

Flight

ISABEL
ASHDOWN

myriad **m**⁸

First published in 2015 by

Myriad Editions
59 Lansdowne Place
Brighton BN3 1FL

www.myriadeditions.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN (pbk): 978-1-908434-60-9

ISBN (ebk): 978-1-908434-61-6

Designed and typeset in Sabon LT
by Linda McQueen, London

Printed and bound in Sweden by
ScandBook AB

*For my children,
Alice and Samson, with love*

‘I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out;
and I thought how it is worse, perhaps,
to be locked in.’

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

PROLOGUE

November 1994

Wren sits on the sofa in her softly lit lounge, her shadowed eyes fixed on the television, her baby at her breast. Her husband is beside her, one hand cradling a glass of red wine, the other loosely resting on his wife's shoulder, a ticket smoothed out across his knee. His toes stretch and press into the deep pile of the new carpet, and Wren's eyes are drawn to them as they flex up, flex down. Flex up, flex down. It's a little tic he's had ever since she first met him, something that, until now, she'd long since stopped noticing.

It's the first ever National Lottery draw, and this evening Robert returned from a squash match with a ticket, bought at the petrol station on the way home. With each number called, he expels an exaggerated grunt of disappointment. His thigh presses hot against hers and she can barely stand the intimacy of it. She resists a strong desire to pull away, to retreat into the cool corner at the other end of the sofa. When the last number is finally called, he sighs, neatly folding the ticket in half, once, twice, three times, four, then casually drops the paper nugget on the lamp stand beside him. He leans in to kiss the baby's soft crown, to kiss Wren.

Wren is frozen in position, incapable of movement, the infant having long dropped from her nipple, milk-drunk. She knows the numbers on the screen – recognises the birth dates and anniversaries as the ones she marked on her own ticket stub just this morning – and she dares not speak for fear of giving herself away.

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Cautiously, she watches her husband from the sides of her eyes, as he pushes himself up from his seat and crosses the room.

‘Oh, well, better luck next time,’ he says, cheerily enough, and he heads upstairs, to run the shower, to wash the squash game from his skin. Wren studies the space he passed through, stares mutely at the gaping door, pulse hammering, muscles contracting beneath the broken wall of her softened stomach, and she knows she won’t tell him. Not now, not tomorrow, not ten years from today.

Instead, she’ll quietly pack her bags and, when the moment is right, she’ll leave. Alone.

LAURA

Laura is drinking tea at the large oak table, watching Phoebe butter toast, when the phone rings. It sounds three times before she really hears it, so entirely captivated is she by the sight of the girl's thickening waist, her newly plump bosom.

'Are you going to get that?' Phoebe looks over her shoulder, holding up the knife. 'My hands are greasy.'

Laura puts down her mug and sprints into the hall, reaching the telephone just too late. She pauses to read the *To Do* list marked on the notebook by Robert, running her fingers over the swirling indentations of his clear handwriting: *Car tax due 1st December. Change internet provider. Order logs for next winter. Call builders re leaking gutter.* She picks up the pen and adds to the list in her own scrawl: *Book romantic getaway to the Maldives. Stock up on champagne. Run naked through Piccadilly Circus.*

'Who was it?' Phoebe calls from the kitchen, her mouth full.

'Don't know. They rang off before I got to it.' Laura returns to the table. 'They'll call back if it's important. So, what's the plan for today? Your dad said you need to start thinking about a job – or another course.'

Phoebe sighs heavily and flops into the seat opposite. She takes another bite from her toast, then reaches across to pick up Laura's glass of orange juice, drinking it down in one, and smirking as she does so.

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‘Phoebe! How many times? Get your own drink, you lazy mare!’ Laura rises to fill the kettle, kissing Phoebe on the top of her head as she passes. ‘Listen, I’ve been wanting to talk to you. Not the uni stuff – something else.’

Phoebe frowns, making a show of licking the crumbs from her empty plate, hiding her face.

‘The thing is, you and Esteban – you became very close over the summer, didn’t you?’

‘Well, *this* is embarrassing.’

Laura gets up to pour the tea. ‘Come on, Phoebs, you’re twenty now. I don’t need to talk to you like a child any more, do I?’

‘S’pose not.’ Phoebe shifts position, wrapping the zips of her hoodie across her body.

The phone rings again; Laura raises a halting hand as Phoebe pushes her chair out to stand. ‘Leave it – let it ring.’

Phoebe looks exasperated but sits down all the same, placing her palms down on the table, impatiently rippling her fingertips against the wooden surface. The caller rings off.

‘So. I’m assuming you and Esteban slept together?’

‘Bloody hell, Laura! That’s a bit personal, isn’t it?’

‘You were going out with him for, what, four months? And you spent every waking hour together during that time. It seems likely, pumpkin.’

Phoebe is doing her best to look offended, but weakens at Laura’s use of her pet name. ‘So what?’

Laura looks out through the glass doors of the kitchen, to the frosty sunlit garden beyond. A cluster of house sparrows dances beneath the feeders that surround the patio, bobbing and pecking at the fallen seeds and millet. ‘Is it completely over between you two?’

Laura

‘He won’t say as much, but it is – you know he went back to Barcelona at the end of the summer, and there’s no way he’ll want to keep it going with me stuck over here. I’m not stupid. I mean, have you seen him? He could be a model. He’ll have found a new girlfriend within a week.’

Laura places a hand over hers. ‘Phoebe, love, were you careful when you were together? I can’t help but notice that you’ve, well, filled out a little over the past few weeks, and –’

Phoebe snatches her hand away.

‘Oh, my God, Laura – so I’m fat now? Christ, as if I don’t feel shitty enough already.’ She marches across the kitchen to bang her plate down beside the sink. ‘And you and Dad putting all this pressure on me to get a job – it’s no wonder I’m comfort-eating!’

‘Give me a bit of credit, Phoebe. It’s not that kind of weight I’m talking about and you know it.’

The colour rises to Phoebe’s cheeks, her left hand instinctively drifting to her abdomen, the fingers resting there for a brief pause before she rushes from the room. Moments later the front door slams shut, and Laura is left alone in the stillness of the large, bright kitchen. Out in the hallway the telephone starts ringing again.

