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Truly Madly Guilty

Written by Liane Moriarty

Published by Michael Joseph

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Truly Madly Guilty

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MICHAEL JOSEPH
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

MICHAEL JOSEPH

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Michael Joseph is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in Australia by Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Ltd 2016
First published in Great Britain by Michael Joseph 2016
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Set in 13.5/16 pt Garamond MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–18027–0
TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–0–718–18028–7

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For Jaci

Music is the silence between the notes.

Claude Debussy

Chapter One

'This is a story that begins with a barbecue,' said Clementine. The microphone amplified and smoothed her voice, making it more authoritative, as if it had been photoshopped. 'An ordinary neighbourhood barbecue in an ordinary backyard.'

Well, not exactly an *ordinary* backyard, thought Erika. She crossed her legs, tucked one foot behind her ankle and sniffed. Nobody would call Vid's backyard ordinary.

Erika sat in the middle of the back row of the audience in the event room that adjoined this smartly renovated local library in a suburb *forty-five* minutes out of the city, not thirty minutes, thank you very much, as suggested by the person at the cab company, who you would think would have some sort of expertise in the matter.

There were maybe twenty people in the audience, although there were fold-out chairs available for twice that many. Most of the audience were elderly people, with lively, expectant faces. These were intelligent, informed senior citizens who had come along on this rainy (yet again, would it ever end?) morning to collect new and fascinating information at their local 'Community Matters Meeting'. 'I saw the most interesting woman speak today,' they wanted to tell their children and grandchildren.

Before she came, Erika had looked up the library's website to see how it described Clementine's talk. The blurb was short, and not very informative: *Hear Sydney mother and well-known cellist, Clementine Hart, share her story: 'One Ordinary Day'.*

Was Clementine really a 'well-known' cellist? That seemed a stretch.

The five-dollar fee for today's event included two guest speakers, a delicious home-made morning tea and the chance to win a lucky door prize. The speaker after Clementine was going to talk about the council's controversial redevelopment plan for the local pool. Erika could hear the distant gentle clatter of cups and saucers being set up for the morning tea now. She held her flimsy raffle ticket for the lucky door prize safely on her lap. She couldn't be bothered putting it in her bag and then having to find it when they drew the raffle. Blue, E 24. It didn't have the look of a winning ticket.

The lady who sat directly in front of Erika had her grey, curly-haired head tipped to one side in a sympathetic, engaged manner, as if she were ready to agree with everything Clementine had to say. The tag on her shirt was sticking up. Size twelve. Target. Erika reached over and slid it back down.

The lady turned her head.

'Tag,' whispered Erika.

The lady smiled her thanks and Erika watched the back of her neck turn pale pink. The younger man sitting next to her, her son perhaps, who looked to be in his forties, had a barcode tattooed on the back of his tanned neck, as if he were a supermarket product. Was it meant to be funny? Ironic? Symbolic? Erika wanted to tell him that it was, in point of fact, idiotic.

'It was just an ordinary Sunday afternoon,' said Clementine.

Noticeable repetition of the word 'ordinary'. Clementine must have decided that it was important she appear 'relatable' to these ordinary people in the ordinary outer suburbs. Erika imagined Clementine sitting at her small dining room table, or maybe at Sam's unrestored antique desk, in her shabby-chic sandstone terrace house with its 'water glimpse', writing her little community-minded speech while she chewed on the end of her pen and pulled all that lavish, dark hair of hers over one shoulder to caress in that sensual, slightly self-satisfied way she had, as if she were Rapunzel, thinking to herself: ordinary.

Indeed, Clementine, how shall you make the ordinary people understand?

'It was early winter. A cold, gloomy day,' said Clementine.

What the . . .? Erika shifted in her chair. It had been a beautiful day. A '*magnificent*' day. That was the word Vid had used.

Or possibly 'glorious'. A word like that, anyway.

'There was a real bite in the air,' said Clementine, and she actually shivered theatrically, and surely unnecessarily, when it was warm in the room, so much so that a man sitting a few rows in front of Erika appeared to have nodded off. He had his legs stretched out in front of him and his hands clasped comfortably across his stomach, his head tipped back as if he were napping on an invisible pillow. Perhaps he'd died.

