

I Love Capri

An Italian Love Story



BELINDA JONES

About the Author

Belinda Jones's first paid job was on cult kiddy comic *Postman Pat*. Since then she has written for a multitude of magazines and newspapers including *Sunday*, *Daily Express*, *Empire*, *FHM*, *heat*, *New Woman* and *more!* magazine where she was a staff writer for four years. Belinda's widely acclaimed first novel, *Divas Las Vegas*, was voted No. 2 in the *New Woman* Bloody Good Reads Awards in 2001 and *On the Road to Mr Right* - a non-fiction travelogue love quest was a *Sunday Times* top ten best-seller.

Also by Belinda Jones

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I LOVE CAPRI

Belinda Jones



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For my mother - Pamela Gwyther
(and everyone who's ever had a love affair with Italy)

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1

Is £5,000 enough to change your life?

It doesn't sound much compared to the loot offered on 21st century game shows but the reason I ask is that I woke up this morning £5,000 richer. I didn't even do anything to deserve it - an old man in a foreign country dies and I get a lump sum transferred into my account. (Now that's what I call pennies from heaven.) No mourning required - I've never even met him - just *spending*.

So now I'm standing here holding the cash in my hands. We're talking one hundred bank-spanking new £50 notes. I feel compelled to fan them out like I'm in an ad for the *Sun* bingo and do a gleeful little dance.

It was my mother's idea to change up the money into high-calibre currency - she said I would have more respect for its worth that way. It sounded elitist at the time - only top-end notes command respect - but she had a point: you can bet your bottom buck that a £50 note will never experience the humiliating origami-scrumpling that fivers get subjected to as you ram your change into your purse at a busy M&S checkout. I pity the poor, hard-working relations with their tattered edges, biro squiggles and smudges of chip grease. No amount of money laundering will get them clean.

Mum (who is always trying to change the way I look at things) went on to suggest that I spend some quality time with the money and feel a sense of duty to do something special with it. I have to indulge her. The old man was her father.

I take one of the pristine notes and hold it up in front of my lava lamp. The holographic foil looks like a transfer that's

just been smoothed into place. I can tell these babies expect to go shopping at Voyage or recline on a silver platter alongside a bill for a bottle of Cristal champagne but I've got rather different plans. The second the £ signs ker-chinged on to my eyeballs I knew what I'd spend it on - Cleo and I had fantasized about it long enough. And yet we've avoided saying it out loud for a good two hours . . .

'Look! I'm a lapdancer!' titters Cleo, tucking a wodge of cash into her bra and thrusting her wannabe-cleavage in my face.

As that most freakish of creatures - dream flatmate - Cleo has more than earned a cut of my inheritance. Two years ago I was a mass of sodden tissues following a mangling break-up and she was the only person who understood that I needed to hide. Everyone else expected me to bounce back and be all *Destiny's Child Survivor* about it. (I'm still waiting for my surge of 'I'm Stronger!/Wiser!/Sassier!' empowerment.) We hardly knew each other at the time but she even upped sticks from Sheffield to coax me through the agonizing miseries and we've been best friends ever since.

I think part of the reason we clicked is that Cleo was a twin in the womb but only she survived the birth and she's always felt half of her was missing. Until me. Somehow I seem to fill in the blanks. In fact, she's such a good person I sometimes feel like her evil twin. Not that I do anything bad *per se*. It's just that compared to her sunny self, I'm a bit of a grump. She doesn't seem to mind. Cleo asks very little of life and in return life gives her just that. I'd like to think that one day I can do as much for her as she's done for me. All the same, I don't want her impaling these precious £50s on an underwire.

'Stop! You'll scrumple them!' I say, retrieving the dosh and smoothing it back to perfection.

'Since when did you give two hoots about money?' Cleo flumps on to our giant pink sofa. (Neither of us is

particularly girly but it seemed the least grown-up colour option and my mother thought it was vile so that pretty much sealed the deal.)

‘Since I actually got some! Show a little respect,’ I reply.

‘Sorry!’ Cleo humphs, then fakes an *a-a-a-TISHOO!* sneeze into one of the notes.

I give a testy sigh and get back to the tricky business of trying to decide what to spend the money on.

