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MESSY, WONDERFUL US

Written by **Catherine Isaac**

Published By **Simon & Schuster Ltd**

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You Me Everything was her first work writing as Catherine Isaac. Translation rights have been sold in twenty countries and it has been optioned for a film by Lionsgate. She lives in Liverpool with her husband Mark and three sons.

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First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2019
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

www.simonandschuster.co.uk
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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-4711-7804-7
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-4711-7805-4
eBook ISBN: 978-1-4711-7806-1
Audio ISBN: 978-1-4711-8040-8

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Typeset in the UK by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



For Sheila Crowley, with enormous gratitude

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Prologue

There were certain scents that could whisk her back to that sultry night at any moment. It would happen for months afterwards. She'd be getting on with her life, trying to keep her head down, when she'd breathe in and a rush of memories would follow. Of hot skin and the spike of perfume. The fug of cigarette smoke and hairspray. The musky aroma that had clung faintly to his neck, as he'd slipped his hand around her waist and whispered to her. And the pollen-rich grass that infused the darkness as she'd followed him, until the boom of music grew faint and they were out of sight, heading towards a tangle of woodland.

She hadn't set out to be reckless that night. But then, she hadn't set out to tell all those lies so she could be with a boy – no, a man – she shouldn't have been with. In the preceding weeks, she'd found herself floating towards this point, unable to stop herself. Unable to think about her betrayal and the pain she had the capacity to inflict on the one man who really loved her.

From the moment this stranger had swept into her life, everything

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about him had bewitched her. The lilting way he spoke, in an accent that captured the intrinsic beauty of words. The muss of hair around the nape of his neck. The way he looked at her, as if every other girl was invisible. She'd glanced up at the shadows on his face as the moon glowed behind him, trying to pretend she was more experienced than she was. But he can't have failed to notice that she was trembling.

His features were unusual, striking rather than handsome. But this wasn't about his looks. It was about what she saw behind his eyes, the antidote to every humdrum thing in her life, a world of adventure, a foreign land. He was leading her to a new place inside herself, away from the person everyone thought she was.

They followed a secluded path beyond the trees and found a spot where the air had stilled. Nobody could see them or hear them. She knew what was about to happen and it made her chest burn. His lips felt like velvet as his mouth travelled along her jaw, her temple, the stretch of her collarbone. Bark scratched through her dress into the damp flesh on her spine and her hem rose to the top of her thighs. All she could do was abandon herself to the exquisite ache in her belly. The weightlessness of the moment. The sky-high feeling of being a woman.

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Chapter 1

THE PRESENT DAY

Allie

The lobby is uncompromisingly fashionable, with a glass staircase that sweeps onto an airy mezzanine, a gleaming grand piano and an architectural approach to flower arranging. I stand amidst a sea of tuxedos and cocktail dresses, of chatter and clinking glasses, and seek out a familiar face.

'Would you care for a rosemary-infused martini?' A waitress appears next to me with a tray of drinks, her slender frame neatly contained in a black minidress.

'Thank you,' I reply, taking one. I sip the drink, wondering if it's the floating twig that distinguishes it from a G&T, and crane my neck over the crowd.

I know there are others here from the university: Petra, my boss Alistair and his wife Maureen, all work alongside me in the department of Cellular and Molecular Physiology. I know I shouldn't, but part of me hopes that I've been seated next to one of them, rather than a stranger. It's not that I'm incapable of small talk, on the contrary. But I enjoy being

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surrounded by like-minded people, even if it's just to gossip about the affair between our new senior lecturer and the Ukrainian postdoc.

Wherever I end up sitting tonight, a glitzy charity ball is, undisputedly, a change of scene from my last few Friday evenings, which I spent in the lab looking down a microscope, taking photographs of fluorescent proteins. Given that Petra likes telling me this is not how a thirty-three-year-old single woman *should* spend her weekends, this will at least satisfy her.

'Well, don't you scrub up well? *Love* the heels.' I turn around to find Petra grinning at my feet. 'They *can't* be comfortable.'

