

I Remember You



Harriet Evans

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I remember you

Heartbroken Tess Tennant is leaving London and moving back to her picture-perfect home town to take up a teaching job. It's time for a fresh start, one with warm stone cottages, friendly locals in oak beamed pubs and of course Adam, her childhood best friend, who never left Langford.

But something isn't right in the town: Adam is preoccupied with a new girlfriend and the past—which Tess thought she'd put behind her—is looming large again.

So by the time she has to take her class on a trip to Rome, Tess is feeling reckless. She is swept off her feet by a mysterious stranger, and falls in love. But her magical Roman Holiday is about to turn into a nightmare...

Back in Langford, as autumn creeps towards Christmas, Adam is gone and everything has changed. Tess has to decide, once and for all, where she belongs and who she belongs with.

Rich, witty and moving, *I Remember You* is for anyone who likes to dream about a new life—and for anyone who still remembers their first love.

Harriet Evans is the author of three previous novels, *Going Home*, *A Hopeless Romantic* and *The Love of Her Life*, all of which were bestsellers. She lives in London and now writes full time, having given up her job this year to do so.

She would love to hear from you: please contact her at www.harriet-evans.com

For the Don, my wonderful dad Phil, with all my love

When my life is through, And the angels ask me to recall
The thrill of it all, Then I will tell them I remember you.

'I Remember You', lyrics by Johnny Mercer

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PROLOGUE

Spring had arrived in Langford early that year. A sprinkling of bluebells carpeted the lanes, and daffodils nodded proudly in the breeze which rolled in from the hills behind the small town. As Tess Tennant raced up the hill from the bus stop, she caught sight of her mother and her mother's friend Philippa, outside the Tennants' house. They were laughing in the bright sunshine.

'Hello, Tess darling!' Emily Tennant called out to her daughter, who ground to a halt, panting. 'I was just telling Philippa your news.'

'You haven't told Adam yet, have you?' Tess said, between breaths. She unhooked herself from her school bag, trying to look nonchalant and grown-up; she was almost eighteen now, after all. By the time Cleopatra was eighteen, she was ruling Egypt with her brother. By the time she was twenty-two, she'd got rid of her brother, seduced Caesar and had his baby. Of course, she was dead at thirty-nine, and had wrecked Egypt with civil war, so perhaps she wasn't someone one should slavishly emulate—but she'd been to Rome, got to shag Mark Antony in the process and wear some awesome gold jewellery as well as being super-empowered and all that, so it wasn't *all* bad.

'No, of course not,' said Philippa, brushing her wild dark hair away from her face as she smiled at Tess. 'But well done, sweetheart. That's wonderful. He's going to be so pleased for you.'

'He's got a scholarship to Cambridge,' Tess said, brushing her hands through her hair. 'He won't remember who we are in a few months' time, he'll be too important. He'll be going to posh college dinners with E.V. Rieu and Oliver Taplin, people like that.'

'E.V. Rieu died in 1972,' said a voice behind her. 'I'd be extremely surprised if he rocked up to dinner.' Tess turned around to see Adam, her best and oldest friend, standing in front of her with an expectant look on his face.

'I got in,' she said, beaming. 'I'm going. I'm going to UCL. If I get three Bs.'

'Oh, my God,' Adam said, a wide grin breaking out over his face. He threw his arms round her. 'That's completely, completely brilliant. You are totally bloody brilliant.'

'Come in and have some tea,' Tess's mother called out to them, as Philippa smiled at them, hugging each other tightly.

'No, thanks, maybe later though,' said Tess. Adam released her, draping his arm round her shoulder and squeezing her tight. 'Hurrah,' she whispered happily. 'The meadows?'

'Yep,' he said, nodding.

'Oh,' said Philippa, pleased. 'Bye, you two! Have a nice time! Get me some garlic on the way back, Adam. Have a—oh, yes. Bye!'

As they walked down the lane together, Adam rolled his eyes at Tess. They both knew their mothers were watching them.

'For someone who despises the conventions of marriage, your mum is surprisingly bourgeois,' Tess said (she was doing Politics A level).

'It's weird, isn't it,' said Adam, chewing on a piece of grass. 'So mysterious and bohemian, and yet she wants her teenage son to go off with the girl next door.'

No one knew where Philippa Smith had come from. She had arrived in town nineteen years ago like Mary Poppins, on a wild, windy day in early spring. She was moving into the cottage opposite the Tennants: Frank was a GP and he and Emily had one child, Stephanie, who was nearly two. Philippa

was nearly eight months' pregnant, Emily barely showing.

~~She had been teaching in Dublin, she told them, and the father of the baby was Irish, a fellow lecturer at the college where she worked. She spoke of him without rancour, but she wasn't going to see him again. Beyond that, Philippa said nothing more about herself. She had no apparent family or friends; she barely scraped a living marking A—and O-level exams and writing textbooks on early English history. Parts of Langford were scandalized; but Emily, who had a young child and had moved with Frank from London to live in this small, strange town, adored her immediately. Philippa accepted her neighbours' friendship—their invitations to join them for pot luck, their casual enquiries checking that she was all right—up to a point, and then she would retreat back to her draughty cottage and her books. For someone with virtually nothing—no family, no other friends, no back-story—she was strangely imperious.~~

Philippa had her baby son, Adam, six weeks after she moved to Langford; Tessa (to use her full name) was born a couple of months after that, and it was always accepted that the two babies would grow up in each other's pockets. The sight, however, of the blond, tall Adam, and his determined blue-eyed sidekick with black hair that bobbed round her head like a halo, trotting hand in hand towards the shop around the corner, was irresistible. It was impossible not to smile, put one's head on one side, and say, 'Aah...aren't they adorable?' And when they were thirteen, and Adam was still tall and a darker blond, now a weekly boarder at a good school thanks to a combination of scholarship and sponsorship, and Tess was still small and stocky and determined, but both of them were shyer, it was rather affecting to see them putting their childhood closeness behind them, behaving slightly awkwardly around each other. People had stopped wondering where Philippa came from, and instead smiled fondly when her sweet-natured, shy son appeared anywhere with Frank and Emily's daughter.

