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**Opening Extract from...**

# Mad

Written by Chloé Esposito

Published by Michael Joseph

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# Mad

CHLOÉ ESPOSITO

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For Paolo

Thou shalt not covet . . .

*Exodus 20:17*

You have two lives. The second one begins when you  
realize you only have one.

*Confucius*

Much Madness is divinest Sense –  
    To a discerning Eye –  
Much Sense – the starkest Madness –  
    'Tis the Majority  
    In this, as all, prevail –  
    Assent – and you are sane –  
Demur – you're straightway dangerous –  
    And handled with a Chain –  
*Emily Dickinson*

## Disclaimer

**T**here's something you should know before we go any further: my heart is in the wrong place. So is my stomach, my liver and my spleen. All my internal organs are on the opposite side, in exactly the place where they shouldn't be. I'm back to front: a freak of nature. Seven billion people on this planet have their hearts on the left. Mine's on the right. You don't think that's a sign?

My sister's heart is in the right place. Elizabeth is perfect, through and through. I am a mirror image of my twin, her dark side, her shadow. She is right and I am wrong. She's right-handed; I am left. In Italian, the word for 'left' is '*sinistra*'. I am the sinister sister. Beth is an angel and so what am I? Hold that thought . . .

The funny thing is that to look at us, you can't tell the difference. On the surface, we're identical twins, but peel back the skin and you'll get the shock of your life; watch in awe as my guts spill out all mixed up and topsy-turvy. Don't say I didn't warn you. It's not a pretty sight.

We're monozygotic, if you want to know; Beth's zygote split in two and I materialized. It happened at the very earliest stage of development, when her zygote was no more than a cluster of cells. Mum had been pregnant for just a few days and then – poof – out of nowhere, I show up, cuckoo-like. Beth had to share her nice, cosy amniotic bath and Mum's home-cooked placenta.

It was pretty crowded in that uterus; there wasn't a lot of room for the two of us and our umbilical cords. Beth's got tangled around her neck and then knotted pretty badly. It was

touch and go for a while. I don't know how that happened. It had nothing to do with me.

Scientists think identical twins are completely random. We're still a mystery; no one knows how or why I occurred. Some call it luck, coincidence or chance. But nature doesn't like random. God doesn't just *play dice*. I came here for a reason; I know I did. I just don't know what that reason is yet. The two most important days of your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.

**DAY ONE:**  
**Sloth**

My problem's always been failure to give a fuck.

@AlvinaKnightly69



## Chapter One

*Monday, 24 August 2015, 8 a.m.  
Archway, London*

From: Elizabeth Caruso  
ElizabethKnightlyCaruso@gmail.com  
To: Alvina Knightly  
AlvinaKnightly69@hotmail.com  
Date: 24 Aug 2015 at 08.01  
Subject: VISIT

*Alvie, darling,*

*Please stop ignoring me. I know you received my last two emails because I put that recipient-tracker thing on, so you can stop pretending. Despite being at risk of repeating myself, I would like to invite you, yet again, to come and stay with us at our villa in Taormina. You would LOVE it here: 16th-century original features, the smell of frangipani in the air. The sun shines every single day. There's a pool to die for. We're around the corner from the ancient Greek amphitheatre, which frames Mount Etna to the west and the shimmering Mediterranean to the east. Even if you can only manage a week – I know you're a slave to that ghastly job – it would be wonderful to see you. I can't believe you haven't met Ernie yet; he's getting bigger each day and is the spit of his Auntie Alvina.*

*But seriously, I need you. I'm begging you. Come. IT'S BEEN TWO YEARS.*

*There's something I need to ask you and I can't do it by email.*

*Beth x*

*PS I know what you're thinking and no, it isn't still awkward.*

*Ambrogio and I have forgotten all about it, even if you haven't. So stop being a mule and come to Sicily.*

*PPS How much do you weigh at the moment? Are you still 9 stone 5? A size 10? I can't lose the baby weight and it's driving me insane.*

Fucking hell; she is intolerable.