'I'm not exactly walking on air, no,' I confess.

The round apples of Petra's cheeks are enhanced by a complicated, serpentine up-do and she's wearing a pretty yellow dress I can already tell she regrets bitterly, judging by her determination to tug her pashmina over her cleavage.

'That's a beautiful gown,' I say.

'Do you really think so?' she replies, hoisting up the front a little higher. 'I bumped into the vice chancellor on the way in and I don't think he was a fan.'

'Well, I'm not sure it would suit *him*, but on you, it's a winner.' She snorts.

But I'm telling the truth, and not simply because in the days when we were working on our joint project about CFTR protein abnormalities in airway smooth muscle, I was more used to seeing her arrive at the lab brushing Coco Pops out of her hair. It was an important and high-profile piece of work, which meant constantly working late and, while this is no terrific sacrifice to me, I know Petra hated missing bedtime for her two young daughters.

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Still, research is the most rewarding part of the job, for both of us. It's what took me halfway across the UK, then boomeranged me back to the Russell Group university that has been thriving in my home city since 1881, leading the way in key areas of scientific research and turning out nine Nobel prize winners. It's also the focus of this evening's festivities. Every penny of the money raised tonight will go to cystic fibrosis research, and at least some will be channelled into my area of work. So I definitely *should* prepare myself for small talk.

'I see your friend Ed is doing the keynote speech,' Petra says. 'I get the impression that there's a lot of money in this room, so I hope he's persuasive.'

'I hope so too.'

'From what I hear, the CFA love him,' she continues. 'So we can only hope he dazzles the crowd.'

I smile at the thought, not because I don't think Ed can be dazzling. I've seen with my own eyes the effect of his presence on both sexes, the way the most unlikely admirer will soften around him. Yet, no matter what my friend achieves, to me he's still the skinny kid I'd sit next to on the top deck of the 86 bus, its windows misted with condensation as we doubled up with laughter.

'Couldn't you tempt Simon out tonight?' As I say it, it strikes me that I can't remember the last time Petra brought her husband to an event like this.

'Couldn't get a babysitter. Besides, he can't stand work dos. There's a reason so many scientists marry other scientists, you know. We bore everyone rigid.'

'Speak for yourself.' She laughs.

The toastmaster calls for attention and invites everyone to take their seats. It's a large room, atmospherically lit with a rosy

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glow pooling on each table centrepiece. I take my seat next to a man who immediately offers me his hand to shake. 'Good evening! I'm Teddy Hancock.' I'd place him in his early sixties, American, with a jovial face and heavy-lidded eyes.

'Oh, I think I recall Ed mentioning your name. I'm Allison Culpepper.'

The corner of his mouth turns up, betraying his satisfaction. 'We're trying to put a deal together right now. Do you work for him?'

'Oh God no. I'm sure he's a lovely boss, but we're just old friends. I work at the university, as an academic research scientist.'

'So, you're *Professor* Allison Culpepper?'

'Doctor.' Blowing my own trumpet has never come easily to me and I sometimes have to remind myself that I earned that title and the authority that comes with it, so I really shouldn't be shy about it. 'But give me time.'

'What do you specialise in?'

'Physiology,' I reply. He makes an expression of vague recognition that reminds me a little of my six-year-old nephew, who remains convinced I am undertaking vital work in the field of fizzy drinks.

'You have some connection with the charity?' he continues.

'They funded a research project of mine a couple of years ago – my primary interest is in the pathophysiology of the airway associated with cystic fibrosis. Also, it was me who persuaded Ed to get involved. He ran the London Marathon for charity a couple of years ago, so I thought I'd twist his arm into devoting his energies to this instead. Keeps me in honest work.'

His eyes narrow momentarily. 'You know, you don't *look* like a scientist.'

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'Really? Well, between you and me, they let scientists wear lipstick these days. At least on our days off.' He guffaws with laughter.

