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Other People's Secrets

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Other People's Secrets

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Chapter 1

Saturday – Ginny

Later Ginny would not believe that she had hardly noticed that first day how beautiful the lake was. And their position on it, right at the water's edge, with the island of San Giulio placed picturesquely to the left. The view was almost too immaculately composed to be real, more like something in a painting where the artist had rearranged the elements to satisfy his personal laws of perspective.

It was a little piece of paradise, Adam said, quoting from the guidebook he'd been studying on the plane. Possibly the most perfect view in all of Italy – and didn't that, by definition, also mean the most perfect view in the whole world? But Ginny didn't absorb the concept any better than she absorbed the view, and she didn't think fourteen days of it would make any difference, either.

Their rental had its own little garden on the lakefront, with a stone table and a set of four stools, each hewn roughly into the shape of a toadstool. There was also a pair of long, low curved wicker chairs, set at a delicate angle to one another as though intended expressly for convalescents. From her viewpoint at the window above, she judged that if you pulled one of those chairs to the edge of the grass, and leaned right over, you'd be close enough to the water to dip your fingers in. You

could dip your whole self in, actually; there was nothing to stop you rolling right off the chair and into the cold. Alternatively, you could do it properly: step up on to the stone ledge of the lake wall, stretch up your arms towards the skies and *dive* in. Swim right across the frame of that famous piece of paradise to the island itself.

She was fairly certain she wouldn't have the energy for that, though. And even if she did, she didn't think she would have the desire.

'What d'you think?' Adam asked, joining her at one of the two sets of French windows in the living room, which along with the oversized fireplace made the small room feel grander than it was. Ginny could tell that Adam was pleased, grateful even, for what they had found when they'd unlocked the door and climbed the steps. Holiday rentals were a leap of faith at the best of times and he'd been painstaking in his quest to find the right place for them. (Not trusting the Internet, he'd gone in person to a travel agency in West London that specialised in just this sort of thing: Hidden Italy, it was called.) Though she was sure she would have felt exactly the same wherever they'd gone, she didn't think he could have borne the disappointment of an obscured view or a decaying interior. He may have looked the stronger of the two of them – in truth, he *was* the stronger – but that didn't mean he wasn't still fragile too, in his own way.

'It's lovely,' she said, summoning a small show of interest. 'I've never stayed in a boathouse before. It feels . . . peaceful.'

'Yep, that's the idea. Italy without the crowds. No queues, no cruise ships, no tour groups . . .' He glanced about him for other notable absences. 'No computer, no TV . . .'

No children.

But neither of them said that.

He set about opening the windows – 'Let's get some air into the place!' –and the breeze that entered was much warmer than that inside, its softness unreal after the cool London rain.

'I can't believe we got here so quickly,' Ginny said.

Adam looked as though he disagreed with that, but she was getting used to not trusting her own judgement and so didn't press the point. Car, plane, taxi; all the dragging of luggage and standing in queues in between . . . it was possible that it *had* been an arduous journey but she just hadn't noticed. These days, hours passed and she could not account for them. She wondered if it was because she didn't *want* time to pass; she wanted to hold it still before it took her too far from the day she counted as her happiest, the day before their lives capsized. April the fifth. And they'd been more than happy: they'd been euphoric.

Sometimes she thought it would have been better if the world had ended that day, or in the night, perhaps, as they slept, forever innocent.

'Right, shall we unpack?' he asked, briskly. Then, seeing her expression, 'I can do it if you want to rest?'

'No, I'll help.'

She followed him into the boathouse's only bedroom, which was even smaller than the living room, sharing as it did its half of the space with an access corridor to the external steps that led directly to the garden (the proper entrance was to the other side of the building, on the public lane). The room was lower-ceilinged, too, the walls wood-panelled, and all there was for lighting was a small, shaded lamp. Perhaps you were supposed to (want to) manage with candlelight alone, for the space had obviously been decorated with romance in mind. There were smooth white linens on the polished wooden bed, fresh flowers in a blue jug on the table, and at the window nothing but a length of that soft sheer muslin that seemed to move without any discernible draught, as if weightless. This was Italy, however, and the bathroom raised eyebrows, being as it was bath-free; little more than a showerhead, a basin and a loo. Not even one of those half-length sit-in baths you sometimes got in

hotels. At home Ginny had got used to spending hours in the bath, often letting the water rise up to her chin, the trickling of the overflow at her feet enough to lull her to sleep. If she timed it well, she could get out, put on a towelling robe, and slip into bed without fully gaining consciousness. She was dismayed that that trick wasn't going to be possible here.

'Come on,' Adam said, from behind the lid of the suitcase. 'It won't take long and we'll be glad we did it properly.'

They began transferring their clothes to the wardrobe and drawers, and when it was done he found a cupboard by the front door big enough to store the empty luggage. He had become noticeably more thorough of late – some might say obsessively so – eking out practical tasks for as long as he could and often lining up the next in advance in order to avoid being faced with too long a break in concentration. Ginny was the opposite: formerly the organised one of the two, she no longer cared what went where or how anything looked. Live out of a suitcase for two weeks; wear the same clothes every day; trip over a pile of shoes each time you came into the room: what did it matter? It didn't change a thing.

Though they'd finished their unpacking, Adam continued to move about the room, using short, cautious paces, a cat processing the dimensions of a new home. Watching from the bed, she wondered if he had also noticed that the cabin-like intimacy that made this place so romantic might in their case make it claustrophobic.

At last his gaze came to settle on her as if it could be avoided no longer. 'I might go into the village and explore. It's only about a ten-minute walk along the lake path, I reckon. Do you want to come?'

