

A woman with dark hair, wearing a vibrant red, long-sleeved, belted dress with a flared skirt, is seen from the back, leaning her right hand against a light-colored, textured wall. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights, suggesting an outdoor setting with trees in the background.

What do you  
do when the past  
just won't let go?

# *Trapped*

BROOKE MORGAN

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## ***About the Book***

**Everyone has to live with their past, but no one should be haunted by it . . .**

Ellie Walters is determined to get back on her feet after the break-up of her marriage. Now living on Cape Cod with her increasingly angry and troubled teenage son, Tim, she tentatively believes they can build a new life together. And when Ellie finds herself falling for her new neighbour's son, Joe, she feels she can at last move on.

Until, one day, elements connected to a tragic event in Ellie's past – an event she has never been able to come to terms with – start appearing. It seems that someone is determined to make her suffer, all over again. Whilst a misunderstanding drives a rift between her and Joe and her relationship with Tim threatens to deteriorate completely, a confused and frightened Ellie seems powerless to stop what seems increasingly like a terrifying campaign of persecution. And Ellie is faced with the horrifying possibility that she'll be trapped in this nightmare for ever . . .

## ***About the Author***

Brooke Morgan is an American living in London. She is also the author of *Tainted*.

*Also by Brooke Morgan*

Tainted

# TRAPPED

Brooke Morgan



arrow books

# 1

*4 June*

The whole idea was crazy, especially for someone like her. Other women might not blink at the thought of an internet date. They could saunter into a restaurant and meet whomever it was they'd communicated with and sit there making small talk without even a hint of nerves. But Ellie had had a pit-of-the-stomach feeling of anxiety all day, heightened when she spent hours trying to decide what would be appropriate to wear, and finally paralysing her as she stood outside of the restaurant door.

She wasn't the type to do internet dating: she'd been pushed into it by Debby. 'Think of me as the eighth dwarf, babes,' Debby had said. 'My name is Dating. I'm going to whistle a happy tune and be at your side and make sure you do this, OK? There's no way out.'

There was no way out. Debby had signed her up, chosen her profile picture, overseen all the personal information she'd offered up. They'd laughed so much as they did it that Ellie had thought it was all a joke. And it had been funny for a while, in an agonising way. It was mean, she knew, but Debby and she had laughed about the various men who had contacted her, all of them truly weird. Until Daniel Litman had popped up and they'd both thought: 'Whoa! This one's different.'

He was a nice-looking, forty-two-year-old oncologist who'd never been married.

'It doesn't get much better than this, babes,' Debby had said. 'No ex-wives, no children. An income. If you don't reply to him, I'll steal your identity and do it myself.'

'No way - he's mine,' she'd responded instantly, surprising herself. Up until that moment she hadn't been sure whether she'd actually moved on from Charlie, or was still too wounded by his betrayal to allow herself to consider a new relationship.

After two weeks of trading emails with Daniel, he'd suggested this dinner and she'd accepted.

But now she wished they'd had a coffee date instead. If it were too awkward, one or the other of them could make an excuse after five minutes and bolt for the door. But this was a fairly expensive restaurant, she knew. They couldn't get up and leave in the middle of the main course.

Two middle-aged women stood side by side, their backs to the restaurant's front window, smoking; Ellie wished she could join them so her loitering would have a purpose, but taking up smoking just to feel a little more comfortable for a few minutes was way too extreme. She went towards the door, then stepped back away from it.

*One more minute.*

'Hi, Daniel, nice to meet you,' she tried out. Or how about: 'Daniel, hey. It's great to see you'? Both sounded lame. Maybe: 'Listen, Daniel, I'm a nervous wreck. How are you?'

This meeting wasn't that important - she had to remember that. They'd exchanged a few emails and were getting together for a meal, that was all. It was only hugely meaningful to her because she hadn't been out with a man other than Charlie for seventeen years.

*No big deal, Debby had emailed. You're just putting a toe in the sea where plenty of other fish are swimming, if you see what I mean. I know I pushed you into signing on for this, but he seems like a nice guy. Just relax and talk to him, El. If you like each other maybe you can meet again. If not, well, adios.*

Which was fine for Debby to say, but she wasn't here. If she had been, she could have come with Ellie to the restaurant, given her a pep talk and sent her inside. Debby

had set this whole thing in motion and then – boom – taken off. ‘Sorry, kiddo, but I can’t turn down Cal Tech. Think about it . . . California. No snow. Movie stars. As much as I love you, you can’t compete with Rob Lowe.’

