendid! And then I'll take the dogs out.'

'I hope you're not thinking of taking your pipe with you,' says Ann as she piles the dirty dishes onto the draining board. 'You know, your Dad still has the odd smoke –very naughty- and I really do think Dear, you use the smelliest tobacco possible. It gets into everything: scarves, jackets... the lot. Even your wellies smell of *Highland Bracken*. Becky! Stay away from the sink! I'm washing up this evening. You go and check on the kids.'

So, we've had such a great evening. Ann's a bit worried that James is getting tired but he seems fine. He's just come out with the dogs and as he passes me, he's whistling and checking his jacket pocket. Pipe? Probably.

Let's skip forward 24 hours and take another sneaky look inside.

Because it's a very different picture this evening. Becky's opening a can of chicken soup and staring at me out of the window. The glow seems to have visibly gone out of the house as her parents left this morning with Freddy and Sophie for 6 sessions of chemo. Becky's going to be doing some tidying up before taking the dogs to a very accommodating neighbour, who says the more the merrier, and then she'll head off back home. There's no need to hurry but she's getting itchy everything and misses Luca terribly. She's feeling a bit lost as it's the first time she's been at The Stage Door all alone or almost, because there are of course the children. James and Ann have grown some very sturdy and strong roots here in the Suffolk countryside, they never go anywhere, and Becky keeps expecting one of them to come into the kitchen at any moment now.

Becky's always so torn, she misses Italy at the moment and she knows when she gets back to the winery, she'll be missing this creaky, crazy old house in the middle of nowhere.

Charlie and Charlotte come down for supper in their pyjamas and look so adorable. There were a few puzzled faces when Becky and Luca decided to call their son Charlie and most of the family on both sides worried that with time, Charlotte would be shortened to Charlie which would have been a bit confusing. Well, she hasn't. She's Lottie which is a beautiful name, or so Becky thinks.

It's comfort food for supper and that is: chicken soup, warmed up rolls and the last of Granny's trifle. And Becky's decided that the dogs get to sleep on her bed as the family have all deserted her.

So, how did the night go? I think OK. I could see Becky switching lights on and off, trying to get just enough to be reassuring and yet not too glary as to keep her awake. Everything seems to close in around the house at night. Have the trees and gorse got legs? Because they all seem to. But it's light by five and the wind has died down, and that's when Becky snuggles under the duvet and falls into a deeper sleep.

It's an amazingly beautiful and *fresh* -I think that's what the weather men say- morning and Becky has promised the kids they'll have some time down on the beach paddling. No way is she going to let them actually get into that North Sea water that is the colour of a cup of tea and so ferocious. She used to come down here on holiday as a kid and actually go swimming, and she didn't think anything of it. The beach is blowy, as always, and the kids adore it. Running down to the sea, following the drag out when the sand appears like magic and shrieking when the waves come back to chase them. Becky keeps a stern eye on them as she's always been terrified of kids around water.

Here they come, back into the car and there are two or three last things to buy. Becky's scrabbling around for that long-lost lip seal that she's just remembered is in my glove compartment, as the salty wind has left her face and lips feeling chapped and very dry. And that's when Becky finds something that's going to ruin her day and possibly her whole life.

Chapter 6: What you find in the Car you Lose in life.

A small packet, not much bigger than a packet of cigarettes, and am I pleased nobody smokes in the car. It's a packet of condoms. Durex to be exact with the name *INVISIBLE* printed on the front. The packet says there are ten but two are missing.

Two packets of tissues. One is unopened, the other has been torn at the top.

All three packets are in a bag from the local Italian chemist's and there is a receipt with the last four numbers of Luca's credit card.

Now why should this upset Becky so much? Because I can see it in her face and she's gone terribly white with dark smudges appearing under her eyes. Why upset about a packet of Durex? Because Becky takes The Pill, that's why, and has never ever used condoms.

Becky's mind goes totally blank and she feels as if she's just had an icy cold shower. The kids are babbling away in the back and Becky is sitting there staring into space. For one very weird moment she wonders if she's got into the wrong car and opened the wrong glove compartment. She feels like getting out and checking the number plate and then a load of ideas come racing into her head all at once.

'It's an ex-girlfriend... Luca's been seeing one of his beautiful and sophisticated exes... it's Mathew... he uses the car sometimes... could be Alice... who knows how old the Durex are... no... the car's not that old... a mate who needed a lift and forgot the bag... there are so many logical explanations.'

But then Becky shakes her head and mutters to herself, 'don't be silly girl, hold it together. This is absurd, just drive home and don't cry!'

She shouldn't drive home in this state but she does and she can, because she's set on auto. All she wants to do is get safely indoors and really think this through. Once we're back at The Stage Door, she puts a video on for the kids -the longest she can find- then sits at the kitchen table chewing at her lower lip and picking at an annoying piece of dry skin on the side of her thumb nail. And wow, is she happy to be on her own with nobody crowding in on her thoughts so that she can well and truly work this out. Becky's an extremely rational girl so she needs to understand why. But any sensible

and logical explanations seem to get swept away by some very nasty and irrational ones. She's sure she'll feel better tomorrow and anyway it's time for supper, a bed time story, and then a very much needed glass of wine.

Thank goodness Becky's not planning to phone anybody tonight because she knows her voice will be all cracked-up and that she's not going to fool anybody. I see the T V going on -no curtains remember- and if she leaves the kitchen door open, I can sneak a peep through the passage and into the sitting room. Becky's sitting in front of the telly and I can imagine a million thoughts running through her mind. She very nearly forgets to feed the dogs - as if they'd let her - and lock the front door and she's not afraid of that creaky old house this evening. She falls asleep on the sofa and finally goes upstairs very early the next morning, only to be woken up a couple of hours later by the dogs who have dumped themselves on her bed. She had forgotten to close the kitchen door and the dogs are so comforting. Then the kids are up and they're just as comforting. It would be awful to be sitting around, alone, biting her nails in the middle of nowhere. No, no... thank God for the kids and the dogs.

Lucy.

Lucy's timing has always been totally out of sync and it is today too, or is it?

Lucy has been Becky's best friend forever. They were at uni together and I know her because she's been over to Italy, with a different man in tow every single time. She's super, super jealous of Becky in the nicest possible way because Lucy couldn't be nasty even if she tried. She envies Becky for where she lives, for her gorgeous husband: the whole package really. Becky finds that when people -girls especially- discover she's living in Italy near the lake AND married to a gorgeous Italian, they will cross their hands over their heart and gasp.

'You are lucky! That is sooo romantic!'

She now even waits for people to say the inevitable and it's hard not to raise her eyebrows and shrug. Becky tries to feel all lucky and she does, she really does, but the novelty wore off some time ago and it's just her normal, routine life these days.

Anyway, Lucy's timing. She's phoned this morning and on the spur of the moment, Becky asks her if she wants to come to dinner and stay the night

and Lucy says, that's exactly what she wanted to do. She's dying to catch up on all the news and she especially wants to see her adorable godson and his sister. Becky can still remember what Lucy wore for the christening and lawdy, let's not forget her hair! She'd had two or three purple streaks and a bright green one, done especially for the occasion. Needless to say, she totally took all the attention away from Charlie. Lucy's dress had been flimsy to say the least with lots of white, sturdy English leg showing. The christening had been in April which meant the Italian side of the family were in their woollies -elegant ones, but still woollies- and then Lucy breezed in as if she was just coming away from the beach for cocktails. Franca and Alice's faces were a picture, one that has been framed and kept in Becky's head ever since. Becky just knows that Lucy's going to give her some much-needed time out from all her hard thinking.

She arrives mid-afternoon because she's got a teaching job in Norwich and it's half term. Bubbly is the right adjective for Lucy and you should see her car: a very old mini which definitely doesn't have one of me in it. As she slams the car door shut, she cries out, 'I'M HERE!' and skips across the gravel drive in a pair of pink flip-flops. Now, how can she drive in those? Heaven knows. The children, as always, are totally entranced by her. Becky has already had a word with them about not expecting MORE pressies because they're old enough to enjoy the company of Lucy without her bearing gifts. She shouldn't have bothered and pressies are always a nice surprise, aren't they? Charlie's got a dinosaur with multiple joints so that it can stomp around and roar, where ever he wants to take it. Lottie has got an absurdly, glittery, girly hairband –much the same as the one Lucy has pushed her impossibly curly hair back with- and she of course adores it. They are thrilled that Lucy's come to sleep over and have already sorted out 4 bedtime stories for her to read after she has played with them in the bath.

Becky was right, Lucy's perfect because she just talks non-stop about *this* and *that* and then when Lottie and Charlie are in bed, she gets down to the nitty gritty about The Latest Boyfriend and how she knows that this is IT: this is THE ONE. She's found her soul mate and it's time to settle down and start a family. Becky nods and has her fingers very firmly crossed under the kitchen table because she's heard it all before, but that doesn't mean she's

given up hoping that Lucy really has found the man of her dreams because it's what she deserves.

The windows are open so I can hear them opening a very nice bottle of red wine and it's while they're chatting that it comes suddenly to Becky that she's going to stay put, there, at The Stage Door for a little bit longer. She has such a sense of relief and Lucy's visit has been perfect for getting everything back in proportion. She can invent a nasty cold or whatever and give herself some breathing space.

She hasn't said anything to Lucy about the Durex because she hasn't really had the chance. Anyway, the whole thing sounds a bit silly really, when she talks it through inside her head. She's sure with a bit more time, she'll find a logical explanation.

Chapter 7: The Life of Luca Franzoni.

Luca Franzoni was born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth.

Franca and Paolo had grown up and played together at two neighbouring farms in those gentle rolling hills at the southern end of the lake. It was as if the two families had always known that their children would become a couple and start out on their own with the winery. The farm they took over had always belonged to Paolo's family and although left to itself for far too long, the old stone house opened its doors wide to Paolo and Franca and from then on, there seemed to be a magical good-luck charm to the place. The production of good quality wine in the area started in the 80s and their business went from strength to strength without one false step and never needing to look back. Luca was the first born and was loved and cherished by everyone. He was an extremely easy baby and the envy of all Franca's girl friends who were also starting their own families. He grew into an incredibly good-looking and affable young man.

Tall and lanky as a teenager with boundless energy, he got away with murder, also because he was and always had been, totally dedicated to his parents' farm. He'd done well at school –he'd never over done it- and then he went on to Agricultural College. So basically, Luca had done everything expected of him AND he was a nice guy at that.

He'd always had a string of girlfriends but nothing serious until he met Becky. She totally bowled him over because she was just so unaffected,

unpoised, unpretentious, and a beauty to go with all the rest. She was totally different from his usual perfectly groomed and stunning girlfriends. And she didn't pressurize at all which was so very appealing.

They'd met on a boat. Luca was helping out as he's English was really good and it was the official language used on the sailing course. He'd been getting the boat ready to take it out and on she stepped, with a lot of wild honey-coloured hair and her amazingly deep green eyes. He'd presented himself at the hotel she was staying at, that very same evening. There he was, holding a beautiful bunch of sunflowers spotted with daisies, with the biggest grin on his face, asking her out to dinner. How could she possibly refuse?

And of course, Becky was blown away by this amazingly tall, dark and handsome Italian who was so romantic and just so different from all her shy and rather inept exes. It's true: Italians know how to do it better; they really do know how to court a girl.

And if Paolo and Franca were somewhat surprised by the whirlwind romance, they definitely were not unhappy about it. Paolo especially liked Becky for her simple, straightforward ways which suited their rural life style perfectly.

So, Luca with his "silver spoon" had it all and could sometimes be a little vain and a little selfish because he always got his way about everything: he'd got the motorbike, he'd got the sports car, he'd got the fine clothes, he'd got the sailing boat. He definitely deserved it all; he was a hard worker and passionate about the winery. And now he'd got Becky.

Becky sometimes thought he'd had it all far too easy and was happy to throw a spanner in the works because it was just what she thought Luca needed.

They couldn't wait to get married, move in together and start a family; they were both ready and it all seemed part of "The Dream". But what Luca hadn't expected was the tough time when the kids came along and Becky's time wasn't all his. Logically, he adored the kids but it was probably the first time that he wasn't the centre of all the attention and so Luca sulked. It was something that not many people saw, this darker side to Luca Franzoni:

cats on the bonnet,

demanding kids in the bath when he was exhausted,
his mother taking up his precious time,
washed and ironed clothes not looking quite so perfect.

But Luca wasn't going to let these things get him down and dent his perfect image because appearances do count in Italy. Something Becky found out very quickly. Once she'd refused to take out a handbag and stuffed everything into her jeans and jacket pockets, and Luca had been really miffed about it. But he's changed, Becky's changed: they're meeting somewhere in the middle. That's what marriage is all about.

Luca remembers the night well. Charlie and Lottie were both ill and so Becky didn't want to leave them and told Luca.

'Go! You haven't seen your old school mates for ages. You deserve a night out on your own.'

That was the great thing about Becks, because unlike some of his very clingy exes, she really did want him to go and have some time out from all the pressures of farm and family. And it was great! After the initial guilty feeling wore off, it was really great to be out with all his friends that he'd known literally forever, from right back to nursery school. They were going to meet at Stefano's trattoria in front of the beach. Stefano's dad was one of the local fishermen who became a boatman in the summer season, when good money could be made from taking the tourists out on trips. Stefano and his mum were lucky enough to own a trattoria right on the lake side which was now considered "prime property". But they hadn't smartened the place up too much and succumbed to the tourist trade, which meant working crazy for 4 or 5 months -if that- and then:

'you might as well close during the autumn and winter.'

So normally tourists drove straight past as there was no smart, catchy sign outside and the trattoria itself was just plain shabby: forget about the chic.

On the evening that had been planned by the most organised of his old liceo scientifico class -a girl of course- there were only them and a couple of tables of regular Germans who had holiday homes nearby and knew where a really good dinner was to be found. The table was set outside on the lake-side veranda. It had been one of those first really warm days that gets everybody excited and thinking that summer has arrived. The wisteria was out and Stefano's mother had cooked risotto with tinca fish and then

there was pike with polenta. Perfect! All washed down with a very good local white wine, provided by Luca of course.

Nobody was on time and Stefano's mother, very sensibly waited until nearly everybody had arrived before starting the risotto.

Luca's school mates were now in their early thirties which is a great age to be and looking around, Luca thought how well and relaxed everybody looked.

As always, something Becky admired tremendously, everybody was dressed perfectly for the occasion and so the boys looked fit, in every sense, and the girls were understatedly cool and casual.

Francesca was so late she was lucky there was any risotto left but she was forgiven after giving Stefano's mum a big hug and some early roses from her garden. Francesca and Luca had gone out for a while but that was history now. She was deliciously curvy and what she didn't have in height, she made up for by literally bouncing everywhere and when the occasion required, wearing extremely high heels. She was quite adorable and one of the first to warmly welcome Becky into the tight-knit group of Luca's friends. Becky would have killed to have Francesca's chocolate brown eyes and beautiful dark skin. Probably Francesca felt the same about Becky's fair complexion with a sprinkling of freckles and honey-blond hair.

Francesca had studied to become a dentist and was now working in her father's surgery. She was bright, giddy and a terrible flirt. Some girls can do it, some girls not. It was like pressing a button. Yes, she had a degree in orthodontics but a masters in flirting and it was just what Luca needed that evening: someone to adore and totally flatter him.

After dinner some of them went into the square to have a last drink. Francesca had walked to the trattoria so it was natural Luca would run her home.

So suddenly, they found themselves in the car alone. They were parked in front of Francesca's flat and both thinking it was a shame they'd never got beyond the holding hands and kissing stage, because they'd been boyfriend and girlfriend a lifetime ago. It wouldn't take much to get Luca to kiss her, they'd both drunk too much and it almost felt like unfinished business. Francesca was laughing about the time Marco had brought a piglet into school - his parents had a pig farm, so it hadn't been difficult to

find one- and let it run around in the corridor. And that's when they brushed shoulders. Luca leaned over and pushed a stray lock of hair, gently, behind her ear.

Chapter 8: Time Out.

Suffolk weather can be capricious to say the least but it has decided to be kind to Becky and The Stage Door. Lucy leaves after a late breakfast which they have in the garden, so I see them coming out the front with a couple of trays and disappearing round the side of the house. Charlie and Lottie are very excited and say they want every single meal as a picnic in the garden from now on. Well, that will definitely depend on the weather.

Lucy's ready to leave, the two friends are standing next to me and I can listen in on their conversation.

'Bye Becky, I'll let you know the latest about Derek... but this is it... I just know it is...'

Becky gives Lucy a big hug, 'that's great Lucy and keep me posted... do you know... I'm feeling a bit icky... I think I'm going to stay put here, for a couple of days.'

'OH NO, poor you! You definitely don't want to drive all that way if you're not feeling well. Let me know how you are, won't you? Now, must dash! Loved every minute and thanks for the scrumptious dinner.'

Lucy's leaving in that old wreck of hers. It's a wonder it's even started.

Becky is playing sick and the first thing she has to do is phone Luca –tricky one- but he's worrying about the forecast for hot weather and the watering he'll need to do, so it's 'sensible' for her to wait if she's not feeling well.

Becky sighs with relief, she's got some time out and she sits on the bench in the brilliantly sunny garden and lets it wrap around her like a blanket: the unexpected warmth, the fantastic garden smells, the crazily loud bird song all around her. She's decided to give herself a week.

It's late breakfasts, mornings on the beach, ice-cream in front of the boating lake, and they even take a boat out which is something Becky wouldn't normally do without Luca. By the time they get back home it's bath time, supper in front of the telly and then bed. The kids are loving it as it's an extended holiday for them and once they're in bed, Becky opens

the French windows wide and soaks up the last of the sunshine with a large glass of wine and a packet of peanuts: bliss. That is, if it wasn't for that dragging thought ever-present in her mind. Becky really needs to talk to somebody and it's tough because she's always been the lucky, happy, carefree one. It's her who always listens to the others, she's not a moaner and she's definitely not used to talking about her problems.

Becky's parents cluck a bit and tell her she's sensible to stay put until she's feeling better and her brother probably hasn't even realized she's still over here as he's totally wrapped up in stocks, shares and whatever. But something must have filtered through because Sophie's coming to Ipswich for work and asks if she can stay the night. Becky says of course she can and she'd like to get to know this rather sophisticated girl a little bit better. And so, we've got another visitor.

When Sophie drives up the bumpy lane in her smart Fiat 500 - it's going to be off white of course- Becky's really happy to see her. The kids are totally over-excited about Sophie's visit which is a great ice-breaker and it's not until they're safely in bed with dogs as well -Luca would be horrified about the dogs continually sleeping on one bed or another- that Becky and Sophie have some time to themselves. As always, Becky feels scruffy in front of her could-be-future-sister-in-law who is only wearing jeans, but they are a perfect fit, with a fantastically expensive looking yellow silk shirt. Yellow makes Becky look yucky, this is a rich yellow and it looks amazing on Sophie. Becky has got a very old T shirt on that lives in Suffolk and has now got some extremely attractive bleach spots on one sleeve. I don't know why Becky worries, to me she looks amazing!

Becky's right, Sophie's shy and without her slightly bossy and career-orientated brother around, she's an extremely easy person to talk to.

Sophie's met Luca only briefly and so somehow that makes it easier for Becky to tell her about the damning Durex in my glove apartment. The wine probably helps as well.

'Sophie, I'm really sorry to burden you with this but... I don't know who else to tell and you've kind of come at the right moment. It all sounds really silly when I go through it inside my head, it really does but...'

'Becky! What's worrying you? It does look as if I came at the right time...'

Becky laughs in a slightly hysterical way, 'this is going to sound ridiculous... I've already said that, haven't I? Cripes! How can I put it? OK, let me just spit it out.'

She takes a large gulp of her wine, 'I've found some Durex in the car. Doesn't sound deadly, I know, but I've never used them and it was Luca's credit card on the receipt. The whole thing's getting to me and that's why I'm staying an extra week so I can think it through.'

Sophie is not the type to say something just to fill an empty space that might be hanging in the air. Becky looks at her expectantly and starts chewing her lip.

... 'Yes, Becky,' Sophie finally says after what seems like a lifetime to Becky. 'What a really upsetting thing to happen, I can imagine how messed-up you must be feeling but I reckon you know yourself that you've got to have it out with Luca. There really is no other option.'

Becky's already feeling slightly better because it's been good sharing this weighty problem and Sophie's saying what, in her heart of hearts, she already knew she had to do.

'You're right Sophie, I've been hiding my head in the sand. I'll have to talk to Luca.'

Sophie and Becky don't chew over it again and again, it's what she would have done with Lucy, and she's grateful for that. With Lucy they would have stayed up half the night and dissected Becky and Luca's whole relationship. Then they'd both have felt washed-out and useless the next morning. Becky knows, because it's what they used to do at college. It's totally different with Sophie, they go on to talk about other things and then go to bed at a decent time. Becky wakes up the next morning surprised at how well she slept. She smiles to herself while she's making coffee in the kitchen as she has now renamed Sophie: Wise Woman. Because that is what she definitely is.

Sophie has an extremely quick coffee and leaves to do something important in Ipswich. Becky lets the kids watch cartoons which is just one more of the never-ending treats for them. Then she gets inside the car.

'Luca, it's me (nervous laugh), of course it's me, you can see the number' 'Becks! How are you feeling? When are you coming home? I miss you terribly.'

'I'm staying here for a while, Luca. I don't think I can face the drive over, I mean, not the way I'm feeling at the moment.'

'What's the matter Becks? You ought to go to the doctor; there's something wrong,

if you're still feeling bad.'

'Oh yeah, there's definitely something wrong.'

'Becks, you sound really strange. Where are you?'

'I'm ringing from the car because I don't want the children to hear.'

'Becks, what's happened? Is it your Dad?'

'I found something in the car.'

'What?'

'A packet of condoms.'

'What!!!'

'Durex, and a receipt with your credit card details. I don't know what to think. I can't think. It makes me feel sick!'

Becky's gone very pink and looks as if she's about to cry.

Luca angrily lets out, 'what the fuck!' and Becky opens her eyes wide at the *fuck* because it's not like Luca at all.

'You don't think they're mine?'

'Well, who else's are they?'

'Don't be silly Becky!'

'And then I found something else.'

'They're not mine, Becky!'

'I found a hair band under the seat. It's not mine, Luca, it's too pretty. It's a real hair band and not a bit of any old stuff that I'd tie my hair up with.'

'Come home Becky, I can explain.....you know Alice uses your car sometimes, I bet the hair band's hers! And you must come home, I need to see you and the kids. You can't stay there forever. You're just being silly, darling. You know you are! I miss you all so much!'

'And the Durex? What about the Durex? I'm all over the place, I can't drive. I'd have an accident,' Becky starts miserably sobbing.

'I'm coming over!'

Chapter 9: Time to Make Up.

Is that what Becky wants? Does she want Luca to come and sweep all her doubts neatly and swiftly aside?

She's not sure.

When Luca's around, Becky finds it harder to think for herself; he's got such a strong and charismatic personality that sort of takes over. He's very much like Freddy in that way who takes all the attention away from Sophie. Becky starts swaying from, 'I'm just being silly' to 'Luca the wanker!' She's thinking about that film with Gwyneth Paltrow called *Sliding Doors* where we -the audience- know he's a complete wanker right from the beginning but in one of the versions it takes Gwyneth -or whatever her name is in the film- forever to catch on.

'But that's only fiction,' Becky reminds herself. 'This is for real. There's a logical explanation... shit!... What a mess I'm getting into!'

She carries on swaying this way and that, until Luca arrives 24 hours later on a cheap flight. Charlie and Lottie are totally over-excited about Papi arriving. Charlie's done a *welcome home* banner and Lottie's made biscuits and a card saying: *to the best papi in the world*.

'Rub it in', mutters Becky to herself as she's making dinner.

By the time Luca's taxi comes bumping up the lane -poor suspension- the kids are well and truly over-excited and Becky is just feeling plain sick. I'm really curious to see how this all works out.

Luca doesn't seem to be his normal self at all as he gets out of the taxi: *haggard* I think is the perfect word for how he's looking and I almost feel sorry for him. ALMOST! Because he doesn't trust me when he's driving the family somewhere and has been known to swear at me. Fancy swearing at a machine, total waste of breath. I can see, straight away, in Becky's face when she opens the kitchen door that she really wants everything to be all right.

'Darling, how could you think...?'

But Luca can't get out anymore, as the kids come racing up to him. They get lifted, they get hugged and even the dogs get a pat which says it all. Luca firmly believes that dogs should work for their keep and I think he's probably right there. He's brought all the right presents with him. Becky's

favourite perfume (bigger size than normal), clothes and accessories for Lottie's latest Barbie and a rather dubious –Becky thinks it's too violent– computer game for Charlie. The game's called, *monster eats monster* and Luca assures Becky that it's more educative than destructive. Charlie of course, adores it.

There's no time for Becky and Luca as the children take over, telling Papi they've made him his favourites for dinner which are sausages, mash and baked beans with jelly for afters. It's not exactly Italian fare, and eaten at the unearthly time of 6 o'clock, but Luca likes English sausages, not every day of course, just once in a while.

At last. Becky and Luca are alone, the children are in bed and the dogs inevitably squashed up in one of their two baskets. She feels shy around him for some reason, as if all her thoughts and doubts are really stupid once she's got her solid and gorgeous husband in front of her. His hair's grown and it suits him, he hasn't shaved for 24 hours and that suits him as well. He looks vulnerable and he's trying so hard to make her understand that no way would he leave something so idiotic in her car and any way... he hardly ever uses the Range Rover. Which just makes such wonderful and perfect sense: of course, it does. Becky feels scruffy and wishes she'd made the effort to change. She hasn't brushed her hair since getting up. Pink spots appear on her cheeks and she suddenly feels terribly hot. 'Oh God! Don't think about combs and things and glove compartments.'

