

# After the Lie

A gripping novel  
about love, loss  
and family secrets



KERRY FISHER

## **AFTER THE LIE**

---

KERRY FISHER BOOKOUTURE

*Bookouture*

*Bookouture*

## CONTENTS

Dedication	
Prologue	
Chapter 1	
Chapter 2	
Chapter 3	
Chapter 4	
Chapter 5	
Chapter 6	
Chapter 7	
Chapter 8	
Chapter 9	
Chapter 10	
Chapter 11	
Chapter 12	
Chapter 13	
Chapter 14	
Chapter 15	
Chapter 16	
Chapter 17	
Chapter 18	
Chapter 19	
Chapter 20	
Chapter 21	
Chapter 22	
Chapter 23	
Chapter 24	
Chapter 25	
Chapter 26	
Chapter 27	
Chapter 28	
Chapter 29	
Chapter 30	
Chapter 31	
Chapter 32	
Chapter 33	
Chapter 34	
Chapter 35	
Chapter 36	
Chapter 37	
Chapter 38	
Chapter 39	
Chapter 40	
Chapter 41	
Chapter 42	

Chapter 43  
Chapter 44  
Chapter 45  
Chapter 46  
Chapter 47  
Letter from Kerry  
Also by Kerry Fisher  
Acknowledgments  
Copyright

*For my mum, and all the other mothers out there, trying to do their best.*

# Prologue

In June 1982, I was thirteen. Pre-internet. Pre-Facebook. Pre-Twitter. We were oblivious to the *#proudparents* of four-year-olds who'd swum five metres for a duckling certificate. We had no idea how many people were eating perfect poached eggs for breakfast. We certainly didn't know that our neighbour down the road 'loved her husband to the moon and back – twice'. And we didn't have the pressure of capturing the one nanosecond that the whole family was happy against a sunny backdrop of turquoise sea, so that everyone else could feel a grumbling sense of dissatisfaction with their own lives.

1982 didn't seem different to any other year. At weekends, I'd disappear off on my bike with a couple of jam sandwiches, a bottle of squash and a warning from my mother to 'Mind what you're up to' before reappearing at teatime hours later. When it was rainy, I'd lie on my bed taping Kool & The Gang off the radio with the microphone jammed up against the speaker, desperately trying to get a version of *Get Down On It* that didn't have the DJ talking over the beginning or someone shouting 'Dinnertime!' in the middle. When it was hot, I'd sunbathe on the Norfolk dunes slathered in baby oil, flicking through *Smash Hits* and plotting how to buy and wear a mini skirt without my mother finding out. The perennial arguments still raged on: why I couldn't have my ears pierced, why we couldn't have a video recorder, why I still had to go to church every Sunday.

The one thing my mother and I weren't at loggerheads about was how often I needed to cycle to the library after school to find new reference books for a particularly onerous history project.

Or at least, that's what I told her.

And that little lie made the big difference. It led to the ten minutes I could never get back, never undo. Like smashing your iPhone, leaving your bag on the bus, driving into a bollard in a car park – but with consequences that money couldn't fix. That sick feeling of self-loathing that all of this could have been avoided if you'd just slowed down, taken your time, *thought things through*. Or as my sixteen-year-old son would say now, 'Not been such a dickhead'.

But in those glorious ten minutes, I didn't even realise I was making a mistake.

Let alone one I could never leave behind.

If the internet had existed back then, I'd have dreaded logging onto Facebook. No doubt my classmates would have been retweeting and WTFing until their fingers fell off.

But in 1982, the only thing that went viral in my little Norfolk village was glandular fever. I wouldn't have expected to get away completely unscathed, of course. I would have braced myself for shocked disapproval from the milkman, an abrupt halt to conversation in the greengrocer's or some knowing looks from the neighbours. Worst case scenario, I'd have skulked past the bus shelter, ignoring the

jeers from the boys sharing stolen Benson & Hedges and swigging Bacardi filched from their parents' cocktail cabinets.