Emailing or talking on the phone with Debby wasn’t the same as actually having her here – but that was the whole purpose of the evening she was about to have, Ellie knew. She couldn’t keep trading emails with Daniel indefinitely.

*He’s just asked me to dinner. I want to say yes, but I’m nervous,* she’d typed in a Facebook chat with Debby.

*Say yes now. If you don’t have dinner with him, you might get into some email romance that works great in cyberspace but is a total bust in real life,* was the message back. *Don’t be nervous. Hell, you might fall desperately in love. And this time he won’t be a sewer rat like your cheating, lying creep of an ex-husband.*

*But what if he’s nothing like what I expect or I’m nothing like he expects? I’m not sure this is the way to meet someone. It feels so staged.*

*Staged-schmaged. People do this all the time now, El. Stop making up excuses and say yes.*

The two women simultaneously threw down their cigarettes on the sidewalk and stepped on them, then turned to go into the restaurant. Ellie looked at her watch: 8.05. He’d said he’d be at their table by eight and that he was never late – unless he had an emergency call, in which case he’d text to tell her.

She pulled out her cell phone. No messages.

He’d chosen Acquitaine because he lived in Chestnut Hill. She was glad he’d picked it rather than an even ritzier restaurant downtown. More casual was easier to dress for. After throwing clothes around her bedroom as if she were in a RomCom ‘what will I wear for this date?’ movie scene, she’d finally decided on what she’d tried on in the first place: black linen trousers, a white sleeveless shirt and a black jacket. And black, medium-heeled sandals. According

to his profile, Daniel was 5'11" - and she was about 5'5" in these shoes.

Not that she had killer high heels in her closet anyway. One of Charlie's rules. No stilettos. And no red nail polish.

'Women who wear red nail polish are whores or call girls,' he'd announced early on in their relationship. 'They may not think they are, but that's the signal they're sending. It's what they are underneath.'

When they were out at a party and a woman wearing red nail polish came up to them, Charlie would give Ellie a sidelong glance and meaningful nod, as if to say 'Clock the slut', and she'd be terrified those women could read the contempt in his eyes.

Stiletto heels were one step away from red nails in Charlie's mind. They weren't as absolutely hookerish, yet they signalled a louche attitude.

The almost laughable irony of these prejudices of his hit her with a knockout blow when she finally saw, in a photograph in the social pages of *Boston Magazine*, the woman he'd left her for. There she was, decked out in some designer dress, wearing impossibly high heels and bright red nail polish.

*She's ten years older than I am, she does all the things you didn't want me to do, and you fell head over heels in love with her. What's the deal, Charlie?*

Ellie had stared at it for way too long, her heart thumping, before throwing the magazine in the trash.

She hadn't worn high heels tonight, but she had painted her nails red in a small, but meaningful, gesture of independence.

*Enough. Stay outside any longer and Daniel will think you're rude.*

Taking a deep breath, Ellie pushed through the door and into the restaurant. Immediately on the left was the maître d's desk, and a young, dark-haired woman said 'Can I help

you?’ before Ellie had time to process the notion of walking straight back out.

‘I’m meeting someone . . . he should be here. Daniel Litman?’

The young woman looked down at a big book propped open on the lectern.

‘Yes, he’s here. Follow me, please.’

Ellie did, passing by the packed bar at the front, a few booths, and then into the main body of the restaurant, which looked like a classic French bistro with banquette tables lining mirrored walls. The place was buzzing; no surprise, given that it was a Thursday night in June. She could see students and their parents celebrating graduations; couples out on dates; and one table of six older women, two of whom were the smokers.

And then she spotted him at the table beside the smokers in the middle of the room. He was facing in towards the mirror. And he was looking at himself, combing back his hair with his hand – a gesture which instantly sent her back sixteen years.

She and Charlie had been playing a game of ‘what do you like/what do you hate’ a few weeks after they’d met.

*‘I hate it when men stare at themselves in mirrors in public places,’* had been near the top of her Hate List. And one of his, almost matching, had been: *‘I hate women who put on make up as they sit at a restaurant table.’*

Daniel Litman caught her eye in the mirror and immediately stood up, waving her over.

‘Ellie,’ he said as she reached him. ‘Hi.’

He took a step forward to give her a kiss on the cheek just as she put her hand out to shake his. In a comic reversal, he then stepped back and put his hand out as she stepped forward and withdrew hers.

‘Oops!’ he said. ‘Should we start again?’

