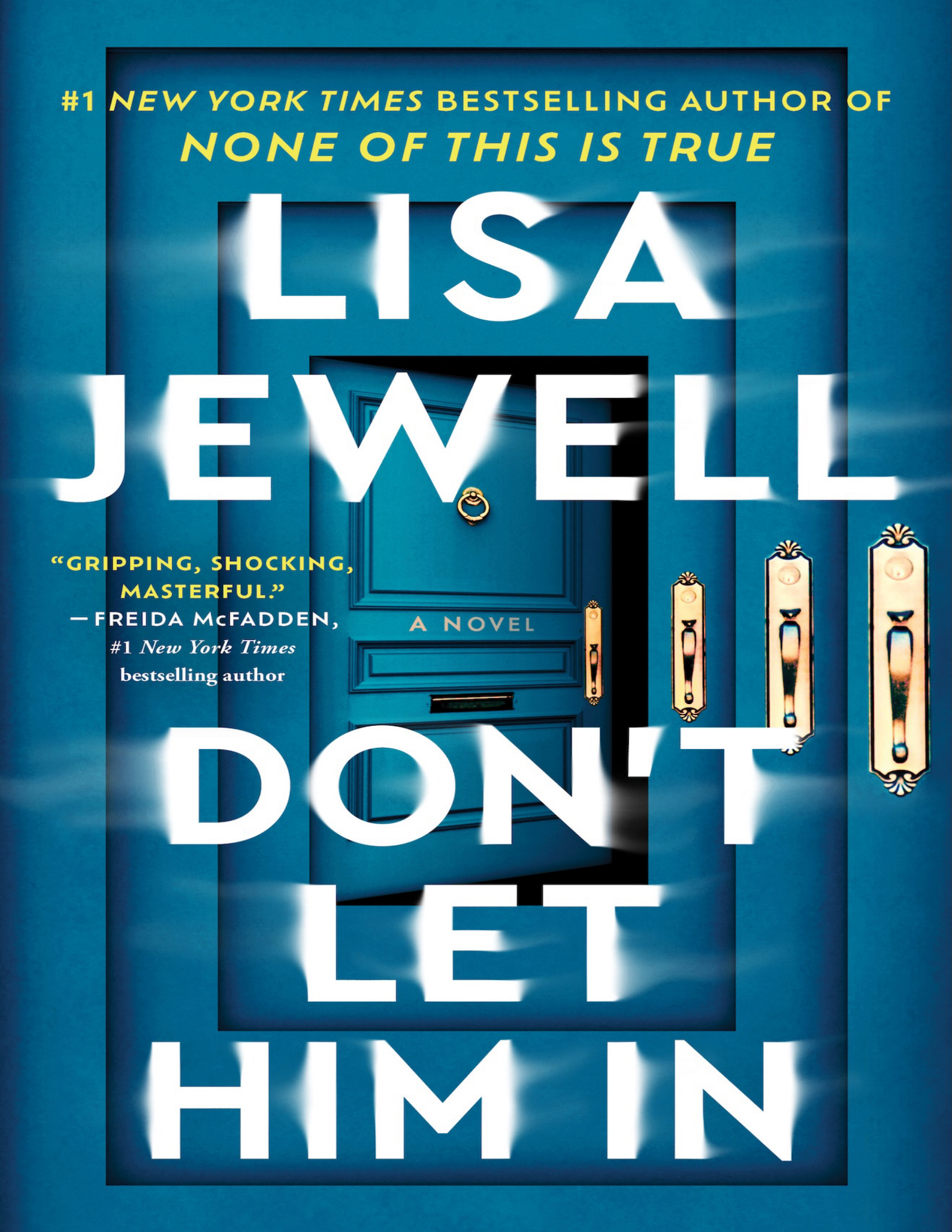
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
NONE OF THIS IS TRUE

LISA JEWELL



"GRIPPING, SHOCKING, MASTERFUL."
— FREIDA McFADDEN,
#1 *New York Times*
bestselling author

A NOVEL

DON'T LET HIM IN

DON'T LET HIM IN

LISA JEWELL

ATRIA BOOKS
NEW YORK AMSTERDAM/ANTWERP LONDON
TORONTO SYDNEY/MELBOURNE NEW DELHI

Part One

ONE

NOVEMBER

The house is spectacular. A huge white stucco villa on three floors plus attic rooms, and a direct view of the sea visible through tall windows that frame the vista at the back and the front. I imagine that a wall must have been taken down at some point to offer up that level of open-plan space in a Victorian house. Steel beams put in. Expensive stuff. Just to give the owners more light and space. I feel an uncharacteristic twitch of jealousy. It's not like me to envy others. I rarely, in fact, give a thought to them. But this is a different case altogether. I turn off the van's engine and sit, just for a moment, readying myself. Through the window, on the other side of the house, I see the shadows of movement and as I pull on a baseball cap and open the driver's door, I hear the muted murmur of chatter. There are four cars parked outside and clearly the day is still going strong. I go to the side of the van and pull open the door. There it is, my last delivery of the day: an extra-large bouquet of white hydrangeas and roses, no expense spared, in a pink bag. On the envelope is the inscription "Nina Swann & Family."

