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# A Family Recipe

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# A Family Recipe

Veronica Henry



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*To Paul and Lucy – key ingredients in my family recipe*



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# I

1942

The night sky was quiet and watchful, as it always was these days.

The full moon slid out from behind a cloud to check up on the city beneath, like an anxious mother with a newborn baby. Bath was settling down to sleep: people were drawing up their bedcovers, reflecting on the day that had been. Prayers were said, thanks were given, and everyone hoped for sleep untroubled by nightmares, or worse.

At Number 11 Lark Hill, the back gate opened. A figure stepped out onto the little lane that ran behind the terrace. Jilly Wilson drew her coat more tightly over her jumper and tweed skirt: late April still had a bite to it once the sun had gone. She would have worn something prettier, but she didn't want to arouse suspicion. It was Saturday night but there was no call for her to be wearing her lilac dress again. It was still on the back of her chair from last night. It smelled of contraband Black Cat cigarette smoke and him.

She and her parents had had supper at seven and by now she should be in bed, if not asleep. Her mother was already snoring lightly, her current read spread on her chest where it had fallen from her grasp. She would hardly

read more than a page before conking out, worn out by her primary school charges whose ebullience never failed to both delight and exhaust her. Her father would still be in his study, reading through his patients' notes, writing referral letters, all the administration of a busy doctor, though there was no light to be seen from his window.

There was no light to be seen anywhere. The hills around Bath were filled with looming shadows, black under the pale moon. The magnificent crescents and terraces made themselves as inconspicuous as they could. In daylight, they could do nothing to hide their beauty and splendour, the yellow stone glowing in the spring sunshine. But come dusk they hunkered down, crouching fearfully, like every other city in England.

Jilly crept along the alley behind the row of Regency houses that made up Lark Hill. Their front gardens were hidden behind a tall stone wall that reached to head height, the houses standing to attention behind, rows and rows of sash windows staring out over the road that swept down into the city. Once she was on Lansdown Road she relaxed a little. If she kept her head down and her hands in her pockets no one would recognise her or question what she was doing at this time.

Halfway down the hill she darted off the main drag and along a side street, the houses here less grand, Edwardian rather than Regency and tightly huddled together, with only a small front garden each. Jilly's legs wouldn't move fast enough. She was breathing heavily now. She couldn't wait to get there.

Until yesterday, she'd had no idea it was possible to feel the way she did. She hadn't had a chance to speak about it to anyone else. She wasn't clandestine or duplicitous by

nature, but she hadn't even told Ivy. She didn't want to break the spell by making it public. For the time being, she wanted to keep the wonder of it all to herself, which only added to the thrill she was feeling. And he felt the same. They'd agreed to keep their meeting secret.

And to think that she nearly hadn't gone to the dance! Ivy had egged her on – Jilly really hadn't wanted to go, but Ivy wasn't going to take no for an answer and when she was in that mood it was easier to say yes. Jilly had had every intention of making herself scarce as soon as Ivy homed in on a likely victim, which she always did within ten minutes of arriving at a social event. Boys – men – loved Ivy, and she loved them. She bubbled over in their company, even more than usual. Ivy was the fizziest person Jilly had ever met, an electric shock of a girl. Tiny and skinny as a rake but star bright. Next to her, Jilly sometimes felt lumpen and staid. No one had ever accused Jilly of being shy, but compared to Ivy she was the ultimate wallflower, a role she found interminably dull.

The church hall near the Assembly Rooms was full to bursting on that Friday night. The onset of finer weather had lifted everyone's mood. The boys had a swagger about them, and twinkling eyes, as if they'd all been reading Tennyson and the spring had turned their thoughts to love – though Jilly doubted that many of them were familiar with the poet. The girls had dug out their prettiest frocks, because it was lovely to have a reason to dress up. The band put a bounce in everyone's step. A fruit cup laced with ill-gotten dessert wine was intoxicating and sweet. Within those four walls, just for one night, you could forget there was a war on.

Ivy threw her arms up with a whoop and was swept up

in the mass of whirling dancers. She had no inhibitions, as giddy as the mirror ball twirling above that threw shards of diamond light across everyone's face. The room soon became hot with music and laughter and a peculiar energy that didn't reach Jilly. She felt panicked by the mood of the crowd, unsure. Her shoes felt as if they were made of lead, whereas Ivy was dancing on air. She could see her friend waving at her, gesturing to her to come into the melee. Jilly watched as a lithe young soldier took her by the arm, and Ivy threw back her head and laughed up at him. White-gold hair, red lips, no shame. Oh for just a smidgeon of her confidence, thought Jilly.

A persistent drum beat began, then the band burst into an exuberant tune that was impossible to resist. The soldier and Ivy began to dance, all elbows and knees and smiles, in perfect time, some secret signal between them synchronising their movements. Jilly had no such signal inside her, she knew that.

'You just need to stop thinking and feel it,' Ivy had told her repeatedly, but the more she tried to stop thinking, the more she thought, and the less her feet did as she asked. It had been the same on the netball court and the lacrosse pitch. She was, she decided, more cerebral than physical.

She decided to head for the cloakroom, more for respite than any particular need. There was a young man of about her age leaning up against the wall in the hall outside. He flashed a smile and raised his glass to her in a gesture of conspiracy.

She stopped in her tracks and smiled back, putting a hand up to smooth her hair. Ivy had set it into curls, with a roll at the front that was larger than she was comfortable

with. It made her feel awkward and foolish. She preferred her shoulder-length hair loose. She wanted to run her fingers through Ivy's handiwork and become herself again.

'You look, like me, as if you wish you were somewhere else,' he said. There was a sombreness about him as if something weighed too heavily on him to shrug off. He was tall and slender, his auburn hair swept back, his eyes Malteser brown.

Jilly nodded. 'Anywhere,' she told him. 'Dances aren't my thing, but I don't want to be a stick in the mud.'

'One always feels such pressure to be jolly at these dos.'

