

PROLOGUE

‘*Wake up! Today is the first day of the rest of your sex life,*’ my own recorded voice blared at me from the alarm on my mobile phone. A sex life that, in truth, was on its last legs, and not for the want of my trying. But I was going to give it one last go.

Six a.m. I stabbed at the snooze button and fell back under the duvet. *Tony*, I thought dreamily, stretching an arm toward his (empty) side of the bed, popping a puffy eye open. But as full consciousness took hold of me, I remembered that in that exact moment, he was in a hotel in Sicily doing, if I knew him at all, a last-minute practice of his presentation on avant-garde surgical techniques for reshaping saggy boobs.

And in the attempt to save my twenty-year marriage, I (who had refused his offer to operate on mine) had decided to defy my worst fear and board an actual airplane to fly out and surprise him. But crap, was it Tuesday already? I had a gazillion errands to run before I left today. I pried the other eye open, my mind way ahead of me and already in panic mode.

I tried to dart out of bed, but today of all days, when I was going to make the most monumentally romantic gesture of my life, I was absolutely knackered and unable to budge. My mind was now fully awake and held captive by my body. I wanted to move, was desperate to do so, but The Old Bod wasn’t having it.

I *very gingerly* rolled over onto my side and balled myself up, trying to stretch my aching back. One more kilogram, one more cupcake and I swear my skeleton would buckle under my ever-increasing weight and leave me on the pavement in a heap of hefty hips and big boobs. I groaned and fell back against the mattress. Time to diet again. Time to change a lot of things.

Even this sex escape thing – was I, Methodical Mum, really up for this completely out-of-character, spur-of-the-moment gesture, at the tender age of forty? Well, almost forty – my birthday was in December, on the same day as my wedding anniversary.

And most of all, was I, who gets dizzy even watching *kites* in the sky or fish in the sea, really going to fly halfway around the world (on my own, to boot) for an improvised three-week vacation where clothing would (here’s hoping) be unnecessary for most of the day (and night)?

Hell, yes. We had to get things moving again (pun intended). Get motivated, heat up the joint or whatever it is they say in sexy movies. But before I boarded the plane that would take me to warmer climes and the man of my life later today, I had quite the lengthy to-do list:

1. Help daughter Annie move her stuff into boyfriend Miles' flat before her move to Spain for her teaching job.
2. Remember not to sob while doing so.
3. Take Jumbo-Gemma, Annie's German shepherd, back to her flat after having looked after her for the week.
4. Finish baking the cakes I'd promised my bestie Martha for yet another one of our charities.
5. Finish helping old Mrs. Collins next door with the decluttering job we started weeks ago (good luck on that one).
6. Ignore my New Wrinkle of the Day and make myself hubby-ready, i.e. book waxing session.
7. Get sex life back on track.

Because – I admit it – I'd let myself go a little lately (yes, okay, for the last few years as it happens) but these days who wasn't busy, right? I mean, how many of us can say we have time on our hands to sit around and pamper ourselves? We have kids to look out for (because even if they're all grown up and have flown the nest you never stop worrying, do you?), jobs to do, bills to pay, husbands to deal with, laundry and ironing to do and oh – those dinners don't cook themselves, do they?

We had all of twenty-four hours in the day, minus let's say about eight for sleeping, and yet, we never seemed to manage any time for ourselves save the occasional late-night bath with candles during which, I'm not ashamed to say, I regularly fall asleep in the tub because I've been up since dawn.

How else was I supposed to get everything done around here, day in, day out? I ran my household with the efficiency of a Marine, keeping the place as clean as a whistle despite the gazillion possessions I'd filled it with over the last twenty years. I never tired of cooking, baking, hosting dinner parties for Tony's colleagues and sometimes even his eminent A-lister patients who wanted bigger implants or a smaller butt.

And especially today of all days, when I'd have relished the luxury of getting things done at a normal speed, it was looking tight. But in the end it would all be worth seeing Tony's thrilled expression. He'd be extremely proud of me for coaxing myself onto an aluminum deathtrap with wings without knocking down a few *gin-and-hold-the-tonics* first.

