BURN THIS

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CANELO

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For my friend, Alex

Prologue

It was late August 1995, and swelteringly, stickily hot. I remember my parents discussing how unusual it was to have a heatwave in Framley, the Midlands town I grew up in, and muttering darkly about global warming.

Vicky and I had both turned ten earlier in the year; we'd been inseparable all summer. The heavy overnight rain had done nothing to clear the air and we spent that morning at my house, sprawled across the living-room floor with Mum's noisy electric fan at full blast. Vicky had nicked a copy of *Sugar* off her older sister and while she attempted the quiz – *how to know if he likes you!* – I puzzled over the fashion tips suggesting ways to achieve 'your hair but better'. After an hour or so, Mum chivvied us outside to Framley Park around the corner.

It was normal for us, that summer holiday, to spend a part of each day in the park. One of our mums would come and check on us every couple of hours, often to call us in for a meal, but mostly we were left to our own devices, though with strict instructions not to talk to strangers.

As we wandered along the dusty street to the park, sun blazing down, Vicky hoicked her shiny pink Hello Kitty backpack over her shoulder. She'd been given that bag for her birthday the month before and took it everywhere with her. I coveted that bag, as I did so many of Vicky's

possessions – and her effortless, feminine style. She knew *so* much more about teen fashion than I did. I only had an older brother at home, and he wasn't remotely interested in clothes. Vicky and I both wore shorts and t-shirts, but Vicky's matching pink combo had pretty, fluted hems while I was, as usual, wearing Frank's cast-offs: a faded, green top and brown shorts tied around the waist with a glittery belt – one of my few girly possessions. I must have looked odd in such a get-up, but Vicky never teased me over my appearance. We were fiercely loyal to each other: the youngest children in our respective families, we'd grown up on the same street and were best friends forever, before anyone thought to use that term.

In the park we played on the swings and the roundabout, both of which were in the shade – then Vicky tried, not for the first time, to teach me how to cartwheel, an activity she could perform with effortless ease. After watching me struggle for a couple of minutes, Vicky sighed and produced a small black and white ball from her backpack. My heart sank as I saw it. Unlike perennial sports-day winner Vicky, I was even more hopelessly uncoordinated at ball games than I was at cartwheeling.

'What's that for?' I asked sulkily.

'Let's play "highers".'

I looked around the park. The browned grass beyond the crowded playground was full of people, mostly spreadeagled and soaking up the sun.

'There's no space,' I complained.

'Yes, there is,' Vicky insisted. 'Over there.' She pointed towards the wire fence that divided the park from the far wilder and larger Framley Wood beyond. Thick, heavy branches hung over the fence, casting the area of the park Vicky was indicating into constant shade. Indeed, after last

night's thunderstorm, the patch of earth where she wanted us to play was sodden and muddy.

It was, as she'd pointed out, free from people – but only because it was so swamp-like. I mumbled something about my mum being cross if I got my sandals dirty, but Vicky – who was entirely unbothered about getting into trouble – was already marching across the parched grass to the squelchy mud close to the trees. She assumed, correctly, I would follow. I usually did what Vicky said. She might have been a few months younger than me, but she had a way about her that made her hard to refuse.

We stood opposite each other in the damp earth, a few feet set back from the fence, and started playing. 'Highers' was a game Vicky had devised in which one person threw the ball as high as they could in the air, attempting to make it land at the other person's feet. Vicky was brilliant at this, making it look easy.

I, of course, was always wildly off target.

I put up with the game for about ten minutes, getting increasingly hot and irritable as I kept having to run through the mud for the ball. 'Can we stop now?' I asked at last.

'Not yet!' came Vicky's insistent reply. 'Another five throws each.'

For goodness' sake. Feeling really grumpy now, I chucked the ball in the air without even trying to aim it towards her. We both watched as it soared over the fence and into Framley Wood.

'Bella!' Vicky flicked her neat, strawberry-blond plaits over her shoulder. It was her 'tell' when she was irritated. 'Go and get that!'

Something in me bridled. I was only playing this stupid game because of her. Anyway, though it was fine for us

to play in the park unaccompanied, we were forbidden to enter Framley Wood without an adult. I wasn't particularly goody-goody as a child, but I didn't relish either rule-breaking or the trouble I'd get into if my parents found out.