He extended his hand and she shook it. She’d expected a bone-crunching handshake and was a little surprised when it

wasn't. It wasn't limp, though, and she was grateful to him, too, for that 'Shall we start again?' which made an embarrassing beginning a little easier.

'I hope this restaurant is all right,' he said as she took her seat on the banquette opposite him. 'It was selfish of me to choose a place near where I live, I'm sorry. You probably would have preferred downtown.'

'No, no, this is great. I've been here before. I like it.'

'I wanted to get a table at the back but they were all taken.' He sat down and smiled at her.

'Why did you want one in the back?'

'To make a quick getaway out the back door if you weren't who I thought you were when you arrived. Wait a second.' He held up his hand. 'Don't look at me like that. You know how people put up doctored pictures of themselves online.'

Debby had told her people sometimes posted fake pictures, but the way he'd immediately introduced the topic sounded as if he'd done a lot of internet dating. Which wasn't what he'd said in his emails.

'Oh, God.' He sighed. 'Sorry again. That makes me sound like an old hand at this business. I'm not, I swear. This is only the third time I've met someone this way. All I meant by that was that you never know who's who in this internet world, you know? I guess it was a tasteless thing to say.'

Daniel looked exactly as he had in his photograph. Blondish, with a rugged physique as if he played a sport or climbed mountains. Which he didn't, she knew. And he had the same baby-face as in his photograph, one that was oddly out of synch with his physical heftiness and was surprising in a forty-two-year-old. She found herself wondering whether his patients would have preferred it if he'd had a craggy, creased face. When you were putting your life in a doctor's hands, you might want him to look older and wiser, be more reassured by an aura of experience.

'What I should have said was: you look as terrific as your photo,' Daniel continued. 'Would you like a glass of wine?'

'Yes, please.'

'Red or white?'

'Red, please.'

'Excellent. Let's decide what we're going to eat and drink and get that out of the way. Then we can get down to the talking business.'

'OK. Fine.'

He was good at getting the waitress's attention: they were given the menus, had time to look at them and then ordered without having to wait for ages in between each stage. Ellie's glass of wine arrived quickly too.

'Cheers to our first meeting,' said Daniel, picking up his glass of white.

'Cheers,' she replied.

She'd met Charlie at a party given by Rebecca, a friend of hers who lived off campus at BU. She'd been in Rebecca's kitchen, looking for a glass of water after eating too many salty peanuts, when Charlie had walked in looking for a Coke in the fridge. They'd started talking, and ended up staying in the kitchen talking until 2 a.m. It had been so easy, so natural, and so completely unlike this contrived dinner.

'I really admire the work you do, Daniel,' she said, after taking her first sip of wine. 'Being an oncologist must be difficult.'

'It's not fun. But it's rewarding.'

'I was thinking on the way over here: everyone must be in such bad shape when they come to you. They must be so nervous and upset and terrified. It's the word cancer, isn't it? The way it's used in everyday language - you know, "terrorism is like a cancer spreading through the world". You'd never say "terrorism is like a heart attack spreading through the world".'

*That sounds rehearsed. Because it was.*

But he nodded, as if he were interested, and she relaxed a little.

'You're right. The word cancer carries so much weight because of the nature of the disease, how insidious it is. Heart attacks don't spread. Cancer does. Of course that doesn't mean heart attacks don't kill.'

'Of course not.'

'And you're right about my job, too. People *are* nervous and upset when they see me. In fact, no one wants to see me. But then again, no one wants to see any doctor, not really. Or, for that matter, any dentist.' He smiled a smile that made her think he went to his own dentist often.

It was so odd to know a little bit about him, but then again, not really anything. She'd liked the way he'd answered the various personal questions on the dating site; he had a sense of humour and there was nothing weird, desperate or self-aggrandising about him. And the emails they'd traded had been short but fun. As nervous as she'd been about meeting him, Ellie had looked forward to seeing him in person. But that didn't change the fact that they were, effectively, strangers.

Still, she reminded herself, almost everyone on a first date barely knew the other person.

'I should be upfront right away.' Daniel leaned towards her, brushed away the lock of blond hair that had fallen over his forehead. 'I hate talking about cancer. I live with it all day. And if I go out there are always people asking me questions because they know someone who has it and they want me to fix it. The truth is, I can't stand to talk about it at night or when I'm not working.'

'I can understand that. Totally.'

Ellie began to search her mind for other topics of conversation, but within seconds realised that his job was one of the reasons she'd been drawn to Daniel: she didn't want to discuss cancer at length, but the fact that he helped sick people, actually *saved* people, amazed her.

