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Written by Jojo Moyes

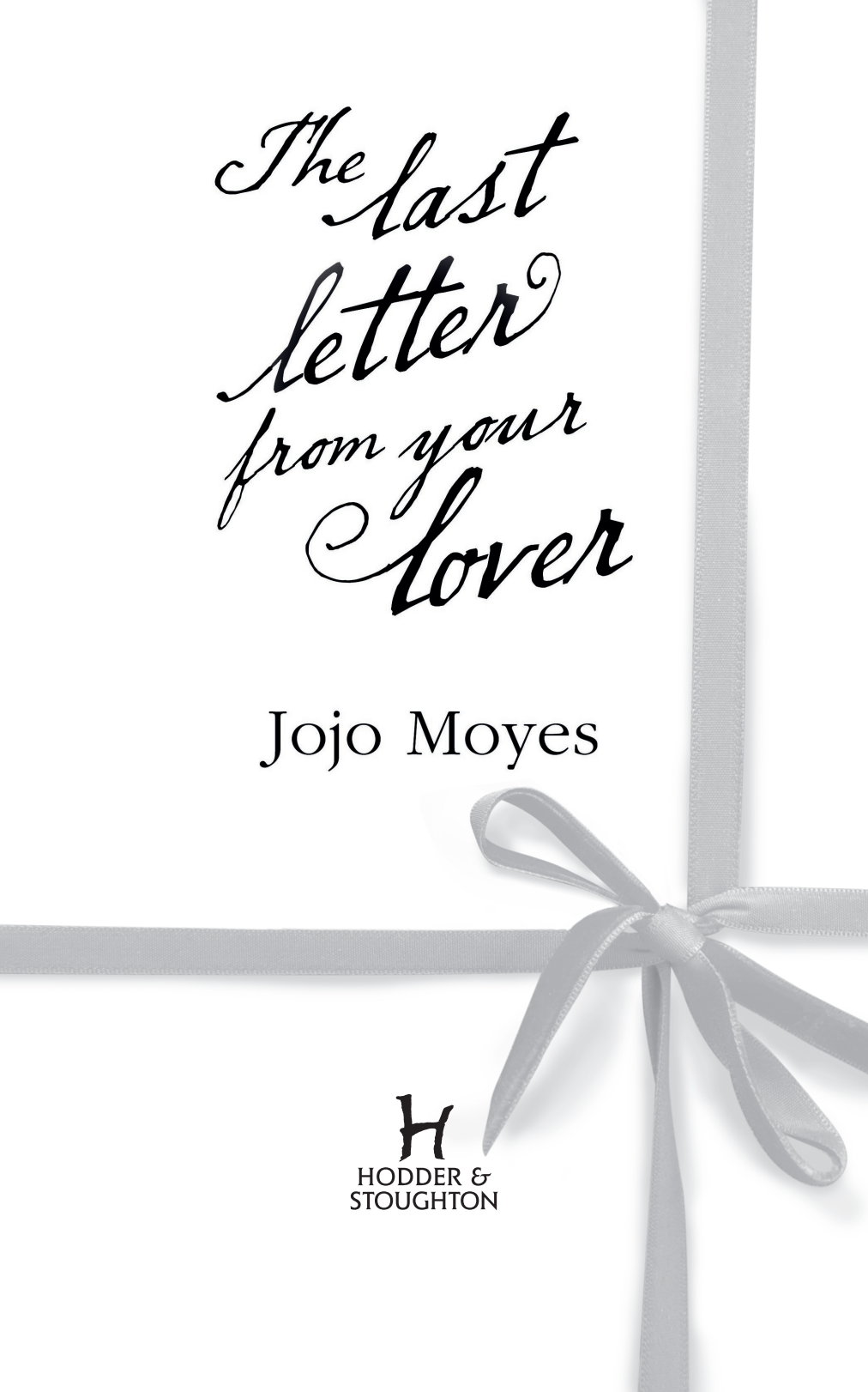
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The last letter from your lover

Jojo Moyes



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Happy Birthday! Enclosed is your birthday present which I hope you like . . .

I am thinking of you especially today . . . because I have decided that although I love you I am not in love with you. I don't feel that you are God's One for me. Anyway, I really hope that you like your present and that you have a fantastic birthday.