No, for a mistake to go viral in the '80s, you needed a deputy headmaster for a dad. A dad who adored his daughter and ended up in prison. To make sure it haunted you forever, you needed a Catholic mother to fall on her rosary beads and declare that 'all that business' should never be spoken about again.

Ever.



# 1

Birthday presents terrify me. Nothing shows up the chasm between who you are and who everyone else would like you to be more than what they ‘saw and thought of you’. And what anyone thought of me never quite matched what I thought of myself.

By far the most dread-inducing present was the flourish of a gift from my mother, delivered in recycled paper carefully smoothed out and reused. Nothing screamed ‘this is the person I wish you were’ more than the parade of diaries, drawer dividers and polo-necked sweaters delivered to me over the decades. But this year, on my forty-third birthday, she’d surpassed herself. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, expectation scaffolding her face. She nodded at the box on the table. ‘Go on then. Open it.’

I picked at the Sellotape, taking care not to tear the paper. A gold cross necklace. I only wore silver. And I never wore crosses. Never. Of all the ways I’d tried to make amends over the last thirty years, giving in to my mother’s rampant Catholicism had remained a glittering exception. No conversation was complete without a variation on ‘God knows what’s in your heart’ – which was really my mother’s shorthand for ‘God will get you back’.

A great bubble of resentment surged up. An image of flinging the necklace into the patch of nettles at the bottom of the garden rushed through my mind.

‘That’s lovely, thank you.’

‘Put it on, darling. Come here, I’ll do it up for you.’

I sat down with my back towards her – a straight back in order not to cop the ‘You’re becoming so round-shouldered’ speech. As she clicked the necklace around my neck with a satisfied ‘Perfect’, I resisted the urge to leap up, throw open my kitchen cupboards and fling out the Wedgwood tea service she’d bought me ‘for best’. To sweep my Christmas present of fussy cut glass tumblers to the floor. To hurl around the collection of jugs she’d infiltrated into my home over the years in the hope that my children would stop their ‘uncouth’ dumping of plastic milk cartons on the table.

‘Go and look in the mirror.’

I walked out to the downstairs cloakroom and peered at myself in the mirror, amazed that my face looked smooth and neutral rather than like a ball of dough in the proving stage. I touched the cross. Not quite as hideous as the Pope Francis thimble, Pope John Paul II commemorative plate or the absolute *pièce de résistance*, the china Popemobile complete with waving pontiff. I could have made a fortune if I’d allowed the kids to put it all on eBay, but I kept it as an insurance against the day when she’d ask, ‘Now what happened to...?’

I knew Mark would tease me and say, ‘Why didn’t she have done with it and buy you a hairshirt?’ All our married life, he’d kept out of the tangled dynamics that passed for a relationship between my mother and me. He’d reluctantly agreed to have Jamie and Izzy baptised, but put his foot down about a full-blown Catholic upbringing. ‘I’m

not having the kids indoctrinated with guilt, blame and shame in the name of religion.'

It was the one time I'd been forced to stand up to my mother when she got her needle stuck on when they were going to be confirmed. I'd fudged it by saying we'd let them decide when they were old enough. Now they were teenagers and refusing even to go to church, my mother was on a mission. But so far, neither of them appeared the slightest bit worried about going to hell.

I walked back in, concentrating on a light, sunny step.

'So, what are you doing for the rest of the day?' my mother asked, in a tone that suggested she'd been the highlight.

'I've just been elected chairwoman of the fundraising committee at school. They want a new rugby clubhouse, so I need to go to a meeting about that.' Even I could see that as birthdays went, it was rather short on celebration.

I was prepared for a little dig of 'Hasn't Mark planned anything special for you?' but instead my mother burst out with an animated 'Really, darling? You should have said earlier. You have done well.'

My mother wasn't given to over-the-top praise. Any praise, in fact. But she was teetering right on the edge of a squeak of approval at my 'news', which was proof indeed that my bar for success was not so much low as buried. Hallelujah for climbing up another rung on the redeeming scale. I usually managed to haul myself up a notch about every five years. There was nothing she liked more than a crumb of evidence that Lydia Rushford, miscreant offspring of Arthur and Dorothy Southport, was no longer the social pariah of yesteryear.