Truth is, I'm wearing more lipstick than I ordinarily would tonight. A small gap in my teeth earned me some character-building nicknames at school so it's still rare that I draw attention to my mouth, but this felt like a suitably grand occasion on which to change that policy. And somehow it compliments my dark hair and the emerald green dress that pulls in my wobbly bits and made my heart soar a little the second I saw it.

'Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please.' The marketing director of the charity is at the lectern. He has a slight face, with thinning ginger hair and a surprisingly basso profundo voice.

'The man I am about to introduce is someone many of you know professionally and some of you know personally. His company, Spark, was a success story of the dot.com boom and became one of the UK's fastest-growing business-to-business retailers. We were delighted to announce earlier in the year that he and his wife Julia are now official ambassadors for our charity and have since worked tirelessly to raise both funds and awareness for cystic fibrosis. Without further ado, please put your hands together for Mr Edward Holt.'

Applause cracks through the room, as I spot Julia at the top table, not far from where I'm sitting. Her cool beauty is unequalled tonight. She is a goddess in Valentino, the pale blue fabric of her dress cinched at her slim waist. Her blonde hair is swept into a soft chignon, drawing all the attention to her face, with its slender nose, faintly dredged with freckles and wide, ingénue eyes. She glances up and we exchange a friendly smile as a hush descends on the room. Ed steps up to the lectern.

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Despite being a child with plug ears, permanently bloody knees and filth that clung to him like treacle, he grew into a striking adult.

He has strong cheekbones, but there's a softness to his mouth. He keeps his light brown hair closely cut and his skin retains the ghost of last summer's tan. But it's his eyes that are the most arresting: ocean blue and framed with black lashes, with straight brows that make him appear more intense than he is.

'If I'd known I'd get a reception like that I'd have spent longer on my speech,' he says. Then he smiles that smile, the one caught somewhere between charisma and self-deprecation, and that's all it takes. He already has the audience in the palm of his hand.

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Chapter 2

'How much did the event raise?' Granddad Gerald takes off my coat and hangs it on the bannister of the narrow hallway, before wrapping me in one of those bear hugs that grandfathers do best, all love and fabric conditioner.

'They're still totting it up, but *a lot*. Ed wrote a hefty cheque himself, though, so I'm not sure if that counts as cheating.'

Granddad shakes his head as he loosens the collar of his maroon jumper, his bald patch still shining from the heat in the kitchen. 'He's done well for himself that boy, hasn't he? Mind you, I still can't believe I've got a granddaughter who's a *doctor*. Speaking of which, will you just take a look at these bunions for me . . .'

I laugh, as ever, at his standing joke; last time he asked me to check his temperature. Granddad never changes and neither does this house. There's still the same Christian Aid collection box on the sideboard, the family photos fighting for space on the textured walls, the blue carpet with tiny

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Fleur de Lys emblems that I thought were ducks when I was little. It's always spotlessly clean and often smells of new paint, though the fundamental look of the place hasn't been updated significantly since my mother lived here.

'Gerald, could you come finish setting the table?' Grandma Peggy pops her head around the kitchen door. 'Oh, hello, Allie. I didn't hear the doorbell.'

I walk towards her and give her a kiss on her cheek. 'Lovely perfume, Grandma,' I say, breathing in the scent that clings to her blouse.

'It's just lotion,' she protests, waving me away, as if she'd never bother with anything as frivolous as perfume.

Grandma Peggy is not a frivolous woman. She is generally intolerant of nonsense, loudmouths, cold callers, people who leave lights on around the house and anyone who sings hymns in church with a two-second delay. Still, she's also the woman who knitted my favourite jumpers as a child, gave me my prized jewellery box from Paris that she'd had since she and Granddad briefly lived there, and relinquished a coveted slot in the local bowls team to take me to ballet classes when I was seven. I also reserved a special admiration for her more recently, after she scolded her friend Dorothy for being 'a silly bigot' when she blamed her Indian GP for everything from a rise in unemployment to the stubbornness of her haemorrhoids.

'What's for dinner?' I ask.

'A feast,' she replies. 'We'll have leftovers until Easter at this rate.'