‘We could blow it on a luxury cruise around the Caribbean. I think that’s actually compulsory when you come into a few thou,’ I frown.

‘Only you don’t like the humidity,’ Cleo reminds me.

‘And you’re allergic to coconuts,’ I counter.

‘And we’d miss too much good TV.’

‘If we hadn’t bought our Sony home cinema system last year we could have paid for that,’ I sigh, taking a moment to behold our rear-projection/surround-sound extravaganza. Our shrine. It wiped out all our savings but if you tot up the hours of pleasure it has brought us, it works out as an absolute bargain.

‘We could re-decorate . . .’ I say, looking around our dinky but deliciously toasty flat. One thing we can’t seem to get enough of is cushions, especially those shaggy-sheep and faux-fur ones. Our most recent indulgence was a pair of duvets specifically for cosying up the sofa on video nights. We could do with a trunk to store them in. And maybe some bigger trays to accommodate Cleo’s ever more adventurous dinners. (She’s into multiple taste sensations at the moment – each served in its own little dish, like tapas. I think she got the idea from *Ready, Steady, Cook* – trying to create as many variations as possible from a set number of ingredients.)

‘I’d quite like some new coasters,’ I say, looking at the coffee table Cleo’s brother Marlon made out of a door he found in a skip.

'That still leaves £4,988. You need to think bigger,' Cleo advises.

'Champagne!' I whoop.

'Just how drunk do you want to get?' Cleo hoots.

'No! I bought some to celebrate,' I say, scampering to the kitchen. It's corner shop fizz that tastes like sherry zapped through one of those old Soda Stream machines but it'll do. (The off-licence is just that little bit too far at the moment.)

As I reach for the corkscrew, I catch sight of my sloppy-joe reflection in the window.

'New wardrobe?' I suggest.

'I'm happy with our clothes rail,' Cleo boom-booms.

'Very funny. If we used my mum's staff discount at Woodward's we could get a whole new rack of stuff.'

'I think you already own every style of pyjama known to mankind.'

'Meaning?'

'Kim, you never leave the house - I can't remember the last time I saw you dressed.'

'You only go as far as PhotoFinish,' I pout.

When Cleo decided she wanted to move to Cardiff and set up the Cleo Buchanan Home for the Emotionally Challenged she requested a transfer from the Sheffield branch of the done-in-a-flash photo lab she's worked at since she left college, but they didn't have an equivalent managerial position available. Even though she had to go down a level, she took the job. Such is her loyalty to me. However, it would seem that selected highlights from the Kaliko summer collection are not the way to repay her kindness.

'The last thing I need is a makeover from your mother. Everyone she dresses looks like they're either going to a wedding or about to read the news. I am New Look. Always have been, always will be.'

'Fair enough. But I might go travelling again. I'd need at least four new business suits if I took that job in Paris.'

It sounds flashier than it is. It's also already gone. I dithered too long and they gave the contract to someone else, as Cleo rams home: 'You've been offered three amazing jobs overseas in the past six months and you've turned every one of them down so you can carry on translating computer games into German in a basement flat in Cardiff.'

She's got a point. In the beginning the idea of a jet-set lifestyle was the reason I studied so many languages, and they came so easily to me. It was such a kick being good at something and I felt a real citizen of the world. But then I became too game, too open, too trusting. After my last spectacularly disastrous trip to Sweden (whatever gives you the idea that there was a man involved?!) I swore 'never again'. I'd had my fun. That was two years ago, and now I like staying in. I've even stopped missing the adventures. Okay, so what I do now isn't glamorous but at least I don't have to stare at the hairy ears of international delegates or smell the noxious aftershave of fashion designers or wish it was my hand a Latin pop star was touching and not the flirty female interviewer from *Glamour* magazine. Really, it takes gooseberryness to new levels: you're serving a vital purpose - helping these people to communicate with each other - and yet they don't even acknowledge your presence.