'No,' I said, my tipping point suddenly reached. '*You* fetch it, it's your ball.'

Vicky drew herself up. 'You're the one who lost it. You should go and find it.'

She was right, of course, but I wasn't about to back down. Instead, I stomped off to the playground. I was still all churned up when I reached the swings. I looked back at that point, but Vicky was nowhere to be seen. Assuming she had crawled through one of the gaps in the fence and was now looking for the ball among the trees, I sat down on the nearest swing, my back to the wood, and kicked out as hard as I could. I focused on swinging higher and higher, letting my anger unravel and float away in the warm air.

Minutes passed. I was calmer now and I slid off the swing, wondering where Vicky had got to. Surely she'd had more than enough time to find the stupid ball?

'Bella!'

I turned at the sound of Mum's voice. She was hurrying across the dry grass towards me, her cheeks flushed from the heat and strands of fair hair stuck to her forehead. 'Come on, love,' she said, sounding out of breath. 'Lunchtime.'

'But Vicky's still in the wood,' I said, pointing towards the trees. 'Fetching her ball.'

Mum hesitated, then frowned. 'I suppose we better go and get her,' she said, sounding strangely reluctant. 'Come on.'

We made our way towards Framley Wood, calling out Vicky's name. But Vicky didn't appear.

'Did you actually see her go in there?' Mum asked, stopping beside the gap in the fence and peering into the trees.

I shook my head, not wanting to explain about our argument.

Mum hesitated. 'Do you think maybe she just went home?'

I shrugged. Mum sighed and turned away from the wood. 'One more loop round the park, then we'll see,' she said, though more as if talking to herself than to me.

Taking my hand, she hurried me around the perimeter of the park. We called for Vicky as we walked, but there was still no sign of her.

Unlike Mum, who was biting her fingernails and growing visibly more nervy with every passing moment, I was sure Vicky had simply gone home in a huff and was eager to make up with her there so we could carry on playing.

We went to Vicky's house.

She wasn't there.

My mum kept telling Vicky's mum that everything was going to be okay, but I could tell from her anxious looks she was seriously worried. I wasn't. Not then. It would be just like Vicky to run off and get everyone all worked up. I was certain she'd stroll in soon, making up some excuse about where she'd been. She probably wouldn't even get into trouble over it, I thought resentfully.

Vicky's mum called her dad, who left work straight-away. He met us back in the park. As we searched for Vicky, other random people who'd just been sunbathing on the grass joined in. We looked and looked for her for

what felt like ages but was probably only about fifteen minutes. And then one of our neighbours ran over; he'd found Vicky's Hello Kitty backpack in Framley Wood. It was, he said, open with Vicky's ball poking out of the top.

Vicky's mum let out a terrible groan when she saw the bag. Mum and everyone crowding round kept reassuring her Vicky was okay and had probably just wandered off and left the bag by mistake. But I knew Vicky would never have left that bag behind *anywhere*.

They found her body covered by branches a couple of hours later. Mum broke the news to me, her voice strangled and strange. I think she thought I would collapse into sobs. But I didn't. I never cried. I couldn't let myself feel the pain of Vicky's loss.

Because if I'd felt that pain, I'd have had to let in the guilt too.

It should have been me fetching that ball.

It should have been me.

THIRTY YEARS LATER

Chapter 1

I stand outside my old childhood bedroom. Of all the rooms in the house, this is the one I've most been dreading going into. I brace myself, then open the door. It's worse than I imagined. This might be the smallest bedroom in the house, but every surface is piled high with cardboard boxes, even the bed. And yet, despite being little more than a dumping ground, my childhood is infused in everything, from the red and gold patterned carpet Mum proudly had laid when I was at primary school to the chipped chest of drawers – white with a pink trim – that younger me adored.

My guts knot at the memory of Dad installing the chest of drawers. He was delighted with himself for providing it and so happy to see me in raptures over what I saw as my first proper grown-up piece of furniture. Would he remember that now? I wonder.