'Sounds wonderful.'

'I can't claim credit. Your dad's done everything except the roast potatoes.'

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Dad and Grandma join forces to cook for the whole family one Sunday a month. This is usually at her house, where there's a slightly bigger dining room and the boon of a hostess trolley, though it's Dad who does most of the cooking.

'As long as he left the roasties to you. He knows better than to encroach on your domain.' She purses her lips into something that resembles a smile. Grandma's skin has slackened with age, but she retains her classically handsome features, even if she does virtually nothing to enhance them. There is never a hint of lipstick, nor a whisper of eye shadow; her slate-grey hair has been cut into a short elfin crop for as long as I remember.

I step inside the kitchen, a neat and functional space in which everything is tucked away behind stained pine cupboards with brass knobs, except a collection of Delia Smith cookery books next to the spice rack.

Dad is at the hob, stirring one of three bubbling pans with a look of intense concentration on his face. He's wearing the apron I bought him for Father's Day, with the words 'Executive Chef' on the front.

He looks up and wipes his hands on a tea towel, 'Hello, love,' he says brightly, pausing to give me a kiss, his skin warm from the heat of the stove.

'How have you managed all this, Dad? I thought you were at work this morning.'

'I got most of it done during the week.' My dad is big on batch cooking. It's how he seems to spend most of his days off, stuffing the freezer, so that by the last Sunday of the month he's always ready to serve some posh starter – little salmon soufflés or a watercress soup – followed by a huge, traditional roast complete with a selection of spiced accompaniments and

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home-made sauces. 'It was a good job as well. I didn't get out until late today.'

'Nothing serious I hope?'

He shakes his head. 'One of the staff at the Royal left the toast on too long and set off the fire alarm.'

Being a firefighter was the only job my father ever wanted and he had joined the service soon as he was old enough. He spends most of his days dealing with house fires, traffic accidents, dogs locked in cars and, in one recent case, helping to rescue a thirty-four-year-old man who'd got his backside stuck in a child's swing. He's also had some close shaves in his time, including one incident last year in which he was caught in a flashover in a disused warehouse. The room flooded with flames and melted the shield on his helmet, leaving him with a second-degree burn that still puckers the freckled skin on his neck and gives me the odd sleepless night.

I head to the dining room and find Granddad laying the cutlery.

'Let me help you with that,' I offer, taking a handful of forks to the other side of the table. 'Oh, while I've got you . . . You know it's Grandma's birthday in a couple of weeks? I'm thinking of buying her a jacket, what do you think?'

He gives me a blank look. 'I've no idea, love. I tried to ask her what she wanted the other day and she said she's too old for presents. She'll end up with a pair of roller skates if she can't be any more help.'

'The one I've seen is lovely, really chic.'

Granddad's forehead crinkles. 'You don't need to buy her designer things, Allie. She's seventy-six.'

'Being seventy-six doesn't mean you don't deserve nice clothes.'

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'She'll tell you off for wasting your money.'

'Tough,' I declare. 'Any idea what her dress size is?'

He looks up from under his eyebrows and hesitates. 'Eighteen?'

I tut. 'Oh, Granddad, she's much smaller than that. Fourteen surely, maybe even a twelve?'

'I wouldn't have a clue. It's been years since she let me buy her clothes. She said the last cardigan I gave her made her look like a sheepdog. Why don't you sneak up and have a peak at the labels in her clothes?' he suggests. 'She's got a wardrobe full up there.'

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Chapter 3

It feels strange entering the bedroom where Granddad and Grandma sleep, even if it was his idea. I haven't ventured in here since I was a little girl, when I'd creep in to play with Grandma's soaps or hide under the candlewick bedspread.

It could be a bright room but the big mahogany dresser that sits in the window blocks out much of the light. The carpet is in a faded shade of pink and on either side of their high double bed are two small cabinets, with a Robert Ludlum novel and a tube of denture glue on one; a book of crosswords and a silver-framed photograph of Mum on the other. It was taken when she was in her early twenties, not long before she became ill.