In her imagination he'd been immensely kind and compassionate - which he could well be - but she had to admit that that first sight of him looking at himself in the mirror had immediately made her wary of him. It was an instinctive response of hers and it wasn't fair. She had to forget about that and try harder.

'So . . . you should tell me about your son,' he said, before she'd had time to think of another question to ask him. 'Tim. He's fifteen, right? Where is he tonight?'

'He's out with friends. It's his last night in the city except on weekends with his father because we're moving tomorrow. Which makes my coming out tonight pretty insane, but - oh, God - I already told you that in my emails, didn't I?'

'Yes. But I haven't told you that / may be moving too. Further than you are. I applied for a job in London a while ago and it looks like I've got it. I just found out this afternoon. So unless there's a hitch, I'm going to England for the next two years. I'll be leaving on Sunday.'

The waitress arrived with their first courses and set them down.

This announcement of his was disconcerting. It wasn't as if she'd been practising writing 'Ellie Litman', but she'd felt as if she'd taken a major step forward by allowing herself to get excited about a man. She'd signed up for the online dating mostly because of Debby's insistence, not really expecting to meet anyone she cared about when she did. So when Daniel had appeared in cyberspace, she'd been surprised and delighted. Even the whole drama of getting dressed for this date had been exciting, reminding her of what it felt like to have expectations. Now he was leaving the country before she had a chance to get to know him.

'I'm not absolutely sure whether I'm going yet,' Daniel said. 'It's all about politics. People who aren't involved in the medical world don't know how political it can be. I can't begin to tell you . . .'

But he did begin to tell her, and he continued, in detail. She tried to keep up with all the different names of the many doctors and administrators he mentioned, and she tried even harder to hear everything he was saying and blot out the background noise. But the women at the table beside theirs were being so boisterous she found herself leaning forward and surreptitiously cupping her ears.

Almost all of what he was saying sailed straight over Ellie's head. He was clearly passionate about his subject and she admired that, yet she didn't know the people involved in his stories and the politics of the medical world were beyond her. At various points, her thoughts would stray - to Tim, to the move the next day - and then she'd mentally nudge herself and try to concentrate. His emails had been short. Now he was being so expansive she was having problems figuring out where one story stopped and another began.

They'd finished their main course, and he'd been as adept at managing to eat and talk at the same time as he had been at getting the waitress's attention.

Did she like him? she asked herself as he began an anecdote about a backstabbing, competitive colleague.

Yes.

Kind of.

He was intelligent, occasionally funny. And his bluey-green eyes were appealing.

But nothing was actually drawing her to him and her initial feeling of disappointment when he told her he might be moving was fading. She felt completely separate from him, almost as if she were watching him on television, not sitting a few feet away.

As inappropriate as her flashbacks were, she couldn't help but compare this meeting once more to her first with Charlie. That hadn't been love at first sight, but it hadn't been far from it. Love at first night was more like it. Because by the time they left that kitchen and he was walking her back to her dorm, she'd fallen for him. Completely,

absolutely, stomach-churningly. For weeks afterwards, she'd feel her stomach roiling any time she was in his presence.

'What's happened to you, Ellie? You're so skittish all of a sudden,' her mother had commented when she'd gone back home to New York for the holidays a week after she and Charlie had met. She hadn't responded, but later on her mother had narrowed her eyes, stared over the kitchen table at her and said, 'You're skittish *and* you're not eating. What's his name?'

*'Happy birthday to you . . .'*

Jolted, Ellie looked around and saw their waitress and two waiters approaching the next table with a birthday cake. She switched her gaze back to Daniel who half-smiled and rolled his eyes, then joined in the singing of 'Happy Birthday' with the rest of the restaurant clientele. Ellie did as well, self-conscious about her awful singing voice. Five of the women stood up while one sat and received the cake. They all whooped and applauded as she blew out the candles.

'I *should* have gotten us a table at the back - but not so I could sneak out the door - to avoid all this noise. Oops again.'

'Oops' was so not what she'd imagine a successful forty-two-year-old oncologist saying, she couldn't help but wonder what Daniel's patients would think if he said it during a consultation.

'In any event, I've been droning on about hospital politics - we still haven't talked about you. I've enjoyed your emails.'

'Thanks. And I've enjoyed yours too. But it's so weird, this whole internet business.'

'I know. Absolutely. I don't know why I ever signed up for the whole thing: a friend convinced me to. And OK, I know everyone says that, but it's true. She said I'm too obsessed by work and it's criminal to be forty-two years old and

unmarried and not dating. She said this was the easy way to do things.'