Three weeks of love, Sicilian sun, beaches and Malvasia wine, not to mention all the gorgeous food they have there. I know because even if I'm Canadian, my parents

are Italian. Not that Ma ever cooked, mind you. She's probably the only Italian mother who's allergic to the kitchen. It was a good thing I loved cooking – albeit not as much as I loved eating.

And boy did it show. In the last three months I'd managed to go up a whole dress size. Either that or (alternative explanation, which I preferred) department stores didn't agree on the *definition* of sizes anymore. What was going on, a retail war? Was that how they managed to keep their customers, make dresses a size bigger without telling you, so that when you tried to shop somewhere else you'd be horrified at being a, say, size eighteen when elsewhere you were a sixteen? Just because I was an M&S size eighteen didn't mean I actually *was* an eighteen, did it? If only I could manage to squeeze into a smaller size in some other store I'd have made my point, but so far it hadn't happened.

The phone on my bedside table rang and I debated. If I didn't answer, it would serve me right if I'd later learned something tragic had happened to someone I care about. But if I *did* answer, it could be also be something completely normal but utterly time-consuming. Like listening to my friend Brends boasting about her brand-new boyfriend. And today of all days was not the day. Damn me for not getting call display. In the end of course curiosity got the best of me.

'H'llo?' I managed.

'Whahh...!' came a sob louder than my alarm.

I sat up. 'Annie, is that you?' My daughter was as stable and balanced as a tanker, her boyfriend Miles a trendy, ambitious yuppie and already ridiculously loaded at twenty-eight. The kind of man most mothers dream about for their daughters. I couldn't stand him personally, but if she was happy, I was happy.

'Gilly...!' came the strangled voice. It was Brends, going through another one of her moments, no doubt.

'What's wrong?' I asked. 'You sound horrible.'

'Never got to bed last night. Rick and I are over. *Over!*'

Well, at least no one had had a fatal accident. I threw my legs over the side of the bed and yawned silently while making sympathetic noises. Her twin Martha, incidentally my other bestie, didn't love drama, at least not her sister's, because it happened roughly every other week and she was sick of it. I was kind of her stand-in, secretly sick of it too, but being her friend and not her blood I *had* to show some degree of sympathy, otherwise what kind of a friend was I?

‘Where are you?’ I asked.

‘I’m at his place. He’s gone and I need to move out before he gets back. I never want to see him again!’

‘Of course,’ I answered, studying my hairy legs. Better get a move-on. The earlier I finished my chores the earlier I could get to the beautician’s – no way was I showing up at Tony’s hotel room looking like I’d escaped from the set of *Planet of the Apes*.

‘Can you come round in your minivan?’ she pleaded.

Ah. Bingo.

‘Please? I’ll never get my stuff out of here in one trip without you, and Martha’s busy with the charity bake.’

There was my get-out card. ‘So am I. I have to bake four cakes and get them there before four o’clock this afternoon, plus I promised to help my neighbor declutter and—’

‘Please?’ she whined again.

Ooff. If I said no, I’d be a shit. But if I said yes, would I manage to squeeze everything else in before my flight? I knew Brends; there was no getting rid of her once she started.

I groaned as silently as I could. ‘Be over in twenty.’

‘Gilly, you’re an absolute star!’ she chimed and hung up.

Not even out of bed yet and already my day was screwed.

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‘Be over in a bit, Mrs. Collins, promise!’ I called over my shoulder to Ancient Agatha, the old biddy next door, who’s as deaf as a doornail, as dried up as a raisin and half-blind to boot, with practically one foot and four toes in the grave but resilient as hell. She’s always threatening to die, the ambulance visiting at least once a month but it would always be a false alarm, thank God. Whenever she was home she’d beg us to take her to the hospital and when she was in the hospital she’d beg us to take her home. But I don’t know what I’d do without seeing her dear old face at the front window looking out onto the heath and watching the world go by,

fantasizing a life she'd never had. Or maybe even remembering one she'd had. Who knew?