Robert was her first real love, though she barely knew it at the time. They lived on the same street in Surrey, a small suburban bore of a place, and their parents were passing acquaintances. Robert wasn’t like the other boys in their little primary class, the boys who hung round the park in provincial packs; she could talk to him for hours about anything – about poetry, conkers, *Magpie*, hair nits, first crushes, fast cars, James Bond, the Bay City Rollers. It was like having

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another version of herself along the street; a better, cleverer, kinder version of herself.

At eight, so incensed was she that she couldn't join the Cubs with him that she would sneak along to the village hall each Tuesday evening, to hide among the cobwebs beneath the stage, watching through a dislodged wood-knot until the session ended an hour later. *I promise that I will do my best to do my duty to God and to the Queen, to help other people, and to keep the Cub Scout law.* Laura knew all the mottos, all the secret hand signals – she even persuaded Robert to steal a Navigator Badge from Akela, in acknowledgement of her secret missions beneath the hall stage. ‘Good work,’ she told him when he handed it over, and she rushed home that night to attach it to her duffel coat with small, careful stitches, one of the few skills she'd gained in her own short-lived career as a Brownie, along with boiling an egg and making a cup of tea without getting scalded.

Each Friday, they would walk home from school via Mr Wilkinson's sweet shop, spending an age dithering over the multicoloured jars and row after row of chocolate bars and prohibited gum. Their favourite combination was two ounces of sherbet pips and two ounces of fairy drops; Sweet and Sour, Laura called it, and before long they would ask for the mix by name, knowing that Mr Wilkinson would understand their request. ‘The Terrible Twins,’ he used to say when they appeared in the doorway with a ring of his shop bell. And it was true: they could pass for brother and sister despite Laura's brick-red hair. Robert's was dark and poker-straight with a fringe that grew too fast and subsequently hung across his left eye at all times, but beneath the fringe were a pair of amber-green eyes, so perfect a match for

Laura

Laura's that their mothers might have ordered them from the same catalogue. They barely spent a day apart, whether at school or at home, each becoming an extension of the other's family, free to come and go as they pleased. When Rob went into hospital to have his tonsils removed, it was Laura he asked for.

'Would you like some ice cream?' his mum had asked him from the side of his hospital bed.

'No,' he croaked. 'Want Laura.'

'Lucozade?'

'*Laura.*'

Lily, his older sister, was sent up the road to fetch her, and so when Rob returned home that evening Laura was already waiting at his bedside with the latest copy of *Whizzer and Chips*. His mum said it was the first time he had smiled since waking from the anaesthetic, and Laura felt like the most important person in the world. 'My throat is sore too,' she whispered into his ear as his mother tucked up the ends of his bedspread.

'How about some ice cream now?' his mum asked again as she left the room. They nodded in unison and Laura clambered on to the bed beside him, where they could sit shoulder to shoulder and pass the comic back and forth.

Despite his childish need of her throughout their youth, Laura was always the driving force, the one to make things happen. She wonders now if it was she who did all the running, she who kept them tethered together across the years, setting more store by their friendship than Robert ever did, chivvying him into joint adventures. 'You've got to have things to look forward to. *Fun* things,' Laura would chide when Robert wanted to take a more serious approach to their life ahead.

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At the end of their final year in junior school, Rob was heading off to Norfolk for a two-week family holiday, whereas Laura had a long summer to endure at home in Gatebridge with her parents. 'I'll die of boredom,' she said. 'We *must* write every day.' The day before he set off, she turned up on his doorstep and provided him with seven notelets, seven envelopes and a strawberry-scented pen to ensure that he had no excuses.

'What about stamps?' he asked, looking as if he'd just been handed the burden of a school project.

Laura was furious at his lack of enthusiasm and returned home immediately to lift a fistful of change from her mother's purse, with which she bought seven stamps and a packet of Tic Tacs. The Irvings were eating dinner when she knocked at Rob's front door for a second time. She knew this because their dining table was located in the front window, where they ate every evening at six pm on the dot, in full view of the residents of Green Street.

'For the letters,' she said, holding up the stamps with one hand. With the other, she rattled the Tic Tacs underneath his nose and slapped them into his palm. 'For the journey.' Pointing her nose skywards, she made her way home without a backward glance, knowing she could expect a lilac-coloured envelope through her door within the next forty-eight hours.

Even now she can recall that first letter.

Dear Lolly,

Wish you were here. Norfolk is boring and Lily is annoying as usual. Will write again when something interesting happens.

Rob

Laura

Not even a kiss at the end. She wrote back immediately.

Dear Rob,

You win the award for the most lazy letter ever written in the history of letter-writing – ever. If nothing interesting is happening, then make something up!

Lots of love,

Laura xxx

ps I saw Tanya Sole holding hands with Grubby Greg this morning. She had her skirt tucked in her knickers hahahahaha.

pps Now that's how you write a letter.

ppps It's true, she really did have her skirt tucked in her pants.

Robert's second letter arrived by return, containing concocted tales of celebrity sightings and puppies saved from drowning, and Laura was happy with his progress, in particular with the inclusion of a small *x* at the foot of the page. *Much better*, she told him when she wrote back, and she counted off the days until he would return to their street, so that she might feel whole once again.

The voice at the end of the line sounds young, boyish even.

'We're trying to trace a Mrs Wren Irving, last known at this telephone number.'

Looking out across the leaf-blown panorama of their smart suburban street, Laura stands at the bedroom window and finds she has lost the power of speech.

'Hello? Am I speaking to Mrs Irving?'

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The suggestion propels Laura to answer, though her reply comes out tongue-tied, her voice uneven. ‘No – she doesn’t – I mean, *no*. She’s not here. She’s no longer at this address – hasn’t been for years. No.’

‘You don’t sound very certain,’ the young man says; Laura detects the hint of a smile in his voice, and hates him for it instantly. ‘Are you sure I’m not actually *speaking* to Wren Irving?’

‘Who did you say you were?’ she asks, sudden anger rearing up.

‘Mike Woods. I’m a reporter. We’re looking for Mrs Irving in connection with her Lottery win in the 1990s. Could that be you?’

‘The Lottery? I’ve told you, *I’m not her*. The person you’re looking for hasn’t lived here for twenty years – and I can tell you she certainly wasn’t a Lottery winner when she did. I’m sorry I can’t help you any further.’