'I know. I think you're either a dance person or you're not.' She gave a rueful smile. 'I'm not.'

'Snap.' He held out his hand. 'Shall we be stick-in-the-muds together?'

She hesitated for a moment. She felt drawn to him. He had dark freckles on his pale skin. His eyes were roaming all over her, asking questions. There was something about him that unsettled her, though. Maybe it was to do with the glass of whisky? Was he drunk? He had the confidence of one who was, though he still seemed in control. But he made her tummy flip; made her feel not quite sure what was going to happen next. It wasn't a feeling she was used to, but she rather liked it.

'So what sort of a person are you?' he asked.

'Well,' said Jilly, thinking. 'A book person, mostly. I like books. I like people too, but I prefer talking to them than dancing with them. One to one.'

'One to one,' he mused, and she blushed.

'I'm not keen on crowds.'

'Why did you come, then?'

'My friend forced me. Ivy won't take no for an answer.'

‘You look perfectly capable of saying no.’

‘Of course I am,’ Jilly laughed. ‘But you don’t know Ivy. I’d never hear the end of it.’ She watched him drain his glass, though his gaze never left her face. ‘What about you?’

‘Same. I’m staying with a friend. He insisted. As a guest, it would have been rude to say no. This is much more his sort of thing than mine.’

‘So what’s your sort of thing?’

He looked wary, as if it was a trick question, as if there was a right answer and a wrong one and he mustn’t get it wrong.

‘I like girls who like books,’ he said finally. He took out a cigarette case and offered it to her. She shook her head. Ivy smoked like a trooper, but Jilly couldn’t take to it. There was enough to worry about without trying to fit in a smoke as often as you could, which is what seemed to happen to everyone who took it up.

She heard the whir of flint and smelled oil as he lit the end of his cigarette and drew on it.

‘Would you like to go for a walk?’ His full mouth wasn’t smiling, but his eyes were.

Jilly gulped. Was it wise, to wander off with someone you had only just met?

‘A walk? It’s nearly pitch black.’

‘I want to explore the city. By moonlight. It’s my only chance.’

‘Only chance?’

He blew out a ribbon of smoke. It left him in curls, drifting into the air. ‘I’m leaving on Sunday.’ His smile was tight. ‘I’m training to fly.’

‘How exciting.’ She could imagine him in a flying jacket. He looked like a fighter pilot. Some people looked

like their jobs, she'd noticed. Her father looked like a doctor – suited, studious, concerned. Her mother looked like a teacher – round, kindly, comforting. Ivy looked like a hairdresser – glamorous, always done up to the nines, with red lipstick. Jilly didn't look like anything yet. There was no point in her embarking on a career in wartime, even though she had done well at school. She was far more use helping her father in his surgery for the time being – making appointments and keeping notes – because it seemed the most patriotic thing to do.

'Perhaps.' He didn't sound sure. He seemed perturbed. Perhaps he was just losing interest in their conversation. Jilly didn't want him to lose interest. She needed to make more effort, she realised. Fizz a bit, like Ivy.

'Come on then,' she said, holding out her arm. 'I'll give you a tour.'

He grinned, dropped his cigarette as they left the building and crushed it beneath his shoe, and placed his glass on a window ledge. Then he took her arm. She could feel the warmth of him under the wool of his suit jacket. It stirred something in her.

There was silence for a moment.

'The Circus is just round the corner,' she offered.

'Circus?' He looked surprised. 'With elephants and clowns and acrobats?'

'No.' She laughed. 'Not that kind of circus. Just buildings. In a circle.'

He feigned disappointment. 'Oh. Doesn't sound like much.'

'You might be surprised. Come on,' she said, leading him out of the hall and into the night air.

The music from the band followed them as they walked



along the street. The golden buildings had turned to grey, but they could pick their way along the pavement by the light of the moon. Moments later they were at the Circus: a solemn, silent circle of buildings around a green lawn. Jilly felt straight away that it was something of an anticlimax.

‘You’re right. I think a real circus would have been much more exciting,’ she said eventually. Handsome boys like this probably didn’t get excited about girls who admired architecture.

‘Shush,’ he told her, and led her across the grass to the cluster of plane trees in the centre of the lawn. The night breeze teased her skin. He sat down and leaned his back against a tree, then patted the space next to him for her to sit too. They sat for a moment, in silence. There was a stillness and a quietness and a gravity to him that she found alluring, and she wondered if he was always like that or if it came from the knowledge that this was his last weekend of freedom; his last chance to be carefree before he entered another world over which he had little control.

‘Talk to me,’ he said eventually. ‘Talk to me about things I can remember, when I’m up there in the sky.’

Her mind raced. Her heart thumped. What on earth was she supposed to tell him?

‘The Circus was designed by John Wood the Elder.’ She began gabbling to fill the silence. She was nervous as she wasn’t sure of the rules or what exactly she was supposed to do or be. ‘It was his grand vision. His masterpiece. But he never lived to see it finished . . .’ She trailed off. This part of the story never failed to sadden her. And suddenly people not living to fulfil their potential seemed a tactless thing to mention. Presumably he had wanted her to tell

him something to take his mind off his mortality, not remind him of it.

He turned to face her. She could just make out his smile in the darkness.

‘Are you some sort of tour guide?’

‘No!’ She laughed. ‘I’ve lived in Bath all my life, that’s all. I know everything there is to know about it. The Romans, the Georgians, Beau Nash, Jane Austen . . .’

‘Tell me something about *you*,’ he said, taking her hand. ‘Something interesting about you that will give me something to think about. A reason to survive.’

She blinked. That was a tall order. Nigh on impossible. What on earth could she tell him about herself that could possibly be of interest?

‘That’s a bit unfair,’ she said.

‘Well, if you can’t think of anything to say . . .’ His fingers danced on the back of her hand. ‘Then think of something to do.’

The night breeze shimmied in the branches overhead but Jilly remained still. What did he mean? She thought she knew. His eyes hadn’t moved from hers. She wasn’t going to tell him she had never kissed anyone. It was a source of exasperation to Ivy. There was barely anyone Ivy *hadn’t* kissed.