Centuries ago, I'd promised her daughter I'd keep an eye on her to make sure someone was there when she eventually did keel over. And then, because I was apparently so trustworthy, in due time I'd also inherited her eight-year-old grandson Alfie whose parents left him there twenty-four seven because they couldn't (and still can't) afford summer childcare. You'd think with a grandmother living in Blackheath money would be no issue.

'What *took* you so long?' Brends squealed as I pulled up.

'Don't push it,' I warned her, my poor back already threatening to give out at the sight of all her stuff and my reserve of sympathy rapidly dissolving. 'Sorry-about-Rick-let's-get-going,' I huffed. 'I promised to help my neighbor declutter before I left for Sicily.'

We (meaning I) hefted her armchair from Rick's doorstep to my minivan while she followed me, pretend-clutching one padded chair arm. I was built like an ox, Brends having, au contraire, dainty, delicate bones that could shatter at the slightest effort.

'You're a real pushover,' Brends scolded me.

'You would know,' I grunted as I lifted the armchair into the back.

'Let her do her own decluttering,' Heart of Gold sentenced. 'Serves her right for hoarding all that crap all those years.'

'You would know,' I repeated. 'Why didn't you get one of your other hot male friends to help you?'

'Ha,' she retorted as I pushed the armchair in as far as it would go while she lit a cigarette. 'Men are only good for one thing.'

Was that a universal truth or what? Hubby excluded, of course. I swear, sometimes I wondered why Brends even bothered hooking up with someone new when all the guys ever did was break her heart. Probably because she knew I'd always be there for her. I know I never had a moment to myself, but what was I going to do if I couldn't be of help to those who needed it?

I also know my altruistic attitude was probably a not-so-knee-jerk reaction to my mother's lifestyle. She never gave a hoot about anyone, Dad especially. I would never want to be like her. So yes, I did make myself useful. Maybe because I wanted

people to love me because as a kid I wasn't very loved – all the sort of stuff a therapist would tell you at a hundred bucks an hour. But if helping others made me happy, where was the harm in that? And hopefully, it would be spread to those around me, especially Brends who needed to see the world beyond her own nose.

Did I just imply she was selfish? I stand corrected.

'Here,' she said tossing me a tiny plastic jar of tablets, which I caught in midair, courtesy of years of life-juggling. A woman's reflexes are paramount if she's going to survive in this circus of a world.

'What are these?'

'For your flight. I know you're terrified.'

'So you're giving me your tranquilizers?'

Brends shrugged. 'I can get some stronger stuff from my doctor friend. *Your* husband won't even prescribe you vitamins. Don't take more than two though, okay?'

'I don't need drugs to keep my cool, but thanks anyway,' I said, but she pushed my hand away.

'When you're on that runway and that engine roars into life, you'll be blessing my soul, believe you me.'

'Right,' I said, pocketing them and making a mental note to throw them out later.

Now only the cakes, Annie's suitcase and Jumbo-Gemma were left, meaning I had precisely one hour to turn into Mary Berry, Pickfords, and the fastest dog drop-off service all rolled into one *and* drive myself to the airport. And oh – mustn't forget my waxing appointment.

Cakes baked, cooled and finally iced, I threw myself in and out of the shower in six minutes flat, my wet hair dripping over my clean sundress and down into my neckline as I tripped over Jumbo-Gemma who broke my fall, which was rather fortunate considering I'd narrowly missed the stack of cakes already in their boxes by the door waiting to go. Phew. That had been close.

So there I was, dashing out of the house like a madwoman, juggling extremely dainty boxes of pretty cakes, the last of Annie's suitcases, my own *Sesame Street* number on wheels (an old gift from my dad), Jumbo-Gemma's leash in my

mouth, said Jumbo-Gemma attached to the other end and dragging me out the door like I was an armless water-skier.

I seat-belted the stack of cakes I'd secured with my huge kneading board so they wouldn't topple and fly all over the dashboard, tied Jumbo-Gemma in the back behind the safety screen, threw both suitcases onto the back seat and jumped into the minivan, flooring it to Annie's to whom I gave a quick hug and kiss with all the usual *keep-in-touch* and other motherly recommendations, unloaded the stack of cakes to Martha in record time, feeling immense satisfaction washing over me. I was done. Free to go and barely on time.