Female to Male, via letter



Prologue

Later x

Ellie Haworth spies her friends through the throng and weaves her way through the bar. She drops her bag at her feet and places her phone on the table in front of them. They are already well lubricated – it's in the tenor of their voices, the extravagant arm movements and loud laughter, the empty bottles between them.

'Late.' Nicky holds up her watch, wagging a finger at her. 'Don't tell us. "I had a story I had to finish."'

'Interview with wronged MP's wife. Sorry. It was for tomorrow's edition,' she says, sliding into the empty seat and pouring herself a glass from the dregs of a bottle. She pushes her phone across the table. 'Okay. Tonight's annoying word for discussion: "later".'

'Later?'

'As a sign-off. Does that mean tomorrow or later today? Or is it just some horrible teenage affectation that actually means nothing at all?'

Nicky peers at the glowing screen. 'It's "later" plus an "X". That's like "goodnight". I'd say tomorrow.'

'Definitely tomorrow,' says Corinne. '"Later" is always tomorrow.' She pauses. 'Or it could even mean the day after.'

'It's very casual.'

'Casual?'

'As in something you might say to the postman.'

'You'd send a kiss to your postman?'

Nicky grins. 'I might. He's gorgeous.'

Corinne studies the message. 'I don't think that's fair. It could just mean he was in a hurry to do something else.'

'Yeah. Like his wife.'

Ellie shoots a warning look at Douglas.

'What?' he says. 'I'm just saying, don't you think you're past the point where you should be deciphering text-speak?'

Ellie gulps her wine, then leans forward over the table. 'Okay. I need another drink if I'm about to get the lecture.'

'If you're intimate enough with someone to have sex in their office, I think you should be able to ask them to clarify when you might be meeting them for coffee.'

'What does the rest of the message say? And please tell me it's nothing about sex in his office.'

Ellie peers at her phone, scrolling down the messages. '"Tricky calling from home. Dublin next week but not sure yet what plans are. Later x."'

'He's keeping his options open,' Douglas says.

'Unless he's . . . you know . . . not sure what his plans are.'

'Then he would have said, "Will call from Dublin." Or even "I'll fly you out to Dublin."'

'Is he taking his wife?'

'He never does. It's a work trip.'

'Perhaps he's taking someone else,' Douglas murmurs, into his beer.

Nicky shakes her head meditatively. 'God, wasn't life easier when they had to ring you and speak to you? Then you could at least gauge rejection from the sound of their voice.'

'Yes.' Corinne snorts. 'And you could sit at home by the phone for hours waiting for them to call.'

'Oh, the nights I spent –'

'– Checking the dial tone was working –'

'– and then slamming down the phone just in case that had been the exact minute they rang.'

Ellie hears them laugh, acknowledging the truth in their humour, some small part of her still waiting to see the little screen illuminate suddenly with a call. A call that, given the hour and that things are 'tricky at home', isn't going to happen.

Douglas walks her home. He is the only one of the four of them living with a partner, but Lena, his girlfriend, is big in technology PR and often at her office until ten or eleven at night. Lena doesn't mind him coming out with his old friends – she has accompanied him a few times but it's hard for her to penetrate the wall of old jokes and knowing references that come with a decade and a half of friendship; most of the time she lets him come alone.

'So, what's going on with you, big boy?' Ellie nudges him as they skirt a shopping trolley that someone has left on the pavement. 'You didn't say anything about yourself back there. Unless I missed it all.'

'Not much,' he says, and hesitates. He shoves his hands into his pockets. 'Actually, that's not quite true. Um . . . Lena wants to have a baby.'

Ellie looks up at him. 'Wow.'

'And I do too,' he adds hastily. 'We've been talking about it for ages, but we've decided now that there's never going to be a right time so we might as well get on with it.'

'You old romantic.'

'I'm . . . I dunno . . . quite happy about it, really. Lena's going to keep her job, and I'll look after the baby at home. You know, provided everything happens as it should and . . .'

Ellie tries to keep her voice neutral. 'And that's what you want?'

'Yeah. I don't like my job anyway. Haven't done for years.

She earns a fortune. I think it'll be quite nice pottering round with a kid all day.'

'Parenthood's a bit more than pottering round—' she begins.

'I know that. Mind out . . . on the pavement.' Gently he steers her round the mess. 'But I'm ready for it. I don't need to be out every night in the pub. I want the next stage. That's not to say I don't like coming out with you guys, but sometimes I do wonder whether we shouldn't all be . . . you know . . . growing up a bit.'