Luca thinks she looks just amazing.

When he opens his arms, she steps into the space and he smells so good. He's not he's normal, slightly cocky self, and Becky finds that so appealing; she wonders why she got herself in such a terrible state because it's all clear now, the whole thing. Stroking the back of her neck, they go upstairs to bed.

Becky wakes up the next morning –and what a glorious one it is too– feeling the family is complete, it's a flash, that feeling you get sometimes when all the family is safely together. They talked it through last night and of course Luca's right because Luca's little brother, Mat, is always nicking the car. He hasn't got one himself as the family feels 3 cars is more than enough between them all and he's been known to *borrow* Luca's credit card as well.

But Mat gets away with it because he's got the Franzoni charm and is considered the baby alongside Lottie and Charlie.

I can see Becky happily making breakfast in the kitchen for the whole family. She's a bit ashamed about all the fuss she's made and Luca having to fly over. But it was worth it, just to have this magical moment all together. She comes outside, humming to herself, to pick some Mock Orange which is going to smell wonderful in the kitchen.

Luca's not stopping, he can't, there's too much to do at the winery but that's fine. Becky will pack up and set off the next day. Dad's doing well and so it's time to go home, she's missed the farm, the beautiful weather and those gentle, warm evenings when you can sit outside in the courtyard over coffee and a last glass of dessert wine.

The taxi's arrived and they've all come outside: Luca Kisses Lottie and then Charlie.

Luca glances down and sees a very greasy, biscuity little handprint on his jeans.

He frowns.

He lets go of Charlie's hand.

A little roughly so.

He moves away.

He swears.

'Becky, you don't have any stain remover?'

'You must be joking and anyway you can't really see it.'

'Of course, you can! Dammit!'

And then, that's it. He's gone. Leaving his family standing there worrying about the stupid stain on his jeans.

Chapter 10: Do You Believe in Threes?

Do you believe in threes? In the sense, there's never two without three?

Well, I do. Get lost once, get lost twice and THEN you decide to listen to me. I will get you there, I promise. It's not my fault if you select the *shortest route* and I take you through a series of pot-holed lanes. You asked for it!

And the same thing happens with Becky -number wise I mean- she starts packing up for the second time but I can see her pausing between one suitcase, box and another. I can see her puzzled expression through the window and I know exactly what she's thinking.

'Why did he have to go and ruin it all with that stupid buttery stain? Shouldn't he have had more important things on his mind? Like saving his family, for God's sake? And reassuring me that I'd been having very stupid and irrational ideas?'

Becky is questioning, Becky is dithering and so she phones Sophie.

'It was great! Everything was sorted and then he went away in a huff because he'd got butter on his jeans! It totally took the wind out of my sails... oh, for crying out loud. What a stupid expression! But you know what I mean...'

There is the inevitable pause and perhaps Sophie is doing something exceptionally important. Becky is just about to apologize for ringing when Sophie replies.

'What do you want to do, Becky?'

'Don't know'

'OK, well... what DON'T you want to do?'

'I don't want to get in the car and drive back to *bliss*, he's really pissed me off.'

'How are the kids?'

'Well, they're excited about going home, logically, but I don't think they'll be too upset as they're getting my full attention here which they don't at home.'

'Then, don't go. Stay where you are. From what you've told me Luca always gets his own way. Give yourself more time. Terrible I know, but you can always say your Dad's had a set back and you want to see how things work out when the therapy finishes. If Luca wants to see the kids, he can come over.'

Sophie sounds so logical, so damn sensible. She's not sure about using Dad as an excuse but with this distance between one home and the other, she'll be able to come up with something and it's not as if any of her Italian family can just pop over.

So, there she is, standing in the drive outside The Stage Door. Will it be this stage or that? This stage for now. I told you so. That means she'll be packing for a third time but who knows when.

Chapter 11: Dear Diary.

Well. Have I done the right thing? Feels like it. Can't really put it into words but I DO NOT WANT to get in the car and drive back, well not now anyway. Was it me just being hyper, hyper sensitive about Luca and his bloody jeans? Go with it, Girl! Go with a feeling!

All this changing of plans is not great for the kids, I know, so I've decided to make it an extra special time for them and luckily, they're still at an age that I can win them round, bribe them if I want to be really honest.

I'd love to be a child again who doesn't have to worry about all these things. I'd love to get into bed and sleep for about a month or so and just wake up and have everything sorted but that's being pathetic, isn't it?

In a way I'm happy Mum and Dad aren't here because I can't hide anything from them and then they'd worry and they shouldn't. I'm a fully grown-up person and I'd be silly if I thought life doesn't throw things at you now and again but... and what would I have done if I'd found the Durex when I was at home, in Italy? Perhaps it really is better I'm here and can have a breather.

Tomorrow I'll start making some lists, I always feel better if I've got a list and then I'll cross things off when I've done them. There are places we can go and things that I can do. I mean, when you think about it: it's no big deal finding a packet of Durex. I've just got to sort myself out and then I'll head back home again. Easy!

Lucy always said I was the sensible one and that's what I've got to be: sensible!

So, here's a very sensible and rational Becky signing off for the night.

Chapter 12: Staying Put.

How quickly do the kids get into a new routine?

It takes them no time at all. Charlie and Lottie have always loved coming to see their grandparents at The Stage Door. The whole place reflects the tie-

died T shirts and fringed waistcoats that Ann and James still have in their wardrobes and it's all wonderfully laid-back, and that's the way Becky likes it. So, the routine they all slip into is fairly easy-going and the dogs are a tremendous bonus for staying in Suffolk. Silky and Shaggy are real pets: not like the neurotic Alsatian back at the winery. The dogs are in seventh heaven as they can now go wherever they want shedding hairs all along the way: Shaggy logically losing more than Silky. The baskets in the kitchen are almost history and the dogs can normally be found on a bed or the sofa. Becky has decided to take on some projects around the house such as painting the miss-matched chairs in the kitchen and she's trying to convince herself that she really does want to see how Dad's doing, although he sounds wonderful on the phone. Ann and James have taken a very respectful step backwards from all this changing of plans and no doubt they've talked long and hard about what's going on between themselves, but they don't ask Becky anything. Something Becky is extremely grateful for.

When she tells Luca, she's decided to stay in Suffolk a while longer because Dad's not doing as well as was hoped, there is an extremely long and nasty pause. Becky knows he hasn't believed a word of what she's said. She can't even lie over the phone. She can hear Luca's anger in his voice but it can't be helped, she's sure she's made the right choice to stay put. Franca has started Skyping - with the help of Alice or whoever is around - as she misses them terribly, especially the kids. She's always grilling Becky about how much Lottie and Charlie are eating and thinks they look thinner than when they left Italy. Becky misses them too but she can't go back, not yet anyway.

With all this painting going on, it means there are lots of trips to the local D.I.Y center. Becky knows the way off by heart so I can just sit back, well sort of if you know what I mean, and gage how my Mistress really is. I mean, I know she's pretty tough and that's she's bearing up well, but, from the dark blue smudges under her eyes and the pinched look around her mouth I can tell she's not sleeping as well as she should be. And I don't think it's a problem anymore with the lengthening shadows outside the house at night and strange noises from the creaking wood. No, it's all inside Rebecca's head. She's started keeping Polo mints in the car and sucking on them hard

because she's got this bitter taste in her mouth all the time and when she's not sucking on a sweet, she's chewing her lower lip: she'll make it bleed!

Ann phoned the other night and although she didn't ask for an explanation, Becky invented a horrible, lingering bug on the spur of the moment that she and the kids have picked up; it was so improvised that Becky for once sounded convincing. It's highly amusing because she has now brainwashed Lottie and Charlie into feeling unwell, as Ann said she'd phone up again to see how they all were.

'Oh darling! You feel a bit hot!' This could be said to either one or the other. 'I bet your throat's sore. I think you've got the bug.'

Charlie and Lottie even start playing *Doctors and Nurses* and put each other to bed with drinks and damp flannels on foreheads.

Ann and James tell Becky how sensible she is to stay put and secretly look forward to coming home to a full house when James has a break from therapy. Becky sends them photos of the freshly painted chairs which she's done in a glorious array of bright red, pink and then dark and light lavender blue. Ann is delighted as they have been totally transformed. She wonders why she had never thought of doing it herself, but then sometimes you don't notice things when they're right under your nose.

Luca is fuming and Becky digs her heels in more firmly, repeating to herself that, 'It just feels right to be here, at The Stage Door at this very moment.'

Chapter 13: Down the Damning Line.

And how right she is, to feel things aren't as they should be. What's that expression? It never rains but it pours. It seems to be doing just that in Suffolk. Because there's something extremely nasty just round the corner. He's mine.

Becky's lucky she got to read it, perhaps *lucky* is not really the right word. The email was in the spam and Becky, being surprisingly tidy in her virtual world, likes sorting through it and putting as much as possible in the bin with the exception sometimes of mail that has slipped into the spam but needs to be read. This of course stood out but Becky is strangely detached and feels that the whole thing is weird enough for some trashy gossip magazine: *Distraught Mother of Two Discovers Hubby's Been Cheating on Her*.

Becky laughs, “he’s mine” ... how dramatic can you get!’

Not for one minute does she think it’s got anything to do with her because everything gets into your computer these days. Probably some crazy advert that will come in dribs and drabs or just basically a scam.

But then the next time Becky logs in and checks her email, it’s a lot more chilling:

He’s mine, bitch.

He was never yours.

So, stay where you are.

You ruined everything, you whore!

Who the fuck do you think you are?

He’s mine.

He’s always been mine.

Why did you take him away from me?

But he knows now that there’s nothing to you.

His family hate you.

They’ve always wanted me to be with him.

Stay in England with your two horrible children.

Are they even his?

Or did you fuck around?

I bet you did.

You scheming little bitch.

I know what you found in the car.

Yes! We did it in your car when you were at home with your kids.

We did it again, and again, and again.

You are just a pathetic, whiney housewife staying at home and mopping up after your two pathetic children.

He wants more than that.

And he can’t get enough of me.

I can see her in the house and obviously closer up in the car and there’s a sea of emotions washing over her and none of them are good ones any more. Sophie knows but apart from her -and me- Becky’s holding it all in

and she's sure that if this had happened before the kids, she'd have run a mile and never looked back! It's more complicated now and Becky doesn't want to hurt anybody, leave Luca out of the anybody, but she's sure as hell hurting herself.

Becky feels as if she's getting to the point of breaking. The words in the email were just so horrible and she can't understand why she, not somebody else, is living this nightmare that came roaring out of nowhere. She's forwarded the emails to Luca and there is an ominous silence.

Becky needs a life line, 'give me something, anything, to distract me from what's happening to me...'

Well, somebody's listening to Becky.

What's she been given?

A playgroup.

Chapter 14: Don't Bother Putting in the Address. You Can Walk It.

The local village hall has organized a playgroup for all those desperate parents that have full time care of their kids over the summer holidays which seem interminable but are in fact half what they have in Italy. Becky thinks there's a lot to say for hands-on grannies which almost seems to be the norm in Italy.

Summer Sun PlayGroup

Come in and have a coffee and get to know other suffering parents. All ages welcome.

On the morning of the playgroup, it makes them late and that's why they're using me after all, Lottie has a fit of nerves and *what am I going to wear* tantrum and by the time she steps up into the car, she is a total vision of pink and frills with beads borrowed from Granny's dressing table to top off the outfit. It's totally over the top but so cute with it.

So, we arrive late which is always a mistake first time somewhere because we're the last and even if it's not really so, all heads seem to swivel round to get a good look at the new arrivals. It's a very small village so newcomers are an absolute novelty. Charlie and Lottie shrink back a bit at first as all the other kids have known each other for ever, but they're friendly and curious and my two are soon ingratiating themselves. I am so proud of

them, the dears, and always have been. Even when they puked up in the car, because they've both done it on various trips to the sea and mountains. Lottie, poor darling, is just that way inclined and Charlie normally stuffs himself so much, with the sweets and snacks he's squirreled away in the back of the car that it all comes back up again. The weather's good by English standards so the children are playing outside and I know I'm going to really enjoy the morning.

The mums look nice and a couple of dads are there too, all sitting around drinking that horrible brown stuff they call *coffee*. Of course, I can't actually taste it but I can smell it. Does that surprise you? Italian coffee smells wonderful whereas this stuff smells evil: nothing like coffee at all. Becky is bravely drinking it and seems to be quite enjoying it, I suppose it takes her back. She's finally relaxing a little and this is just what she needed: to get out and be distracted for a while.

The Summer Sun Playgroup doesn't happen every morning, it's at an extremely civilized time - 10.30 - and is scheduled for a couple of hours, although it tends to overrun into a picnic lunch as there's nothing else happening in the hall until Miss Pritchard's patchwork class at 3.

Charlie and Lottie adore it because it was what was missing in Suffolk. They've always had plenty of play mates but not children because family, dogs and Becky's friends are not quite the same thing.

The first mother to introduce herself is Laura who's wearing some heavily frayed, bleached jeans and a vest. She's got various tattoos and piercings all over her wonderfully dark skin which Becky tries not to stare at too much: it's all very artistic. Laura's with her daughter called Luna who's got the same wonderful almond shaped, chocolate-brown eyes as her mum and lots of dark super-frizzy hair. It's quite obvious that Luna has also raided somebody's jewellery box and is more heavily bejeweled and beaded than Lottie. There's lots of bonding, as Luna generously lets Lottie try some of her jewels on.

The boys have got a ball, which makes me a bit nervous about my windscreen, and Charlie has become the much-needed goal keeper positioned between two piles of tops and jackets. They are suitably impressed and excited about having an Italian team mate. Becky can't actually see two teams and yet there's a certain formation going on. Ben's

dad is vaguely refereeing and can't help dribbling the ball around a bit himself.

Becky's no idea who the organizer is or who's in charge but it doesn't seem to matter and everybody looks so pleased to have their children out of their hair -there's another strange English expression- for a while.

'Well, this is nice', thinks Becky. Nobody has dressed up for the occasion and one mum looks as if she's still in her pyjamas. Becky's just dashed to the corner shop to get some lunch and they're now happily munching on some very dubious-looking sandwiches which is not Becky's normal fare at all: white bread. Becks never buys white bread. There are some very square and orange pieces of cheese inside with some bright pink –can't be natural-rubbery ham. They've got crisps! And Fanta! Which Becky thinks is slightly better than coke and the kids are just loving it all.

Time flies and everybody is packing up and going home but it's something to look forward to next week and I can't see that tense look on my Mistress's face anymore. It's been really good for her, some new faces, not quite friends but it feels almost as if they are. The morning after she meets Sarah and the twins by chance in the high street and they go for coffee which makes her feel very much like a local.

Sarah's always lived in the town and so for her, Becky's life in Italy is verging on the exotic. Becky almost wants to stop telling people where she lives because she always gets the same reaction which seems somewhat ironic at the moment. But anyway, Sarah's blond and pretty with a nice sun tan from the beach; heaven knows how she's managed that! She tells Becky she's a travelling hairdresser who goes round to people at their homes. She says she's more a psychologist than a hairdresser because people will tell her EVERYTHING when they're under the portable dryer. And while they are chatting, the kids are amazingly good as the twin boys, who are Charlie's age, are quietly sizing up Charlie and his sister. When Sarah suddenly stops her banter with her mug of coffee in mid-air and says, 'well, tell me all about you and why you're in this dead hole of a place instead of wonderfully sunny Italy', it takes Becky quite by surprise and she's totally lost for words. Sarah immediately picks up on Becky's uneasiness and quickly flows into another conversation. Perhaps she really does have a degree in psychology and has decided to put it to good use going round to people with the excuse of doing their hair. Once coffee's over and the kids

start fidgeting, Sarah says she has to dash but she really wants Becky and the kids to come round to hers. They swap phone numbers and make a firm date for Monday.

It's all very nice and makes Becky feel normal, liked and wanted.

Chapter 15: Dear Diary.

I feel like I'm playing on a big board of Snakes and Ladders. Just as soon as I land on a ladder and manage to climb up a bit, then I'm sliding down a snake, again!! I didn't deserve all of this. And now I'm crying and smudging all the words, so how pathetic is that!!!

Playgroup was great and then meeting Sarah for coffee was so nice. Both are definitely ladders. Just waiting for a snake now. Everybody at playgroup was so friendly and it was so laid-back and it's nice not having people know too much about me, not having to explain. It was a really great break and it's surprising how many kids and parents turned up, suppose it's the highlight of the week. It's just what Charlie and Lottie needed AND they've already made friends. Think I might have as well.

But then there's that one big horrible snake... the emails! Didn't think they were mine at the beginning but then there were those details which meant they really were for me and they were... HORRIBLE! Horrible, horrible! I wish I didn't have a computer here; I wish there wasn't internet but there is and this is what I got. The kids are helping because when they're around, I don't really have time to dwell on other things but it's like... a really nasty dream. And I keep just hoping that I'm going to wake up and I'm back on the farm pruning the vines.

Luca. What's wrong with him? Or is it just me? Packet of Durex... no great sweat you might say, and I thought I could trust him so perhaps the Durex really are Mat's. This is useless, I'm just going round in circles. I almost feel jealous of Lucy: no ties, no complications and she's got all the exciting, great things about falling in love (she's always thinking she's in love but it hasn't happened yet) and starting a family, still to come. Just hope she meets the Right One. And they're we are again it's all Snakes and Ladders! Let's end tonight with a list! Because that always makes me feel better.

THINGS TO DO SO I STOP THINKING ABOUT ALL THE BAD THINGS.

Try and find a stables for Lottie as she wants to try riding lessons.

Bath the dogs (ha ha).
Clean the floors at least once a day.
Cook more healthy and nutritious food.
Sink the computer in water!
Wash the car (it keeps glaring at me).
Take the dogs out for proper walks.
Weed the borders.
Don't let the kids watch too much T V/computer.
Dig out our old board games to play (as long as it's not Snakes and Ladders).
Wash up before starting on the wine in the evening.
Try and pair up all the odd socks (another ha ha).
Clean the windows.
Separate colours from whites... well, I think that's enough to be going on with for now.
Night, Diary. Cross my fingers and hope to sleep!

Chapter 16: Looks like I could Be Changing Sides for Ever.

It's as if there's been a mobile blackout because Luca is not communicating with Becky. She's had a couple of very stilted conversations recently with Franca who is getting more and more desperate about the continual postponements of a date for when they're coming back. Becky still gives her dad's chemo therapy as the reason for delaying her departure, God help her, because it's terrible to be using such an excuse.

Sophie and Freddy have come up to Suffolk for the weekend and so Becky's decided to go down to London and *confess all* to her parents while she's got two very willing babysitters. She doesn't really know how much Sophie has told Freddy but it doesn't seem to actually matter because her brother has far too much, basically himself, to talk about.

And so here she is, in her uncle's bachelor flat which Mum has been trying to make less severe looking by draping her precious silk shawls over the black leather sofa and two swivel armchairs, and by also finding a place in the back of a cupboard for some very angular and shiny sculptures. There are herbs sitting in pots on the window sill and Ann's now thinking about where she can hide some of the horrendous art work on the walls that has

started to get on her nerves every time she walks into the flat. Becky feels strange sitting at the glass and chrome kitchen table without the kids and I feel even stranger parked outside on a normal tarmac road. The traffic was UNBELIEVABLE coming here, especially the M25 that always seems to be just one long traffic jam, and I'm dreading the journey back. Becky coped, as always, admirably but I'll be happy once we're in the Suffolk countryside. I might even start to grow fond of a pot hole.

Her parents' policy has always been to stand well back from what Becky and Freddy are doing in their lives: there if needed but no interfering. And anyway, they really like Luca and his family so when Becky tells them what's happened, they are totally gob-smacked and James has the most irrational and sudden impulse to throttle his son-in-law. Becky shows them a couple of emails which haven't stopped coming and are still horribly nasty. The timing is always perfect; Becky's just putting things straight again in her head and then another one arrives.

Stupid bitch! He's totally pissed off with you and the kids and he just can't get enough of me.

And she feels terrible, really terrible all over again and that's the way it's been going...

Becky doesn't hang around and wants to get back to Suffolk before it's dark. She actually lets out a big sigh, once we've got out of London and are on the road heading East. I guess she's relieved that her parents are now in the picture and that she's left the M25 behind. James is not so sure about her staying at The Stage Door all on her own but Becky feels it's the right place to be, and she's even toying with the idea of sending the kids to school here and to just concentrate on that and Daddy getting better. Is she hiding her head in the sand? Maybe. She's taking one step at a time and that's probably the best way to get through each single day. As long as she's not thinking of changing the car, I'm totally with her. She's not. I know so, it's one thing swapping sides road-wise but it's another with pedals, clutch and brakes all the wrong way round. Becky starts sweating just thinking about a right-hand drive, and I'll get used to the roundabouts and house names, I know I will.

Becky's fleeting idea about the kids starting school in Suffolk, starts making perfect sense. Lottie and Charlie have made new friends - thank you

playgroup - and so it would be exciting more than daunting for them. It would only be temporary and it'd be great for the kids' English, you could call it an exchange experience. Charlie would be in the same class as the twins and Lottie would be with Luna which couldn't be better. When Becky goes to speak to the head teacher at the local primary school, she finds Miss Wilson extremely enthusiastic and helpful. The kids would just be visitors for now and the school welcomes children from abroad as, 'please call me Stefany' feels it broadens the children's horizon and that is, 'just such a splendid thing!' Becky comes away loving both the school and Stefany.

Becky has started Skyping (no, she didn't drown the computer) her in-laws regularly on Sunday afternoon, she has a chat and then moves over to give the kids some screen time and that's when they also see their Papi while Becky keeps well out of view. Franca and Paolo are always so sweet and asking how Becky's dad is doing, which makes Becky squirm and feel like a total fraud.

And here I actually am! Taking the children to their first day at the new school. Becky was driving to the supermarket and her beautiful face just froze, happens when she's decided something, and she said, 'school it is then!' She then chickened out a bit as she didn't ring Luca to tell him but sent him a message instead, one that he still hasn't answered.

Lottie will be in class 3 and Charlie, who would still be at nursery school for another year in Italy, will start the reception class which I haven't a clue about, as *reception* conjures up ideas of big entrance halls in hotels. I think it's all to do with receiving.

School starts later than in Italy and they don't have to get there until 9.15. It's probably got a lot to do with heat: get them to school before it starts baking. Well, there's no problem of that over here. And even if the two of them would still be on holiday in Italy for another couple of weeks they are so very excited. Or at least Lottie is. Luna is waiting for her outside the gates, minus beads, and Lottie just loves her school sweatshirt. It's something that English kids don't get excited about, all having to wear the same clothes, but it's such a novelty for Lottie and she feels very grown-up. Charlie's OK about it all and has been assured that it's only temporary until Gramps gets better. There is the alluring promise of abundant hours

of football during and after school as the boys can play at recreation and there's a football club as well.

The school is sweet and has big coloured pencils that make up the fence around the playground. It's one of those schools from the late 1800s which has now become desirable and attractive. Desirable in the sense that some of them have been made into homes with big lofty sitting rooms and fantastic windows where the hall used to be. This one has been saved and is still a school and Lottie and Charlie get the giggles, when they see the separate *BOYS* and *GIRLS* entrances.

Becky's standing in front of me with one hand on the bonnet and the other clutching a paper tissue as her eyes and nose have started watering. Is it a sudden cold? Strong emotions more like it and I've got a very good idea what she's thinking.

'This is so bizarre! My kids here, going to a village school. Life is full of surprises. And I'm now free until 3.30 so I can wallow about in my darkest and murkiest mood and not have to put on a good face for once.'

But funnily enough she doesn't feel like wallowing. The weather is magnificent and Becky decides to go for a walk along the sea-front which she has always found so utterly charming with its splendid Georgian houses painted in beautiful pastel pinks, blues and yellows, their windows constantly smeared from the sea salt in the air. And when Lucy rings, she happily answers and invites her down for the weekend because she's actually feeling better.

She buys some fish from the fisherman's hut on the beach and it's still moving, so you can't get fresher than that, can you? And then coming back to pick me up, she meets some mums from the playgroup having a celebratory first-day-of-school coffee at the baker's which has gone all trendy and put a couple of tables outside on a non-existing pavement. How nice is that? To meet up and have a chat. Becky tells herself, 'take some time out, you deserve it.' She sits back and listens to the other mums but there is always that guilty feeling that niggles her. She just can't shake it off, that this whole *Italian Affair* -because that's what she's started calling the horrible mess she's in- is her fault. Did she push Luca into the arms of another woman? Even just thinking about it makes her go icy cold. Laura

breaks into Becky's thoughts and asks her if she'd like to go horse riding one day. She loves it that Laura's asked but it's not her cup of tea at all. Horses are such big brutes! But she'll keep it in mind for Lottie as it was on *the list*. And it's then that she has an idea, 'I can get a sailing boat out.' Becky hasn't been sailing since the kids were born, there just never seemed to be the time and now she's got some.

The sailing club is at the very end of the sea front just after the posh hotel which has the most fantastic bay windows in the bedrooms almost falling into the sea. Becky used to stay there, the hotel that is and not the sailing club, as a teenager. She can remember going for walks along the stony path that led away from the town center towards the mouth of the estuary. She had been intrigued by the shack that stood all on its own in the middle of the windy landscape and getting closer she had seen a board outside telling her it was the *premises* –what a joke! - of the local sailing club. So that's where she's going to go. It'll be a real treat for her and she's more than capable of taking a small boat out all on her own.

Looks like Becky's landed on a ladder.

Chapter 17: Squashed Parking as Visitors Arrive.