And then, as I pulled into the parking lot at Gatwick, it hit me. After all that, wouldn't you know it? I'd forgotten to wax. Which, as it turned out, was the tiny detail that turned my whole life completely upside down...

1

Ignorance is Bliss

The Aeolian islands, off the northeastern coast of Sicily.

'Lipari! Island of Lipari! Stay on board for Salina!'

Thank you, God. I had finally made it through a three-hour flight and a bloody boat ride without throwing myself at the airplane doors in a panic attack, courtesy of Brends' tranquilizers. It had been a battle of my inner wills, but when the engine screamed before take-off I almost did too and quickly washed at *least* a couple down my throat under the eyes of a snooty, slim woman in a business suit next to me. And they had worked a dream because when I came to, the plane had not only arrived, but was already emptying out.

And now I must have dozed off again in the catamaran from Point Milazzo to the islands because there were only a few stragglers left in the harbor. My white sundress was now so manky from perspiration and sleep and not even a boxful of wet wipes could save me. Grateful for *terra firma*, I slowly hauled myself to my feet, fished for my bag under my seat and followed the throng of vacationers out into the sun, breathing deeply of the fresh sea air.

Lipari! I was finally here, hairy legs and all. If I got to Tony's hotel before dinner I could sneak into his room for a quick shower and borrow his razor. And put on that lace cherry red number I'd been saving for ages...

But first – the fragrance of butter pastry *cornetti* and freshly made espresso coffee were bringing me to my knees. I hadn't eaten a thing on the plane as I'd knocked myself out with Brends' pills. Why don't airline staff wake you when they come round with the food trolleys? They should give us a *Please Wake to Feed* sign to hang around our necks or something. I still felt absolutely wiped out, almost as if I'd crossed the Atlantic by backstroke instead of just flown in the ITA Airbus. And believe you me – *bus* is the word. A bus with wings.

I'd never seen such a small plane – good luck finding bits of that thing in such a vast sea in case of a crash, assuming of course, we crashed in the Med and not on dry land. But we hadn't crashed and here I was, safe and excited, utterly proud of myself. I'd done it! I'd flown alone, although I hoped it would be the last time I'd ever have to do *that*.

Three luxuriously romantic weeks stretched ahead of us, sunning ourselves and bathing (not too deep, though) naked in the moonlight (I wondered if there were any private beaches?) and when we got back Tony and I would start the second (and hopefully sexier) half of our married life together.

And then I remembered my Ernie and Bert trolley. I'd forgotten it on the boat!

I whirled back and tried to fight against the waves of descending passengers to where all the luggage was stacked against a wall. I not-so-patiently waited for everyone in front of me to retrieve their belongings, wheeie suitcases, training bicycles and scooters. But a cursory glance told me my *Sesame Street* number was nowhere to be found. And through my tranquilizer fog, it hit me. *I'd forgotten it at the bus station in Catania airport in my haste to make the bus for Milazzo harbor.*

Crap! *Now* what? I had everything in there: my clothes, my shoes, my cosmetics, even my phone. Now, you might ask, who puts a cell phone in their suitcase? Did I mention that I'm a very organized person but not *quite* the seasoned traveler?

I waited, forlorn, as the ferry emptied completely and then had a pointless last look around lest Saint Christopher, patron saint of travelers, had had pity on me and somehow managed to unload Ernie and Bert from the bus and onto the ferry for me.

My entire arsenal of lingerie and party dresses was lost. How was I ever going to replace it? All my favorite *pièces de résistance* (meaning if he tried to resist me once again it would *pièce* me off royally) were in that damn suitcase, from my Monsoon cocktail gowns to my plus-sized lingerie. Some stuff I already had; other stuff I'd bought on a last impulse to boost my confidence. My marriage and subsequently my whole life were at stake here.

Now, standing amongst the dispersing throng of colorful and loud vacationers, I saw that the square off the harbor was in effect a circle. A roundabout, to be exact. Everywhere I turned cars were double-parking, picking up and dropping off tourists. And the heat? Unbelievable – like standing in the blaze of an open oven door. I ran my tongue over my already parched lips to moisten them and hitched my orphaned bag over my shoulder. At least I had my laptop with me.