‘It’s the only way you find out,’ she’d told Jilly. ‘What sort of a man they are. When they get it wrong, it’s enough to turn your stomach. But when they get it right . . .’

Jilly stared at his mouth. It would have been perfect on a girl, yet it didn’t make him look like one. A full lower lip and a curved top one. It was the same with his eyes: the thick dark lashes looked as if they’d been painted on. Yet put together with a straight nose and a strong chin,

the combination was devastating. The more she looked, the more handsome she thought he was.

*For God's sake, Jilly, she heard Ivy tell her. You'll never get this chance again. Not the way this war's going. It's only a kiss.*

She shut her eyes. It was worse than plucking up the courage to dive into the water off the cliff at Maiden Cove, when they went to Cornwall on holiday.

When her mouth found his, she knew straight away what sort of a man he was.

His lips were soft and sweet. It was like devouring a firm, ripe peach, and kissing him felt as natural to Jilly as breathing, her body responding in a way that made her understand every book she had ever read and every song she had ever heard. She pulled him down onto the ground, the chill of the grass unnoticed. Their kiss seemed to last for ever, yet was over in a flash. Eventually they broke away, arms still round each other, eyes locked, their breathing ragged but in tandem.

'Will that do?' she asked with a shaky laugh. 'Will that give you a reason?'

'I think it will do very well,' he replied. He stroked her hair away from her eyes and ran his hand over her head and down to her neck and she shivered in delight.

'Are you very scared?' she found the courage to ask him. They both knew the risks a fighter pilot took. Him better than her, presumably. He must have given what he was about to do some considerable thought. She had nothing but admiration for his valour.

It was a while before he replied. 'Some people say the risk doesn't change, every time you go up. That the roulette wheel has no memory.'

‘That can’t be right, surely?’ She wrinkled her nose, trying to work out the logic, trying to remember probability from school. ‘You must increase your chances—’

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ He cut her off abruptly.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, panicking she’d upset him as he looked away into the shadows, his expression dark. ‘Let’s talk about something else. Tell me something.’ She paused. ‘Tell me your name! I don’t even know your name.’

He seemed to be giving the matter some thought. Maybe he didn’t want her to know who he was? Maybe he did this to girls all the time? Maybe she wasn’t special? Maybe he made everyone he kissed feel the same?

‘Harry,’ he said. ‘Harry Swann. And you?’

‘Jilly.’ She didn’t give her last name – Wilson sounded so plain next to Swann.

‘Jilly. Jilly and Harry.’ He hooked his arms round her neck and pulled her to him. ‘It sounds perfect, wouldn’t you say?’ he murmured, kissing her again.

Jilly and Harry . . . The words sang in her head from that moment onwards. Like a nursery rhyme.

And now here she was the following evening, approaching the entrance to Hedgemoor Park, the great oaks in a cluster like a crowd of girls gathering in the playground. As she plunged deeper in among the trees the darkness enveloped her and for a moment she doubted the wisdom of the rendezvous they had planned the night before. They had wanted total secrecy. No chance of being observed. The opportunity to be just themselves, uninhibited by the curious glances of friends or onlookers who might make assumptions.

She didn’t think for a second about what her parents might say. They weren’t particularly disapproving or strict,

but they did love her, and if they knew what she was doing they would worry that she might get hurt. Harry Swann was going the next day, to an airfield in Devon, to learn how to fly a plane. Everyone knew what that meant. Every day brought rushed engagements and hasty marriages. The war conflated life. Everything happened more quickly and had a sense of urgency that was contagious. She felt it now as she rushed through the park, searching for him in the tenebrous ink. This was their last chance to be together for who knew how long. He would get leave, of course, but not straight away. Their future was as uncertain as it could be.

There he was, waiting in the bandstand. She imagined the ghosts of musical notes drifting around him, untethered crochets and quavers, searching for an audience. She smiled at herself. Love was making her quite fanciful.

Love. How could you call what you felt for someone you had only just met 'love'? But she didn't know what else to call it, that hot, overwhelming certainty that someone held the key to your future. When she thought of Harry Swann something molten rushed through her, urgent and sweet and unstoppable. And it wasn't unrequited. That was what was so intoxicating, the sense of being complicit: the way their gazes had locked that evening as they explored each other, looking for clues, little crumbs of information to turn into memories. The depth of a freckle, the length of a lash, the curl of a hair. They didn't have long to commit each other to memory, after all.

Sunday. The very next day. Never had she felt such dread. She imagined being inside a giant grandfather clock, holding on to the pendulum to stop the hands moving round. She had never felt less in control of her destiny.

Even war didn't fill her with this sense of panic. Though of course the whole situation was the fault of the war.

Everything was the fault of the war.

'Jilly.' She could sense rather than see his smile as he reached out for her and she moved into his arms at the top of the bandstand steps.

Harry Swann. A hero's name, she thought. In less than forty weeks, he could be a pilot, flying off into battle . . .

The cloth of his sports jacket was rough, rougher than the suit he had worn the night before. She slid her arms underneath and felt the solid warmth of him beneath his flannel shirt, breathed in his smell, so familiar already. It made her slightly unsteady on her feet, that scent of cedar and tobacco and leather. The smell of a man, not a boy.

They barely spoke. They both knew any words would be almost meaningless. What they had each done that day, since they had met the night before, was irrelevant. Talking about the future was pointless, for no one knew what it held. They were living for the moment, this very moment, not yesterday, nor tomorrow.

His mouth found her mouth. Her fingers twisted in his hair. His lips were on her neck. She felt the button on her skirt undo and the rough tweed slither down her legs; the softer wool of her jumper rode upwards, leaving her milky paleness exposed. But he soon warmed her, leaving her breathless, speechless, barely able to stand. And she explored him too, peeling away the layers, with no reticence, no inhibition.

Soon all that was left was skin on skin, their discarded clothes flung to one side.