Maybe the day of the barbecue had been cool, but it was definitely not *gloomy*. Erika knew that eyewitness accounts were notoriously unreliable because people thought they just pressed 'rewind' on the little recorder installed in their heads, when in fact they constructed their memories. They 'developed their own narratives'. And so, when Clementine remembered the barbecue she remembered a cold, gloomy day. But Clementine was wrong. Erika remembered (she *remembered*; she was absolutely not constructing) how, on the morning of the barbecue, Vid had bent down to lean into her car window. 'Isn't it a magnificent day!' he'd said.

Erika knew for an absolute fact that was what he'd said.

Or it may have been 'glorious'.

But it was a word with positive connotations. She could be sure of that.

(If only Erika had said, 'Yes, Vid, it certainly is a magnificent/glorious day,' and put her foot back on the accelerator.)

'I remember I'd dressed my little girls extra warmly,' said Clementine.

Sam probably dressed the girls, thought Erika.

Clementine cleared her throat and gripped the sides of the lectern with both hands. The microphone was angled too high

for her, so it seemed as though she were on tippy-toes trying to get her mouth close enough. Her neck was elongated, emphasising the new skinniness of her face.

Erika considered the possibility of discreetly edging her way around the side of the room and zipping over to adjust the microphone. It would only take a second. She imagined Clementine shooting her a grateful smile. 'Thank God you did that,' she would say afterwards, while they had coffee. 'You really saved the day.'

Except that Clementine didn't really want Erika there today. She hadn't missed the horrified expression that flashed across Clementine's face when she had suggested she'd like to come along to hear her speak, although Clementine had quickly recovered herself and said it was fine, lovely, how nice, they could have coffee in the local food court afterwards.

'It was a last-minute invitation,' said Clementine. 'The barbecue. We didn't know our hosts that well. They were, well, they were friends of friends.' She looked down at the lectern as if she'd lost her place. She'd carried a little pile of handwritten palm-sized index cards with her when she walked up to the lectern. There was something heartbreaking about those cards, as if Clementine had remembered that little tip from their oratory lessons at school. She must have cut them up with scissors. Not her grandmother's pearl-handled ones. They'd gone missing.

It was odd seeing Clementine 'onstage', so to speak, without her cello. She looked so conventional, in her blue jeans and 'nice' floral top. Suburban mum outfit. Clementine's legs were too short for jeans and they looked even shorter with flat ballet shoes like she was wearing today. Well, it was just a fact. She had looked almost – even though it seemed so disloyal to use the word in relation to Clementine – *frumpy*, when she'd walked up to the lectern. When she performed she put her hair up and wore heels and all black: long skirts made out of floaty

material, wide enough so she could fit the cello between her knees. Seeing Clementine sit with her head bowed tenderly, passionately towards her cello, as if she were embracing it, one long tendril of hair falling just short of the strings, her arm bent at that strange, geometric angle, was always so sensual, so exotic, so *other* to Erika. Each time she saw Clementine perform, even after all these years, Erika inevitably experienced a sensation like loss, as though she yearned for something unattainable. She'd always assumed that sensation represented something more complicated and interesting than envy, because she had no interest in playing a musical instrument, but maybe it didn't. Maybe it all came back to envy.

Watching Clementine give this halting, surely pointless little speech in this little room, with a view of the busy shopping centre car park instead of the hushed, soaring-ceilinged concert halls where she normally performed, gave Erika the same shameful satisfaction she felt seeing a movie star in a trashy magazine without make-up: You're not that special after all.

'So there were six adults there that day,' said Clementine. She cleared her throat, rocked back onto her heels and then rocked forward again. 'Six adults and three children.'

And one yappy dog, thought Erika. *Yap, yap, yap.*

'As I said, we didn't really know our hosts, but we were all having a nice time, we were enjoying ourselves.'

You were enjoying yourself, thought Erika. *You* were.

She remembered how Clementine's clear, bell-like laughter rose and fell in tandem with Vid's deep chuckle. She saw people's faces slip in and out of murky shadows, their eyes like black pools, sudden flashes of teeth.

They'd taken far too long that afternoon to turn on the outdoor lights in that preposterous backyard.