'Same here.' Ellie smiled. 'I mean, a friend of mine convinced me, and I'm telling the truth too.'

'But this really is such a strange way of meeting people, isn't it?' He leaned forward. They were bonding over their shared discomfort.

'Completely crazy.'

'I Googled you, you know. That sounds so intrusive, but it's gotten to be a reflex action these days.' His lock of blond hair fell forward again and he brushed it back. She found herself imagining him with a hair band, fixing it so it wouldn't fall, and smothered a smile. 'Anyway, I couldn't find you. There were a lot of Ellie Walterses but none that seemed to be you. Did you Google me?'

'Yes.' She blushed. 'My friend Debby, the one who convinced me to do this - she told me to, just to make sure you were who you said you were.'

'Hey, don't apologise. Everyone does it. Sometimes I think that even though technology is supposed to bring us all closer together, it's actually making us more distant and suspicious of each other. We sit alone at our computers sending messages out into cyberspace and checking up on people instead of actually interacting in person. But, hey, I shouldn't be saying that. I'm pro-science. I shouldn't be dissing technology.'

'Sometimes I wonder how email has changed the way people write; whether when they used to write real letters they wrote differently. More intimately, or something.'

'Probably. So tell me, Ellie. Have you ever been to Europe? Do you like to travel?'

She felt immediately wrong-footed. He'd changed the course of the conversation unexpectedly and asked her a typical 'getting to know you' question just when she thought she actually was getting to know him better.

'I went to Paris once,' she replied, not adding 'on my honeymoon'. 'I've always wanted to go back to Europe. You must be excited about the the idea of moving to London.'

'Absolutely. I've been to London before, of course, but working there, seeing for myself what the National Health Service is like, that would be really fascinating.'

He was off again, discussing the pros and cons of universal healthcare with the same intensity he'd talked about hospital politics. For an instant she'd thought they might have a conversation about writing emails, writing letters, how people communicated with each other, but that didn't happen. And she really didn't want him to fire questions like 'do you like to travel?' or 'what are your hobbies?' at her. They'd more or less covered all that in their online profiles.

*It was all so much easier online. Sitting on the spot like this, being asked questions, is so awkward. And what do I have to say? My husband left me for another woman eighteen months ago. I've been married to him since I was twenty and I have no idea what life is like out in the single world.*

*So, why did he leave you, Ellie?*

*Even if he didn't ask it, he'd be wondering. Women sympathise with you when something like that happens. Scared that they might be next in the firing line. But men can't help but think of you as somebody some other man dumped.*

The rest of the meal went by quickly as Daniel talked about living and working in London and then caught himself again, apologising once more for monopolising the conversation.

'I keep meaning to ask you . . . why Bourne? Of all the places to move to, why did you choose there?'

A few mintes before, he'd signalled for the bill and before she had a chance to reply, it arrived. She reached into her purse to pay her share, but he had already pulled out a wad

of cash and was handing it to the waiter. 'This is on me, Ellie. You're in my neighbourhood, I pay.'

'That's incredibly nice of you.'

'No problem. You still haven't told me - why Bourne?'

'My aunt rented a house on Mashnee Island in Bourne when I was fourteen and I spent two weeks there in the summer. I had an amazing time, and when I thought about moving out of Boston, Bourne was the first place that came into my head.'

'It's at the very beginning of the Cape, right?'

'Yes, just over the bridge.'

There was a strained silence and she was struggling to think of a way to fill it when he said: 'Listen, you've probably figured out by now that I'm not very good at small talk - or medium talk. I either talk my head off like I'm in a presidential debate and I'm the only candidate or I try to be funny. You haven't heard me try to be funny yet. You're lucky. Anyway, that's why I've never married, I guess.' He winced. 'I'm very good at my job, I'm very comfortable in it, but I'm not good - or comfortable - with this dating business.'

This self-effacing confession touched her heart; it was more like the Daniel she'd met online and she wished he'd said it at the beginning of the evening. He was nervous too. For some reason she hadn't considered he'd be feeling the same way she was.

'I'm not comfortable with the dating business either, Daniel.'

'You seem fine to me.'

'I haven't dated anyone since I met my ex-husband when I was nineteen. Even the idea of dating makes me nervous.'

'Well, listen, could I see you again if something unexpected happens and I don't go to London?'

