



# A Hundred Pieces of Me

By Lucy Dillon

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First up: throwing away all her possessions except for the one hundred things that mean the most to her. But what items are worth saving? Letters from the only man she's ever loved? A keepsake of the father she never knew? Or a blue glass vase that perfectly captures the light?

As she lets go of the past, Gina begins to come to terms with what has happened in her life and discovers that seizing the day is sometimes the only thing to do. And when one decides to do just that...magic happens.

**Includes an Author Q & A**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“Bittersweet, lovely...The kind of book that makes you want to live your own life better.”—Jojo Moyes, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Me Before You*

“Such a brilliant book. So satisfying and clever and deeply moving. I’ll be passing it on to all my friends.”—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Sophie Kinsella

“This vibrant and uplifting novel has not only entertained me hugely, but made me change the way I look at life.”—Katie Fforde, bestselling author of *A French Affair*

“Simply wonderful...a real ‘just one more chapter before bed’ novel.”—Milly Johnson, bestselling author of *It’s Raining Men*

“A warm, heartbreakingly brilliant novel that will make you re-evaluate your ideas of love and life along with the main character, Gina. Tissues essential.”—Ali Harris, author of *The First Last Kiss*

“I can think of few lovelier ‘me’ moments than the joy of being curled up with a truly magical novel like this one.”—Fiona Walker, bestselling author of *The Love Letter*

“A gorgeous story—perfect for an indulgent and absorbing treat.”—Lulu Taylor, author of *Outrageous Fortune*

#### About the Author

**Lucy Dillon** is the national bestselling author of *The Secret of Happy Ever After*, *Walking Back to Happiness*, and *Lost Dogs and Lonely Hearts*. She lives in Herefordshire, England, with her pair of basset hounds, Bonham and Violet.

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#### Prologue

#### ITEM:

a red cashmere scarf

LONGHAMPTON, JUNE 2008

Gina wraps her new scarf tightly around her wrist, like a bandage. It’s a scarlet cashmere one that she bought on the way home from work two days ago, the color of lipstick and poisoned apples and danger. For something that cost so much, it took no time to buy: she was cold, she’d always wanted a beautiful big cashmere scarf, and the usual sensible voice of caution, reminding her of the gas bill or the council tax, had gone, and in the silence Gina could hear her own voice asking aloud, “Why not?”

“Why not?” always makes Gina feel anxious. She isn’t a “why not?” sort of person. But this whole week has felt like careering downhill on a sled, swerving and dodging as shock after shock has rushed at her. The price tag on the scarf didn’t even register.

The bright color is still taking her by surprise. Gina’s house and her wardrobe are calming shades of sea blue

and cloudy lilac, but something in the bold scarlet feels right. It looks alive against her pale skin, somehow Spanish against her wavy dark hair, her brown eyes. This red is bold and definite, grabbing attention, fixing her against the grayness of the town.

Gina's extravagant scarf is the only clue to the reason she and Stuart are sitting here. The red slash lurking at the corner of her eye whispers that now is the time to indulge herself. Now might be the last chance to do it.

She glances at Stuart again, to see if he's noticed the scarf. He hasn't. He's frowning over some notes he made for today's consultation: he sat up until 2:00 a.m. in bed with his laptop while she was pretending to sleep, the greenish light reflecting the planes of his handsome face, his forehead lined with concentration.

Stuart's absorbing everything. There's a lot of information to absorb, on the Internet, from the hospital, from the friends of friends. Words and terms are floating around her but nothing will settle in her brain. They melt away like snowflakes as soon as they touch her.

The door behind them opens and Dr. Khan hurries in, fresh from someone else's crisis, full of apologies for keeping them waiting. Stuart stiffens in his seat. Gina remembers the suspended moment in school exams when the proctor coughed and told them to turn over their papers. Weeks and months hanging in the air, the desperate scramble to go back, one more week's study, but it's too late. It's already over. Half panic, half relief.

Now.

"Hello, Georgina . . . Gina?" he says, with an easy smile. "Lovely, yes, Gina, and this is your . . . ?"

"Fiancé, Stuart Horsfield, hello," says Stuart, and Gina still thinks it sounds strange, but everything that's happening to her seems to be happening to someone else. She grips his hand. It's strong and comforting.

While Dr. Khan flips through his notes Gina makes herself look around the room so she won't try to read the scrawled words in front of him. Maybe that's why doctors make their handwriting so bad, she thinks, so it can't be read upside down from the other side of the desk.

She notes everything deliberately. There's a window, looking onto the car park, white gloss paint, a calendar and a candy pink cyclamen (very hard to kill off). There's a mirror on the wall by the door, simple, unframed, too far from the desk to be intended for the doctor.

A cool shiver of fear runs over Gina's skin. It's for the patients. So they can adjust their faces, wipe away their mascara smears before they go back to the silent waiting area outside. Stuart's fingers tighten around hers.

Dr. Khan clicks the lid back on his chunky silver fountain pen, pushing it in with his palm and letting a sigh escape from his downturned lips. He doesn't smile. And that's when Gina knows. She struggles to stay in the moment. Part of her is flying above it, her consciousness shooting backward, out of her head, detaching her. Is this really happening to me? she wonders. How can I tell?

A bleak longing to go back sweeps through her, and she has to force herself to concentrate on the now.

Now.

Now.

"So, Georgina," he says, "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

## Chapter One

ITEM:

a gold blown-glass Christmas-tree decoration in the shape of an angel playing a trumpet

LONGHAMPTON, DECEMBER 2013

Gina stands back and breathes in the sharp dark green scent of the Douglas fir, and thinks, Yes, this is why I bought this house. For Christmas.

It's an extravagantly tall, old-fashioned tree and it fills what she'd earmarked from their very first viewing as a specific Christmas-tree space in the black-and-white-tiled entrance hall of 2 Dryden Road. The springy branches are ready to be hung with glass baubles, topped with a star, the special iron tree stand hidden by a pile of presents underneath. The final Victorian touch to a lovingly renovated Victorian family home.

Gina smiles at it, pleased. It's taken a long time, this house, renovating themselves, after work, on weekends. The mental picture of this tree, of this moment, has kept her going through the endless months of sanding, plastering, builders turning the electricity off without warning, washing in a bucket: the backdrop to her own slow crawl back to normality. It's been one tiny goal at a time—a finished room, a complete lap of the park—and now, finally, it's here: Christmas in Dryden Road.

As she reaches for the first bauble, a memory skims the back of her mind, moving too fast for her to place it: she's filled with a sudden glow of contentment, a deep red sort of Christmassy anticipation that wraps round her like a sudden soft blanket of joy. It's more like *déjà vu* than a memory: the satisfying sensation of something clicking into place.

What is it? The smell of pine and cinnamon sticks? The slithery rustle of tinsel? The coziness of the central heating ticking into life as the afternoon shadows start to fall? Gina probes in the shapeless depths of her early memories but can't find the exact moment. She doesn't have a lot of childhood memories, and the precious few she does have are blurred by over-examination, and she's never sure whether she's remembering actual facts, or something her mother's told her happened. But this happy feeling is familiar.

It's probably dressing the tree, she thinks, turning back to the box of ornaments in their tissue nest. It's a tradition: first Saturday in December, tree goes up. Decorating it was always something she and her mum, Janet, did, just the two of them, listening to a Christmas compilation tape and sharing a tin of candies, Gina handing the baubles to Janet, Janet fixing them in the same spots every year. They lived in lots of houses while Gina was growing up, but the tree routine was always the same.

Gina has a box of baubles, including some old favorites handed down by her mum, and she's adopted Janet's ritual of buying a new one every Christmas. She picks up the decoration she bought for this year: it's a golden angel, playing a trumpet. Next year, she thinks, suddenly light inside with hope, will be better. It has to be. It's a long time since Gina's felt so simply content; the uncomplicated pleasure is so unfamiliar that she's horrified by how long it's been.

A few snowflakes blow past the window and Gina hopes it's not snowing in the New Forest where Stuart's office is on a Christmas jolly. Instead of their usual all-you-can-eat bonanza in the local Chinese restaurant, the whole sales department of Midlands Logistics has been treated to some sort of karting event, followed by a murder mystery dinner.