‘Perhaps *Mr* Irving is available?’

‘No.’

‘So, I take it he still lives at this address?’

‘I’m not answering these questions – I don’t even know who you are.’

‘*Mike Woods*. Now, as far as I can establish, they *are* still married, aren’t they? Are you and he – ?’

Laura picks up a pen, flipping open a magazine to find a blank space to write in. She jots down his name, underscoring it fiercely. ‘OK, Mike Woods. I’ve told you Mrs Irving no longer lives here. Her husband hasn’t seen her for two decades, and really – the last thing he wants to do is have a conversation with some journalist about her last recorded movements.’

‘Has she ever been reported as a missing person?’ Mike Woods asks. ‘Do you think she’s dead or alive?’

Laura

Laura is almost floored by the question. ‘*Fuck you,*’ she replies, and she returns the handset to its cradle, her heart hammering against the cage of her chest.

Without realising it, Laura had been on the lookout for a female friend for years, even before she first laid eyes on Wren in the college refectory on that grey day in October 1982. She had Robert, of course – she’d always have Robert – but she’d never really experienced the deep kinship of a sister, and she knew it was a missing part of her, something that ought to be filled. Just like the girls in her primary school, the girls in her senior years didn’t really *get* her, not the way Robert did – and, to be fair, she didn’t get them either. Theirs was a foreign language to her, and while she was never bullied, not really, neither side was interested in the other.

But then, there was Wren, alone and birdlike, in her black china doll slippers and tweedy overcoat, with her gentle wise smile – and Laura recognised her instantly as the missing piece. ‘I like her,’ she told Robert as they took their table by the window after chatting to her in the lunch queue. ‘She’s different.’

Robert nodded.

‘Rob, she’s like us.’

‘What does that mean?’

Laura couldn’t think of the answer. It wasn’t a tangible thing; it was just a feeling, a sixth sense, if you believed in that kind of thing. It was the same feeling she had when she spent time with Rob: the comfort of profound familiarity, of security and warmth, of *simply knowing*.

They raised their arms in synchrony and waved at Wren across the room, beckoning her over to join them. At first,

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her expression somewhat aloof, she appeared not to notice them, until her face shifted and she crossed the room to slide her tray on to the table, sweeping the crumbs from the seat opposite.

‘Will you be in our gang?’ Laura asked her, purposely affecting an adolescent twang.

Wren was cool; she leant back, tipping the front legs of her chair off the floor to arch over and fetch the salt from the table behind. ‘I’m not much of a crowd person. How big is the gang?’ She raised the salt cellar, poised to sprinkle her rice. Robert ran his hands up through the front of his floppy fringe, betraying his embarrassment.

‘It’s very select,’ Laura replied, now lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. ‘We like to keep the numbers down – weed out the riff-raff, you know?’

‘I understand,’ Wren said. ‘So, just you two, then?’

Laura nodded.

‘And me?’

‘Correct – should you choose to accept our offer of membership.’ She reached into her parka pocket and brought out a strip of Wrigley’s gum. ‘And there’s a free gift if you sign up now.’

Wren took the gum, sliding it under her plate with a solemn nod. Robert’s face relaxed enough to break into a wide smile.

‘So, you’re in?’ Laura said, offering her hand across the plates of steaming curry.

Wren shrugged, and took her hand, giving it one firm shake. ‘OK. I’m in.’

The headlights from Robert’s car flood through the front windows as he pulls up on the drive outside, rousing Laura from her slumber in the darkness of the living room. She

Laura

rises from the sofa, fuzzy-headed, and dashes to the kitchen to remove the supper from the oven, relieved to find that she hasn't let it overcook.

'Smells good!' he calls as he opens the front door, dropping his keys on the telephone stand in the hall. 'What've we got?'

Laura places the dish at the centre of the kitchen table, pushing her hair back and gesturing towards it like a game show hostess as he enters the room. 'Shepherd's pie – Laura-style, I'm afraid. We didn't have as much mince as I thought, so I had to improvise: I bulked it out with a can of baked beans.'

'Ah, that takes me back to our student days. You were always a dab hand at conjuring a meal out of nothing.' He fetches plates and cutlery, pausing to kiss Laura on the lips before laying the table. 'How was your day?'

She opens the fridge and brings out a bottle of white wine, snapping open the screw cap and pouring two large glasses. 'I don't know where to begin.' She indicates towards the table and Robert sits, removing his tie and ladling a large helping of supper on to his plate.

'Any veg?' he asks as he passes her the spoon.

Her face falls into a frown. 'I meant to do some broccoli to go with it. Damn. My mind's been all over the place today. Do you mind?'

Robert shakes his head, raising his face long enough for her to see his contented expression before he goes to work on his meal. 'Nope. This is perfect. So – what's up, then? You look worn out. Everything OK with Phoebe? Where is she, by the way?' He takes a large mouthful of pie.

Laura gazes across the domestic landscape of the table, at the benign concentration of Robert's sun-speckled face, and

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wonders how to put it all into words. *I think your daughter's pregnant, Robert. I think she's got herself in a bit of bother. I think Phoebe's having a baby and I wish it was me. Oh, and then there's the Wren thing...*

'She went out,' she answers. 'Actually, we had a bit of a falling-out. I guess she's gone round to Maisy or Hannah's for a bit.'

'Really? That's not like you two. What was it about?' He rests his fork on the side of his plate.

She almost says the words, almost tells him. But wouldn't Phoebe hate her for it? Isn't it Phoebe's right to tell him herself?

'It was my fault really. I was pressuring her about knuckling down to something now she's dropped out of uni, and she wasn't ready to talk about it. Anyway, it's probably better coming from you, Rob. You know how much she cares about your opinion. I'm pretty sure I'll only wind her up if I mention it again.'

He grimaces. 'And there was I thinking life would be a breeze by the time she was out of her teens. Honestly, when she left for Hull I had visions of you and me heading off on weekend city breaks and tours of the French vineyards. Mind you, looking at the abysmal state of our pensions, that plan doesn't seem too likely whether Phoebe's at home or not.'

'Please don't start on the pension conversation again, Rob. It's just too boring. We're well off, compared to lots of other people I know.'