With effort, Ginny rose to her feet, pulled back the wispy drape at the window and eyed once more the little garden, those invalid's wicker chairs. 'I think I'll stay here and read for a while. But we'll go out for dinner later, shall we?'

'Absolutely.' Adam nodded, pleased with this evidence of initiative on her part. 'I'll check out some places while I'm out. Though I'm sure someone told me they eat donkey meat in the mountains . . . What's "donkey" in Italian?'

She had no idea and didn't answer – that was something else she'd lost, the ability to keep a conversation going beyond the required exchange of information – and, used to this, he came to kiss her goodbye. As he did so, she stood quite motionless, hardly even blinking. It was only when she'd heard his steps on the wooden stairs and the lower door pulled shut behind him that she allowed her body to stir again, as if waiting for an intruder to leave the premises before daring to emerge from her hiding place.

Crazy behaviour; incomprehensible.

She couldn't face the paperback Adam had chosen for her at the airport and instead picked up a folder marked 'Location Pack' that had been left on the breakfast bar in the kitchen. Settled in one of the garden seats, she squinted as the sun bounced off the white pages:

Dear Mr and Mrs Trustlove,
Welcome to the boathouse at Villa Isola, Orta's beloved Arabian-style folly – we know your stay here will be a happy one! Lago d'Orta is probably the least known of the Italian lakes, little sister of the more famous Garda, Maggiore and Como . . .

After managing only two sentences, Ginny closed the folder again. These days reading hurt her eyes, exactly as if she were still learning the technicalities of it and the effort overtaxed her brain. And the sunlight was so powerful here! It felt like they were on the equator. She supposed that explained the clusters of dark heads she could make out near the far shore, bobbing above the surface of the water alongside something bright and

flashing. Adam had packed her a swimsuit, though she didn't intend to wear it. Seeing her body, all stretched and misshapen, was unendurable enough in private without having to display it to other people as well.

She never looked in a full-length mirror now; she rarely looked at her face, either, only in the mornings to check she hadn't smeared herself with toothpaste. She didn't need a mirror to tell her that her once artfully cropped and highlighted hair had been replaced months ago by a badly made nest – fitting, perhaps, given the crow's feet now established around her eyes. As for those eyes, they were strange, spiritless things, the blue re-blended to a drabber shade, the windows to this particular soul quite blacked out.

Remembering her earlier thought, she reached her arm towards the water; she'd been right: it was close enough to touch. She brought her face as near to the surface as possible without sending her chair toppling sideways, then, straightening again, felt herself consumed by a spinning sensation – she even lost her vision for a few seconds. But that was nothing to worry about: dizziness was a known symptom. She was familiar with the full list, as well as with the order in which they might be expected to come. What the experts didn't tell you, however, was that sometimes you got all the symptoms at once, in one huge chemical whoosh that knocked you off your feet. That was when you needed your bath and the warm water up to your neck and the merciful loss of pain that came with it. It was the closest you could get to not feeling.

Eyes half-closed, she watched a pair of white butterflies dance above the tall rushes on the far side of the boathouse. A fact popped into her head, where from she didn't know, though it was possibly from Adam himself: *the average lifespan of an adult butterfly is two weeks*. Was that true? And there was something with an even shorter natural span than that, though she couldn't remember its name. Something very simple that

lived in the water. Maybe there was one in the lake out there, swimming about at this very moment, oblivious to its own brevity.

That was the one saving grace in all that had happened, she thought: *you never knew*.

After that, she must have dozed. When Adam came back, the fresh infusion of enthusiasm the expedition had given him was clear in his whole demeanour. He bounced on the balls of his feet as he spoke, he used his hands to describe the piazza and the steep cobbled streets and the little chapels on the hilltop; he even smiled. 'This place is incredible, Ginny! And you know what? I think we must be in the original boathouse of the funny villa we saw from the road. D'you remember: that pink and green thing with the watchtower? I didn't realise they were connected when we arrived because we've got separate entrances, but it's right there behind the trees. It makes sense now what the agent said about sharing a jetty.'

Ginny gestured to the information pack. 'It tells you about the villa in here . . .' she began, but he was stepping past her, speaking over the top of her.

'That must be where this gate leads to. I wondered why it was there . . .' And he was already through it, closing it carefully behind him with that air he'd always had – and had not lost – of wishing to be above all else a good citizen, and now she could see only the upper part of him, his arms still gesturing eagerly as he reported to her what he was seeing.

He's behaving as if I'm blind, Ginny thought, *or disabled. He's my* carer. She pulled herself to a standing position and looked beyond him to a broad sweep of lawn, finished at the lake's edge with a row of horse chestnut trees whose overlapping branches created a long, inviting canopy of shade. There was a private jetty, too, modest but well-kept. She couldn't see the villa itself, but whoever it belonged to had a park-sized piece of waterfront, the boathouse allotted only the tiniest corner of it.

Adam came to a halt with his back to the lake and his face upturned. 'Wow, come and look at this! It's not a house, it's a palace! Looks empty, though, which is just as well because we want to be alone, don't we? Shall we sneak up and have a nose around?'

It was only when he added, 'Oh, Ginny,' and came rushing back through the gate towards her that she understood that she had sunk back into her chair and begun crying. In a trice he was kneeling on the ground by her side, forcing her right arm against the hard edge of the wicker as he pressed her to him in an awkward hug.

'We will get through this,' he murmured, 'I promise we will. Coming here was definitely the right thing to do.'

He held her for a little longer, telling her he loved her. The way Ginny heard it, it was *I* love you, with that sorrowful emphasis on the 'I', as if he were only confirming what she already understood: that everyone else in the world had deserted her.