Stuart will almost certainly be leading one of the teams. He cycles; he plays cricket; he's still captaining his football team at thirty-six, with his modest but determined attitude. The other football WAGs, most of whom

have not-so-secret crushes on Stu, joke that he's the Longhampton David Beckham. Without the tattoos. Obviously. Stuart's not a fan of tattoos.

She hangs another silver bauble, then stops: it'd be nice to share this with Stu, she thinks. He shouldered the back-breaking part of the renovation when she wasn't up to it; it's only fair that they should share the fun stuff. Decorating the tree is something they should do together, a new tradition of their own they can start.

Gina puts the lid on the box so the cats can't get into it, and goes through to the sitting room where she's been ordering presents on her laptop. There aren't that many shopping days left, and she's barely started their shopping. She turns up Phil Spector's Christmas album to an indulgently loud level, but has only got as far as Stuart's aunts when her credit card's declined.

She checks again. Declined.

Gina frowns at it. It's their joint card, the one that's supposed to be for household bills. Stuart must have bought something big, probably for his bike—she'd paid off the balance last month in full, ready for Christmas. The website says the cutoff date for presents to Australia is Monday; if Auntie Pam in Sydney wants her usual tin of shortbread, it's got to be sent today.

Gina chews her lip, then dials Stuart's mobile. Her card's already at the limit with her car's inspection and insurance, and Pam's his auntie. After two rings it goes to voicemail, which doesn't surprise her—if he's karting, his mobile will be sensibly stowed in his locker—so she calls his workmate Paul, who picks up after a couple of rings.

"Hello, Paul, it's Gina," she says, wandering around the sitting room, drawing the heavy curtains, clicking on the lamps. "Sorry to bother you—hope I'm not interrupting any murdering!"

"Hey, Gina." Paul sounds as if he's somewhere noisy: she can hear "Merry Xmas Everybody" by Slade in the background.

"I'm trying to get hold of Stu. When he finishes what he's doing, can you ask him to give me a ring?"

"Stuart?"

"Um, yes. Are you supposed to refer to him as Hercule Poirot or something?"

"Sorry?"

Gina pauses in front of the mirror over the fireplace and stares at her reflection in the age-spotted glass; as usual, after a trip to the hairdresser, she doesn't look like herself. Her short dark hair is smooth, swooping across her long face in a sophisticated fringe that will last four more hours before curling back up. But the new haircut is part of her resolution to make more effort this year. More effort with her business, with Stuart, with . . . everything.

"Gina? Sorry, I'm not with Stuart."

"He's not with you?"

"Not unless he's stupid enough to be in Cribbs Causeway shopping!" Paul pauses, then laughs. "Oh, bollocks, I've probably blown his big surprise, haven't I? He'll be out getting your present from somewhere. What'll it be this year? A kayak?"

“Yes, that’s probably it.” Gina tries to laugh. She can’t. Her face feels heavy, her cheeks suddenly doughy. “Ha! Sorry to bother you, Paul. Have a good weekend!”

She hangs up and, halfheartedly, tries on Paul’s explanation, but it doesn’t fit.

Stuart packed a weekend bag; he ironed his own shirts. He told her several times—once too many, come to think of it—that it was a karting weekend, then a murder mystery dinner, and they’d be busy from Friday morning through to Sunday afternoon but not to worry if she couldn’t get hold of him because the hotel was in a forest with no reception, “which is best for team building.”

Too much detail. Stuart’s even an over-efficient liar.

Gina sinks onto the sofa, still gripping her phone, and Loki, the less disdainful of their two cats, shoots away from her.

She has to force the two concepts to mesh. Stuart: lying. Reliable, upright Stuart, who got the decorations down from the attic for her before he left, who emptied the trash cans and changed the cat litter.

All practical things, she realizes. Thoughtful, but housemate-y. That’s what they are, after five years of marriage, housemates. Her last birthday present had been a sander, for the upstairs floorboards.

The weird thing is, Gina doesn’t feel devastated, just . . . sad. It’s only confirmed something she realizes now that she already knew. Has known for months, but not wanted to acknowledge. She’s been buying how-to-fix-your-relationship books and hiding them in the airing cupboard; Stuart’s just been more practical, as usual.

She gazes at her half-dressed tree out in the hall. It’s making a cookie-cutter Christmas-tree shape against the pale blue staircase behind, and underneath the dull ache that’s filling her chest like gravel, Gina feels a faint flutter of that elusive happiness.

Something pushes her toward the tree, to finish decorating the branches. There’s at least half a day before he gets back when this house is going to be perfect. It deserves it. She deserves it.

Gina levers herself off the sofa and sleepwalks into the hall, to her box of decorations and memories. While the Ronettes harmonize in the background, she carries on slipping glass baubles onto the knotty pine branches, breathing in the rosemary-scented resin and letting the dark heart of the tree fill her senses until there’s no room for any thoughts about the future or the past.

Outside, beyond the glossy holly wreath and the brass knocker on the freshly painted front door, it snows.

•••

It was no coincidence, thought Gina, gazing around her empty new flat, that Heaven was commonly assumed to be a big white room with absolutely nothing in it. Something about this clean, peaceful space made her feel calmer than she had in weeks.

She stepped toward the big picture window with its panoramic view over the brown and gray rooftops beyond the high street, and experienced a strange elation like sparkling mineral water rinsing through her veins. She hadn’t expected to feel quite so positive about the first day of her new life, single, in a new place. The last few weeks had been hard, and Gina’s bones ached with invisible bruises, but now underneath there was a first-day-of-school excitement.

Fresh paint. Empty rooms. Smooth walls, ready to be filled, like a brand-new notebook.

Some of it was adrenaline at having sold the house and rented this new flat in just a fortnight. Some of it was relief to be away from the atmosphere that had hung over Dryden Road after Stuart's bombshell, which, like an actual bombshell, had left a sort of miserable crater where Christmas was supposed to have been. Even though he'd moved out almost as soon as he'd admitted where he'd really been that weekend (Paris), his presence had lingered in every stray sock and framed vacation photo, of which there were many. Almost overnight, Gina felt as if she'd woken up in the house of a happily married couple of strangers.

She knew that was her own fault, which only made it worse. She'd deliberately set out to make Dryden Road into a sort of scrapbook of her and Stuart's life together: it was feathered with tiny mementoes of parties and anniversaries, and quirky collections in frames. Gina never met a shelf she couldn't fill, which was why it came as a bit of a surprise to feel so instantly at home in the cloudlike emptiness of this modern flat, above the optician's, next to the deli.

The flat at 212a High Street was the exact opposite of the house she'd just left in the desirable poets' streets area of Longhampton, the neglected Victorian terrace that she and Stuart had coaxed from damp shabbiness to what interiors magazines liked to call a "forever home." Gina was a conservation officer for the council; putting back the dado rails and molded ceiling roses was a labor of love. Two Dryden Road's final gift to them for their split nails and silent hours' sanding was a quick sale: it wasn't their forever home but several other families wanted it to be theirs.

If Dryden Road was a busy Victorian scrapbook collage, 212a High Street was a blank page. It was an open-plan conversion, painted throughout in soft vanilla eggshell with brand-new carpets and wooden floors, resolutely featureless. No fireplaces, no skirting, no picture rails, just plain walls and double-glazed windows that turned the town's skyline into a sort of living picture across one wall of the sitting room. It reminded Gina of a gallery, full of light and air, a place that invited you to pause and think. The moment she'd walked in with the estate agent, her eyes gritty from another sleepless night, a sense of stillness had come over her, and she'd handed over the rental deposit the same afternoon.

That had been a week ago, the last week in January.

Bright sunshine was warming the flat despite the chill outside, and Gina turned slowly on her heel, assessing the available space, and stopped at the long wall next to the window. It demanded one really powerful piece of art, something beautiful that she could sit, gaze at and get lost in. She didn't have the right painting or print yet, but she'd formed a middle-of-the-night plan to get rid of everything she didn't need or love from the old house, and use the money to buy something new, and special.

Everything from the old house.