'Actually, Ben in the finance office was saying that if your pensions are looking dodgy – and let's face it, most are – ISAs are the way to go. We ought to think about it –'

Laura puts her fork down, stretches her arm across the table, palm up. Robert pauses, smiles at her dead-eyed

Laura

expression, and takes her hand in his. ‘OK, OK, I’ll stop. Just planning for a comfortable future, that’s all.’

‘Well, don’t, please. It’s boring. You’re turning into your father.’

‘In that case I’ll stop right away.’ He squeezes her fingers before reaching over for a top-up of wine.

After supper, they clear the table, and move into the living room with what’s left of the wine. Robert pulls up a footstool and flicks through the television channels while Laura searches the bookshelves until she finds the photo album she’s looking for – the oldest, most well-thumbed of the collection, the one labelled ‘Kingston’. Sitting cross-legged on the sofa beside Robert, she cradles her glass in one hand, turning the leaves of the album with the other. Every couple of pages she pauses to study their young faces, noting the subtle changes in their hairstyles, their clothes, their eyes, as the years pass from the early days at college to their final term of those turbulent, delirious, distant days of youth.

Robert glances at the album on Laura’s lap. ‘There’s something else you’re not telling me,’ he says, frowning. ‘What is it, Laur?’

Laura gently closes the album, smoothing out the wrinkles of its vinyl cover. ‘It’s about Wren.’

‘Wren?’ Robert presses the mute button on the remote control, and the quiet of the room expands in the expectant pause.

‘A journalist phoned today, looking for her. He was asking all sorts of questions, asking if we knew whether she was dead or alive. He said something about her winning some money on the Lottery. He was really pushy. And it got me thinking – what if he’s got a point, Rob? What if she

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is dead? What if she died all alone – and neither of us was there for her?’ Laura presses her face into Robert’s wool-clad shoulder, the weight of her anxiety now given voice.

He shifts himself back to look directly into her eyes. ‘She’s not dead, Laura. Wren’s no more dead than you or I.’

She hugs the photo album to her chest, as if the secrets are somehow stored within. ‘But how can you be *sure*? What about her car? You said it was burnt out when the police found it.’

‘Yes, but they were pretty certain it had been stolen – it’s what joyriders do, drive around a bit then set a match to it. And that solicitor’s letter made it quite clear that she’d decided to stay away, that there was no reason for us to fear for her safety. Anyway, don’t you think we would have felt something if Wren had died? Don’t you think we would just know?’

He’s right, of course; this is Wren they’re talking about, and somehow they would simply know.

From the earliest age, Laura was driven by a ferocious competitive streak when it came to the boys in her life, even with Robert, who she loved like a brother. Tired of the constant suggestion that boys were stronger, smarter, more interesting than girls, she did everything in her power to outrun them, outwit them, outsmart them. It wasn’t just the boys in her class who held this opinion – it was the teachers, male *and* female, the stuffy besuited men on the telly, the man behind the counter in the local post office... even her own father. It seemed like madness to her young mind, a crazy, topsy-turvy lie of a thing, and she made it her mission to prove them all wrong.

Laura

‘You’ll never get a husband if you don’t dress like a female,’ her dad once told her. She was nine at the time. ‘No one likes a tomboy.’

‘Robert does,’ she replied smartly, as her mother applied Germolene to the fresh skating graze across her left knee.

‘I’m not talking about nancy-boy up the road. I’m talking about everyone else. Women should be feminine, look nice and pretty. You look as if you’ve been dragged through a hedge backwards.’

Laura dropped down off the dining table, stooping to inspect the clean dressing, stark against her grimy, tanned legs. ‘Did I tell you I came top in the spelling test again? Twenty out of twenty.’ She peered at her father through the thicket of her rich red fringe. ‘That’s three times in a row.’

He lowered his newspaper and gave her a curt nod. ‘Nobody ever made a happy home with spelling prizes. Spelling doesn’t cook the dinner, does it?’

‘None of the *boys* got twenty out of twenty,’ she replied, standing tall and planting her hands on her hips. ‘Maybe *they* could cook the dinner.’

Her father slammed the newspaper into his lap, his face shifting into waves of irritation. ‘How dare you speak to me...’ he started, but he ran out of words as he glared into Laura’s unflinching young face.

‘George,’ her mother said, raising her small hands as a peace offering, careful to keep her voice soft, ‘a girl can do both, can’t she? You know we’re very proud of your school achievements, Lolly. Aren’t we, Dad? And doing well at school won’t make her any less of a homemaker, will it?’

Her dad returned to his newspaper and cleared his throat. ‘Stick the kettle on, love,’ he told her, and that was the end of the conversation, his point made as her mum obeyed

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his request. Laura straightened the buckles on her battered red rollerskates and rattled up the road to call on Robert.

‘I’m never getting married,’ she told him as he sat on the kerbside, lacing up his own skates. ‘*Never*. I’d rather poke my own eyes out with a saveloy.’

Robert laughed and held out his arm to be helped to his feet. ‘You will. I bet you will. I bet you a pound that you’ll get married and have six children.’

‘Never!’ she screamed, tearing up the street on her skates, wheeling her arms wildly as she picked up speed. ‘Never, never, never!’

Every Saturday morning Laura cooks the same breakfast: poached eggs on smoked salmon, freshly squeezed juice and a large pot of espresso coffee. In their student days, this was the feast they’d reward themselves with if they had any spare cash – a rare treat. Back then, of course, Wren would cook, while Laura laid the tiny Formica table and Robert nipped along the street for the weekend papers. Fleeting, as she scoots a knife around the edge of the poaching cup, Laura wishes that Wren were here now, to cook them their royal breakfast, to sit at the head of the table that’s rightfully hers.

‘Are you ready for your coffee?’ she asks Robert as he brings in the newspapers. ‘I’ll heat up some more milk if you are.’

‘Thanks,’ he replies, reaching into his trouser pocket to fetch his mobile phone. ‘Ah – message from Phoebe. She’s on her way home now. Told you not to worry.’

Laura removes the jug from the microwave and pours steaming milk into Robert’s Superdad mug. ‘I wasn’t worried. I just hate parting on a bad note, that’s all.’ She places the

Laura

cup on the table in front of him, watching the milk and coffee swirl and blend around the spoon. ‘I know it’s a cliché, but she really is like a daughter to me. I couldn’t bear it if she hated me, Rob.’