There were no warning voices in Jilly's head. No stern parent or forbidding teacher or shocked friend telling her

to stop. Not even her own conscience, which was usually quite vocal. Jilly wasn't a reckless girl by nature, but the pull she felt towards Harry was stronger than her moral compass.

This was the first and last chance they had. She wanted to get as close to him as she could. She knew it was madness, but the need was overpowering. He paused for a moment, uncertain.

'Are you sure?' he murmured, the whispered words making her quiver inside.

She couldn't speak. Instead, she urged him on with her body. It was a primal response, but her answer was quite clear.

She felt the roughness of the wooden floor beneath her and the warmth of him above her and the hardness of him inside her and she could hear the roaring of her blood. It was momentous, more than anything she could ever have imagined. And somehow her body knew what to do, when to yield, when to take control, how to dictate the rhythm. She felt sinuous and confident, pulling him deeper inside her until she felt a triumphant explosion and they laughed and cried, the tears on their cheeks mingling as they kissed each other.

'Oh!' was all Jilly could say, softly.

'You're beautiful,' he whispered in reply. 'I don't ever want to let you go.'

'Then don't,' she whispered back. 'Hold me for ever. Let's stay here for ever.'

He was still inside her. He began to move again and she felt him grow hard, and the tingling warmth that still hadn't subsided spread through her veins and she cried out with the wonder of it.

‘Shhhh,’ he laughed, kissing her. ‘You’ll wake the whole of Bath.’

She laughed too, kissing him back. ‘I don’t care,’ she breathed, locking her legs round him to stop him moving away, and the sensations charging through her body seemed to make the whole bandstand shake and the pounding of her blood roared in her ears.

Suddenly he stopped, alert to something she wasn’t. The bandstand was still shaking, and her ears were still roaring, but there was another noise. A very real one.

‘Shit. They’re bombing us.’ He rolled off her, and suddenly everything was clarified. The roaring wasn’t her blood. It was the bombers – she was used to them flying overhead every night, on their way to Bristol. Only this time they weren’t heading for the port. ‘They’re bombing us! The bastards.’

Jilly sat up. She could see the flares falling from the sky, dozens of them twirling in the moonlight, deadly silver ballerinas. And then the awful sound of dead hit after dead hit all around them – north, south, east, west – as the sirens began.

‘They can’t be bombing Bath!’ It must be a mistake. A bungled mission. Bath wasn’t strategically important or heavily populated. Never for a moment did they think they would be a target.

‘They bloody are,’ said Harry, leaning his hands on the bandstand rail and peering out at the sky. His naked body was like a silver ghost in the moonlight. He bent down to grab his clothes.

‘My parents. I need to get to my parents.’ Jilly began pulling on her skirt and tugging her jumper back over her head. She pushed her feet into her shoes, not doing



up the laces. He reached out for her as she made for the steps of the bandstand, pulling her back.

‘You’ve got to stay here. They won’t go for open spaces. They’ll go for buildings. It’s not safe to leave the park.’

He was holding on to her from behind, his arms pinning hers. She twisted round, pulling at his hands, prising at his fingers. Only moments ago, she had wanted to stay in his arms for eternity.

‘Let me go,’ she protested.

‘No. It’s far too dangerous.’

She realised he was much stronger than she was. She stopped struggling for a moment.

‘Don’t worry. I’ll keep you safe.’

She nodded, breathing heavily with the exertion, leaning against him until he finally relaxed his grip. She stood still for a moment, watching from the corner of her eye until he bent down to put on a shoe. Then she made a run for it.

‘Jilly!’ He was still half-naked. He stood at the top of the bandstand steps, anguished. He grabbed at the rest of his clothes. ‘Wait!’

She darted into the undergrowth. She knew the park like the back of her hand – she’d been playing here since she was tiny. He would have no hope of following her through the twisted trunks of the trees. She wove her way among them, back to the streets she had come from. She heard him shouting after her but she ignored him. No one was going to stop her. She lost a shoe but she didn’t pause. Instead she kicked off the other. It was easier to run with none than one. And all the lights were illuminating the night sky, while the bombers were screaming above her, filling her head with a terrible noise. She’d read about

bomb attacks. They all had. Listening to descriptions on the wireless or reading accounts in the papers didn't even begin to match the reality.

As she reached the main road, she could see people running for shelter, each face a rictus of panic, women holding babies tightly to them, men with toddlers under each arm. Her lungs burned with the effort of running, her feet were scraped raw on the tarmac, so for one moment she stopped and looked back down the hill. In the distance, the sky was crimson with flame. More flares were falling, spinning silver. The noise was hellish. The pounding of her heart, the moans of the sirens, the buzzing of the planes—

Suddenly she saw one swooping low, coming towards her. She heard cries of warning. Surely it wasn't going to land on the road? There was a gunman staring straight at her, illuminated by the searchlights. He was aiming to shoot her down. Couldn't he see she was just a girl? A frightened, desperate girl? She threw herself into a doorway as the bullets strafed past her.

She crouched down in terror, too terrified to cry. An ambulance hurtled past, siren clanging as it headed down the hill. She breathed to calm herself, then emerged, cautious, trembling.

She carried on up the hill. She smelled burning, the air thick with charred soot. Her beautiful city, she thought. They couldn't destroy it. Surely it was sacrilege, to decimate centuries of history? She turned a corner and saw a row of houses, one in the middle knocked out like a skittle. It had spilled its guts out onto the pavement and was now a pile of bricks and splintered wood and rubble and dust. She had no way of knowing if the people who

lived there were underneath. She wondered if she should stop and help, then thought of her parents. She could see a fire engine turn the corner and felt relief. There was nothing much she could have done in the face of such destruction.

Further, further, up the hill she ran, her chest tight with exertion. Again she stopped for breath and looked back down into the city, at plumes of black smoke, cherry-red flames and the moon looking down in astonishment.