She grabbed my hand and squeezed it. The softness of her skin surprised me.

I waited.

My mother selected a tone several decibels below the one she'd used to congratulate me. 'It's wonderful how you've moved on from all that...you know...'

I stared at her. In our family, no one *moved on*. The passage of time had covered the worst wounds with a scattering of normality. But like watchful crows gathered on a garden fence, our conflicting resentments were always waiting to swoop down for a vicious peck. Just before I took my dad's arm to walk down the aisle to marry Mark, my mother clutched my hand and whispered, 'It hasn't turned out so badly, considering...' My first born, Jamie, had barely taken a breath in the world before she murmured, 'We'll keep an eye on this one, we don't want history repeating itself...'

Too flipping right about that. Whatever mistakes Jamie made, I wouldn't cling to them like a koala to a eucalyptus for three decades.

Unfortunately, I now had my mother's full attention. 'What will you have to do on this committee, dear?'

The full horrors of what it would entail eluded me. Despite my mother's delight, being voted chairwoman wasn't a question of 'doing well'. In any half-accurate poll, I reckoned there would be a one in two chance of people opting to clean the sports hall loos rather than chair a school committee.

Personally, I would have happily put on the Marigolds and got scrubbing. I was cringing at the thought of sitting in front of the headmaster, discussing the merits of a hog roast over a quiz evening. I should have refused immediately when the class über-rep, Melanie, had put my name forward at the coffee morning. The enthusiastic endorsements from the others had paralysed me. It seemed easier to get the spotlight

off me if I agreed than to explain why the very word – *headmaster* – made me want to hide behind the bike sheds and start smoking for the first time in my life.

When I tried to discuss my misgivings with my mother, she might as well have stuck her fingers in her ears and tra-la-la'd. 'You spend your life fiddling about with balloons and coffee in that wedding business of yours, don't you? You'll be perfect.'

After all these years, it was astonishing that my mother could still engender a little frisson of fury every time she talked about my career. 'That business of mine' often took care of the exorbitant school fees, plus the running of the whole Rushford household whenever Mark's kitchen business was in a slump. But unlike my doctor brother who saved lives, my job keeping bride and groom calm with precision event planning was a little frippery – a small step up from origami and pom-pom making.

'I'm not centre stage at work. No one is watching me. I'm just creeping about behind the scenes, straightening bows and making sure there are enough wine glasses.'

But nothing would derail my mother from her cock-a-hoopness that her daughter had reached the pinnacle of social acceptability. Who could blame her? After the miracle of snagging a husband in the first place, I'd spent nearly two decades airbrushing myself into a perfect wife. Just enough small talk, Boden and discreet pearl earrings to pass through life, slipping under the radar, as unremarkable as a mid-range estate car. No wonder Melanie had peered at all the mothers scrabbling down the hallway, FitFlops flapping at the mere mention of 'volunteers needed' and thought, 'Where's Lydia? She can organise baskets of almond favours and rose petals on tables. A couple of quizzes and a raffle should be well within her grasp.'

As a measure of my mother letting her hair down in wild celebration, she sawed another slice off the birthday Battenberg, saying, 'I shouldn't really,' and mumbling, 'Accolades like that don't come along every day.' If I'd just kept my mouth shut, I wouldn't have to endure months of my mother wanting to know the minutiae of every tedious meeting. Or worse, grilling me on my social connections: had I met any lawyers, doctors or dentists? Whether or not they were nice, decent people didn't even feature. And now her interrogations were spreading down the generations with 'innocent' enquiries whenever she clapped eyes on my children –

'Izzy, so who are you friendly with now? Hannah? Isn't her mother the one with a stud in her nose? I wouldn't bother with her. Don't you see anything of the little girl whose father's a surgeon in London, what's she called, Alexandra?' – followed by Izzy disappearing upstairs with the insolent stomp of a thirteen-year-old.