‘She doesn’t hate you, Laur. She’s just a bit sensitive about the whole dropping-out thing at the moment – she was just sounding off, and it happened to be you who was in the room at the time.’

‘OK.’ Laura feels sick with the weight of her suspicions. She wonders what the right thing to do is – wonders if she’s making a terrible mistake by not sharing her concerns with Robert. *It’s Phoebe’s secret*, she reminds herself again. And, at any rate, perhaps she’s got it all completely wrong.

The first time Laura conceived, she was just fifteen. The boy, Niall, a wiry little Irish lad with black eyes and biceps like smooth pebbles, was with Quinn’s Travelling Fair, which stopped on the common for a week each October. He was not much older than Laura, and they had first met on the waltzers after she’d quarrelled with Robert over which ride to go on next. Laura had wanted to stay put – she’d already spotted Niall giving her the eye – but Rob had wanted to move on to the shooting range. So he’d left her there, where, beneath the seductive charge of Niall’s unwavering attention, she took another spin, and by the end of the ride they had arranged to meet behind the ghost train at nine – an arrangement they would repeat on every one of the six nights that followed. By the time Niall and Quinn’s funfair had left, Laura was feeble-minded with passion and, for a few weeks at least, oblivious to the tiny cluster of cells that now grew and divided within her.

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Finally, it was Rob who broke the news to her.

‘Something’s changed, Laur,’ he said. ‘You’re different. You *look* different.’

In that instant she knew; of course, the signs were all there – the halt in her monthly cycle, the taut swell of her breasts, the voracious appetite. That night she locked herself in the bathroom with a half-bottle of vodka stolen from her dad’s drinks cabinet and drank herself incoherent, all the while topping up the hot bathwater and praying for a miracle. Whether it was the combined power of prayer and liquor or nature’s will, within days she collapsed in Rob’s upstairs toilet and the tiny life slipped from her in a pool.

‘Laura’s got her period,’ she heard him whisper to his mother outside the door, the hesitancy in his voice conveying his embarrassment. ‘It’s really heavy, she says – have you got anything?’

Rob’s mum fussed about, discreetly providing sanitary napkins and paracetamol, encouraging Laura to lie down on Rob’s bed until the pain passed. ‘It’s a woman’s curse.’ The older woman smiled as she placed sweet tea and chocolate biscuits on the bedside table. ‘It gets much better once you’ve had kids, I promise you, sweetheart.’

By the time she walked back home that evening the worst of it seemed to be over, and, while relief was her abiding emotion, Laura felt the grief of loss: the loss of childhood, and the loss of a child.

By Sunday evening, without any mention of their earlier disagreement, things seem to have returned to normal between Laura and Phoebe. The following morning, when

Laura

Robert sets off for work, Laura drives her to the local college, to pick up a prospectus and look around the facilities. Apart from A-levels, which Phoebe already has, the main focus of the college is business and technology, with a few other subjects like hairdressing and mechanics thrown in for good measure. Laura tries to buoy her up as they pass suite after suite of computer screens and desks, but by the time they get back to the main foyer Phoebe is more miserable than ever.

‘I’m an A-star student, for God’s sake,’ she whispers to Laura as they stand at the brochure carousel, listlessly thumbing through the various subjects.

‘All the more reason for you to do something you really want to do.’ Laura notices the dark circles beneath Phoebe’s eyes; she looks as if she hasn’t slept for a week. ‘Come on, we’re both getting ratty – let’s go and get something in the canteen.’

They queue at the counter, where Laura picks up a Danish pastry and a pot of tea, while Phoebe orders fish and chips. She glances guiltily at Laura. ‘I’m starving,’ she says.

‘Well, it *is* nearly lunchtime. Do you want a tea too?’

Phoebe wrinkles her nose. ‘No – I’ve gone off tea lately. I’ll get a Coke.’

Laura’s breath catches in her chest as she recalls the fierce aversion for tea and coffee that she herself had developed with each of her pregnancies. And the deep fatigue; the dark half-moons that had appeared underneath her eyes. She slides her tray along the counter behind Phoebe, taking in the almost imperceptible swell of Phoebe’s hips, the subtle plumping of her skin. At a guess, she must be three months gone.

‘You sit down,’ she says. ‘I’ll pay.’

Flight

With her own longed-for babies Laura had never got beyond eleven or twelve weeks, never stepped into that blossoming realm of ripening serenity promised by the mother-and-baby magazines she kept hidden in the bedside cabinet. After the first miscarriage with Doug, she'd held her subsequent pregnancies close, desperate to reveal them to the world at the turn of twelve weeks, only to have them slip from her too soon, like an empty promise.

She joins Phoebe at a table beside the window, looking out across the courtyard. Drizzly mist hangs over the benches and flower borders beyond the glass, painting it dreary, depressing. Laura sugars her tea and unravels her pastry; Phoebe concentrates on her plate, vanishing her fish and chips at speed. Only when she's mopping up the ketchup with her final chip does she look up.

'Wow, you *were* hungry,' Laura says.

Phoebe looks a little embarrassed. 'I didn't eat much for breakfast.'

'Do you want to get yourself a dessert?' Laura's anxious to let Phoebe see she's not judging her. 'They've got some nice cakes up there. And trifle – your favourite.'

She appears to think about it, before sliding her tray away and opening up the college prospectus. 'Nah, I'm fine. Don't want to get fat, do I?' She gives Laura a cheeky smile to show there are no hard feelings.

'So,' Laura says, spinning the brochure to face her, and flicking through its pages, 'is there anything here that takes your fancy?'

Phoebe shakes her head, despondent.

'Nothing? Well, let's look at it another way. What do think you want to do with your life – what really interests you? Something you can imagine doing as a job, not just a hobby.'

Laura

A gardener passes the window, pushing a wheelbarrow of cuttings. Phoebe's eyes travel with him, as he carries on along the path and stops beside the flower borders.

'I wouldn't mind being a gardener. Or someone who designs gardens. Something outdoorsy would be nice. I can't bear the idea of being stuck behind a desk.'

'Your mum liked gardening,' Laura is surprised to hear herself say.

Phoebe's eyes widen slightly. 'Really? I thought she was just a teacher.'