I push my way past the clutter to the window and peer out at the tiny back garden. Like the rest of the house, it's in dire need of some attention. Mum used to love tending to the flowers, but after she died suddenly two years ago, Dad let everything run wild. He lost interest in the house too, struggling to focus on completing simple tasks like making a cup of tea or walking to the shops. Mum's death had come on top of his retirement and my brother,

Frank, and I assumed his regular bouts of confusion were a response to all the trauma or a sign of depression.

Soon, however, it became clear he was struggling with dementia and after the third time he wandered out of the house and was found lost and bewildered on the high street, we decided he should no longer live alone. Frank found a local care home for him, which is a whole other story, and for the next year the small three-bed terrace that Frank and I grew up in was rented out to tenants. But not this room. This is where Frank locked away all of our parents' belongings that he didn't want to keep but needed me to agree to let go of.

Now I'm back in Framley and have promised to sort through them. I'm planning to make three piles: things I want to keep, things to offer to other people, and things destined for the charity shop or rubbish bin.

I take a deep breath and pull the first unmarked box towards me. I yank open the top, to find a messy stash of crafting paraphernalia: there are three embroidery sets, two boxes of colourful buttons and several half-finished wicker baskets, along with books on bookbinding and millinery. As I draw these out, various bits of fabric and skeins of wool and lengths of ribbon come to light. Was all this Mum's? Hobbies she took up, perhaps, after I'd left home?

I can't find anything that looks completed, apart from a pair of lumpy, hand-knitted teddies. I take them out and reveal a bottom layer of random cards. Frowning, I take a look. *Wow*, there are birthday and Christmas cards here going back over twenty years. One card, featuring a bunch of flowers and the word 'Congratulations', jogs a memory. I open it up, to find Mum's looping handwriting:

Dear Bella, we are so proud of you – the first person ever in our families EVER to graduate from university. Love you to the moon, Mum and Dad

I bite my lip, wondering if Mum felt sad or disappointed that I hadn't kept the card with me – and whether she stayed so proud once I'd established myself in a life such a long way away from the one in which I'd grown up. She always encouraged me academically, putting me in for the eleven plus even though nobody we knew had gone to the nearby grammar school. I got in too, then worked hard, determined to use uni as my ticket out of Framley. I wasn't a snob about the town I'd grown up in, but my earliest memories are of strikes on TV and walking past the derelict mills that once, when my parents were young, had given Framley its identity.

Under the cards, I find a faded photocopy of one of my first copywriting jobs – a print ad for a futon company – with a note paper-clipped to it.

I did this! love, Bella

I gaze at the cartoonish flower my twenty-something self drew after my name. I feel a million miles away from the girl who got picked up as a trainee by an ad agency straight out of university and bounced into a working life in London without a thought, never looking back at the small town I'd come from.

I rummage on. Among a cluster of invitations, I find the one to my wedding with Angus. He was an account manager at the second agency I worked at. After a whirlwind romance we were married within a year, just making it onto the housing ladder before all London properties

became completely unaffordable. Tora was born a few years later and for a while things were great.

Until my life imploded.

The first thing to go was my job. I got made redundant three years ago, when I was thirty-seven, as part of a thinly veiled corporate attempt to get rid of a raft of stale, pale oldies. Unlike Angus, who'd been freelancing for years at that point, I couldn't get my head around the insecurity of self-employed life and soon we were forced to sell our house and rent somewhere smaller and cheaper. After a really difficult year, I thought things surely had to improve, but then Mum collapsed with an aneurism aged just sixty-seven and was gone in less than an hour. What remained of my world finally blew up when, just two weeks after her funeral, I discovered Angus had been having an affair with one of my closest friends since my redundancy.

They were besotted with each other.

I was devastated.

And so it was that I suddenly found myself not just without a job and a partner, but with dwindling supplies of friends, money and confidence. Even Dad, once my absolute rock, was vanishing before my eyes, his mind gradually becoming more and more tangled in itself.

Angus and Annie moved abroad and the calls to poor Tora dwindled away. I hit my fortieth birthday in April – and plunged to a new low. I needed a fresh start and coming back to Framley last week seemed like a positive option. That's what I tell people anyway: that I'm here in my childhood home to sort it out before Frank and I sell it, while taking stock of my life and forging a new career in a thoughtfully planned sabbatical.

The truth is that I'm broke and desperate, with nowhere else to go.