'I think someone's got a little crush on someone...' a well-meaning person would hiss, delightedly, as Tess ambled casually over to Adam, shyly, at a drinks party to say hi.

'You can tell he's awfully fond of her,' someone else would say. 'Look at them!'

Tess and Adam had long accepted there was nothing they could do about it. It wasn't their parents. It was the whole bloody town: Mrs Sayers the primary school secretary, Mrs Tey the solicitor's wife, the lady at the newsagent's—even Mick, who ran Langford's best pub, the Feathers, had been heard to say, 'They make a sweet little pair, don't they?'

It was one of the reasons Tess was desperate to get out.

The water meadows were flooded in winter, but as spring arrived and the water receded they began to dry out so that, even in the full heat of summer, the grass was always lush and green, the butterflies colourful and plentiful, the honey bees always busy. On this sunny April day they could sit on the tree by the river, swinging their legs over the bubbling water, drink the beer Adam kept in the knothole and smoke illicit cigarettes, the butts of which they were always careful to collect and remove when they left. Not just to save their own hides, but because they were country children and, along with other things like never leaving a gate open, they would sooner eat a cigarette butt than leave it lying in a field. Especially the water meadows. They'd been used in a Merchant Ivory film and the Prince of Wales had visited them last year. Everyone in Langford was proud of them.

Adam took a drag of his cigarette. 'So, you're really moving to London, then,' he said.

'Yep,' Tess said, swinging her legs happily. 'Can't believe it. You'll have to come and visit me.'

'I'll visit you, but I'm not so crazy on London,' he said.

She nudged him. ‘Don’t be silly. You don’t even know it!’

‘I know it well enough to know I don’t like it.’

Tess stared at him, trying not to look impatient. Adam was not especially open to new things, and it annoyed her, though she hoped university would change that. She wanted to take on the world, to run full tilt at life. He was content to sit and watch the world go by outside his window while he worked.

‘I’m serious,’ he said. ‘Cambridge I can cope with—although it’s pretty flat, at least there’s countryside nearby. London—’ He shrugged his shoulders. ‘Too noisy. Too crazy. Too many people! No green spaces, nothing. I think you’ll miss it.’

Tess turned and stared at him. ‘Have you lost your freaking mind?’ she said, half-seriously. ‘I’m eighteen, bruv! So are you! Just because we’re studying Latin and Greek doesn’t mean we have to turn into old men with bushy moustaches and elbow patches who talk about the good old days.’

‘Well, you especially,’ said Adam. ‘I’d love to see you with a big bushy moustache, T.’ He nudged her, but she glowered at him and he relented. ‘OK, I’ll come and visit you.’

‘You’d better,’ she said firmly. ‘We are going to parrrrtay. When Cleopatra first met Caesar, she said—’

‘Oh, shut up about Cleopatra,’ said Adam, who was highly bored of Tess’s Cleopatra obsession. ‘Her parents were brother and sister, no wonder she was crazy.’

‘Adam!’ Tess said, in outrage.

Adam rolled his eyes. ‘OK, OK.’ He patted her on the back. ‘You really can’t wait to get out of here, can you?’

She looked at him, and shuffled along the wide branch, suddenly a little uncomfortable. ‘It’s not that. I just want to do something different, get away, you know? I feel like all these things are just round the corner waiting for me, and I’m sick of the same old faces, same stupid tourists gawping over the same boring things.’

‘Yeah,’ Adam said slowly. ‘I know. Still...I’m going to miss it.’ He looked around, at the meadows that stretched before them, the shocking green of the trees in bud, the blue sky, the fields folding out away to the horizon. ‘It’s a nice life here, that’s all.’

‘Of course it’s a nice life for you,’ Tess told him. ‘You’re Adam Smith. The richest woman in town paid for your education. You’re tall. You’re super-intelligent. You’ve got a cool bike. And all the girls at my school have a massive thing for you and you could basically snog anyone you wanted. You’re a superstar.’

‘Tess!’ Adam laughed, embarrassment written over his face. He blushed. ‘That’s rubbish.’

‘It’s not,’ she said. ‘Why would you want to leave? You’ve got the perfect life.’ She stood up; a piece of bark was digging into her. ‘Me, I *want* to leave. I want to live in London. I don’t want to turn into an old lady before my time.’

‘You’ll come back, though,’ Adam said, still sitting on the branch. ‘Won’t you?’

Tess felt sad suddenly, and she didn’t know why. She turned to face him, and stood between his legs. She pinched his cheek lightly. ‘Don’t bet on it. I can’t see myself living here.’

‘I know what you mean, but *omnia mutantur*. All things change,’ said Adam.

‘Yeah, they do,’ said Tess. ‘But we change with them, that’s the rest of the quote.’ They were silent for a moment; both of them took another swig of beer. ‘Still,’ she said. ‘We’ve got ages till we have to go. We’ve got the whole of the summer. And then—’ She lifted her beer and clinked it against his. ‘The rest of our lives.’

They were right, of course. Things do change, but neither of them could have foreseen in what way. Because already, part of Tess and Adam’s future had been written, set in stone long before they

were born.

PART ONE

I'll tell you of a tiny Republic that makes a show well worth your admiration—Great-hearted leader
a whole nation whose work is planned, Their morals, groups, defences—I'll tell you in due order.

Virgil, *Georgics*, Book IV (trans C. Day Lewis)

Langford College

Classical Civilization Tutor Required For A levels, Term-long courses and Seminars Immediate start preferred

Langford College is one of the most important and well-regarded adult educational facilities in the country. This private training college for further education is set in a Grade I listed Victorian manor, former seat of the Mortmain family, in twenty acres of beautiful grounds near to the historic market town of Langford.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, the position of Tutor in Classical Civilization now becomes vacant. We are urgently seeking a replacement, to arrive in February to prepare for the Summer term. The applicant must be educated to MA level or beyond in Latin and Greek. Three years' teaching or lecturing experience essential. The applicant must be prepared to guide his or her students on a field trip, one per annum.

Applications are now invited by post, including CVs with *two* references, to Miss Andrea Marsh, c/o Langford College, Lang-ford,—shire. No email queries, please.