You get used to it, of course, being ignored. Lucky for me, I got in a fair bit of practice over the years with countless dinners to introduce me to my mother's latest beau. Each time I'd become redundant after the first flush of introductions. I couldn't bear the awkwardness of them trying to include me in their pet-name conversations so I became adept at blanding out - you'd barely notice I was there. I'd sit imagining I was being paid not to react and deduct money every time I made a sarcastic remark or felt the need to defend my father, who left when I was nine. (Because of *her*, I have to point out. She drove him to it.) Anyway, now when I'm on a translating job I show no

expression at all, even when the person I'm speaking for is telling a joke or getting all steamed up. As my trainer told me, you're not re-enacting what they are saying, just repeating it, like a human tickertape.

My one unfulfilled ambition is to be one of the interpreters that speak for Miss World contestants. I've always thought they could help the girls out a bit with their answers. You know, the host asks, 'So, what two things do you think would make the world a happier place?' and in her native tongue she replies, 'An end to war and hunger.' But the interpreter could say, 'Laughing gas and calorie-free chocolate' and she would win the crown! Or better yet, 'When I look this good, does it really matter what I think?'

Maybe one day I'll get to do that. In the meantime the computer game contract suits me fine. Besides, the pay is better as I remind Cleo. 'Think of all the real holidays we can take with the extra money I'm earning!'

'Kim, you haven't been abroad in two years. The cat gets more use out of the suitcase than you.'

'I'll have you know I speak six languages.'

'Of which Spanish is your second most fluent and you've never even been to Spain.'

'I might go.'

'In which case I take it all back,' she mock-strops. 'There: FLAMENCO DRESS is top of the list!'

I peer at our heavily-doodled page of *Ways to Spend £5,000*.

'Happy?' Cleo snaps.

'I hate shopping,' I moan.

'Me too.'

We become briefly transfixed by our feet - 'I'm actually sprouting hairs on my big toe!' 'Me too!' - then I flip to the underwear section of our Freemans catalogue, scribble a quick calculation in the corner and say, 'How about 312 pairs of hold-your-blubberty-bits-in knickers?'

Cleo knows what's coming next and turns to me expectantly.

My heart starts to hammer and my mouth goes dry. I can't believe that after months of wishful thinking and speculation (beginning way before the money landed in our laps) I now have the power to make our greatest desire a reality.

'Or . . .' I begin, palpitating wildly.

Cleo takes a breath and exhales the word 'Or . . .', daring me to go on.

I reach for her hand and together we scream: '*LIPOSUCTION!!!*'

When you've got thousands of pounds at your disposal, potentially disfiguring surgery is really the only option.

Toasting our decision, Cleo and I prepare to indulge in our favourite pastime: playing Who's Got the Grossest Bulgy Bit?

'You know how people say cellulite is like cottage cheese?'

'Yes,' I say.

'I think mine is the variety that comes with pineapple chunks!'

'That's nothing,' I giggle, sitting forward. 'Check out my Buddha-belly. You don't get a figure like this from eating raw seaweed!'

'I'm sure there's got to be some tribe in the world who'd consider us goddesses,' Cleo reflects.

'There is,' I assert. 'They're called cannibals. We'd be the equivalent of a KFC bucket for six to them.'

We fall about laughing. Okay, we're only a size 14 but for some reason we find it amusing to torture ourselves about our bodies. And what better way to celebrate the prospect of becoming fat-free femmes fatales than with a dummy run of our first plastic surgery consultation . . .

Taking turns with the red felt-tip pen, we mark the 'gotta go' areas. Despite the fact that the pen runs out of ink before we're done we still manage to look like human

jigsaws. Before we move on to attempting home facelifts with Sellotape we stand side by side in front of the full-length mirror and decide that if we pooled our resources we could probably come up with a half-decent-looking woman: Cleo's long legs (her cellulite is imaginary), sleek shoulders and auburn hair, my 36C boobs, cat's eyes and disproportionately dainty wrists. Then we consider the monster our reject parts would form and are suddenly so grateful for what we've got that we nearly talk ourselves out of surgery altogether.

But no. That would be silly - it's our dream.

We've already chosen the clinic. Months before the windfall we whiled away a gap in our TV schedule by flicking through our leaning tower of women's mags and scrutinizing the back page ads offering plastic surgery: you know the ones where they show a dimpled, saggy crone next to some busty pert-buttocked nymph and claim it's a genuine before and after shot?

