An Offer You Can't Refuse

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Extract

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1

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Chapter 1

Ten Years Ago

There are some places where you might expect to bump into your boyfriend's ultra-posh mother. At a Buckingham Palace garden party perhaps, or Glyndebourne, or turning her nose up at Ferrero Rochers at some foreign ambassador's cocktail party. And then there are other places you wouldn't expect to bump into her *at all*.

Like, for example, the Cod Almighty at the dodgier end of Tooting High Street.

'Blimey, it's Dougie's mum.' Instinctively wiping her hands on her green nylon overall and curbing the urge to curtsey – because Dougie's mum was *that* posh – Lola said brightly, 'Hello, Mrs Tennant, how lovely to see you!'

And how typical that she should turn up two minutes before closing, when all they had left to offer her was a tired-looking saveloy and a couple of overlooked fishcakes. Maybe Alf could be persuaded to quickly chuck a couple of fresh pieces of haddock into the fryer and—

'Hello, Lola. I wondered if we could have a chat.' Even for

a visit to a fish and chip shop, Dougie's mother's make-up was immaculate, her hair swept into a Princess Michael of Kent chignon.

'Oh, right. Absolutely. I'm just finishing here.' Lola glanced across at Alf, who made good-humoured off-you-go gestures. 'We close at half past two. So you don't want anything to take away?'

Was that a shudder? Mrs Tennant shook her head and said with a flicker of amusement, 'I don't think so, do you?'

Having retrieved her shoulder bag from the back room and shrugged off her nylon overall – youch, *static* – Lola ducked under the swing-top counter and took the king-sized portion of chips Alf had wrapped up for her, seeing as they had so many left.

'Bye, Alf. See you tomorrow.'

'I can drop you home if you like,' said Dougie's mother. 'The car's just outside.'

Lola beamed; free chips *and* a lift home in a brand new Jaguar. This was definitely her lucky day.

Outside on the pavement it was stiflingly hot and muggy. Inside the Jaguar the cool air smelled deliciously of expensive leather and Chanel No. 19.

'This is such a great car,' sighed Lola, stroking the upholstery as Dougie's mother started the engine.

'Thank you. I like it.'

'How could anyone not like it?' Lola balanced the steaming parcel of chips in her lap, careful to keep it away from her bare legs. Her stomach was rumbling but she heroically resisted the temptation to open them. 'So why did you want to see me? Is this about Dougie's birthday?'

'No. Actually it's about you and Dougie. I want you to stop seeing him.'

Bam, just like that.

Lola blinked. 'Excuse me?'

'I'd like you to end your relationship with my son.'

This couldn't be happening. Her shoulders stiffening in disbelief, Lola watched as Dougie's mother drove along, as calm and unconcerned as if they were discussing nothing more taxing than the weather.

'Why?'

'He's eighteen years old.'

'Nearly nineteen.'

'He's eighteen now,' Mrs Tennant repeated firmly, 'and on his way to university. He *is* going to university.'

'I know.' Bewildered, Lola said, 'I'm not stopping him. We're going to see each other whenever we can, take it in turns to do the journey. I'll catch the coach up to Edinburgh every other weekend, and Dougie's going to drive down here when it's his turn, then—'

'No, no, no, I'm sorry but he won't. This isn't the kind of relationship Doug needs right now. He told me last night that he was having second thoughts about going to university. He wants to stay here. And that's all down to you, my girl. But I won't stand by and let you ruin his life.'

The hot chips were burning Lola's legs now. 'Honestly, I'm not ruining his life. I want the best for Dougie, just like you do. We love each other! I've already told him, if we miss each other too much I'll move up to Edinburgh and we'll live together!'

'Oh yes, he mentioned that too. And the next thing we know, you'd be feeling left out because he'd have all his university friends while you're stuck working behind the counter of some backstreet fish and chip shop.' Mrs Tennant's lip curled with

disdain. 'So to regain his attention you'd accidentally get yourself pregnant. No, I'm sorry, I simply can't allow this to happen. Far better for you to make the break now.'

