The EUNION

A chance to heal the past. A weekend they'd never forget.



Amy Silver

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About the Book

They thought they'd be friends forever . . .

Jen and Conor, Andrew and Lilah, Natalie and Dan, inseparable at university but divided by tragedy soon afterwards, are reunited after nearly two decades apart at Jen's house in the French Alps; the house in which they spent one golden summer before a terrible accident changed all their lives.

When a snowstorm descends, they find themselves trapped and forced to confront their unresolved issues, frustrated passions and broken friendships. And as relationships shift and marriages flounder, the truth about what really happened years before is slowly revealed. And Jen realises that perhaps some wounds can never be healed...

About the Author

Amy Silver is a writer and freelance journalist living in London. This is her fourth novel.

The Reunion

Amy Silver



arrow books

For Mum, with all my love

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Prologue

Sunday 10 March 1996

Hey beautiful,

Hello from rainy Cork. I hope you're doing OK.

Just wanted to get some words down for you. After I got your message last night, I lay awake for ages, thinking about what an idiot I am and how lucky I am to have you in my life and how sorry I am that I made you cry. God, I'm so sorry.

So last night, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't stop thinking about how upset you were, and I wanted to call you again, I wanted to hear your voice but I was worried that you'd already gone to bed and I'd wake you up. So eventually I got up and went downstairs, found an open bottle of Bushmills in the kitchen cupboard and drank the lot of it. I assume it was Ronan's. He's going to kill me. I probably ought to leave town before he finds out.

I digress. The point is, I was sitting there in the dark in the kitchen and I was thinking about all the ways you make me happy.

I went back to bed and I still couldn't sleep so I did that thing I do, when I replay things over in my head, start to finish. Sometimes I do Godfather II or the whole of Goodfellas, scene by scene. Last night I thought about us. I thought about the last day at the French house, the day before we had to come home.

It had been glorious all summer, and then on the last day it had to rain – the thunder started up that morning and the heavens opened and I was convinced that the roof wouldn't hold out and we'd all get soaked. Last night I thought about that day and I played it out in my head, scene by scene.

It turned cold, suddenly, overnight, so we lit the fire in the morning. There was barely any wood left, so someone had to go out to the shed in the slashing rain to get more, and poor Andrew drew the short straw. Wrecked he was, from the night before, do you remember? All he wanted to do was go back to bed, but Lilah wouldn't have it and so out he went and he slipped and fell on the way back and cut his hand and we heard about it all bloody afternoon.

It was all right, though, wasn't it, because that farmer, the grumpy bugger down the way, had brought us sausages and eggs (glad to see the back of us, I'm sure he was), so we did a big fry-up and we just sat there, drinking pots of coffee and talking nonsense because there was nothing else to do and not one of us who didn't have a hangover. We were making plans, already looking forward to the next summer, when we'd be back again. Fire roaring in the grate, windows steaming up, the smell of sausages and coffee and the sound of the rain pounding down outside. And you, sitting there, holding my hand under the table, looking gorgeous, just lush, this after you'd drunk almost your own weight in red wine the night before and slept for less than three hours. How d'you do it? You're a sorceress, aren't you? That must be it.

God, I didn't want to leave that place. And now I can't wait to get back there. Less than four months now.

At some point (I think it may have been after we decided it was late enough to open a bottle of wine), Nat decided that she couldn't possibly return to England the same girl that left it, so she demanded that Lilah cut all her hair off. Do you remember that; you were horrified? All that long brown hair lying in clumps on the floor, Lilah wielding those scissors like some sort of evil mad woman, and then she was done, and Nat looked gorgeous, a tiny pixie with enormous green eyes. Dan and Andrew were gobsmacked, just staring at her like they'd never seen her before.

Eventually, the rain stopped, and Dan forced us all to go outside so that he could take photographs of us, the house, us in front of the house, us on the stone wall, us with the valley as backdrop, with the mountain as backdrop, us, us, us. You three girls, you and Lilah and Natalie posing on the wall like supermodels, you three beautiful girls, and Andrew lying on the wet grass moaning about his terrible head and his injured hand, the lightweight. Do you have those pictures, now? I don't think I ever saw them. I want to get those pictures, put them up on the wall.