We now have a spate of visitors at The Stage Door and the first to arrive is Lucy who brings her dizzy self for a sleep over. Becky's been fretting about what to say about her extended stay in Suffolk but Lucy, as always, is more wrapped up in her own affairs and after asking how the chemo's going, just presumes that's why Becky's hanging around.

Inevitably: this is it. This is the one! He's teaching at the same school as her and they've been out a couple of times to the pub after school meetings. There don't seem to be any ties or messy past. Because, let's be honest, they're now at an age when it's hard to find someone without a slightly complicated background. Lucy shows Becky his Facebook page and he looks good; he looks really nice. Becky, as always, crosses her fingers under the kitchen table and sincerely hopes Lucy's going to get lucky for once.

'Next time, I'll bring him down with me so you can get a better look.'

Lucy's off early Sunday morning. 'Got fish to catch!' she shouts as she skips over to her sad-looking Mini, whatever that means. Becky's looking just as puzzled as me while she waves goodbye from the kitchen door.

Then it's time for Granny and Gramps to come down for a week between the two lots of therapy. Becky's mother brings her own special type of cheer, as she breezes into the kitchen in a multi-coloured kaftan, she's picked up from the Oxfam shop just outside the hospital. She says she's spending a *sinful* amount of time in there and she's even thinking of offering to sort out their visuals because they haven't got a clue. And just because it's for charity doesn't mean it has to be all dusty and disorganized. Becky's tried to explain how charity shops work to her Italian family but they all visibly shudder at the idea of wearing somebody else's clothes.

'But somebody might have died in them!'

'Possibly, yes,' thinks Becky but what a morbid thought. Becky doesn't even wash some of the stuff she's got from the local Sue Ryder. Her in-laws would die on the spot. But why have charity shops in Italy when you have the best fashion in the world that changes overnight with everything *out* being dropped instantaneously? Another world, that's what it is: another world. So, we've got a little off the point about Granny and Gramps coming to The Stage Door for a week but I'm just trying to get my head round all the odd recycled shoppers that are in the boot these days. There's not a designer name in sight. Not one new crisp paper carrier.

I can see the chemo is taking the strain on James but their prime concern is what's happening down here with Becky and the kids.

What is happening then? Not a lot actually. The three of them seem to have stepped nicely into a very accommodating time bubble. They're stuck inside and fast forgetting about the routine back home in Italy. Ann and James are relieved to find a relaxed, if somewhat messy, homey thing going on here. The children are looking extremely well, they tell their grandparents all about the pencil fence and separate *BOYS* and *GIRLS* entrances at school, then Lottie dashes upstairs to put on her school sweatshirt to show them. She then excitedly goes on to say she'll be setting up a shop with Luna and Constance outside Constance's house on Saturday morning while Charlie is explaining how Tommy (one of the twins) broke his arm saving the ball during football practice... 'what a hero!' I can see James and Ann at the kitchen table trying to listen to both children at the same time and grinning at each other.

It's not until Lottie and Charlie go to bed that Becky can tell her parents about how difficult the communication between Suffolk and Italy is becoming. Becky would have preferred a voice call but the Italian family want to actually see them and Becky hates it, as Franca and Paolo are trying to read as much as they can from Becky's face. They have the same idiotic conversation every week about what the kids are eating (Franca), the good harvest they've had (Paolo) and are they warm enough? (Franca). Becky hasn't personally seen or talked to Luca for weeks now. Her parents who, as always, don't want to step over any lines and start interfering -although James would love to because it's his little girl we're talking about-, just tell Becky to do what she feels is right for her. And that she can stay as long as she likes, tucked away here in the country.

'My chemo's come in handy.' Chuckles James. 'It's the perfect excuse. Tell everybody back home that I'm looking peaky. That should keep everything simmering instead of boiling'

'Good way to put it,' thinks Becky.

Everything really does seem less tragic with her parents around and she's so happy they're totally in the picture. And as she helps herself to another glass of wine, why not she's not driving anywhere, she knows she's going to sleep well tonight with the family around to keep her safe from those branches scratching against her bedroom window, and the howling wind that gets in everywhere. She doesn't know, of course she doesn't, but I'm keeping an eye out as well. Making sure the family's safe and not only when they're in the car.

Chapter 18: Changing Seasons and I Could do with a Change of Tyres.

We're settling in at school and there's talk of Alice flying over and taking the kids back to Italy for half term. But somehow Becky can't see it happening and starts having nightmares about the children being held captive on that sunny side of Europe where the family has never been anything but warm and welcoming. Nobody suggested her taking them to Italy so they know something is up. No way could Becky face Luca and there she goes again. Feeling guilty. Feeling guilty when she's done *f all*. Or has she? Did she push Luca away when the kids were born...?

She sharply mutters 'Stop it!' and shakes herself, literally, like the dogs when they've been in the sea.

So, school and trying not to think about much else and even if it's already October which is not the best time really, Becky has done what she promised herself she would do; she has joined the sailing club and she's loving it. Wish I could say the same, yes...you've guessed, the club is down ANOTHER bumpy lane. She's making friends, there's Rob from the playgroup and father of Peter: The Devilish Dribbler from the football club. They sometimes go out sailing together or meet in the club house afterwards for a mug of hot coffee -this stuff looks worse than normal as Becky has brought a couple of mugs back to the car- but it's hot and the estuary where they sail looks very blowy and cold. I really don't see what they get out of it, sailing in a freezing wind and getting a lot of salt water spray in their faces. But she always comes back from sailing looking so much more herself that it must be doing her some good.

I'm feeling so useful these days, taking the kids to school and more as well because Becky's now on the school run, not that we actually *run* anywhere: what a stupid language! You're probably asking yourself, *yeah... useful, but does she ever turn you on?* That's not important. I'm here on the dashboard and part of a team. And let's not forget the shopping we have to do because it's quite a trek when you live in the middle of nowhere, and then sometimes we go and have a coffee out with other mums from school. So, you see we're getting out and about, and Becky really doesn't look so bad, although her clothes sense has gone totally to pot. She used to make a bit of an effort when we were on the lake but she's now just trying to keep warm. She's young so she can get away with anything, which is 2 or even 3 very tatty sweaters and long-sleeved t shirts layered one on top of another with a pair of mucky-looking jeans. Her hair is looking wilder than ever and pulled back with one of her mum's Indian scarves. She looks fine to me but I know Luca wouldn't approve.

Becky has stopped using her computer, apart from the screen time with Italy on Sundays and as her phone is more stupid than smart, she has no idea whether the emails have stopped coming or not. Anyway, until her dad is *out of the woods* as they say in English -I'm about to give up with these expressions, I really am- she's staying put here.

But the mood suddenly changes one gloomy late October morning when Becky gets back inside the car with a very worried look on her face. She's been sailing and that's normally a real tonic for her: all that being thrown around the place seems to agree with her. But not today.

And I soon learn why because she phones Sophie, although I can only hear one side of the conversation as Becky uses her mobile with the car still standing.

'Sophie. It's me, sorry to phone you at work. Can you talk? I can always ring you later...'

'I'm feeling really freaked-out! I was out sailing and we went a little way along the sea front as it wasn't too blowy and I saw this guy walking along Crag Path and I swear, it looked just like Luca. He was wearing this jacket I bought for him last Christmas and it's a bit bright for here, it sort of stood out and the way he was walking and everything, as if he was going to die of cold which is just so much like Luca when he comes over. I wasn't close enough to have a really, really good look but it upset me.'

'No, nothing since Sunday when he spoke with the kids. Do you think I'm over-reacting or what?'

'Yes, I guess so, and I know it's a busy time for Luca at the moment so it's probably me just imagining... look, I'll let you go.'

'But I do.... although it's only doing stuff with the kids. There's a Halloween party soon but I wasn't going to go, do you think I should?'

'Promise, I'll think about it. I'll let you go, you're probably busy.'

'Don't worry Sophie, I'm already feeling better... I really am.'

Becky finishes the call and just sits in front of me staring out of the windscreen. Well, I never! It does sound a bit over the top, Luca here and creeping around. Doing what, precisely? I remember the jacket well and I don't think Luca's got exclusive rights to wearing it. My Mistress really needs to calm down a bit because I really don't think Luca would go to such extremes: or would he?

Chapter 19: I'm Not Going Because There's Fireworks.

Did that freak her out? Seeing a Luca-look-alike walking along the sea front, of course it did. But as always, Sophie's so sensible and puts everything back into proportion.

Once Becky's home, she makes a big mug of tea and tells herself to stop being silly while she's sipping it. 'It's really not the type of thing Luca would do. Creeping around the place and, whoever it was, they weren't exactly creeping and it wasn't Luca... full stop!'

Then let's get on with the party, I say. Because Becky has decided she's going after all. It's Friday evening and it's Halloween-cum-Guy Fawkes. It's been organized in the woods next to the golf course and it's near enough for Becky and the kids to walk, so I'm missing out on this one which doesn't worry me that much because there'll be rockets and bangers: the bangers in both senses, I've been told. I think, I really would prefer to stay at home with the dogs. The party's at 6 which is definitely catering for the little ones and anyway it'll already be very dark which is all that matters.

Lottie and Charlie are so excited and have decided to go as mummies in the sense of Egyptian-tombs-and-all-that, because Becky has done some serious convincing and it's so easy: toilet paper. She's wrapping the kids up in toilet paper so they look like they've been bandaged all over. Lottie at the beginning had wanted to go as a fairy and then quickly changed her mind when Luna looked highly disgusted by the idea.

'Lottie, you can't go as a fairy, it's got nothing to do with Halloween. It's all about zombies, blood, ghosts and stuff like that, cos Halloween is scaaaary!'

'What are you going as?'

'Haven't decided yet but Mum says a headless ghost would be good, so probably I'm going to chop off my head or something.'

'Don't be silly!', giggles Lottie. 'You'll never get to the party. You'll die with no head. Only REAL ghosts can do that.'

Of course, I know that! But Mum'll find a way... she's really clever.'

So, Becky has taken the easy option: lots and lots of loo paper and it'll probably all fall off by the time they reach the party which will be in a clearing among the trees where they've been busy all afternoon building a

bonfire. There'll be sausages, bangers if you like, and jacket potatoes with some mulled wine for the grown-ups.

'They're going to put the potatoes in the fire!', Charlie excitedly informs his mum and sister. 'Isn't that just FANTASTIC!'

It's his first real Halloween and neither he nor Lottie have done Guy Fawkes before.

Everybody's ready and I see them off with their torches and toilet paper trailing behind. Shaggy and Silky are a bit miffed to be staying at home but they would freak out with the fireworks and anyway the party's going to be over by 8.30 or so. It'll seem like midnight though, because it's, as you know, spookily dark outside.

There they go, skipping along and Becky's pleased she's got the kids because the woods really is another world at night. Charlie and Lottie are useless with their torches and there are beams of light all over the place, creating some very impressive shadows that are being thrown back at them. Becky's torch is firmly trained on the ground so that they don't fall over roots and what-not. There's a lot of rustling going on around them with all the poor animals, who had burrowed down for the night, being disturbed by crashing -to a little animal it is precisely that- footfalls and the kids' excited shouting.

It doesn't take them long before they notice a faint flickering among the trees which is coming from the bonfire. When Becky steps into the clearing, she is totally enchanted by it all. The décor's been done by Laura and she's got glowing lanterns hanging and some very spooky cardboard cut-outs peeping out from behind the trees. She's even made curly, whirly patterns with the leaves which won't last long but look so pretty for now and then the final magical touch is sparklers delineating the circular clearing. The kids are totally enthralled and just loving meeting their friends and seeing how they've dressed up. The twins are zombies and Luna -as promised- is a headless ghost which is easy really because she's covered in a sheet with slits to see through and holes for her arms. She is proudly holding a very gruesome papier-mâché head with lots of red paint on its severed neck which she keeps thrusting into people's faces. It's all a bit farcical when you think about it as everybody at the party is normally so... *British*.

‘Perhaps it’s the fancy dress that gets people going.’ Becky seems to have acquired the knack of standing back and observing since she’s been living in Italy and has decided she’s originally from one very crazy country.

Charlie’s right, there are jacket potatoes being cooked (burnt more like it) in the fire and sausages and hamburgers on a barbeque. There are some games for the kids, the most successful being bobbing apples in a bucket that you have to get out with your teeth. And, of course, a prize for the best costume that sends Luna into a sulk as she doesn’t get it: hardly surprising as she’s lost her head somewhere. The best costume goes to a Frankenstein who is not much bigger than Charlie but really quite creepy.

Becky’s really enjoying herself, the party’s well-organized and there are lots of dads to keep kids away from the fireworks and bonfire. There’s music and Becky wonders how they’ve managed that, because there’s not a socket in sight. Dancing children are soon joined by parents who after a couple of paper cups of the wine, are now getting into the swing of things and anyway, there are no teens around to stare in disgust at their demented parents. The fireworks are at the end of the party and as they were bought by the mums, they’re more pretty than destructive, also because, quite rightly so, you can’t have rockets whizzing all over the place in a very inflammable wood. The party goes well over time which means kids are getting hysterically tired. Charlie and Lottie’s toilet paper has nearly all ended up in a soggy mess on the ground. They’ll be clearing up tomorrow which Becky has happily volunteered for and once the bonfire’s innocently smoking, it’s time to walk home.

Rob gallantly insists on walking Becky and the kids home, before turning back towards the golf course so it’s one last treat with Peter, who came to the party as one of the many zombies, now chasing brother and sister along the path. They first met Peter at the summer playgroup and he’s 10 going on 50; he’s an old soul says Laura. Charlie is totally in awe of Peter and Lottie adores him as he always includes her in their games.

‘He’s so damn diplomatic that he’ll become a politician’, chuckles Rob as they watch Peter waiting for Lottie to catch them up.

Becky’s not so sure, give him another couple of years and he’ll become another sulky, grumpy teenager. But for now, he’s really enjoying chasing Charlie and Lottie through the woods and disturbing, once again, all the

wild life that had been convinced it really had settled down for the night. Anyway, for now Peter's a great kid who absolutely adores Inter Milan football team. A touch of the exotic there maybe. Well, he's obviously never been to Milan because there's nothing *exotic* about Milan. It's a nice city but not exactly exotic. With all these thoughts swimming around in her head, Becky is enjoying the walk back to The Stage Door and it's not until they're quite near that she notices an unnatural amount of light spilling out of the house. And then she sees what's parked next to me and she turns very, very cold. Because right there, beside me is Luca's nifty red sports car. And if I could, I would have warned her. The kids think it's all part of the party and race up to the porch door. Luca's leaning against the door frame with the light behind him so it's difficult to see the expression on his face but he looks wooden and Becky can imagine him stiffening when he sees Rob because Luca's never liked Becky too close to another man. Rob's carrying the kids' jackets and Becky's woollen scarf which needed saving, as it had been trailing behind and sweeping up the leaves. Introductions are made and Becky would have loved Rob and Peter to hang around for a while but no way is that going to happen and Rob backs off and is probably thinking, 'ahhh ... happy family reunited'.

'Now, why did he go and do that? Turn up out of the blue?' And now Becky's certain it was Luca she saw along the sea front a few days ago, so basically, he's been hanging around here and where did he sleep the last couple of nights?

It wasn't hard for Luca to get inside the house because the whole world knows there's a spare key in the over-turned flower pot next to the porch door and then the other door is always open, although Becky bolts it from the inside at night. The kids, who were already overexcited, are peaking and Becky knows it's going to be impossible to calm them down, so she let's go for a while and just stands back and tries breathing deeply. She's feeling totally unhappy about the whole thing and would like to just throw Luca out into the cold night.

Eventually the kids are in bed. Luca played with them in the bath as the last shreds of loo roll were left lying on the bottom and now they're watching a cartoon on Becky's P.C. She's sure the bath and cartoons in bed will send them nicely off to sleep. And it does, because mums know best.

And now Luca's trying to win Becky round.

‘Come on Becks. Come here and give me a hug. You’re standing miles away. I really can explain the emails. They’re nothing. You shouldn’t believe all you read. It’s some nutter who probably doesn’t even know us. I’ve heard about this type of thing before and I miss you and the kids so much. It’s awful, back home without you.’

‘When did you drive over?’

‘Today, I started thinking about everything last night and just needed to see you and get things sorted out, so I left at, like, 4 in the morning and came through the tunnel. And anyway, where were you? And who was that guy?’

‘You liar!’ thinks Becky and starts folding a pile of clean washing that’s on the kitchen table. Anything to keep her hands busy and her eyes focused on something simple and less complicated than her husband’s dark and enigmatic face. Becky starts folding the pile of washing all over again...

‘The kids told you. We went to a Guy Fawkes and Halloween party and it was really good. Rob just walked us home.’

‘And school, Becks? The kids are missing school, Lottie’ll never catch up.’

‘Luca, you know they’re going to school here.’

‘Becks, it’s not natural. You three here and me over there. People have started talking.’

Becky shoots an angry look at Luca, ‘what do I care if people have started talking? It’s none of their business and why do you make me feel so guilty? As if I’ve run away. Well, I haven’t! It’s just there’s too much going on and I don’t believe you about the emails. It’s someone you know and let’s not forget the Durex and the hair band.’

‘Come on! Mat practically confessed it was him!’

‘Just give me some space Luca and a real proper explanation. You know I feel bad about keeping the kids away and sometimes it all feels so melodramatic. I would just love to wake up tomorrow at home and nothing’s happened. But it has!’

‘And your excuse about your dad is pathetic. I bet he’s a lot better. They don’t need you! I do!’ Luca suddenly realises he’s gone too far and tries to grab Becky’s arm, as she walks quickly past him with the washing.

‘I’m going to bed. You can sleep on the sofa but I want you gone tomorrow.’

It's Saturday morning and there are some seriously tired faces around the breakfast table. Becky looks extremely pale and anxious, and Luca appears drained and a teeny weenie bit miffed; I don't think he expected a night on the lumpy sofa in the sitting room. Don't forget, no curtains so I can see them all. The only ones that are looking well-rested and eager are the kids. Luca wants to take them down to the beach. He wants to dig out the kite and get it flying but Becky tells him she's promised to clear up the stuff from last night's party. Luca says, 'no problem'. He'll take the kids on his own and meet her back here later. Of course, the kids are all for it, but Becky insists they come along with her because there's going to be football while the mums clear up. It's totally irrational of Becky but she is terrified of letting the kids out of her sight and she can see Luca snatching them up and taking them back to Italy with him. It's not logical, she knows, but that's how she feels. Charlie's torn now, between kite and football and Luca says that's fine and they can all go out together for lunch afterwards.

Lunch. Definitely not what Becky wants! And so, while the kids are hunting for jackets and shoes, she hisses at Luca that he's not helping and she wants him gone. Luca's doing that thing with his mobile, he just can't leave it alone. He keeps picking it up and checking nobody's rung or that he hasn't got any messages. 'Put the bloody phone away!' screams Becky in her head, 'and just leave right now!'

Silky and Shaggy are in their baskets, makes a change, and keep turning their heads from one to the other, as if they're at Wimbledon. They've picked up on the tension between Becky and Luca and Silky whines a little. So, when the kids are ready, Becky bolts and the dogs come too. She just prays that Luca will be gone by the time they get back home.

Chapter 20: This Time I am Sticking Around for the Party.

Becky had been looking forward to clearing up with the other mums but she doesn't even know where she is anymore. She feels totally numb and would like to stay there, in the woods, for as long as she possibly can. At one point she starts shoveling up leaves and stuffing them in her black plastic bin liner alongside the burnt-out fireworks and paper cups. Laura thinks it's hysterical. 'You'll be here until Christmas, if you want to clear up all those leaves.'

‘Suits me fine’, mutters Becky to herself.

We both sigh with relief at the empty space beside me when she really can’t hang around in the cold any longer and has to come back home.

How can you love someone so much and then it all goes so terribly wrong? Becky’s just happy that he’s gone and she can breathe again.

This is the first time that Becky really does worry about the children, as they are confused and hurt by their Papi appearing and then just as suddenly disappearing again. We have quite a few outings and friends coming back to The Stage Door after school. The lane’s getting muddier and muddier with so much traffic driving through, OK, the traffic is only me basically and the local farmer’s tractor. But I’m looking forward to some stiffer, colder weather that’ll sort this mud out.

At first it didn’t seem to bother Becky: all the mud and dirt that was being brought in and trodden all over the kitchen slate floor and sitting room carpet. Becky has got out of the very English habit of slipping off your shoes before going indoors somewhere. Eventually though, it must have got to her and she’s started insisting that everybody takes their shoes off and leaves them in the front porch. It’s really nice because if they leave the door open a bit, I can check who’s come round.

There are some very interesting shoes there at the moment because it’s Becky’s birthday and she’s decided to have the only people round who she can stomach at the moment.

I could tell when she remembered that it was going to be her birthday, we were on the way to pick up Lottie and Charlie from school and she very suddenly got pink spots in her cheeks and swore at herself, ‘fuck!’

Becky doesn’t often swear and so I thought, she’s left something behind, shopping list probably, because she’s always doing that and a couple of times, she’s left me in the mud and dashed back to get it, but this time, no. So, I couldn’t work out what the problem was until she made a couple of phone calls.

‘Hi Sophie, it’s only me.’

‘Fine, but I’ve just remembered it’s my birthday next week. How about you two coming down and easing the pain?’

‘Because ouch! It’s 30 something’

‘Great, so you’re both free AND I’ve got loads to tell you.’

‘He turned up the night of the Halloween party. He was here on the doorstep when we came back and it spooked me, you know, thinking I’d seen him in the High Street so I’m fairly sure, no I AM sure, it was him.’

‘I know, I was going to phone you straight away but I was so relieved he went without a fuss that I just got on with things. I’ve been trying to stuff the whole episode to the back of my mind...if you get what I mean. Anyway, he’s gone...I’m just so sorry for the kids. We can have a good chat when I see you both.’

‘Great, can’t wait!’

‘Nobody else, apart from Lucy and whoever she’s got in tow. Don’t think I could handle anything bigger at the moment. The kids are really excited you’re both coming. How’s Pa looking?’

So, done and dusted, as Becky often says. She’s having a birthday party and she literally has been doing the dusting and it looks as if she’s trying to sweep her problems outside with some serious accumulated muck from the spare room. There’s nothing like a bit of proper housework to blank out the more serious stuff on her mind.

And here I am, between Sophie’s shiny Fiat 500 and Lucy’s very dilapidated mini; it really is a marvel she manages to actually get anywhere.

Lucy and Freddy have known each other since uni, as all three of them were studying in London, and they’re now happily reminiscing about this and that. Sophie and Becky smile at each other while Freddy’s telling them about the rugby match, he practically won on his own. Becky can’t exactly remember the game but sure as hell remembers the party afterwards. There they are, sitting around the kitchen table enjoying an after-dinner glass of port, thanks to a bottle bought by James at Duty Free when he and Ann went to Lisbon last year.

Sophie’s looking sophisticated in black and Freddy’s hair is standing up in peaks as he keeps running his twitchy fingers through it. Lucy’s alone - boyfriend couldn’t come – which is a real shame because Becky wanted to have a good look. She is, of course, wearing something chiffony and totally inappropriate for the season. Becky’s taken off her best cardy and is in a vest that looks suspiciously like one of James’, as the Aga and drinking has somewhat overheated everybody, so perhaps the chiffon wasn’t such a

bad idea after all. There's a lot of friendly bantering going on and then Lucy breaks the mood by suddenly coming out with,

'Becky, there's something going on with you and Luca, I know there is. He'd be here otherwise or you'd be over there and not stuck out here in the middle of nowhere!'

'Oh, hell!' thinks Becky. 'Why did she have to go and say that?'

'We're taking a break.' What else can Becky say...

Lucy blushes, she always does that when she gets overexcited or emotional about something. Perhaps she's had a little too much to drink and has forgotten her manners.

'A break? That's just not possible! You two are made for each other!'

'Well, it looks as if we aren't after all. I found things in the car and then other things started happening. Then he turned up out of the blue last week and it wasn't good. It's just that I'm not sure if we're a couple anymore, so I'm staying here until we've sorted things out.'

Lucy looks really astonished and she's gone even pinker if it's at all possible. These fair English complexions are not always a blessing and for once, she seems lost for words and it's probably a good thing it's not just the two of them on their own, otherwise there'd be a lot of digging down into the mess that used to be Becky's marriage. It's a blessing Freddy and Sophie are here to take the edge off things and keep the dinner party going. Although it doesn't take them long to decide it's time to go to bed. Hardly surprising after Lucy's little explosion of words.

The kitchen's empty now and I can see three lonely wine bottles in a pool of moonlight on the window sill. Shame the party had to end as it did.

And Becky is surprised when Lucy dashes off early the next morning, mumbling something about lunch at her local pub. It's not quite the reaction Becky had expected and she thought Lucy would have hung around for hours this morning, to get her friend to tell her EVERYTHING! Becky suspects that she's got boyfriend problems and she's definitely not as sympathetic as Becky expected her to be and perhaps, she's marked that Becky hadn't confessed about what was going on way before. Anyway, Lucy's rather inappropriate golden sandals have gone from the porch and she had topped the chiffon with a thick Aran sweater this morning, as she tried to tip toe around the puddles to get to her mini. I must say I held my

breath when she turned the key but the vehicle started and she's gone now.

Sophie and Freddy are much more leisurely and they decide to go to the local for Sunday roast which is surprisingly good by Freddy's standards but we're not on a desert island and it's not as if you can't buy decent food down here. But then Freddy's from London and he thinks civilization ends at the North Circular, that's a very busy ring road by the way.

And then it's only Becky and the kids back at The Stage Door once again. Becky's lit the Aga and so it's nice and warm inside and by 4.30 it's almost dark and a race to give the dogs one last walk before it's totally dark. I can see Becky about to lock up when she does a reverse and goes outside to look under the flowerpot. And I guess she's thinking about taking the spare key inside and feeling a bit safer about everything. It's something she's been meaning to do all week but keeps forgetting. But the keys not there, so.... where's Luca put it? She would have been happier if it was in her pocket, she goes inside, locks the outer door and firmly bolts the inner one.