*The smell of frangipani in the air blah, blah, blah, the ancient Greek amphitheatre blah, blah, blah, the shimmering Mediterranean blah, blah, fucking blah. She sounds like that presenter on *A Place in the Sun*: 'Alvina Knightly seeks a pied-à-terre in the stunning coastal region of Eastern Sicily.' Not that I would ever watch that kind of thing.*

I am *definitely not* going. It sounds boring, old-fashioned. I don't trust volcanoes. I cannot stand that kind of heat. It's sticky. Sweaty. My English skin would burn in two seconds; I'm as pale as an Eskimo. *Don't say 'Eskimo'!* I can just hear her now . . . *They don't like that name. It's not politically correct. Say 'Inuit' instead.*

I scan my bedroom: empty vodka bottles, a Channing Tatum poster, photos on a pinboard of 'friends' I never see. Clothes on the floor. Cold mugs of tea. A vibe that would make Tracey Emin's cleaner freak. Three emails in a week. What's going on? I wonder what she wants to ask me. I suppose I should reply or she'll continue to break my balls.

From: Alvina Knightly

AlvinaKnightly69@hotmail.com

To: Elizabeth Caruso

ElizabethKnightlyCaruso@gmail.com

Date: 24 Aug 2015 at 08.08

Subject: Re: VISIT

*Elizabeth, darling,*

*Thank you for the invitation. Your villa certainly sounds stunning. Aren't you and Ambrogio and, of course, little Ernie lucky to have such a splendid home in what sounds like the perfect location? Do you remember how as children, I was the one who loved the water? And now you have the swimming pool . . .*

(and I have the bath with the blocked-up drain.)

*Isn't life funny? I would, of course, love to see it and meet your gorgeous little cherub, my nephew, but it really is flat out at work at the moment. August is always our busiest month, that's why I've been so tardy in responding. Apologies.*

*Let me know when you're next visiting London; it would be good to catch up.*

*Albino*

No matter how many times I type my name, *Alvina*, predictive text always changes it to fucking *Albino*. (Perhaps it knows how pale I am and it's taking the piss?) I'm just going to change it by deed poll.

*Alvina*

*PS Do send my regards to your husband and give Ernesto a kiss from his auntie.*

Send.

Elvis Presley's twin brother was stillborn. Some people have all the luck.

I drag myself up and out of bed and step in a pizza I left on the floor. I only ate half of it late last night before passing out

around 4 a.m. Tomato sauce all over my foot. A piece of salami between my toes. I peel off the meat and shove it in my mouth, wipe the sauce off with a sock. I get dressed in the clothes that I find on the floor: a nylon skirt that doesn't need ironing, a cotton T-shirt that does. I look in the mirror and frown. Urgh. I rub the mascara away from my eyes, apply a slick of purple lipstick, run my fingers through greasy hair. That'll do; I'm late. Again.

I go to work.

I grab the mail on my way out of the house and rip it open as I trudge down the street sucking on a Marlboro. Bills, bills, bills, bills, a business card for a minicab company, an advert for takeaway pizza. 'FINAL DEMAND', 'BAILIFF'S NOTICE', 'URGENT ACTION REQUIRED'. Yawn, yawn, more of the same. Does Taylor Swift have to deal with this shit? I shove the letters into the hands of a homeless man sitting outside the Tube: no longer my problem.

I push through the crowds in the line for the turnstile, slam my Oyster card down on the reader. We shuffle through the station at 0.0000001 mph. I try to write a haiku in my head, but the words won't come. Something deep about existential struggle? Something poetic and nihilistic? But nothing. My brain's still asleep. I glare at the adverts for clothes and jewellery that cover every spare inch of wall. The same smug, airbrushed model with the same smug, airbrushed face stares down at me just as she does every single morning. She is feeding a toddler in an advert for follow-on milk. I don't have a toddler and I don't need reminding. I definitely don't need to buy follow-on milk.

I stomp down the escalator, push past a man taking up too much space.

'Hey, watch it!' he yells.

'Stand on the right! Dickhead.'

I am a great artist trapped inside the body of a classified

advertising sales representative, a reincarnation of Byron or Van Gogh, Virginia Woolf or Sylvia Plath. I wait on the platform and contemplate my fate. There must be more to life than this? Stale air kisses my face and tells me that a train is approaching. I could jump now and it would all disappear. Within the hour, paramedics would have scraped me off the track and the Northern line would have resumed service.