Who did this woman think she was?

'But I don't want to.' Lola's breathing was fast and shallow. 'And you can't force me to do it.'

'No, dear, of course I can't force you. But I can do my best to persuade you.'

'I won't be persuaded. I love Dougie. With all my heart,' Lola blurted out, determined to make his mother understand that this was no silly teenage fling.

'Ten thousand pounds, take it or leave it.'

'What?'

'That's what I'm offering. Think it over. How much do you earn in that fish and chip shop?' Dougie's mother raised a perfectly plucked eyebrow. 'No more than five pounds an hour, I'm sure.'

Four pounds actually. But it was still a mean dig; working at the Cod Almighty was only a temporary thing while she applied for jobs that would make more use of her qualifications.

'And if I took your money, what kind of a person would that make me?'

'Oh, I don't know. The sensible kind, perhaps?'

Lola was so angry she could barely speak; her fingernails sank through the steamed, soggy chip paper, filling the air-conditioned interior of the car with the rank, sharp smell of vinegar. Something else was bothering her too; up until today, Dougie's mother had always been perfectly charming whenever they'd met.

'I thought you liked me.'

'Of course you did.' Mrs Tennant sounded entertained. 'That was the whole idea. I know what young people are like, you see. If a parent announces that they don't approve of their children's choice of partner, it's only going to make them that much more determined to stay together. Fuelling the flame and all that. Goodness no, far better to pretend everything's rosy and you think their choice is wonderful, then let the relationship fizzle out of its own accord.'

'But ours isn't going to fizzle out,' said Lola.

'So you keep telling me. That's why I'm giving it a helping hand. Goodness, this traffic is a nightmare today. Is it left down here at the traffic lights or straight on?'

'Left. And how's Dougie going to feel when he hears what you've said to me today?'

'Well, I should imagine he'd be very annoyed with me. If you told him.' Mrs Tennant paused for effect. 'But do yourself a favour, Lola. Don't say anything just yet. Give yourself time to really think this through, because you do have a brain. And ten thousand pounds is an awful lot of money. All you have to do as soon as you've made up your mind is give me a ring when you know Dougie isn't at home. And I'll write out the cheque.'

'You can stop the car. I'll walk the rest of the way.' No longer willing to remain in her boyfriend's mother's plush Jag, Lola jabbed a finger to indicate that she should pull in at the bus stop ahead.

'Sure? OK then.'

Lola paused with her hand on the passenger door handle and looked at Dougie's mother in her crisp white linen shirt and royal chignon. 'Can I ask you something?'

'Feel free.'

'Why don't you approve of me?'

'You risk ruining my son's future.' Mrs Tennant didn't hesitate.

'We love each other. We could be happy together for the rest of our lives.'

'No you *couldn't*, Lola. Do you really not understand what I'm trying to explain here? You're too brash and noisy, you have no class, you're not good enough for Dougie. And,' the older woman paused, her gaze lingering significantly over Lola's low-cut red vest top and short denim skirt complete with grease stain, 'you dress like a cheap tart.'

'Can I ask you something else?' said Lola. 'How are you going to feel when Dougie refuses to ever speak to you again?'

And, heroically resisting the urge to tear open the parcel of chips and fling them in Dougie's mother's face, she climbed out of the car.

Back at home in Streatham – a far more modest house than Dougie's, which his mother would surely sneer at – Lola paced the small blue and white living room like a caged animal and went over everything that had happened. OK, *now* what was she supposed to do? Dougie was currently up in Edinburgh for a few days, sorting out where he was going to be living come October and acquainting himself with the city that was due to be his home for the next three years. Doubtless Mrs Tennant had planned it this way with her usual meticulous attention to detail. Her own mother and stepfather were both out at work. The ticking of the clock in the kitchen was driving her demented. Bloody, bloody woman – how *dare* she do this to her? What a *witch*.