I walk toward the front door, peering in subtly as I pass the kitchen window. A small group sits around the table, a mix of younger and older people. They all have wine, are dressed somberly. There is music playing, candles are flickering. I see art and photography and graphics on the walls; I see a designer kitchen in midnight blue and pink, with flashes of brass and copper, big globe light bulbs hanging at irregular intervals from golden

chains, plants on shelves. Through a door at the back of the kitchen, I see huge velvet sofas, a mixing desk, a Gorillaz poster.

It's the home of a Gen X man who has made good decisions, made a success of his life, piled his building blocks one on top of the other with precision and care. But also, the home of a man who made one really bad mistake that his wife and his family are going to pay for, over and over again.

I keep moving past the window and then I put my finger to the doorbell.

TWO

Ash thanks the delivery driver, then closes the front door behind her and carries the flowers to the kitchen. Here, her mother, Nina; her brother, Arlo; her grandmother; her uncle; her aunt; her three cousins; and her best friend all sit around the big wooden table, which is littered with wine-stained glasses, dirty plates, the gelatinous-looking remains of the canapés. The atmosphere is both brittle and unburdened. The worst of it is over, the day is done. Now Ash is shoeless in black tights, her heels abandoned earlier, once most of the other guests had left.

"Who are they from?" asks her mother. Her voice is ragged.

"Er..." Ash feels around the pale pink bag for a card, peels it off, and hands it to her mother.

"Please," says her mother. "You do it."

Ash pulls a small card from the envelope; it is the same shade of antique pink as the bag and has a linear rose embossed on the front, over which she subconsciously runs her fingertip. Inside is a note scribbled in messy florist's handwriting with a water blotch on the ink.

Thinking of you all
Love and condolences,
The Tanners

"Who are the Tanners?"

Ash's mother sighs. "Literally no idea. Can you put them in some water?"

"We've run out of vases."

Her mother sighs again, and Ash knows that she must not mention anything more to do with flowers today. She sticks them in a vase that already holds a bouquet—the two bouquets look wildly mismatched, aesthetically unpleasing—then joins her family at the table.

Ella slops some white wine into Ash's empty glass. Ash makes a kiss at her.

The sun didn't come out today, not once, which is ironic as Ash's father was obsessed with sunshine, chased it around the garden, chased it around the world, kept a UV lamp in his home office for gray days, studied forecasts religiously, insisted on barbecues at the merest hint of spring. He'd wanted this house because it was south-facing; he had his favorite suntrap spots in the garden, one in particular where he could sunbathe even in February, which he referred to as "Ibiza." "I'm going to Ibiza for a bit," he'd say on a sunny morning, a coffee in one hand, sunglasses on his head. There was always a bottle of sun cream by the back door. All year round.

But today, the day they said goodbye to him, the sun stayed away. Ash liked to think maybe he'd taken it for himself. But on the other hand—no. She very much believes that dead people have no influence.

He was fifty-four.

He was killed by a stranger.

Pushed onto the tracks.

Under a train.

He was on his way home from a restaurant opening, not one of his but a friend's, in Soho. He was very drunk. He'd been drinking tequila slammers, according to his friend. The life and soul. Always the life and soul, Paddy Swann.

The man who pushed him was called Joe Kritner.

There. Done. One moment. Two lives. More, if you include the train driver, the witnesses, the paramedics who had to pull the bits of him off the tracks.

There's a photo album on the table; Ash and her brother, Arlo, had put it together. They'd left space in the final pages for guests to add their own photos of Dad, of Paddy. Ash opens it at a random page and sighs at the sight of her dad wearing a bucket hat and sunglasses, holding a pint of beer in a plastic cup at some kind of festival. Peak nineties, Ash thinks. He was born in 1970, so must have been about twenty-five here. Same age as she is now.

"Where's that?" she asks her mum, turning the album toward her mother.