A mouse runs over the metal rails. It only has three paws, but it lives a life of freedom and adventure. Lucky bastard. Perhaps that train will crush its little skull? It darts out of the way in the nick of time. Damn.

I perch on the shelf at the end of the carriage. A man with a cold sore invades my personal space; his shirt is translucent with sweat. He holds the yellow rail above my head, his armpit an inch from my nose; I can smell his Lynx Africa mixed with despair. I read his *Metro* upside down: murder, drugs, war, a story about somebody's cat. He presses his crotch against my thigh, so I stamp on his foot. He moves away. Next time, I'll knee him in the balls. We stop for a few minutes somewhere in London's lower intestines and then start again. I change trains at Tottenham Court Road. The carriage empties its bowels and we disembark as amorphous excrement. I am defecated at Oxford Circus.

### *Mayfair, London*

Outside, the air is as thick as lard. Traffic noise and police sirens. I inhale a lungful of nitrogen dioxide and start to walk. *Big Issue* sellers, charity muggers and hordes of bored-looking students. Five Guys, Costa, Bella Italia. Starbucks, Nando's, Gregg's. I do the three and a half minutes to the office on autopilot. Perhaps I'm sleepwalking? Or maybe I'm dead? Perhaps I did jump and this is Limbo? I keep on

walking and turn left down Regent Street, thinking about Beth. I am not bloody going.

A pigeon craps on my shoulder: grey-green goo. Great. Why me? What did I do wrong? I look around, but nobody's noticed. Isn't that supposed to be lucky? Perhaps it's a good omen for my day? I pull off my jumper and fling it into a bin; it had moth holes anyway.

I push through revolving doors and grimace at the man behind the desk. We've both worked here for years. We don't know each other's names. He looks up, frowns, then goes back to his crossword. I don't think he likes me. The feeling is mutual. I trudge downstairs with leaden feet. I am wasted here, wasted. I don't sell the big glossy fold-out ads at the front of magazines for sexy brands like Gucci or Lanvin or Tom Ford. That would be heaven. That's the big bucks. Then I'd get to sit upstairs. No, I work in *classified*. I sell the crappy little blink-and-you'd-miss-them ads that nobody reads at the back of magazines: hair-regrowth supplements, Viagra for women or obscure gardening paraphernalia that even your gran wouldn't buy. It's sixty-one quid for an eighth of a page. I don't know how I got here and I don't know why I've stayed.

Perhaps I'll run away and join the circus? I've always wanted to be the guy who throws daggers at the woman on the spinning wheel. (Why is it always the *guy* who throws the daggers?) I can picture the big top with its rainbow colours, the clowns, the jugglers, the horses, the lions. I can hear the crowds roll up, roll up, cheering, applauding, screaming in terror as knives fly through the air. The prickly sting of perspiration. The high of my adrenaline rush. I can see her now, spinning, spinning: blades slice through the wheel and just miss his face. Come on, Alvina, that's never going to happen. You're living in cloud cuckoo land. And you can't make any money writing haikus. My sister always said I'd make a great traffic warden. It would be fun to work in an abattoir.

I push through the doors to the basement. Angela (the ‘g’ is hard) Merkel (not her real name) looks up as I enter the room and raises a well-plucked eyebrow. She has an air that promises today will be torture: like a root canal or kidney stones.

‘Good morning, Angela.’ *Go to hell, Angela.*

I sit at a wood-effect desk in a room filled with cookie-cutter cubicles and no windows. Despite being ‘adjustable’, my swivel chair always seems to be the wrong height or shape or angle; I’ve long since given up fiddling. There’s a peace lily that needs watering. The air is stale and dry.

A strawberry Hubba Bubba stuck beneath my computer monitor looks like a pink-grey rat brain. I pop it in my mouth and start to chew. It doesn’t taste of strawberries, but then it didn’t last week either.

I am exactly twelve minutes late. I think I’m supposed to be on a conference call with Kim (Jong-il, not his real name) but I can’t be bothered to dial in. Kim is as pleasant as an ingrowing toenail. I contemplate picking up the phone and harassing people; my job entails cold-calling strangers over and over until they take out some kind of restraining order or finally purchase advertising space. They pay up to make me shut up and go away. Instead, I turn on my PC. Bad idea. My inbox floods with ‘Urgent’ emails: ‘WHERE ARE YOU?’, ‘REPORT TO HR’, ‘EXPENSE POLICY VIOLATION’. Urgh, God, not again. I activate my out-of-office so I don’t have to deal with anyone’s bullshit.