Chapter 21: Lucy Edwards.

What a really stupid bitch she is!

'I found things in the car and I'm not sure if we're a couple anymore.'

Whine, whine, whine!

You fucking well aren't! I can tell you that for sure!

And Luca came over and didn't even phone, well he's a total prick! They deserve each other! They are both totally pathetic!

I don't know what Luca ever saw in her. I can still remember the first time and he was so hot!

For fuck's sake! Just look at what she was wearing last night and that's typical of her: any old stuff and then frizzy hair and chipped nails. Useless! Talk about Love being blind! But it didn't last long, did it? Soon went sour and then those sniveling kids came along.

Just stay here, you stupid bitch and leave him alone because he doesn't want you anymore.

And even if I didn't see him when he was over, I know he's got his reasons..... I know he wants me.

Lucy Edwards... nice name, but not such a nice person.

Becky met Lucy at uni the very first week on campus. They had rooms almost in front of each other and Becky was enthralled by Lucy's already very hectic social life. She wondered if Lucy had come to uni with friends from secondary school but apparently no, she was just extremely sociable. And Becky began to admire tremendously Lucy's ability to get essays and other projects done while spending most of her time in the student's bar, a fine art indeed! But then that was what Lucy was studying.

Lucy and Becky became the best of friends, they seemed to complement each other perfectly. Dizzy Lucy and Extremely Sensible Becky. Lucy had to admit that Becky was absolutely stunning but she didn't deserve to be, as she did ZERO to enhance herself. Friday and Saturday evenings would find Becky sitting around reading a book while her best mate did: face pack, hair, waxing, nails, make up and what-am-I-going-to-wear tantrums. Becky would probably opt for jeans and Lucy, once her entire wardrobe had been tipped onto her bed, would go for something totally impractical and very feminine, well, it was about the only type of clothes she had in her wardrobe.....something flimsy that she'd probably tried on for first and so was at the bottom of the pile. Eventually they would be ready, with Lucy teetering in her heels and Becky in her flats so that she didn't absolutely tower over Lucy, and they always had a great time together. Then they decided to move out of Halls and share a flat which is all good experience in life when you've just turned 20.

There were lots of boyfriends that came and went and there was never a problem about snatching because they went for two totally different types: Becky inevitably picked up a solid and healthy type from the sailing club that she'd joined, and Lucy always seemed to be chasing, and quite often catching, "the love of her life". Becky got teased constantly about her string of "sailors" and she had to admit that Lucy managed to find some drop-dead gorgeous guys but they always seemed to turn out highly unpredictable and too much like hard work for Becky's taste. They would spend hours over mugs of cheap instant coffee, analyzing each other's love life, or more to the point, analyzing Lucy's because Becky's was a trifle ordinary and verging on the boring.

Both of them scraped through their finals and Becky still regrets that she hadn't made a bit more of an effort but they had had a lot of fun and

perhaps that was the most important thing about college and they'd learnt loads about living with friends, getting by and breaking away from parents. Of course, work took them in two different directions and they lost that bond they'd had at college but they were still definitely in touch. Lucy had decided to go into teaching and was back at college and Becky was doing visuals in a clothes shop, which Lucy found hysterical because she'd never thought Becky had much dress sense.

The blow came when Becky declared she was madly in love with this Italian guy she'd met when she'd been on a sailing holiday in Northern Italy. It wasn't Becky's style at all: being "madly in love", it was much more like Lucy to lose herself in a whirlwind romance. And then Becky moved over to Italy and got married after an indecently short time. Lucy first met Luca at his and Becky's wedding and she was totally blown away: he was the most amazingly sexiest man Lynsey had ever met! And what was he doing with her fairly boring best friend? She didn't get to say much to him at the wedding but it was the beginning of a very irrational infatuation.

And that's when Lucy turned nasty. She appeared to be the same giddy, funny friend as always but inside the whole of her was crawling with jealousy: an uncontrollable feeling of pure envy. She'd always thought Becky had had it easy in life what with her accommodating, reasonably well-off parents, Becky had "sailed" -huh.....that's a good verb for Becky! - through life. But it hadn't really touched Lucy until she saw Luca for the first time and she was struck by this extremely strong desire to snatch him, there and then from her upper middle-class and boring best friend. Lucy wanted Luca at all costs. And Lucy, being Lucy, started scheming.

She felt no remorse at hunting her mate's hubby because that was what she was planning to do: hunt! She stalked him on the computer which wasn't difficult with the wonderful Facebook which opened the door into everybody's lives and she tried to get over to Italy as much as was decently possible. She never stayed long and sometimes she brought a man in tow and they stayed at the local B and B at the bottom of the hill.

She could tell that Luca found her good fun to have around, who didn't, and she suspected there was also a smidgeon of attraction which was what she was working on, because if he was truly besotted by Becky he wouldn't be showing, not even an iota, of anything near to fancying her.

Luca and Becky asked her to be Charlie's godmother and of course she said yes that she'd love to be and so she was going over for the christening.

'Goody, goody!'

This time she was coming on her own and Luca came to pick her up from the airport and Lucy was in seventh heaven. She only stayed 4 nights but as always, she was blown away by the great life they had in Sunny, Sunny Italy. She loved the farm, set back in the hills and away from the busy lake-side town where they went for their aperitif's before having a scrumptious dinner back at the farm. And if Becky ever made a jab at her in-laws in any way, Lucy told her to shut up and just look around her, at this idyllic place where she was living.

The 3 days were up and, joy of all joys, Luca was taking her back to the airport without kids or whoever because there was something going on at Lottie's nursery school and Becky couldn't get out of it. Lucy was looking rather delectable in one of her flimsiest outfits which was now topped off with a slight tan. They'd driven off in the sports car and Luca had put the roof down even if it was getting dark because it was one of those wonderfully warm Italian evenings. They were doing all the short cuts along the windy country roads as Luca was probably a little over the limit and you were less likely to get stopped by the police in the middle of nowhere. He was just generally showing off to this adoring, giggly and slightly silly friend of Beck's. Lucy was displaying a lot of leg through her see-throughish skirt and had an extremely low-cut T shirt with something floaty on top. And unlike Becks, Lucy really seemed to enjoy driving fast so Luca was doing well over the limit and showing her what a great driver he was.

He was playing into her hands. Lucy just knew it was going to be a doddle to seduce him and anyway, she was going to really pour it on, so when they were in the middle of the countryside, she suddenly declared she needed a pee, 'right now', she'd do it behind a tree. Luca stopped and had a fag while Lucy disappeared into the darkness. Of course, she was wearing her highest sandals and coming back to the car, it wasn't difficult to trip, lose a sandal and fall against Luca who was leaning against the bonnet.

Luca went totally rigid for a moment and Lucy started apologizing for being so silly but she didn't move away as quickly as she should have done and she let her incredibly feminine and curvy body, press against Luca's. It must

have seemed very unfamiliar to have such a petite body softly pushing against his.

Luca lost it.

He was kissing her and touching her and then they were on the ground. He couldn't wait to get inside her and for Lucy it was like heaven.

It was a moment of madness for Luca but it was something else for Lucy. She did have a fleeting thought while they were still breathing hard on the ground.

'He's done this before!'

And even if Luca was looking stricken as he drove her to the airport, she knew he was hooked.

Chapter 22: Becky's Got a Cleaner

The missing key keeps niggling Becky and although she'd be happier if she could find it, the routine goes on and there's something comforting about it. The days are shrinking and Becky likes to get everything done and be back before dark.

Ann and James are still in town and staying there for blood tests and checkups because The Stage Door is too far out. They've promised to be home for Christmas and Becky can't wait.

Shoes come and go from the porch, alongside winter jackets, scarves and other wooly things as we're really into the cold weather now. I love to see the bright assortment of jackets that are hanging up in the porch with the giggling and fun seeping out of the many cracks around drafty doors and windows.

I feel quite exposed under my oak tree, it took some time, but now it's totally bare and there's a lot of mulching going on around me and then there's been the odd acorn hitting my windscreen, just to add to the sheer fun of it all. Definitely the shedding season and that's not *shed* in the sense of a little hut down the bottom of the garden but in the sense of losing and, WOW, does an oak tree lose a lot of leaves. Becky doesn't even attempt to rake them up and is much more likely to be out in a boat which I find absolutely incredible. Don't they take a winter break here? I'm sure they'll have stopped sailing on the lake back in Italy by now. Talk about robust.

That's what the English are: robust or possibly insane. The colder, the wetter, the windier it is, the better. Unbelievable!

So, it's Friday, around tea time and we're just back from school and, 'hooray', it's the beginning of the weekend. Becky's got shopping, the kids, their school bags and she's struggling to get the front door key out of her zipped-up pocket, when Lottie just opens the door.

'Christ! I left it open.' mutters Becky. She hopes the kids won't say anything to Dad when he rings because he's always telling her to be careful about locking up and she still hasn't told him about the missing key.

Lights go on which is normal.

The kettle goes on, normal.

The kids switch on the T V, normal when they come back from school.

But then Becky's letting the kettle boil on and on, as she can't seem to take her eyes off the dresser that sits at the back of the kitchen against the wall. It's been tidied.

There's a vase of fresh flowers, gorse as it's the only thing out at the moment, and they've replaced the drooping roses that Sophie had brought for Becky's birthday party. There's a piece of card propped up by the vase with: *welcome home* written on it.

Could it have been Mum?

Did she come down for something?

Becky's desperate for a logical explanation

She would have told me.

Everything else is normal. It's just the dresser; all the pieces of scrappy paper, cards, memos have been neatly stacked. Pens and pencils put back in their mug. The phone book perfectly in line next to the house phone. It's the type of thing a cleaner, apart from the flowers and note, would do.

Becky takes the screaming kettle off the hob and feels totally violated. She's shaking and tears are running, silently, down her face.

What's she going to do?

Call the police?

What's she going to say?

'Somebody's tidied up the dresser.'

There's nothing missing because she's looked around.

There's nothing wrong.

It's just the dresser.

Becky doesn't even bother going to bed that night and once the kids are in bed, she sits on the sofa in front of the dying fire in the sitting room, with her duvet wrapped around her, and watches endless rubbish on telly. Becky's discovered that you can in fact watch telly 24/7. It's one re-run after another. How do I think she's feeling? Horrible! I've realised with everything that's been going on in her life that she's a hard nut but there is a limit. I guess, she's just sitting there staring at the lit-up screen and not taking in the moving pictures and probably feeling really sorry for herself, I would, if I were her, and in that very British way she's worried that she won't be able to hold it all together for much longer and keep some semblance of normality.

It's a joy to see Charlie and Lottie the next morning and Becky has to force herself to think about breakfast, the dogs and normal morning stuff. She rings Laura at the earliest time she dares to and asks her if she minds having her two over for a while.

'Of course, Becky! The more the merrier, and Luna will be thrilled to have company on a Saturday morning.'

Becky sighs with relief because she's got a plan.

Once she's dropped the kids off, she heads straight for the hardware shop and asks if somebody can come and change the locks. She's got a sort of hysterical energy about her.

Change the lock.

That'll make her feel better.

Who was it? Did I see anyone lurking about? Perhaps I did. But for now, I'm not saying, and anyway Becky's changing the lock so she's solving the problem.

Scary for her. And having to hide it all from the kids.

We're driving back with some shopping and now Becky'll have to wait in for the lock smith. The lane is beautiful, I must say, with the wind chasing the last leaves around and that crystal clear sunlight that you only get in

winter time which blinds you because the sun's so low. But it's all lost on Becky.

Fred Stunning - what a name! - the locksmith arrives punctually, so that's a blessing. He's jolly and well into his 60s and has a cup of tea with Becky at the kitchen table, before getting down to work. Turns out he knows The Stage Door well and was curious to come up and see the old place, and he starts telling Becky its story, she closes her eyes for an instant and listens to the wonderful soft Suffolk burr in his voice.

Chapter 23: The Stage Door Story.

The house was built at the very beginning of the 1930s when everybody had got over the Great War and were still blissfully unaware of what was just around the corner.

The land had been left to Rose by her Great Aunt who had always had a soft spot for the girl. And Rose, being Rose: the land just sat there for 10 years or so, while she sorted out her acting career. Rose was a free spirit and adamant that she was never going to tie herself to a man and have children and all that, because the stage and wifey/motherly commitments just did not go together. But then we all say some very silly things in our youth and she hadn't taken into account on meeting Albert.

And when they both became fairly successful actors in the West End, they decided to "tie the knot" and Rose realized they needed a country retreat to dash to, when they had to recuperate or learn the lines of a new play.

Rose was surprised at how much she enjoyed putting her personal touch into the new house. It became a bit of an obsession and if it looks a bit chunky and ugly now, at the time it was considered very modern and contemporary. The Bloomsbury Group was beginning to fizzle out but Rose loved its style and Bohemian ways and that's what she wanted to create down here in Suffolk.

The house was just how Rose wanted it, and the garden: a dream, which had been no mean feat with that terribly sandy soil everywhere.

And then suddenly –surprise, surprise- Rose got to feeling broody when she hit 34 or so, and she managed to have twins which was just so neat and done with, because only one would have got so terribly spoilt.

Twins: Alice and Alfie. And then Rose put her career on hold and spent all her time at her beloved home in the Suffolk countryside becoming the perfect wife and mother.

It sounds too good to be true. Rose adored the house, the kids and, of course, adored Dear Albert. And so, life at The Stage Door was just perfect. It was a secure and healthy place for the children to grow up in and there was the added spice of exciting visitors coming for the weekend when shows closed or scripts needed serious learning.

Life would have gone on and on in the same delightful way if it hadn't been for Hitler, and Albert having to go off to War. Rose stayed on with the twins but when the theatres started closing and friends stopped visiting, the house seemed to lose its glow. When Albert came back from the war, and thank goodness he did, the house was suddenly too gloomy, too isolated and Albert needed doctors, a hospital nearby, to treat his depression. Inevitably The Stage Door was locked up and basically forgotten about.....

And even if the house had stood empty and weary for some decades, before Ann and James found it because, let's be honest, it was old and drafty by then, Ann picked up on all those positive vibes that Rose had left behind. She didn't know anything about its history but just its name was wonderful and they really were the most perfect couple to take over from Rose and Albert and make The Stage Door glow once more.

Chapter 24: We're Back on Track.

So, the house lives on. Becky thinks that's a great story and she can't wait to tell Mum. And she feels a little better now. Isn't life strange? You feel really bad and then someone like Fred Stunning comes along and tells you this amazing story. So, we've got a new lock and perhaps she really did do some tidying when she just wasn't thinking. Could happen, couldn't it? When you're stressed-out and just not thinking straight.

Well, if you say so.

Becky's beginning to feel a bit like a train, in the sense she keeps derailing and then having to get herself back on track. And she's managed it again, she's back on track. Well, she has to, because there's the shopping, there's the cleaning, there's the ferrying about and then there's also a bit of socializing. It's not actually Becky doing the socializing, it's all about the kids

but that means sometimes staying for a cup of tea at Laura's, Rob's or at the twins'.

All the trees around, caught up with my oak tree, are now also totally bare and so there's more light coming into the house and they've had some terrific bonfires with the leaves. She's not actually sure about whether you can burn things in the garden, or not. Is it ecologically correct? Could stuff around catch light? Well, we don't know. But it's so perfect before hot drinks, bath, stories and bed.

And then there's the sailing; horse riding would have been so much warmer. She seems to go out most of the time with Rob, who I must say seems a nice enough bloke and even if his name keeps cropping up, don't start thinking there's a romance in the air. No, no way. Because Rob is totally the opposite to Luca. He's quite a giant and it's all arms and legs with which he doesn't know quite what to do and I've never seen such big hands. Heaven knows how he fits into the teeny-weeny boat they take out together because Becky isn't exactly short herself. His hair is the colour of treacle -seen it (the treacle) in a bag in the boot and was impressed by its colour- and curly. It's too long really but he never seems to get round to cutting it and, anyway, who cares. Definitely not Rob.

How come he's got all this time to go sailing? Well, he's got one of those modern, socially inept jobs where you just sit at home in front of a computer and at the end of the month, get paid for it. Rob likes nothing more, well perhaps sailing is the more, than sitting in front of the screen tapping, scrolling, shifting or whatever and getting great money for what he's doing. Which is a good thing definitely because Rob's live-in girlfriend, Pete's mother that is, has gone off to *find herself*, so Rob's the sole provider and parent at the moment. What's with this need of *finding oneself* these days? Perhaps we've made it easier to not get literally lost and so it's all gone a bit spiritual. Just an idea of mine...

Anyway, as I was saying, it's just father and son at home and Rob says it's a real joy having Pete all to himself. Rob doesn't think he was such an accommodating and charming 10-year-old as Pete is, well, he knows so because Mum's always saying he was 'just normal'. So, Rob's holding his breath and enjoying this easy-going, obliging and -is it possible at his age- diplomatic son. Rob calls him Pete Prince Charming and wouldn't Lottie just

love to be his princess. And instead of swatting away the younger kids such as Lottie and Charlie, Pete really does seem to enjoy their company.

All this pleasant pondering goes on while I'm waiting quietly beside Rob's extremely dirty and older version of my own self. And here she is! Back with the inevitable mug of steaming disgusting brown stuff that she's sipping on the way home. She's got extremely rosy cheeks and she's looking well, which is such a relief. Perhaps she ought to take the kids and go and live on a boat.

Back and forth we go along that bumpy lane. The weather's colder and crisper now which means less mud and less skidding. I guess you could say everything's fine.

Yes, it's all looking fine.

Chapter 25: Dear Diary.

I'm really trying to hold it all together and I haven't told anybody. Sophie knows about the dresser and told me to scoot out of here and come up to London but changing the locks and all that has helped. Well, had helped... Until I saw the dress.

I've just found it but I'm sure it was done when the dresser got tidied. I just know it.

It was the only dress I brought over with me, cos I thought I'd better bring at least one thing presentable and it's the dress I got for Charlie's christening. So, it's summary but not too much because it was for April. It's beautiful. Or let's say: it was beautiful.

I bought it down in the center and it was quite expensive, but Franca insisted I needed something new for the occasion and treated me to it. She came with me and we left the kids at home because that's the great thing about the farm, there's always someone around to keep an eye on them. And we had a really nice afternoon. It was a tossup between tea before shopping or aperitif after. The aperitif won and Franca took me to this dress shop that's been there forever but that I'd never paid much attention to. The clothes in the window always looked a bit too classic and the prices just sent me into shock. So, it was the first time I'd been inside and it's where Franca goes for all her stuff and she always looks amazing.

There wasn't too much to choose from, thank goodness, because that totally freaks me out. And there was this very pretty dusky pink dress made in a crepey type of material which felt wonderful but it looked a bit plain on the hanger. Franca absolutely insisted I try it on, she said it was perfect for my height and colouring, and I have to admit it was stunning. There's a lot to say about Italian fashion. I said it was too expensive and Franca said it would last forever and so I got it and thought, 'wow, that's my first little classic number'. It was a great afternoon and the drinks after were a nice way to finish it off.

And now it's in tatters. It's sitting in the wardrobe with the pleated skirt cut into ribbons.

How nasty is that?

Why would anybody do that?

Somebody took some very sharp scissors and cut the bottom part into strips: one after another.

I mean, it's only a dress but it's like a sort of ... violation! Again! Why is somebody being so nasty? I can't even open the wardrobe anymore; it just makes me feel sick looking at the doors

Thank God there are the kids and the dogs... I keep saying that but it's true! It's what's keeping me focused and I can't tell Sophie about the dress because I know she'll drive down and physically bundle me and the kids up, put us in the car, and drive us up to town. Yes, it is the logical thing to do but I'm trying to make this like home and I don't want someone forcing me out of here. The dogs are fairly useless but the good thing is, if there's somebody around outside, anybody around, they start barking and making a lot of fuss. They do it with literally anything that moves at night and then there's the house phone, so I'm staying.

Do you know something? I'm not feeling pathetic, I'm feeling angry!

I really, really am.

Chapter 26: It Shouldn't Happen to A Nice Girl Like Her.

Well, you know I was going on about trains and getting back on track and all that, the train bit's a metaphor because she's got the car and doesn't need to catch a train, well: forget it. I'm changing my mind about Becky. I

said she looked better but I think something else has happened and she's not telling. She's definitely lost some weight and those blue smudges are back under her eyes.

Just how much can a girl take, I ask myself. Her parents should be back soon. Then there's Christmas and that's always nice. Or, is it?

Will it be nice this year?

She seems to be doing everything mechanically, like my engine. One thing leads to another:

She gets up,
goes downstairs,
lets the dogs out,
makes breakfast for the kids,
gets them ready for school,
we go and do some shopping,
does some cleaning.

But she's not trying to make things better as she was doing before and she has an angry, nervous energy about her. Becky's frowning a lot, and she's even snapped at the kids.

It's just the same every day:

get up,
go downstairs,
get breakfast,
today's Saturday so no school,
go out and do some shopping for the weekend,
and then back home...

The front gate's open.

'Shit!'

And she's always so careful about the gate, when the dogs are in the garden.

The dogs have gone.

Becky's gone terribly pale and her mouth stays slightly open as if she needs more air. She's trying to call the dogs but she's finding it hard, her voice is

squeaky and faint. She's panicking and Lottie picks up on it and looks as if she's about to cry.

'They won't have gone far,' but Becky's not convincing anybody.

'Did I leave the gate open? Or perhaps I left them inside by mistake.'

As always, it's her fault.

'They can't have gone far: those dopey dogs. They're around here somewhere,' she mutters to the kids and more to herself. 'If we walk through the woods and call them, they'll come.'

Becky can't bear to think of them near a road. They're now walking along the path by the side of the house, 'SHAAAAAGGY. SIIIIILKKY. WHERE ARE YOU?'

There's nothing.

Silence.

Charlie's trying to be brave and not to cry, because boys don't cry. Becky knows the woods well by now, but has that horrible, panicky feeling that they're walking around in useless circles.

'SIIIIIIILKKY. SHAAAAAAGGY.'

Lottie's sniveling and wiping the snot away with her tongue and Becky's trying to calm down, 'be logical, be methodical...' And she shouts once more.

'SIIIIIIILKKY. SHAAAAAAGGY. OK, let's go to Rob's, he's the nearest. See if he can help.'

And thank goodness he's at home, otherwise Becky doesn't know what she would have done. Rob opens the front door with his friendly, wide open face and Pete's there as well and: of course, they'll help.

'Perhaps it's better to take the car and drive around slowly through the back lanes.' Rob calmly tells Becky, 'they can't have gone far.'

Becky's screaming inside her head, 'BUT, WHERE ARE THEY? They'll be cold. They'll be feeling lost.'

It's gloomy, it's getting dark quickly, it's really hard to see whatever.

They all pack into Rob's Range Rover and start driving very slowly down one lane, and into another... by the golf course, along the sea road.

'Oh no, they can't have gone this far!' thinks Becky desperately.

Rob's turned his headlights on and it's probably better to go home.

They might be back home. Dogs are great at finding their way home. Dogs can go miles and miles to get home. They never really get lost. They'll be at home, waiting in the garden. They'll be unhappy because nobody's there. The family's always back before dark. They'll be hungry.

'Rob, let's go home. I'm sure they're in the garden back home, sitting there waiting. I know they are.'

And so, they drive back from the beach, up the lane, where there's even a signpost directing you to The Stage Door.

But the garden is dark.

The garden is silent.

No dogs.

And she doesn't know what to do now, she's run out of ideas. Both kids are crying, as if the bottom of their whole world has just fallen out.

'Perhaps we ought to report it, Becky,' Rob suggests, 'they're two big dogs so someone'll have seen them for sure. You stay at home and I'll go to the police.'

'No, we'll all come,' replies Becky feeling she has to do something, anything. She can't just sit at home waiting... 'I'll leave the light on in the porch and their basket with a couple of biscuits.'

So, they're leaving again. Shame I can't be of more use than just sitting here under my bare oak tree.

Did I see anything? Maybe. But I'm not telling, not now anyway.

I wish I could just drive off on my own and go looking for them. But I can't. We haven't got that far yet: driving alone, I mean.

They've gone to the police station which is further away than it used to be because they keep closing the smaller ones. And it's going to take them some time to get there and get back again, Becky wonders if she should have stayed at home after all and just waited to see if they came back. And while they're at the police station, Laura calls and says perhaps she's just being daft but she thinks she saw Silky and Shaggy on the road that goes towards the boating lake. It was dark and she'd seen these big shadows moving along the ditch by the side of the road and it had made her think of Becky's two dogs. It had been playing on her mind ever since, so that's

why she's phoned. Now Becky's telling her the dogs have actually gone missing, so it is going to be them, isn't it? And Laura's so sweet. She's going to put Luna back in the car, and go and have another good look around. Becky's holding her breath while they drive back home.

Chapter 27: Mary Shaw's Tea Room.

Mary Shaw closes the tea room, round about 3 on these cold winter afternoons. It's another story in the summer when she literally has to throw people out at 6 which is the time written on the board outside. She could of course close down during the winter months but then what would she do? With nobody at home anymore apart from the dogs, it gives her something to do. And anyway, there's now some very stiff competition just across the road, where they knocked down the old cafe and replaced it with a very trendy eatery and coffee shop called, The Beach Front.

'Hmph, Beach Front, my foot! It faces the road and not the beach', mumbles Mary every time she walks past.

Mary's tea room, on the other hand, really has got prime position because it's in front of the boating lake and you can literally, in the summer that is, step from the decking, where there are a few tables and chairs, into a rowing boat and off you go. The building is as old as the boating lake itself and the decking was definitely there before it became fashionable.