If Jamie wasn't quick enough to evaporate at the same time, the focus would switch to him. 'I hope you're going to join the orchestra? It's a very good way to get to know the right people.' Which was enough to make him sever a few fingers so he'd never have to pick up his saxophone again. Luckily, at sixteen, Jamie had mastered the art of the grunt that could be construed as a 'yes' or a 'no'.

As usual, my mother heard what she wanted to hear.

Eventually the conversation came full circle, a rainbow of Battenberg crumbs flying out of my mother's mouth as she made the point – again – that 'after all that business' I'd been lucky to end up with a husband and family.

After thirty years, the only reply that allowed us to grind along without bloodshed was 'Another piece of cake?'

## 2

Unlike my mother, Mark had been more put-out than proud that I was head honcho of the fundraising committee. ‘Couldn’t they find someone who doesn’t work to do it? Surely one of the Eastington House mothers could take a break from making quinoa and pomegranate salads to push around their plates?’

The fact that Mark even knew what quinoa was made me laugh. ‘Get you, MasterChef. I know. It was just really hard to say no.’

Mark stabbed at his phone and sighed. ‘I hope you’re not taking on too much. I don’t want you keeling over with exhaustion. And frankly, I need your fundraising skills a bit more than Eastington House’s posh and privileged. I’ve no doubt those kids can go on to lead fulfilling lives without underfloor heating in their changing rooms. I could really do with a hand chasing up kitchen leads before Christmas. The order book is completely empty for November.’

‘I don’t suppose it will be very onerous, so perhaps I could do some follow-ups for you in the evenings. The main event is the hog roast in October to raise money for the new clubhouse.’

‘I’d much rather have a few grand a year off the fees than a swanky new bar. I’d be quite happy to sit on a camping chair under a gazebo.’

Yet again, I wished I’d stood up to my mother when she’d done her whole ‘private school or die’ as soon as I’d had kids. By the time I’d packed Jamie off to Eastington House kindergarten aged three – in his cap, for god’s sake – I was still deluded enough to think I could build some bridges with her. Instead, I’d just signed us up for a lifetime of tightening our belts, which made my poor husband feel as though he’d let me down.

If only he knew the truth about me.

About all of us.

I heaved a sigh of relief as Mark picked up his laptop and started packing his briefcase for work. I had to squeeze in a meeting with my fellow fundraisers before racing off to a consultation with a woman who’d sounded more funereal than bridal. Black tulips, black jelly babies and black candles. The idea of standing my ground with the bossy women on the committee was stressing me enough without having to persuade a client that caves, crypts and dungeons were not suitable wedding venues.

The front door clicking shut, for me, was right up there with a baby’s laugh and the first cup of tea after the school run. The moment of the day when I could just be myself. The self that no one knew. The person who wanted to shake my mother by her scrawny shoulders when she binged on about the right way to behave, the right circle of friends, the right connections. The wife who wanted to make plans for the future without fearing the past. The mother who wanted to encourage her children to live expansively, joyously, to cultivate a healthy immunity to what ‘everyone’ thinks.

About anything.

Instead, I checked my make-up and took my navy blazer from the coat cupboard. I tried to ignore the whimpering of our black Labrador, Mabel, who had just realised that a walk was not on the immediate agenda.

Despite arriving at the café twenty minutes early, Melanie was already sitting in the far corner. I paused on the threshold, recoiling from a one-to-one spotlight with the woman whose opinions came at you with all the finesse of a prop forward: 'We shouldn't allow alcohol at school social evenings. One father was sick in the flowerbed that had been specially planted to look like the school crest last year'; 'The school really needs to serve plain water, not fruit juice, at sports matches because of the risk of tooth enamel erosion.'

And if that wasn't bad enough, Melanie also seemed to have a secret hotline to the exam results of every child in her son's year, with a special terminal illness announcement voice for anyone with less than fifty-five per cent in Maths. As it was the start of a new term, she'd no doubt be up till midnight trying to crack the teacher's streaming code. It would only be a matter of time before she worked out that the duffers were languishing in the Rhododendron set, with the brainy ones beavering away in the Apple Blossom group.