By four o'clock she could no longer bear to be confined. Deliberately not changing out of her *low-cut* top and *far-too-short*

denim skirt, Lola left the house. What she was wearing was practically standard issue for teenagers on a hot summer's day, for heaven's sake – not tarty at all. And if she didn't talk to someone about the situation, she would burst.

'Ten thousand pounds,' said Jeannie.

'Yes.'

'I mean, ten thousand *pounds*.'

'So?' Lola banged down her Coke. 'It doesn't matter how much it is. She can't go around doing stuff like that. It's just sick.'

They were in McDonald's. Jeannie noisily slurped her own Coke through two straws. 'Can I say something?'

'Can I stop you?'

'OK, you say it's a sick thing to do. And you're going to say no. But what if Dougie comes back from Edinburgh on Friday and tells you he's met someone else? What if he sits you down and says, "Look, sorry and all that, but I bumped into this really fit girl in a bar, we ended up in bed and she's just fantastic"?' Pausing to suck up the last dregs of her Coke, Jeannie pointed the straw at Lola. 'What if he tells you you're dumped?'

Oh, for heaven's sake.

'Dougie wouldn't do that.'

'He might.'

'He *wouldn't*.'

'But he *might*,' said Jeannie. 'OK, maybe not this week, or even this month. But sooner or later the chances are that you two will break up. You're seventeen years old. How many seventeen-year-olds spend the rest of their lives with their first love? Let's face it, that's why it's called *first* love, because you

go on to have loads more. You're too young to stay with the same person, Lola. And so's Dougie. I know you're crazy about each other now, but that's not going to last. And if Dougie *is* the one who finishes it, you can't go running to his mother crying that you've changed your mind and can you have the money now please? Because it'll be too late by then. You'll have lost out big time. Think about it, you'll be all on your own.' Mock sorrowfully, Jeannie clutched her chest. 'Heartbroken. No more Dougie Tennant *and* no ten thousand pounds.'

So that was the advice from a so-called friend. Well, what else should she have expected from someone like Jeannie, whose parents had fought an epic divorce battle and left her with a jaundiced view of relationships? Jeannie now despised her mother's new husband and was escaping all the hassle at home by moving to Majorca. The plan was to work in a bar, dance on the beach and generally have the time of her life. Sleep with lots of men but very definitely not get emotionally involved with any of them. Any kind of romantic relationship was *out*.

The memory of Dougie's mother continued to haunt Lola all the way home, that pale patrician face and disparaging voice letting her know in no uncertain terms why she was nowhere near good enough for her precious son.

Lola pictured the smirk on that face if Jeannie's cheery prediction were to come true. Then again, imagine how she'd react if she and Dougie defied her and got married! Ha, wouldn't *that* be fabulous?

Except . . . except . . .

I'm seventeen, I don't want to get married just to spite someone. I'm too *young*.

Back home again, Lola was overcome by an overwhelming

urge to speak to Dougie. No plan in her head, but she'd play it by ear. When she heard his voice she would decide what to do, whether or not to tell him that his mother was the world's biggest witch. God, how would he feel when he found out?

Dougie was staying in a bed and breakfast in Edinburgh. The number was on the pad next to the phone in the narrow hallway. Dialling it, Lola checked her watch; it was five o'clock. He should be there now, back from his visit to the university campus . . .

'No, dear, I'm afraid you've missed him.' The landlady of the B&B had a kindly, Edinburgh-accented voice. 'They came back an hour ago, Dougie changed and showered and then they were off. Said they were going to check out the pubs on Rose Street!'

'Oh.' Lola's heart sank; she'd so wanted to hear his voice. 'Who was he with?'

