

A psychological thriller  
you won't be able to put down



# tell me no lies

LISA HALL

Lisa Hall

**Tell Me No Lies: A gripping  
psychological thriller with a  
twist you won't see coming**

«HarperCollins»

## **Hall L.**

Tell Me No Lies: A gripping psychological thriller with a twist you won't see coming / L. Hall — «HarperCollins»,

‘Breathlessly fast-paced and cleverly unsettling’ – Heat magazine  
Don’t. Trust. Anyone. It was supposed to be a fresh start. A chance to forget the past and embrace the future. But can you ever really start again? Or does the past follow you wherever you go? Steph and Mark have just moved house, trying to find a way forward after all the secrets, lies and betrayal. But starting over isn’t always easy. Especially when someone will go to any lengths to make sure you never forget... ‘An excellent thriller that had me hooked from the start.’ – Katerina Diamond, author of The Teacher

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'Hall packs a punch with this one and the ending left me gasping.'

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'A gripping psychological thriller with a level of tension that will leave you breathless.'

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– Bibliophile Book Club

'Lisa Hall has written a harrowing, disturbing and chilling novel which I couldn't help but devour in a matter of days. She's one of those authors you don't see coming and BANG best seller, up there with the greatest crime writers like Stuart McBride and Lee Child. She's one to watch.'

– Brunette Lifestyle

Tell Me No Lies

Lisa Hall



[www.CarinaUK.com](http://www.CarinaUK.com)

**LISA HALL**

loves words, reading and everything there is to love about books. She has dreamed of being a writer since she was a little girl – either that or a librarian - and after years of talking about it, was finally brave enough to put pen to paper (and let people actually read it). Lisa lives in a small village in Kent, surrounded by her towering TBR pile, a rather large brood of children, dogs, chickens and ponies and her long-suffering husband. She is also rather partial to eating cheese and drinking wine.

Readers can follow Lisa on Twitter @LisaHallAuthor

For my Granny and Grandad Langford – for always being there.

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Extract

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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[PROLOGUE](#)

They say everything happens for a reason. That a person comes into your life at a certain time, whether their intentions are good or bad. I used to think it was a load of rubbish, that we are in control of our own destiny, but now, knowing what I know, I'm not so sure. Sometimes people aren't what they seem. Sometimes people set out to destroy everything you hold dear. And sometimes, that person is you.

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

I heave a box from the back of the van, taking care not to stretch too far. It's not heavy, and I shift it in my arms as I turn and look up at the house. A fresh start, that's what it is. It's not just a house, it's a chance for Mark and I to put straight everything that has gone wrong this year, to give Henry a happy family home instead of the war-torn existence full of accusations and blame that he's had to put up with this year. This imposing, statuesque Victorian townhouse is going to make us feel like a family again, with its large rooms set over three floors, a garden with enough room for Henry to run around in and impressive trees that line the street outside. It's a step up too, from our cramped two-bedroom flat in Crouch End, to this beautiful house in Blackheath, that's almost so big I don't know how we'll ever fill it. And Blackheath isn't *that* far from Crouch End, not really. A movement to one side catches the corner of my eye and I turn slightly to see Mark walking towards me, holding out his arms.

'Here, give me that.' Dark eyes twinkle at me, in the way that captured my heart six years ago, and I swallow hard. Twinkly eyes or not, forgiveness is not quite that simple.

'I'm fine. It's not heavy. And I'm not made of china.' I shift the box again in my arms, but he insists and tugs it gently away from me.

'You're carrying precious cargo there.' Mark smiles down at me and I manage to muster up a small smile back. Surreptitiously, I run my hand over the small swelling of my stomach, still almost

invisible to anyone else. Mark strides towards the house, and after one last look at its imposing front, I follow after him.

He heads straight for the huge, airy conservatory at the back of the house, a stunning addition that lets vast amounts of light into what would otherwise be a gloomy, shadow-filled, Victorian kitchen. He adds the box to a pile that has already been off-loaded and turns to me.