How could she say no after what he'd just said about himself and dating? And she wasn't sure that she wanted to say no. She'd had mixed reactions towards him: doubtless

he'd had mixed reactions to her. A first date was a first date. It hadn't been straightforwardly fantastic, but it hadn't been a disaster either.

'Sure. We can keep in touch and you can let me know what's happening, whether you've moved or not.'

'Great. I won't hog the conversation next time, if there is a next time, I promise.'

'You didn't hog anything. What you were talking about was really interesting, honestly. I had a very nice evening.'

'OK then. Great. I guess it's time to go.' He didn't look at himself in the mirror before he stood up and he didn't try to take her arm or elbow to guide her out - both plus points.

She'd called a taxi on her cell phone as they were having their coffee. With any luck, it would be outside waiting for her.

'Take care of yourself, Ellie,' he said when they reached the sidewalk. 'You know, moving to Bourne might be a great thing for you. Think about it. You can be Bourne again!'

'Daniel . . .'

'I know, I know. Lousy joke. I told you, I can't help but try to be funny. So I bet you'll be glad to get rid of me. Look, there's your taxi. Perfect timing.'

A Red Cab pulled up and the passenger-side window zoomed down. Daniel leaned in and spoke to the driver, then turned back to her.

'Yup, it's yours. Goodnight, Ellie. Thanks for putting up with me.'

He went to kiss her as she put her hand out - an exact replay of their first meeting. This time they both laughed and he went ahead and kissed her on the cheek. She climbed into the taxi, gave the driver the address, then gave Daniel a wave as they drove off.

She collapsed against the back of the seat, realising when she did just how tense she'd been the whole time she'd been sitting on the restaurant banquette.

*That's it. It was all right, but I'm not going on that dating site again. If he stays and asks to see me again, I might say yes. But I'm not trawling cyberspace any more. It's too strange a way to meet someone.*

*And what if Tim found out? Debby can say everyone does this now, but how embarrassed would I be if he knew I had done this?*

The cab driver put his wipers on; Ellie watched the rain belting against the windshield as they travelled down Beacon Street. Outside one of the bars they passed, a young couple stood, clearly looking to wave down a taxi. The woman was pregnant, the man had his arm around her. Ellie turned in her seat, kept looking at them as they sped by.

*That was Charlie and me fifteen years ago, she thought. Young and happy and together, planning our future.*

*You think you know someone and then they do something you never expected them to and your heart stumbles around, reeling, like a bad drunk at a horrendous party.*

But she was making headway. She was getting there, wherever there was. Away from Boston anyway. Tomorrow she and Tim would be out of this city, away from Charlie. They'd be living on the water with a view of their own.

She missed Debby, though. Hugely. Debby had a kind of magic to her, a way of bringing out the fun in any situation, seeing the absurdity and humour and going straight for it, whisking Ellie along with her.

'Jesus, you're almost as short as I am,' she'd said, the first time they'd gotten on the apartment building's elevator together. 'Please tell me you're the one who's just moved in on the fifth floor. I so need another short person in my life.'

Laughing, Ellie had said 'That's me', and their friendship began.

Every time she saw Debby, she pictured her playing Annie on Broadway, with her red hair and freckles, singing her heart out and dancing around. The idea of Debby teaching

at MIT and being a maths prodigy was unimaginable. 'Are you telling me you can stand still in one place for more than five minutes? I don't believe you,' Ellie had said to her when she found out.

'Believe it, kiddo. I'm a fucking genius. Forget that at your peril,' was the reply.

Debby liked dissecting people's characters as if they were frogs in a laboratory. And when it came to Charlie, she did it with a vengeance.

'You know, your ex is a wannabee WASP with a chip on his shoulder,' she had stated one night when they were sharing a bottle of wine in her apartment.

'Deb, you've never met him.'

'As if I need to meet him! You told me he's from a working-class background, right? And he's pulled himself up by his Gucci bootstraps . . . not that Gucci shoes *have* straps or anything except those little gold bracelets on them. I mean, what's with that? Who thought of putting bracelets on men's shoes? And now you're telling me he joined the Country Club? That place teeming with all those dyed-in-J.Crew WASPS? It doesn't get any more social-ladder-climbing than that. His hands must be calloused as hell.

'Except . . . wait a second . . .'

She took a swig of her wine, stood up, sat down again. 'Has he made it into the *Social Register*? That big black book with anyone who's anyone's name and address and telephone number? Like Facebook for snobs only without the internet part. Don't tell me he's in that thing?'

'No, not yet anyway. I know he'd like to be in it, though.'