'Oh, no!' Ellie clasps his arm. 'You've crossed over to the dark side.'

'Well, I don't feel the same way about my job as you do. For you it's everything, right?'

'Almost everything,' she concedes.

They walk on in silence for a couple of streets, listening to the distant sirens, the slammed car doors and muffled arguments of the city. Ellie loves this part of the evening, buoyed by friendship, temporarily free of the uncertainties that surround the rest of her life. She's had a good night at the pub, is headed home to her cosy flat. She's healthy. She has a credit card with plenty of unused capacity, plans for the weekend, and she's the only one of her friends not yet to have found a single grey hair. Life is good.

'Do you ever think about her?' Douglas asks.

'Who?'

'John's wife. Do you think she knows?'

The mention of her dissipates Ellie's happiness. 'I don't know.' And when Douglas says nothing, she adds, 'I'm sure I would, if I were her. He says she's more interested in the children than him. Sometimes I tell myself there might even be some little part of her that's glad she's not having to worry about him. You know, about keeping him happy.'

'Now *that* is wishful thinking.'

'Maybe. But if I'm really honest, the answer's no. I don't

think about her and I don't feel guilty. Because I don't think it wouldn't have happened if they'd been happy or . . . you know . . . connected.'

'You women have such a misguided view of men.'

'You think he's happy with her?' She studies his face.

'I have no idea if he is or not. I just don't think he needs to be unhappy with his wife to be sleeping with you.'

The mood has shifted slightly, and perhaps in recognition of this, she lets go of his arm, adjusting her scarf around her neck. 'You think I'm a bad person. Or he's a bad person.'

It's out there. The fact that it has come from Douglas, the least judgemental of her friends, stings.

'I don't think anyone's a bad person. I just think of Lena, and what it would mean for her to carry my child, and the idea of dicking around on her just because she chose to give my baby the attention I felt was mine . . .'

'So you *do* think he's a bad person.'

Douglas shakes his head. 'I just . . .' He stops, looks up into the night sky before framing his answer. 'I think you should be careful, Ellie. All this trying to decipher what he means, what he wants, it's just bullshit. You're wasting your time. In my book things are generally pretty simple. Someone likes you, you like them, you hook up, and that's pretty much it.'

'Nice universe you live in, Doug. Shame it doesn't resemble the real one.'

'Okay, let's change the subject. Bad one to bring up on a few drinks.'

'No.' Her voice sharpens. '*In vino veritas* and all that. It's fine. At least I know how you feel. I'll be fine from here. Say hi to Lena for me.' She runs the last two streets to her house, not turning back to view the old friend behind her.

The *Nation* is being packed up, box by box, for transfer to its new glass-fronted home on a gleaming, reclaimed quay

to the east of the city. The office, week by week, has been thinning: where once there were towers of press releases, files and archived cuttings, now empty desks, unexpected shiny lengths of laminated surface, are exposed to the harsh glare of the strip lighting. Souvenirs of past stories have been unearthed, like prizes from an archaeologist's dig, flags from royal jubilees, dented metal helmets from distant wars and framed certificates for long-forgotten awards. Banks of cables lie exposed, carpet tiles have been dislodged and great holes opened in the ceilings, prompting histrionic visits from health and safety experts and endless visitors with clipboards. Advertising, Classified and Sport have already moved to Compass Quay. The Saturday magazine, Business and Personal Finance are preparing to transfer in the next weeks. Features, Ellie's department, will follow along with News, moving in a carefully choreographed sleight-of-hand so that while Saturday's newspaper will emanate from the old Turner Street offices, Monday's will spring, as if by magic, from the new address.

The building, home to the newspaper for almost a hundred years, is no longer fit-for-purpose, in that unlovely phrase. According to the management it does not reflect the dynamic, streamlined nature of modern newsgathering. It has too many places to hide, the hacks observe bad-temperedly, as they are prised from their positions, like limpets clinging stubbornly to a holed hull.

'We should celebrate it,' says Melissa, head of Features, from the editor's almost-cleared office. She's wearing a wine-coloured silk dress. On Ellie, this would have looked like her grandmother's nightie; on Melissa it looks like what it is – defiantly high fashion.