'Nearly there, Steph. Only a few more boxes to go and we're done. You can start unpacking if you want, make it look like home a bit before Henry gets here.' I give a small nod, and Mark pulls me towards him.

'Honestly, Steph, it's a fresh start. We can say goodbye to all that's happened and try to start again. Or we can carry on dwelling on it all and let things really disintegrate. We can do this, Steph, I know we can.' Hearing the slight sense of desperation in his voice, I lean into him and feel his chin rubbing against my hair as he rests his head on mine. Pulling away I look up at him, trying to see the man I married, instead of the man who broke my heart.

'I know, fresh start. I'm trying, Mark, really I am. It's just a bit overwhelming, that's all. Everything's changed, everything that I thought was solid has turned out to be ... liquid. I'm just finding my foundations again. Give me a bit of time.'

'I'm sorry, Steph. You know that, I've never been more sorry. We can get over this; it'll be hard but we can do it.' He tugs me back into his arms and I rest there for a moment, squashing the queasiness in my stomach, and trying to ignore the stench of decay that still surrounds our relationship.

Two hours later, the removal lorry is finally unloaded and I've managed to find mugs and the kettle. Henry's bed has been made up, and I feel like maybe this wasn't the worst idea we've ever had. Maybe we have done the right thing, getting away from everything that went wrong, trying to start again somewhere new where there are no memories. Surveying the mass of boxes in Henry's room I take a deep breath – I just need to get over the anxiety that hangs over me in the wake of all things new, and remind myself that this *is* for the best. I'm just smoothing the bed covers on Henry's bed when the doorbell rings. Hoping it's my parents bringing my little boy home, I run lightly down the stairs. I can hear Mark in the conservatory, swearing under his breath, obviously attempting to put a piece of furniture together or unpack something that is clearly getting the better of him. Swinging the door open, my 'Hello' dies on my lips as I realise it isn't who I am expecting. Instead of my mother standing on the doorstep, there is a tall, redheaded man in a Christmas jumper, despite the fact that it's not even the middle of November yet. There is a vaguely familiar air about him, as if I think I have met him somewhere before, but nothing comes clearly to mind. This isn't unusual; my memory for faces isn't the best even when I'm not pregnant.

'Hello?' I lean on the doorframe, aware that I must look a sight. My T-shirt is crumpled and filthy from cleaning Henry's room before setting up the bed, my hair a tangled bird's nest. The man on the doorstep smiles, showing off a perfect set of gleaming white teeth, and holds up a bottle of red wine.

'Sorry, I know I'm probably intruding hugely, but I just wanted to introduce myself. I live next door – I'm Laurence. Laurence Cole.' He holds out a hand and I shake it without thinking, before glancing down at my dusty palms and wiping them surreptitiously on my jeans.

'Hello, Laurence Cole. You're not intruding as such ... It's nice to meet you, but perhaps now isn't a very good time.' I glance behind me, where swear words are pouring from the kitchen.

'Steph, is that the chap from next door? I told him to pop over; show him in.' Mark's voice floats out from the kitchen and my heart sinks a little. I'm really not feeling up to visitors; the house is a tip and I look a fright. But I rustle up a smile, taking the wine bottle from Laurence and showing him into the kitchen where Mark has just about given up on putting a cabinet together. As a television producer it's safe to say DIY isn't his forte. Getting to his feet, Mark wipes his hands over his jeans and holds one out for Laurence to shake.

‘Sorry about that.’ Mark swats his dark hair out of his eyes and turns to me. ‘Laurence, this is Steph, my wife. She’s a journalist too.’

‘Hardly a journalist, Mark.’ I look down at the floor, before raising my eyes to meet Laurence’s. ‘I don’t really think interviewing minor celebrities for trashy magazines is journalism.’

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Laurence smiles at me. ‘I wouldn’t mind interviewing a few celebs. I’m at the far more boring end of the scale, I’m afraid – I’m a financial journalist. I bring you all the doom and gloom from the financial quarter.’