'Oh my God! What's that bird that never lands? An albatross, right? His ego is like an albatross. Just keeps flying. And now he's swanned off with Sandra fucking Cabot, precisely because she *is* a fucking Cabot. What's that rhyme they say? Wait a second . . . right, I've got it: "Welcome to Massachusetts, the land of the bean and the cod, where the Lodges speak only to Cabots and the Cabots speak only to

God.” Charlie bagged a Cabot . . . It’s so predictable, guys trading up. But he’s put a spin on it, hasn’t he? Because she’s older than him. Where’d he meet her anyway?’

‘I don’t know. The Cougar Club?’

Debby laughed and Ellie did too, relieved that time and a sense of humour could make a subject that had once been so painful almost palatable.

‘I don’t know how you lived with that idiot. Thank God you don’t have to speak to him any more. I understand you have to be civil to him because of Tim, but at least you don’t have to have any real contact with him. Let’s toast to that.’ Standing up again, Debby had clinked her glass against Ellie’s.

Ellie stood too and took a sip, feeling uneasy. If Debby had actually met Charlie, she wouldn’t dismiss him so breezily. Ellie could picture him, sitting in a chair, one leg slung over the other, eyes narrowed, asking Debby questions, concentrating on her with that considered way he had. Charlie didn’t make you feel like the only person in the room when he talked to you, he made you feel like the only other person on a desert island – one you had no desire to leave because he was on it with you.

He wasn’t classically attractive: he was short – only a half-inch taller than Ellie was, his eyes were disconcertingly close together, he had a mole on the side of his face which he’d often touch when he was concentrating. Charlie wasn’t about his physical appearance; he was about his pull. People used that word ‘pull’ all the time now, instead of ‘scored’ when it came to dating, but Charlie’s pull wasn’t just about getting someone into bed; it was also to do with finding out exactly how they ticked, reaching into their psyche and gently lulling them as he lifted out information.

Debby could call him an idiot, but Ellie knew Debby would have been entranced by Charlie too, if he’d chosen to focus on her.

But she sipped her wine and kept quiet. Debby had labelled Charlie an egomaniac social climber. She liked making jokes at his expense and Ellie wasn't going to stop her. Defending him would be pointless and she didn't want to do it anyway. Charlie had left her. Charlie had gone.

The taxi pulled over to the side of the road in front of her apartment building. Ellie paid the driver then ran in, throwing her jacket over her head to shelter her from the rain.

I want Debby, she thought as she got in the elevator. I want to knock on her door now and tell her to come over and I'll debrief her on tonight. I want her to make me laugh.

Her apartment was as close to empty as it could get. For the past week she and Tim had been using sleeping bags on the floor, and she'd kept back only a few plates, pots and pieces of cutlery. Everything else was waiting for them at the cottage in Bourne.

Ellie had always thought of this place as temporary, so seeing it like this wasn't upsetting. When the divorce happened, Charlie had sold their three-bedroomed apartment in Back Bay, overlooking the Charles River, and they had split the proceeds. Instead of buying a new place, as he had done, she'd decided to rent. Because she knew she had to have some time to form a plan; she was too shaken to make any permanent decisions.

As the months went by, the plan gradually took shape. She wanted out of Boston. There were too many damaging memories here. If she were going to start a new life, she wanted to start it in a new place. Not too far from Boston, so Tim could visit his father easily, but away from the city. In the place she'd loved so much when she was fourteen years old: Cape Cod.

Finding a place she liked, buying it, moving into it, were part of the process of taking control of her own life; a new feeling for her. She'd always relied on Charlie before; even

her part-time job in the Museum of Fine Arts had been one he had engineered through friends of his.

This move was symbolic on all sorts of levels. Tim was upset about it, but he was having big problems at his school and Ellie truly believed a new place, new school and new start would help him too.

*One more night. Tomorrow at this time we'll be in the cottage.*

Taking her jacket off, she went into her bedroom, sat on the floor and turned her laptop on.

*Hey, Deb,*

*I so wish you were here so I could tell you about my night in person. Anyway, it was fine but I haven't fallen desperately in love and he hasn't either. Which is probably a really good thing because it looks like he's moving to London for two years.*

*We said we'd get together again if he didn't move. So - what else can I tell you? He was nice. But . . . he said 'oops' twice. Which was endearing, sort of. But it's a little too Hugh Grant, isn't it?*

*So, MY big move tomorrow! Tim is still not happy about this, but I think he will be when we get there and he sees how beautiful it is.*

*It's funny - you're on the Pacific and now I'll be on the Atlantic. I hope I find a friend like you in Bourne, but that's not going to be easy, I know. I really, really wish you hadn't moved.*

*OK I've had two glasses of wine and I'm going to get ready for bed.*

*Sorry Daniel and I haven't run off into the sunset. I know you would have LOVED that.*

*I miss you tons.*

*Love, Ellie.*

She shut off the computer, went to her cupboard and pulled out a pair of pyjamas. Tim was staying the night with his friends, so she didn't have to worry about him coming

home late. She'd get into bed now, read a little and fall asleep.