I put the craft items in the charity donation pile and select a few of the cards for my own memory box. The rest can go. I reseal the box and set it by the door. There! One down, several million to go.

'Mum!' Tora flies into the room. 'Mercedes says there's no school uniform at my new school!' Her eyes are wide with excitement. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

I smile at her. My nine-year-old daughter may have something of my colouring, with her flyaway dark hair and green eyes, but I can't believe I was ever as innocent and excitable. Sometimes she seems far younger than her years.

'When I was at Framley Park there *was* a uniform,' I say. 'I didn't know they'd got rid of it.'

'This is the best thing that's ever happened to me!' she cries, clasping her hands together. 'I'm going to wear a different signature colour for each day of the week.'

'You've watched too many episodes of *Colour Me Positive*!' I look up to see Mercedes Jones, the only Framley friend I really kept in touch with over the years, standing by the bedroom door. She leans against the door jamb, eyebrows raised affectionately at Tora's enthusiasm.

'Do you think the girls at my new school will be judgy, though?' Tora stops, suddenly uncertain.

I hesitate, unsure exactly how to answer her. I really wanted her to see out the year at her old school, so she didn't have to start at Framley Park Primary halfway through the summer term. But my finances just got too squeezed and here she is uprooted and clearly a little anxious.

'Hey,' I say, sitting down on the bed and reaching for Tora's hand. 'What matters is being yourself and who

people are on the inside. That's what your new friends will be focused on, never mind what anybody's wearing.' I hope there is at least some truth to this.

Mercedes clears her throat. 'If anyone does get in your face, Tora, over *anything*,' she says gruffly, 'I'll get Dani onto them.'

'Thanks, Mer.' Our eyes meet and Mercedes nods. She's a senior nurse and a single mum with two daughters, the younger of whom, Daniela, is the same age and in the same year as Tora. We've been best friends since our first day at secondary school though over the past few years our meetings dwindled to the increasingly rare visits I made to Framley. Angus never took to practical, outspoken Mer, who – though she never said – I'm sure found him unbearably pompous. Anyway, once we'd moved into our tiny rental flat it was just too difficult to invite her and her kids to stay.

Mercedes's gaze wanders around the room, taking in all the piles of boxes. 'This is a lot to deal with,' she says flatly.

'I know.' I grimace. 'I'm exhausted already and I've literally looked inside one box.'

Mercedes nods, understanding immediately. 'How about I take Tora to mine for a few hours?' she suggests. 'The girls can have ice cream and Dani can give Tora tips about her new school.'

'Please, Mum?' Tora makes big eyes at me.

'That would be great,' I say. 'Though we're expected at my brother's for dinner later, so—'

'No worries, I've got a shift later anyway. I'll drop her back in plenty of time.' Mercedes grins. 'But how about you guys coming over *tomorrow* evening? The girls can play upstairs, and you and I can have a glass of wine and

discuss how to get you back in the, er, saddle, if you know what I mean?'

I shake my head. Mercedes's been banging on about me finding a new man since I arrived, but it's the last thing I want to focus on. I've got Tora to settle in, a house to clear out, and a new job to find.

On top of which, after Angus I can't imagine ever trusting a man again.

'A glass of wine sounds nice,' I say evenly.

'Good.' Mercedes glances around the room. 'One step at a time,' she says. 'It's not like you have to do it all today.'

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As Tora skips happily away, I get up from the bed and take proper stock. There are thirty-six cardboard boxes in here, including the two I've already looked at. Only a few are labelled. I peer inside one marked *EDDIE*, which is my dad's name, and find a jumble of ties and socks as well as a silver tankard, two watches I don't recognise and a large box of spare buttons and cufflinks. I give the box a cursory rummage, then reseal it and place it by the front door – there's nothing here of any value, sentimental or otherwise and, sadly, Dad no longer has any use for any of it. I'm going to give the entire box to Dad's brother, my uncle John, when I next see him. Feeling positive, I return upstairs and tackle a box marked *SPARES*. It contains a selection of blank birthday cards, a bag of picture hooks, two cutlery sets and three blocks of plain, A4 paper. At least none of these items are emotive. I remove the paper and put everything else in the 'donate' pile.