'I remember at one point we were listening to music,' said Clementine. She looked down at the lectern in front of her, and then up again, as if she were seeing something on the horizon

far in the distance. Her eyes were blank. She didn't look like a suburban mum now. '"After a Dream" by the French composer Gabriel Fauré.' Naturally, she pronounced it the proper French way. 'It's a beautiful piece of music. It has this exquisite mournfulness to it.'

She stopped. Did she sense the slight shifting in seats, the discomfort in her audience? 'Exquisite mournfulness' was not the right phrase for this audience: too excessive, too arty. Clementine, my love, we're too *ordinary* for your high-brow references to French composers. Anyway, they also played 'November Rain' by Guns N' Roses that night. Not quite so arty.

Wasn't the playing of 'November Rain' somehow related to Tiffany's revelation? Or was that before? When exactly did Tiffany share her secret? Was that when the afternoon had turned to liquid and began to slip and slide away?

'We had been drinking,' said Clementine. 'But no one was drunk. Maybe a little tipsy.'

Her eyes met Erika's, as though she'd been aware of exactly where she was sitting the whole time and had been avoiding looking at her, but had now made a deliberate decision to seek her out. Erika stared back and tried to smile, like a friend, Clementine's closest friend, the godmother of her children, but her face felt paralysed, as if she'd had a stroke.

'Anyway, it was very late in the afternoon and we were all about to have dessert, we were all laughing,' said Clementine. She dropped Erika's gaze to look at someone else in the audience in the front row, and it felt dismissive, even cruel. 'Over something. I don't remember what.'

Erika felt light-headed, claustrophobic. The room had become unbearably stuffy.

The need to get out was suddenly overpowering. Here we go, she thought. Here we go again. Fight-or-flight response. Activation of her sympathetic nervous system. A shift in her

brain chemicals. That's what it was. Perfectly natural. Childhood trauma. She'd read all the literature. She knew exactly what was happening to her but the knowledge made no difference. Her body went right ahead and betrayed her. Her heart raced. Her hands trembled. She could *smell* her childhood, so thick and real in her nostrils: damp and mould and shame.

'Don't fight the panic. Face it. Float through it,' her psychologist had told her.

Her psychologist was exceptional, worth every cent, but for God's sake, as if you could float when there was no room, no space anywhere, above, below, when you couldn't take a step without feeling the spongy give of rotting *stuff* beneath your feet.

She stood, pulling at her skirt which had got stuck to the back of her legs. The guy with the barcode glanced over his shoulder at her. The sympathetic concern in his eyes gave her a tiny shock; it was like seeing the disconcertingly intelligent eyes of an ape.

'Sorry,' whispered Erika. 'I have to –' She pointed at her watch and shuffled sideways past him, trying not to brush the back of his head with her jacket.

As she reached the back of the room, Clementine said, 'I remember there was a moment when my friend screamed my name. Really loud. I'll never forget the sound.'

Erika stopped with her hand on the door, her back to the room. Clementine must have leaned towards the microphone because her voice suddenly filled the room: 'She shouted, *Clementine*!'

Clementine had always been an excellent mimic; as a musician she had an ear for the precise intonations in people's voices. Erika could hear raw terror and shrill urgency in just that one word, 'Clementine!'

She knew she was the friend who had shouted Clementine's name that night but she had no memory of it. There was nothing but a pure white space where that memory should have

been and if *she* couldn't remember a moment like that, well, that indicated a problem, an anomaly, a discrepancy; an extremely significant and concerning discrepancy. The wave of panic peaked and nearly swept her off her feet. She pushed down the handle of the door and staggered out into the relentless rain.

Chapter Two

'Been at a meeting, then?' said the cab driver taking Erika back into the city. He grinned paternally at her in the rear-vision mirror as if it were kind of cute the way women worked these days, all dressed up in suits, almost like they were proper businesspeople.

'Yes,' said Erika. She gave her umbrella a vigorous shake on the floor of the cab. 'Keep your eyes on the road.'

'Yes, ma'am!' The cab driver tapped two fingertips to his forehead in a mock salute.

'The rain,' said Erika defensively. She indicated the raindrops pelleting furiously against the windscreen. 'Slippery roads.'

'Just drove this goose to the airport,' said the cab driver. He stopped talking as he changed lanes, one meaty hand on the wheel, the other arm slung casually along the back of the seat, leaving Erika with the image of an actual large white goose sitting in the back seat of the taxi.