Although Melanie was scribbling in a notebook, she appeared to have little antennae on the top of her head that swivelled round the second my foot creaked on the step. 'Lydia. Lovely to see you.' She untucked herself from the armchair in a graceful movement, her black trousers swishing to attention above her ballerina pumps. 'Come and sit down.'

'I'll just get a coffee.'

'I thought we'd do one big round when everyone gets here, to save wasting time. There are a few things I'd like to discuss with you first, without the others.'

It seemed a bit childish to get into a big hoo-ha over the cappuccino timings, even though I hated giving into Melanie's little power play. I pulled out a chair.

Melanie crossed her legs and tapped her pen on her notebook. 'Now, the main project this year is the new rugby clubhouse. It's going to be your job to keep the form reps involved and force them to push the other parents to help out. You'll have to be a bit dictatorial, otherwise nothing will happen.'

I told myself that I made life-changing weddings happen all the time, without ever needing to draw on my inner dictator. Quiet efficiency and polite requests had worked well enough so far.

Melanie stared at me. 'You'll have to accept that not everyone is going to like you. As I'm sure you know, I've ruffled a few feathers, but that comes with the job.'

I couldn't even tell the dog off without kissing her head and giving her a biscuit afterwards.

'We need to raise at least twenty thousand pounds. There's a parent who's joined the school this year who's very interested in photography. He's going to take photos at various sports matches, which he will then print and sell at other events. He's coming along this morning so you can meet him.'

'Don't we need permission from the parents to take photos?'

Melanie twittered her fingers airily as though I was obstructing her brilliant ideas. 'You'll have to get permissions signed. The sports staff can send them out to the parents.'

Oh dear. That would mean talking to Mr O’Ryan who called all the pupils ‘Booooooy!’ and frothed at the mouth whenever Eastington House was losing.

Before I could sink any further under my burden of duties, a few other women came clacking in. Melanie pointed them into seats, cutting across chatter about the new Italian restaurant. She whistled up a waitress and dispatched her to get coffee. ‘White Americano okay for everyone?’

I dared to disrupt Melanie’s call to action with a request for soya milk, earning me an irritable glance as though I’d started discussing a complicated order for a triple decker sandwich, hold the mayo, no tomato.

Melanie tapped her clipboard for silence. She turned to Fleur, an ex-model and Pied Piper for the dads at any school event. ‘Right. Fleur, your job is to source some shawls, scarves and shrugs we can sell at the Christmas fair. Do you think some of your connections in the rag trade would be happy to donate?’

Fleur raised her eyebrows and smoothed her glossy hair behind her ear. ‘Fashion designers, do you mean, Melanie? I’m sure a few of my friends will be able to oblige.’

‘Good.’ Melanie ploughed on. ‘Terri, could your husband offer some complimentary tickets to... What is it he does? Bingo evenings?’ Melanie managed to say the word ‘Bingo’ in the manner of someone who’d just bitten into a maggot-ridden nectarine.

Terri cackled with laughter and slapped Melanie’s knee as though she’d cracked a great joke. Melanie made a big show of struggling not to spill her coffee. ‘Come on, Mel, don’t be naughty, you know he owns casinos now. You should come down sometime. Get you on the blackjack tables. Free drinks when you’re gambling. I’ll sort out some freebies for you. You’ll have to stick his name at the top of the programme though – he likes a bit of a fanfare.’

At that moment, a stocky man strode up to the table. Melanie leapt to her feet, running her fingers through her hair and straightening the neckline of her T-shirt. ‘Sean! You found our little gathering. Come on in. He’ll make a great addition, won’t he, ladies? We could do with a bit of male insight.’

I looked up at the object of her adulation and blinked hard, feeling the world quiver slightly. While Terri launched in with a hundred questions about what year his kids were in and where he was living, I excused myself to the loo, aware of my feet skittering on the wooden floor like the dog when she was trying to escape the Hoover.