'Yeah, before and after the body double entered the room,' Cleo scoffed, though deep down I knew she was desperate to believe that such miraculous transformations were just a slice and suck away.

We settled on the 'New You Clinic', loving their TAKE A TRIP TO NYC! slogan.

'Just think - a week from now a surgeon could be looking down at our anaesthetized bodies thinking, "Look at the Empire State of that!"' Cleo chuckles, dancing around the room.

'We have to make a pact not to tell anyone,' I insist, gravely.

'What about your mum?'

'No way!' I protest.

I want this change to be mine. My mother has been trying to find a way to reclaim her influence over the way I look since I was old enough to rebel against her twirlie-girlie

styling. If there was a culture that believed in arranged wardrobes rather than arranged marriages for their children she'd sign up straight away. Even my make-up - or lack of it - bothers her: 'You're looking a bit pale, darling,' she'd complain. 'Why don't you try this?' And then, out of nowhere, some sickly bright confection would appear - just call her Edwina Lipstickhands. But the bane of her life is my hair. I've lost count of the number of pictures she's sent me of Minnie Driver and Nicole Kidman with their naturally springy curls ironed straight. I did secretly try and straighten mine once but it just ended up looking like a perm that had given up the will to live. So I cut it all off. Then she said I looked like a boy. I just can't win with her. She's always had the better hand in the looks department. And she never tires of playing it.

'You know she'll notice. It's her job to assess people's physiques, you won't be able to hide it from her.'

'If she says anything I'll just tell her I've cut wheat out of my diet, she's always saying that's what gives me a bloated stomach.'

'So you won't be wanting your last slice of pizza, then?'

'You can have half,' I grant.

'It's funny how your mum is so into image but dead against surgery,' Cleo muses, sending a little pepperoni Frisbee in my direction as she yanks the dough base apart. 'I mean, she talks her customers out of boob jobs and tummy tucks and then cons them into spending a couple of grand on a new wardrobe when if they'd gone ahead and had surgery they would look great in T-shirts and jeans for the rest of their life! Look at all the people we've seen on TV and in magazines saying how a quick nip and tuck has improved their lives.'

'Ooooooh, do you remember that really awful scarring picture?' I say, face shrivelling with revulsion.

'All right she was unlucky,' Cleo concedes.

‘Not that it really matters if we end up looking like we’ve been ravaged by sharks – it’s not like anyone’s going to actually see us naked, is it? It’s just for the overall effect.’

I’m really not convinced that I’m ready to bare even a new-improved physique in public.

‘Speak for yourself! If we go through with this we’re having the heating up full blast every night so I can watch TV in my bikini!’ Cleo chortles, draining her wine glass. ‘Oh, Kim! We’re really going to do it, aren’t we? Just think of all the gorgeous men we’re going to attract.’

‘Heaven forbid!’

Cleo looks miffed. ‘Not all of them are like—’

‘Don’t say his name!’ I cut her off.

‘You really don’t want a boyfriend, do you?’ she blinks in bafflement.

Cleo says she wants to meet someone but there hasn’t been too much evidence to support the claim. Last summer she got quite serious with a rugby lug called Dylan but then E4 began their 24-hour coverage of *Big Brother* and he was history. She’s currently got a crush on a chap called Gareth who’s started popping into PhotoFinish, but despite having copied his phone number off the processing envelope she hasn’t done anything about it. She says she’s going to make a move next time he comes in but really I think her ideal relationship would be one where she and a minor celebrity got together once every six weeks for a photo shoot for *OK!* magazine.

As for me – when I say I’ve had it with love, I mean it. And I really think it’s for the best because I can’t take the way that one day the whole world seems dipped in gold and the next you’re reduced to a blubbering pulp. Even before the Unmentionable One I hadn’t exactly welcomed *amore* with open arms. It was more a case of grimacing as it twisted and contorted me – doing my best to keep a pleasant demeanour as my insides leaked acidic juices. I would tolerate relationships until they petered out, then shakily

emerge and wait for the love toxins to leave my body and the alien personality traits (suspicion, jealousy, neediness) to settle back down to acceptable human quirks. After the last emotion-skewering disappointment two years ago I worked hard to give my life some equilibrium. Having Cleo around has helped enormously and now I'm so even-tempered I'm like a perfectly aligned spirit-level. The only thing that knocks me off balance is my mother, so I keep my encounters with her to a minimum.