But of course, there are no tables outside now and the low black board building with its perpetually misted-over white frame windows, is showing its age and the strain. The place is a bit of an institution and Mary's very proud of her, *Best Tea Room Around* certificate, that has been framed and hung on the wall beside the shelf of dusty local tea towels.

Ann's always torn between the two when she wants a morning coffee because The Beach Front has Illy and has definitely done its homework visuals-wise but then... Mary's is just so homely. Crazy really, that one is smack bang in front of the other.

It's surprising how many people do come in during the winter. It's normally retired couples who do the blustery walk along the beach road and stop for a hot drink before bracing themselves to do the walk back, hopefully with the wind behind them.

Mary manages with one of the girls she has working there in the summer, and she normally sends Samantha home after the lunch time rush. Well, *rush* is perhaps a little of an exaggeration but Mary can get on with the preparation while Samantha serves.

Mary turned over the *open* sign to *closed*, a good hour and a half ago and there is absolutely nobody around. This is her favourite time when she can give the kitchen a good clean, bake a cake or two and make some fresh soup: oxtail this afternoon for tomorrow. She can check what needs stocking up and then it's all down to cleaning the floor.

And, what a floor! It's a dark stone floor which looks fine until somebody steps on it, one footprint and it's messy. It's absolutely the last thing Mary does in the evening and she's very careful not to walk over it again. So, there she is, with the door open and keys in the lock, admiring her clean floor when she hears some heavy panting, coming from behind her.

She finds Shaggy and Silky - what adorable dogs- cowering round the corner by the bicycle rack. It's probably the oxtail soup that has led them to the tea room because they are two very hungry hounds. They're shivering with the cold and probably a bit from fright as well, and they're looking at Mary with two pairs of enormous, sad eyes. Mary knows them by sight but has never been formally introduced, as Ann and James don't hold with this new idea of taking your dogs literally everywhere.

'Well, where did you two come from?'

She doesn't want to frighten them and she doesn't want them bolting, so she slowly walks over to the kitchen area, goodbye clean floor, and puts some old bread into a couple of bowls and then pours some warm oxtail soup into them. She gently places the bowls on the floor in full view of the open door.

And as the dogs pad cautiously over to the bowls, Mary gently closes the door and gets ready to make a real fuss of the two of them, while she thinks about what to do. They can always come home with her and meet her dogs but first of all they need to be reported missing.

Luna's decided to make this a mission.

'I will save Shaggy and Silky, whatever, and then they will adore me forever!'

Laura's more of a cat person and: 'yes' Luna loves Topsy and Turvy but when you want a cuddle, they're never around and then they take over the WHOLE of your bed at night AND wake you up at about 4 in the morning because they're hungry! Luna has been pestering her mum for some time now because she really needs a puppy! Something to look after and care for, all by herself. Laura is resisting her daughter's psychological bombardment because everybody has told her that the dog novelty wears off very quickly and mums get landed with parenting them. Laura just loves cats because they don't need all your attention and you still get so much back from them, and, what beautiful non smelly animals they are. She is definitely not a dog person. But that doesn't mean, she's not going to do her damndest to find those two big soppy dogs of Becky's.

Laura's driving round the bend and sees the lights on in the tea room.

'That's strange! Late for Mary. I'll ask her if she's seen anything.'

And so that's how Laura and Luna find Shaggy and Silky, having supper at Mary's Tea Room which is what she texts to Becky.

Looks like the two of them went out for tea! Meet me at Mary's Tea Room.

Chapter 28: Third Time Lucky, So Turn Around.

It's Sunday so Luca's phoning. Everybody's been going around the house with a big grin on their faces, dogs as well, if that's possible.

Luca phones straight after lunch to know how the kids are and they're not doing screen time because the computer's at Rob's as it's not very well, and Becky's mobile is too old to do anything other than phone.

Perhaps it happens because there's only Luca's voice and it's easier somehow just to come out with the whole thing about the tidying up, the dress and the dogs. Becky always told Luca everything before this mess and it's such a relief to tell somebody: to tell Luca.

Luca is speechless.

'Say something, Luca! Don't spook me! I mean I'm trying to be sensible about it all and perhaps I really did leave the gate open yesterday morning and the dogs went wandering. Thank goodness they're here now and everything's OK and I've decided to lock them in whenever I go out, they're

not going to mind and I'll make more of an effort to take them out for walks instead of just leaving them in the garden...'

'Becky. Stop it! What you've told me is shocking. I'm flying over and then we'll drive home together.'

Becky didn't expect that at all. And it's her turn now to be speechless.

'Come on, Becky! It'll give us some real time to talk things over, we'll be together for Christmas and I would have come over anyway because no way would I have had Christmas without you all. And then you can decide Becky: where you want to be. I'm going to buy my ticket straight away and then I'll let you know what time I'll be there.'

Luca's ended the call and left Becky feeling *woolies* to say the least. It's an expression she and Lucy had invented at uni and they used it when your normally sharp mind goes totally soft and useless, let's say before an exam, and so that's how Becky's feeling now. I can see her through the window, phone in hand, sitting down suddenly on the pink kitchen chair.

It's all out of her hands.

All she's got to do is pack.

Told you: third time lucky.

So, I've finally taken Silky and Shaggy to their temporary home until Ann and James are down for Christmas... only like 6 months late! She's this crazy lady who says the more dogs the merrier. And she has this incredible knack with all of them, dogs just love going to Anthea's.

And now we're on our way back to Italy. Lottie and Charlie are logically, really excited and they're missing the end, again, of the school term. Becky's promised herself that it's not going to happen another time, wherever they are. After Christmas she's going to have to decide lots of things but for now it's fitting to be in the family car with Luca driving and going home. She feels all the strain of being a single parent falling away and even I, a mere machine, am picking up that feeling of unity that's in the car.

Her initial feeling when she saw Luca was shyness, to have to look her husband in the eye. He arrived literally 36 hours after they'd spoken on the phone and they left once she'd locked up and left the new keys in the left-hand Wellington boot in the porch.

And now I am back on the right side, in both senses, of the road. We went through the tunnel which is a real experience. Becky knows she's got to talk to Luca about a lot of things, but not here in the car with the kids and so it's a sort of time-out for all. And she may be an independent woman but she still likes to have a strong male figure who is in control and looking after everything. Luca looks really happy and so he should do and I guess he's a hundred percent sure that once the family's home, he can show them that the best place to be is the farm.

Ann and James were surprised when Becky phoned and told them about the change of plans. No way was she going to tell them about all the crazy things that had happened at the house but there was the new lock; she explained that the key had broken into two when she was unlocking the door, and with half the key left inside she'd had to change it. Can that happen? She thinks so. She hopes so. And she was so pleased she was telling them on the phone because, no way, could she have made it up if they were standing in front of her.

And even if James and Ann are somewhat disappointed that the whole family won't be there for Christmas, it's good that her and Luca are sorting things out and that hopefully the kids are not going to be in the middle of something very messy. James is pleased he didn't actually meet Luca face to face because he's still angry with the boy but hopefully there's a logical explanation to it all and so, in that very English way, they stand back and let things go.

Paolo and especially Franca are over the moon and can't wait to have the kids and Becky back home and in the house across the courtyard, exactly where they should have been all along. Franca has missed them terribly. When they're there she has always tried to give the family their own space but it's just so wonderful to hear Charlie and Lottie and her door's always open for biscuits and homemade cake.

Becky knows that they're all going to be terribly spoilt for a while because that's what families are for. And everybody is really pleased and happy to see them back. Well let's say, apart from the cats who look at Becky accusingly as if they'd been abandoned and hadn't in fact been sleeping on Paolo and Franca's bed since Becky left. That's just cats for you. They'll be climbing all over my bonnet as soon as they can.

Chapter 29: Spitting Spite.

Well, well, well. Went down to see my closest, bestest friend called Becky and she's not at home.

Wonder why?

Wonder where she is. I hope she's fallen off the face of the earth.

Stupid bitch!

I was just curious to see how she was looking with the strain of it all. Away from *darling hubby*, looking after her two sniveling kids. All alone in that creepy house in the middle of nowhere and no friends -apart from me of course- to turn to.

Yeah! It's tough! It's hard! Well, you shouldn't have gone and married the most perfect man in the universe. Who, by the way, doesn't love you anymore.

What a loser!

What a pathetic woman!

She's probably gone to her brother's and that cold tart of his

Chapter 30: Luca Speaking.

'Thank God, they're home! Wow, have I missed them! Sometimes I catch Becky looking at me with a hurt expression on her face which she then tries to change, and it breaks my heart.

All because of a stupid packet of Durex in the car which had nothing to do with me! Thank you, brother, and it's not the first time he's nicked my credit card. I've told him to tell Becky because it'll sound better coming from him. And then everything will be OK, or almost. Because there is that crazy bitch back in England.

It's the one thing that I have totally regretted doing in my entire life. She just came on at me and I thought: 'why not?' Nobody will know. Silly, silly me!

At the beginning it seemed OK. She texted and said what a fool she'd made of herself and that she would never do anything so stupid again, and especially to her best friend!

And when she was over, she never came near me and she often had her latest boyfriend with her, so I really did think we'd got through it. She'd

been great about arranging flowers once for Becky when she'd been at her parents. I thought she'd become a mate and that's why I stupidly told her about the Durex because she couldn't understand why Becky was sticking around in Suffolk without me.

Shouldn't have really, but no way did I think she'd start hitting on Becks. Sometimes I think it would have been better to just have told Becky and explain that her *best friend* is totally and utterly crazy!

But then Becky would have hated me forever and it was literally 5 minutes on the ground in the middle of nowhere because she sure knew how to get at me!

5 minutes shouldn't ruin your life, your family and all those crazy emails she started sending. It's sick! Thank goodness Becky's here with the kids, safe, and away from her.

I'm just hoping and praying she'll find somebody else and stop this obsession with me. When I'm lying awake at night, believe me I do it a lot these days, and I start thinking about it, I can't believe I could have been so stupid.'

Chapter 31: We All Love Christmas.

Becky has always loved Christmas. Becky's parents are definitely not religious and probably don't believe in any of it, but Christmas is Christmas, with its potent mix of heathen and religion. It has always been a wonderful excuse to over indulge and even if Ann has been swaying towards being vegetarian for years, there's nothing like a good turkey with all the trimmings and then let's not forget the drinks, which means excellent wine since Becky's been in Italy. Last but not least there's pudding.... Luca and his family have never been able to get their heads round, and let alone like it, Christmas pudding. And then there's Christmas cake and mince pies; why mince when there's no meat in it! But then they've got panettone and pandoro in Italy which Becky has to admit are sublime.

And then of course the presents. Loads and loads of presents which logically are mainly for Lottie and Charlie. Luca finds it hysterical that even the dogs in England get a Christmas present. How daft is that? In Italy they have Saint Lucia at the beginning of December and the Epiphany when the Italian children get all their presents, it depends a bit on where you live.

But Becky has always insisted they do Christmas. So, Lottie and Charlie are just as excited as everybody else.

It's quite a jolt as they're approaching the farm because Becky left early summer and is now coming back to Christmas trees in everybody's front garden. She's not going to have much time to do the decorations but she'll have a jolly good try. Franca has insisted that Becky doesn't have to worry about cooking Christmas lunch because they're coming to hers. Becky's brought over mince pies and Christmas pudding which she grabbed before the tunnel and everybody secretly wishes she hadn't bothered. Well, not a problem. Becky will slowly work her way through the whole lot!

Here there's the religious side as well and even if it's only Franca that goes to church regularly, they'll all be going to Midnight Mass so that it's done and out of the way, and there's no need to go on Christmas morning. Alice has very kindly, or conveniently for her, said she'll stay in and check on the *sleeping beauties* who will already be dreaming about their full Christmas stockings. She's informed her Mama that she's sleeping over with friends the following night and so time to wash her hair, do nails and a million other things is perfect.

I could see, when we finally pulled into the courtyard last week that everybody was looking a bit nervous, apart from the kids that is, and that's what children are for. They just went running up to Nonna, Nonno and I Zii and the tension vanished. And Becky, who was still feeling strange about the change of plans, was surprised how happy she felt to be back at the farm. The weather was perfect, and still is, which is typical of Northern Italy in the winter, with stunningly clear and sunny days and very cold and frosty nights. Becky's got her two English friends who live in town to see and to catch up on the news but for now, for the holidays, it's all about the family. The Midnight Mass is OK ish, Becky just finds it all a bit hard-going as she hasn't been near a church since Sunday school, but then there's mulled wine and panettone in the square afterwards which is just magic. The family's sweet and Franca really has been doing her hardest all week to keep to her side of the courtyard which is the sweetest and most considerate thing of all.

And Luca? They've been circling around each other all week and now that Matteo's come clean, which is what Luca said all along, about nicking the

car, his brother's credit card – how cheeky is that? - and then going and buying the Durex before meeting his girlfriend. There's not much to forgive, that's if it weren't for all those crazy things that happened in Suffolk. How can you explain all that weird stuff that went on? Still, Becky thinks it's better to let go for a while as it's Christmas, and then.... we'll see. Everybody would have loved snow for Christmas, vines included apparently, but it's another one of those startling sunny, frosty mornings and Becky who doesn't normally during the day –but hey, it's Christmas- decides to light the fire in the kitchen.

The whole of the farmhouse was slowly renovated as needs and funds came along and Becky loves her side. The kitchen hasn't got the biggest of windows but then as we're in Italy, it's often a question of keeping the hot sunlight out. So, Becky insisted on a glass door which has transformed the kitchen into a much lighter and airier space. The walls are in beautiful old stone and the fireplace is massive. Of course, in the old days it was where all the cooking was done but now it's just pretty impressive. This morning it's lovely to glance over at the burning fire and she's getting breakfast ready when Charlie and Lottie come dashing downstairs with their stockings. Becky's always found the stocking bit of Christmas magic and even if it was a rather last minute put-together stocking, the kids are delighted.

The cats are coming round and have let Becky stroke them but they won't be getting presents this year because there just hasn't been time. They're in prime position in front of the warm fire and keep sniffing the air. Becky knows they'll be around her legs soon because she's cooking eggs, their own of course, and bacon for breakfast. Lunch will be late for sure so that's why she's cooking and then they'll open their presents to each other.

And as she starts frying the bacon, she's mulling over what to wear for lunch because at the moment she's got her oldest track suit bottoms on and one of Luca's discarded sweaters. She has always preferred Luca's sweaters to her own, she even goes shopping in men's shops because there's always something silly on a woman's sweater: a ribbon, a sequin or two, something written or embroidered.

Luca comes in and sits down to take his boots off. He can't not go for a walk around the fields every morning and that's when King, the vicious farm dog

which is a mix between Alsatian and Border Collie, gets his exercise. Becky doesn't even like passing his pen during the day as he always starts making a terrible noise. Surprisingly enough, he adores the children and Lottie even sneaked in there once and was found patting him which really freaked Becky out. He is definitely Luca's dog and maybe he's just jealous of Becky. There's only one word to describe Luca this morning and that's: hot! He glances over as he's taking his second boot off and his shirt sleeve is pulling against his perfectly muscled upper arm. He's wearing his oldest jeans and he's just taken off his fleecy jacket because, 'it's so damn hot in here!' Becky feels a jolt of pure lust. 'No way, girl!' Because Luca's not sharing their double bed under the eaves at the moment. Becky still hasn't forgiven him. Silly really. Because at this point, what is there to forgive? But there are the emails, the dresser AND the dress... Luca hasn't shaved this morning which is how Becky prefers him and if she's not careful, she's going to burn the toast.

So, it's very brown toast and extra crispy bacon for breakfast and then they're opening their presents to each other. The kids were easy because they'd gone down to the toy store after the Santa Lucia rush and the tractor –'oh my lawd!'- had a whopping great big discount on it and was just waiting to be scooped up by a local farmer for his son. Lottie and Charlie are going to get everything they asked for in their letter to Father Christmas, and more, because there are both sides of the courtyard.

Charlie just loves his mini tractor with peddles and Becky has been promised by every male in the family that Charlie will not use it unattended. Because, 'crikey!' who would give a little boy who lives at the top of a hill, something with peddles? Lottie is now sitting in a sea of pink wrapping paper which just says it all, and her joy of joys is a jewellery making kit. Now she'll be making everything herself with so many beads - Becky knows she'll be finding them everywhere- and she has already decided to make a necklace for Luna and send a parcel over.

It's too early to really understand how the kids are, but they seem well if somewhat over-excited. I can see Lottie sometimes glancing over at her Mummy and Papi and she seems to be mentally sticking them back together.

It's thanks to the glass door that I can see all the presents being opened and I know what Becky got Luca because we went shopping together. Well, I didn't actually get out of the car and go anywhere but Becky showed me when she got back in. Yes, she was just putting on her seat belt when she picked up the paper bag from the passenger's seat and I am pleased to say we're back to pristine and classy shoppers these days. Anyway, she took out the cashmere -saw the label- scarf she'd presumably bought for Luca and laid it across her knees. And very nice it was too. Must have cost her a fortune! Paisley, I think is the name of the pattern and it was in browns and oranges which will definitely look good on Luca. But she was looking down at it and frowning and then she started biting at her lower lip. I wonder what she was thinking? Perhaps she didn't think it was right for Luca. Perhaps she didn't think Luca was right for her. Perhaps she didn't think she was in the right place for now. But she shook off whatever was bugging her and clicked in the seat belt and we were off home.

So, I know precisely what Luca is getting for Christmas but I'm curious to see what he got Becky because he used the sports car and not me, to go and buy it.

It's in a small box which means it's probably the most expensive present under the tree and we've all guessed, haven't we? It's a piece of jewellery and it's quite something. I can't see so terribly well but it's on a chain and it's got a sail so, it's a sweet little sailing boat necklace. Heaven knows where Luca found that! AND she's got a year's membership to the local sailing club. Perhaps Luca's overdone it there because it's like saying: you're going to be here and not in that blustery hut on the North Sea estuary. But Becky looks really happy and touched by such a thoughtful present, and she leans over the wrapping paper and kisses Luca briefly on the lips and although she takes Luca totally by surprise, he swiftly catches the back of her head in his hand and the kiss turns into a real one. We are all a bit stunned after that but I think happily so. Wonder where Luca will be sleeping tonight...

I thought lunch would be late and: it is. The cats are the first to move over, onto the other side of the courtyard where Franca has just opened the shutters of the two sets of French windows that belong to the dining room. They've taken up guard outside her door and it's the same as Becky's, in the sense that it leads directly into the kitchen, but is still the traditional

wooden one. They're following their olfactive sense, or for you poor commoners, their noses. Franca hasn't converted to turkey yet but she's got a couple of very nice - their own of course - chickens roasting in the oven with loads of yummy things beforehand. Everybody said don't bother with the antipasti but Franca has made up for it by making a homemade flan, and laying out salame with her own pickles -crisps for the kids- with their aperitivo. They'll be drinking their (it's quite embarrassing all this self-sufficiency) sparkling white wine with the whole meal because it goes with everything, perhaps the exception being Christmas pudding, but luckily there's not only that as a dessert...

They've set the dining room table and lit the fire. It's a magnificent room with a vaulted ceiling which Becky just loves, unfortunately it doesn't get used as much as it should do. It's looking stunning today and Alice has done it all herself. As soon as she knew Becky and the kids would be back for Christmas, she started poring over all her mum's interior decorating magazines and the end result is perfect. She's used all the greenery she could find, for garlands that are strung across the ceiling and arrangements that she's placed on the wonderfully polished dining room table. There are no miss-matched chairs here and Becky quickly walks round leaving a cracker beside everyone's place mat. Once again, she grabbed them before going through the tunnel and they'll definitely be more appreciated than the Christmas pudding. Heaven knows why Alice is studying law and not interior design because she's definitely got a flair for it. And even if she's normally busy socializing and not around much at the farm, she looks so happy to have Becky and the kids back. Lottie adores Alice of course and happily trails around after her for as long as she can get away with. Becky always holds her breath when Lottie merrily skips back across the courtyard after a session with Zia Alice, normally with nails varnished and eyes made up which to Becky is grotesque. It very quickly flashes through Becky's mind. 'Yes, of course!' the hair band is Alice's. Perhaps I'd even seen her wearing it. How silly of me to think it was somebody else's.

Stuffed is the right word for how everybody's feeling after the enormous lunch and then there are more presents from this side of the courtyard and Becky can see the kids are getting to an extreme and wonders how the hell, she's going to settle them tonight. Her children seem to be living a

continual life of highs and lows, she really must get them back into a routine, and she will, once the holidays are over.

Finally, the two of them are in bed and the courtyard is quiet. I can only guess what's happening at the farm because I've taken Alice and Mat down to the centre.

Chapter 32: Silently Waiting in the Car Park.

I'm now parked beside a splendid old building that has become the council offices with the liceo, where all three Franzoni children went to school, next door. I think it's going to be quite some wait. Mat will be driving me home when he's had enough, and Alice is sleeping over with friends who are staying at their parents' holiday flat in front of the lake.

It's a cold evening and the windscreen is frosting over already and it's quite peculiar to be back in a town instead of the middle of nowhere. There's this strange yellowy/orangey glow coming from the street lights all around me and the car park is surprisingly full for Christmas night, and it's all young things who couldn't wait to get away from family lunches and meet friends in the square. There are flocks of them, laughing and shouting at each other as they park and then there's the sound of those impossibly high heels, tip-tapping down the cobbled street that leads into the centre. I can't see much, it's just dark shadows with the glint of an earring or bracelet here and there, because everybody seems to be wearing black.

It's nothing like the slow mulching under the oak tree.

Becky and Luca would have been here too in more normal circumstances to meet up with his voluminous group of old school friends. They could have asked Franca to babysit but I guess they're trying to restore some of that unity they've lost and I have a very clear idea where Luca will be sleeping tonight, and I'm usually right about this type of things. Just call it a woman's intuition.

So, let's just imagine what's going on in Becky's mind while she's getting ready for bed under the eaves.

She'd been so excited about hers and Luca's bedroom being in the attic and although it can be a bit stuffy in the summer when all the heat rises, it's still her favourite room. It's been a surprisingly wonderful Christmas and she's happy they're back at the farm as one family. Everybody has been so

sweet and there have been no awkward questions: zero pressure. It's quite hard to think about where she's been for the last half a year or so and she's finding it even harder to continually skirt around Luca. She's a girl who forgives and forgets quickly and she's glad about that because for her, holding a grudge is a total waste of time, and even if she's always thought she just goes with the flow and hasn't got a terribly strong character: she has put up with a lot recently. She feels stronger somehow from it all, I Suppose you could say, she's finally done the total growing up process.

Luca can be slightly bossy sometimes and definitely moody but all she's seen since she's back, is the loving and considerate side of him. Perhaps all this has done them good and made them more aware of what they've got and she doesn't want to think about the dusky pink dress in a black bin liner, not now anyway.

She's fingering the little silver sailing boat around her neck and the whole family scene seems like a jigsaw in her head. There's the farm, there's the family by the kitchen door and the in-laws across the way and all the pieces are neatly back in place and so she's smiling to herself as she gets into bed.

Chapter 33: Better Late than Never.

Luckily, we got back before it started snowing. One day late but we've got snow.

The house is quiet this morning and it looks as if Luca's forgotten about taking King out for a walk around the vineyards. It's 8.30 and there's still no movement from inside which is almost unheard of and then there's that wonderful blanketed silence that you get when it's snowed.

Charlie and Lottie are going to be so happy when they look out this morning and the rest of the family too... for about 5 minutes or so. Because then it's all about shoveling the stuff out of the way, because the tiles, beautiful as they are, in the courtyard were a bit of a mistake and get really slippery when there's snow on them.

I can see one of the cats putting a paw cautiously into the snow, quickly removing it and then backing in through the cat flap from where he came. There's no sparkling blue sky this morning, it looks as if it's going to snow again which will cause havoc on the roads as nobody ever seems prepared.

It's officially another holiday today so nobody will be working in the office and the only thing that Paolo does automatically, is go and check everything down in the cellar where all the mysteries of wine making take place. Then they'll finish off all the food that was left from yesterday.

I knew it.

They haven't even managed finishing breakfast before being dragged out by Charlie and Lottie. They've got the sledge which is perfect for the lane going down the hill: no peddles so should be fine. Luca has just wound Becky's scarf around her neck because she has a tendency of losing her scarves as we well know, he then lightly kisses her on the tip of her nose and as they walk down the hill, she puts her right hand in the back pocket of his jeans. Mh-hmm happy family. And I can't actually see them sledging but the noise comes back up the hill and they're definitely having fun. Luca's even let King come along, so it's as if they've got Silky and Shaggy and he's just as excited as the rest of the family.

Becky's back later to put jacket potatoes in the oven which is her contribution for today's lunch which they're eating in Franca and Paolo's kitchen, and then it really will be back to normal. Well, perhaps not quite so because there's New Year just round the corner which means more celebrations. Becky's not worried about parties and whatnot. She'll be happy to spend it quietly at home with the kids and then with Luca, alone, under the eaves.

Is it possible to fall in love with the same person twice? Becky's looking that way: as if she's in love. And I must say the whole family's looking happy. There was a bit of a blib when Becky told Luca that Lucy was thinking about coming over for New Year's Eve, but Becky for once had put her off saying the family needed some time out, just the four of them, together. She called when Becky was out on her own in the car and Becky was positively squirming when she told her she didn't think it was such a great idea and anyway, now with the snow it would have been a problem getting from the airport because it's not stopping. There'd been quite a pause when Becky had told her basically to stay at home. Eventually, it seemed to Becky hours instead of seconds, Lucy said that was fine and she'd be over early on in the New Year. And then Becky had told Luca while they were out doing some shopping because she still felt a bit mean about putting her best friend off. But on the other hand, her best friend had quite a thick skin,

knowing what problems they had been having, and still wanting to come over. Luca looked positively ill when Becky told him about the call although she didn't notice because she was driving.