'He reckons all this rain is related to climate change. I said, mate, mate, I said, it's nothing to do with climate change. It's La Niña! You know about La Niña? El Niño and La Niña? Natural events! Been happening for thousands of years.'

'Right,' said Erika. She wished Oliver were with her. He'd take on this conversation for her. Why were cab drivers so insistent on educating their passengers?

'Yep. La *Niña*,' said the cabbie, with a sort of Mexican inflection. He obviously enjoyed saying 'La Niña'. 'So, we broke the record, hey? Longest consecutive run of rainy days in Sydney since 1932. Hooray for us!'

'Yes,' said Erika. 'Hooray for us.'

It was 1931, she never forgot a number, but there was no need to correct him.

'I think you'll find it was 1931,' she said. She couldn't help herself. It was a character flaw. She knew it.

'Yup, that's it, 1931,' said the cabbie, as if that's what he'd said in the first place. 'Before that it was twenty-four days in 1893. Twenty-four rainy days in a row! Let's hope we don't break that record too, hey? Think we will?'

'Let's hope not,' said Erika. She ran a finger along her forehead. Was that sweat or rain?

She'd calmed down as she waited in the rain outside the library for the cab. Her breathing was steady again, but her stomach still rocked and roiled, and she felt exhausted, depleted, as if she'd run a marathon.

She took out her phone and texted Clementine: *Sorry, had to rush off, problem at work, you were fantastic, talk later. Ex*

She changed 'fantastic' to 'great'. Fantastic was over the top. Also inaccurate. She pressed 'send'.

It had been an error of judgement to take precious time out of her working day to come and listen to Clementine's talk. She'd only gone to be supportive, and because she wanted to get her own feelings about what had happened filed away in an orderly fashion. It was as though her memory of that afternoon was a strip of old-fashioned film and someone had taken a pair of scissors and removed certain frames. They weren't even whole frames. They were slivers. Thin slivers of time. She just wanted to fill in those slivers, without admitting to anyone, 'I don't quite remember it all.'

An image came to her of her own face reflected in her bathroom mirror, her hands shaking violently as she tried to break that little yellow pill in half with her thumbnail. She suspected the gaps in her memory were related to the tablet she'd taken that afternoon. But it was a *prescription* pill. It wasn't like she'd popped an Ecstasy tablet before going to a barbecue.

She remembered feeling odd, a little detached, before they went next door to the barbecue, but that still didn't account for the gaps. Too much to drink? Yes. Too much to drink. Face the facts, Erika. You were affected by alcohol. You were 'drunk'. Erika couldn't quite believe that word could apply to her but it seemed to be the case. She had been unequivocally drunk for the first time in her life. So, maybe the gaps were alcoholic *blackouts*? Like Oliver's mum and dad. 'They can't remember whole decades of their life,' Oliver said once in front of his parents, and they'd both laughed delightedly and raised their glasses even though Oliver wasn't smiling.

'So what do you do for a quid, if you don't mind me asking?' said the cabbie.

'I'm an accountant,' said Erika.

'*Are* you now?' said the cabbie with far too much interest. 'What a coincidence, because I was just thinking –'

Erika's phone rang and she startled, as she did without fail whenever her phone rang. ('It's a phone, Erika,' Oliver kept telling her. 'That's what it's meant to do.') She could see it was her mother, the very last person in the world she wanted to talk to right now, but the cab driver was shifting in his seat, his eyes on her instead of the road, virtually licking his lips in anticipation of all the free tax advice he was about to get. Cab drivers knew a little bit about everything. He'd want to tell her about an amazing loophole he'd heard about from one of his regular customers. Erika wasn't that kind of accountant. 'Loophole' wasn't a word she appreciated. Maybe her mother was the lesser of two evils.

'Hello, Mum.'

'Well, *hello!* I didn't expect you to answer!' Her mother sounded both nervous and defiant, which didn't bode well at all.

'I was all prepared to leave a voicemail message!' said Sylvia accusingly.

'Sorry I answered,' said Erika. She *was* sorry.

'Obviously you don't need to be sorry, I just need to recalibrate. Tell you what, why don't you just listen while I pretend to leave you the message I had all prepared?'