This can be a positive experience, Gina told herself, as her stomach fluttered with nerves at the enormity of what lay ahead of her. The nerves tended to ambush her, creeping up when she wasn't concentrating to dive-bomb her good mood, like seagulls. Once the novelty of her new place wore off, Gina knew it was going to be tough, dating again at thirty-three, unraveling her life from Stuart's, and having to make new friends to replace the social life he would be taking with him. Gina had only one real mate, Naomi, whom she'd known since school; the rest of their circle had been Stuart's football and cricket friends.

But this flat would help her start again, she told herself. Everything she loved would be on show, all the time, instead of hidden in cupboards. There wasn't room for much, so she'd have to be selective. She'd have to choose every new detail of her life from now on; everything that came into this flat had to make her happy or be useful, or ideally both.



One of the self-help books Naomi had pressed into her hands had been about a man who'd got rid of all his possessions, except a hundred vital things. He'd felt spiritually freed by it, apparently. Gina wondered if she could do that. It did seem wrong to spoil the serene minimalism with clutter. And the discipline would be good for her. What hundred things did she actually need?

Could you get rid of that much stuff and keep anything of yourself? Or was that the whole point? That you'd have to focus on being you, instead of relying on your things to explain who you were.

The thought made Gina cold and light-headed, but not necessarily scared.

Her mobile buzzed in her pocket. It was the removal men, coming with the boxes from Dryden Road. She hadn't been there for the packing. Naomi, in her role as cheerleader and supporter, had been firm about it. Well, bossy. In a nice way. "You've been through enough, you're exhausted, and they're the experts," she'd insisted. "Pay them to do it. I'll pay them to do it. If you put your back out packing you'll only have to fork out for massages later."

Naomi had been right. She was usually right.

"Hello, Gina? It's Len Todd Removals, and we're about to leave your property. Just checking you're in to take delivery of the boxes that aren't going to storage."

Some of the bigger items, like Gina's huge velvet Liberty sofa and her inlaid arts-and-crafts wardrobe, had gone straight to the Big Yellow on the outskirts of town, to wait until she could bring herself to sell them, or find a flat big enough to house them. The rest—the drawers, the cupboards, the shelves—was all on its way to her.

Gina checked her watch. Two o'clock. They'd arrived at Dryden Road before eight, but even so . . . A whole life bubble-wrapped and packed in under a day. "You're not finished already?"

"All in the van. You had a fair bit of stuff, though, love, I'll give you that."

"I know." She winced. "Sorry. I should have had a clear-out."

Gina had assumed Stuart would take more than he did. Instead, he'd swept through in one morning while she was at work, packed a few small items and stuck Post-it notes on large articles (like the new bed, which he'd suddenly remembered he'd paid for) and left a note saying she could have the rest—he didn't want to make life difficult.

At first Gina had been hurt by how little of their combined life Stuart wanted, and then it turned out that he didn't need a lot because his new life already had a toaster. And a duvet. And other personal touches. Within two days of his big revelation, Naomi—whose husband Jason played football with Stuart—had ferreted out the fact that he had moved in with his Other Woman, the woman he'd taken to Paris. Bryony Crawford, a friend from his cycling club, who lived in the Old Water Mill development. As soon as Naomi told her that, Gina knew exactly what kind of person Bryony would be. Storage wouldn't be a priority. Stainless-steel-surface cleaners would.

Gina pushed the thought away, as it started to unfurl into further, more troubling mental images. Everything coming into this flat, she reminded herself, had to be positive. Including thoughts. And she was glad none of her beautiful possessions would be ending up in Old Water Mill, even if it meant paying for them to be in storage for a bit.

“Are you there, love?” Len Todd sounded concerned.

“Yes,” she said. “I’ll expect you in—what? Half an hour?”

“Great.” The removal man paused. “You’d better clear some room.”

• • •

Len Todd, and his Removals, arrived at half past two, bumping the first of the cardboard boxes up the side stairs to Gina’s first-floor flat.

“If you could put it in the spare room,” she said, opening the door to the small second bedroom, so far bedless. “The plan’s to fill that with boxes, with a few in the sitting room, if necessary, to keep as much of the flat as clear as possible.”

“No problem.”

Len parked the box in a corner, and stepped aside to make way for a full-size wardrobe case, being lugged in by a second man. And then a third, with a fourth and fifth already dropping something heavy on the stairs outside with a muffled swearword.

Gina flattened herself against the hallway wall. Suddenly the calm white flat wasn’t feeling quite so spacious, with this stream of sturdy men hauling in boxes nearly as big as she was. A dark cloud passed over her bright mood and she braced herself against it. There were a lot of hurdles to get over in the next few days: solicitors, unpacking, name changes. She needed this positive forward motion to lift her over them.

As a box marked “Kitchen” went past, Gina had a sudden flash of her warmhearted house, the amiable third person in her marriage to Stuart, being cut up and broken down, packed into boxes and brought into this new place in chunks. All this stuff had made perfect sense in those rooms; it was why she hadn’t even tried to have a sort-out before she left. How could she have thrown anything away? Now, though, her old home was separated into individual bits, like a jigsaw she could never put back together in the same way.

It was the same with all the pieces of her life so far—they wouldn’t fit back together to make the same shape ever again. So which bits should she keep?

The removal man seemed to sense her panic. Gina guessed they’d seen enough marital divisions of property to know a breakup when they packed one. “Why don’t you take yourself over the road for a cup of tea while we get on with this?” said Len Todd, with a friendly nod. “I’ll give you a ring when we’re done. Don’t suppose you’ve got a kettle, have you?”

“In the kitchen—there’s coffee and milk and, er, you’ll find mugs in the kitchen box.” Naomi had packed Gina an emergency basket with all the essentials. The comforting simplicity of the single mug, single bowl, single spoon in her sleek Scandinavian-style kitchen had made her think that perhaps her hundred-things life plan might work. It was quite restful, the lack of choice.

“We won’t be long.” He patted her arm. “And don’t you worry, love. It’ll feel like home in no time.”

“Yes,” said Gina, with a bright smile she didn’t feel.

• • •

For the next hour or so Gina sat in the delicatessen next to her flat and drank two coffees, watching the late-

afternoon bustle of the high street, an unmade to-do list started in the notebook next to her phone on the table.

She ignored a call from her mother and, more guiltily, from Naomi. Both of them, Gina knew, wanted to be supportive on this day of big changes, but her instinct was to focus all her energy inward, on herself. She tried to keep a vision in her head of her sunny, open flat and all its possibilities; what she was going to do with it; whether she should paint one wall a bright sunshine yellow to pin this positivity for days when she wasn't quite so energized.

Len Todd rang at twenty to four, just as the first heavy dots of rain began to speckle the pavement, and she hurried round.

He was waiting at the foot of the stairs that led up to her flat, looking, it had to be said, shattered. "All done," he said, and dropped the keys into her hand: her old keys, and the new ones. "We got it all in in the end."

Gina laughed, and tipped him, but it wasn't until she opened the front door that she understood properly what he'd meant.

The flat was completely crammed with cardboard boxes. Crammed, from floor to ceiling.

The movers had left a narrow corridor through the spare room so she could get inside, and they'd lined two walls of her bedroom with wardrobe crates. The sitting room was now two-thirds filled, the white walls lost behind brown ones. She had to turn sideways to get into the kitchen-diner. Her possessions loomed over her every way she looked.

Gina was stunned by the unexpected invasion. It felt crushing, claustrophobic. Before her shock could tip over into tears, she started pushing the boxes away from the big white wall, where her special painting was to go. She needed to be able to see that wall, even if every other one was blocked.

Her muscles ached as she dragged the heavy boxes around but she forced herself on. I've got to start sorting right now, she told herself, or I'll never be able to sit down.

Gina's previous vision of sitting in the empty flat, languidly considering one item at a time from a single box, evaporated. She tipped four boxes of bedding into the corner of her bedroom, and wrote "KEEP," "SELL," "GIVE AWAY," and "DUMP" on the empty cases in big letters, lining them up in the limited space in front of the sofa. Then she took a deep breath and pulled the brown tape off the nearest box.

Everything was bubble-wrapped and at first Gina couldn't work out what the first item was, but as she unrolled the plastic, she saw it was an antique blue glass vase. She had to think twice about where it had come from, then remembered that she'd bought it when she was at university.