'Per Artem Lumen'

CHAPTER ONE

The old woman sat at her window, her usual position, and watched, waiting. It was noon in Langford, and if there was to be any activity on the high street (described as ‘one of the most beautiful streets in England’ by DK Eyewitness, ‘picturepostcard perfect’ in the Rough Guide, and ‘chintzy’ in the Lone Planet), it would be at this time.

There might be a couple of ladies walking to lunch at the tea shop. Or some weekenders emerging from Knick-Knacks, one of the many gift shops that sold Medici Society notelets, Cath Kidston cushions and ‘vintage’ mirrors. Or perhaps a group of American tourists, rarer at this time of year, distressingly loud, having visited the house where Jane Austen spent several months staying with an old friend. (The house, formerly known as 12 St Catherine’s Street, was now the Jane Austen Centre, museum which contained a glove of the great author’s, a letter from her describing Langford as ‘*neither incommodious nor invidious, yet I cannot like it*’, and a first edition of *Emma*, inscribed, ‘*To Lord Mortmain, in respect of his great knowledge, this little offering.*’ But since the author was anonymous until she died, it was generally agreed it wasn’t her, anyway.)

Perhaps she might spot a bus trip taking people to Langford Regis, the famous Roman villa nearby (home to some of the best mosaics of Roman Britain, and a new heritage trail promising a fun day out for all the family.) Perhaps even a film crew—they were increasingly common in Langford these days. But whatever it was, Leonora Mortmain would have seen it before, in some form or another. For, as she was fond of telling her housekeeper Jean, she had seen most things in the town. And nothing surprised her any more.

She watched them walk past with a weary disdain; the tourists, lured from London or Bath for the day, even on this cold January morning, clutching their guide books, reading aloud to each other. And there was her old adversary, Mick Hopkins, the publican at the Feathers. He was putting a sign out on the road—what did it say? Leonora couldn’t make out the bright chalk lettering, and her glasses were on the other side of the room, in the bureau. Something annoying, no doubt; some quiz night that would mean everyone became disgracefully inebriated and staggered out onto the street, calling names and making noise, waking her all too easily from a restless sleep. Leonora Mortmain sighed, and her long fingers briefly clutched her skirt. Sometimes she wondered, quite literally, what the world was coming to. The town she had known all her life was changing. And she didn’t like it.

There was a picture in the town hall (renamed the Civic Centre in the eighties, now mercifully renamed). Leonora had a copy, too. It showed the Langford Parish Council on Easter Day 1904, outside St Mary’s Church, behind the high street. Men in morning suits, top hats and gloves, walking sticks, their sepia faces serious and respectable, their wives demurely on their arms, expressionless and slim in pintucked, ruffled Edwardian dresses. Everything correct, respectful. The church noticeboard in the background was freshly painted. Even the urchin playing in the street in the foreground, unseen by the subjects of the photograph—even *he* was clean and *presentable*! The previous day, Leonora had watched in amazement and horror as a mother—she presumed she was the mother—pushed her child along the high street in a buggy with one hand. The woman was fat, red-faced and sweating, holding a cigarette with the hand that steered the buggy and eating a pasty of some description in the other. She was dressed in pink jogging bottoms; the child was filthy. And she

was shouting at it as she went. 'Shut the **** up, Tiffany!' she'd screamed as the child screamed back. And then later that same day, as evening came, a troupe of girls, no more than teenagers, walking along towards the bus stop, wearing jeans and trainers, and tops that displayed more than enough of their cleavages, smoking and drinking out of cans. One of them—no more than fourteen, Leonora estimated—stopped and kissed, in a most unseemly way, a youth of the same age, whose hands had roved over her body like—like oil in a pan. And under her clothes! Leonora had watched it all from the window.

Extraordinary! Incredible! That the town had come to this, and Leonora increasingly had no remedy for it. *O tempora, o mores*, her father had been wont to say (although he disapproved of Cicero in many ways). Well, what Sir Charles Mortmain would have made of his beloved town now, she shuddered to think. She simply could not imagine. Leonora Mortmain shifted uneasily in her seat, and her hand restlessly stroked the bell that lay near her at all times.

Her father was a man who cast a long shadow: a passionate classicist, author of *Roman Society* (Heinemann, 1933) which expounded the virtues of Imperial Rome—its organization, its rules, its ruthlessness—omitting many of its more interesting vices—vomitoriums, poisonings, slave boys. Young Leonora (many doubted such a beast had ever existed but it had) had lived in fear of him, desperate for his approval. He had died in 1952. She wondered, often, what he would have made of things now.

The fact that his own daughter had been forced, because of death duties, to sell Langford Hall, the Victorian Gothic manor house at the edge of the town, was something that still, nearly forty years on, gave her pause. Langford Hall was now Langford College, a private institution that at least taught respectable things, like History of Art, French classes, the Classics, of course, and so on. But no matter how respectable it was, she knew Father wouldn't have liked it.

Leonora Mortmain took a deep breath. Thinking about her father brought back painful memories. She had been feeling older lately, and these days she kept thinking about the past. More and more. She had a final plan underfoot—one that she knew was right, but which sometimes made even her quail at the thought of what she was doing...

Something caught her eye, and Leonora sat back in her chair. A tall, darkish blond boy—well, she supposed he was a man now. He appeared outside the pub and started chatting to Mick Hopkins. He clapped the older man on the back as they laughed about something, his wide, easy smile infectious.

Leonora knew them both. Mick Hopkins had been at the Feathers for more than thirty years now. They said he was a good landlord—Leonora had never been inside the pub, though she had lived opposite it for forty years. She supposed he was an inoffensive man in his way, compared to some of the people she was forced to watch on a regular basis, but she didn't care for him. He was responsible for so much of the bad behaviour she saw outside her window, and whenever she complained he brushed her aside, politely, but she could tell he was laughing at her... She hated that, hated it.

Her eyes fell, almost greedily, on the man he was with. It was Adam Smith, Philippa Smith's son. Leonora watched him carefully, knowing she was spying, but just for once letting her curiosity get the better of her.