Lipari town, as far as I could see, was tiny – a cluster of pastel-colored houses, really. In two steps I was in the center, among the cars and buses with people weaving through them, oblivious to the rules of the road.

I found Tony's hotel immediately and breezed through the sliding front doors, grateful for the rush of cool air and the taste of luxury already embracing me.

'Hello. I'm Gillian Dobson, Dr. Anthony Dobson's wife. He's staying here.'

The Sicilian girl in her white shirt and silk scarf looked up at me, pretending not to notice the sweat stains under my arms. 'Led me see – for de conference?'

'Yes.'

'Dobson... I see no Dobson.'

I leaned over the counter, swallowing, still sleepy and confused. How the hell was I going to find him: visit every single hotel on the island? 'There has to be. He said he was staying here.'

'Led me see again. Dobson... Dobson... ah yes. Apologies. Room 177. Here is your *kaycard*. It's de deluxe suite.'

Deluxe was to say the least of it. White marble-floored bathroom, Jacuzzi bath, shower with all the bells and whistles *and* a water bed. I thought water beds were a thing of the past. And the bathrobe? To die for – soft, white and plush, perfect for the cool temperature of the air-conditioned room, which oozed luxury, second-honeymoon sex. Well, soon – hopefully within the hour, if I had any say.

I immediately glugged down a half bottle of orange juice from the minibar and oh, what had we here? Cookies! A vast assortment, too! And did I see the familiar blue packaging of my all-time faves, *Baci Perugina* hazelnut-centered chocolates? Typically a Valentine's Day treat, for me and every woman in Italy with a choco-holism problem, *Baci Perugina* were practically a staple product in my diet. Diet – ha. Never did a word make me laugh that much. How are you expected to diet when you're surrounded by such scrumptious, gorgeous food, I ask you?

Now, while in the UK, Cadbury chocolate is my weakness, in Italy it's without a doubt *Baci Perugina*. Along with *Ferrero Rocher*, of course, and by the same brand, Ferrero Nutella. Can you even imagine life without Nutella? Nutella is the answer to every woman's problems.

Bad for you? Ha – how do you figure that the inventor of Nutella died in his eighties while inventors of medicine died much younger?

I should've written the slogans for Nutella:

Frustrated because you can't get a raise? Have yourself some Nutella.

Knackered by the end of the day?

Hungry but too lazy to cook?

Dumped by your man?

Nutella – the solution to almost every problem.

Forget the slogans. I should write an *Ode to Nutella* to thank it for all the slumps it had got me out of since I was old enough to twist the cap off on my own. My idea of hell? Chocoholic-proof Nutella jars.

When I'd fished the *Baci* and the *Ferrero Rocher*, I threw myself onto the salted peanuts and crackers, peering into the depths of the not-so-minibar. Was that *ice cream* I saw? Something told me I would be enjoying my stay here very much. Plus if I ate now I wouldn't be ravenous at the dinner table tonight and maybe, for once, I'd actually manage to pass as the dainty girl I used to be pre-motherhood, when Tony and I had no trouble whatsoever in between the sheets.

Before emptying the whole fridge and pissing Tony off, I jumped into the shower to wash the grime of seven hours off me (and to finally shave my legs). I would pamper myself with the contents of all those boutique gels and creams that I never bothered with at home, all the while humming romantic cheesy love songs.

The tranquilizers had been meant to knock me out for only a couple of hours but they must have reacted with something I ate or drank (the wine being a probable candidate) and even after that shower I was sitting on the edge of the tub in my pristine robe, slowly combing the no-rinse conditioner through my hair. Still a little woozy, I had just finished shaving one leg and was about to start the other when the hotel room door burst open, startling me.

'My sexy lady...' he drawled and I grinned. He'd come in with the energy of a full-blown twister. Indiscreet hotel staff. This was supposed to have been a surprise.