It started to rain again. You took my hand and gripped it hard – you said you felt dizzy, you had a case of the weirds, the way you do when you're hung over, and I said you'd feel better with another drink in you. So we all went back inside and drank red wine and the rest of that God-awful cider and we danced to Gainsbourg and Donna Summer. Do you remember, when we went to bed that night, when we lay down on the mattress in the back room, we were sore, bellies aching from laughing so much? (Have I told you, by the way, that you've the most beautiful laugh I've ever heard?)

That was the best of days, wasn't it? Nothing really happened, nothing special. We just ate and drank and danced and laughed and I've never felt happier.

I played that day over in my head, last night, and when I woke up this morning my head was full of you. I don't want ever to forget what we were like that day, the way we felt, you and me and all of us. We should hold on to that. I'm told it doesn't always last.

Ma sends love.

Can't wait to see you pretty girl, I ache for you.

All my love, always,

Conor

Part One

Chapter One

December 2012

AS SHE CLIMBED the stairs for what seemed like the fourteenth time that afternoon, len noticed a drop of blood on one of the stone steps. She made a mental note to clean it up. Later. After she'd finished getting the bedrooms ready, after she'd checked the bathrooms were spotless, after she'd straightened the bedspreads and dusted the sills, after she'd made sure there was dry firewood in the kitchen and the living room, after she'd placed flowers in vases. White tea roses for Andrew and Natalie, blood-red orchids for Lilah. She'd driven all the way to a posh florist in Draguignan to buy them, close to a two-hour drive there and back. Ridiculous, really, but it had seemed important that morning. To make the place feel welcoming. She hadn't been sure what to buy for Dan: peonies seemed too feminine, lilies funereal, carnations too cheap. In the end she bought a little pot of black velvet petunias which she placed on the desk below the window, the one looking up to the thicket of trees behind the house, and to the mountain beyond.

After buying the flowers, she'd ended up spending more than 300 euros, buying brightly coloured throws for the beds and the sofa downstairs, scatter cushions covered with vibrant African prints, an oxblood rug for the living room. It was beyond stupid, she'd only have to pack it all up in a couple of weeks' time. And do what with it? She wasn't even sure where she was going. And now, placing the roses on the chest in the second bedroom, the one she'd given to Andrew and Natalie, she wondered if it might all be for nothing. She stood at the window looking out across the valley and shivered; it was three o'clock in the afternoon and the light was almost gone, threatening charcoal-grey clouds moving inexorably towards her. She'd had the radio on downstairs; the forecast had changed. The bad weather they had been predicting for the middle of the following week had been brought forward, to the weekend, but looking at the sky now even that seemed optimistic. It seemed as though the storm were almost upon her. Snow lay thick on the ground from the last heavy fall, a couple of days previously, but for now the roads were clear. If the storm came early, if the snow fell too soon, the road would be blocked and her guests would never get there.

Flowers done, she went into the bathroom, soaked a cloth and cleaned the blood from the stairs. She'd cut her finger French-trimming the rack of lamb for dinner. A banal enough explanation, but for some reason the action of wiping away blood seemed to herald something sinister. The hair on the back of her neck stood up and out of the corner of her eye she seemed to catch movement in the half-light of the house; she felt afraid. She went downstairs and stoked up the fire in the living room, she turned on all the lights.

Even with the lights on, the fire lit, the bright new throws and the cushions, despite all her attempts to make the house feel lived in, it felt cold, empty. Before she'd arrived, two months prior, it had been unoccupied for over a year and it hadn't lost its sense of abandonment. That took time, she imagined, and people, and possessions. She'd brought very little from Paris: clothes and books and kitchenware, a laptop and the radio, not much else. The rest was all still there, packed up in boxes marked with her name, awaiting a destination.