I loved this, she thought, surprised. Where's it been?

A memory slipped into the forefront of her mind, of stopping outside the window of a junk shop in Oxford . . . fifteen years ago now? It had been drizzling, she'd been late for a lecture, but something about the curved shape had leaped out of the cluttered display, a suspended raindrop of bright cobalt blue in the middle of a load of tatty brass and china. Gina could picture it in her rooms at college, on the window overlooking a courtyard, but she struggled to remember where it had been in Dryden Road: in the landing alcove with some dried lavender in it. There, but invisible, just filling a space.

She sat back on her heels, feeling the weight of the glass. The vase had cost twenty-five pounds—a fortune

in her student days—and had always been full of striped tulips from the market, left until they decayed in that pretentious student style, falling in tissue thinness onto the stone ledge of her windowsill. Kit had started it: he'd brought her flowers on his first visit, and she'd been unable to bring herself to throw them out. And after someone had said, "Oh, you're the girl who always has flowers!" Gina had made a point of keeping the vase full because she wanted to be the Girl Who Always Had Flowers.

At least I don't do that anymore, she thought, with a twinge of embarrassment at how much she'd wanted to make some sort of impression on people at university. She wasn't in touch with a single one of them now.

Gina started to put the vase into the GIVE AWAY box; over the years she'd collected lots of different vases, special ones for lilies, hyacinths, roses. She didn't need one that reminded her of Kit, and of all the expectations she'd had at university of where her life would be by now. All her life, she realized, she'd been creating this paper trail of possessions, hoping that they'd keep her attached to her own memories, but now she'd found out they didn't. The last years meant nothing. They were gone. All the photo albums in the world wouldn't keep them real.

But as she held it, she stopped seeing those things and instead saw a vase. A rather nice vase that made Gina think that, actually, she'd had a bit of an eye for quality even as a student. Its bold sculptural shape had got lost in Dryden Road's collage of color and detail, but it was perfect for this flat. The white background reframed it: it was still a beautiful frozen raindrop of glass, bright cobalt blue, ready for flowers to fill it.

Gina edged around the boxes until she was in front of the big picture window, and placed the vase squarely in the center of the windowsill, where the sun would shine through it as it had done at college, revealing the murky wet shapes of the flower stems, rigid below the papery petals.

She stood for a moment, trying to catch the slippery emotions swirling in her chest. Then a cloud moved outside and the last light of the day deepened the blue of the glass. As it glowed against the blank white sill, something twitched inside her, a memory nudging its way back to the surface. Not of an event but of a feeling, the same bittersweet fizz she'd felt when she'd unpacked her belongings in her university room, waiting for the happiest days of her life to roar around the corner, despite her secret worry that maybe she'd already had them, anticipation sharpened with a lick of fear. Was that a memory? Was it just the same feeling in a different place? Because her life was starting again now too?

Gina took a deep breath. She wasn't going to keep the vase because it reminded her of college or because a visitor might be impressed with her good taste. She was keeping it because she liked it. And when she looked at it, it made her happy. It caught the light, even on a gray day. It was beautiful.

She hadn't bought it for her student rooms. She'd bought it fifteen years ago—for this flat.

The blue glass vase glowed in the weak, wintry sunshine, and the white flat didn't look quite so white anymore. Gina stood for a long minute, letting nothing into her head except the liquid swoop and the deep, jewel-like color.

Then, with a more confident hand, she reached into the box for the next ball of bubble-wrap.

## **Chapter Two**

ITEM:

a brown leather satchel, with GJB embossed on the front

HARTLEY, SEPTEMBER 1991

Georgina is experiencing very mixed feelings about her new school satchel.

This morning, on the kitchen table, it had looked all right. Shiny and burnished brown, with brass buckles and a corrugated section inside for putting pens in. She could tell it was expensive—although Georgina wasn't fooled by that. It was a Trojan satchel. A satchel containing a whole stack of her mother's guilt about sending her to yet another new school although, nominally, it was a present from Terry.

Terry is her stepfather. Before he was her stepfather, he was the unmarried son of her grandmother's friend-from-church, Agnes, and then he was the lodger in her mother's spare room when they'd moved out of Gran's house, where they'd been living since Georgina's dad died. Now they're living in their own house, near Terry's new job, a few hundred miles away. Mum, Terry and Georgina, the new family. The satchel seems to have been Terry's idea.

"You don't get a second chance to make a first impression," said Terry, when she inspected it over breakfast. He works in medical sales, and has meticulously ironed shirts that he presses himself, even though Georgina's mum irons like a demon. Tea towels, pants, even socks, if they have frills on them.

"Say thank you, Georgina," Janet had prompted her, before she'd even had time to think about not saying it.

"Thank you, Terry," Georgina had said obediently, and looked down at her new school shoes, so as not to catch whatever variety of look her mum and Terry were exchanging.

Her shoes are navy blue, with the Mary Jane strap that everyone had wanted at St. Leonard's. Mum had finally given in after months of pleading, but the shoes—exactly the right shade of blue—aren't making Georgina as happy as she'd hoped.

Half an hour later, pretending to read safety notices outside the registration room, Georgina knows for definite that the shoes are wrong. The satchel is beyond wrong. The other first-years around her are wearing the exact same brown blazer and white shirt but her over-tidy newness is making her different—she can already pick out the kids with older brothers and sisters by their cool, worn-in, hand-me-down uniform and bags. And their confident manner, the way they're laughing and bumping against their mates, at ease with teasing and physical contact.

Georgina wishes she knew how to make friends. How come some people have that knack, she wonders. What do they say? How do they know the right people to home in on?

Think about Dad.

The three photographs of Captain Huw Pritchard that she still has flash into her mind: Dad in his Welsh Guards uniform, Dad in shorts on vacation, Dad with an SAS mustache in a rugby shirt, holding a pint of beer. He looks handsome in all of them, happy and sociable. The sort of man who doesn't even think about making friends, they just happen.

Georgina digs her nails into her palm. I can't just be like Mum, she thinks. Dad fitted in everywhere he was posted. I must have some friend-making genes. What would he have done?

She ignores the fact that she doesn't know what her dad would have done because she can barely remember him. A dark streak of unfocused longing sweeps through her and, as the bell goes, she dives forward, carried by the hope that she'll look like she knows someone if she barges in with the rest, but when she gets a seat, no one comes to sit next to her.

The teacher—Mrs. Clarkson, flustered in a mohair jumper—arrives, and Georgina fiddles with her pencil case. She’s sat too near the front. Again. The next class, she’ll aim for the middle.

Did she hear the faint hiss of “. . . satchel?”

“Good morning, first-years,” Mrs. Clarkson shouts over the racket. “Are we all here? Let’s make a start.”

As she gets the register out, the door’s flung open and a small girl barrels in, wearing a blazer that’s so big her fingers are hidden by the sleeves. Her tie is knotted low and thick, more like a cravat, and she’s cradling her stack of books in one arm. No bag.

No bag, thinks Georgina, making a mental note.

“Sorry I’m late, miss,” the girl gasps. “Missed . . . bus.”

“Oh, that bus,” says Mrs. Clarkson, sarcastically. “Never seems to stop for McIntyres. Which one are you?”

“Naomi, miss.” The girl grins. She has two dimples. Georgina notes Naomi’s stubby plaits are the exact same color as her satchel, a bright chestnut.

“Don’t be late again, Naomi. Now sit down.” The teacher looks up and sees Georgina for the first time. She blinks. “There. Next to . . . ?”

“Georgina Bellamy, miss,” says Georgina, and someone definitely sniggers.

“Quiet!” snaps Mrs. Clarkson, but it’s too late. This time Georgina can hear “satchel” and “Georgina.”

Naomi slides into the seat; she smells strongly of Impulse. As the teacher starts dictating their timetable, Georgina’s aware that Naomi doesn’t have a pencil—silently, she passes her one of hers, her name stamped on it in gold (another gift from Terry).

They write down the unfamiliar new lessons—personal studies, RE, domestic science—then Georgina feels a nudge.

Naomi pushes a note at her. Her writing is round, with big circles over the is, something Janet has specifically forbidden Georgina even to contemplate doing.

Is this your satchel?