I check the time. Two boxes dealt with in less than ten minutes. I'm making progress!

I reach for an unmarked cardboard box and open it. The scent of Mum's honeysuckle perfume rises up, so strong that I gasp. Tears well in my eyes as I lift out a pile of folded jumpers and cardigans. I bury my face in a soft pink sweater, drawing in deep breaths of Mum's smell, then set the knitwear down and peer into the box again. A jumble of memories stares straight back at me: Mum's delicate seed pearl necklace is draped over the framed photo of Frank and me as kids that she kept on the living-room mantelpiece. I take them out to find two more framed photos, both from my parents' wedding, with Mum breathtakingly pretty in a meringue of a white dress and Dad's youthful, handsome face full of intense joy. There are other pictures of Mum here too, from her teens, posing for pictures in skimpy mini-skirts I'd never have been allowed to wear. I stare at them, struck by the light sparking from Mum's eyes as she grins down the lens. It's almost impossible to connect the young woman in this photo with my memories of Mum growing up. When did she lose her main character energy and settle back into the shadows, a figure in the background, keeping everything running smoothly but never stepping into the limelight?

Beneath those are yet more photos, mainly of my parents on holiday together. It's like looking into another world to stare at their younger selves, blissfully happy as they always were, with beaming smiles on their tanned faces. There's a selection of souvenirs from those holidays too: the paper fan from Spain, with a handle in the shape of a flamenco dancer that Mum inevitably used when the weather turned hot, and the crimson-fringed shawl she bought on Rhodes, which she would wrap me in when I was sick. As I stroke the soft wool of the shawl, another photo catches my eye. It's one of me and Vicky with our

arms around each other. Vicky's Hello Kitty backpack is slung over her shoulder. The photo must have been taken the summer she was killed. My throat feels thick and tight as I stare down at her face. God, she's so full of life. I can still see her as my dad took this picture, her eyes sparkling with mischief. 'Take your time, Mr Wilkins,' she teased, like she was twenty-five instead of ten.

Unwanted memories of that terrible day rise inside me. I blink them away, put everything back in the box, then reseal it and write the words *TO DO* on the outside.

Clearing out this room is going to be harder than I thought.

As I shove the box in the corner of the room, my eyes light on the cardboard edge of a container I hadn't noticed before. It's crammed into the space between the bedside table and the wall. *Great*. That makes thirty-seven. I drag it out and turn it around, searching for a label.

Bella

My heart gives a jolt as I spot my own name, scrawled on the side in Mum's familiar, looping handwriting:

I sit on the bed and make a space for the box beside me. What has Mum kept in here? My heart beats faster as I lift the flaps and peer inside.

The very worn yellow teddy bear I had as a baby lies on the top next to my two favourite dolls: Superstar Barbie with her massive froth of blonde hair and Great Shape Barbie in her blue bodysuit and striped legwarmers. Waves of nostalgia wash over me as I lift them out and take in the sheaves of cards and drawings and exercise books beneath. Oh, wow, did Mum really keep all these? I remove everything, one by one, and lay it out on the

single bed. There are school reports and colouring books and pictures of horses and families and pretty much every birthday and Mother's Day card I ever wrote as a child. The only odd addition is a framed photo of Mum aged about nineteen or twenty, dressed up as my Great Shape Barbie doll. I peer at it closely. She's copied the outfit exactly, even wearing a blonde wig and a blue headband. Surely this belongs with the other photos of her when she was young – or perhaps I had some sentimental attachment to the photo because of my own love of Barbie. I don't remember. The box is empty now, apart from a hardbacked bible. Another anomaly, surely? My childhood was resolutely non-religious, unless you count the cultural nod to Christianity offered when I was christened in church as a baby, or the local carol service which we attended as a family every Christmas.

I take out the bible and lift the cover, wondering if the flyleaf will give a clue as to where it came from. But there is no flyleaf. It's been torn out along with most of the bible. In its place is a notebook which, now freed from its hiding place, slides into my hand. Its once white cover is yellowing, but my mother's handwriting on the front is clear.

I stare at the words she wrote, my heart thudding.

Why did she hide this notebook so carefully? What does it contain? And why does its cover give such a stark and dramatic instruction:

BURN THIS