"Ha, Glastonbury. Of course."

"Of course," says Ash drily. "Were you there too?"

"Yup. Oasis. Pulp. The Cure. Boiling hot. We went with Lena and Johnny. Dad got very, very..."

"Drunk?" Arlo suggests.

"And the rest."

They all smile wryly. Everyone knows what Paddy was like. He liked to drink, he liked to take party drugs, he liked to get stoned. He liked to listen to music all the time, always walked around in headphones. He liked vinyl, liked T-shirts, liked live music, liked people, liked food.

Paddy Swann was the most uncomplicated human being in the world, and then, two weeks ago, a very complicated person used Paddy Swann as a character in his own very complicated internal story and pushed him under a train. And now he is dead.

The remains of his clan are loud now, they don't know how to be quiet, even in the fading light of the day that they buried him. But the noise is riven through with something piquant and terrible. The lack of his voice, his laugh, his bulk. The fact that at the other end of today, everyone's lives will continue without him.

Ash slams the album shut and grabs her wineglass, tips it back, ignores the sugary, cloying warmth of it in her mouth, the way it leaches into the stale insides of her cheeks. How will they go to bed tonight? How will they say that this day is over, and the next bit begins?

Part Two

THREE

JANUARY

Ash picks up the card that is propped on the sideboard in the kitchen and reads the greeting inside.

Dear Nina and family

I just heard the news about Paddy. I am so devastated to hear of his death last year. Paddy and I worked together in a restaurant in Mayfair many, many moons ago. He was one of the nicest guys I ever knew, and one of the best chefs I've ever worked alongside. A few years ago, I chanced upon his restaurant in Whitstable and didn't realize it was his place until I saw him passing across the floor. I stopped him and we had a chat, and he looked so well, so full of his usual bonhomie and generosity of spirit. He pulled up a chair and joined me for the rest of my meal, forced good wines upon me. We caught up a little on our lives, his spent growing a family and a restaurant empire on the south coast, mine living the bachelor life and running a wine bar not far from where we first met in Mayfair. I always

thought our paths would cross again someday, that I'd go back to Whitstable and enjoy another hour or two in his delightful company, eat another one of his delicious meals, but it never happened, life got in the way, and now it is too late.

Anyway, I just wanted you to know how much I adored Paddy and how sorry I was to hear that he had gone so young and in such tragic circumstances.

Yours, with sympathy and with love, Nick Radcliffe

Ash waves the card at her mother, who is standing by the kettle, waiting for it to boil.

"Nice card."

Her mother turns. Her eyes are dull and tinged with gray circles.

"Oh," she says. "Yes. Very sweet."

"You ever met him?"

"No. I don't think so. At least, not that I remember."

Ash pulls her phone out of her pocket and googles the name, adds Mayfair to the search terms. His name pops up on LinkedIn and she clicks it.

Nick Radcliffe is listed as the "Co-founder and Owner of Bar Amelie in London W1." In his profile photo he looks about fifty, has pure white hair, a trim white beard, very blue eyes, and a pleasant smile. She turns the phone toward her mum. "Look," she says.

Her mum glances distractedly at the photo and says, "Nope. Never seen him before. He's quite hot, though."

Ash throws her mother a look of horror.

"What?" says her mother. "There's no law against it."

Ash googles "Bar Amelie" and finds a glitzy website for it. It's just off Curzon Street and is sleek and beautiful—brushed brass and pale velvet, three different types of caviar

on the bar menu. It's the antithesis of her dad's restaurants: sandy-floored, rough-hewn, chalkboards, tongue-and-groove cladding, smoky chowders and chargrilled lobsters.

"We should go there," Ash says, showing the wine bar's website to her mum. "Get him to tell us more about what Dad was like back then, before you met him."

"Your dad knew hundreds of people before I met him."

"I know. But he sounds really nice. He might have stories."

"Well then, you can go there," she says. "I'm sure he'd be thrilled to meet Paddy's lovely girl and share his stories with you. And you might get a free dinner. Or a job."

This last sentence is clipped and raw and there follows a small, tense silence.

"I might," says Ash. Then she puts the card back on the sideboard with a slightly haughty snap of her wrist. "I might."

Ash works at the fashion exchange boutique in the village. People bring in their old clothes; she and the shop's owner, Marcelline, steam them up in the back room to get the smell off them; then they hang them on expensive hangers next to displays of silk flowers and snazzy cabinetry. If the item sells, the customer gets 50 percent; the shop gets the rest.