At last she reached the end of her road. Lark Hill. A dozen houses, as familiar to her as her own fingers and thumbs. She couldn't see past the first three for the smoke. The terrible sound of bombs dropping was beginning to subside as the planes disappeared, though there was still shouting and sirens and the roar of nearby flames. Bedlam, thought Jilly. This is what Bedlam sounds like.

'Jilly!' Her neighbour Mr Archer stepped into her path. He was the air-raid warden for Lark Hill. She'd known him all her life. His wife used to take Jilly for walks in her pram when her mother was working. She would pretend to let go when they walked down Lansdown Hill to the park: Jilly remembered squealing with horrified delight, sitting up like a princess in her Silver Cross.

'I need to get home.'

'I'm sorry, love.' He grabbed her by the arms and pulled her back.

'My parents.' She writhed in his grip, sobbing, but like Harry he wouldn't let her go. This time she had no strength left to fight him or outwit him. 'My parents...'

'There's nothing you can do,' said Mr Archer.

In that moment, she knew.

September 2017

Willow had asked for nachos for her farewell supper. Laura was pathologically incapable of doing what most normal people would have done: plonked a saucepan of chilli on the table with a packet of tortilla chips and got everyone to help themselves.

Instead, by five o'clock the evening before Willow was due to go to university for the first time, a huge cauldron on the hot-pink Aga belted out a cloud of steam scented with cumin and cinnamon and chilli. On the worktop were bowls filled with grated cheese, soured cream, guacamole, jalapeños, spicy beans, finely chopped coriander and chargrilled sweetcorn salsa. Wedges of lime were waiting to be stuffed into bottles of beer – 'cerveza', Laura teased herself with a Spanish lisp.

She had stopped short of making margaritas because no one would want to face the next day with a hangover: it was a six-hour drive to York and it was going to be a difficult enough day without a thumping tequila headache.

She'd put a row of tiny cactuses in pots down the middle of the slate-topped island and empty milk bottles filled with bright pink, yellow and orange gerbera. A donkey piñata hung from one of the hooks in the ceiling. She'd managed to refrain from filling it with

sweets. This wasn't an actual party, after all, just a goodbye to Willow from her family and her friends, and a few neighbours, and . . . well, Laura didn't know exactly who else, but by eight o'clock the joint would be jumping. That was how things rolled at Number 11.

It was Laura's schtick to go to immense trouble, but her efforts on this occasion were doubled, masking the fact that tomorrow was the day she had been dreading more than any other in her life – and there had been a few. She stood for a moment in the quiet of the kitchen.

This kitchen was her safe place, where she felt love and gave love. There was always a sense of calm underlying the chaos. No one else knew how she did it.

'How do you make it look so effortless? I always have a nervous breakdown when I'm entertaining. Nothing looks right, nothing tastes right, and I worry myself to death.' Her best friend, Sadie, was eternally mystified by her entertaining skills.

'Because I love it? Because I don't have a career? Because I don't look as if I've just walked off the pages of *Vogue*?' Laura teased.

Sadie owned La, the most fashionable boutique in Bath, and always looked incredible. 'But you're naturally gorgeous. You don't have to spend hours making yourself look ravishing. You just *are*,' she complained.

It was true, with her eyes the colour of maple syrup and her tousled dark mane. Laura, however, thought she was overweight and unkempt, as it was all she could do to pull a comb through her hair. She wore skinny jeans, because her legs were like matchsticks, and had a selection of linen shirts and sloppy sweaters that covered her embonpoint

and her tummy, about which she was unnecessarily self-conscious. She didn't see her own beauty.

'I'm top heavy,' she complained. 'Like a robin – far too big for my silly little bird legs.'

She felt distinctly unglamorous at this moment, her hair tied up on top of her head with the elastic band the postman brought the letters in, a blue and white apron wrapped round her and a wooden spoon in her hand, dishevelled and covered in tomato sauce. She was also finding it desperately hard to stop herself from seeing how Willow was getting on with her packing.

The back of the car was already loaded up with everything a new student could possibly want, mostly courtesy of Ikea to keep the cost down. But Laura had spoiled Willow with a few things. A luxury mattress topper, essential for making a strange single bed comfortable. A fleecy blanket to snuggle up in when it was cold and Willow was missing home. And some Jo Malone bath oil, because Laura believed in the power of smell to comfort you.

Willow, however, was a girl who liked to leave everything to the last minute. Even now her favourite sweatshirt was rolling around the tumble dryer because she'd only fetched it from her friend's house this morning. Laura, who laid everything out on the spare bed a week before they went on holiday, found it nerve-racking.

Dom told her not to worry. If Willow forgot anything she could do without until she came back for the weekend.

'I probably won't come back till Christmas,' Willow had pointed out. 'York's miles and I won't be able to afford the train fare.'

Laura's stomach lurched at the thought of three months

without seeing her daughter, but she squashed the feeling down. Instead, she sat down at the island and picked up her Berol pen. She couldn't remember the last time she'd written a proper letter, but she wouldn't be able to say what she wanted to say without blubbing. As she began to write, in her best handwriting, she relished the satisfaction of forming perfect letters, the ink running smoothly across the paper, the loops and the circles and the curlicues.