It wasn't just the loneliness, though, it was the season. The wind fairly screamed up the valley, whipping through the place, whistling through gaps under doors, rattling against the old leaded windows. This was the first time Jen had ever come here in winter, and she found herself wandering around with a blanket permanently wrapped around her shoulders.

The entire character of the place was different in winter. It was so quiet. In summer, you would hear the clang of bells on cows, sheep bleating in the fields, tractors in the distance, birdsong. In winter there was nothing, the deepest calm interrupted on the rarest of occasions by the sound of a triporteur, one of those funny little three-wheeled vans, chugging past on the road below, or a sudden crackle from the fire, which always made her jump. It was unnerving, this silence, it rang in her ears. She had to put the radio on to drown it. And at night, she kept the radio on to drown out the other noises, the ones that kept her awake: wooden beams creaking, the wind in the trees behind, whispering or howling, the foxes with their horrible cries, like infants abandoned to the elements.

You could smell the cold. In summer, the air was full of the scent of the lavender and rosemary that grew in the beds along the front of the house. There used to be climbing roses, too, although they were gone now. The essence of wood smoke remained, of course, but underneath that was something else, damp, untouched, the smell of cold stone, like a tomb. The quality of the light was also different. She remembered the house as it was in July, all the windows and doors flung open, shutters hooked back, sunshine streaming in along with the scent of the flowers and herbs. Now it felt as though there were parts of each room which light never touched, as though she were living in permanent shadow.

And there were ghosts. No neighbours (Villefranche, the nearest village, population 1,489, was a five-minute drive down the mountain; further up, there was nothing but shepherd's huts and, much further on, a farmhouse or two). Only ghosts. They sat around the kitchen table, they

searched for firewood in the stand of trees behind the house, gently caressed Jen's shoulder blade when she stood at the mirror in the bathroom brushing her teeth. There was Conor, standing on a ladder, stripped to the waist, hammering nails into a beam, Natalie and Lilah sunning themselves on the lawn out front, Andrew listening to the World Service in the kitchen, Dan sitting on the dry stone wall with his notebook, cigarette dangling from his lower lip.

And now, this afternoon, weather permitting, they'd be back for real, those of them that could make it. And in her mind they would be exactly the same. People don't really change that much, do they? Her own life had been turned upside down, once, twice, three times, and she still felt pretty much the same as she had when she was twenty-one. A little worn around the edges, rounder and slower, but essentially not much different. The same convictions, the same passions – she still loved words and language, Offenbach, sailing; she loved the sea but hated beaches; she loved dogs but not the ones Parisians have, the ones that fit into handbags. She wasn't sure whether this was a failing or something to be proud of, this sameness. She liked to think of it as suggesting a certain strength of character, but sometimes she wondered if it just meant she was stuck.

She was nervous, she couldn't settle. Now, arrivals imminent, she almost wished it *would* snow. She was suddenly frightened, to think of them all, here in France, making their way here, to her. There was no going back. She felt a flutter in her belly, butterflies or baby, she wasn't sure. She couldn't escape the feeling that she might have made a terrible mistake. She went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of red, trying not to feel guilty about it. After all, she'd been in this country the best part of twenty years, and French women think nothing of it.

A couple of hundred miles south, in a hotel room in Nice, a skinny girl lay on a bed, propped up against the headboard,

her long blonde hair not quite covering her breasts. She watched her lover haphazardly throwing clothes into a suitcase.

'You should stay tonight,' the blonde girl said. 'It's going to be snowing in the mountains and you'll get stuck on the roads. Stay with me.' As she said this, she raised her left knee slightly and, grasping the sheet which covered her between her toes, pulled it a little lower, exposing a few inches more of her pale flesh. Her teeth grazed her lower lip. Her eyes held his. Dan laughed.

'I can't stay, Claudia, my friend's expecting me. In any case your plane leaves at midnight.'

'That's hours away,' she replied, giving him her most enticing little-girl pout. She drew her left leg up higher still and pushed the sheet all the way down to the bottom of the bed, leaving her totally exposed.