'I didn't catch their names, pet. Another boy and two girls . . . isn't it lovely to see him making new friends already? The boy's from Manchester and the pretty blonde one's from Abergavenny! I must say, they do seem absolutely charming. I'll tell him you rang, shall I? Although goodness knows what time he'll be back . . .'

Hanging up, Lola heard Jeannie's words again. It wasn't that she was overwhelmed with jealousy that Dougie had gone out for the evening with a group of new friends, two of whom happened to be female. It was just the realisation that this was the first of many hundreds of nights when she would be apart from him and—

Lola started as a floorboard creaked overhead; she'd thought the house was empty.

She called out, 'Hello?'

No reply.

'Mum?' Lola frowned. 'Dad?'

Still nothing. Had the floorboard just creaked on its own or was someone up there? But the house seemed secure and a burglar would have his work cut out, climbing in through a bedroom window. Taking an umbrella as a precaution, Lola made her way upstairs.

What she saw when she pushed open the white painted door of her parents' bedroom shocked her to the core.

Chapter 2

'Dad?' Lola's stomach clenched in fear. Something was horribly, horribly wrong. Her stepfather – the only father she'd ever known, the man she loved with all her heart – was packing a case, his face almost unrecognisable.

'Go downstairs.' He turned his back on her, barely able to speak.

Lola was shaking. 'Dad, what is it?'

'Please, just leave me alone.'

'No! I won't! Tell me what's wrong.' Dropping the umbrella, she cried, 'Why are you packing? Are you ill? Are you going to hospital? Is it cancer?'

Grief-stricken, he shook his head. 'I'm not ill, not in that way. Lola, this is nothing to do with you . . . I didn't want you to see me like this . . .'

It was such an unimaginable situation that Lola didn't know what to think. When she approached him he made a feeble attempt to fend her off with one arm.

'Daddy, *tell* me,' Lola whispered in desperation and tears sprang into his eyes.

Covering his face, he sank onto the bed. 'Oh Lola, I'm sorry.'

She had never been so frightened in her life. 'I'm going to phone Mum.'

'No, you mustn't.'

'Are you having an affair? Is that why you're packing? Don't you want to live with us any more?'

Another shake of the head. 'It's nothing like that.'

'So tell me what it *is* then.' Lola's voice wavered; they were both crying now. 'You have to, because I'm scared!'

Twenty minutes later she knew everything. Unbelievable though it seemed, Alex had been gambling and they'd never even suspected it. Through his twice-weekly visits to a snooker club he had been introduced to a crowd of card players and gradually, without even realising it, he'd found himself being sucked in. They had all met regularly at a house in Bermondsey to play poker and at first Alex had done pretty well. Now, he suspected that this had been the plan all along. Then the tide had turned, he had begun to lose and the genial group had made light of his run of bad luck. When the losses had mounted up to a worrying degree, Alex had confided in them that he needed time to pay back what he owed them. It was at this point that the genial group had stopped being genial and begun to threaten him. Terrified by the change in them, realising he was in way over his head, Alex had done the only thing possible and concentrated all his energies on winning back all the money he'd lost. Since his bank manager wouldn't have appreciated this as a sensible business plan, he'd borrowed the money from the friend who'd introduced him to the poker group in the first place.

A week later he'd lost it all.

He borrowed an emergency sum from a money-lender, tried again.

Lost that too.

Meanwhile his family was oblivious. When Lola's mum asked him if he was all right, he explained that he was just tired and she told him he shouldn't be working so hard. The following night, as he was leaving the garage where he worked as a mechanic, he was stopped by two heavies in a van who explained in graphic detail what they would do to him if he didn't repay every penny he owed by this time next week.

This time next week was now tomorrow and desperate times called for desperate measures. Sick with shame and in fear for his life – the heavies had been phoning him regularly, reminding him that the countdown was on – Alex had decided to disappear. It was the only answer; he couldn't admit to Blythe what he'd done, the hideous mess he'd made of his life. She and Lola meant everything in the world to him and he couldn't bear it any longer. If Lola had arrived home half an hour later he would have been gone for good.