But I saw. He went very white with a nasty greyish tinge underneath, I wonder why.

Chapter 34: Now or Never

S.N. 34605.V3 here.

Now I don't know how to put this but I feel I must try, otherwise you're going to think really badly of me and this is the last time, probably, almost definitely, that I'll get to have my say. You see, over the last few months I have grown strangely fond of the family, you've probably noticed. And that shouldn't happen with a machine, should it?

I've tried to be impartial but I've seen so much. It's getting really difficult and you know I said right at the beginning, we're not taking over yet. Well, it's true but that doesn't mean I can't do a little bit of meddling now and again.

I've been trying to feel happy for the family, I really have, but when you know things and you've seen things, you can't help but interfere and up till now, I was afraid I'd never have the chance but it's there: right in front of me. Literally right in front of me and so I'm going to grab it!

Well, you know it's normally Becky and the kids in the car with me but this gloomy afternoon it's Luca who's come out to get some important thingamajig for the winery. He's taken me because his sports car is useless in the winter and I think the thingamajig is going to be big as he's put the back seats down. The weather has been sunny for the last few days but now it's snowing again and everybody has started predicting we're in for a hard winter this year. Anyway, we're bowling along -where do they get these expressions from? - and as he's not so sure where he has to go, he's given in and turned me on and put in the address.

Everybody's going to be so upset, but I just can't help myself because there has been more than one and that's just not fair on Becky.

There was Francesca. It was the night they went to Stefano's for dinner and Luca was taking me because the wine didn't fit into the sports car. He could

have just given her a peck on the cheek for old time's sake but it went a lot further than that.

They fucked right in front of me.

Vulgar word: fuck, but appropriate here because once they got started that was precisely what it was, a physical pent-up longing that probably Luca didn't even know about, until Francesca was next to him in the car. The dark outside protecting them, her flirting and teasing with those incredibly deep brown eyes and skin like velvet.

So, Francesca.

But there were others and I'm not sure about what went on with Lucy the night he took her to the airport in his sports car because he looked all wrong when he came back that evening. I can't quite put my finger on it but he didn't look himself at all and between you and me, Lucy is not my favourite person anymore.

And then the sneaking backwards and forwards because we all know who sent those horrible emails but you'll be shocked to hear that it was Luca who did the tampering in the house and there is one thing that I really cannot stand and that's a sneak! And he did a lot of that. Sneaking over, going back to Italy and pushing Becky over the edge. You see, Luca always gets what he wants and he thought if he scared Becky enough, she'd come running home and into his arms. Well, it worked, didn't it? But he doesn't know what I can do, he thinks I'm useless...

'Well... let's see where I'm taking you today.'

So, all of that is why I'm grabbing this opportunity and I just wanted to get things straight because as soon as Luca starts fiddling with his mobile, and he will, and I've got something really solid in front of me, I will forget to tell him to turn. And that'll be that.

Nice to have known you: really, really nice.

Part Two

Chapter 1: Let Me Introduce Myself.

Hello.

My name is S.N.65913 V6.

I am the ultimate model and still under guarantee.

I belong to a dark green Range Rover and have a male voice which suits me extremely well as I think it proves to be more authoritative.

I am here to tell you the story of my host family.

Unfortunately, there is no Master but only a Mistress. And I am slowly piecing together the fragments of the tragedy that has struck this family.

I have concluded that the Master of the family, drove into an oak tree at some considerable speed. The weather conditions at the time were extremely inclement and the car was catapulted into an adjacent ditch where the poor man was literally crushed to death by the disintegrated bodywork of the vehicle. It is hard to comprehend with such a robust car, an earlier model of my own, but I fear the speed was a crucial factor in this case and the dip in the road no doubt, contributed to the exaggerated acceleration of the vehicle.

As can be expected the family is distraught and I am pleased to be of service to them all.

I was purchased extremely promptly after the accident by a gentleman that I have deduced is the Mistress's father-in-law and I have been programmed in English as it is her mother tongue.

My first trip was in no way a joyous one and it was made to acquire the appropriate attire for the poor deceased's funeral. It is hard to describe fully the sadness that emanated from inside the car that morning. I sincerely hope that with time, the family will gather together and surpass this extremely trying and strenuous moment.

I am here to serve.

The funeral itself was in the magnificent church of a nearby town where we were permitted to enter into the pedestrian area in order to leave the grieving family within easy reach of the principal door. I was able to observe an abundance of mourners of both Italian and British origin and I

was used frequently -the trip is extremely brief- to accompany numerous members of my Mistress's family and also friends, the majority of whom showed considerable restraint in their comportment. I was however struck by one young lady, a close family friend I presume, who cried copiously the entire trip, both going and returning from the church. I could not help but notice that she did not seem to be wearing the most suitable induments for the occasion. The whole ensemble being somewhat floaty and transparent. Perhaps it would have been more suitable for a party, although I cannot hesitate to say she was most definitely in pain for the poor deceased and his family.

The day was bitterly cold and there was a constant stream of black entering the church that sad morning, as the young man had been loved and admired by many. It was after a respectful length of time that the same stream of mourners reappeared and dispersed on the steps of the church. There was no burial as the young man was being cremated and his ashes will at a future date, be scattered among the vines that he adored all his life.

After a margin of some days, apart from the distraught young lady in the party attire who left in considerable haste, I was engaged in taking family and friends to the airport and now it is just a question of dealing with the daily routine.

I am totally at your service Rebecca.

Chapter 2: Time Will Heal

January and February are what I would describe as considerably drab months and they undoubtedly reflect the mood of the family. I cannot but admire how close they are all working together to surmount these difficult times. The snow has all but gone and has left a grey and misty climate which I have been informed by the radio is not typical of these parts.

It is sometimes Rebecca in the car but more often young Mathew or Alice who accompany the children to school in the morning, as my Mistress seems to be having troubles with her physiological clock. It is in fact not rare for her to appear at midday and not before. Franca is often assisting with the chores around the house, a commendable lady I must say, as she is also suffering terribly. I think it is correct to say that Rebecca is lost and

has no sense of time and purpose. One can only hope that time will heal all. But for now, the mood in the courtyard where I am placed under a splendid trellis, is a dark and gloomy one.

It is thankfully the children who seem to be faring better. It took them some time to *snap out of it*, as I gather is said in a more colloquial and familiar language. I can only ponder at the fact that children recover in every way a lot quicker than their adult counterparts.

And even as spring is approaching which will thankfully bring a kinder note to the air, I fear that The Franzoni family will not be able to enjoy the changing of seasons.

I have decided to now relate to several telephone conversations that have taken place in the car in order to continue my story, as I am still inadequately new to the family and consider them more informative than myself.

Chapter 3: The First in a Series of Conversations

The first and foremost caller and reciprocator on various occasions is the mistress's mother. I have already had the honour of meeting this fair lady and her husband at the sad occasion of young Luca's funeral. Rebecca is inclined to ring them, or they ring her, when she is in the car alone. I gather there are more social calls in the house which entail the use of a screen, where the children can be seen by the grandparents who can therefore be assured that the family is on the road to recovery. These calls in the car are of a more intimate nature and Rebecca, if I may call her so, can be more open and honest with her mother.

I am therefore presenting the following conversation between Rebecca and her mother.

'Hello Mum, it's me. How's things?'

'Darling! How are you? Is it a nice day there? There's definitely a touch of spring in the air here. You should see the daffs in the garden, I'll send you a picky.'

'Oh, that'd be nice... How's dad?'

'He's fine darling and sends you his love. He's just come back from walking those two daft dogs. How's things with the kids? Did Charlie get his

birthday present in time? I really was in two minds about how to send it, but the post office is the nearest and they assured me it would get to you in no time...'

No, no... I mean yeah, it got here and Charlie was so happy with it, it's his first real Lego and he thought it was great. I'm pleased you didn't send him anything for the computer, cos the more I can keep him away from it, the better.'

'So how did the party go?'

'OK. In the end we did it at home with I nonni, zii and his best mate. It was OK.'

'Good darling. I'm so pleased you did something. I know it must have been hard. How do you think the two of them are? Kids are incredible... they looked fine when we saw them on Sunday'

'Yeah, they're doing fine. They're both back in their own beds and Charlie hasn't had any more accidents during the night. It was only twice and that was right at the beginning, so things are looking better. School's fine, I guess that's where everything's the same and normal and they've got all their friends.'

'Darling... are you still taking the sleeping pills? It was definitely necessary at the beginning but try not to take them for too long because they are terribly addictive.'

'I know, I know.'

'So as soon as you feel you can, stop taking them. Promise?'

'Yes Mum, I will. I've taken the kids to school every day this week which is a record. Mat and Alice have been amazing.... the whole family has.'

'How's Franca? Are you still eating with them in the evening?'

'Yes, we are. Franca looks terrible and I'm amazed she still can, AND wants to dish up dinner for all of us every evening. She says it's therapeutic and having the kids around is helping her no end. I'm afraid the idea of making more than a bit of toast just turns me stone cold.'

'It'll take time, darling. You need time. Are you sure you don't want us to come over for Easter? We'd love to be there.'

'No, Mum. It'd be lovely to see you but I don't think I'd be able to let you go back... sorry Mum, I just feel I need to get through this...'

‘Of course, you do darling. Hopefully you’ll feel strong enough soon to come and see us or we’ll come over, that’s when you want us of course. Dad’s fine and he’s now into check-ups every 6 months so we can come whenever you want.’

‘What a stupid accident Mum! What a stupid, stupid accident! It still feels like a bad dream and that I’m going to wake up and it’s all OK. Things were going so well... we’d sorted it all out. We’d had a really good Christmas. It’s not right... not fair, Mum. I’ve never heard of anything like that happening before. Sometimes I wish I’d never come to this bloody country, never met him! Every time I go down that road, it just doesn’t feel possible that it could have happened there... and somebody keeps putting flowers in front of that stupid tree. I wish they wouldn’t... just makes it worse. He was 34 for Christ’s sake!’

‘Darling, I know. I know.’

‘No, you don’t Mum. Nobody knows! ... Look Mum I’ve gotta go, the kids are coming out from school.’

‘OK darling.’

‘Sorry Mum. I didn’t mean that... about you not knowing.’

‘Darling, it doesn’t matter. Love you loads.’

‘You, too.’

Chapter 4: A Certain Young Lady Called Sophie Calls.

‘Becky, it’s me. Can you talk or shall I ring you another time?’

‘No, it’s fine Sophie. I’m in the car waiting for the kids. It’s a good time.’

‘How’re you feeling?’

‘Hard to say. I just feel I’m dragging myself around all the time. Mum says I should stop taking the sleeping pills, as soon as I possibly can but at least I’m sleeping at night... or let’s say it’s more like falling into oblivion than healthy sleeping. What d’you think? You know what Mum’s like, if it’s not natural, it’s a really evil substance.’

‘Yeah... well... in the long run you ought to stop taking them but you’re not taking anything else and I think you need something to get you by.’

‘How’s that big lump of my brother?’ and there’s a faint smile of Becky’s lips. ‘Still sure you want to move in with him?’

‘He’s well and he sends you his love, and I know he doesn’t show it but he’s really thinking about you a lot. We all are. I mean, that was totally crazy, what happened AND after all you’d been through.’ Sophie pauses and then adds in a quieter voice, ‘you know I’m here for you, don’t you?’

‘I know, I know.’ Becky’s grinning now, ‘and there was me thinking you were all silk shirts and high heels.’

Sophie laughs, ‘what’s wrong with silk shirts?!?!’

‘You’ve been amazing Sophie, you really have. And don’t think you have to change. You’re perfect as you are.’

‘Flattery, young lady, will get you everywhere! And yes, I’m still sure about moving in with Freddy. Anything I should know? Although I think I know him pretty well by now. How are the kids?’

‘Fine. Well, you saw them yourself Sunday... they’re fine. By the way Sophie. You haven’t heard from Lucy, have you? She seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth. I’ve been bad, I know, about keeping in touch but I sent her a message the other day and: total silence! Any ideas?’

‘Er... no’ and Sophie pauses. ... ‘Perhaps she’s got problems of her own. I wouldn’t worry too much. She’ll be in touch, you’ll see. ...hmm Becky?’

‘Yeah?’

‘I’ve got some news.’

Becky starts biting a finger nail, ‘good, I hope’

‘Very. It was a bit of a shock at first, and Freddy says we should find a bigger flat.’

‘You’re pregnant!’

‘Yes! Isn’t it crazy? We’d talked about it, of course we had, but it was like in the long, long distant future and we’re moving in together NOW, so this is a bit of a mistake. I mean, in the sense, yes, we wanted to do it: have children but not so soon, but then again, I’m not getting any younger so it’s probably better this way. I definitely didn’t want to be one of those women that has a baby in her forties...’

Becky giggles, ‘Sophie! You’re prattling. I have never heard you so flappy! That’s my specialty.’

‘Soo? Are you happy?’

'ME happy? Of course, I am! What about you? How's Freddy taken it?'

Sophie's smiling, 'He's walking around in a trance, as if he's forgotten that daytime's for going to work. He says it's unbelievable.' And now she's laughing, 'didn't your parents ever explain what happens when a girl and boy get together?'

'He probably thought it would never happen to him, all that baby stuff. ...You know he might be surprisingly good at it all. I bet he's totally involved and stuffing cushions up his jumper to get a feel of things.'

'Almost... yeah.'

'Have you told Mum and Dad?'

'Yes,' confirms Sophie. 'We called both sides last Sunday and everybody was delighted.'

'How many weeks are you?'

'I'm 12 and a bit. I wanted to wait a bit before telling anybody and now I'm beginning to feel well and truly preggers AND I've got a bump and it doesn't worry me at all, in fact I like it. Just crossing my fingers that I don't get ENORMOUS... so, it looks like the silk shirts and heels are going...'

'Oh my God Sophie!' gasps Becky... 'If it's a boy, it's going to be hyper! Think about it. A little Freddy!'

'I know. I'm crossing everything and praying for a girl or a very passive boy.' Sophie asks cautiously... 'Charlie isn't over, over-active, is he?'

'Yes ... ah... no. I haven't got a lot to compare with but no... he's OK.'

'There you go then', sighs Sophie.

'You know Sophie,' Becky's really smiling now. 'I think this is about the first time, I haven't been thinking about Luca and what happened. You really have given me the best news possible.'

'Well, now you're in the know and I'm going to keep you fully up to date. Most of my mates at work are looking a bit shocked and puzzled, as if I was going to be trotting in and out of work for ever. They're all absolutely clueless about baby stuff so you are now my official mentor and I'll be asking you everything.'

'Oh! I don't know about that... I haven't been the best of mums recently.'

'You're a wonderful mum and I'm not joking... Means though,' Sophie adds... 'I might not be coming over to see you for a while, I know everybody

says flying's no problem but I seem to have become anxious about everything, so I'm going to play it by ear. I really do want to come and see you but we'll see. How's the Italian family?'

'OK. Franca is still looking awful and has totally thrown herself into looking after the rest of us. They've all been so sweet Sophie. I can't tell you and: Alice! Alice has been a total revelation, there was me thinking she was all nails, drinks and gossip. She's been popping in and out and takes Lottie on girlie trips out or up to her bedroom. She even had a game of football with Charlie the other afternoon. Truly amazing. No, Sophie. I cannot start to tell you how incredible they've all been. Ah! Here come the kids. Can't wait to tell them they're going to have a cousin. We'll Skype Sunday. Bye Sophie."

'Bye Becky. Take care.'

I am pleased to note that Rebecca is looking a lot better after receiving such happy news from her confidante, Sophie. My mistress joyously greets her two children and informs them of the forthcoming birth of their cousin. It is undoubtedly an event to anticipate with great delight.

Chapter 5: A Worried Message left For A Dear Friend.

'Um...

Hi Lucy.

Me again.

Hope everything's OK.

We're getting there, I think.

Ring me some time.

Take care.

Bye'

Chapter 6: Brother and Sister.

'Hey, Freddy! You sneaky little thing. Getting that poor innocent girl up the spout!'

It's early evening and Becky is in the courtyard, while the children are inside watching cartoons. She's brought a kitchen chair outside and is sipping a glass of white wine.

'Becky! You sound a lot better... and I did not do the dirty. If anything, I think Sophie did a sly one on me.'

Becky is smiling into her glass, 'takes two.'

'Nooo!'

'Happy?'

'Very! Just think,' adds Freddy enthusiastically... 'another me... another wizard of finance.'

'Hang on a minute!' and Becky puts down her glass to give Roly a stroke. 'Who says it's going to be a boy? I'm hoping for a girl because another you would be impossible. I didn't ask Sophie because I got so excited but... is she planning to have expensive nannies and get straight back into the high heels and suits?'

'No, she says she wants to be a kept woman and she's going all earthy. My God, Becky! I think I'm going to end up living with a Mum Alike! I'm happy both ways, so if she suddenly decides to go back to work or wants to stay at home... it's really totally up to her.'

'Well, well' grins Becky. 'How accommodating you are!'

'Always have been. I still can't believe it happened though...'

Becky giggles, 'That's all Mum and Dad's fault for not telling you the nitty-gritty facts of life.'

'Gosh!' exclaims Freddy excitedly and Becky doesn't know if he's joking or not... 'I mean. It's a miracle! I'm sure I felt something fluttering in our tummy the other day.'

Becky howls with laughter, 'What do you mean: *our tummy*? It's Sophie's tummy.'

'No Becky. It's our baby so it's now become our tummy. Tried sleeping with a couple of cushions shoved up my T shirt the other night and damn uncomfortable it was too!!' Becky nods her head in a sort of knew-you-were-going-to-say-that type of way. 'When are you coming over? Mum said you're not going to make it for Easter'

Becky's face instantly changes and she's looking serious, 'no, Freddy. In a way I'd love to, but things are beginning to look a bit less bleak and I've started working out in the vineyards which is helping tremendously. I don't want to... *rock the boat*... in the sense, coming over might set me off again and I'd find it hard to leave you all. And I've put Ma and Pa off coming here for the same reason.'

'I can understand that.' Freddy lightens the mood by asking, 'now, Becks, is it possible that I'm getting heart burn because of the pregnancy?'

'Freddy!' and Becky's smiling again. 'You're hysterical, you really are! Too many sausage rolls and beer, more like it. Don't be silly! Sophie gets the heart burn and all that, not you.'

'Well, I'm a very sensitive person.'

'Since when?' Becky replies. 'You daft thing! ... anyway Freddy, your news was really what I needed. How are the Parents?'

'Well, I think. Haven't heard from them for a week or so, but well, I'm sure. Dad's really looking better and Mum: well, you know Mum. They're definitely happy to be back in *darkest Suffolk*, although Dad's always muttering that things have been moved around. Wonder who that was? Hey, Sis?'

Well, that's logical. Things probably have been moved around a bit, I mean, we did stay there getting on for 6 months. And anyway, you make it sound as if Dad knew where everything was. Ha! The tidiest person in the world!'

'He was asking me AGAIN why you changed the lock the other day. No way does he believe you...'

The mood in the courtyard shifts once again and she asks tentatively, 'did Sophie tell you all about the bad stuff that went on?'

'Of course she did and we were both really worried. I know I always seem so tied-up with work but I was really shocked, and we would have come down and physically bundled up the three of you and moved you out of there, if you hadn't decided to go back to Italy with Luca. You seemed to be living in a very dark place...'

'And I didn't tell Sophie everything... it was horrible.'

‘And what with Luca’s accident...’ adds Freddy. ‘I’m only saying all of this, cos you are sounding a lot better. I quite understand if you don’t want to talk.’

Becky’s staring into the gloom of the courtyard. ‘No, you’re right Freddy, I mean, yes, I think I can talk about it. It was like: going from everything perfect into a nightmare and then when I thought things were getting better, there was the accident... It’s... almost... as if... it was all those bad things coming together... if you get what I mean.’

‘I don’t know about that Becky. Real life is sometimes stranger than fiction.’ Freddy tries to lighten the conversation, ‘look what I’ve done to Sophie!’

‘Exactly!’ and there’s a smile back on Becky’s face. ‘Just look what you’ve done to Sophie! And thank goodness. Best news ever and if you’re not careful, they’ll be three of us looking after that tummy!’ After a short pause, Becky asks, ‘Freddy?’

‘Hmm?’

‘Who do you think did those things back at the house and sent me those emails?’, there’s a note of desperation in Becky’s voice.

‘No idea! Totally weird.’

Becky’s not letting go, she really wants to hear what her brother thinks, ‘man to man... well that’s what they say anyway... you probably get a feeling about these things. Was Luca cheating on me?’

Freddy does not want to express an opinion and anyway, ‘does it really matter now?’

Becky’s been inside to get a refill for her glass, ‘no, suppose not.’

‘Becky, don’t try to dig into the past. You’ll never really know. Think about now, think about the kids.’

There’s a sudden change of the mood again and Becky smiles, ‘oh Freddy! We’re having a heart to heart.’

‘I know, incredible isn’t it?’ Freddy’s relieved by the shift in the conversation, ‘don’t think you can start using me like the last page in one of those girly magazines where there are all those grisly problems.’

Becky grins, ‘you don’t read them, do you?’

‘Course not. Silly girl. And anyway, I’m only being kind and considerate for once, to keep you sweet because you’re the only aunt we’ve got!’

‘Aha... that’s why.’

‘Try to forget the past year. You’re through it, you know that, don’t you?’

Becky’s wiping her eyes with a paper tissue, ‘yes... I think you’re right. Gotta go Freddy. Look after her.’ She doesn’t want to start sniveling over the phone.

‘Course I will.’

Chapter 7: The Commendable Lady from Across the Seas.

It is heartening, I must say, that Rebecca’s life is taking on a more positive shine. She is now keeping regular hours and going about her daily business with a definite spring in her step. I am herewith reporting another conversation which has taken place between my Mistress and her fine mother. The conversation is brief but I feel it depicts a much-improved picture:

‘Darling it’s me. Freddy said you sounded so much better the other day.’

‘Hi Mum! Can’t stop. I’ve got to get back and help with the pruning. Paolo’s going crazy because it’s too warm, the vines are shooting already and we never pruned them properly this winter...’

‘Sleeping pills?’

‘Stopped them Mum, so stop worrying. I’ll Skype you Sunday. Love you loads.’

‘Love you too, Darling.’

And if I am not mistaken, I hear my Mistress’s mother take a long sigh of relief before the connection is broken.

Chapter 8: A Call from A Certain Young Man Named Rob.

I am now relating another conversation which I feel is significant, as it is a call made by a friend of Rebecca’s from the United Kingdom and which has been put through to the apposite apparatus on my dashboard. Communication with her friends has been irregular and my Mistress seems to prefer writing a message than having to communicate vocally.

‘Becky? It’s Rob... now tell me, if it’s not a good time...’

‘No... I mean yes... it’s great to hear your voice Rob. How’s the sailing?’

‘Oh fine, the sailing’s fine. Didn’t go out much in January and February. It really was nasty weather AND I had loads of work...’ There’s a pause, as Rob is trying to find the right words. ‘I was really sorry to hear about Luca. I met your Mum in the High Street and introduced myself and she told me. What a horrible thing to happen. I was going to write you a letter but...’

‘Oh Rob, that’s really sweet of you.’ Becky’s sitting in the car outside the supermarket and she’s on her own. ‘We were having problems, well you knew, and all those weird things going on, while I was staying in Suffolk... the dogs and stuff and then the accident. It’s been tough...’

‘Yeah.’ Rob is lost for words and perhaps he’s wishing he hadn’t phoned, but Becky saves the moment by saying.

‘Rob, do you mind if we don’t talk about all of that? Tell me what’s going on there. I miss you all. Laura has sent me a couple of messages but you’re the first proper phone call.’

‘Um... well, things are all much the same.’

‘Is Pete still as charming as ever?’ asks Becky smiling to herself.

‘He is! Isn’t that incredible?’ Rob is relieved that they’ve changed track conversation-wise. ‘I almost feel we should reverse roles and I can go to school all day and then play computer games while he gets on with the serious stuff at home. He asked ME the other day if I was hurting because Sally’s gone astray. Me! She was my girlfriend but she’s his mother. So, if I’m hurting, what’s he doing? I don’t know where he gets it from. He misses your two no end.’

‘Ooh..., that’s so sweet. I’ll tell them and just his name will send Lottie silly for a good while. Is he going to wait for her, d’you think?’

Rob grins and begins to relax, ‘you never know... Are you sailing?’

‘No, haven’t really felt like it. I mean, I’m feeling a bit better now but I was having problems just getting out of bed, let alone getting into a sailing boat. Anyway,’ Becky’s smiling out of the window, ‘there’s no real mate to go sailing with here because that’s you.’

‘Umm... Yeah’ Rob’s sounding awkward again, ‘I really ought to let you go.’ Becky’s response is quite surprising as she immediately tries to hold on to the conversation. ‘No! Don’t go! It’s nice hearing your voice. Oh, I mean...

if you've got things to do then I quite understand and it was great you rang... but...'

'Nooo... nothing to do really urgently,' replies Rob. 'Everything can wait.'

'Are you busy? I mean work and stuff...'

'Busy, enjoying myself? Is that what you mean?' Chuckles Rob, 'yeah, mucking about on the computer. Never thought I'd get good money for it though. How's that horrible old cranky thing of yours?'

'Fine Rob, and very fond of it am I too. Although you installed some new stuff when you were mending it, that took a load of time to work out. I'm just not good with technology, we can't all be brilliant like you, BUT... bet you can't prune a vine! I can!' She claims proudly.