Perched on the edge of the tub, I turned to smile at him through the cinch in the door and rose, alarmed. At first I thought he was tripping backwards. But why would

he be entering his hotel room backwards? And then because of his jerking movements and a huge, white vase crashing to the floor, I figured he had to be having a stroke. But when he turned I saw that he wasn't. But soon *I* would be, because guess what was attached to him? A woman. And even then (I swear to you) for a split second I thought they were wrestling, so remote from my mind was the idea that this could be happening. That he could be *kissing* another woman. Because there they were, mouth on mouth, hands grabbing and tossing off clothes like they were on fire.

'Oh, *Tony...*' the woman moaned.

'Oh, *Nadia...*' he echoed.

'Oh, *God...*' I screamed as the entire world stopped and he turned around, his eyes widening in horror.

'Gillian!'

A demolition ball had just swung its way into the room and straight into my chest as I tried to breathe, barely registering my surroundings now, trying to make some sense of it. The room swaying and my sight dimming weren't helping much either.

Wait, wait. Lemme get this straight. I'm in my husband's hotel room in Sicily after braving a three-hour flight, still sleepy from the tranquilizers and – that's it! I'm asleep – none of this is actually happening. It's just a... what do you call it? A figment of my imagination.

'What... what are you doing here?' the figment demanded.

Terrific question. What *was* I doing here, in this, this deluxe House of Shag? How had I even got to this place? I tried to remember, but my life just before this moment was gone.

I tried to focus on the face of the man I'd married almost twenty years ago, and all I saw was a blurry, fuzzy image. 'What *am* I doing here?' I asked him and, unable to think or feel, I instinctively turned and stumbled out of the still-open door, careening down an endless corridor in my (well, technically *his*) terry-towel robe and coordinated flip-flops, down a flight of stairs and out into the blinding light of the busy street.

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Run. Run. Far. As far as I could from this nightmare. Why – *how* – had this even happened to us? Why was he sleeping with other women? Didn't he love me

anymore? And if not, when did he fall out of love with me? What had I done to deserve this? Was I not caring and loving enough? Had we drifted that far apart without even realizing it? Or perhaps I was the blind one and he'd been planning this all along?

Don't you get it yet? said a voice inside me. *She's young. Fit. Gorgeous.*

Sick to my stomach, I dashed across the sweltering street into a bar and reached the bathroom just in the nick of time. There was no doubt that people's emotions were connected to their guts, but my gut was probably sitting on my heart instead. Or maybe it was my minibar splurge, who knows? The stomach has reasons that reason cannot understand.

I stuck my head down the toilet bowl for what seemed like hours as every source of pain tried to squeeze its way out of me along with my minibar sins. But before I could release it, the anguish pushed its way back down again, and I had to fight harder and harder to expel something that just didn't want to leave me. Because I knew I couldn't let go of the status quo that I'd been living with all this time. Grasping the reality of the facts had been almost impossible for me at this stage. Was she a one-nighter or were they having an ongoing affair?

'What *difference* does it make?' I wailed to myself. My husband was sleeping with someone else; wasn't that enough?

He didn't love me passionately and I wasn't the woman of his life after all. I was just an idiot. An idiot who'd sacrificed her life all these years for the love of her young family. And in one split second my whole world had shifted on its axis once again, inverting its trajectory completely. Another person had come between us, and I would not be able to forgive him. Ever.

And neither was I willing to be his doormat for another twenty years. Twenty *years* – bar a few months – we'd been married. Twenty years of *lies*? While I gave him my all, and more? How can someone who says he loves you, has shared a bed with you, actually *do* that to you?

I paused and tuned in to my body. My stomach seemed to have given all it would for now, having somehow plateaued out into a sense of equilibrium. And now it was my heart that was about to explode. Served me right to have a coronary in the john of a café gazillions of miles from home instead of staying put like the good little wife that I was and waiting (none the wiser) for my man to come home.

This was all Brends' fault. If I hadn't had to run off and help her fix her own life, I'd have managed to wax before my flight out, meaning I wouldn't have wasted all that time in his hotel room shaving, meaning I would've gone looking for him at the

conference. Meaning that I would've surprised him in his hotel room, fully dressed and professional-looking, meaning I'd have probably never found out about *her*.

And now, what did I have, besides a cheating husband and one hairy leg?