Dan sat down on the edge of the bed, leaned over her body, lowered himself to kiss her. She grabbed hold of him tightly, wrapping her arms around his waist, pulling his body against hers. No denying it was tempting, she was tempting. She was more than that, she was special.

They'd been in Nice three days. There was a film festival, a mini one, lots of worthy indies and angry documentaries made by 23-year-olds with extravagant facial hair. In comparison he was an old man, and, relatively speaking, wildly successful, which in their eyes, of course, meant sellout. They'd learn. In any case, it was hard to feel aggrieved when you were staying in a suite at the Palais de la Mediterranée with the most beautiful girl in Nice.

The idea of staying with her, even for just a few hours more, was almost irresistible. Almost. He had to go. No, it was more than that; he wanted to go. To say that his interest was piqued by Jen's email, received quite out of the blue a month previous, was an understatement. Jennifer Donleavy, the girl who ran away, the one who got away. The girl he hadn't seen in, what was it, sixteen years? She wanted to see him, she'd invited him, and the others of course, back to the French house. It was being sold, she said, and she thought they might like to see it one last time.

If ever there were an offer he couldn't refuse, this was it. A chance to go back to that house, the place, he still felt, where his career pretty much started. He got all his best ideas, wrote all his best lines sitting on the stone wall overlooking the valley with his fancy leather-bound notebook (a present from Jen for his birthday), smoking Gauloises Blondes. He grinned at the memory. There was no denying it, he'd been a pretentious wanker back then. He wondered what it would stir up, being back there, walking through those rooms, whether there was any inspiration left.

And he couldn't wait to drive his brand-new Audi on those incredible winding mountain roads. Music up loud, adrenaline rushing as he took the corners, space to think. He hadn't had that in a while, it would do him good. Get the creative juices flowing. Plus, it wouldn't be a bad thing for him and Claudia to be apart for a few days; it would sweeten the reunion, heighten its passion.

But above all that, there was Jen. He didn't allow himself to think about her much, he hadn't done for a long time, but how could he pass up the chance to see her again, to find out where she had been all this time, what she was now? She had been off the radar, no Facebook page, no Twitter he could locate, not a single hit on Google. He'd dug out some old photos when he first got her email, pictures he hadn't looked at in a decade. He was dying to see what she looked like now: was she still beautiful? Had she got fat? It was a chance to see all the others too; and he had to admit that he was looking forward to seeing how a reunion between Natalie and Lilah would play out. He had a feeling it would be worth getting the popcorn out for that one.

'I told Jen I'd be there today,' he said to Claudia. 'I can't just not turn up. I'm not even sure I have the right number for her, she'll think something's happened to me. And I'll see you in three days, in Paris. In three days we can be together properly. Can't we?'

'Of course,' Claudia said, lips pushed into a perfect little moue. She pulled the sheet back up to her waist and rolled away from him, affording him the perfect view of her creamy, lightly freckled back.

'Christmas Eve in Paris,' Dan said, reaching out to touch the smooth blade of her shoulder.

'Of course,' Claudia said again, but she didn't look back at him.

It took them more than forty-five minutes to get to the front of the hire-car queue and by the time they actually found their silver Citroën in the middle of a football field-sized car park full of silver Citroëns, it was almost dark and starting to rain. They got lost trying to get out of Marseilles, mostly because Natalie was too busy fiddling with her phone to read the road signs. Andrew didn't say anything, because the last thing they needed now was to get into a fight.

'I wonder if we should stop somewhere, just stay in a hotel for tonight?' Natalie asked him. Her left arm was pressed against her upper body, her hand gripping her seat belt, knuckles white. With every sharp corner, every lane change, her right hand shot out and grabbed the dashboard. Every time she did it, Andrew tried not to flinch. Natalie didn't like driving in bad weather.

'Do you remember what it was like up there? The roads are dreadful. Scenic, I think, is the euphemism, meaning winding, narrow, along the edge of a bloody great cliff. And you know how the French drive. It'll be a nightmare. Plus, we don't have snow tyres. We should have asked for them, shouldn't we?'