Why would it be him, here, now?

### 3

I lowered the loo lid and sat down. I couldn't be sure. There was no sign that he'd recognised me. He probably didn't see me in the worshipful fog surrounding him. I hadn't seen the man in thirty years. I hadn't forgotten about him – how could I? – but I'd stored him away in the understairs cupboard of my mind, to remain there undiscovered until I died, with any luck. Last I'd heard he was living in America, some big-shot estate agent for the rich and famous. Why would he turn up in a Surrey backwater? Sean was a pretty common name. It didn't have to be Sean McAllister. I re-applied my lipstick and prayed that it was any other Sean: Sean Smith, Sean Connery, Shaun the flaming sheep.

My body seemed to think it was him, though. Every time I tried to bring his face to mind and compare the chunky adolescent with today's broad-shouldered man, my stomach suffered from air turbulence. If it was him, his hair wasn't as dark as I recalled. But maybe, like me, he had plenty of grey. I hauled myself up and leant on the sink. My hands were shaking so much I was rattling the taps. I had to go back out there. I'd brave a few more of Melanie's diktats, then I'd make an excuse to disappear.

I opened the door and pretended I was stepping into a meeting with a new client, steeling myself to look smiling, confident and capable. I hovered at the side of the room, staring straight at the back of the man who'd blown my life apart so many years ago. Was it him? I didn't remember his hair being that wavy. I strained my ears. There was a deep timbre to his voice. Was that a slightly American inflection? Or Irish? Mark always teased me about my inability to distinguish a Brummie from a Liverpudlian. I consoled myself that if Sean wanted to ingratiate himself with the great and good of Eastington House, he wouldn't be in a hurry to tell the story either. Too many of the women out there had teenage girls themselves.

I slunk towards the group, undecided whether I was going to introduce myself or just slip in quietly. Melanie made the decision for me. 'Sean. This is our new chairwoman – the very capable Lydia Rushford.'

Hallelujah for my parents' decision to call me by my middle name when we moved away after everything that had happened. For the millionth time I thanked my lucky stars that I'd married Mark. Right now, the fact that he was kind and honourable was a bonus. Having his surname, totally different from my original name was the real prize. Sally Southport sounded like a weathergirl on the TV to me now.

Sean stood up. If it was him, he'd ended up quite tall, well over six foot. I remembered him as a thickset bulldozer on the rugby field, steaming through the opposition, stubby legs powering away. I'd loved watching him play. Saturday was my favourite day of the week, when I was allowed to linger on the edge of the 'in' crowd. When I stopped being the deputy headmaster's daughter and became one of the rugby girlfriends.

My hand shook a little in his firm grasp. 'Lydia, lovely to meet you.' Had he

lingered on 'Lydia'? Put a little bit of emphasis on 'meet'? Would he even recognise me now, with my blonde highlighted bob rather than the long brown hair I used to have? I'd been stick-thin then as well. I was what my mother would call 'solid' now. Certainly not the thirteen-year-old girl with the jutting hip bones of adolescence. Mark chivalrously called me 'hourglass', which would have worked if I'd been three inches taller.

I automatic-piloted, 'Pleased to meet you, too' and sat back in my armchair, unable to concentrate on any of the bulk-buying of jelly snakes as prizes, glow-in-the-dark antlers for the fireworks evening or rigid rules for the contents of the Christmas gift box for the children of Africa.

'Toothpaste, toothbrush – yes. Chocolate, soldiers, anything gun- or sword-shaped – no.' Everything had a life-or-death quality when Melanie spoke, as though slipping in a chocolate button would result in a revolution in Uganda.