When he was eleven, Adam had won the top prize at Langford Primary, for outstanding achievement. Leonora had offered to pay his school fees. It was the right thing to do. He was an extremely intelligent boy, he had been offered a part scholarship, as a weekly boarder, to—School,

and his mother couldn't afford for him to take it up. Leonora had stepped in, enjoying the slightly surprised murmurs of approval that greeted the announcement that she was paying for his education. She would do it every year, she said, fund the brightest pupil from the school through to their graduation, as a memorial to her father.

But to Leonora's immense displeasure, Adam had gone to the bad. His mother had died, suddenly, when he was almost eighteen, dropped dead in the street of a brain aneurysm. A terrible thing and a shock to everyone, but Adam had gone to pieces. He had failed, soon after his mother's death, to get the results he needed for Cambridge, and he had gone on failing ever since. He didn't seem to care about that fine mind of his after that; he would rather loll about on the street chatting and laughing like a common idiot, not like the gentleman he should be. She had had such high hopes for him, had seen it as her chance to create something out of nothing, and it had failed... Leonora Mortmain blinked, realizing she was staring rather too intently out of the window at the young man.

She rang the bell with fury, shaking her head querulously. Too tiresome to think about all that now.

'Mrs Mortmain?' Jean Forbes bustled into the room. 'Are you all right, Mrs Mortmain?' The 'Mrs' was a courtesy—no one quite knew why or where it had started, but no one dared call her 'Miss' now. Much less 'Ms', though some would have loved to have tried.

'I am well,' said Leonora, collecting herself once more. She looked out of the window, searching for composure. Her eye fell upon a girl in jeans and a light blue top, ambling slowly along the street towards where Adam Smith stood with Mick from the Feathers. 'Tell me, who is that?'

The inhabitants of Langford believed Jean Forbes put up with a great deal. Leonora Mortmain didn't pay well, and she was an extremely difficult woman, who almost went out of her way to be unpleasant. Poor Jean, people said. That awful, dried-up old crone—imagine having to live with her! Did you hear, she tripped Ron Thaxton up with her walking stick, because he was in her way? She told Jan Allingham that she believed charity should be in the home and nowhere else, when she came round collecting for Cancer Research. The list went on and on.

For her part, Jean knew they said it—on certain days, she couldn't blame them for saying it. But luckily for Leonora, Jean's nature was good and kind and, most importantly, patient. 'You rang very loudly. I thought you were—' she began.

'What?' snapped Leonora. 'I asked you who that—' She jabbed the window with a long finger, painted magenta and crowned with a thick gold and garnet ring. '—was.'

Jean looked now as if she were about to say something, but she thought better of it, and leaned out of the window. The girl and Adam had recognized each other, and were embracing, laughing heartily as they did so. He patted her on the back, lifting her up so her feet were off the ground as Mick went inside, leaving them chattering happily together. Jean screwed up her eyes.

'Oh, my goodness,' she said, after a moment. 'Isn't that Frank and Emily's daughter?'

'And *whom* might they be?' asked Leonora Mortmain.

'Tess,' Jean said. 'I'm sure that's Tess Tennant. Ah! Bless her! Sweet girl. The doctor's daughter, Dr Tennant? He came when you had that problem with your foot. You used to like her, remember, she went off to become a Classics teacher. She and Adam were such friends. Looks like she hasn't seen him for a while.' She clapped her hands together. 'Of course! Didn't Carolyn Tey tell me that she's joining Langford College in a couple of weeks? She's the new Classical Civilization tutor there.'

'Is this true?'

Jean blinked. 'Well, yes, of course it's true. Do you remember, Derek what's-his-name had to leave before Christmas, he got shingles? They've been desperate for someone ever since.' She looked

at her employer, realizing she was gabbling, and sighed. ‘Carolyn’s signed up for a course, Mrs Mortmain! They’re going on a trip to Rome in May!’ Jean sighed. ‘Ooh. I’d love to go to Rome.’

Rome. Rome, in May. In the plans that Leonora had had when she was young, Rome had figured large. And it would mean she could go back to the house, legitimately go back once more, as a student not as a young girl living there. Just once more, before she died. Leonora pretended to ignore Jean, leaning back towards the window, watching Tess who was explaining something to Adam. He stood listening intently to her, hugging himself, his hands tucked under his armpits. Tess ran her hands through her black hair, and it stuck up a little at the back. *Rome. Rome.*

‘Hm,’ said Leonora. ‘Well, I don’t remember her.’ She wrinkled her brow, as if searching for a memory.

‘You do remember, Mrs Mortmain,’ Jean said. ‘She used to play with Adam—Adam Smith all the time. Best of friends when they was little. It’s nice to see her again,’ she said ruminatively. ‘Nice to have a young face move back to the town, isn’t it?’

‘Ye-es,’ said Leonora slowly, not really listening. Her gaze had slid from the girl to the poster she was now reading, stuck crudely onto the old blackened wood of the archway. ‘Jean—ah, what does that poster say?’ she asked.

“‘Stop the Out-of-Town Superstores,’” Jean read slowly. “‘Shame on the Mortmains! Save Langford!’” Oh,’ she said, realizing what she’d just said. ‘Oh, Mrs Mortmain, I’m sure it doesn’t mean...’

Leonora stood up; leaning heavily on the windowsill as she did so. She was shaking. She peered forward, the better to see the poster:

STOP THE OUT-OF-TOWN SUPERSTORES
SHAME ON THE MORTMAINS!
SAVE LANGFORD!
SAVE THE WATER MEADOWS!!!!

If YOU want to stop Leonora Mortmain from ruining OUR town with these plans for 2 megamarkets, a homeware store and 4 other retail outlets, to be built on the historic Langford water meadows, which will make HER RICH and KILL THE TOWN AND OUR BEAUTIFUL WATER MEADOWS, come to the Feathers, March 15th, for a town meeting. Call Andrea Marsh, Ronald Thaxton or Jon Suggs for more information! **Get involved!**

‘Oh, dear,’ said Jean, as her employer sank back into the silk chair, breathing fast. ‘I didn’t want you to see it—’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ Leonora snapped. Her mind was racing, almost as fast as her heart. ‘It was bound to happen, sooner or later. And the sooner they realize it’s our land, to do with it what we wish the better. The plans are already approved in principle.’ She looked around her lovely sitting room, and then out onto the street again, at the poster, as Tess and Adam walked away, still talking. Adam looked across, towards the house. Leonora shrank against the curtains. She did not want him to see her.