'Don't you ever feel numb?' Cleo asked me a couple of months back and I had to admit that I do - most of the time, actually. I realize it's not ideal but it's got to be better than the alternative, hasn't it?

'Anyway, it's easy for your mum to be dismissive - she's already got the perfect figure,' Cleo decides.

'Yeah, what does she know about our suffering?' I grump, gloomily inspecting the floorboards.

'Do you really think Pamela Anderson has had a rib removed?' Cleo ponders, trying to cheer me up. She can spot one of my mother-induced sulks coming a mile off and has become expert at heading them off at the pass.

I take a closer look at the evidence in *heat* magazine then attempt to re-create her eggtimer waist using gaffer tape, while Cleo gets busy with her brown eyeshadow giving me contours I could only dream about.

We're just concluding a rousing rendition of *If I Said You Had A Beautiful Body Would You Hold It Against Me?* when the doorbell rings.

We freeze.

Our pose is absurd - Cleo twisting round to gauge the benefit of her manual bumlift and me hunched forward to create my most self-repulsing belly roll. We look like some feminist sculpture decrying modern woman's obsession with bodily imperfections.

The doorbell rings again. There's only one regular visitor to our flat but the pizza was delivered half an hour ago, so

that rules him out.

My startled eyes search Cleo's for a solution. She mouths 'Ssshhhh!' though there's little chance of pretending we're not in with the lights on full glare and Rod Stewart now serenading the neighbourhood with *The First Cut Is The Deepest*.

As the letterbox creaks open we drop to the floor like marionettes who've just had their strings snipped.

2

'Kimmy! It's me. Are you there?' a voice trills.

'*Mum?* I hiss, cheek to grain with the floorboards.

'Can you let me in, darling - it's tipping down out here!'

'Just give us a moment!' I bluster as Cleo and I skid to the bathroom on loo-paper-bound feet. It's all elbows over the sink and inside-out dressing gowns as we attempt to scrub off our red crows' feet and cartoon lip-lines. As I lather frantically, Cleo goes for the Mrs Doubtfire face-in-cake-topping option, daubing herself with an oatmeal-nubbed clay mask. I decide to follow suit but the mask I spurt from a hastily grabbed tube has a gloopy gelatine consistency and provides zero coverage, just maximum sheen. The letterbox rattles impatiently. With an internal squeal I scurry back through the lounge and unlock the door.

'Sorry about that - we're just having a bit of a beauty bonanza,' I pant, securing my towel turban.

Mum eyes my freshly varnished face with suspicion. We've turned down every spa discount she's ever offered so she knows there's no long-running tradition of Sunday evening pampering in this house.

'Cup of tea?' I say hoping to regain my composure in the kitchen.

'I told you I was dropping by tonight,' she says with a quizzical look. 'I don't know why you look so surprised.'

Oh God - that'll be the Sellotape hoiking my eyebrows up to my temples. I peer at my distorted reflection in the kettle and attempt to gently ease the tape off without giving myself a receding hairline.

'Camomile with lemon,' she calls after me.

I roll my eyes and reach for the PG Tips. Her quest for inner purity really gets on my nerves. She even puts filtered

water in the kettle when she needs to fill a hot water bottle. Suddenly she's in the doorway.

'What's this?' she demands with a slight tremor in her voice.

I turn around and see she's holding up the New You Clinic brochure. I feel a chest-thump of panic – as much as I tell myself I'm my own person and don't care what she thinks, any hint of disapproval from her winds me.

'Oh that – nothing,' I cover masterfully, turning my back on her.

'Then why have you gone all pink?' she asks, moving closer so she can study my face.

'It's a self-heating mask,' I pout. 'I'm trying to encourage the natural oils in my skin. I've had a bit of a dry complexion lately.' (You don't get brought up by a perfume-squirting, product-pushing beauty counter assistant and not pick up some of the lingo.)

'Tell me you're not thinking of having surgery,' she pleads, looking stricken.