Georgina shrugs, not wanting to rise to the teasing, but Naomi nudges her again, nodding under the desk.

What’s the point in denying it? Everyone’s seen it. And anyway, Georgina thinks, with a flicker of defiance, so what? She writes, yes, in her neat cursive.

Naomi shoots her a sympathetic glance, and in that second, even though she is taller, bigger and probably older than Naomi, Georgina feels herself being taken under a wing.

My brother’s got a locker. You can dump it in there before next lesson if you want?

Georgina stares at her half-filled-in timetable, stunned at the way Naomi’s read her mind. She’d happily ditch the satchel but in it there’s something precious: an entry tag from Ascot racecourse, pale pink and gold embossed. She doesn’t remember her dad giving it to her, but apparently he did when he came back from the

day's outing with her mum, their anniversary treat. Dad tied the tag to her chubby toddler wrist and she paraded around "like a lady at the races." It's her lucky charm.

Georgina's father died not long after the trip to Ascot. She doesn't have enough things like the tag. Things that prove the stories her mum tells her actually happened. Not that Mum tells her much. Captain Huw Pritchard was on a secret operation for the army when he was killed.

"Your father was very brave," is about as much as Janet'll say before her lips go flat and her eyes glisten.

But the thought of ditching the satchel makes Georgina feel traitorous. She doesn't want to be rude to Terry. He's not awful, just a bit boring, and embarrassing with his old car. Her mum watches her like a hawk for signs of disrespect. Though if she has to take the satchel home bearing scars of a playground kickabout, won't that be worse?

Rebellion doesn't come easily to Georgina. If she can find a reason, though, that's different. Swiftly, while Mrs. Clarkson is explaining about lunch queues, she reaches under the desk, unbuckles the hard clasps and gets the tag out from its secret place. She slips it into the inside pocket of her blazer, zips it up safely. Then she writes, thanks, on the note.

Naomi grins at her, dimpling, and Georgina feels something change in the atmosphere around her. The class has moved on, is whispering about Mrs. Clarkson's funny eye, not about her. She smiles cautiously back at Naomi, feeling the warm tingle of being liked. It might be all right, this school.

Naomi flicks her gaze to the teacher, then crosses her eyes, and Georgina splutters in delighted surprise.

"Georgina! Naomi!" snaps Mrs. Clarkson.

They spin forward and Georgina sees the wall chart by the board: uniforms of the British Army from 1707 to the present day. It's a sign. It makes her tingle again. Georgina is big on signs.

• • •

The next day Naomi arrived at Gina's new flat at half past nine for their regular Saturday-morning coffee date. It was a routine they'd got into when Jason and Stuart were at football practice together, and now carried on while Jason took two-year-old Willow to the out-of-town supermarket for some father-daughter bonding and illicit Haribo.

Naomi wasn't great at hiding her feelings at the best of times, but the horror on her face as she squeezed her way past the boxes stacked in the hallway was so blatant that Gina nearly laughed.

"Oh, my God, Gee," said Naomi, struggling to unhook her jacket from where it had caught on a stray coat hanger. "Where did all this come from?"

"Where'd you think?" Gina moved a box of electrical leads away from the door so Naomi could get in. "Dryden Road. It came yesterday. I've been up half the night unpacking."

"Wouldn't it be easier to stick it all in storage? Sort it out bit by bit? Seriously, this would give me a panic attack."

Naomi wasn't a collector like Gina. She and Jason lived in a new home on the edge of town, an exclusive development with views of the park and the cathedral. Their house was modern, and so tidy Naomi had a robot vacuum that could go round the whole downstairs without getting stuck on any clutter.

Gina wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She'd already dispatched three boxes that morning and dropped off some books and kitchen clutter at the charity shop. "I can't afford more storage. You have no idea how much it costs to keep your sofa under a warm roof. It'd be cheaper just to rent my possessions a flat of their own. Anyway, it would just stay there. This way I've got to sort through it. Sort or die."

"You joke, but this is like something from one of those documentaries." Naomi eyed the towering stack of boxes marked "Crockery." "The ones where they have to dig people out from under their lifetime collection of used Christmas wrapping paper."

"It's not as bad as that. Look, I've got a system," said Gina. She gestured toward the sorting boxes by the window.

GIVE AWAY was stacked with paperbacks, vases and a bedside radio. SELL had a couple of limited-edition Emma Bridgewater plates that had once taken pride of place on her Welsh dresser. KEEP had only one thing: a 1940s brass desk lamp Gina had found years ago in an antiques shop. In her head, when she'd bought it, it had formed the basis of a classic New York-themed study, but had always got lost in the clutter of her house. Here, against the white walls and empty shelves, it would be a proper feature.

"Wow. You're going to make some homeless kitties very happy." Naomi got as near to the big window as she could, and peered down at the drizzly high street, already busy with weekend shoppers. "I see you've got plenty of charity shops to choose from down there."

"There are five," said Gina. "Local dog rescue, Breast Cancer Care, Oxfam, Marie Curie Nurses, and Hospice at Home. I've already taken four bags to the dogs' home. What?" she added, when Naomi turned back, her eyebrows raised. "Don't look at me like that. I don't have to support the breast-cancer shop. The dogs are nearer. And they open earlier."

"I don't mean that." Naomi picked her way back to where Gina was standing. "I mean, are you feeling up to sorting things out? On your own?"

"I'm fine," said Gina, surprised. She'd thought she looked quite good: not having access to a bathroom's worth of cosmetics had pared her routine down to an almost Parisian minimalist chic. "Really. It's my heart that's broken, nothing else. Why? Do I look like death warmed up?"

"You look shattered." Naomi was always honest. Kind, but as honest as a lifelong friend—and someone who'd grown up with older brothers—could be. "You've got that shiny-eyed look you used to get when you wanted to pretend you were feeling better than you were. Are you sure you're not pushing yourself too hard? This is me. It's okay to be honest."

"I'm fine." Gina didn't want sympathy from Naomi right now: it would unbalance her fearless mood to be reminded that she needed looking after. "I look ropy because I've been up half the night chucking my past into boxes." She paused, then said, with a ferocity that was only just covered with her smile, "I know what ill feels like. I'm not ill. I'm feeling a bit . . . raw, but not ill, all right?"

Naomi tried to look satisfied with that, but Gina noticed she folded her arms. "Well, you know best, Gee. But you've got to tell me if things get too much. You don't have to live here in all this chaos. Come and stay with us until you've sorted the boxes out. Hey, do that! Willow would love to have her fairy godmother around. And we've got room . . ."

"That's kind but there's no need." Gina gestured wryly at the mess. "I have to get this under control in one go, or it'll never get done. And it's therapeutic, working out what to throw away, what I don't need anymore."



What might benefit someone else. It's good."

"Yeah, that's the bit I'm having trouble with. You, getting rid of things." She pretended to feel Gina's forehead. "You sure you're all right?"

"The more I chuck out, the better I feel."

"Well, don't I feel bad," said Naomi, with a wry sigh. "I've just brought you one more bag to sort through. Some of it's to eat, though. I bet you're not eating enough."

"I'm hardly wasting away," Gina scoffed, then stopped as she remembered she hadn't actually eaten since . . . the previous morning? Over the past few days her appetite had come and gone with the unpredictable surges of energy that propelled her into mad activity, then dropped away, leaving her staring, amazed and exhausted, at the unfamiliar place she was in.

"Knew you wouldn't have. That's why I brought breakfast." Naomi pointed at the bag. "Don't want you keeling over. Where am I going to get another best mate at this late stage? Eh? Not to mention a reliable babysitter."

Despite her cheery tone, Naomi's eyes were searching her face with a motherly concern that made Gina feel a bit tearful. She nodded toward the open-plan kitchen. "Climb through and make us some tea, then. I unpacked the kitchen boxes last night. You won't believe how much stuff we had in that kitchen. Do you know how many mugs there were? Forty-five."

"Forty-five?" Naomi gave it the full comic timing pause. "Was that all?"

"I know. Two charity bags full. There were seven different 'I heart' mugs. Made me look very fickle."

"So how many did you keep?"