'It'll be OK, Nat. I'll drive slowly. We're in no hurry.'

She gave a little sigh. 'Why don't we just stop somewhere? And we can drive to Jennifer's tomorrow, when it's light, and the weather's better? If we stop somewhere, I could phone the girls, I don't seem to have any signal at the moment.'

Andrew drew a deep breath. 'Jen's expecting us, Nat,' he said, giving his wife a tight little smile. 'And we rang the girls from Heathrow, they were fine.'

Just as they'd been fine that morning when he and Natalie left them at their grandparents' place in Shepton. Fine was an understatement, in fact; they were delighted to see the back of Mum and Dad and didn't bother hiding it, high-fiving each other as they watched their parents' car pull out of the driveway, looking forward to four days of endless pre-Christmas shopping trips financed by Grandpa's credit card and being allowed a glass of sparkling wine before dinner.

Natalie didn't like driving in bad weather, it was true, but Andrew was well aware that there was more to her reluctance to take this trip than just that. She hadn't wanted to leave the girls so close to Christmas and she didn't share his desire to see the house again. It had taken a fair bit of persuasion to get her to agree to being in the same room as Dan again, too.

Andrew couldn't wait. Not to see Dan, though he didn't mind that. He didn't harbour grudges with quite the same tenacity as his wife did. He didn't feel he had the energy. Dan simply wasn't that important to him any longer. For Andrew, this trip was all about Jen. He felt that he had somehow neglected a duty of care towards her, although Natalie never wasted any time in pointing out that this was ridiculous. It was Jen who had made it impossible for them to be in her life, just as she'd failed to be in theirs. Even so, Andrew couldn't get past the feeling that there were other things he could have done, should have done. They didn't talk about it much, because conversations about what happened back then invariably ended in arguments, but when the subject did come up, Natalie always insisted that Jen was not Andrew's responsibility, and Andrew never once managed to succeed in demonstrating to his wife why he thought that she was.

More than that, though, he just wanted to see her again, those warm brown eyes, full of laughter. And to see her in that place, too. That would be something.

'I really think,' Natalie was saying, 'that we ought to call the girls to let them know that we've arrived safely.'

'We'll call them from Jen's place,' Andrew said, 'when we actually have arrived safely.' He regretted the words as soon as they came out of his mouth. It wasn't what he meant, but he'd made it sound as though some other outcome might be a possibility. He reached over and gave her thigh a comforting squeeze. 'They're probably not at home anyway, your mum's almost certainly taken them shopping already.'

'Keep your hands on the wheel, Andrew,' Natalie said. There were tears in her voice and the overreaction irritated him, but he didn't say so. Dutifully arranging his hands in the ten to two position, he repeated: 'It'll be fine, Nat. I'll drive slowly.'

The Moroccan taxi driver was called Khalid. He had a winning smile and the confidence of a Formula One driver.

'I come from Imlil, you know this place? In the mountains of Atlas. Toubkal, you know this place? These roads here like autoroutes compared to there.'

'Great,' Lilah said, taking another furtive sip from the half jack of vodka they'd bought at duty free. She offered it to Zac, who shook his head.

'You nervous?' he asked her. She gave a little shrug.

'No need to be afraid,' Khalid said cheerily. 'I never have accidents in this country.'

She was nervous, but not about the driving. The whole situation was a little bizarre. About a month ago, she'd received a letter written in a hand she'd known immediately. Jen, writing to tell her that the French house was on the market, and wondering would she like to come and see it, one last time. She'd invited the others, too – she felt a reunion was long overdue. Lilah's first reaction had been to throw it in the bin. She retrieved it, hours later, and read and reread. It would be lovely to see Jen after all this time. But all of them? In one house? Blood would be spilled.

She talked it over with Zac when he came home from work. Old friends, a get-together at a house we went to one year. We spent the summer doing it up for Jen's dad. She's selling it now, and she's invited us out there, to visit.

'Sounds like fun, babe,' he said, but what did he know?