‘So,’ she said. ‘It’s started, then.’ She paused. ‘Well, everyone needs to understand. It’s for the best.’

Jean Forbes said nothing as Leonora Mortmain turned to the window again, and continued to stare out onto the street.

CHAPTER TWO

‘So when did the train get in?’

‘An hour or so ago. I dumped my stuff at the pub and you’re the first person I saw.’

‘You’re staying there?’

Tess said grimly, ‘I need to find somewhere to rent, fast. It’s expensive, the Feathers—what’s happened?’

‘I can’t believe you’re back,’ Adam said, smiling at his oldest friend as they walked down the High Street. He made to put his arm round her.

‘Ow!’

‘Oh sorry,’ he said, rubbing her shoulder where he had jabbed it.

‘It’s fine.’ Tess picked up her speed; she was small and he was tall and she remembered, then, that they didn’t walk well together: always out of step. There was an awkward pause.

‘It’s really you! Man.’ Adam shook his head, looking at her. ‘It’s been a long time, Tess. I can’t think of the last time I saw you.’

She looked up at him. ‘I know.’ Her eyes searched his face. ‘Your hair got darker,’ she said, eventually.

He tugged at it. ‘Oh. Probably not.’

‘You used to be so blond,’ she said. ‘Especially in summer.’

‘Not for years,’ he said. ‘That was when I was a boy.’

‘Remember your mum used to call you the Milky Bar Kid, and you’d get so cross?’ She smiled, but a look of pain shot across Adam’s face at the mention of Philippa’s name, and she regretted it. Was he still not able, after all this time, to talk about his mother?

‘I’d forgotten,’ he said, though she knew he was lying, he remembered everything. ‘You just haven’t seen me for a while, that’s all. You are a heartless girl.’

Tess shook her head firmly, glad to move the conversation on. ‘You never come to London, that’s the problem.’

‘Hey.’ He grimaced. ‘You never came home, *that’s* the problem.’

‘Rubbish,’ Tess said. She avoided looking at him, trying not to sound defensive, keeping her voice light. ‘Anyway, Mum and Dad don’t live here any more, so why should I?’

‘Typical,’ said Adam. ‘A brother. I’ve been like a brother to you all these years, and you just don’t care.’

‘A brother?’ Tess laughed, rolling her eyes, she couldn’t help it. ‘Right.’

Adam seemed not to hear her. He looked at his watch. ‘So—how’s Stephanie?’

‘She’s great. She and Mike just moved to Cheltenham—but you knew that.’

‘Sure,’ said Adam, stopping to let a tiny old lady clutching a green string bag pass on the crowded street. ‘She sent me a Christmas card. Morning, Miss Store! How are you?’

‘Good morning, Adam dear,’ came a bright voice back. ‘I’m very well, thank you. I have some lovely rhubarb, if you’d like some. Didn’t you say you were coming round later?’

‘Yes, please, that would be great.’ Adam smiled, and they walked on. Tess chuckled.

‘What’s so funny?’ Adam said. ‘She’s a very nice lady.’

‘OK, OK!’ Tess said. ‘Where are we going later?’

~~‘I’ll explain in a bit,’ Adam said. ‘I hope you’re pleased.’~~

Tess pulled her ponytail out and rubbed her scalp, letting her hair fall about her shoulders. She looked around her again, frowning. ‘Well, I’m back.’

She had to remind herself how, back in Balham before Christmas, dumped, unemployed and miserable, the job at Langford College had seemed, quite literally, like a miracle. Not only was it a job, which in these times was a rarity itself, especially since she was a Classics teacher and not someone providing a necessarily indispensable teaching service, but it was also a way out, a new start, a way to leave behind the misery she’d felt and start over again. But now she was here...It was eighteen months since she’d been back; even longer, she realized now, since she’d really taken stock of Langford, of what were to be her new surroundings. Like someone walking through their new house and wondering if they’ve made a terrible mistake, she now saw the town again, as if through fresh—and rather dismayed—eyes.

Take, for example, the high street. It was like walking through Toy Town. The shops looked smaller; the church of St Mary’s at the end was tiny. Even the side gate, the entrance to one of the medieval lanes that skirted around the edge of town, seemed minute to her, as if a child could climb over it. Compared to London, to her old street in Balham, which was three times as long as the high street, it was hilarious. She’d forgotten, when she first went to London, how huge everything seemed even though she knew it already. How it took her a term of wandering around Bloomsbury to get used to it, the size of the squares, the vast classical columns of the university buildings, the height of the houses, even the size of the theatres. She was taken to the ballet by a boyfriend from university, and Covent Garden seemed as huge a football pitch.

And the shops! Everything here was either an antique shop or a gift shop or a tea shop, or else a crappy homestores place that only seemed to sell frozen Findus pancakes and ready-made Yorkshire puddings. She peered into the window of a shop called Jen’s Deli, noting with some relief that there was at least *one* shop that sold parmesan and prosciutto. She may have lived in Balham, but even Balham had a shop that sold Poilane bread.

‘Penny for them,’ said Adam’s voice, behind her.

‘What?’ said Tess, momentarily disconcerted. She glanced up, and saw his reflection in the window, watching her. She brushed her hair out of her face. *I was just thinking how glad I am that at least there’s a half-decent shop here that sells fresh parmesan.* She was ghastly. ‘Oh, well. Nothing!’ she said brightly. ‘So—tell me. How’s it going? How is—everything?’

For a while now, Tess hadn’t known the best way to ask what Adam was up to, but she knew it drove him mad, the pussyfooting. After Philippa died, people pussyfooted all the time, half-asking him what he’d do. ‘You’re—not going to Cambridge? Ah! What will you do here instead? A job at the pub? Sounds like a good one, Adam, keep you behind the bar instead of in front of it, eh! Ha! Ha!’

‘Ah, so you’re working in the museum now too? Well, no one better than Jane Austen! If that’s what you’re going to...So, how long do you think you’ll be—oh, you don’t know, well, of course, that’s absolutely right, isn’t it! Quite right.’