'Well, you're always saying I should make the most of myself,' I brazen, shakily splashing semi-skimmed into the tea. If there's a way of making her feel somehow to blame, so much the better.

'Although it's really about making the *least* of yourself in this case,' blunders Cleo as she reaches for her Jamie Oliver 'Pukka Cuppa' mug. 'You could be seeing up to *a stone* less of your daughter in two weeks' time!'

Mum and I give her a 'not-helping' glare. She carefully puts the mug back on the rack and whispers, 'I'll be in my room if you need me.'

I brace myself for the onslaught of 'if you gave up dairy products you'd feel like a new woman' but instead Mum wanders back through to the lounge without saying a word. I watch her staring at the fireplace with glazed eyes and then, just as I am about to defend my decision and tell her I

don't need her permission anyway, she says, 'I want you to come to Capri with me.'

I didn't see that one coming.

'I thought they'd already had the funeral . . .' I say, brow knotting in confusion.

'They have, but now Luca wants to buy my father's boutique and—'

'Who's Luca?' I interrupt.

'The shop manager. He's worked there for over ten years. Twenty per cent of the shop is his and now he wants to buy it outright.'

'And the other 80 per cent is in your name?' I check as I edge on to the sofa.

'Yes,' she confirms. 'Dad left me everything to do with the shop, except the £5,000 petty cash which he gave to you.'

I didn't even think he knew he had a granddaughter but it's not the time to go into that now.

'Can't the lawyers just sort it?' I suggest. 'They managed fine with the rest of the will.'

'I'm not sure I want to sell,' she quavers.

Uh-oh. 'What do you mean?' I ask, levelly.

'I was thinking I might go out there and run the place myself.'

Is she mad? I'm incredulous. '*What?* It's got to be nearly fifty years since you were last there!'

'Forty-five.'

'I thought you swore you'd never go back!'

'My mother made me swear. Now she's gone . . .' She looks intently at her teacup. 'I don't want to leave it any longer.'

'But what is left for you now?' I don't understand.

'Memories,' she says defiantly. 'Memories I haven't been allowed to have since I was eleven.'

For a second I feel a flicker of sympathy for her. My mother has told me very little of her childhood but I know she was born on the Isle of Capri because for years I

thought she was saying 'I Love Capri' and it became my singsong mantra. By all accounts she had a blissful childhood but then a couple of days before her twelfth birthday her mother (Granny Carmela) discovered her husband Vincenzo (the dead guy) was having an affair – not just a fling, it had been going on for years.

In a justifiable rage Carmela grabbed three suitcases, two saucepans and one daughter and left for Cardiff the same day: one of her best friends had married a Welshman and she'd always promised to visit. From that day on Carmela severed all contact with Italy and even forbade the use of her native tongue in the home. Consequently my mother's knowledge of Italian is now sub-tourist level, as I now point out:

'You can't even understand the menu at Ciao Cymru!'

'Which is why I need you to come and translate for me,' she says calmly.

'Hold on!' I pull back. 'You can't have thought this through. Are you talking about giving up your job and moving out there permanently?' I reel. Mum has always lived so nearby. Driving me nuts but living nearby. The idea of her being based in another country . . . I shake my head. Not that I haven't wished it a few times . . .

'I'd like to give it a try,' Mum smiles. 'It would be a dream come true having my own boutique. I know all about fashion buying and window displays and sales—'

'In *Wales*,' I snort. 'It's a whole other world out there! Remember that week I spent translating for that poncey designer in Milan?'

'If you came with me, explained how things worked, got me started, I'm sure I could make a go of it,' she says, ignoring my protests.

I look at the determined fifty-seven-year-old woman before me and wonder where she gets her energy from. And why none of it was passed on to me. I'm half her age and it all sounds like way too much upheaval. (Lately I've come to

the conclusion that you have to accept change when it's forced upon you but why on earth would you go looking for it? It's so unsettling.)

'Don't you want to retire like a normal person?' I ask, finding it unfathomable that someone should want an alternative to all that guilt-free TV watching.

Mum sets her un-drunk tea down on the spray-painted side table.

'I'm not ready to give up working yet but I am ready for a new challenge. Now Teddy has passed away and I don't have a man to look after, I want to do something for myself.'