Now, sitting in the car, she was certain that this was a terrible idea. What were they all going to say to each other, after the initial hellos and how've you beens? It was going to be like Facebook, where you make contact with people from your past, only this would be like real-world Facebook where you couldn't just turn off your laptop and walk away when you realised that actually there was a perfectly good reason why you weren't friends with these people any more.

Zac reached over to her, grazed the side of her face with his fingers, nudged her chin gently towards him.

'You look so worried, babe.'

'It's just weird, you know, her contacting me after so long. I mean, we used to send Christmas cards and stuff but I haven't actually laid eyes on her in about fifteen years. I can't believe this is just about the house.'

'Didn't you ask? When you emailed her, to accept?'

'I did. She just said she wanted to see us. Christ, I hope she isn't dying.'

'Lilah.'

'Well, you never know, do you? Although I suppose she wouldn't have invited a plus one if she was dying, would she?'

'I'm sure she's not dying.'

'No, probably not. I'm excited to see her,' she said, hoping to convince herself as much as her boyfriend. 'I really am.' She shifted up closer to Zac and hooked one leg over his, so that she was almost sitting on his lap.

Khalid watched them in the rear-view mirror. 'This is honeymoon?' he asked.

Lilah laughed. 'It's not a honeymoon. Just a dirty weekend.'

'Dirty?'

'It's just a little holiday,' Zac said.

Thank God for Zac. Even if it was awful and awkward, at least she had Zac, a human buffer zone. He was so ridiculously affable, so likeable, so very nice to look at, that he had a soothing effect on those around him, a tendency to calm troubled waters. He should be a UN peace envoy or a hostage negotiator or something. Not that he wasn't a damn fine fitness instructor. Such a shame there was bugger-all money in it.

There. She'd gone there and now the thought was in her head, the one she'd had just before she'd retrieved Jen's letter from the waste-paper basket. Money. She was broke, and she was tired of it. Poverty didn't suit her, never had. She didn't know about Jen or Andrew or Nat (and she would never ask them, anyway), but Dan had money. She knew Dan had money and frankly, he owed her.

It was dark by the time they got there, and they almost missed the turning, a sharp bend to the right, up the hill. You couldn't actually see the house from the road – it wasn't until you got halfway up the drive that it appeared, looking deceptively small against the rise of the mountain behind. They pulled up out front as the snow was starting to fall. Lilah, determined that if she was going to have to face the past she was going to face it in style, was wearing boots with four-inch heels and open toes; Zac had to carry her to the front door while Khalid took their bags out of the boot.

Zac deposited Lilah on the doorstep.

'Thank you, baby,' she purred, and gave him a kiss with lots of tongue, trying to exude a confidence she didn't feel. She took a hand mirror out of her bag and checked her face. She pinched the skin over her cheekbones and bit her lower lip to redden it. She put the mirror back into her bag and took out the small bottle of vodka. One quick swig, a run of her hand through her hair and she was ready.

'Let's do this,' she said, and pressed the doorbell.

They got there in the end, no thanks to a taxi driver who almost ran them off the road as they turned out of Villefranche, a speeding Mercedes overtaking a lorry as it careened down the hill. Natalie's yelp of fear caught in her throat, and she'd barely made a sound since. She gripped the door handle, her chin resting on her chest – she didn't dare look up. They crawled up the hill. She had been right about the roads, narrow and winding. He should have listened to her.

When she did look up, she tried to keep her eyes front, on the road, or to the right-hand side, the mountain side, where a bank of snow piled a metre high served as testament to weeks of heavy snowfalls. But she couldn't help herself: every now and again she would glance to her left, where the snow had fallen away, over the edge of the mountain into the ravine below. Andrew turned on the radio. Natalie turned it off again.

'Just concentrate on the road,' she said, wishing she didn't sound quite so peevish, so plaintive.