"Five?" Gina made it sound light but every keep-sell-chuck decision felt like a bigger statement to the universe about her future life. Keeping two champagne flutes was a hopeful message. She'd chucked the three-tier light-up punchbowl: end-of-season football parties were never going to happen again. Thank God. "I thought five was a good number. Somewhere between simple living and I-still-believe-I'll-have-people-round-for-coffee."

Naomi considered it, then nodded. "I like that reasoning. Did you keep that glass cake stand? For birthday parties?"

"I did. Where there's cake, there's hope."

"I agree. Now, where are your plates?"

The kitchen was brand new and very streamlined, with no visible handles or appliances. The granite work surface gleamed after Gina's cleaning fit in the small hours, and two of the kitchen boxes had been sorted and dispatched. Only the bare essentials had made it onto the worktop: one balloon whisk, one spatula, one wooden spoon, one Microplane grater, one silver fish slice, all stored in a Victorian earthenware jar. Somehow the functionality of it, Gina thought, made her appear more like a serious cook than the cupboards full of unused pasta machines and juicers had.

The juicer was dumped in the box of appliances marked SELL by the door, along with a waffle maker, a mini slow cooker and a coffee grinder, among others. It had been an expensive wedding present, but Gina

was happy to see the back of it. Just looking at it brought back the gritty, bitter taste of apple core: it reminded her of the endless “healthy” juice drinks Stuart had made when she had been too sick to eat. He’d never cleaned it out, and the crusty plastic parts had lingered on the side of the sink for days. The moment Gina put the juicer in the box she’d felt lighter. Lighter, but slightly reckless, as though she’d just chucked out an instruction manual for something.

Naomi found the side plates in a cupboard; there were six, all plain white. “Wow, this is a change from Dryden Road,” she said, stroking the smooth, almond units, with their sleek handles. “Very modern. What have you done with that lovely old hanging airer from the kitchen? Is it in storage?”

“I had to leave it. And the Welsh dresser. And the butcher’s block. The buyers wanted the kitchen exactly as it was, so I got the estate agent to haggle them up.”

“You left the butcher’s block?” Surprise broke through Naomi’s politely encouraging expression. “The one you dragged back from that vacation in Yorkshire?”

Gina shrugged. “Where was I going to put it? Anyway, it’s part of that kitchen, not this one. What? Why are you pulling that face?”

“Because you made such a fuss about . . . Are you getting enough sleep? Sorry, forget I said that. I guess it’s just that . . .” Tact and concern struggled on Naomi’s face. “It’s just that you put so much of yourself into that house,” she finished. “You don’t have to walk away from it all just because . . . well, you know.”

“It’s someone else’s house now,” said Gina, and she didn’t mean the family who’d bought it.

Naomi almost said something, then changed her mind. She patted Gina’s arm. “Let’s have a croissant. They’re in the bag.”

Gina lifted the paper bag onto the countertop. Inside there was an expensive three-wick hyacinth-scented candle; a couple of glossy magazines; a tub of cookie-dough ice cream; a bottle of wine; and some still-warm croissants. All old favorites. Nearly the same selection of treats Naomi had brought round after every hospital treatment, barring the wine. In the end, Gina had got wine in for Naomi to drink while she was sitting with her—one of them, at least, deserved to be excused the juicer.

“Ah, yes. I remember these. No self-help books?”

“Nope. I reckoned you were a bit past them now. And it sounds like your mum’s sent you all the best ones already.”

“I don’t know about the best ones . . . Did I tell you she accidentally gave me one of hers in her last consignment—How to Cope with Your Child’s Divorce?”

“God, really?”

“Really.” Gina put the ice cream in the freezer for later. The chiller drawers were beautifully free of stray peas and graying ice-cube trays. “I’m very tempted to write ‘It’s not always about you, Mum’ across the first page and give it back to her. You’d think she was the one who’d been dumped, the way she’s acting.”

Naomi laughed, but then looked remorseful. “You won’t, though, will you? I know Janet drives you mad, but she means well. And when you’ve lost two husbands before you’re fifty . . .”

“ . . . you know what it’s like to be alone.’ Yeah, we’ve had that conversation. And no, of course I won’t say

anything.”

“Sorry. I don’t mean to nag. I know it’s easier to be patient with other people’s mothers. But at least Janet’s around, and not constantly swanning off to foreign parts with her new bloke, like mine.” Naomi put the kettle on. “So—what’s the latest with Stuart? Is he still texting you, or has he picked up the phone?”

“Still texting. It’s better that way. It’s not like we’ve got a lot to say to each other. Has Jason seen him since . . . since he moved out?”

“No. He wasn’t at football this week. Jay won’t tell me anything anyway. You know what blokes are like. What happens in the changing room stays in the changing room.” Naomi’s lip curled eloquently. “But he sends his love. He thinks Stuart’s lost his mind. Says if there’s anything we can do . . .”

“Thanks.” Gina pulled the horn off a croissant. “But I’m hoping it’s going to be straightforward. I mean, we’ve no kids to argue about, the house has been sold, he’s got the cats. It’s just a case of giving all the details to the solicitors and letting them get on with it. Rory—thanks for the recommendation, by the way, he’s brilliant—says he can probably get things sorted out in about three months. Four months if people are away.”

“Good. I’m glad the practical stuff’s in hand. But what about you? You’re being so calm.” Naomi poured boiling water onto the teabags and poked them impatiently. “I’d be going after that cheating bastard with a pair of nail scissors. Seriously, you just have to say the word.” She pushed the mug over the counter with a fake-menacing smile that was only half joking. “It doesn’t have to be nail scissors. It could be Veet. Or laxatives.”

Gina cupped her scalding mug in her hands, and tried to work out how she did feel, right now. “Most of the time I’m fine. Sometimes I’m . . . not. But it’s mainly a relief. Things weren’t right with me and Stuart. Maybe I should have been braver and ended it myself, instead of letting it fail.”

“You didn’t fail. You two had a lot to deal with,” said Naomi at once. “Way more than most couples have to face in a lifetime.”

“But that’s what’s so awful.” She winced. “Isn’t going through bad times together supposed to make you stronger? I know that’s what everyone’s thinking—they got through that, how come they split up now?”

“No one’s thinking that. If they’re thinking anything, it’s that Stuart’s having an early onset midlife crisis and you’ve kicked him out. How long were you together? Nine years? Ten?”

“Nearly nine. And married for five and a bit.” Gina winced. What was that feeling? Shame? Despair? Nostalgia? Marriages weren’t meant to collapse so soon. Not round here. “Do you need a steamer, by the way? For some reason, we got three for wedding presents. I’m going to put a notice up on the board at work. I’m having a purge.”

“Gina, you don’t have to throw everything away.”

“I do. I want to.” She gestured at the boxes. “Where would I put it anyway? This flat is a fresh start. All white and clean and mine. Whatever I choose to put in it has to say something about who I am now.”

“Riiight.” Naomi picked at her croissant and tried to look encouraging.

Gina carried on. It was the first time she’d explained her plan in words, and saying it aloud made it feel more . . . definite. “There’s no room here for anything I don’t really love or need, so I’m going to keep a hundred

things that I can't live without. The rest has to go. And then I'll be able to appreciate the hundred things properly, instead of having drawers of stuff I never look at."

"Whoa there!" Naomi put her croissant down. "You're a hoarder, you've always been a hoarder. Is this the interior-designer version of cutting all your hair off and having a dolphin tattooed on your bum?"

"I'm just being practical. I can't unpack my old house here. There's no room, and that house is gone. That person's gone. And I've been carting all this stuff around with me for years, so it's about time I had a sort-out."

"But why a hundred? You know that's not a lot, right? You probably had a hundred candlesticks in your old house."

"It's a nice round number. And it's not going to include essentials, like, you know, underwear. But I need some rules, otherwise where do I start? One thing I have decided, though," Gina added. "I'm going to sell what I don't need anymore and buy myself something really special. A present for my new place."

"That's a great idea." Naomi nodded more enthusiastically. "Let me know if you need a bit of help with that. I do a lot of eBaying."

"Really?" Gina was surprised. Not just that Naomi had time to eBay, but that she wanted to. The Hewsons weren't short of money: Naomi had just gone back to work full-time as the all-seeing, all-knowing practice manager at the dental surgery, and Jason was a senior partner with an IT recruitment company.