Laura laughs. '*Just* a teacher, eh? Well, yes, she was a teacher, but she had other interests too. Once she and your father moved to the house we're in now, she became a really keen gardener. The garden was always beautiful in springtime. It smelt of honeysuckle and jasmine, and wild roses. It was idyllic.'

'It doesn't look like that now. It's really boring.'

'That's because your mum's not there to keep it looking beautiful.'

Their eyes meet across the table. Laura reaches for her teapot.

'I don't mind talking about her, you know,' Phoebe says, breaking the tension. 'It's not like I'm able to miss her, is it? I only know her through photos. You're the one who brought me up, Laura, not her.'

'I know that. But it still feels strange talking about her, as though she's dead or something.' She stops, appalled by her own lack of tact. 'I don't mean that – I know she's not. I suppose I still miss her. She was my best friend, after all.'

'I don't know why you and Dad are so – so nice about her. After what she did. I mean, what kind of a mother just walks out?'

Flight

Laura shakes her head. ‘It’s hard to explain, Phoebes. You should talk to your dad about it some time. It would probably do him some good to talk it through with you.’

Phoebe takes a packet of sugar cubes from the bowl, unwraps it and pops one in her mouth. She turns to gaze out of the window, to where the gardener is digging out weeds with his hand fork. ‘I think we should ask at reception about gardening courses. I think that’s what I’d like to do.’

Back at the car with a clutch of new leaflets, they embrace, neither wanting to let go.

‘I’m proud of you, Phoebe,’ says Laura, ‘whatever you end up doing – however life turns out. And I know your mum would be too.’

Although they never admitted as much, Laura is certain that Wren and Rob first got together after that horrible night she had spent in the student bar with Jack in their final year.

She didn’t remember much about arriving home – barely a thing, in fact – except that she woke bathed in sweat in the early hours, thankful for the miraculously placed bucket by her bedside. She felt weak with dread, subdued by that unique thread of paranoia which comes after a night of alcohol-fuelled self-annihilation, her head throbbing like a fractured limb, every tiny movement vibrating throughout her trembling body. *I’m poisoned*, she thought as she fought the urge to retch again, and she tried to gather the stamina required to cross her bedroom to fetch her dressing gown from the back of the door.

After several failed attempts she was up, into her gown and out in the living room, gingerly making her way to the kitchen, where she would attempt to drink a glass of water

Laura

without throwing up. She rested at the sink, gripping the units with white knuckles, a fresh film of perspiration beading up through her pale skin. She groaned through a long breath and reached into the cupboard for a glass – filled it swiftly and banged it down on the side with a slop of overspill, rushing to the medicine box to search for paracetamol before the nausea caught up with her again. ‘*Pills, pills, pills,*’ she chanted in a whisper, until eventually she found them, picked up the water and retreated to the living room to perch on the edge of the sofa with her head on her knees. She stayed there for an age, long enough to actually drift into a light sleep, for her neck to seize up and complain as she finally raised her head to drink from the glass. Every movement had to be slow-motion, to trick her body into thinking it wasn’t moving at all. She popped out the tablets into her hand and stared at them for a while, slowly reaching out for the glass, thinking too much about the journey they had to take, via her lips, her mouth, her gullet. She noticed the stillness of the flat at this hour, and wondered for a brief moment if she was there all alone.

That was when she noticed it.

The door to Rob’s bedroom stood uncharacteristically ajar. Rob never slept with the door open; he needed complete darkness to sleep. Laura sat and stared at the foot-wide gap in the doorway, fighting back a tangle of images from the night before, each scrambling across the other to dominate her mind’s eye. Jack in the toilet cubicle with that girl, her ivory leg hooked around his, the soft brown ghost of a bruise snaking up the bone of her shin, the metallic chink of his belt buckle swinging loose at his thigh. The girl’s indignant expression; his dead-eyed shrug of indifference as he glanced over his shoulder then pushed the cubicle door between

Flight

them, slotted the bolt into place. Mum and Dad framed in the window of their joyless kitchen; married for better or worse. His disappointment; hers.

On shaky legs, Laura trod softly across the ghastly carpet and peered through the gap, into Rob's bedroom. She pushed the door back a little, a little more, until it was quite, quite clear that Rob wasn't there – that his bed was empty. And that was when she heard it: the soft murmur of two voices joined as one, drifting through the plasterboard walls of Rob's room.

Unable to stop herself, Laura followed the sounds, laying her ear against the wall, her palms pressed flat either side of her head.

'I love you,' she heard Rob say, as clearly as if he were in the room beside her.

She closed her eyes, straining to hear Wren's response, paralysed by the sudden shock of jealousy at the thought of Wren in there with Robert, her Robert. She prayed for Wren to say nothing, but her words came through as clear as Rob's. 'I know,' she said. 'I wouldn't be *here* if I didn't believe that.'

Laura backed away, disgusted at herself, at her furtive eavesdropping, at the life she led, and retreated to the sanctuary of her sickbed, where she wept between retches and vowed to embrace her friends' union, to be the best friend that she could be.

A letter arrives for Robert on Wednesday morning, while Laura and Phoebe are completing application forms for the college. The light blue envelope is handwritten, with an unreadable postcode, and its arrival unsettles Laura for

Laura

the rest of the day. In the afternoon, after Phoebe goes out, Laura turns it over in her hands a few times, even lifting it to her nose to inhale its papery scent, before placing it on the dresser with Robert's other mail of statements and circulars. *It's not Wren's handwriting*, is her first thought, but she can't shake the overwhelming feeling of its being somehow connected to her, to the recent resurrection of her ghost in the house.

By the time she hears Robert's car returning at seven, Laura is so deeply unsettled that she leaps up from the kitchen table where she's paring beans, and slides the envelope underneath the tea towels in the top drawer. Next morning, however, after a restless sleep, she forces herself to hand him the letter at the front door, as she helps him into his winter coat. Just as she had done, he turns the envelope over a few times and tries to make out the smudged postcode. 'You don't get many handwritten letters these days,' he says, kissing her on the lips and picking up his briefcase. 'Perhaps it's a long-lost inheritance cheque. You never know.' Smiling and waving it between them, he leaves the house for work.