The problem was, she felt peevish and plaintive. What were they doing, flying and then driving all the way out here, to the middle of nowhere for three days? It would have made so much more sense for Jen to come to them. She could have stayed for Christmas. (Christ, Christmas. She had a million things to do, this trip really couldn't have come at a less convenient time.) She would have put her foot down, point blank refused, only she could see that it meant so much to Andrew, to come back to the old place. The summer they'd spent at the house had been raised, in his mind, almost to the level of myth, it shone golden in his memory. She understood, but she couldn't help but feel a little sad about it; for her, as sweet as that summer was, it was bitter too. Her feelings about it were always going to be mixed.

And Dan was going to be there, the weasel. She'd promised Andrew that she'd be nice, but it was going to take iron self-control not to give the little git a slap.

And oh God, she wished they could have made this journey in daylight, preferably without snow. Still. Finally, mercifully, there were there. She hadn't expected it, but she felt a surge of happiness looking up at the house, beautiful in its dusting of white, an idyll standing all alone on the hillside. Lonely, but welcoming, pine-scented wood smoke billowing from chimneys at either end of the roof, a warm glow spilling out onto fresh snow.

'God,' Natalie said, 'it's so lovely.' She turned to Andrew and smiled, and he looked so incredibly relieved, she felt awful for being so snappy with him on the way here, for making things so difficult.

'Sorry, love,' she said, reaching for his hand.

'Nothing to be sorry for,' he said, and squeezed her hand and leaned over to kiss her on the lips.

Andrew fetched their bags from the boot of the car. Natalie stood on the doorstep, her back to the door, gazing out across the valley and to the mountains beyond, white caps illuminated by moonlight. She could hear voices inside the house, laughter. She felt nervous all of a sudden, wished she'd thought harder about interesting things to say, and, looking down at her bootcut jeans, trainers and khaki parka, she wished that she'd made a bit more of an effort. She could at least have had her hair cut.

'OK, love?'

She nodded and took his hand again, then lifted the iron knocker and let it fall. The sound rang out alarmingly loud, splitting the silence. 'Here we go,' a voice called out. 'I'll get that, shall I?'

Natalie's heart did a little flip in her chest. That wasn't Jen's voice. She looked over at Andrew; he was looking back at her, his eyes widening. Natalie shook her head a little, something wasn't right, she knew, they both did, and she brought her hand up to cover her mouth which had fallen open, aghast. The door flew open and there she was, railthin and ice-blonde, a smear of vermillion lipstick on her mouth. Lilah.

'Hello, you two,' she said, a voice to cut glass, an assassin's smile. 'We were just wondering where you'd got to. How the devil are you?'

Dear Nat,

I'm sorry I didn't make it to see you at the weekend. I was all set to drive down yesterday, but Lilah came home in the early hours in a bad way and I couldn't leave her on her own. Pupils like saucers, chattering and shivering and scared of her own shadow, talking the most unbelievable shit. She couldn't sleep, wouldn't eat anything. She'd been out with the guys from work. She doesn't handle drugs nearly as well as she thinks she does.

She's asleep now, finally. I think she'll be in bed all day. Viva bank holidays. I rang her mum this morning, she seems to think it's posttraumatic stress from the accident, but that doesn't really make sense. This has been going on a while, hasn't it? I mean, I know it's been worse of late, but the bingeing and the secretiveness, that goes back further. I don't know what the hell to do. Neither of us are happy in this relationship any longer, but I can't leave her like this. I've suggested counselling, I guess you can imagine how that goes down.

I'm sorry she hasn't been down to see you these past few weeks, you know it's not that she doesn't care. She talks about you all the time. She' s just not facing up to the here and now particularly well.

God, listen to me whinge.

How are you, Nat? I hope the physio's going better. I know (what do I know? I know nothing) – I understand that you're working so hard, and I hope that it won't be long until you're back on your feet, strong again, like you were. That ridiculously handsome nurse must be easing the pain a little!

How are you getting on with Infinite Jest? I found it hard going at first, but I think it's worth sticking with it. (Lilah doesn't. She had a quick flick through it and said, 'What on earth would she want to read that for? Doesn't she have enough on her plate?' Then she called me a pseudointellectual wanker and went to get herself a drink. She may have a point. She suggested I bring you Bridget Jones' Diary, which she thinks is hilarious. I read a few pages and have to admit, it is quite funny. I'll bring it for you when I come next.)