"Yes, it's brilliant for keeping the clutter under control," said Naomi, blithely. "I do a cull of the house three or four times a year. Jason's golf stuff, clothes Willow's grown out of, books, Christmas presents—you'd be amazed what people will buy with the right description." She wiggled her fingers. "I quite enjoy doing the descriptions."

Gina raised an eyebrow. "And doesn't your inability to call a spade a gardening management solution get in the way of a sale?"

"That's the weird thing! People appreciate a bit of honesty. I just haven't told Jay's mum what my seller name is. Otherwise she'd realize that all those china angels she keeps giving us aren't actually in the display cabinet she thinks they are."

Naomi did her half-wink grin, and Gina thought how little she'd changed in the years they'd known each other. The hair had been a variety of colors and styles, and there were a few crow's-feet round the sharp green eyes, but otherwise it was the same bossy, thoughtful, faintly anarchic Naomi she'd encountered on her first day at senior school. Gina felt a sudden rush of relief that they'd met when they had. It could so easily have been someone else with a space next to them in the classroom. Someone else who had Naomi McIntyre as their best mate, dragging them out of so many gloomy days, instead of letting them wallow.

"I've got something for you, actually," said Gina, and clambered her way back into the sitting room to find the shopping bag she'd filled earlier. "Although after what you've just said I don't know if you deserve it."

Naomi accepted the bag with a groan. "Is this where you get your own back by re-gifting me all my own Christmas presents?"

"No! Have a look." She sat back, anticipating the reaction with a glow of pleasure.

It took a moment, but when Naomi's shriek of joy came, Gina felt like Santa Claus.

“Oh, my God! Gina!” Naomi lifted out a precious stack of old 1990s magazines—Q, Melody Maker, New Woman—her face bright with delight. “Oh, my God, I can’t believe you still have these! Are you really sure you don’t want them?”

“I’ve got loads. I couldn’t keep all of them, and I knew you’d appreciate a bit of nostalgia. Maybe you can put them in storage for Willow. Bit of her mum’s past.” Gina wasn’t joking. So much of her and Naomi’s teenage years had been spent poring over magazines together, in breaks, in the common room, in Naomi’s noisy kitchen at home. The music magazines in particular meant a lot to Gina: she’d never felt she belonged till she’d stumbled on music that articulated the knotty mass of emotions choking her teenage heart, and suddenly the world outside had opened up. You didn’t need to wonder which people to try to make friends with if they were already wearing your favorite band’s tour T-shirt.

“Just don’t eBay them, please,” she added. “Not straightaway, anyway.”

“Are you kidding?” Naomi was turning the pages reverentially. “This is bringing back so many memories. Oh, no! Look at the old Rimmel adverts . . . You are amazing. And what’s this?” She reached into the bag and pulled out a black T-shirt, printed with a band logo that was still stiff. The Marras, a long-defunct indie band that Gina and Naomi had adored for six months. Naomi looked up. “Didn’t you buy one like this at that gig we went to in Oxford? The one where you met Kit? It’s not this one, is it?” She sniffed the old cotton. “It smells like it’s brand new.”

“It is.” Gina stared at the T-shirt. It had felt right to pass it on last night when she’d put it into the bag, but now, seeing it in Naomi’s hands, she felt as if part of her past was slipping under the waters, vanishing as it left her home. She caught herself. This stuff had to go, and it was better that it went to someone who’d understand why she’d treasured it. “I bought two, in case one shrank in the wash, or Mum found out where we’d been and I never got to go to a gig again. That’s the spare.”

“But where’s yours?”

“Oh, Kit borrowed it, never gave it back.”

Naomi looked up, and her eyes were sad. “Oh, Gee. I can’t take this, then.”

“No, I want you to.” Gina hadn’t talked about Kit in a long time. Naomi was the only person she could talk to about him. “Keep it for Willow. I couldn’t wear it now—it’s way too small for me. It’d just go back in a drawer, and I need to be ruthless.”

She glanced away. The logo had hooked up a memory that had been stuffed at the back of her mind, hidden away like the T-shirt: Kit sprawled across an unmade single bed, sleeping off a late night in his blue-checked boxers and her T-shirt, his long arms thrown over his head, pulling the T-shirt up his flat stomach with its gentle curves and hollows. Gina had told herself to remember how perfect he looked.

It felt like a very long time ago, and her heart contracted at the freshness of the T-shirt print in Naomi’s hands.

“No, listen, I’ll happily take the mags, but not this,” said Naomi, seeing the change in Gina’s face. “I want you to keep it and give it to Willow when she’s old enough to appreciate what a cool godmother she’s lucky enough to have.”

Gina forced a smile, but the image wouldn’t go away. She wasn’t in it. That morning had happened to her, she’d been there, but now, even with this T-shirt as evidence, it was as if she was remembering a film she’d

seen ages ago. Those mornings with Kit had felt like the beginning of something, the first steps along a long road they'd look back over together, and yet it had stopped, and now it was as if it had never happened. It would be the same with Stuart. All those expectations and assumptions, months and years, experiences and memories . . . gone.

Her stomach flipped as if she'd got too close to a sharp drop.

"Where have the last few years gone, Naomi?" she blurted out. "How are we suddenly this old?"

"We're not old, you daft cow," said Naomi. "We're just getting started. Life isn't meant to begin till forty, and that's years off."

"But I feel old. I feel time's going so fast and I don't even know what I—"

"We're just getting started," Naomi repeated, more firmly. She reached across and took her hand, her eyes locking on Gina's, full of concern and support and an unspoken understanding of all the things that made Gina feel suddenly exhausted whenever she forgot to concentrate on her fresh start. "There's lots more time than you think. Promise."

Gina managed a watery smile, and squeezed Naomi's hand.

She didn't need things to remind her of her past. Not when she had Naomi. Honest, sympathetic, practical Naomi.

• • •

When Naomi had left, Gina tidied up the cups and plates and, out of habit, went to put the beautiful scented candle in a cupboard somewhere, to keep for later. For best. For visitors.

She stopped, the box in her hand. She had no cupboards or visitors. She was the only person here, so why save the candle for someone else when it had been given to her?

Before she could think too hard about it, Gina slid the glass jar out of the box and put it on the windowsill, the only clear flat space in the flat. Then she lit it. After a moment or two, the pale blue scent of hyacinths began to fill the room: the spicy-crisp smell of the chilly winter months before spring broke through the grayness.

### **Chapter Three**

ITEM:

the Marras T-shirt, student-union tour, 1996

OXFORD, 1996

Georgina is having the best night of her life so far, and it's only just gone ten.

She glances from side to side before taking a covert swig from Naomi's dad's hip-flask, then realizes that no one's going to tell her not to. No one's watching, and no one cares that she's two years under the legal drinking age; everyone around her is either drunk, or on something, or making out, or all three. She fizzes inside with an exhilaration that has nothing to do with the vodka and everything to do with the music pounding through her, and takes another large gulp, which burns her throat, but she grimaces and swallows.

Naomi says vodka doesn't taste of anything but Georgina isn't so sure. Not that she's going to say anything. Mixed with the hormones and sweat in the airless air, compressed by the low, dark ceiling of this student-union function room, it tastes of liquid headache, but it's going to have to do, because even with Naomi's kohl eyeliner on, she still has a nervous suspicion that they look underage and, anyway, they only have enough money for the bus back to Naomi's brother's student halls where they're crashing for the night.

So, technically, this is a university visit. It's just to the student union, not to the library, as she assured her mother and Terry.

And it's brilliant. Gina has the feeling she should be scared, but she's not. Or if she is, it's a good kind of scared.

"This's the most amazing night 'f my life," Naomi slurs, grabbing her arm. Her eyes are shining with the intense joy that Georgina knows will turn into intense weeping in about thirty minutes, and this is just the support act. The Marras, whose album Gina has listened to about a million times, aren't even on for another hour. "You were so right about us coming here!"

"Thanks!" Georgina yells back, pleased.

Something she wouldn't say, even to Naomi: when she's listening to music, Georgina imagines the interesting person she's going to be when she finally gets to university. Here. Two more years—six terms, five A levels—and she'll get the chance to be someone new. Georgina Bellamy had a brace, and a prefect's tie. Gina Bellamy is a writer. An actress. She has a fringe, sexy boots and mystique.