'I wish you had,' he said heavily. 'You told us you were going shopping in Oxford Street this afternoon. I thought I was safe here.'

Shopping in Oxford Street. She'd completely forgotten about that after Dougie's mother had dropped her bombshell.

Lola, her face wet with tears, said, 'But I didn't, and now I know.'

'I still have to go. I can't face your mother. I'd be better off dead,' said Alex in desperation. 'But I'd rather do it my way than stay to find out what those bastards have in store for me . . . oh God, I can't believe this is happening, how could I have been so *stupid* . . .'

Hugging him tightly, Lola already knew she had no choice. Her biological father, an American boy, had done a bunk the

moment he'd found out that Blythe was pregnant. But it hadn't mattered because Alex had come along two years later. He loved Lola as if she were his own daughter. He had made her boiled eggs with toast soldiers, he'd taught her to ride a bike, together they had made up silly songs and driven her mother mad, singing them over and over again; she had run to him when she'd been stung by a wasp, he had driven her all the way to Birmingham to see a boy band who were playing at the NEC. His love for her was absolutely unconditional . . .

'I can help you,' said Lola. 'You don't have to leave.'

'Trust me, I do.'

Dry-eyed – this was too important for tears – she said, 'I can get the money for you.'

'Sweetheart, you can't. It's fifteen thousand pounds.'

Her stomach in knots, Lola didn't allow herself to think of the repercussions. 'I can get you most of it.'

And when Alex shook his head in disbelief she told him how.

When she'd finished he shook his head with even more vehemence. 'No, no, I can't let you do that. No way in the world, *absolutely not*.'

But what was the alternative? For him to disappear from their lives? For her to lose the only father she had ever known? For her mother's world to be shattered?

'Listen to me.' Although her own heart felt as if it were breaking in two, Lola played her trump card. 'Mum would never need to know.'

'Lola. How nice to see you again.' Adele Tennant opened her front door and stepped to one side. 'Come on in.'

Following her across the echoing, high-ceilinged hall, Lola

felt sick and dizzy but grimly determined. Mustn't, *mustn't* pass out. She'd barely slept last night, hadn't been able to eat anything either.

'I'm glad you've seen sense.' Adele sat down at the desk in her study and reached for her chequebook. Next to her, morning sunlight bounced off the glass on a silver photo frame. Shifting position to avoid the glare, Lola saw that it was a photograph of Adele and her children, Dougie on the left and Sally on the right. The photo had been taken a couple of years ago while they were on holiday somewhere unbelievably exotic, with palm trees and an ocean the colour of lapis lazuli, because Adele Tennant didn't take her holidays in Margate. Dougie, tanned and grinning in a white shirt, was looking carefree and heartbreakingly gorgeous. Sally, the older sister Lola had never met, was blonde and pretty in a flamingo-pink sarong. Now twenty-six and engaged to an Irish landowner, she was living with him in the Wicklow Mountains outside Dublin. Dougie adored his sister and Lola had been looking forward to getting to know her.

Her throat tightened. That wouldn't be happening now.

'You won't regret this.' Adele crisply uncapped a fat black fountain pen and hovered the glinting nib above the cheque.

The old witch couldn't wait.

'Hang on a minute.' Lola briefly closed her eyes, wondering if she could do this. Yes, she could. 'Ten thousand isn't enough.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'It isn't enough.' She had to say it. 'I need fifteen. Then I'll leave Dougie alone. I'll never see him again.'

'The cheek of you!'

Lola's mouth was bone-dry. 'Otherwise I'll move up to Edinburgh.'

Adele shot her a look of utter loathing. Frankly, Lola didn't blame her one bit.

'You are beyond the pale.'

Lola felt sicker than ever. 'I need the money.'

'Eleven thousand,' Adele retaliated. 'And that's it.'