Sean caught me staring and winked at me. It was him. That little lopsided grin. His nose didn't seem crooked, though. He leaned back, one foot crossed over his knee. Long-discarded memories shrugged off their dust sheets. I batted them away, picking up my coffee to hide my face but I couldn't take a sip. Everything in me seemed bilious, as though I'd glugged down a two-litre bottle of coke without pausing to breathe. I was making a gulping noise, the way the dog did when she was about to throw up. I put my cup back down and coughed, hoping to release, very quietly, some of the trapped air from my stomach. Instead, a big swell – a hard knot of fright – lodged itself halfway up my oesophagus, threatening to bring my porridge with it. I tried to breathe steadily, my mind catching wafts of Melanie's 'fundamental principles', 'expenses down and income up', 'more volunteers, lighter burden'. I was aware of Sean glancing at me now and again. His eyes were constantly on the move, drinking us all in. Still restless, then.

Would it all come out now, this secret we'd fought so hard to keep? What would they think, these people with their granite-topped kitchens, their husbands in the latest Range Rovers, their children with cellos in wheeled cases? Every time Jamie fouled at rugby, overdid the rough and tumble in the playground, or, god forbid, got into a fight, would there be mutterings of 'From what I hear, it runs in the family'? Or would it be a total non-event, greeted with a shrug before they all went back to watching the *Great British Bake Off*? With my mother's barometer stuck on stormy for all these years, I had no way of working out an accurate public disapproval forecast. Mark would know. But of course, he didn't *know*.

'Lydia. Lydia!' Melanie's sharp voice cut into my fear.

I dragged my eyes up to meet her questioning glance, feeling the beginning of a migraine.

She said, 'You'd better have a separate meeting with Sean, to discuss pricing and publicity. It's going to be a real money-spinner for us. I've seen his pictures; he's an excellent photographer.'

Photographer.

The word bounced off the walls at me.

'I'm sure he is.'

I gathered every last bit of strength, imagined my thigh muscles connecting to my knees and contracting to force myself into a standing position. I grabbed my handbag.



Sean smiled, a man used to a warm welcome wherever he went. 'I'll give you a ring, Lydia, and we can come up with a strategy.'

If he hadn't recognised me, it was just a matter of time. My voice sounded thick, as though I was speaking underwater. 'Okay. Sorry, I have a meeting now, I have to go.'

I raced out into the street, gulping in the urban air of exhaust, Chinese takeaway and fresh bread. I just managed to dash into an alleyway before I lost the battle with the porridge.

## 4

On days like today, I wished we'd stayed in our little village in Norfolk and let everybody gossip their arses off until they'd found someone else to talk about. I fantasised about telling my mother that I wouldn't go along with her charade any more. That I didn't care that she arranged the flowers at St Joseph's, that Dad had had his application accepted to join the golf club, that she loved telling everyone that her grandchildren went to Eastington House. I just wanted to be who I was, imperfect bloody me, who messed up.

But most of all, I wished I'd told Mark – some of it at least – the first day I met him after he rescued me when my stall collapsed at a wedding show. I wished I'd never allowed the secret to grow, rolling down the generations like a toffee under a sofa, collecting dust, hair and grit as it went.

'I've led a very dull existence,' I said when people asked me about my past. I'd been in Surrey long enough to lose my Norfolk accent, except for the occasional word. Mark knew we'd lived there but I blocked all suggestions about going back to show him where I grew up.

'It's so flat and boring.'

'You'd hate all that seaside town nonsense, amusement arcades and silly souvenir shops.'

'I'm a townie now. All those marshes depress me. It's so bleak.'

In reality, I longed to be under those big open skies again. Yearned to walk for miles and miles on those sandy beaches, picking up razor shells or crabbing ankle-deep in freezing water. I craved the sea air, with its taint of dead seal and seaweed. I wanted to burst through the front door, cheeks whipped by blasts of sand and winter wind. I'd even run squealing into the Wash in April, just as we used to, disdainful of the out-of-towners who stood shivering on the shore, wrapped in their puffy anoraks and suburban attitudes.

Even my mother, who was a great one for snuffing out any source of fun, never batted an eyelid about me being gone for hours, as long as I didn't commit the cardinal sins of getting home after dark and letting my dinner go cold. That freedom seemed laughable now when I thought of my own kids and their constant texting about where they were and what time they needed picking up.