Laura is astounded by his unruffled response; has he completely forgotten the journalist searching for Wren? Perhaps it's just she who has become paranoid, on the lookout for every little signal, every tiny sign of her? From the quiet of the hallway she tunes in to the sounds of his feet crunching over the drive, the bleep of the car unlocking, the soft thud of the car door as he closes it behind him. She stares at the coat rack, her mind racing, until, after a few minutes like this, it strikes her – his car hasn't left the drive. Moving into the living room, she looks out through the netted front windows. He's sitting in the driver's seat, the opened letter in one hand, his lower lip pinched between the forefinger

Flight

and thumb of the other. Slowly he drops his hand, and raises his face to stare ahead through the windscreen to the street beyond, his body a silhouette against the salmon glow of morning. Laura wants to rush out to him, to prise open the door and ask him, *What is it? Who is it?* But she can't. Her feet are sunk into the plush champagne carpet of their living room, and all she can do is watch as he wearily fixes his seatbelt and disappears through the gate, his face a picture of alarm.

Throughout the day, Laura's thoughts return to Wren and Robert, to the early years they shared together, Laura ever-present as the couple graduated from lovers to partners to husband and wife. She thinks of their wedding day, a strangely subdued affair, overshadowed by the spectre of Wren's mother, by the weight of her absence. It took place in Weybridge register office, with a small gathering of friends and family, and a few of Rob's old schoolfriends thrown in for good measure. Wren had been adamant that she didn't want any of her work friends to attend; it was a private affair, she'd insisted, though she was fine with Rob's guests. Her mother had been in Austria in the run-up to the wedding, helping Siegfried host a conference on corporate efficiency; but *of course*, she told Wren, *yes, darling, I'll do everything in my power to attend*. Laura knew how much Wren was looking forward to seeing her; it had been two years since she had last met up with her, in Rome, and naturally her mother's presence on this special day was important to her. Laura was in charge of making the hotel reservations needed for their few far-flung guests, and she had phoned Wren's mother just two days earlier to pass on the details. It was

Laura

the first time they had ever spoken, and she was effusive and charming. *She's very posh*, Laura had told Rob afterwards. *She's got a voice like Joan Collins*. Rob had replied that of course she thought she was posh, because Laura was a great big leftie and an inverted snob to boot.

In her characteristically distant fashion, Eliza Adler kept them all thinking she'd be there right up until the day itself, when in her place she sent a telegram, wishing the newlyweds good health and happiness for the years ahead.

'What does Wren have to do, for Christ's sake?' Laura hissed to Rob when she conveyed the news to him as they waited in the antechamber, moments before the ceremony. Dreary daylight filtered in through the high windows, and with the rising heat of the waiting guests the room was growing uncomfortable. 'Man, missing her graduation's bad enough – but her wedding? I've never met the woman, but she sounds like a selfish bitch to me.'

Rob rubbed his chin anxiously, before seeking out Wren to steer her into a quiet corner and deliver the news. Laura stood at a distance, watched Wren's calm façade shift momentarily, the involuntary grasp of her fingers, the fleeting darkness that passed over her face like a shadow. Rob laid a hand on Wren's shoulder; she shook her head, brought her expression back into repose and leant in to kiss him on the lips.

'Sorry,' Laura mouthed to her as Wren turned and met her gaze. She opened her arms and Wren abandoned Rob to rush into them, the hem of her simple lace dress bunched up in one hand, a posy of daffodils in the other.

'I'm fine,' she whispered into Laura's neck, her voice low.

Laura stepped back and took her face in her hands, careful not to smudge her wedding make-up. 'Sure?'

Flight

'I'm fine. At least your folks are here – and Rob's.'

'Some consolation.' Laura laughed. 'His are boring and mine are nuts. I'll be spending the next few hours worrying about the many ways they might embarrass me before the day's out. I already caught Dad boasting to the registrar that he's Father-of-the-Maid-of-Honour. I think he was angling for a front-row seat.'

Wren accepted Laura's fresh tissue and dabbed the corner of her eye as she scanned the room, deliberately looking past Rob who was standing at the opposite window talking with his parents. They were all pretending not to, but it was obvious they were talking about Wren's absent mother, as their sympathetic eyes moved from each other to her. 'Well, you can tell your dad there's a spare seat going if he wants it.'

'That's the spirit. Now, then – ' Laura lifted her floor-length gown to reveal her Doc Marten boots, tied for the special occasion with daffodil-yellow laces ' – what do you think of these?'

'I think they're perfect,' Wren replied, with a small, sad smile. 'Are you sure I can't marry *you*, Laur?'

They embraced, and Wren clung to her, the pads of her fingers pressed into the curves of Laura's shoulderblades. It was only when the registrar entered the room and announced their ceremony that she finally broke away.

'Love you, Wrenny,' Laura whispered, and she let her go.

After work Rob is evasive about the letter, his mood too light, too jovial. 'It was nothing, Laura, honestly – an old college friend hoping to meet up some time.'

'Which college friend?' she asks as she slices carrots, eyeing him with suspicion.

Laura

‘Oh, Dominic – he was on my course, so you may not remember him.’

‘So are you going to meet him?’

Rob turns away and starts sorting through a bowl of keys on the sideboard, making a pantomime of appearing busy. ‘Oh, no. No, we weren’t actually that close, so I don’t think –’

‘I’d love to see it.’ Laura carefully lays down the knife, and grips the edge of the counter to steady the tremor that has been building up inside her throughout the day. ‘The letter.’

He looks up, startled. ‘Oh, sorry. I threw it away when I got to work. The bin men will have taken it by now.’

He’s lying. She knows it; he knows she knows it. That evening, they eat a wordless supper beneath the glare of the kitchen light, and later, side by side in their shared bed, they lie motionless, each listening to the other’s breath and wondering what on earth to do next. Thoughts of Phoebe and Wren muddle together in Laura’s drifting state, digging deep into her anxious sleep, unearthing feelings and memories of an age ago.

They waited so long before starting a family – eight years – that Laura wondered if Rob and Wren would ever get on with it at all. It seemed there was never a good time, when you were constantly studying as Rob was, feathering your nest, securing your future. Saving up for a rainy day. Eventually, however, practicality won out, when Wren convinced him it was a good idea to start trying, in case it turned out that he had a low sperm count or something similar. Laura howled with laughter when Wren recounted the conversation over a

Flight

pub lunch the next day, explaining in great visual detail the look of terror that had crossed Rob's face at the suggestion.