I quietly pad across the floor, wondering how they sleep in such a chilly room, with two windows wide open. Letting in 'fresh air' is a constant preoccupation of Grandma Peggy's, as if there is a limited amount of it on offer.

The sound of laughter drifts upstairs from the kitchen as I

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gently open her wardrobe door, releasing a faint scent of lily of the valley. The interior is tightly packed with dresses and suits, all in muted fabrics, some still covered with plastic from the dry cleaners. I take out a dress and examine the label. It's a size 16, which surprises me, so I put it back and check out some of the others. Only, there's a whole array of sizes, ranging from 12 to 16, and no indication as to which might be the most accurate.

I close the door and decide to look in her chest of drawers instead, where I'm more likely to find a top that I know she's worn recently. I work from the bottom up, opening the first drawer to find a stack of sweaters and the cashmere cardigan she had on when I saw her a couple of weeks ago. I take that out and check the label: size 14, much more what I was expecting. I want to leave the clothes as neatly as I found them, so I remove the pile to refold each item. But when I attempt to straighten the drawer liner, I realise there's something underneath. I slide my fingernail under the edge and carefully lift it up. It's then that I find the envelope.

It's dry and faded with age, ripped open at the top. I don't know what it is exactly that compels me to pick it up, slide out the letter and unfold it, carefully unfurling the old newspaper page concealed inside. I do it almost without thinking, stroking my fingers against the grey print before I can even contemplate the ethics of my intrusion.

It's the date that I register first – 11 June 1983 – before I cast my gaze over a spread of pictures from a summer party held at Allerton People's Hall to celebrate its centenary. There are two rows of photographs, some of austere-looking men in cricket whites, others of women in pleated skirts and batwing sleeves. There are teenage boys in Ray-Bans and polo shirts

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with popped-up collars, girls in crop tops and lace, looking sticky under the dying heat of the day. Then I spot the name on one caption: Christine Culpepper.

When my eyes settle on my mother's face, at first I don't think beyond the tug in my chest, a jolt of something sad and indefinable. But as I take in each detail, a creeping realisation begins to take hold. Something doesn't add up.

My mother is holding hands with a young man I don't know, someone I've never even seen before. Her mouth is curled up in a mysterious smile and teenage infatuation shines brightly in her eyes. The name of this unknown person, according to the caption, is Stefano McCourt. He looks to be older than my mother by a couple of years and has dark eyes, a full mouth and a gap in his teeth. I look at the date again, trying to reconcile each contradictory detail, but one in particular: the photo was taken nine months before I was born.

'*Five minutes until dinner*,' I hear Dad shout from downstairs. I don't answer, ignoring the rapid thudding in my chest as I turn my attention to the handwritten letter. It is addressed to my Grandma Peggy and dated December 1983. There's no address from the sender.

Dear Mrs Culpepper,

I write to respectfully ask you not to contact Stefano, myself, or my husband Michael again via his office at the Museo di Castelvecchio.

While I understand that you are in shock about Christine and Stefano – we all are – no good can come of us continuing to maintain contact. I am particularly upset about you writing to my son

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about his supposed responsibilities to his 'flesh and blood'. This kind of emotional blackmail is very wrong when he already made his decision not to have anything more to do with your daughter before our family left Liverpool. The fact that he moved back to Italy with us should have made this very clear.

From what you said in your letter, Christine has now made amends with her boyfriend. He will no doubt make a good father to the baby. So why rock the boat by trying to bring Stefano back into the equation when nobody needs to know the truth?

He is not going to change his mind and he has absolutely no intention of returning to the UK. I am deeply sorry if this sounds harsh under the circumstances, but I'm sure you appreciate that it is not just you who has been upset by events.

Yours truly,

Signora Vittoria McCourt

I look again at the photograph on the newspaper cutting. At the date. At my mother's enraptured smile. But most of all, I am drawn to the young man with dark hair and a gap in his teeth that's so identical to my own that it makes my breath catch in my throat.

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