*Number 11 Lark Hill  
Bath*

*My darling Willow,  
Apologies in advance for doing one of those embarrassingly sentimental mum things. You know how good I am at those! But I wanted to send you off on your adventure with something to remind you of home, and I couldn't think of anything better than these recipes. They all come from the little recipe box I keep in the pantry. You and Jasmine have used them often enough over the years because they still have your sticky paw prints on them!*

*The oldest recipes go all the way back to your great-great-grandma – the flapjack and the Yorkshire pudding come from her (also good for toad-in-the-hole!). The crumble and the tea loaf come from Kanga – she used to cook them during the war for the people she had living with her at Number 11. The avgolemono and the spanakopita are from my mother, from her travels in Greece . . . I was not the only thing she brought back!! You can taste the sunshine in them – they are for when the wind is howling outside and you want to feel warmed.*

*The rest are from me: things I have made for you over the years. Brownies and pancakes and sausage rolls for*

*sharing. And your favourite suppers: spag bol and chilli and Thai curry. I know you probably know how to cook them, but I wanted you to have a keepsake, a little bit of family history to keep with you. And I know you will probably live on Cheerios and Cheesy Puffs and Chinese takeaways, but maybe from time to time you might want some proper home-made comfort food to share with your new friends.*

*I'm so proud of you, darling girl. I know you will fly, and make the most of this wonderful opportunity.*

*With lots of love and kisses*

*Mum xx*

Laura looked down at the letter, the inevitable tears blurring her eyes, then folded the sheet into three. She tucked it inside the Moleskine notebook she had bought specially. Each page held a different recipe, carefully copied. It had taken her over a week to write it, as she'd had to hide it from everyone. She wanted it to be a surprise, but she was also a bit self-conscious. Was it too sentimental?

'My goodness – it smells absolutely wonderful in here.'

'Kanga! You made me jump.' Laura put a hand to her chest. 'I was miles away.'

Kanga walked through the kitchen, lifting the lid on the pot and smelling it appreciatively. She looked around the room.

'What is this? Fiesta time?'

'You know me. I can't help myself.' Laura grinned, sliding the notebook into a drawer. 'I'm sure Willow would much rather go to the pub with her mates.'

'She did that last night. Tonight's for family – she knows that.'



‘Yes. I want it to be a good send-off, though.’

‘You’re a good mummy.’

‘I had a good role model.’ Laura smiled at her grandmother. Kanga had brought her up from the age of four, when Laura’s mum had died. The tiny, thoughtful Laura had decided that she didn’t want to call her ‘Granny’ any more, as she was so much more than that, and had christened her Kanga, after her favourite *Winnie the Pooh* character.

At ninety-three, Kanga was still more than just a grandmother – though she looked barely seventy-three. She was in a pale-pink linen shirt and black trousers and soft boots, her bright white hair cut close to her jaw, her dark-grey eyes with their hooded lids missing nothing. Of course Laura worried she was too thin, but Kanga had laughed that her appetite had gone with her libido many years ago, and she was much happier for it. ‘I have so much more time now I don’t have to think about sex or food,’ she claimed. Laura wasn’t sure what else there was to live for.

‘No Dom?’ asked Kanga, taking a seat at the island.

‘He’s got a meeting with the quantity surveyor this afternoon. So he’s bound to stop off at the Wellie on the way home.’

The Wellington Arms was Dom’s favourite watering hole, where he and his property mates cut deals and watched rugby and sneaked in dirty pints on a Friday afternoon.

Kanga frowned. ‘Even on Willow’s last night?’

‘It’s fine. He’d only drive me mad if he was here. It’s always much better if he turns up five minutes before everyone else and doesn’t interfere.’ Laura pulled the elastic band out of her hair, wincing as it caught. ‘Can I leave you to keep an eye on everything while I get changed?’

‘Of course.’

‘There’s wine in the fridge.’

In her bedroom, Laura tipped her head upside down and sprayed dry shampoo onto her roots then ran her fingers through her curls. There was no time now for a shower. She pulled off the sweatshirt she’d been cooking in and rifled through her wardrobe for something to wear. Sadie was incredibly generous and always gave Laura things from La for her birthday she would never dare choose for herself. She pulled out a pearl grey shirt with pintucks and pearl buttons, pulling it over her head. It looked perfect – it fitted in all the right places, as expensive clothes tend to.

‘Hey, Mum.’ Willow sauntered in. Laura’s heart squeezed. Every time she saw her she wanted to hold her tight. All her fears whooshed in – a runaway bus, an insecure balcony, a virulent strain of meningitis . . . Oh God, had Willow actually had all the jabs she should have? Laura knew she’d checked a trillion times, but what if she thought she’d arranged it but had forgotten? The familiar dry mouth of anxiety hit her and she worked her tongue to get some saliva.

‘Have you finished packing?’

‘I think so. I’m going to do make-up and stuff in the morning.’ Willow flopped on the bed.

‘Are you excited?’

‘I don’t know about excited . . .’

Of course. Excited wasn’t cool. ‘Looking forward to it?’

‘It’ll be what it is, won’t it?’

‘Well, I think it’s exciting. York’s lovely. We can explore tomorrow. Maybe an open-topped bus tour if it’s sunny.’

Willow laughed.

‘What?’ asked Laura, hurt.

‘You’re so funny, Mum.’

‘I’m not trying to be funny.’

‘I know. That’s why you are.’

Willow jumped up and put her arms round her. Laura breathed her in. Sugary, powdery perfume and Wrigley’s and the awful incense she insisted on burning in her bedroom. Not like Jasmine, who was driving back to her third year at uni in Loughborough by herself the next morning, who smelled of chlorine and talc and muscle rub.

Laura had always been grateful for Jasmine’s love of sport. It had given their life structure at a time when everything else was chaos. Asthma was nothing if not disruptive. They had never really known when Willow might have an attack. There’d been a team of mums ready to help whenever she did: the netball mafia were fiercely loyal and supportive, taking Jasmine home for tea or for a sleepover or dropping her home. Laura could never repay them as long as she lived, but they didn’t want repaying. Of course not.

Jasmine could have told her she was going to Timbuktu on a skateboard and she wouldn’t have worried. They were close, but in a very different way. When Jaz had gone off to Loughborough, Laura had treated them both to a day at the spa in Bath, swimming on the rooftop and sitting in the Roman steam room and the ice chamber and the celestial relaxation room; a physical treat for the physical Jaz, who rarely sat still for a moment and didn’t really need nurturing.

But Willow . . .

She felt tears fill her eyes. She didn’t want to go down

to the kitchen and share Willow with everyone else. She wanted to curl up on the bed with her, watch a few episodes of *Gilmore Girls* on Netflix, eat a bowlful of M&M's, let her daughter fall asleep in her arms, like they always used to when she was recuperating.