'Go ahead,' said Erika. She looked out at the rainy street where a woman battled with an umbrella that wanted to turn itself inside out. Erika watched as the woman suddenly, marvellously, lost her temper and jammed the umbrella into a rubbish bin without losing stride and continued walking in the rain. Good on you, thought Erika, exhilarated by this little tableau. Just throw it out. Throw the damned thing *out*.

Her mother's voice got louder in her ear as if she'd repositioned her phone. 'I was going to start like this: Erika, darling, I was going to say, Erika darling, I know you can't talk right now because you're at work, which is such a pity, being stuck in an office on this beautiful day, not that it *is* a beautiful day, I must admit, it's actually a terrible day, a horrendous day, but *normally* at this time of year we have such glorious days, and whenever I wake up and have a peek outside at the blue sky, I think, oh *dear*, oh what a *pity*, poor, poor old Erika, stuck in her office on this beautiful day! That's what I think, but that's the price you pay for corporate success! If only you'd been a park ranger or some other outdoorsy job. I wasn't actually going to say the park ranger part, that just came to me then, and actually I know why it came to me, because Sally's son has just left school and he's going to be a park ranger, and when she was telling me, I just thought to myself, you know, what a marvellous job, what a clever idea, instead of being trapped in a little cubicle like you are.'

'I'm not trapped in a cubicle,' sighed Erika. Her office had harbour views and fresh flowers bought each Monday morning by her secretary. She loved her office. She loved her job.

'It was Sally's idea, you know. For her son to be a park ranger. So clever of her. She's not conventional, Sally, she thinks outside the box.'

'Sally?' said Erika.

'Sally! My new hairdresser!' said her mother impatiently, as if Sally had been in her life for years, not a couple of months. As if Sally were going to be a lifelong friend. Ha. Sally would go the way of all the other wonderful strangers in her mother's life.

'So what else was your message going to say?' said Erika.

'Let's see now . . . then I was going to say, sort of casually, as if I'd only just thought of it: Oh, listen, darling, by the *way*!'

Erika laughed. Her mother could always charm her, even at the worst times. Just when Erika thought she was done, that was it, she could take no more, her mother charmed her back into loving her.

Her mother laughed too, but it sounded hectic and high-pitched. 'I was going to say: Listen, darling, I was wondering if you and Oliver would like to come to lunch at my place on Sunday?'

'No,' said Erika. 'No.'

She breathed in like she was breathing in through a straw. Her lips felt wonky. 'No, thank you. We'll be at your place on the fifteenth. That's when we'll come, Mum. No other time. That's the deal.'

'But darling, I think you'd be so proud of me because –'

'No,' said Erika. 'I'll meet you anywhere else. We can go out to lunch this Sunday. To a nice restaurant. Or you can come to our place. Oliver and I don't have anything on. We can go anywhere else but we are not coming to your house.' She paused and said it again, louder and more clearly, as if she were speaking to someone without a good grasp of English. 'We are not coming to your house.'

There was silence.

'Until the fifteenth,' said Erika. 'It's in the diary. It's in both our diaries. And don't forget we've got that dinner with Clementine's parents on Thursday night! So we've got that to look forward to as well.' Yes, indeed, that was going to be a barrel of laughs.

'I had a new recipe I wanted to try. I bought a gluten-free recipe book, did I tell you?'

It was the flip tone that did it. The calculated, cruel brightness, as if she thought there was a chance Erika might join her in playing the game they'd played all those years, where they both pretended to be an ordinary mother and daughter having an ordinary conversation, when she *knew* that Erika no longer played, when they'd both agreed the game was over, when her mother had wept and apologised and made promises they both knew she'd never keep. But now she wanted to pretend she'd never even made the promises in the first place.

'Mum. Dear God.'

'What?' Faux innocence. That infuriating babyish voice.

'You *promised* on Grandma's grave that you wouldn't buy another recipe book! You don't cook! You don't have a gluten allergy!' Why did her voice tremble with rage when she never expected those melodramatic promises to be kept?

'I made no such promise!' said her mother, and she dropped the baby voice and had the audacity to respond to Erika's rage with her own. 'And as a matter of fact, I have been suffering quite dreadful bloating lately. I have gluten intolerance, thank you very much. Excuse me for worrying about my health.'