'He virtually ravished me on the spot,' she said, reaching across the table to pinch one of Laura's chips. 'So now we'll just have to wait and see if we can make it happen!'

Twelve months later, Phoebe was born, and Laura loved her instantly. When Rob phoned to tell her that the baby was on its way, Laura hurriedly packed her overnight bag and drove straight down, to fuss around in their big, comfy house, cleaning sinks and hobs late into the night while anxiously waiting for news from the hospital.

At just after six the following morning, Rob called. 'It's a girl!' he told her, the joy in his voice streaming through the telephone line and into Laura. 'She's beautiful, Laur. You've got to come straight away – Wren's asking for you.'

In the hospital, Wren had been taken off the main ward, as the birth, a ventouse, had been long and protracted, leaving her bruised and exhausted. The intervention had terrified them both, and for a short while, before she'd appeared, safe and sound, there had been fears that the infant was in distress. 'We're quiet at the moment,' the midwife had told Robert as they wheeled Wren's bed into the private room. 'We'll have to move her out if we get any high-priority cases in the night – but fingers crossed she'll get a good night's sleep in here.'

As soon as visiting hours permitted, Laura burst through the doors with grapes, chocolates, magazines and flowers. 'Where is she, then?' she asked Wren, as she threw her arms around Robert. 'Where's my honorary niece? I take it I'm to be Auntie Laura?' She released Robert and bounced on the edge of the bed, clutching Wren's hand.

A pale Wren, shrouded in white sheets and gown, weakly pointed to a Perspex crib at the foot of the bed, and Laura

Laura

gasped, bringing her hand to cover her mouth. 'I'm sorry, little one! I didn't even see you there. Noisy Auntie Laura, coming in here and making all this fuss!' She brushed her fingertips across the baby's smooth crown, marvelling at the soft wrinkling of her stirring brow. She turned to Robert and Wren, almost mute with wonder. 'Aren't you just *completely* in love with her?' she asked.

'Completely,' they replied, as one voice.

By Friday morning they've barely exchanged a word. Rob has retreated so far into himself that he can't seem to climb out, and Laura has become increasingly preoccupied by Phoebe. She continues to behave as if everything's just fine, chatting about her college plans and making lists of the things she'll need before she starts her taster course in April. By April it will all be too late, Laura thinks, watching her goddaughter stretch and yawn in the kitchen doorway, her pyjama top lifting just enough to reveal the soft alteration in her waistline. Phoebe catches her looking and tugs at her top, stooping to kiss her dad on the cheek. Lazily she slides the phone handset on to the counter beside Laura, having just hung up from one of her friends.

'Hannah,' she says. 'She hates her uni course too. She's thinking of switching.'

Laura holds up a slice of bread. 'Toast?'

'OK,' Phoebe replies, and she drops into a seat at the table and rests her head on her folded arms. 'God, I'm knackered.'

Rob ruffles her hair. 'It'll be all that hard work you've been doing, Phoebs. You know, lying around on your bed, listening to Radio One. You must be shattered.' He throws a smile at Laura, momentarily forgetting their stand-off.

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Beside her, the phone rings and Laura nearly shrieks with the shock of it, her hand shooting out to grab the handset on the second ring. She lifts it to her ear, her eyes never leaving Robert's, and somehow they both know it's a call of significance.

'Hello?' she murmurs into the mouthpiece.

The sounds on the other end of the phone are those of a roadside, somewhere like a motorway service station; after a brief delay, the caller speaks. 'Hello? Laura? It's Mike Woods here – from the newspaper.'

Laura? 'How did you get my name?' she asks, his brazen overfamiliarity stoking anger in her.

'Oh, the electoral roll. But that's not important – listen, Laura, I've got some news for you – well, more for Mr Irving, I suppose. Is he there?'

Laura taps her fingernail on the worktop, glancing up to see Rob and Phoebe studying her intensely. '*Who is it?*' Rob mouths at her.

'No, so you'll have to tell me.'

'OK – well, I'm not sure how you're going to feel about this – but we've found her.'

Laura can feel her blood pressure plummeting, the heat rushing out through her fingertips. She feels the expectant energy coursing off Rob and Phoebe as they stare at her still, their expressions demanding further explanation. 'I don't think I want to –'

'We've found *Wren*, Laura – we've found Wren Irving, and if you stay on the line, please, I've got an address that I'm happy to pass on to you. Have you got a pen handy?'

Outside, the rain starts to fall, hammering against the French doors in a harsh gust of wind. Laura's hand scrabbles along the sides of the dresser for an old envelope; it's

Laura

carelessly torn open at the top, and with an irrational lurch Laura regrets that such a tatty scrap will be used for this purpose. *Wren deserves better*, she thinks, and she reaches for a pen, turning away from Rob and Phoebe, so that she's leaning on the counter beside the sink. 'Go on, then,' she says, and she begins to write down the address, one line after another. She stares at the letters she has just set down, for a moment forgetting the caller at the other end of the phone.

'So perhaps I could ask you for a statement, Laura?' Mike Woods' voice interrupts her thoughts. 'How do you feel now that you know Wren Irving's whereabouts? Do you think your long-term partner will be looking to claim half of his wife's Lottery fortune? It was only just over half a million, but still, if there's anything left of it he'll have a legitimate claim, particularly having brought up their child on his own.'

Laura slams the phone down on the counter with a hard plastic clatter. *They've found her; they've found Wren*. Envelope clutched in her hand, she presses her fist into her chest, feeling her ribcage rise and fall. She knows she has to turn back to face Rob and Phoebe, to give them some kind of account of what's just happened, of what's been said.

With a deep breath, she turns, her eyes darting from one to the other, alarm flooding her veins.

'Laura?'

She can't tell Phoebe yet – or Rob for that matter; she can't alert them to Wren's resurfacing until she's spoken to her first. If Wren chose to disappear so completely all those years ago, there's no way they can turn up mob-handed now, expecting to be welcomed back in. Wren might simply run again. Laura knows she has to do this quietly, alone. Decided, she finds her voice.

'I've got to go away for a few days,' she says.

Flight

Rob opens his mouth to speak, but she cuts him off.

‘Please don’t ask me where I’m going, Rob. I’ll call you, I promise – I’ll explain everything. But, for now, I just have to do this on my own.’