'Do you think I should take Magic?' Willow asked.

Magic. The white toy rabbit whose fur had worn away to nothing, he had been hugged so much. So called because he was the Magic Rabbit who helped her fall asleep in a plethora of strange hospitals. Laura felt fearful for him. What if he got lost or stolen or thrown out of the window as a student jape?

'If you want to leave him here, I'll look after him.'

'I kind of want him, but I don't know if you're supposed to take your cuddly animals to uni.' Willow made a face. 'Of course Jasmine didn't, but we all know Jaz doesn't need looking after.'

Jasmine's teddy was as pristine as the day it had been bought.

'I'd leave him here,' said Laura, not wanting to admit that Magic had been as much a talisman for her as Willow. 'You will look after yourself, won't you?'

'Mum.' Willow sat up and fixed her mother with a stern stare. 'Will you stop worrying? I'm not an idiot. And it's been nearly eighteen months.'

'That doesn't mean you won't have an attack. Anything could trigger one.'

York, thought Laura. If something went wrong, she couldn't be there quickly. Even London would have been nearer. But maybe Willow felt the need to escape. She knew she'd been guilty of smothering, but what mother wouldn't?

*Let her go*, her inner voice told her.

She turned and picked up her mascara wand. They must have had this conversation a thousand times, starting from the moment Willow filled out her UCAS form. If it had been up to Laura, she'd have chosen Bristol.

'Mummy. I will be fine. I promise you.'

Her daughter's voice was kind and understanding. Which made her want to cry even more.

There was a tap on the door and Jaz put her head round.

'Are you OK? Is there anything else you want me to do? I picked up a bag of ice from the garage when I went to fill my car up.'

Laura felt grateful. Jaz was a practical girl, and often thought ahead – not like most young people. She put down her make-up and turned.

'Come on in. Come here, both of you.'

The two girls tucked themselves under her outstretched arms.

'Group hug,' said Jaz, and they all squeezed each other tight.

'I'm so proud of you both,' said Laura, choked. 'What am I going to do without you?'

'We've talked about this, Mum,' said Jaz sternly. 'You've got plans, you know you have. And I said I'd help you with the techy stuff.'

Laura gave her eldest daughter a squeeze, appreciative of her reassurance. Practical Jaz was never phased by anything. Laura thought it was probably Kanga that Jaz got it from. She didn't have her daughter's confidence, though as an adult and a mum she often had to pretend.

'Go the Griffin Girls,' she said, giving a cheerleader's

punch to the air. It was their team name, the name they invoked when they needed some family solidarity.

‘The Griffin Girls,’ echoed Willow and Jaz.

Laura grinned.

‘Come on, then. Let’s get this party started.’

An hour later, Laura thought the party had been the right thing. There was no time for her to dwell. Sadie had turned up first, with a shoebox for Willow. Inside was a pair of silver sequinned sneakers.

‘Oh my God, these are perfect!’ Willow squealed with delight.

‘They’ll bring you good luck whenever you wear them,’ said Sadie. ‘There’s a pair for Jaz too.’

‘Darling, that’s very generous.’ Laura smiled at her friend. Sadie always showered Willow and Jasmine with presents as she had no children of her own.

Mike and Daphne from next door turned up with a popcorn machine. Then came Edmond, the owner of the bar Willow had been working in all summer. The Reprobate was a glamorous cocktail bar with a reputation for being rather decadent. Edmond, with his pale face, large grey eyes and emerald velvet suit, looked just that, but Laura knew that underneath his glittery exterior he was extremely kind and was also very good to his staff – part of the reason for the bar’s raging success.

He gave Willow a Gustav Klimt card with two fifty-pound notes tucked inside. He only had to phone when someone rang in sick and Willow would cover at a moment’s notice, and he appreciated the fact she was reliable.

‘I don’t know what I’m going to do without her,’

he told Laura. 'I hope she'll come and help me out at Christmas.'

'I'm sure she will. She'll be needing the money.' Laura smiled at him.

He lifted up a tendril of her hair and tucked it behind her ear. 'What about you, darling? The dreaded empty nest. What are you going to do?'

She was touched by his concern. He wasn't the sort of person you'd expect to be empathetic about the things that affected middle-aged women. 'I've got a few ideas,' she said. 'It's about time I contributed to the coffers, for a start.'

Edmond frowned. 'That's not Dom speaking, I hope?'

'God, no. But let's be honest. I haven't done a day's work for as long as anyone can remember. I've got no excuse now.' She smiled brightly.

'So what are you going to do?'

Laura had mentioned her idea to the girls, but only in passing to Dom, because he was so busy and had enough business worries without hearing her paltry plans. But she thought she'd test the water with Edmond, whose opinion she respected.

'Actually, I was thinking about doing Airbnb. I've got two rooms at the top of the house. They're just full of junk at the moment. They'd be perfect.'

Edmund nodded. 'You'd make a killing. Honestly, it's money for old rope. You've got this bloody great house. You wouldn't even know they were there. You could almost charge what you like. Just lob them a croissant at breakfast and give them the bill. Job done. Kerching.'

She laughed. 'It can't be that easy.'

'It is! Honestly, everyone's doing it. I'm telling you,

Laura. You could clear a couple of hundred quid in a weekend just for making up the beds and plonking a few freesias in a vase. Check-in early evening, leave by elevenses next morning. And you're such a great cook – you could charge another fifty quid for a couple of plates of boeuf bourguignon and a slice of roulade.'

'Do you think?' She was delighted by his enthusiasm.

'Absolutely, yes. This town is crammed with visitors, all looking for somewhere to stay. You could have people booked in by the next weekend. No stags or hens, though.' Edmond curled his lip. He didn't allow them in the Reprobate. 'They're sucking the soul out of Bath. They might spend money but they make a mess.'

It was true – the city was an incredibly popular destination for pre-wedding knees-ups, and they were definitely a double-edged sword.