It was meant to be temporary, this job, just a stopgap for the summer after coming back to live at home when London didn't work out for her, while she sorted herself out. But then it had been September, then October, then her dad had died and now it is January, nearly February, and she is still working in the fashion exchange boutique and still sleeping in her childhood bedroom, and she will be twenty-six soon and did not expect to still be here.

But as much as she knows she shouldn't be here, she doesn't want to move out. Not now. She wants to be in this beautiful house where she grew up, which still smells of her father.

She has regressed. She is going backward. She is falling.

FOUR

FOUR YEARS EARLIER

I kiss my wife on the lips. Her breath smells of last night's toothpaste mixed with sleep. But I kiss her every morning. It's what I do. It's part of the thing, the illusion, the rhythms that have formed the percussion of the last four years of our lives. If I did not kiss her on her lips in the morning, then she would wonder… and I don't want her to wonder. If she starts to wonder at the little things, then she will eventually start to wonder at the bigger things. So, I manage the little things forensically to make sure that everything is the same. Until it isn't.

"Morning," she says, curling into me, an arm reaching across my chest, her face nestling into the space between my shoulder and chin.

"Morning, my love." I kiss her hair. It smells of her laundry, and also slightly of her scalpy essence, which I don't love, but it's part of the deal. I snuggle into her, and we lie like that for a moment, as we do every morning. And then I peel myself away from her and stretch and yawn and climb off the bed, find my gown where it is slung across the armchair in the window, and slide my arms into it. The sky through the window is a rich blue, more like July than February. It sends a shiver of hopefulness through me. My time here in this stultifying, unsatisfying place is drawing to an end. I can feel it sliding away, like a dropped silk scarf running between my fingers.

I turn and smile at my wife. "I love you," I say.

"I love you too," she replies.

Then I say, "Oh, by the way, I'm speaking to George today."

George is my fictional financial advisor.

“He wants us to put a little more into our pensions. Just a thousand or two. He’s found a little wriggle room.”

Fictional pensions too. For the fictional future that we will be spending together.

“Oh,” says my wife. “That’s good. But I don’t really have the cash to hand right now. Not after paying for your knee surgery.”

I feel my jaw clench.

“I really think we should do it, though. Darling.” The word almost hurts to utter. “Think about our future. You don’t want to be doing this forever. You work so hard. We both work so hard. We need something soft to fall back onto, and the sooner the better. Every penny we put into that pension now, the closer we get to what we both want.”

I hear her sigh, and I know it’s a sigh of acquiescence and I feel my jaw unlock. The picture of the future I have painted for us is so exquisite that I almost wish it could be real. We will sell this house, this stupid house she bought when she left her stupid husband (nothing makes me happier than talking about how stupid her ex-husband is), and we will buy a house in the Algarve and she will paint and I will potter, and her children will come to stay and all of this, this dreadful day-after-day toil and drudgery, it will be over and we will be happy, forever.

“I’ll see what I can do,” she says.

“Thank you, darling,” I say, and this time the word doesn’t hurt because this time I mean it. She is my darling. My darling wife who would do anything for me. Absolutely anything.

FIVE

MARCH

Two days after Ash's twenty-sixth birthday, a parcel arrives. Ash sees it on the front step as she arrives home from work. It's not an Amazon parcel, it's in a smart box with a handwritten label, and at first she assumes it's for her, a late gift. But she looks closer and sees that it's addressed to her mother, so she scoops it up and brings it into the kitchen.

"Mum," she calls out. "There's a parcel."

"I know," Nina replies from her office at the top of the landing. "I asked the guy to leave it. I was in a Zoom."

"Looks interesting. Can I open it?"

"If you like."

Ash unloops her bag from across her chest and pulls off her teddy bomber jacket and oversized scarf. She gets scissors from a drawer and slices through the tape. As she folds back the arms of the box, she sees another box inside, pale antique pink with a teal satin ribbon.

"Er, Mum. I think you should open this. It looks like a present."

"Give me a minute."

Nina appears a moment later, taking AirPods from her ears and pulling a cardigan on over her work shirt.

"Ooh," she says, glancing at the pretty box. She looks at the writing on the address label and shrugs. "Don't recognize that."

Then she pulls the lid off the box and peels back some tissue paper to reveal a scuffed-up copper Zippo lighter and a note in a small envelope.

She glances at Ash, and Ash shrugs. Then she opens the small envelope and reads out the note:

Dear Nina,

I was going through old boxes the other day, looking for some letters from my late mother, when I came across this. It belonged to Paddy. He left it at the restaurant one night and I took it home to make sure nobody else snaffled it. When I mentioned it to him, he told me to keep it. I think he was intending to give up smoking, but I'm not sure that he ever did.