Do not engage. Remove yourself from the emotional minefield. This was why she was investing thousands of dollars in therapy, for exactly this situation.

'All right then, well, Mum, it was nice talking to you,' said Erika rapidly, without giving her mother a chance to speak, as if she were a telemarketer, 'but I'm at work, so I have to go now. I'll talk to you later.' She hung up before her mother could speak and dropped the phone in her lap.

The cab driver's shoulders were conspicuously still against his beaded seat cover, only his hands moving on the bottom of the steering wheel, pretending that he hadn't been listening in. What sort of daughter refuses to go to her mother's house?

What sort of daughter speaks with such ferocity to her mother about buying a new recipe book?

She blinked hard.

Her phone rang again, and she jumped so violently it nearly slid off her lap. It would be her mother again, ringing to shout abuse.

But it wasn't her mother. It was Oliver.

'Hi,' she said, and nearly cried with relief at the sound of his voice. 'Just had a fun phone call with Mum. She wanted us to go over for lunch on Sunday.'

'We're not due there until next month, are we?' said Oliver.

'No,' said Erika. 'She was pushing her boundaries.'

'Are you okay?'

'Yep.' She ran a fingertip under her eyes. 'Fine.'

'You sure?'

'Yes. Thank you.'

'Just put her straight out of your mind,' said Oliver. 'Hey, did you go to Clementine's talk at that library out in wherever it was?'

Erika tipped back her head against the seat and closed her eyes. Dammit. Of course. That's why he was calling. Clementine. The plan had been that she would chat to Clementine after her talk, while they had coffee. Oliver hadn't been overly interested in Erika's motivation for attending Clementine's talk. He didn't understand her obsessive desire to fill in the blank spots of her memory. He found it irrelevant, almost silly. 'Believe me, you've remembered everything you're ever going to remember,' he'd said. (His lips went thin, his eyes hard on the words 'Believe me'. Just a little flash of pain he could never quite repress, and that he would probably deny feeling.) 'Blank spots are par for the course when you drink too much.' They weren't par for *her* course. But Oliver had seen this as the perfect opportunity to talk to Clementine, to finally pin her down.

She should have let him go to voicemail too.

'I did,' she said. 'But I left halfway through. I didn't feel well.'

'So you didn't get to talk to Clementine?' said Oliver. She could hear him doing his best to conceal his frustration.

'Not today,' she said. 'Don't worry. I'm just finding the right time. The food court wouldn't have been the best spot anyway.'

'I'm just looking at my diary. It has been two months now since the barbecue. I don't think it's offensive or insensitive, or whatever, to just ask the question. Just ring her up. It doesn't need to be face to face.'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

'You don't need to be sorry,' said Oliver. 'This is difficult. It's not your fault.'

'It was my fault we went to the barbecue in the first place,' she said. Oliver wouldn't absolve her of that. He was too accurate. They'd always had that in common: a passion for accuracy.

The cabbie slammed on the brake. 'Ya bloody idiot driver! Ya bloody goose!' Erika put her hand flat against the front seat to brace herself as Oliver said, 'That's not relevant.'

'It's relevant to me,' she said. Her phone beeped to let her know another call was coming through. It would be her mother. The fact that it had taken her a couple of minutes to call back meant that she'd chosen tears over abuse. Tears took longer.

'I don't know what you want me to say about that, Erika,' said Oliver worriedly. He thought there was an actual correct response. An answer at the back of the book. He thought there was a secret set of relationship rules that she must know, because she was the woman, and she was deliberately withholding them. 'Just . . . will you talk to Clementine?' he said.

'I'll talk to Clementine,' said Erika. 'See you tonight.'

She turned her phone to silent and put it in her bag, at her feet. The taxi driver turned up the radio. He must have given up on asking her accounting advice now, probably thinking

that judging from her personal life, her professional advice couldn't be trusted.

Erika thought of Clementine, who would be finishing up her little speech at the library by now, presumably to polite applause from her audience. There would be no 'bravos!', no standing ovations, no bouquets backstage.

Poor Clementine, feeling she had to virtually *abase* herself in this way.

Oliver was right: the decision to go to the barbecue was of no relevance. It was a sunk cost. She put her head back against the seat, closed her eyes and remembered a silver car driving towards her, surrounded by a swirling funnel of autumn leaves.