To Tess’s father Frank, who had asked Adam straight out a couple of months after his mother died, why he wasn’t going to Cambridge, why he wasn’t even going to defer for a year and then go, Adam simply replied, ‘Things have changed, I’m afraid. I’m not going.’

‘I think Philippa would have wanted you to go,’ Tess’s father had said. Tess had watched, terrified, her fingers in her mouth.

Adam had said, evenly, ‘I know she’d have understood why I’m not going. There are reasons

why. She would understand, trust me. Thanks, though.'

'What for?' Dr Tennant had said, bewildered.

'For asking directly in the first place,' and Adam had said it so politely that Tess had looked at him, almost in despair, and then at her mother whose hand flew to her chest, as if clutching her heart in some sort of pain. He was heart-breaking, this young man, completely alone in the world, prepared to throw away his best chance at life. But what could they do? They couldn't bind him and bundle him in the back of a van, then drive east and dump him outside the gates of his college. And there was no one else they could talk to, either. All Adam—or Frank or Emily—knew about Adam's father, the Irish professor, was that he'd moved to America many years ago, and there were no details for him; Adam wasn't even sure of his surname.

He was only just eighteen, and he was alone in the world. There wasn't really anything the Tennants could do now, except watch out for him, help him as much as they could. Watch, as everyone's favourite boy passed his twenties living in the small cottage where he had grown up with Philippa, never clearing out her possessions, and alternating jobs between the bar of the Feathers and the Jane Austen Centre, where he worked behind the front desk two and a half days a week. He never talked about his mother, or what might have been. Never.

Looking at Adam now, Tess knew she wasn't going to get an answer out of him.

He said, 'Things are the same as they've always been.'

'Still working at the Feathers? I didn't know the barman when I went in to drop my stuff.'

'Yep,' said Adam. 'Suggs is doing a couple of nights a week there, actually.'

Suggs was Adam's best friend and his housemate in the cottage.

'How's the Jane Austen Centre?'

'Oh, you know,' Adam said. 'Pretty full-on. Tiring.'

'Really?'

'Yes, you know. We'll have to rearrange Her Glove soon, and some people are talking about moving the furniture in the Writing Room. Phew.' He saw her expression. 'I'm joking, you idiot.' He pushed her gently. 'It's dead, deader than a dodo. Especially this time of year. We get tourists, but it's ten a day at best. Even I can cope with tearing off ten ticket stubs.'

Tess was embarrassed, and tried to cover her embarrassment. 'Right. I see. Well, it sounds like you're keeping yourself busy!' He gave her a strange look. 'Er, let's take a look in here, shall we?' she said, almost wildly, and pushed the door of the deli open before Adam could stop her.

'No—er—Tess—' he called after her as she went inside, but she ignored him.

'Hi,' said a friendly-looking person behind the counter, wiping her hands on a tea towel. 'Can I get you anything?'

She was beaming in a welcoming way which made Tess, less than two hours off the train from London, instantly suspicious of her. 'Just looking, thanks,' Tess replied repressively and turned to the shelves.

'They've got some good stuff in here,' Adam said, in a low voice. He swivelled round, so they were both facing the shelves. 'Nice pasta, and the vegetables are fresh. They get them from George Farm, it's a good arrangement.'

'I love cooking,' Tess said. She sighed with pleasure.

'How long are you staying at the pub for?' Adam asked her.

‘Till I find somewhere,’ Tess said.

~~‘You should have stayed with me,’ Adam said. ‘It’s ridiculous, you paying to stay there.’~~

‘I didn’t—’ Tess began, then she stopped. ‘That’s so sweet of you.’ She patted his arm, touched and grateful for the presence of him, and shook her head.

‘That’s OK,’ Adam said, still in a low voice.

‘Why are you speaking so softly?’ Tess said. She turned back to the counter. ‘Perhaps I should get some—’

‘Adam?’ said the friendly girl eagerly, her pale face lighting up. ‘I thought it was you. Hi—hi there!’

‘Hi, Liz,’ said Adam neutrally. ‘How’ve you been.’

He said this not as a question, more from a need to say something. Tess watched this exchange with dawning understanding.

Liz wiped her hands on her tea towel again, beaming with pleasure. ‘It’s good to see you! I wondered where you’d been.’

‘Ah—ah.’ Adam took a step back, and Tess smiled wryly, looking at her feet. Just like the old days; nothing had changed. She knew what was going to happen next.

And it did. ‘This is Tess,’ Adam said, putting his arm around Tess and squeezing her shoulders. He kissed the top of her head. ‘Tess, this is Liz. She’s from London too.’

‘Actually, I’m from Nantwich,’ Liz said. ‘But I live here now. Moved down here last year.’ She held out her hand bravely, smiling a little too enthusiastically. ‘It’s great to meet you, Tess!’

‘Yes,’ said Tess, shaking her hand. ‘You too.’ She cleared her throat. ‘I’ve just moved back and is great to catch up with people like Adam,’ she said woodenly. ‘Because he is my oldest friend. And is like a brother to me.’

‘Right! Right!’ Liz tried and failed to hide her pleasure at this news, and stared at Tess with something like adoration. Adam, meanwhile, glared at his oldest friend with something like loathing.

‘So—’ Tess went on, evilly, getting into her stride. ‘It’s great to meet you. Are you two—’

‘That wasn’t fair,’ Adam said a couple of minutes later, as he bundled Tess out of the shop, having guilt-bought far too many overpriced deli items and leaving Liz smiling pleasantly behind them.

‘It wasn’t fair of you to do that to me, the old routine again,’ Tess said firmly. ‘Or to that nice girl. I remember you and your ways, Adam. But poor Liz doesn’t know about you.’

‘What about me?’ Adam said tetchily.

‘That the main reason you work at the Feathers is to pick up women,’ Tess told him. ‘And that you should be in the tourist guide as a well-known landmark.’

‘I only slept with her a couple of times,’ Adam said, ignoring this.

Tess hit him on the arm. “‘I only slept with her a couple of times,’” she mimicked, crossly. ‘Go men. You think that means it doesn’t mean anything! Oh, you are so useless. She’s mad about you! She’s been waiting for you to call her!’