To think I believed that now Annie had grown up, we'd be able to have some time for us – the rest of our lives. But now he wanted out. To think that all this time I'd tried to justify his coldness when I didn't live up to his standards with my shortcomings – the things I'd done wrong, done too late, too soon or not done at all. Not only that, the *frisson* of excitement was long gone. He'd found it with someone else who was much better than me in every way. All you had to do was take one good look at her and compare her to what I must've looked like all these years in my housewears and ponytails.

His implicit message was, obviously, *Don't get too comfortable around me*. Always be at your best, as if you were just bumping into me on a night out and not, say, in the corridor on your way to the bathroom. Because, while you might feel comfy and happy and safe and at home with me, I'm watching you and taking notes, tallying up all the times you look like shit.

Heaving a rattled breath like a dying nonagenarian, I splashed some freezing water onto my face and took a good look in the mirror. Jesus. My once happy (-ish) face had transformed into a blotchy mess with dark canyons under my eyes. There were new lines between my eyebrows and some even around my mouth now. My whole face looked like a geological experiment gone bad.

Hell, when had all this happened to me? When did I become this old? Had it been a slow, year-after-year process that I hadn't noticed, all the while slapping expensive goo onto my face, trying to ignore every new wrinkle and thinking all was okay, as long as my family was solid? Or did it happen just now, the second I saw Tony with that woman?

Tall, slim, lithe. Long dark hair. An exotic look. Definitely a local. A gorgeous, young, sexy local. The exact opposite of me. And he'd "befriended" her in, what? Two weeks?

How many times had this happened before? What if this was a constant pattern? What if he did it all the time? How the hell would I know, sitting at home amongst my pretty things sipping coffee with my friends? How the hell would I ever know if he had one, two or ten lovers? I'd trusted him with my life – my *heart* – completely.

How can you have been so wrong? I asked the mess in the mirror with the eyes of a madwoman. Oh God, if this was how one aged overnight, I'd just broken the record. We were, I suddenly realized what doctors had been saying for decades, not

only what we ate (which was more than enough to make *me* look like shit), but we were also what happened to us. And how we lived our lives, the decisions that we made. We wore our entire lives on our faces and bodies.

I dug into my pockets for a much-needed tissue, but couldn't find any. And there was no toilet paper to speak of. So I exited the bar and tore a couple of thin, scratchy tissues from the dispenser on one of the café tables while no one was looking. Only I'd grabbed a whole bunch and watched in dismay as they took flight on the afternoon breeze like seagulls gently gliding without a care in the world. Just like Tony's love, they scattered to the four winds, forever lost.

I swiped at my eyes and blew my nose with the tattered tissues. They completely disintegrated as I rubbed them over my face and as I picked the bits off, I wished I could also rub the unhappiness away with my tears, oblivious of the people who were staring at me like I was a nutter of some sort. Well, yeah – I had to be completely insane not to notice my husband was bonking younger women.

The sun could've fried an egg on my head and I'm sure my brain was already at a boiling point, but I charged on amidst the traffic, feeling sorry for myself and wondering how I'd managed to lose everything that had been dear to me. Oh, to see a friendly face now! I didn't even have my cell to call anyone back home. I'd never felt so alone in my life.

Still dizzy and now sick and exhausted, I stopped, confused and overwhelmed, trying to get my bearings among the cars whizzing by at a busy intersection.

'Gillian! Gillian!'

I turned in horror at the sound of Tony's voice as he ran after me, but he was still far behind. Obviously he couldn't have been in that much of a hurry to catch me. Tony had always been one for appearances, only starting to do something for me, only seeming to make unselfish gestures, like setting the table when in reality he was simply reaching for a bottle of wine and a glass for himself. Only thinking about himself. So now this gesture of chasing me was totally wasted on me.

'Gillian, stop! I need to talk to you!'

But I turned away, letting out a sob as I tried to put as much distance as possible between me and the immense pain ripping my heart open.

'Go away,' I cried over my shoulder as I ran, my flip-flops slowing me down (not that I was an Olympic sprinter by nature, mind you). And then an unnatural screech filled the air as a huge dark vehicle hurtled toward me.