I haven't seen Dan in a couple of weeks, though he rang last week and claims to be working very hard. He and Lilah cross paths in Soho from time to time. He said he was planning to get down to see you soon. Perhaps I'll bring him the weekend after next? I think this weekend I want you all to myself.

I've heard nothing from Jen. I wrote to her mother and she sent back a very short note saying that Jen was no longer in England. No further details. They're obviously still very angry with me. I wonder whether Jen's with Maggie, in Cork? As kind as Maggie's been to me, I can't help but think I'm the last person she wants to speak to right now. Perhaps you could drop her a line? We'll talk about it when I see you.

I think about you, all the time. I know I shouldn't. I can't help myself. I'm counting the minutes until I'm by your side, it's the only place that makes sense to me right now.

With all my love,

Andrew

P.S. I have a court date, by the way. It's 12 December, just in time for Christmas. Frankly, the sooner the better, I just want it over.

Chapter Two

NOTHING WENT THE way she'd imagined it would, and yet, as it played out, Jen kept thinking, well of course this was the way this was going to go, how stupid of me to think otherwise. She'd expected, based on where they were all coming from, Andrew and Natalie to be the first to arrive. Jen had estimated that she would have a good half an hour with the two of them before Lilah got there, which would give her ample time to explain that she hadn't been 100 per cent honest about the guest list. If she broke it to them gently, just the two of them, over a glass of wine, it would be all right.

But it didn't happen like that. Dan was first to arrive. He pulled up outside the house in a flashy silver car, and she watched from the living-room window as he climbed out, looked up, turned to look down the valley, and then back towards the house. He stood there, hands on hips, the trace of a smile on his face, looking ludicrously boyish. His hair was cropped close to his head, the skin over his nose a little freckled, like he'd spent some time in the sun.

When she opened the door, he looked almost as though he were surprised to see her, as though he'd been expecting someone else. He seemed lost for words. And she was taken aback, too, because he wasn't what she'd been expecting. She'd read about his films and his success, she'd seen him 'linked' with any number of women and she'd expected him to be brasher, bolder, louder than the old Dan, and yet there he was, smiling diffidently at her, stumbling over his words when he said hello, shyly kissing her on the cheek. She remembered why he'd got to her the way he did. The lost boy.

He stepped inside and she closed the door behind them, and they stood there for a moment, just looking at each other, not saying anything, Dan's face a little flushed, and Jen started laughing and offered him a drink. She didn't have time to get it, though, because it was just then that she heard another car pull up, heard doors slamming and laughter and a loud, confident knock. She smiled at Dan and took a deep breath, opened the door and was knocked back by a blast of cold air and by Lilah, hurling herself into Jen's arms.

'Jen! Oh God, Jen!' Lilah was laughing and crying at the same time, her arms wrapped tightly around Jen's body. She clung to her, and Jen couldn't say a word, she could barely breathe, she just stood there, locked in an embrace, feeling the sharp edges of Lilah's scapulae rising and falling. It was like hugging a skeleton. Eventually, Lilah pulled away.

She laughed, wiping the tears from her cheeks, smearing mascara towards her hairline.

'Jen! Oh my God. Look at you! You've put on weight.' She laughed again, pulling Jen towards her. 'It suits you! No, it does, I mean it. You look wonderful.'

'And you look exactly the same,' Jen said, although this wasn't quite true. Lilah was even thinner, even blonder than before, her blue eyes huge above razor-sharp cheekbones. She looked almost other-worldly, a caricature of herself.

'Oh, you are kind,' she said, flicking her hair over her shoulder in a parody of coyness. 'This,' she said, waving her arm grandly in the direction of the man she'd brought with her, 'is Zac.' Zac, who was extremely handsome and looked around twenty-five, shook hands with Jen and then with Dan, while Lilah inspected the place, making funny little noises of exclamation. After a few moments she