‘Well...’ Adam said. ‘I bet that’s not true. I mean, I like her, but—’

‘Oh, I know, you can’t be bothered to actually talk to her, after you’ve shagged her,’ said Tess, and it came out sounding angrier than she meant.

‘Don’t split your infinitives,’ Adam said, brightly. ‘Call yourself a Classicist?’

‘It’s not funny,’ Tess said. They walked down the road towards the pub and after a pause she

burst out, 'God, sometimes I really hate men.'

~~Adam glanced at her swiftly, and was silent for a moment, then said, 'So, er—have you heard from Will?' He patted her arm. 'Don't hit me again. I'm serious. I'm sorry about you two, I thought it was all going well.'~~

'I thought so too,' said Tess. 'I was wrong, obviously.'

'Do you know why...?' Adam began, and trailed off.

'Yeah. He's seeing someone else.' Tess said. Adam nodded. 'Someone called Ticky.'

'I don't know what that means.'

Tess gazed up at the thick white January sky. 'No, I don't either. Except I hate her.'

'You see, just like a girl,' Adam said. 'You should hate him, he's the one who did you wrong.'

'You sound like Mae West,' Tess said, trying not to sound miserable.

'I mean it. I never thought he was...' he trailed off again. Tess nodded, and shoved her hand through the air in a 'I know, I know' gesture. Adam had met Will a couple of times and she had come to accept—so she told herself—that there were some people with whom Will was not destined to get on. Adam was one of them. He was too ready to laugh, too ready to take the piss out of Tess; they knew each other too well, perhaps, for Will ever to be the third side of the triangle.

Will had not been a laugh-a-minute. Indeed, that was one of the things that Tess had originally liked about him. Here she was, this poverty-stricken teacher, frittering her twenties away in South London pubs, wearing too-short skirts and drinking Pernod and Black, her only claim to cultural superiority being that she taught Classics (though bribing bored fourteen-year-olds with a bloodthirsty description of the Emperor Nero's brutal murder of his mother Agrippina as a back route to telling them about the fall of the Roman Empire did not necessarily indicate the highest levels of academic achievement, she knew). Their friend Henry, whom Tess knew from university and Will from school, had introduced them at a birthday party. It was a hot summer's day and Tess was wearing a shirt dress which emphasized her curvy form; her eyes were sparkling, her thick dark hair shining, and she had a tan, having just returned from two weeks in Greece with Fiona, another friend from university.

Will had been impressed with this clever, pretty girl and—height being a sensitive issue with him, since he stood less than five foot six inches high in his shoes—what he particularly loved was the way her tanned face looked up to his, her blue-grey eyes smiling at him, as she described her holiday. He had barely listened as she talked, and so he never heard that they were staying in an all-inclusive resort, and to his question, 'Did you go to Mycenae?' never heard the answer, 'Well, we went to a karaoke bar called Mycenae Mike.' He merely smiled as she chattered, wondering how easy the promising shirt dress which revealed just enough of her breasts would be to remove.

Three dates did it; by then Tess, who had been rather unsure about him at the beginning, since he was so unlike her in so many ways, had fallen for his adept flattery, and by Christmas she was head over heels in love with him. For the first year all was wonderful; Will liked the fact that she was a little different from his usual (tall, thin, blonde, posh) girlfriends, and Tess for her part liked the fact that he was a little different from her usual (young, puppy-dog-eager) boyfriends. Their differences were a badge of honour in her eyes: they weren't each other's usual type, she told herself, and anyone who'd care to listen, including Adam. That's what made it work so well—to start with.

'I've asked myself if I knew when it went wrong,' Tess said. They were walking towards the edge of town, down to the ancient walls. It was mid-afternoon but the sky was getting darker, almost as if night-time was approaching.

'And what conclusions have you reached?' said Adam.

She looked sideways up at him, pushing her hair out of her face, as they walked along the windy

street. Here, at the edge of town, the breeze was often strongest, whistling through the lanes like a dervish. Tess wished she could tell him the truth. But he, of all people, was not someone she wanted to talk to about it. She gave a little wince, as if she were speaking an unfamiliar language, trying to frame the words correctly.

‘He—’ She shrugged her shoulders. ‘He just went off me, I think. I wasn’t right for him.’

‘Well, it’s also that he wasn’t right for you,’ said Adam, but Tess wasn’t really ready to hear that she still remembered the Will who stood up when she came back into the room, who was always on time, who sent her flowers to work on a regular basis, who bossed her around, in an amused, rather despairing way, which made her feel like a naughty schoolgirl, instead of the matronly teacher she feared becoming.

‘He wasn’t,’ she said, slowly. ‘But...I thought he was.’

‘Did you have the Dealbreaker, though?’ Adam said.

‘The what?’

‘Come on!’ Adam smiled at her. ‘You remember the Deal-breaker.’

‘My God, do you still use that?’

The Dealbreaker was Adam’s cut-off point, the moment when you knew, he said, by some tiny action, that this woman was never going to be for you—though he insisted Tess apply it to men, too. It was his excuse to be picky, she always thought. It had seen off Cathy (gobbled her food), Laura (pigeon-toed), Alison (never heard of Pol Pot) and Belinda (allegedly, hairy chest). Tess shook her head, wondering at him. Twelve years since she left for university, nine years since she moved permanently to London, and Adam was still working in the same place using the same terminology, pulling with the same frequency. But who was she to judge any more? She’d moved back here, after all, and she no longer had any idea who she was. He at least seemed to know.

‘Sure I do,’ he said. ‘It’s good, I’m telling you. There’s always a Dealbreaker. The fatal flaw. In any relationship, until they’re the One.’

‘There’s always a fatal flaw if you always look for one, Ad,’ Tess said pointedly. ‘So, what was the dealbreaker with Liz?’

‘I’m not telling you,’ said Adam. ‘Though it’s pretty bad.’

She stared at him, curiously. ‘Oh, go on.’

‘No,’ said Adam, and she knew he meant it. ‘What was the Dealbreaker with Will? Come on, there must have been one.’

‘There wasn’t...’ She shook her head.

‘Bollocks, Tess,’ Adam said. ‘Are you seriously telling me there wasn’t? I know there was.’

She said, slowly, ‘God, there really was.’

‘So?’