'Fourteen,' said Lola. What if she threw up all over Adele's Persian rug?

'Twelve.'

'Thirteen.'

'Twelve and a half.'

'Done.' That was it, she'd haggled her way up to twelve and a half thousand pounds. As far as Dougie's mother was concerned, she was now officially despicable beyond belief. But it was enough to get Alex out of trouble; his boss at the garage was able to loan him the rest.

'I hope you're proud of yourself.' Adele dismissively wrote out the newly agreed sum.

Lola could so easily have burst into tears. She willed herself to stay in control. 'I'm not. I just need the money.'

'And hallelujah for that.' Adele, for whom twelve and a half thousand wasn't that much money at all, smiled her chilly, unamused smile. 'So what are you going to be spending it on?'

As she said it, her gaze slid disparagingly over Lola in her turquoise vest, jeans and flip-flops.

It was all over now. No more Dougie. She no longer had to try to impress his mother. 'Moving abroad,' said Lola. 'New bikinis. Silicone implants. Isn't that what you'd expect?'

'It's your money now. I don't care what you do with it, so long as you keep out of my son's life.' Adele paused. 'Will you tell him about this?'

'No.' Lola shook her head and took the cheque which Alex

would pay into his account this morning. He had arranged an overdraft to cover the days before it cleared. In exchange she handed over to Adele the letter she'd written this morning, the hardest letter she'd ever had to write. 'I'm just going to finish with him. You can give him this when he gets home. I'll be out of the country by then.'

'Delighted to hear it. Dougie will be over you in no time, but I agree it's best to put some distance between you. Well, I'll show you out.' Adele rose to her feet and ushered Lola back through the house. Evidently relieved that Dougie wouldn't be discovering the part she had played in seeing off his undesirable girlfriend, she smiled again at the front door and said, 'Goodbye, Lola. It's been an education doing business with you.'

This was it, this was really it. Lola's throat swelled up and for a moment she considered ripping the cheque into tiny pieces.

It was what she wanted to do. But then what would happen to Alex?

'I do love Dougie.' Her voice cracked; she still couldn't imagine living without him. 'I really, really do.'

Opening the door with a flourish, Adele said cheerfully, 'But you love money more.'

The moment he arrived home three days later, Dougie had only one thing on his mind.

'Hi, Mum, you OK?' He dumped his rucksack in the hall and kissed Adele on the cheek. 'Just going to shoot over to Lola's.'

Adele hugged her clever, handsome eighteen-year-old son, the light of her life. 'Actually there's a letter here for you from Lola.'

It had almost killed her not to steam open the envelope.

Now, as Dougie scanned the contents and she saw the colour drain from his face, Adele knew she'd been right to do as she had. He was far too fond of the girl for any good to come of it; at his age it was ridiculous to have let himself get so involved with any girl, let alone one as unequal socially as Lola Malone, the cheaply dressed daughter of a mechanic.

'What does it say?'

'Nothing.' Pain mingled with disbelief in Dougie's dark eyes as he crumpled the letter in his fist and headed upstairs.

Adele didn't want to see him hurt, but it was for his own good. It was for the best. Calling up after Dougie she said, 'Are you hungry, darling? Can I get you something to eat?'

'No.' He turned abruptly, his jaw set. 'How did you know the letter was from Lola?'

Adele thought fast. 'I was upstairs when I heard something coming through the letterbox. When I looked out of the window she was running up the road. Why don't I make you a roast beef sandwich, nice and rare?'

'Mum, I'm not *hungry*.'

Adele's heart went out to him. 'Sweetheart, is everything all right?'

'It will be.' Filled with resolve, Dougie nodded and said evenly, 'I'm going to my room, then I'm going out. And yes, everything *will* be all right.'

But it wasn't, thank God. Lola had kept her part of the bargain. The moment Dougie left the house, Adele infiltrated his room and found the crumpled-up note under the bed.