And now I'd missed my moment to come clean. Perhaps if I hadn't been so *grateful* that someone could see the good in me, I might have trusted Mark. I could have flopped against him, maybe heard him say, 'Poor you. You were so young.' Sometimes I struggled to remember how this Bazooka bubble gum of a lie had burst and engulfed us all.

I hardly ever cried. It was as though I didn't have the same amount of moisture in my body as other people. When the whole room wept at wedding speeches, I stood dry-eyed at the back, wondering where people found the huge well of emotion to

display. But today I was making up for it.

I needed to talk to Sean. Surely he had as much to lose as me? What if he just viewed it as a bit of fun, something that happened so long ago as to merit barely a mention? What if he couldn't believe it was still governing my life, my family's life, changing us all forever? Of course, he hadn't lived it the way we had, but if his lips, those perfect lips, even suggested a smile, I'd have to be kept away from pitchforks.

I forced myself to take deep breaths until I stopped shaking. Nearly time to go and meet the bride who was taking the theme of 'Until death do us part' to extremes. I didn't dare cancel in case I lost the ability to face anyone ever again once I'd stepped off the merry-go-round. Onwards and upwards with eye-whitening drops, foundation and a quick polish of my backbone.

I found the bride's house easily. From the outside, it was a smart executive home, a square of lawn in front, garage to the side. When Clarissa answered the door, I did have to practise 'eyes in', as I instructed the children whenever we walked past a shouting match in the street, a car accident or anyone who was passé enough to be sporting a Mohican. Clarissa had enough nose and lip jewellery to quake in fear at magnetic forces. Beneath the long black hair streaked with pink, she had the sweetest elfin face. I did wonder what her fiancé looked like. How would he kiss her without getting an eye tooth hooked in a hoop? I wondered whether the neighbours shooed their children away in case they were invited in to eat barbecued bat.

She waved an arm tattooed with crossbows and gothic symbols and swept me across the threshold. 'Come in, come in. I'm Clarissa.'

I held out my hand, noticing the inky skulls on her knuckles. She led me into a sitting room that looked like a skeleton might jiggle out from behind the velvet curtains. The walls were black. Two deep purple sofas were suspended from the ceiling by thick rope, dominating the room. Despite my misery, I was still trying to catalogue every little detail, storing it up to make the kids laugh. I didn't want to think about what the bedroom looked like – chains and drapes and spiky things came to mind.

Clarissa indicated one of the swings. 'Have a seat.'

I hesitated. 'Is there anywhere I could sit with the laptop at a table?'

Clarissa smiled. 'We don't have a table.'

I moulded my face into a blank. 'Okay, I'll just balance on the swing.' Nothing like trying to look professional while clinging onto playground equipment.

While we discussed her desire to come down the aisle to *Bat Out of Hell* and the logistics of having her Doberman, Satan, as a bridesmaid, my mind was chasing all sorts of solutions to stop Sean messing up my life for a second time. I needed to warn my parents. I couldn't allow them to bump into him at school over coffee and croissants on French Day. Disappearing abroad was beginning to look very attractive.

'Could you organise a wedding cake with a big skull on top?' Clarissa asked, breaking into my miserable thoughts. 'Would it be hugely expensive? My fiancé is concerned about the finances. He thinks we should just have cupcakes, but I've got my heart set on it. It would be so cool with a little bride and groom sitting in the eye sockets.'

'I do know a clever cake maker but she doesn't come cheap. Of course, if it really matters to you, I can spread the cost about among some other things on the invoice, so

your fiancé wouldn't necessarily have to know that it went on the cake.'

Clarissa looked aghast.

'No. That wouldn't be right. I love Mungo so much, we tell each other everything. You can't go into a marriage without total honesty, can you?'

She looked at me with those huge eyes, thick black eyeliner distorting their beauty. Who was I to criticise the stuffed bat spread-eagled on the wall? Who cared if they donned dog collars and ate their supper from bowls on the floor? She was streets ahead of me. Fifteen years younger and generations smarter.

Total honesty was the way to go. But would my own marriage be able to withstand it after eighteen years of half-truths?