Anyway, I thought you might want it. A little bit of history.

I do hope you are holding up OK?

All my very best, as before,

Yours Nick Radcliffe

"Wow." Her mum holds the lighter in the palm of her hand and stares at it.

Ash can see tears glistening across the surface of her eyes and touches her arm gently. "That's wonderful," she says. "Isn't it?" She picks up the letter and sees that Nick Radcliffe's email address is written under his signature. He clearly wants a response. "Can I?" Ash glances at the lighter in her mother's palm.

Her mother passes it to her, and Ash is taken aback by the weight of it in her hand.

"Everyone had these in the eighties and nineties," says her mother. "The smell of them —it takes me back."

Ash lifts it to her nose: a hit of butane, burnt metal, smoke. "Will you write to thank him?"

"I suppose so," Nina replies, her chest going up and dropping down with a heavy sigh. "Yes. I should."

"He wrapped it so nicely too. Do you think he's gay?"

"Ash!"

"Just joking! But it is so beautiful. The tissue paper. All of it." She hands the lighter back to her mother, who curls her fingers around it. "Can I keep the box?"

"Of course," says her mother. Then she sighs again and says, "I've got another stupid Zoom in a minute. But I'll be down after that. Maybe we could light the fire and watch some trash?"

Ash smiles and nods. "Yes. That would be nice."

Ash takes the box up to her room. She puts it on her dressing table. She'll fill it with something. With trinkets. Mementos. She goes to the window of her room, which overlooks the sea. The sun has just set, the sky through the bare trees is a dark, haunting gray, lacy with pale clouds catching the ends of the daylight. She feels the thud and canter of time running by as her early twenties bleed into her late twenties and thirty appears heavy on the horizon. She hears the drone of her mother's tired, end-of-the-week professional voice talking about staffing issues with the people who run her dead father's restaurants, the restaurants that her mother now has to run, even though she has another job, albeit a part-time one that she can do in an hour or two a day, but still, it's a lot. Her mother is tired and sad and alone. And so is she.

Four months and eight days since her dad died.

She thinks of Arlo, her baby brother, far away from here, living a life unaffected by the echoes of devastation that still ring around their home. He has his big, messy house full of friends, his high-paying job, his pub nights and club nights, his girlfriends (a different one every week), his weed, his tattoos, his normal life. He has the same freewheeling, formless starter life that Ash had been living up until eight months ago, but while Arlo takes it in his stride, hers had nearly broken her.

She flops onto her bed and goes onto Hinge, scrolls mindlessly for a while, thinking that a boy might save her, but they all look ugly to her, stupid and ugly. Then she goes onto Airbnb and looks at expensive apartments in stunning European cities that she can't afford to visit. Then, and only then, does she go to her camera roll, scroll backward through February, through their hideous Christmas, past the funeral and into the

summer before, when she was lost and broken by a sequence of events that she still can't explain, and back further again until there she is, a year ago today, before any of the bad things had happened, and she stares at herself, that girl with slightly shorter hair, with a mouth wide open in the throes of laughter, her arm around her father, his arm around her, a glass of wine in his other hand, an apron tied around his waist, and a smile, that smile, the one he always had when it was sunny, when there was food, and especially when he was with her and Arlo, because he loved them both so much.

She lets her phone drop onto her chest, and she cries.

SIX

FOUR YEARS EARLIER

I look at my wife across the breakfast table. She looks tired. She's been looking tired a lot recently. It's probably my fault, but there's not a lot I can do about that. She was forty-four when I met her, a youthful forty-four. She's forty-eight now but looks closer to midfifties. She's put on a few pounds, keeps going on about "perimenopause" when she's ten years younger than Jennifer Aniston, who doesn't appear to have any problem keeping herself in shape. I want to tell her to put less butter on her toast, but I can't because that would be unpleasant, and I am a very pleasant man and a very good husband.

"You look like you could do with a holiday," I say.

She glances up at me, her tired eyes suddenly bright. But then they dull again. "We can't afford a holiday," she says. "You know that."

"Well, what if I told you that I'd had a bit of a windfall." I put it out there with a flourish.

"You have?"

"Yes, just a few hundred. Money I lent a friend a couple of years ago, they finally paid me back."

"A friend?"

"Yes. Peter Tovey. Remember I told you? He needed it to keep his child at that special school?" There is of course no such person as Peter Tovey and this never happened. But what difference does it make?