'The move?' Ellie's glancing at her mobile phone, set to silent, beside her. Around her, the other Feature writers are silent, notepads on knees.

'Yes. I was talking to one of the librarians the other evening.

He says there are lots of old files that haven't been looked at in years. I want something on the women's pages from fifty years ago. How attitudes have changed, fashions, women's preoccupations. Case studies, side by side, then and now.' Melissa opens a file and pulls out several photocopied A3 sheets. She speaks with the easy confidence of someone accustomed to being listened to. 'For instance, from our problem pages: "*What on earth can I do to get my wife to dress more smartly and to make herself more attractive? My income is £1500 a year, and I am beginning to make my way in a sales organisation. I am very often getting invitations from customers, but in recent weeks I have had to dodge them because my wife, frankly, looks a mess*."'

There is a low chuckle around the room.

'"*I have tried to put it to her in a gentle way, and she says that she doesn't care about fashions or jewellery or makeup. Frankly she doesn't look like the wife of a successful man, which is what I want her to be.*"'

John had once told Ellie that, after the children, his wife had lost interest in her appearance. He had changed the subject almost as soon as he had introduced it, and never referred to it again, as if he felt what he had said was even more of a betrayal than sleeping with another woman. Ellie had resented that hint of gentlemanly loyalty even while a bit of her admired him for it.

But it had stuck in her imagination. She had pictured his wife: slatternly in a stained nightdress, clutching a baby and haranguing him for some supposed deficit. She wanted to tell him she would never be like that with him.

'One could put the questions to a modern agony aunt.' Rupert, the Saturday editor, leans forward to peer at the other photocopied pages.

'I'm not sure you'd need to. Listen to the response: "*It may never have occurred to your wife that she is meant to be*

part of your shop window. She may, in so far as she thinks about these things at all, tell herself that she's married, secure, happy, so why should she bother?"'

'Ah,' says Rupert. '"The deep, deep peace of the double bed".'

'"*I have seen this happen remarkably quickly to girls who fall in love just as much as to women who potter about in the cosy wrap of an old marriage. One moment they're smart as new paint, battling heroically with their waistlines, seams straight, anxiously dabbed with perfume. Some man says, 'I love you,' and the next moment that shining girl is, as near as makes no difference, a slut. A happy slut.*"'

The room fills briefly with polite, appreciative laughter.

'What's your choice, girls? Battle heroically with your waistline, or become a happy slut?'

'I think I saw a film of that name not long ago,' says Rupert. His smile fades when he realises the laughter has died.

'There's a lot we can do with this stuff.' Melissa gestures towards the folder. 'Ellie, can you dig around a bit this afternoon? See what else you might find. We're looking at forty, fifty years ago. A hundred will be too alienating. The editor's keen for us to highlight the move in a way that will bring readers along with us.'

'You want me to go through the archive?'

'Is that a problem?'

Not if you like sitting in dark cellars full of mildewing paper policed by dysfunctional men with Stalinist mindsets, who apparently haven't seen daylight for thirty years. 'Not at all,' she says brightly. 'I'm sure I'll find something.'

'Get a couple of workies to help you, if you like. I've heard there's a couple lurking in the fashion cupboard.'

Ellie doesn't register the malevolent satisfaction crossing her editor's features at the thought of sending the latest batch of Anna Wintour wannabes deep into the bowels of

the newspaper. She's busy thinking, *Bugger. No mobile reception underground*.

'By the way, Ellie, where were you this morning?'

'What?'

'This morning. I wanted you to rewrite that piece about children and bereavement. Yes? Nobody seemed to know where you were.'

'I was out doing an interview.'

'Who with?'

A body-language expert, Ellie thought, would have identified correctly that Melissa's blank smile was more of a snarl.

'Lawyer. Whistleblower. I was hoping to work something up on sexism in chambers.' It's out almost before she knows what she's saying.

'Sexism in the City. Hardly sounds groundbreaking. Make sure you're at your desk at the right time tomorrow. Speculative interviews in your own time. Yes?'

'Right.'

'Good. I want a double-page spread for the first Compass Quay edition. Something along the lines of *plus ça change*.' She is scribbling in her leather-backed notebook. 'Preoccupations, ads, problems . . . Bring me a few pages later this afternoon and we'll see what you've got.'

'Will do.' Ellie's smile is the brightest and most workmanlike in the whole room as she follows the others out of the office.