Dear Dougie,

Sorry to do it like this, but it's easier than face to face. It's over, Dougie, I don't want to see you any more. We've

had fun and I don't regret our relationship but my feelings for you have changed recently, the magic just seems to have gone. I don't want to move up to Edinburgh with you, it's not my kind of place, and the thought of all that travelling up to see you is just too much. It'd never work out – we both know that, deep down. So I've decided to go abroad, somewhere hot and sunny. Don't bother trying to contact me because I've made up my mind. You'll find someone else in no time, and so will I.

Have a good life, Dougie. Sorry about this but you know it makes sense.

Cheers,

Lola x

Adele nodded approvingly, crumpled the note back up again and replaced it under the bed.

Good girl. She couldn't have put it better herself.

Together-forever, together-forever, together-forever. The words sang tauntingly through Doug's head in time with the rhythmic rattle of the tube train over the tracks. Just last week – seven *days* ago – he and Lola had taken a picnic up to Parliament Hill. Lola had let out a squeal of mock outrage when he'd pinched the last sausage roll. He'd run off with it, she'd caught him up and wrestled him to the ground and he'd given the sausage roll to her. They'd shared it in the end, laughing and kissing the crumbs from each other's lips. It was a warm sunny day and new freckles, baby ones, had sprung up across Lola's tanned nose. He'd rolled her onto her back and teased her about them, holding her arms above her head so she couldn't dig him in the ribs. And then they'd stopped laughing and gazed into

each other's eyes, both recognising that what they were experiencing was one of those perfect moments you never forget.

'Oh Dougie, I love you.' Lola had whispered the words, her voice catching with emotion. 'We'll be together forever, won't we? Promise me we'll be together forever.'

And he had. Furthermore he'd meant it. Now, sitting in the swaying carriage gazing blindly out of the window as the train clattered along singing its mocking song, Doug wondered what could have happened to make it all go so wrong.

'She's gone, love. I'm so sorry. You know what Lola's like once she makes up her mind about something – whoosh, that's it, off like a rocket.'

Dougie couldn't believe it. Lola had left. It was actually happening. One minute everything had been fine and they'd been completely, deliriously happy together, the next minute she'd disappeared off the face of the earth. It wasn't manly and it wasn't something he'd admit to his friends in a million years, but the pain of loss was so devastating it felt as if his heart might actually break.

Instead, struggling to retain his composure, Dougie swallowed the golf ball in his throat. 'Did she say why?'

'Not really.' Blythe shrugged helplessly, as baffled as he was. 'Just said she fancied a change. Her friend Jeannie was moving to Majorca, they met up for a chat and the next day Lola announced that she was going out there with Jeannie. To *live*. Well, we were shocked! And I did ask her if she'd thought things through, what with you two having been so close, but there was no stopping her. I really am sorry, love. She should have told you herself.'

It didn't help that Lola's mother was looking at him as if he

were an abandoned puppy in a cardboard box; she was sympathetic but there was nothing she could do.

'Do you have a phone number for her? An address?'

'Sorry, love, I can't do that. She doesn't want you to contact her. I think she just feels you have your own lives to lead.' Lola's mum struggled to console him.

As if anything could. Dougie raked his fingers through his hair in desperation. 'Is she seeing someone else?'

'No.' Vigorously Blythe shook her head. 'Definitely not that.'

He didn't know if that made things better or worse. Being dumped in favour of someone else was one thing, but being dumped in favour of no one at all was an even bigger kick in the teeth. Controlling his voice with difficulty, Dougie said, 'Can you do me a favour? Just tell her that if she changes her mind, she knows where I am.'

'I'll do that, love.' For a moment Blythe's blue eyes swam and she looked as if she might be about to fling her arms around him. Terrified that if she did he might burst into tears and ruin his street cred for life, Dougie hurriedly stepped away from the front door.

'Thanks.'