Tess laughed up at him, her eyes sparkling. ‘Not telling you either.’ He smiled. ‘Not because you won’t, honest. Just ‘cause—it’s—’ She shook her head again. ‘Too embarrassing. Get me drunk and I’ll tell you.’

‘That’s a promise,’ Adam said. ‘So,’ he said, changing the subject. ‘What do you need to do first?’

‘Find a place to live,’ Tess said. ‘No idea where to begin. I’ll probably have to get a flatmate, too.’

‘When do you start?’

‘Four weeks’ time. But my lease came to an end, and I just wanted to leave London,’ Tess said, walking fast to keep up with him. ‘Beside, they wanted me here early to prepare for the summer term.’

‘When did the job end?’

‘Last week,’ said Tess. ‘They’re folding my classes into Mr Collins’s—he’s the head of Classics.’

‘Two people teaching Latin and Ancient Greek at a secondary school in South London, eh,’ said Adam. ‘Wow.’

‘Wow exactly, and that’s why I’m the one who got made redundant,’ Tess said, in a small voice.

‘Sorry,’ Adam said, putting his arm round her again. ‘You’re back now. You’ve got loads of time to settle in, too.’

‘Exactly. I thought I’d use my redundancy to come down early and scout the place out for a bit, before I start at the college.’ She shook her head. ‘Funny, isn’t it. So posh. Going from Fair View comp to this.’

They had reached the end of town; they were standing in the last lane that overlooked the medieval city walls. It was still strangely dark for the middle of the afternoon. Tess peered over, down to the valley, the hills opposite, the gathering clouds above them. ‘Hey,’ she said quietly. ‘The water meadows.’

‘Yeah,’ said Adam. ‘Did you know, they’re—’ he started, but then stopped abruptly and held out his hand. ‘It’s raining.’

‘What were you going to say?’

‘Doesn’t matter.’ He patted her arm. ‘T—it’s great to have you home again.’

‘I need somewhere to live,’ she said, uneasily. ‘Then I’ll start to feel like I’m home.’

‘Fine,’ said Adam, clapping his hands. ‘Let’s go and see Miss Store.’

‘Who? Oh, the old lady with the bag—why are we going to see her?’

‘Because,’ said Adam, looking pleased with himself, ‘Miss Store’s neighbour has just moved out and there is a cottage for rent by the church, which I am pretty sure you will love.’

She stared at him. ‘Adam, that’s—wow!’

‘I told you,’ he said. ‘I know everything in this stupid small town. I’m like a fixer.’ She laughed. ‘And I want my oldest friend to be happy now she’s back. Shall we go?’

‘Is it called something like Ye Olde Cottage?’

‘It’s called Easter Cottage,’ Adam said, smiling. ‘And it’s on Lord’s Lane.’

‘Of course it is,’ said Tess. ‘You are wonderful.’

‘Let’s go,’ he said, and they turned away from the water meadows.

‘Aw,’ Tess said. She stopped and hugged him, her voice muffled against his jacket. ‘Oh, Ad. I missed you, man. I’m sorry. I’m sorry it’s been so long.’

‘S’OK,’ he said, squeezing her tight. ‘I missed you too, T. But you’re back now. Back where you belong. And it’s brilliant.’

CHAPTER THREE

Several weeks later, Tess sat on the sofa in the sitting room of Easter Cottage kicking her shoes against the worn flowered silk of the sofa. Her feet beat a steady, echoing rhythm against the fabric in the silence of the room as she gazed out of the window, lost in thought. It was late afternoon. From the direction of the high street, sounds of small-town life drifted up to her—each one, it seemed, redolent of the world she was now in, each one serving to emphasize once again the world she had left behind. The sound of friends meeting in the lane. The ring of the shop bell in the Langford gift shop. A dog barking. Evening was fast approaching, another evening alone in this still-strange new cottage. She was living in a *cottage*, for God's sake. She shivered. Tess was uneasy. Unhappy, even.

She remembered, as she had done several times, the conversation she'd had with her mother the night before she'd moved back to Langford.

'I'm sure you'll enjoy being back there,' Emily Tennant had told her daughter. 'Just mind you don't turn into an old lady.'

'An old lady?' Tess had said, amused. Three years ago, the week after Stephanie's wedding, her father Frank had sold his GP practice and her parents had retired to the coast. Tess had thought they were mad, moving away from home. Still did, especially now she was on the eve of going back there. 'I still don't understand why you moved. I mean, the new house is great, but—Langford's Langford! It's beautiful.'

'Of course it is,' her mother said soothingly. 'But we wanted a bungalow. Somewhere easy to manage. We wanted to have some fresh air, be by the sea. Take the dogs for walks in peace, and put in double glazing and a satellite dish if we want it.' She sighed. 'I was just sick of feeling like a tourist in my own home. Langford's full of second-home owners and day trippers and tea shops. Sit at the table where Jane Austen sat, and all of that. Trust me, I know,' she had added, mysteriously. 'It's wonderful, Tess dear, but—don't get sucked into all that heritagey stuff. You're still young.'

'Oh, Mum, calm down!' Tess had told her, slightly indignant. Was it not she who had danced on the bar in Vauxhall the previous week, and done three tequila shots in a row before snogging the barman? 'I'm thirty. I'm in the prime of my life. I'm not an old lady.'

That afternoon, in the sweet little shop next to the Tourist Centre at the far end of the high street, Tess had bought a tea towel with a map of Langford on it. It was really nice, and she needed some more tea towels; Easter Cottage was lovely but it had virtually nothing in it. But it had cost her six pounds, and she was starting to see her mother's point. She was pretty broke, and she was lucky to have got this job.

Summer term at the College would be beginning soon; Easter was early that year. It seemed impossible that three months ago she'd been living with Meena in Balham, in the depths of despair, dumped by Will and sacked by work (well, rather smoothly told her job was being 'folded into' her boss's). Added to which, the week before Christmas, a boy who looked about ten had mugged her and taken her purse, just outside Stockwell tube. That had been the final straw.

Well over a month had passed now since she'd found Easter Cottage and she was still without a flatmate. Tess was starting to realize how foolhardy she'd been. People didn't turn up somewhere like Langford looking for a place to rent. They were either retired, or young married couples, or weekend-

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