'Humm... wine making. Sounds simple enough to me: watch the plant grow and produce its little grapes, pick them, squeeze or stamp on them, and hey presto you've got wine. Can't be any more difficult than that. It's just a natural process.'

Becky laughs, 'ah, if only! It's a fine art, I'll have you know, young man! You wouldn't believe how complicated it all is and just one tiddly mistake, and you've got gallons of vinegar on your hands. And now that the Franzoni family have two glasses....'

'What the hell's that?'

'Well,' explains Becky, 'It's like Michelin stars but for wine and when you've got them, you damn well try your hardest to keep them.'

'Becky?'

'Mm-hmm?'

'I miss you. The boat's not the same without you.'

Becky's looking a little surprised. Is Rob joking, or what? 'Course not. Because you've got more room without me... Rob... look, I better go. I'm in the supermarket car park and I've got to do the shopping ... don't start looking for another sailing mate. I just might surprise you and come over some time.'

'You're on, Becky!'

'Seeya.'

Rebecca has finished her telephone conversation and is looking extremely rosy-cheeked. The sun has decided to shine at this very auspicious moment

and it adds to the harmonious and joyful feeling inside the car. I am happy to serve...

Chapter 9: Daughter Phones Mother.

‘Hello Mum.’

‘Now you!’ exclaims Ann... ‘sound so much better!’

‘I am feeling a lot better... yep,’ replies Becky.

‘Good. Now tell me, how was Easter?’

‘Quiet, Mum. I don’t seem to be great around people but I’m fine at home ... so we had a family Easter. It was good and the weather was amazing. How’s Sophie?’

‘Well. Looks wonderful. No doubt she’ll phone you and tell you about the scan.’

‘Boy or girl?’ asks Becky excitedly. ‘I really do hope it’s a girl.’

‘Not saying’ and Ann’s smiling. ‘I’ll leave Sophie to give you the news. She said she’d phone soon. Darling, must go. I’ll ring you in a couple of days’ time. Love you.’

‘Love you too, Mum.’ Becky’s looking a little startled, as her mum never cuts off a phone conversation, it’s always Becky that has to wriggle her way out. So is there something wrong. Becky is now frowning and decides to ring Sophie straight away.

Chapter 10: Sophie Reveals All.

‘Hi Sophie. How are you? Mum rang and said you’d be ringing but I just couldn’t wait.’

‘Curious, are you?’ Becky’s relieved because Sophie sounds fine. ‘Well... first I want to know how YOU are?’

‘There are good days and bad days. At least there are good days and I don’t have that tunnel vision quite so much and I can see some light,’ explains Becky. ‘And I’m busy which is good... come on! Tell me how the scan went?’

‘Ahhh! The scan.’ Becky’s sounding worried once again, ‘everything’s OK, isn’t it Sophie? Mum wouldn’t tell me anything. She sounded a bit distracted and then basically put the phone down.’

'It's twins, Becky!'

'You HAVE TO BE joking!' Becky now has a very wide O-shaped mouth.

Sophie replies smugly, 'no, I'm not'

'Oh... wow! No way did I expect that!' Becky sounds so excited.

'Neither did I,' chuckles Sophie... 'neither did we... but it's kind of neat, isn't it? I'll be getting it over with in one go, cos I'd always thought an only child gets so terribly spoilt so you need two at least...'

'And... Freddy?'

'Freddy.' Sophie is stroking her tummy, 'Freddy is now a super dad: hitting two eggs instead of one!'

'So that means not identical twins, right?' Becky's trying to remember how twins work. 'You've got two whatever-you-call-them.'

'Two sacs. Better! Identical is a bit creepy, don't you think?'

'And so?' asks Becky excitedly. 'Come on Sophie... boy? Girl? Don't tell me it's two boys!'

'It's a boy and a girl.' Replies Sophie, still sounding very smug.

'Even neater! Wait until I tell Lottie and Charlie. Two in one go!'

Sophie begins to explain, 'well, as you can imagine... Freddy is now strutting instead of walking and I've had to enlarge all the doors to get his head through them.'

Becky laughs. 'You are going to be enormous! Do you mind?'

'Not at all.' Replies Sophie in a surprised voice, 'strange, isn't it? How you change. The only thing that's worrying me a bit is that I'll have to push TWO of them out!'

'Long way to go yet. Don't even think about it for now.' Becky has an idea and smiles, 'get Freddy to push them out for you.'

'If only!'

'Oh Sophie, you've made my day.' There is a note of sadness in Becky's voice as she adds, 'just wish I was nearer...'

'Knew you would.' Sophie tentatively says, 'no reason you can't come over for a while.'

'Yeah.' Becky's voice has lost its happy note. 'But I think I'd find it hard coming back again. I feel a bit stuck.'

‘Well: if you don’t come over when they’re born, I will never speak to you again, Becky Turner!’ Sophie’s grinning to herself because she knows that her last words are going to put Becky in a spot. And that’s precisely what she wants...

Chapter 11. The Turner’s Story

James and Ann: Ann and James... they’d always been a couple. They started going out from the very beginning. It must have been the second or third disco of their first year at college. They met at the students’ bar which had attracted a lot of the boys from the Economy Department down the road because everybody knew: the art students were the prettiest. And that’s when they instantly became an issue, in the sense, ‘what DOES she see in him?’ So, if you saw one of them, you were going to see the other ambling along within the space of 5 minutes and not more: they were most definitely a fixture. Ann was doing design and James, well you know already: economics, and if physically they fitted perfectly, both being tall, blond and a little droopy around the shoulders, character-wise they were complete opposites. She was giddy and loud and he was quiet and a little stern which basically suited their subjects. Ann was lots of hair drawn mysteriously across her face with long skirts, fringes and dangly things. She’d missed out on Woodstock, she’d been too young and in the wrong continent, so it was more like Windsor Free Festival. James, who had come to college with his pyjamas, odd socks and drainpipe jeans, just tagged on and let Ann take over in the clothes and style department, while basking in all the giddy fun that Ann created around her.

When Ann looks back, she doesn’t seem to have done much studying and can remember more parties than lectures but that could be just a twist of her imagination because she came out with a very respectable 2.1 degree and then vaguely started thinking about what to do next. James on the other hand, knew precisely what he had to do and that was get a good job in the City and provide for himself and wife-to-be because unlike many of the steady couples at uni who were now splitting up and going their separate ways, they stayed firmly stuck. And even if Ann couldn’t see the point at all of getting married, James most definitely could.

Their first flat together as a couple was in Crouch End and was seriously dubious. It was right at the top of one of the buildings that made up a parade of shops with a car showroom on the ground floor that had glass doors leading out onto the street. This worried Ann's mother no end, as they were basically living on top of a very big petrol bomb. But Ann and James loved it because it was a space just for them after having been in Halls and student houses for what seemed like forever. As soon as they were in, Ann started ripping up the ghastly Lino in the surprisingly large and sunny kitchen-cum-diner to discover some rather nice boards underneath. Then there was the second door that led out onto the communal landing from their bedroom which they kept firmly locked. It became a canvas for Ann and went from a woods-with-fairies scene, 'no, that's far too dark', to a sunrise, 'ah yes, much better!' And James just looked lovingly on.

It was those years in the early 80s when everybody seemed to fall effortlessly into the right job, or perhaps that was just London. James was soon earning good money in the city and Ann decided to try her luck in one of the big stores, at getting on their Managerial Course. It was a slip here and a slide there and she started doing some buying because there was no doubt about it: Ann had excellent taste and an eye for what was going to sell.

Everything was fine and then Ann got pregnant which meant the wedding went ahead as James had always known it would do. Ann looked charming in her own personally designed not-quite-but-almost wedding dress. And even if they would have preferred a registry office do, the parents sort of took over and the wedding was in Ann's local church back home in Hertfordshire with a rather serious reception at a nearby country house that had been turned into a hotel. Not what they had planned at all but the parents were paying and: 'who cares anyway, it's only a day.'

Freddy was, and of course still is, the eldest and Rebecca came along after not much more than a year. The only thing that was missing - 'my God they look identical!' exclaimed James as she was pushed out- was the reddish tint in Rebecca's hair. Again, it was a little unexpected but not unwanted and: 'better to get it all out of the way and have them close enough together that they might actually play with each other.' Which they did, and Ann was surprised how easy it all seemed to be, bringing up two adorably lively and loving babies. They'd decided she'd stay home until the

kids were into infant's school and then she'd think again. Home had now become a very squashed terrace in Southgate with an amazingly long and windy back garden that had some surprisingly mature trees. It was the perfect place to bring up children as the gardens backed on to more gardens giving all the children along both roads a great big green ribbon between the houses to play in. There was a constant stream of mums and kids coming and going from homes nearby AND to crown it all they had a park and tennis courts in front, if they decided they needed even more recreational space. They might have stayed there forever, if it hadn't been for the subsidence.

And when it was time to get back into suits and high heels and head off back to work that's exactly what Ann did, with that surprising ease she had of doing everything. Ann was blessed with what seemed like boundless energy whereas James was more the constant plodder and both the kids had acquired the same vital energy their mum had. Freddy must have tried about every sport possible over the years AND he was extremely bright. He was the typical little boy that you had to keep busy, otherwise he was going to find trouble. Rebecca on the other hand was capable of sitting quietly somewhere and playing: 'thank goodness!' Two boys would have been impossible, Ann often thought.

Chapter 12: Becky Turner's Story

Rebecca Turner, Becky as she was called from a very early age, smiled from the day she was born or that's how it seemed. It was also what the teachers said when Ann went into school to talk to them: 'Rebecca is such a happy, cooperative and sunny girl.' Although Becky didn't find it easy at school, and Ann realized later that she was probably dyslexic and it had never been picked up. So, primary school was a struggle and it was only at secondary school that she started really enjoying herself and doing well. She was great at sports and the more practical subjects and scraped through with a handful of G.C.Es and an A. Level in Art which meant she easily got a place at art school..... she was most definitely following in her mother's footsteps.

Ann was entranced to see Becky's transformation from an overly tall and awkward teenager into a slim, graceful and effortlessly beautiful young woman. Totally lacking in self-confidence, she was painfully shy, Becky

made up for it by overdoing in a nervous sort of way the friendliness and socializing. But basically, she was happiest on her own or with family and really close friends. It was probably why she loved her painting and later on the sailing because they were things, she could reasonably get away with doing on her own. So, when she was feeling especially shy around new people or big groups of friends, she would get really, really silly and loud: she'd start babbling, she'd start shrieking, she'd start giggling. Ann had had to put her foot sternly down at all the long and animated phone calls to mates which had sent her into total shock when the phone bill arrived, because it was that time when mobiles were about to take over but it was still easier to use the landline to phone friends. And that was really expensive when you phoned a mobile, and let the parents pay.

Becky was really excited about Art School and made loads of friends, how could such a pleasant smiling person not? But sometimes when things got a bit edgy at college, where all the home rules were being broken, she would have happily gone home to Mum and Dad and curled up in a safe and cosy corner.

It was at college that the sailing really took off as there was a sailing club not far away and instead of sitting around in the local pub all Saturday afternoon-cum-evening, Becky preferred to go out and do some sailing. And the blowier and wetter: the better. It was her therapy for the week which Lucy could not understand at all. Still, some of the guys from the sailing club were tasty enough, no doubt about that, and when they organized an evening it was always wild. Just like the English weather they sailed in!

So then off she went to Italy for a sailing course on the lake. Art school had finished and Becky was doing visuals for a chain of shops in London. And how could Luca not fall very hard for her? There she was: blond, unassuming and very beautiful and trying her hardest to not turn an awful bright red in all that hot Italian sun.

And she positively bloomed from all the attention Luca showered all over her and then it was history repeating itself: moving in with Luca, although this time it wasn't a grotty flat in Crouch End with that surprisingly spectacular view of Alexander Palace, no, this was a charming farmhouse just across the courtyard from Luca's family. A farmhouse that was simply crying out to be renovated and turned into a family home. This time the

wedding was in the local registry office or whatever it's called in Italy and Becky was already pregnant with Lottie. She never looked back, not even once, because she was in love with it all: Luca, the family, the farmhouse, everything about her new life. And that's when all her friends and family sighed and said: 'how very romantic!'

Chapter 13: Dear Diary.

Well, I just wanted to tell you, I'm feeling a lot better and: *about time* I can hear you, my dear diary saying. Everything's looking a little brighter and I don't wake up with that horrible gloomy feel to the start of the day anymore. I cannot believe how well the kids seem to be and sometimes I find myself holding my breath and just watching and hoping and praying that they're OK. Luca's gone, yes, but everybody else is making such a fuss of them... perhaps it'll all come to the surface when they're older and they'll need to go to the psychologist to sort themselves out but somehow, I don't think so... it's just me taking more time.

It's mid-summer, sorry diary I used to religiously write in you every day with the date at the top of the page... but sadly, no more, and I've brought you outside into the courtyard because it really is the best time to sit back and enjoy an after-dinner glass of dessert wine. There's always a breeze here at the top of the hill in the evening -must be sweltering down at the lake- and we've started laying one long table in the center of the courtyard and everybody eating whatever Franca and I put on it. Franca's finally winding down, I mean she's not so hyper and seems to prefer spending her time with her grandchildren to crazily cooking and cleaning all day long. I wonder if Paolo's had a word with her because she was really, really over the top after Luca died. Shame Dad and Paolo have problems communicating, cos they've got such a lot in common being the quiet, calm type that when needed, steps in. Mum and Dad came over in June for 10 days which was great but Sophie and Freddy haven't managed to, not surprising really, and that's one thing I'm really looking forward to. Sophie keeps threatening me with things like, 'if you're not here for the birth, I will never speak to you again!' I'd like to go but, how would I feel about coming back home? I feel like a very wonky compass at the moment with its needle flying all over the place. Does that make sense? Does to me.

And Lucy? I wonder if she's changed her mobile number because there's just a lot of silence there... and it's worrying if I think about it... really worrying.

Reading back things look positive, don't they? BUT!!!! There's something eating away at me and even if I KEEP telling myself there's no point, there's still this niggle which is driving me mad. Even the car's computer, or whatever its name is, seems to be staring at me with a worried look on its screen, only joking there, trying to keep things light. But. Was it Luca, or not? I know it's all about turning over a new page blah blah blah, but it's an itch and it's getting worse AND I've thought of a way of finding out: the log book! Paolo's one. There's this log book in the office which people sign, when they've done the morning or evening checking. Complicated thing, making wine. Rob said it all sounded so easy but I assure you it's not, so someone has to go and check the gages, the pressure and the temperature, cos if you don't, it could all go horribly wrong

So, the log book, it's like a bible... it's sacred and you have to fill it in so that the others know what's been done and get on with the rest outdoors. So, it's going to tell me if Luca was ever missing for a day or two from the winery and then thanks to you, Dear Diary, I can check when the dresser got tidied and the dogs went missing and I don't want to even think about the dress. I always did think I saw Luca that day along the sea front and then he turned up after the fireworks and it's not difficult to just pop over on a plane these days.

It's not going to change anything now but I just really want to know. Is it going to help me? I think it is.

Chapter 14: Being Functional which Makes A Change.

Well, I'm feeling quite proud of myself; we've travelled quite some way today and I have been well and truly working! Must confess, I was quite puzzled by all the sudden preparation that went on for this journey, it seems as if Becky has got a real hold of herself and decided to get on with her life. At long last, I must say.

And, have you noticed? It seemed silly to be all *hoity toity* language-wise so I've eased up and anyway, it's easier to understand my directions. I think

I sounded a bit like an elderly Victorian Gentleman, which was a total waste of breath in this day and age. Don't worry I'm not actually breathing...

Anyway. Here we are, resting for the night in this rather quaint and unpronounceable French town and from what the kids have been saying, it's quite a treat to be stopping and not drive on until: *journey over*. I've been programmed for a town in a place called Suffolk G.B. and this is about halfway there, so, isn't it nice to be out and about? And to be actually turned on! It seems that we're on our way to see Becky's family and especially Freddy and Sophie who are about to have twins.

At the beginning I could see Becky found it hard to get her head around this trip. Sophie and her have had various phone conversations in the car about the forthcoming births and Sophie kept saying: 'if you don't come over in time, I'll never speak to you ever, ever again! She was joking of course but it always left Becky looking a bit upset at the idea of travelling back to England. But then, as I said before, something changed and here we are!

She's got enough stuff in the back to stay forever but I guess that's what it's like when travelling with kids AND the cats very nearly sneaked in too, they would have hated a trip away from home and I just might be able to keep my bonnet clean for a while. Charlie and Lottie are getting very excited about seeing two animals that have got something to do with silk and shag and I'm just hoping and praying it's not more cats. Well, we'll just have to see...

Time to shut down and get some rest for a while and I am so excited about going over to the continent tomorrow because we're crossing a sea so that means: the continent.

Over and out.

Chapter 15: Dear Diary.

I'VE DONE IT! I've made about the biggest decision in my whole life and I'm feeling 100% sure it's the right one and that's going back to England to live. I think Paolo and Franca were expecting it and they have been so incredibly sweet; I've promised to come over for the vendemmia every year because they say they'll just leave the grapes to rot on the vines, if I'm not there. I wouldn't miss it for the world anyway...

It all seems so right, the right thing to do in the end, especially after checking the log book. Because Luca was missing at precisely those times when things happened at The Stage Door. And that really, really freaked me out.

I still feel guilty sometimes, thinking about perhaps not being such a loving and considerate wife and possibly pushing Luca away and into the arms of another woman. It wasn't easy with Lottie and Charlie around, to give my whole to Luca and anyway it shouldn't have to work like that... we were a family, giving and taking and so on. I've just lost endless hours of sleep over it all but I really have come to the conclusion that all that sneaking around he did in Suffolk, came with a guilty conscience. It was strange one evening, Franca just came out with it... totally out of the blue and admitted Luca had always been spoilt rotten which made me feel a bit better for some reason because she said, spoilt rotten and that he always got what he wanted... well perhaps he couldn't stand the idea of not getting me back.

So, like I said, Franca and Paolo could see this coming and it's a real pity Charlie and Lottie won't be across the courtyard anymore but: *hey*, they've got two other children that will, at some stage I'm sure, produce some more grandchildren. So, yeah, we're all right there.

I am SO EXCITED!!!! Isn't it strange? I was just waffling around but, in the end, it just seemed so crystal clear: get in that car and go! So here I am, sitting on the most disastrously busy bedspread surrounded by some equally hectic wallpaper! It's not even matching; I really do not know where the French find their soft furnishings! I am already bracing myself for dinner because there 'll be a lot of poking things around on Charlie's plate. Humm mm... I think he's going to be fussy like his Dad.

So back to Luca. I miss him dreadfully. Did he really love me? Or did he get all bitter and twisted when I wouldn't come home? I'll never know.

I bet Mum never felt guilty about going back to work and sometimes neglecting things at home and possibly Dad as well. I'm gonna have a long chat with Mum and I'm gonna tell her everything and I think that'll make me feel better as well.

Anyway, back to the bedspread: it's beginning to make me feel a bit sick! So, it's time to drag the kids away from the French cartoons and go in search of some grub. Wish me luck!

And then tomorrow early, we'll be off in my amazing new Range Rover which Paolo has so generously said is mine for keeps, which is great because wherever I'm going there always seems to be a bumpy lane and the suspension is amazing. Oh... and yeah... could have sworn the satnav said: 'you're welcome' just as I was turning the engine off this afternoon. How crazy is that? Although silly me to say: 'thank you' back.

Chapter 16: End of Journey.

Well, here we are. Everything seems to have gone as planned and after having driven along this extremely monotonous stretch of motorway for what seemed like forever, we have finally crossed a disappointingly small stretch of sea and are on Becky's home soil. So, what are my first impressions? Cold, you can dress it up as I believe the weather people do by saying it's *fresh* or *on the cool side*, let's just be honest: it's damn cold! And extremely windy, again they'll probably say: *blowy* but no, it's just WINDY. And then the greenness, the English seem to have added another twenty shades to the colour green which is probably due to the vile weather they are famous for.

There were some very impressive white pillars of something looking quite crumbly and about to topple over near the docks when we landed, with one of those incredible shades of bright green right on the top. But the biggest surprise was, wait for it, they drive on the wrong side of the road! Nobody warned me so I'm still trying to work things out at the moment and I guess that roundabouts are going to be a total nightmare... hang on, here's one now...

Well, that was quite an experience! But we've done it. Do they do everything the wrong way round here? Thank God Becky knows exactly what she's doing because I'm just making it all up for now.

We're heading for a place called The Stage Door, which sounds very exciting I must say, something to do with a theatre no doubt. And the other drivers are keeping their distance, probably noticed the foreign number plates, which I'm very happy about and there's just as much traffic as back home, all going the wrong way, logically. Becky was toying with the idea of stopping off somewhere in London first but then re-programmed me. Well, I'm relieved about that: big city, first time round, no thanks.

And here we are. The Stage Door. Well, it's definitely not a theatre and I have a sneaking feeling that if this place is called The Stage Door, there are going to be some other ludicrous house names. Why not a simple number? But then they even give their number plates names here, so what can you expect? I reckon house searching is going to be a real joy, no doubt about it.

And the road: the road leading up to our destination –lane more like it- is appalling, but everybody's looking super happy so I feel I've done a good job getting them safely here.

I am now parked under the most impressive tree which looks as if it's got enough wild life in it to do a whole series of nature documentaries. One of the most beguiling animals is grey with a long fluffy tail which I've never seen in Italy before and I just know I'm going to have lots to keep me amused here.

Of course, I know the family already as they all came over for Poor Luca's funeral although young Freddy's girlfriend has levitated considerably which is hardly surprising as she's expecting twins. Becky's in the process of unloading me with the help of her Dad and Freddy and says the rest is being shipped over later. The rest? Did she forget to tell me something?

And then there are Charlie and Lottie being hugged and patted by all, with them doing the same to the family pets which I am pleased to tell you are dogs. Big I must say, and one is a very handsome creature; the other sadly no. But they are both getting just as much attention from the children and are in an ecstatic frenzy, no control at all so they'd be useless as working dogs. I am very pleased that they cannot fit either under or on top of me although the scruffy one has already peed on my wheel which I think is a proprietary thing. Yes, I know we're going to get on and there's lots of room in the back for them although I shudder to think of the smell.

The house is totally in the middle of nowhere so that means lots of trips in the car which is good news and I'm extremely intrigued by what I can see inside. Virtually everything because there don't appear to be any curtains and the windows are so wonderfully grand; it's like watching the telly!

OH! Something just dropped on my windscreen: a sort of hard nutlike thing. I think it could have been one of those grey animals with the long fluffy tails so I'm taking it back, they are not sweet anymore and I could see

a malevolent glint in its beady little eyes, as it peered down at me through the branches. I think they're going to be worse than the cats.

I'm so sorry, with all this excitement I forgot to say, 'end of journey'.

Chapter 17: There's No Going Back.

I'm back with you after a very busy time because, yes, basically I was being thick and we're not here on holiday; we are here for good.

There has been so much ferrying going on, luckily no water is involved so heaven knows why you *ferry*, as Becky has moved into the most charming cottage in the little town not far away from The Stage Door. Aldeburgh is on the sea but don't get all excited as it, the sea that is, is vicious and an extremely unappealing colour brown. The kids, heaven knows why, love going onto the beach and getting buffeted around by the constant wind. Anyone who deigns to sit on it, has to erect a flimsy wall-like thing on sticks and hide behind it, otherwise the beastly wind gets you. So, for crying out loud, what is the point? Go abroad and then you can laze around on a beautiful sandy (this of course is pebbly) beach, soak up the sun and enjoy the crystalline aquamarine water.

Luckily, I'm not allowed on the beach -and who in their right mind wants to go- so they walk there and I can stop at home under my splendid new trellis beside the cottage. There's no school run here either so I am sometimes a little inert because they're literally a hop, skip and jump away from their new school. Do they actually hop, skip and whatever to school? I don't think so. Again: it's the English language. I say *new*, but Lottie and Charlie seem surprisingly familiar with it all so who knows what I've missed out on. And there are already a lot of little ones coming for tea after school with a particular young lady who is always shedding numerous beads all over the car floor, when we have to take her back home.

So, the cottage. It was so exciting when we came to see it for the first time. Becky told the nice young man who showed us around that she'd always loved this part of the town as it's near the center but quiet and leafy. I think she's buying it and not renting as she got a considerable amount of money from Luca's life insurance. It has a very little front garden and a bigger one at the back which has a splendid view of the estuary where Becky goes sailing. It's only October but the sailing looks worse than the beach and it

looks as if it's all to do with getting as much cold sea water thrown into your face as possible. Unbelievable! Just unbelievable and from what I can gather, Becky's even going to be doing some teaching, everyone to their own.

The dogs logically didn't come to Belleview Cottage. Please Note, another house name but at least this one does suit. Oh! And we have a cat. So, there goes the clean bonnet and windscreen because I have never known such muddy little paws; it's all that rain churning up the dirt in the garden. I am delighted to say though that we are now on a proper road and so no more bone-shaking rides unless we're off to the inappropriately named Stage Door. And OK a cat, it's better than that grey fluffy-tailed animal that lives at The Stage Door and keeps dropping natural bullets all over me.

Ah, here comes Becky! Back from sailing with that extremely nice young man who could definitely do with a haircut. The sailing club is a stone's throw away although we don't actually throw any because what would be the point. She's come in me because we've got some shopping to do. And there they are, clutching the inevitable mug of steaming brown liquid. Heaven knows why they can't wait until they're home and make a proper cup of coffee. Yes, we have a lot of mugs coming and going from the sailing club, hut more like it. Becky's laughing about something and the young man puts his arm protectively around her shoulders, she smiles and it's like the biggest most beautiful sun coming out from behind the clouds.