Laura felt excited. Maybe she'd run it past Dom as a serious proposition, rather than an idle fantasy. It had just been a germ of an idea, as she had long been meaning to clear out the attic rooms. Now she had actually vocalised it, it made a lot of sense. The perfect way to ease herself into doing something constructive and potentially lucrative. Dom never ever complained about being the breadwinner, but he had worked incredibly hard over the years. Maybe she could take some of that pressure off him with an easy source of revenue. And she and Dom might meet some fun new people as a result. She loved having the house full of laughter, and with the girls going...

She looked at her watch. Surely Dom should be here by now? It was gone eight o'clock. A few more friends and neighbours had arrived, and some of Willow's friends from school. Sasha, Poppy and Emma were heading off



on their gap year in a month's time. Laura felt grateful that she wasn't having to face the horror of Willow going to Colombia. She couldn't even imagine the fear of your kids loose in South America. York held enough terror for her.

'I swear I never had a send-off like this,' Jaz grinned, but she didn't mind. Everyone knew it was a miracle Willow had got through her A levels and got the place she wanted. She'd lost a lot of school time over the years, but had worked valiantly to catch up. There had once been a suggestion that she stay down a year, but she was desperate to stay with her friends, and it was her determination that had kept her on track. So this was a celebration as well as a farewell.

At half past eight, as Laura was handing out warm plates for everyone to start helping themselves, Dom turned up. He looked strained.

'Everything all right?' asked Laura.

'Eventually. I had to do a lot of sweet-talking to release the next tranche of money. I'm sorry I'm so late. But it was time well spent.'

Laura knew Dom was under a lot of pressure with his latest development: three apartments converted from a seven-storey house in Wellington Buildings, a grand eighteenth-century terrace in a prime position near the Royal Crescent. It was the biggest project he had done so far. The financing was complicated and the building itself beset with problems – the vagaries of Georgian drains, the logistics of keeping the Listed Buildings people happy, the conundrum of future-proofing. Every day brought a fresh set of challenges. Not least keeping the bank sweet so the money to do it was available. So Laura wasn't going to

moan about him being late. She knew Dom would have much preferred to be at home than schmoozing but it was a necessary evil.

She hugged him instead, her big bear of a husband. People often mistook him for Will Carling, with his thick dark hair and dimpled chin. Dom had given up rugby after uni, though he was a familiar fixture at the rugby ground on match days.

‘Shall I get you a plate of food?’

‘Thanks.’ He grabbed a bottle of beer, held it to his lips and drank thirstily. ‘What time are we off in the morning?’

Laura felt a flash of irritation. If she’d told him once, she’d told him ten times. She ladled some chilli onto a plate for him.

‘Seven.’

He puffed out his cheeks and rolled his eyes. Laura felt guilty for being irritated. He was tired. She knew he lay awake at night worrying about the apartments. He needed to get them on the market in the New Year if he was going to stay on target, and there was still a long way to go. Time was money: every day he was paying interest on his development loan. She decided she’d try and drive the next day. She wasn’t keen on motorway driving but he could nap in the car if he needed to catch up on sleep.

When everyone had finished eating, Willow stood up and tinged a fork on her glass. She was usually quite reserved, but she smiled around at everyone.

‘This is such a massive deal for me. I never thought this day would come. So I want to say thank you to a few people. Firstly, to my big sister, Jaz – for never complaining when I upset everything because I was ill, not even

when we had to cancel our trip to Euro Disney. And for making me awesome playlists to listen to in hospital, and letting me watch *Skins* in her bedroom when she knew I wasn't allowed.'

Laura's mouth dropped open in mock shock as Willow and Jaz grinned at her, scheming sisters.

'I'm proud of you, Willow,' said Jaz. 'But if you've nicked my Jack Wills hoody, it's war.'

'I swear I haven't. You can check my bags.' Willow turned to her great-grandmother. 'Thanks to Kanga, for being a brilliant great-gran and holding the fort at home when Mum was with me in hospital, and for encouraging me when I was behind with my work and thought I would never, ever pass an exam. You are the reason I know all my irregular French verbs and how the digestive system works and what an allegory is. Thank you for believing in me.'

'I always believed in you, darling,' smiled Kanga.

Willow went and burrowed herself under her dad's arm.

'Thanks to Dad, for always coming to see me in hospital as soon as you got off from work – your hugs are the best. Thanks for the piggybacks whenever I got tired and for teaching me to ride a bike and to swim and to ski, even though I thought I was a weakling and I couldn't do all the things other kids were doing. Thanks to you I know I can do whatever I want.'

'You can do anything. You know you can,' said Dom, beaming with pride.

'But most of all...' Willow turned to Laura and held out her arms, 'thanks to Mum for being all-round totally amazing and always there. I know how much you've given

up to look after me and I know you say it's your job but I don't know anyone else who has such an incredible mother who never complains. *You* are why I'm going off to York tomorrow. I never dreamed I would go to uni, but you made it happen.'

As she stepped across the room and into Willow's arms, Laura wondered how on earth she was supposed not to bawl her eyes out after such a heartfelt speech. Luckily everyone else was a bit teary too, so it was acceptable, but the difference was that Laura wasn't sure she would stop once she'd started.

'That was the most wonderful speech. I can't tell you how much it means. Thank you,' she murmured in Willow's ear, struggling to keep her composure but somehow managing.

'Thank you, Mum,' said Willow. 'I meant every word.'

As the evening started to wind down – everyone had been told they had to leave by half ten; a first for Number 11 – Kanga touched Laura on the arm. 'I'm going to slip away. I've already said goodbye to Willow. I won't come and wave you off in the morning. It'll be a bit emotional.'

'That's very thoughtful.' Laura kissed her grandmother's cheek. 'And thanks – I know you've given the girls some money.'

'A little bit extra won't go amiss.' Kanga smiled at her, aware that her granddaughter was anxious. 'And don't worry. It'll be Christmas before you know it.'

Laura didn't want to think about it. Christmas was over three months away. How on earth was she going to survive?