Spent today in modern day equivalent of purgatory, she types, pausing to take a sip of her wine. *Newspaper archive office. You want to be grateful you only make stuff up.*

He has messaged her from his hotmail account. He calls himself Penpusher; a joke between the two of them. She curls her feet under her on the chair and waits, willing the machine to signal his response.

You're a terrible heathen. I love archives, the screen responds. *Remind me to take you to the British Newspaper Library for our next hot date.*

She grins. *You know how to show a girl a good time.*

I do my best.

The only human librarian has given me a great wedge of loose papers. Not the most exciting bedtime reading.

Afraid this sounds sarcastic, she follows it with a smiley face, then curses as she remembers he once wrote an essay for the *Literary Review* on how the smiley face represented all that was wrong with modern communication.

That was an ironic smiley face, she adds, and stuffs her fist into her mouth.

Hold on. Phone. The screen stills.

Phone. His wife? He was in a hotel room in Dublin. It overlooked the water, he had told her. *You would love it.* What was she meant to say to that? *Then bring me next time?* Too demanding. *I'm sure I would?* Sounded almost sarcastic. *Yes*, she had replied, finally, and let out a long, unheard sigh.

It's all her own fault, her friends tell her. Unusually for her, she can't disagree.

She had met him at a book festival in Suffolk, sent to interview this thriller writer who had made a fortune after he had given up on more literary offerings. His name is John Armour, his hero, Dan Hobson, an almost cartoonish amalgam of old-fashioned masculine traits. She had interviewed him over lunch, expecting a rather chippy defence of the genre, perhaps a few moans about the publishing industry – she always found writers rather wearying to interview. She had expected someone paunchy, middle-aged, puddingy after years of being desk-bound. But the tall, tanned man who rose to shake her hand had been lean and

freckly, resembling a weathered South African farmer. He was funny, charming, self-deprecating and attentive. He had turned the interview on her, asking her questions about herself, then told her his theories on the origin of language and how he believed communication was morphing into something dangerously flaccid and ugly.

When the coffee arrived, she realised she hadn't put pen to notepad for almost forty minutes.

'Don't you love the sound of them, though?' she said, as they left the restaurant and headed back towards the literary festival. It was late in the year and the winter sun had dipped below the low buildings of the quietening high street. She had drunk too much, had reached the point at which her mouth would race off defiantly before she had worked out what she should say. She hadn't wanted to leave the restaurant.

'Which ones?'

'Spanish. Mostly Italian. I'm sure it's why I love Italian opera, and I can't stand the German ones. All those hard, guttural noises.' He had considered this, and his silence unnerved her. She began to stutter: 'I know it's terribly unfashionable, but I love Puccini. I love that high emotion. I love the curling *r*, the staccato of the words . . .' She tailed away as she heard how ridiculously pretentious she sounded.

He paused in a doorway, gazed briefly up the road behind them, then turned back to her. 'I don't like opera.' He had stared at her directly as he said it. As if it were a challenge. She felt something give, deep in the pit of her stomach. Oh, God, she thought.

'Ellie,' he said, after they had stood there for almost a minute. It was the first time he had called her by name. 'Ellie, I have to pick up something from my hotel before I go back to the festival. Would you like to come with me?'

Even before he shut the bedroom door behind them, they were on each other, bodies pressed together, mouths

devouring, locked together as their hands performed the urgent, frantic choreography of undressing.

Afterwards she would look back on her behaviour and marvel as if at some kind of aberration seen from afar. In the hundreds of times she had replayed it, she had rubbed away the significance, the overwhelming emotion, and was left only with details. Her underwear, everyday, inappropriate, flung across a trouser press; the way they had giggled insanely on the floor afterwards underneath the multi-patterned synthetic hotel quilt; how he had cheerfully, and with inappropriate charm, handed back his key to the receptionist later that afternoon.

He had called two days later, as the euphoric shock of that day was seguing into something more disappointing.

'You know I'm married,' he said. 'You read my cuttings.'

'I've googled every last reference to you, she told him silently.

'I've never been . . . unfaithful before. I still can't quite articulate what happened.'

'I blame the quiche,' she quipped, wincing.

'You do something to me, Ellie Haworth. I haven't written a word in forty-eight hours.' He paused. 'You make me forget what I want to say.'