Naomi giggles. "Georgina, you're so . . ."

"Gina," says Georgina, firmly. "Gina."

"What?" Naomi looks like she might be about to give her the bit of her mind that remains after half a hip-flask of vodka but at that moment the support band launches into the one song the audience has heard of, a cover of "Heroes": they're not stupid enough to end on one of their own. Georgina and Naomi are shoved forward by the crush of sweating bodies.

Naomi squeals, somewhere in the distance, but Georgina closes her eyes and lets the music wash through her, the beat vibrating outside and inside her body, like she's not even there. She feels weightless, lifted by the force of the crowd as the band powers through the verse. Then the key shifts, like a huge car changing gear, and the whole room tips over into the chorus, bouncing, yelling, pushing. Georgina's lips form the words, but the music is so loud she can't hear her own voice; she can sense, not hear, everyone else singing and it makes her feel tearful. A wave of pure drunken happiness drowns her as she smiles blindly into the darkness pulsing behind her eyelids, stinging with sweat and smeary mascara.

When she does open her eyes, her dry lips parted, ready to sing, he's there, looking straight into her face. A boy (man?) with longish blond curly hair like an angel's, and wide-set blue eyes that shine with the same dazed pleasure as hers. His black T-shirt's damp, his face is sheeny with sweat—everyone's is, so many bodies packed together—and she can smell the heat from his body. It's a sharp male smell, dangerous and exciting.

"We could be heroes," Georgina sings, and it comes out toward him. He smiles and she blushes hotly. Hotter. But she's not embarrassed. Not even slightly. This is an entirely new feeling. Georgina is embarrassed at least five times a day: by her stepdad, her "exemplary" grades, her neurotic mother's constant notes to the head, her shoes. She never has the right shoes.

They stare into each other's faces and Georgina has the weirdest feeling that she's known this boy from somewhere before. His face isn't new to her. She feels like she's arrived somewhere she's been heading for all her life. It's intensely comforting and freaky at the same time.

The crowd is squeezing them closer, and her heart is beating in her throat. They're still singing, but he's leaning closer and, without warning, as the guitar solo soars over their heads, he shouts, "Kit!" right in her ear, and there's a sharp tug inside, as if a giant fishhook has landed in her chest. For a second Georgina wonders if she's actually hurt, and puts a hand up in surprise.

He grabs it, and cups it to his ear, trying to mime "Tell me your name." The skin of her arm goosebumps at the sensation of his fingers round her wrist. She shouts, "Gina!"

Her voice is drowned, however, by a roar rumbling down from the front. Hard elbows jab in her back, and Gina turns to see a massive rugby player surfing across the raised hands, upside-down and so close she can smell the beer on his breath, the acrid sweat on his T-shirt. His eyes lock on hers as he crashes nearer, his fist outstretched like Superman. It's aiming straight for her head.

Gina panics, but she's trapped by the crush of bodies around her, arms pinned to her sides. All she can think as he hurtles toward her is, Mum. How'm I going to explain being in hospital in Oxford to Mum?

She opens her mouth to scream as the boy—Kit—grabs her by the belt of her jeans and drags her away with surprising strength. Gina feels two hundred fifty pounds of solid athlete brush past her shoulder and slam into the lads next to her. The whooping crowd bends away like a field of corn, pushing her into Kit's arms, but before Gina can register the sensation of his skin against hers, hot and intimate in the general crush, it moves back again, and she's shoved into a stranger's side, half lifting her off her feet. By the time she gets her balance on the slippery floor, another surge has surrounded her in a thick forest of strangers. Black T-shirts and clammy backs and a communal body odor, dark under the aftershave and deodorant.

She looks but Kit's gone. Adrenaline—and disappointment and vodka—rakes her body so hard she wants to cry.

Gina's foot feels wet and she realizes she's lost her slip-on pump. Naomi's nowhere to be seen, and she needs the loo. The spell's broken. Close to tears, she fights her way out of the audience to the back of the hall.

The few cool people hanging at the back ignore her. Gina stands there with ringing ears, one sock sodden with spilled beer. Then, just at the moment she most wants to go home, Kit appears out of the thicket of the audience, with a shoe in his hand. He doesn't see her at first, and Gina has the luxury of watching him looking for her, his blond hair hanging damply in his eyes. Then he spots her, and his anxious expression turns to a smile. Gina's stomach flips over and over as he approaches.

"Cinderella, I presume?" He offers her the shoe.

"Gina," she says, taking it. It's not the one she lost, but she doesn't care. It's roughly the right size and her foot's soaking. Why let a small detail like that spoil the moment?

"Hang on." Kit frowns as she tries to force her heel in. "Is that yours?"

"Near enough," she says. They're both talking too loudly; she assumes his ears are buzzing like hers. "Well, no. To be honest, it's not." She smiles apologetically. "I'm not Cinderella either."



He laughs, and turns back to the crowd, only just thinning out as the band milks the applause. “Look, it’ll be in there somewhere, we can find it once this lot have finished.”

We. We can go and find it.

“Can you hop as far as the bar? If I help you?” Kit’s blue eyes are dark when he looks at her, and Gina has the sudden thrilling sensation that he feels exactly the same way she does. As if she could climb right inside him, as if everything else in this crowded room is slightly blurry in comparison with his sharp outline.

She nods. He grabs her hand and Gina lets Kit lead her to the five-deep bar where the student serving waves at him and makes a “Drink?” gesture. His hand is warm and damp and grips hers tightly, ostensibly so they don’t become separated in the crowd, but there’s no crowd where they’re standing and he only lets go to collect the beers.

They take their drinks to a quieter corner and before Gina can even worry about what they’re going to talk about, they’re talking. About the band, about her lost shoe, about the bar, about their favorite music, about the amazing coincidence that Kit’s mates with Naomi’s brother, Shaun. His amused blue eyes never leave her face, and again, Gina feels as if she’s been here before, as if they’ve known each other all their lives.

They have another beer, and discover they both love Nick Drake, and are left-handed, and always wanted a cat but were never allowed one. And the headliners arrive but Kit and Gina are still talking in the dark corner of the bar, the space between them slowly disappearing. She only hears the Marras in the distance, but that’s fine. It’s as if they’re playing in a corner of her bedroom.

This is the best night of my life, she thinks, light-headed with a funny serene happiness that makes her feel as if she’s floating like a helium balloon over the crowd of dancers. Nothing will ever feel better than this.

And it’s not even midnight.

• • •

To get to her mother’s home in Hartley, Gina had to drive past 7 Church Lane, the house Janet had coveted for as long as they’d lived in the area.

It was the handsomest house on a road of handsome houses—1930s mock-Tudor detached, all clean black-and-white half-timbering, with flower beds edging a velvety lawn, and a cherry tree in exactly the right spot in the garden, poised like a flattering hat on a beautiful face. As if to mark it out as the best house in the row, a red postbox was set into the brick wall outside the sunburst wrought-iron gate, the GR monogram picked out in gold.

G for Gina, she used to think as a teenager, ever monitoring her surroundings for Signs. R for who? It had made her tingle with anticipation and a bit of dread, that her R was out there but might not find her in boring Hartley.

Janet used to swivel in the passenger seat of Terry’s brown Rover P6 as they drove past, but at the same time as her eyes were clearly drinking in 7 Church Lane’s domestic perfection, she insisted she had no interest in being “the sort of person who is that obsessed with their lawn—it takes a lot of work, keeping it up, a real burden.” As an adolescent, from her slumped position in the backseat (in case anyone from school saw her out in Terry’s ancient car), Gina had secretly mouthed along in unison with her mother’s observations. Even now Janet’s voice was permanently connected with the geography of the drive back home—the apple tree that should be cut back, the conservatory that would be better with a sloping roof. Once or twice, Terry had

caught Gina's eye in the rearview mirror, the twinkle in his expression offering a gentle solidarity with Janet's self-delusion, and Gina had felt a funny mixture of guilt and relief that made her drop her gaze, even though part of her wanted to grin back. Maybe even roll her eyes.

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