Twitter’s still up from Friday from when I didn’t log off. I glance over at Angela; she is waterboarding one of my colleagues in the far corner of the room. Fuck it. I take a peek at what’s trending, but it all looks boring. Taylor Swift hasn’t replied to any of my tweets complimenting her on her recent outfits. Not even a favourite. Perhaps she’s busy? She’s probably on tour.

*‘So bored at work I’m gonna watch porn #Ilovemyjob.’* Tweet.

I meant it as a joke, but now I'm curious. I call up YouPorn on my phone and scroll through genitalia: 'Threesomes', 'Fetish', 'Fantasy', 'Sex toys', 'Big boobs'. *Oooh*, 'Female-friendly'. Then my phone rings: 'Beth Mobile'. Bloody hell, she's persistent. Why is she calling me at work? I am busy and important. I scan the office, but nobody's noticed. I try to send it to voicemail, but my fingertip slips and I answer it instead.

'Alvie? Alvie? Is that you? Are you there?'

I hear her voice calling my name; it's small and far away. I screw up my eyes and try to ignore her. I want to hang up.

'Alvie? Can you hear me?' she says.

I grab the phone and slam it against my ear.

'Hi, Beth! Great to hear from you.' Seriously, she's made my fucking day.

'At last. Finally, I—'

I grit my teeth.

'Listen, Beth. I can't talk now. I've got to run to a meeting. My boss is waiting. I think I'm getting a promotion! I'll call you back later, OK?'

'No, wait, I—'

I cut her off and get back to the porn: cocks, tits and asses. Someone with both tits *and* a cock. Cool.

'Good morning, Alvina! How are you today?'

I look up and see Ed (Balls: face like a testicle) peering over his cubicle. Oh God, what now? What does he want? Apart from a personality transplant.

'Hello, Ed. I'm fine. What do you want?'

'Just checking how my favourite co-worker is doing on this fine Monday morning.'

'Fuck off, Ed.'

'Right, yes, of course. I was just, er . . .'

'Yes?'

'Er . . . I was just wondering when you might be able to . . .'

'Pay you back that fifty quid I owe you?'



‘Yes!’

‘Well, not today, obviously.’

‘No. Obviously not today.’

‘So fuck off.’

‘Right. OK then. Bye-bye.’

His head pops back down again. Finally. God. I’ll need to avoid him this week at the water cooler. I almost wish I hadn’t borrowed it now. I only needed the money to get a vajazzle; in hindsight it wasn’t that urgent. I had a super-hot date with a crazy-hot guy I’d met in the Holloway Poundland. I thought a bit of glitter would add some sparkle to our first night of passion. But the sequins went *everywhere*, all over the bed, all over his face, all in his hair. He got one stuck behind his eyeball and had to see a doctor. I kept finding sequins for weeks and weeks after, in my shoes, in my wallet, on a pack of chicken nuggets in the bottom of the freezer (I have *no* idea). The worst thing was that he didn’t even appreciate all the effort I’d gone to: his name spelled out in pink diamanté all the way across my crotch: ‘AARON’. Apparently it should’ve been ‘ARRAN’, like some stupid island in Scotland. So what if I spelled it wrong? It’s the thought that counts. By the end of the night, it just said ‘RUN’.

I get back to the porn. I lower the volume to mute the moans, but it’s still very loud. Moaning and groaning and grunting and swearing. ‘*I like that ass, baby.*’ Someone shouts, ‘*Whore!*’ A ‘MILF’ is just getting fisted by a man in a mask when I notice a figure in my peripheral vision; Angela is looming over my cubicle. Shit.

‘You’re tweeting about *porn* from the company account?’

‘That was the *company’s* account? Oops. My bad,’ I say.

‘You’re fired,’ says Angela.

‘YOU ARE SOOO FUCKED, BITCH,’ says YouPorn.

I grab my handbag, the peace lily, a stapler and the copies of *Heat* and *Closer* from under my desk. I go home again.