Then I'm doomed, she thought, because as soon as she had felt his weight against her, his mouth on hers, she had known – despite everything she had ever said to her friends about married men, everything she had ever believed – that she required only the faintest acknowledgement from him of what had happened for her to be lost.

A year on, she still hadn't begun to look for a way out.

He comes back online almost forty-five minutes later. In this time she has left her computer, fixed herself another drink, wandered the flat aimlessly, peering at her skin in a bathroom mirror, then gathering up stray socks and hurling them

into the laundry basket. She hears the *ping* of a message and hurls herself into her chair.

Sorry. Didn't mean to be so long. Hope to speak tomorrow.

No mobile-phone calls, he had said. Mobile bills were itemised.

Are you in hotel now? she types rapidly. *I could call you in your room.* The spoken word was a luxury, a rare opportunity. God, but she just needed to hear his voice.

Got to go to a dinner, gorgeous. Sorry – behind already. Later x

And he is gone.

She stares at the empty screen. He will be striding off through the hotel foyer now, charming the reception staff, climbing into whatever car the festival has organised for him. Tonight he will give a clever off-the-cuff speech over dinner and then be his usual amused, slightly wistful self to those lucky enough to sit at his table. He will be out there, living his life to the full, when she seems to have put hers perennially on hold.

What the hell was she doing?

'What the hell am I doing?' she says aloud, hitting the off button. She shouts her frustration at the bedroom ceiling, flops down on her vast, empty bed. She can't call her friends: they've endured these conversations too many times, and she can guess what their response will be – what it can *only* be. What Doug had said to her was painful. But she would say exactly the same to any of them.

She sits on the sofa, flicks on the television. Finally, glancing at the pile of papers at her side, she hauls them on to her lap, cursing Melissa. A miscellaneous pile, the librarian had said, cuttings that bore no date and had no obvious category – 'I haven't got time to go through them all. We're turning up so many piles like this.' He was the only librarian under fifty down there. She wondered, fleetingly, why she'd never noticed him before.

'See if there's anything that's of use to you.' He had leant forward conspiratorially. 'Throw away whatever you don't want but don't say anything to the boss. We're at the stage now when we can't afford to go through every last bit of paper.'

It soon becomes apparent why: a few theatre reviews, a passenger list for a cruise ship, some menus from celebratory newspaper dinners. She flicks through them, glancing up occasionally at the television. There's not much here that'll excite Melissa.

Now she's leafing through a battered file of what looks like medical records. All lung disease, she notes absently. Something to do with mining. She's about to tip the whole lot into the bin when a pale blue corner catches her eye. She tugs at it with an index finger and thumb and pulls out a hand-addressed envelope. It's been opened, and the letter inside is dated 4 October 1960.

My dearest and only love,

I meant what I said. I have come to the conclusion that the only way forward is for one of us to take a bold decision.

I am not as strong as you. When I first met you, I thought you were a fragile little thing, someone I had to protect. Now I realise I had us all wrong. You are the strong one, the one who can endure living with the possibility of a love like this, and the fact that we will never be allowed it.

I ask you not to judge me for my weakness. The only way I can endure is to be in a place I will never see you, never be haunted by the possibility of seeing you with him. I need to be somewhere where sheer necessity forces you from my thoughts minute by minute, hour by hour. That cannot happen here.

I am going to take the job. I'll be at Platform 4,

Paddington, at 7.15 on Friday evening, and there is nothing in the world that would make me happier than if you found the courage to come with me.

If you don't come, I'll know that whatever we might feel for each other, it isn't quite enough. I won't blame you, my darling. I know the past weeks have put an intolerable strain on you, and I feel the weight of that keenly. I hate the thought that I could cause you any unhappiness.

I'll be waiting on the platform from a quarter to seven. Know that you hold my heart, my hopes, in your hands.

Your
B

Ellie reads it a second time, and finds her eyes welling inexplicably with tears. She can't take her eyes off the large, looped handwriting; the immediacy of the words springs out to her more than forty years after they were hidden. She turns it over, checks the envelope for clues. It's addressed to PO Box 13, London. It could be a man or a woman. What did you do, PO Box 13? she asks silently.

Then she gets up, replaces the letter carefully in the envelope and walks over to her computer. She opens the mail file and presses 'refresh'. Nothing since the message she had received at seven forty-five.

Got to go to a dinner, gorgeous. Sorry – behind already. Later x