My eyes narrow - she's definitely been watching *Oprah* on her lunchbreaks.

'If I fail then I'll sell up and come home - no damage done,' she shrugs, adding: 'It's not like having surgery where you can't reverse the process.'

Oooh - pointed. I hold her gaze for a second and then sigh heavily. I suppose there's a price to be paid for my freedom. I've always said I'd be so much happier if she wasn't around to nit-pick and undermine me. It's just the tiniest things but they get to me so much; like I might be wearing a jumper I adore but all it takes is one of her classic 'Have you still got the receipt?' comments, and from then on every time I go to put it on all I can see in the mirror is her look of disdain. (Of course it does make it easy to decide what to wear when we meet up. I like to be as aesthetically displeasing as possible to make her suffer.) I tried to do a bit of fashion sniping back at her one time, just to show her how it feels but the expression on her face when I said, 'That doesn't look as good as you think it does' told me I'd gone too far. I always wimp out because I feel guilty about being mean and I hate the prospect of any confrontation - I'd much rather leave things festering inside for all eternity. Perhaps her moving to Capri would solve the problem - it would be her decision to remove herself from my life so I wouldn't have to feel like I was abandoning her.

'How long would you need me for?' I ask cautiously. 'I've got work to do . . .'

'I'd pay you. This isn't just a favour. I want to employ you to translate for me and take a look at the business, talk to Luca, talk to the locals, help me make the right decision.'

'So if I said it wasn't going to pan out, you'd believe me?'

'Yes,' she says simply.

That's a first - she never asks my opinion on anything.

'How long?' She still hasn't answered me.

'A week, maybe two.'

Way too long to get my head around at the moment.

'Where would we stay?'

'I've found a beautiful hotel by the Gardens of Augustus. Hotel Luna,' Mum says dreamily.

'So no relatives?' This is key - I can't sustain the doting daughter routine for more than an hour at a time.

'No relatives.'

'And what you said before about memories - this isn't some kind of pilgrimage to rediscover your Italian roots?' I ask, sounding a tad more patronizing than I intended but really, I can't be doing with it if she's going to get all mournful about lost heritage and absent fathers.

Mum moves a sofa cushion closer to me and takes my hands. 'Come with me.'

I'm torn between duty and dread. Overlaid with the discomfort I feel when she touches me.

I think one of the key things that bound Cleo and me together was her confession that she cringes when her mother sits too close and gets too adoring. I'd never admitted I felt that way to anyone until she said it first. It seems wrong to shun parental affection when so many children are denied it but it's just the way we both feel. We've tried to rationalize it - our mothers carried us inside them so there is no such thing as too close for them - but we can't escape the feeling of being smothered.

'When are you planning to go?' I ask, wriggling my fingers to loosen her grip.

'Tuesday.'

'*This Tuesday?*' I panic.

She nods.

'Day after tomorrow Tuesday?' I double-check. 'I can't, I've got an appointment, I . . .' I stop myself from saying out loud I'll miss the final episode of *Ally McBeal*! even though it is high on my list of concerns. I can't cope with last-minute dashes any more. I like to have time to psych myself up and the prospect of being suddenly uprooted makes me feel slightly sick. I'm dug in deep here. I don't know if I want to come out of my bunker and squint at the sunshine.

'Think about it overnight and meet me for lunch tomorrow,' Mum says, getting to her feet.

Standing at the door she gives me a flesh-squidging squeeze and says, 'I'd do anything to have curves like you!'

'Well it could be arranged,' I begin. 'What's sucked out of me could be injected into you . . .'

She blanches and says, 'It's not funny, Kim. It's mutilation.'

'Body sculpting,' I counter.

'It's blood and scarring and -' she catches herself. 'Just come and see me tomorrow.'

'Okay,' I agree. 'Just one last thing . . .'

'Yes?'

'Can I have the clinic brochure back?'

Mum tries for a 'I don't know what you're talking about' expression but realizes she's been sussed and huffily reaches into her bag.

'You're beautiful as you are,' she insists, handing it over.

'You have to say that,' I reply, prising her fingers from the scrolled pages. 'You made me.'