Just as she put on her pyjama top, she heard the sound of a siren.

Police car or ambulance?

It didn't matter which.

She sat down on the bed. The images were creeping in; she could sense them stealing in sideways, like some horrible slime oozing under a door.

*Breathe in.*

*It didn't happen.*

*Breathe out.*

*It didn't happen.*

Why? Why did she have to go to Starbucks that morning? Why did she have to overhear what the people at the next table were talking about?

All this time she'd managed to push the memories away but since that morning at Starbucks she'd felt them massing at the periphery of her mind; little things, tiny reminders, beckoning them back.

'Start with your toes, Ellie. Clench them, then unclench them. Now your ankles. Right. Move up your body, clenching and unclenching. Relax.' She heard an echo of Dr Emmanuel's voice. 'All right. Now do your breathing exercises. And let yourself forget.'

*Breathe in.*

*It didn't happen.*

*Breathe out.*

*It didn't happen.*

*It never happened.*

*It never happened.*

The memories began to recede. Her brain cleared.

Ellie opened her eyes. The sirens had gone.

## 2

### *5 June*

This was not a great beginning. It was such a crucially important day, but everything seemed to be going wrong. The rain had been pelting down non-stop, with no sign of letting up, and they were stuck on the Bourne Bridge, wedged in a late Friday afternoon June traffic jam.

Tim kept fidgeting, taking his seatbelt off, pulling it as far as it could go, putting it back on, taking it off again. He was driving Ellie crazy and he knew he was. This was his way of saying: 'Mom, you're screwing up my life. There's no way I want to move to Bourne. Don't think I'm going to pretend to be happy about it.'

In the mood he was in, if she asked him to stop playing with his seatbelt he'd do it even more.

The car ahead of her moved two feet forward, and everyone behind followed; as if they'd won something precious, as if this were a war and they'd moved those crucial feet further into enemy territory. Tim stretched his seatbelt again, pretended to be fascinated with it, while Ellie stared out the windshield, praying that the rain would stop and the traffic would clear.

This wasn't how she had pictured this trip. They should have been speeding over this bridge, windows down, catching a glimpse of the Cape Cod Canal beneath them. A week ago, when she'd made the same drive, the sun had been shining, the water had been glittering and sparkling, and she had imagined Tim, sitting beside her as he was now - except she'd envisioned him excited and impressed, maybe even saying 'Awesome' as he peered down at the sailboats.

A week ago she'd crossed this bridge in no time; she'd made it from Boston to the cottage in eighty-five minutes, and spent all afternoon unpacking and making the place look nice for Tim. She'd been so happy and so full of an unimaginable sense of freedom, she'd danced around the cottage by herself, like a teenager before a party.

*You're driving me crazy - enough of the seatbelt-pulling.*

*No, don't say it.*

*He'll say something sarcastic back and you'll end up arguing and this day will become even more of a disaster.*

*'So, I put blue sheets on your bed.'*

*'Great.'*

When Tim was a child, he'd loved blue sheets for some reason, and they became his special treat. Now she was hoping to get him to revert and be that little boy again, the one who cared about something silly like sheets and who adored his mother, instead of the truculent fifteen-year-old whose mother irritated the hell out of him.

Ellie didn't know whether he was being a typical teenage boy or whether he was suffering more from the divorce than he'd let on. When it happened he'd seemed to take it reasonably well, but as hard as she tried to get him to talk, he'd never opened up to her about it. And then he'd done badly at school, flunking out of his year.

Now she was taking him away from his friends. Of course he'd be angry; she understood that. But what if he'd stayed in Boston and had to repeat his year there? She knew he'd hated that idea with a passion. And if he had moved to a new school in Boston, his friends wouldn't have been there either.

Meanwhile Charlie had been pressuring him to work like a demon and apply to a boarding school. The thought of sending Tim away like that made Ellie feel sick.

She leaned forward, hunched over the steering wheel. They were right in the middle of the bridge now, at the top of the hump.