Chapter 18: Stupid Bitch

What an A1 BITCH she is! She's been texting and leaving wimpy messages saying she misses me and: where are you?

Does she think she's the only one grieving? Yeah, cos she is just so much up her own arsehole. You can't even imagine how much I've been suffering because Luca really was the love of my life. I know, she got there first but I'm so sure he was waking up to how boring and monotonous his whole life had become. And there was I, waiting in the wings, ready to catch him in my open arms.

My God! Don't let me think about how good it was that evening when he took me back to the airport. And it hadn't taken much to have him inside me and I just know he wanted me over and over again.

That's not getting me anywhere, is it? Because he's gone and this year has been the most horrible year of my life. Perhaps I shouldn't have gone over for the funeral but they have this creepy custom where you can see the dead person in their coffin before they do whatever and he still looked amazing, and I was able to touch him one last time.

She's even come over here to live now because she sent me a Christmas card with her new address and I bet she's got a new boyfriend because she's a right slut. I wish she'd stayed in Italy with her pathetic in-laws as she's now just round the corner but: hey!!! No way am I getting in touch with her and I'm now trying to get a life back, and I know that she would just ruin it all over again if I let her.

So, Becky Turner.....just fuck off! And let me get on with my life! You've ruined it once and I'm not going to let you do it again!

Chapter 19: It's One Big Jolly Party.

I'm sitting in a very cramped space outside The Stage Door for Christmas and it looks fairly packed inside as well, because there are both sides of Becky's family here. The day is going tremendously well with loads of presents and a splendid lunch round the kitchen table which has the most startling assortment of coloured chairs I have ever seen. I can see inside with no trouble at all because by the time they sat down to eat, it was well and truly gloomy and so lights had to be turned on.

Bottles are being continually brought outside and put next to the brimming bottle bin and heaven knows who's been drinking all that stuff but: hey, it's Christmas! It's often Ann who comes out and adds another bottle to the collection and then she chuckles to herself, it must be some private joke of hers to do with bottles. Christmas lunch seems to be endless and everybody's made their contribution. Franca's was the starters and it must have been seriously difficult to have transported all those yummy things over from Italy. As she was going to and fro from their Range Rover with numerous Tupperware containers, I could see that finally she is looking a lot happier. So, Franca's starters and then Ann dished up the inevitable turkey which she keeps telling anybody who will listen, had miraculously fitted into the oven. She'd woken up during the night all in a sweat about the size of the bird and came down at 3 in the morning to make sure it

would squeeze in. I get the impression that the Italian side of the family don't really understand why she bothered and that she should have gone for something smaller but I gather it's another of those Christmas traditions: ramming the turkey into the oven.

Paolo and James have just come out with the dogs who need a short walk in the woods before Christmas pudding and panettone. Take the *who* as you wish because the men look as if they need more of a break than the dogs. They are both looking really silly in red shiny paper hats which I bet they wouldn't normally be seen dead in. They are communicating extremely well in a strange language of mixed-up English and Italian with lots of gesticulating on top. James is trying to explain why they need a lighter –already got- and a piece of holly –still to find- for the Christmas pudding and that Paolo must be very careful when he bites into it because of the coins. I'm not sure Paolo has understood everything but he's looking appalled by the whole procedure and something tells me he's tried the pudding before and doesn't think much of it. Franca keeps trying to get near the sink and get started on the mountain of washing up and Ann just shoos her away saying they've got until New Year's Eve to do it. Occasionally Franca can't help but cast an anxious eye at the continually growing pile of precarious miss-matched china and comes to the conclusion that Ann must have a dish washer tucked away somewhere, because she doesn't appear to be worried, not even one little bit. And she isn't. Ann's just so happy to have everybody around the table and looking so well, because it's been one hell of a year.

The stars of the show are the new twins, Emma and Einstein, who are being clucked at and cooed over by everybody. Mh-hmm... Emma and Einstein, Emma I think is right but perhaps Einstein is just a nickname which his Dad, Freddy has decided to call him. Yep probably, because every time he says it, Sophie smiles. The two darling babies are being so obliging, just as soon as they've been put back down in their twin pod-like transporter, they are picked up by somebody else. I can't actually see a lot of them as they're swaddled in various hand-knitted blankets which are being removed or put back again as every member of the family has a different opinion on whether they're too hot or too cold. But from what I can see, Einstein has inherited his father's flaming red hair which looks OK on a boy but can be more difficult on a girl. It is Alice in the end who tells everybody to stop it,

and Lottie and her guard the two babes from anymore probing hands. And there they are, gazing in on the two infants. I wonder if Alice has come over all broody, and Lottie has decided that, given the chance, they could be tons more fun than her Barbies. The only person missing today is Mat, who's back at the farm playing boss, and Paolo sincerely hopes he's doing everything he should be because it's the first time he's been left all on his own.

Logically the cat stayed at Belleview. It's there with its Christmas present which is a furry mouse-like smelly toy which is guaranteed to drive cats crazy, happily patting and pawing it around for hours. Well, it didn't happen, did it. Tiddles took one sniff of it and then haughtily turned its back and stalked out of the house which Becky and the children found hysterical. The dogs on the other hand were ecstatic with their new rubbery, chewy bones which I suspect have already been buried somewhere: much more appreciative animals.

The Italian side of the family are staying at Belleview Cottage for a couple of days and then going back home. I gather from the conversations in the car that Becky will then be having a New Year's party. She's invited both her friends and the kids' so it'll be an interesting bunch of people. I have no doubt that Rob will be round at some time to set up his sound system because he's good at that type of thing and Becky is absolutely useless. So, it's just one long glorious holiday.

Chapter 20: It Really Is a Happy New Year

So, here we are jumping from Christmas to New Year because there's this strange vacuum in between the two and like I predicted, Rob has already been round to sort out the sound, well let's hope it's actually music, for Becky's Party. It's tonight and there's a real buzz in the air. The guests are going to be both young and old....er and Becky's decided to have it early and let Charlie and Lottie's friends sleep over. She's thinking about counting in the New Year at about 9.30. Can you do that? She's hoping to get the kids into bed before the party really starts. Mh-hmm, kids can be capricious so we'll see if Becky manages that. Although I must say I like the idea of inviting a hotchpotch of people, to make the whole evening just

warm and friendly because that's what Becky wants. It's also what she deserves, a real positive start to the New Year.

It's dark now and some lights have been turned on inside the cottage. The children keep running to the sitting room window and pressing their faces up against the glass to see if anybody's coming through the garden gate. It's a quiet time when Becky thinks everything is wonderfully under control and she keeps going through the check list she's got in her head.

And here they come. The guests. How exciting, all in one go which is what always happens and will totally upset the organisation in Becky's head. There's her hairdresser friend and the twins, then in comes Laura and little Luna who is a glittering wonder, if somewhat bent over by the sheer weight of it all, in her beads and jangly jewelry on top of a very colourful blouse which is long enough to be a dress and has definitely been raided from her mum's wardrobe. Sophie and Freddy are here without the twins, who have been left behind at The Stage Door with their doting grandparents and some expressed milk in the fridge. Freddy still looks a bit shell-shocked, it's probably the night time feeds, whereas Sophie is as cool and elegant as always and she's really looking forward to the party. Here's Rob and young Pete who seems to sprout up at least 3 or 4 inches every time I see him. And yes, aren't I clever? I have converted from metrics to the weirdest measurements ever. I don't think in kilometers anymore, oh no... I've gone over to miles. But don't ask me how many inches there are in a mile because I don't know and you don't drive in inches anyway. Ah! Here comes a new face. She's all on her own and looks really happy to be here and tells Becky on the doorstep that she normally stays at home with the dogs on New Year's Eve, so this is a real treat for her. Everybody seems to know her, literally everybody, because there are also friends from the sailing club, so I presume she does some type of public service. She calls everyone *dear* and I think her name is Mary. Well, I hope she's going to enjoy the party... oh my goodness, I sound like the host!

And surprise of all surprises, it's just gone 9.30 and the kids are indeed in bed, well upstairs at least. I know so because lights have come on in both Lottie and Charlie's bedrooms and considering that they're supposed to be settling down for the night, they are all making an extreme amount of noise: overexcited, there's no doubt about it. Oh, here comes another partier, a little late in the day, sorry, night almost... and I recognize her. She

is the young lady who cried continuously before, during and after Luca's funeral. She's not alone but with a shy-looking young man who has a very bemused expression on his face. Hardly surprising, as this young lady is behaving in a really hyper way.

That's it! Her name's Lucy and she springs out of the car as soon as it stops and starts pulling at her party dress and shawl. I must say the dress looks rather chilly and transparent for this time of year and as she tries to cover up bits of breast and legs, I can't help feeling it's going to be a hard job as there's basically not a lot to what she's wearing. They haven't brought much with them, all the others had bags groaning with food and drink, as they staggered through the front door: one bottle as far as I can see. The look on Becky's face when she opens the door is puzzling to say the least. She's shouting to someone about checking the wine on the stove, strange because I thought wine normally went in the fridge, and when she turns round her mouth drops open and she freezes there on the spot, for what seems like forever. But then she pulls herself together, gives Lucy a big hug and greets them.

'You should have told me you were coming... What a surprise!... What a wonderful surprise! I am so pleased to see you guys.'

'Sorry Darling, I should have let you know, but you said in your Christmas card you were going to have a party and... da da da daa SURPRISE!'

Becky's still looking a little shocked as if these two just popped out of nowhere, which is basically what they have done, but in they go, to join everybody else. And now that the kids are upstairs the music has gone up at least 10 decibels AND it's changed genre and is now rock more than pop. I know, I know...you're asking yourselves; how do I know? Well, the car radio of course. Becky could be disturbing the peace terribly with this loud music thumping out of every nook and cranny. So, what about the poor suffering neighbours? No problem, because Becky did an extremely intelligent thing: she invited them. And it seems to me that this crazy mishmash of people, has been a really good idea with everybody making the effort to meet new people and to basically have fun.

I must say, I have never seen my mistress looking quite so beautiful. She's put on some weight, they're stones here - would you believe it? - although I don't think she's put a whole one on, and it suits her. She's swept up that

wild abundant honey-coloured hair of hers and is wearing a beautiful long dark green dress. I know all about the dress because we went shopping together and she bought it in the High Street from a curious shop where no two items were the same. She immediately dashed round to show her mum what she'd bought, who said that velvet had always been her favourite material and that the colour and fit was perfect on Becky. Ann then gave Becky the most beautiful long dangly earrings which have set the dress off a treat.

I mean, I've always known what an attractive woman Becky is, but this year's strain has taken its toll and she was looking *washed-out* as they say ... but not anymore. She is really stunning tonight. And it's interesting to see the effect on Rob because he's suddenly gone all shy around her and what an effort, he himself has made this evening. He has finally been to have his hair cut, mane more like it, and it now curls attractively instead of running away with itself, if you get what I mean. And he has put a shirt on with a reasonably smart pair of jeans... odd socks I noticed but you can't be perfect. Pete had insisted that his dad wore a shirt, telling him to stick to something plain and hiding the Hawaiian one in the dirty linen box. I must say, Rob's a very handsome man indeed tonight and so they, Becky and Rob, make an extremely attractive couple which, I don't think they are yet but if things go on this way, they will be, I just know.

The sitting room's at the front of the house and that's where Becky's pushed back the sofa and two armchairs and there's just enough space to dance. And they really are going at it, as if they'll never have the chance again. Even Dear Mary is there swaying to the beat although she seems to miss it now and again, but nobody cares and that hot wine which was on the stove is flowing nicely.

Pete's gone up to join the kids and it was like Royalty calling and they've now all settled down to a card game. What they need is some proper lighting above the table where they're playing and some cigarettes, joking there, I sincerely hope they're not playing for money. And downstairs they've finally put on some slow jazzy music by a rather wailful young lady who from the reminiscent look on everybody's faces, is no longer with us. Becky often plays her music in the car and her name has something to do with wine and houses. I'm just waiting, and hoping that Rob will ask Becky to dance because I can tell, I know her, that's what she really wants. It's

one thing to be out in a boat together in a blustery sea and quite another, to be in the warm and safely in his arms.

Drats! Just when it looked as if it was going to happen, because Rob was definitely about to make a move, Lucy has stepped in and asked him to dance with her. Can you do that? I don't really know. Can a woman ask a man to dance?

Becky's not looking too happy about it and Lucy's young man has somehow got pinned, don't take that literally, to the wall behind the sofa. Now how very, very strange. Becky's whole attitude has changed and Lucy is dancing far too close to Rob; she's stroking his arm and whispering something in his ear. Rob's face has frozen and he's at a total loss about what to do with his body and arms which is hardly surprising with this young lady pressing up hard against him. It all comes over as a bit embarrassing and there's this empty space around them with a lot of the guests just trying not to look, but not managing to, and then just outwardly staring. Yes, Miss Lucy Edwards is misbehaving, and Becky looks as if she's been drinking neat vinegar instead of wine. Is she jealous by any chance?

Well, thank goodness for that, the song is over and they've put something faster on which sends everybody into a frenzied tangle, with arms punching the air and all singing along. The song doesn't seem to have many words to it and they're all shouting a series of letters, something to do with YMC and A. It's thankfully broken that horrible atmosphere and it might be silly but that's what I get the impression everybody wants. Time speeds up and it's soon approaching midnight, the whole house seems to be literally pulsing as the music gets louder and even louder. I can see the kids upstairs shrugging and raising their eyebrows: grown-ups! Give them another 20 years and they'll be doing exactly the same thing, but we won't tell them because they wouldn't believe us anyway. None of the kids bother coming down at midnight, well Remember they're supposed to be in bed and midnight for them was about 3 hours ago. No, they just carry on with their cards and tolerate the appalling amount of noise coming from downstairs. Oh, and by the way, I haven't seen Tiddles all day, it definitely sensed something was up and has no doubt hidden in a wardrobe.

I am still holding my breath, well I would if I had any, and hoping Rob and Becky finally discover that they are perfect for each other and GET TOGETHER once and for all. I mean you can be best friends for just so long

and the so is minimal here. I was hoping they'd get into a clinch at midnight but there were too many people and lots of hugs all round, although I did notice Rob kept well clear of Lucy.

Ooh! Now this should be interesting, Sophie has marched Lucy outside saying they need to chat and as they come and stand next to me, I can hear everything. From their stance, I don't think it's going to be two friends catching up on the gossip or anything similar. Sophie has quite sensibly put her coat on and is standing very straight in front of Lucy who has turned to one side with her shoulder nearest to Sophie, raised defiantly.

Sophie discards with any pleasantries by simply saying, 'why did you come this evening?'

'And Happy New Year to you too, Sophie! I came to see Becky as she is my oldest and dearest friend. Poor darling, I know she's been trying to get in touch for ages but I lost my phone and all my numbers went, so I was a little out of touch with the world, but then she sent me a card and told me she was having a party and I just had to come.' Lucy turns her back on Sophie shooting a glance over her shoulder, 'didn't I?'

'And ruin it for her!'

Lucy turns round slowly and faces Sophie, 'now, why would I do such a thing? And anyway, now she's back in England, I hope to see a lot more of her and the kids. She's been through such a rough time, poor thing.'

'Oh, stop it!' It's as if Sophie can see right through Lucy and her dizzy, silly facade. 'Stop playing games because I saw what you were up to in Italy. You couldn't keep your eyes off of Luca but you were so crafty because if Becky was around, you were all sweetness and sunshine. You are one extremely crafty little bitch! And now you've decided you're going to have a go at Rob. What IS wrong with you? Well, I'm telling you just stay well away from her and the family because I'll be keeping both eyes open.'

'You always were a cold tart,' spits Lucy back but she's looking a bit shaken by the cold and Sophie's verbal attack. 'And if you think I'm interested in that loser that goes sailing with Becky, you are totally wrong. Fuck off!'

Sophie's not put out at all and calmly replies, 'no, you go and do that. Bye Lucy, just get out of here. Right now.'

Well, well, well... there's no love lost there and it makes me even more curious about what I missed in the past.

Lucy goes all huffy and puffy and marches back inside to collect her boyfriend -and a rather pretty hair band that somehow had come loose and was lying on the carpet just ready to be trodden on- and leaves with everybody looking more and more astonished by her erratic behaviour. It's a very dramatic exit and something tells me that Becky would normally have gone out of her way to smooth things over and make things up, but there's something strange going on with her face. She looks as if she's coming to one very definite conclusion about her best friend and when Lucy swans out with boyfriend in her wake, Becky does absolutely nothing but stand, watch and frown a little. Is it revelation time? Don't I wish the old car was around and could tell me the whole story.

So, has the spark gone out of the party? Definitely not! Looks as if everybody is just warming up. There are going to be some seriously sore heads tomorrow, sorry, later on this morning.

Chapter 21: Dear Diary.

It's the first of January and no way did I think I'd be writing in you today but I've got to get this all down in words because I'm bursting with them.

Well, big party last night and all in all: what a success! After all the organization and decorating and stuff and going out and buying a dress especially for the party, I felt young and alive again. And what a great feeling it was, and still is, but then the weirdest and insanest thing happened when Lucy turned up out of the blue. It should have been the cherry on top of the cake and all that, because I'd been really worrying as I couldn't get in touch with her. But when she surprised me, all I felt was that she was going to spoil everything. It quite shocked me and was totally irrational but that's the way I felt.

Anyway, after getting over the initial shock, she came in with her new boyfriend who quite frankly looked a bit of a drip. And Lucy didn't even introduce him. It was a bit like her walking in with a cardboard cut-out as a boyfriend. It was impossible to say much to him because Lucy just took over. I can remember her doing the same at college and she'd really gone over the top with her dress, you could see literally everything she'd got on underneath and I'm telling you: it wasn't a lot! Even the kids didn't seem so enamored with her because of course, they came down to say hello, and

then she went and hit on Rob. Poor guy! He looked so embarrassed and well everybody did really, because they were sort of glued to each other instead of dancing together.

And the really surprising thing is, I'm still reeling about it, is that I felt JEALOUS! Not a little bit, because Rob is my best mate: no... A LOT! I was so jealous! Rob had made a real effort last night and looked really good and as soon as he walked through the door and we saw each other, something happened and I felt positively dizzy and started blushing and he did the same. The dizzy part I don't know, perhaps that was just me, but we both turned bright red and I suddenly wanted everybody else to go home and have him all to myself. Now where did that all come from? That amazing feeling!!!! Not possible of course, for everybody to disappear that is, and anyway it was just a load of good friends and Freddy and Sophie and the nice lady from the tea shop, and I knew Rob would be the last to go home after the party so it was something to look forward to. Anyway, I never got that special time with him, when everybody else finally went home because Rob very kindly, and quite rightly so, gave Mary a lift home. She was so sweet saying she didn't think she'd ever stayed out so late in her entire life. And hadn't the time flown? Well, that's the sign of a good party. It all took me totally by surprise and I guess I was drinking too much so it could have just been that but: wow was I feeling good last night! And then Lucy turned up and everything shifted and nobody looked as happy as they had done before. And then what was even stranger was that after dancing with Rob, she disappeared for a while and then came storming back inside, grabbed Boyfriend and left all in a huff. And you know what? I was really pleased to see her go, a hundred percent and I don't really know what I'll do when she phones or whatever, because there's something not quite right there.

But have I lost those good feelings I had last night? No. I'm feeling amazing! And Rob's coming round this afternoon to pick up all the sound system and I might just go and put a bit of make-up on and comb my hair before he turns up...

Happy, Happy New Year!

Chapter 22: Just Another Working Day.

Well, it's the very first day of a new year, although that doesn't mean a lot to me and it's just another working day... EVERY day is a working one for me. Today started off with me taking Charlie and Lottie to their grandparents as they, the kids that is, are desperate to babysit the twins. I say desperate, I think that's more Lottie than Charlie. But there are also Silky and Shaggy to take for a walk and Charlie feels that given a bit of training, they'd be great on the football field as goalkeepers, because once they've got the ball there's simply no giving it away.

So, Becky and I are back at Belleview trying to clear up some of the debris from the night before. Mine is a kind of moral support and I hope she's picking up on the vibes I'm sending out. Everything that looked sparkly, welcoming and *let's party* last night is now looking drab and grubby. There are dark stains on the sofa, soggy stuff on the carpets and heaven knows how some of the hot red wine got sprayed all over the wallpaper near the French windows. Becky's so pleased that she put her foot down and said no smoking in the house but then she shudders to think about the borders. It's surprising how many of the sailing club smoke, you really wouldn't think so, would you? And then smokers think they're fag ends are just going to melt into the environment wherever they are. It's something that Becky gets really upset about which is probably thanks to Ann, who has always brought every bit of rubbish home with her. Becky can remember when they were small, coming back from a walk with their pockets stuffed with whatever litter they had picked up along the way.

I think Becky's at that stage where she doesn't really know what to do next and that's why she's mulling over fag ends and the rubbish they used to bring home in their pockets. She's still happy she had the party as she feels it's the beginning of her new life and I can see her wandering from one room to another with a big black plastic bag in her hands but not actually doing much. She's been looking out of the window a lot, waiting for somebody, but whoever was expected hasn't turned up and it's so gloomy outside now, that she's given up coming over to the window because you can't see a damn thing. And it's only 3 o'clock! Lights have gone on and so I can see her running upstairs and grabbing some loo roll - know the name because she's ALWAYS forgetting them: 'oh no! LOO ROLLS!' and having to

dash back into the supermarket for them - and then angrily wiping away the lipstick she'd put on earlier.

There's no need to worry because of course he's coming, yeah, I know she's waiting for Rob and I see him before Becky does. He's got to unplug and put away all his wires and speakers from yesterday, or that's the excuse anyway.

And while Becky's walking to the front door she's thinking about the worst possible track suit bottoms she's got on and the scratchy synthetic pullover that came out of the wash, the most horrible, mucky brown. She'd made the effort about 3 hours ago and then given up and changed back to scruffies and anyway it's only Rob..... probably..... hopefully that is, because who else is coming round today. So, what's the problem? Well, the problem is that things between them shifted last night and Becky's worrying that it was just the drink, just the dark, just the party that had done it. And look at her now in the most revolting and unattractive pullover possible.

Rob hadn't been sure what to do today and that's why he almost didn't come. He desperately didn't want to get it wrong. He'd fallen for Becky the very first time he saw her at the summer playgroup when she'd turned up in that incredibly shiny new 4-wheel drive, which Londoners thought was compulsory down here in the country, with two terribly nervous kids inside. It actually turned out that she was a farmer's wife, so the car was forgiven but heaven knows why she hadn't walked it though.

She was a dream! All that wild hair, green sparkling eyes and freckles on the end of her nose. And she'd looked totally lost. As if she didn't know what the hell she was doing there. Well Rob knew what she was doing there: she was there to turn his whole world completely upside down. And then she'd turned up at the Sailing Club. It almost made Rob believe in God. And she was in the hut asking to take a boat out and there was him, asking her if she needed a mate.

She'd never given anything away but she often looked one very unhappy lady and then after the fireworks in the woods, her hubby popped up out of the blue and he was all suave, dark and broody: looked like a total jerk! But by that time, Rob would have detested literally anybody who was married to Becky Turner.

So, He can't get it wrong this afternoon. Last night was just magic but it's now one very cold and dark day after. When everybody's hung-over and depressed about the new year to come. Because New Year's Eve is magic and New Year's Day is back down to earth with a bump. Was there really something there, between them, last night? He'd almost seen sparks in the air when he was near her and then that dizzy, stupid girl friend of hers turned up and totally ruined it all.

So here Rob comes down the garden path, he knocks on the front door and there's Becky opening it. They go into the kitchen and Becky automatically puts on the kettle. And when she gives Rob his tea -milk and too many sugars to be good for him-, his hand is very slightly shaking: she holds it still in hers. And that's when he just leans over and kisses her fully on the lips and doesn't even give her the time to breathe as he scoops her up and carries her straight up the stairs.

It's the strongest and most perfect feeling Becky has ever had of: coming home.

Chapter 23: Simply Here to Serve.

Here I am. There's no need to introduce myself because you know damn well who, or let's say: what I am. And I bet you can't get behind the wheel these days without thinking what your satnav is up to. Probably not a lot, just getting on with the job, just as I do.

I think we can safely say there's a happy ending to this story. All the family is well and, like I said before, I'm just doing my job. But, how fond of them I am these days! I can see Lottie and Charlie are really happy and they'll be off to Italy during the Easter holidays to see the Italian side of the family. I'm not going and neither is Becky, although she's promised she'll go over for the grape picking. So, it'll be me and her over the hols. I've finally given up with trying to understand all those crazy expressions they use over here and as Becky hardly ever turns me on, I can just relax and enjoy everybody's company. It's not a bad life at all. I guess my only worry is that she'll change the car but I'm still practically brand new, so I'm not going to get all heated about that... ha! Heated! Let's say over-anxious otherwise the thing could start to get worrying with circuits getting over-heated and all that.

And as I foresaw, Rob has become a very good and special friend indeed. He and Pete are often aboard and leaving just as much stuff as the rest of them which makes them practically family. And isn't it amazing how many: empty mugs, annoying little shiny beads that roll all over the place, deflated footballs, half-finished sweet packets, elastic hair bands and then... the odd wet sock and even a bone for the dogs that got under the front seat and was then forgotten until it started smelling, are left behind in the car? It's so annoying and I would just love to clean it all up but no hands you see. It's very, very frustrating.

But I adore them all!

And Becky? She's my Mistress and she's who I serve.

Sometimes I day dream about coming to her rescue when she's in trouble... and no sirree, I wouldn't let anyone hurt her and I don't know what I'd do if someone even tried.

I'd get them on their own...

and then... and then:

I'd drive them off the road!

That's what I'd do!

NOBODY is going to hurt that lady ever again.

But of course, I'm only joking.

Journey over. We have reached our destination.