‘There’s probably more juicy gossip your side than there is at Steph’s end.’ Mark gives Laurence a wink as I cringe. Mark doesn’t always think before he speaks, not realising that sometimes he comes across as brash and embarrasses me, even when he’s trying to be complimentary. Bussing myself opening the bottle of red he’s brought over, I don’t realise at first that Laurence is speaking to me.

‘I’m sorry, what?’

‘I said that must be where I know you from.’ Laurence accepts the glass of wine I’m offering, his hand brushing mine as he reaches for it. I pull back, not sure if I imagine the tiny fizz of electricity that sparks on my skin where his hand glances against mine. He takes a sip of wine, his eyes never leaving my face. ‘From the magazine. I think you interviewed Sasha Ronan after she got caught having an affair with that London banker – the one who embezzled a ridiculous amount of money and then spent it on his mistress. It was one of those trashy magazines that picked up on it all and gave her the chance to tell her story.’ My cheeks burning, I fill the kettle to make myself a drink, seeing as how I can’t drink the wine, no matter how much I want to.

‘Well, you know, it pays the bills.’ I avoid looking at Laurence; he is ridiculously good-looking and obviously my pregnancy hormones must be going crazy, my face hot with the force of the blush that spreads across my cheeks.

‘Sorry – I didn’t mean that the way it came out. I just meant that that was where I’d heard your name before. It caused a bit of a scandal in my office, and we talked about it for weeks. It made a change to read the other side of the story for once.’ He smiles at me, and I feel the hot flush of my cheeks subside.

‘Chill out, Steph, he didn’t mean anything by it. We don’t want to fall out with the new neighbours before we’ve even settled in.’ Chuckling, Mark perches on the kitchen stool next to me and picks up his glass of wine, patting my hand in that clumsily affectionate way he has. I slide my hand out from under his and spend the next hour listening to him and Laurence trading stories, like they’ve been friends for years. They don’t seem to need much input from me, thankfully, and I can tune out and think my own thoughts, random and spiralling, taking me somewhere far away.

We see Laurence out some time later, after an impromptu takeaway suggested by Mark, following a call from my mother to say that Henry has fallen asleep after a busy day and she will keep him for another night, allowing us to settle in properly. Standing at the end of the garden path, watching Laurence fumbling with his door key to get in, Mark puts his arm round me and pulls me in for a hug. I breathe deeply, inhaling the scent of him, the smell of clean laundry and Hugo Boss aftershave, with a slight tang of sweat.

‘See, I told you everything would be OK. We’ve made a friend already – it’ll be nice living next door to someone we get on with, who we can have a curry and a bit of a laugh with. And I’ll feel better when I’m working away, knowing there’s someone nearby if you need them.’

‘Hmmmm. Yes, Laurence seems nice. It was very kind of him to bring us a bottle.’ I wrap my arms tightly around him, wanting to believe that what he’s saying is true, that everything will be all right. Walking back up the path together, the curtains in the living room of the house on the other side of the street twitch slightly, and I can’t help but feel an unexplained but overwhelming sense of unease.

## CHAPTER TWO

I am sitting at the kitchen table, sipping a cup of mint tea, when Mark hurries in, simultaneously wishing me a good morning, tying his tie and flicking the switch for the coffee pot. It’s still dark

outside, crisp swirls of frost patterning the kitchen window. The kitchen is warm, the heating having come on half an hour before, and I loosen the belt of my dressing gown a touch, now that the early morning chill has abated slightly. We have only been in the house a week and it's beginning to feel more like home, but now the furniture is all in place and only the very lightest boxes remain to be unpacked, Mark has no choice but to leave me to it and go back to work – he starts production on a new series in a few weeks and he can't put off his return to the office any longer. He pours himself a cup of strong coffee and the smell of it makes my stomach roil in protest. I swallow hard, pressing down the bile that sits at the back of my throat.

'What time will you be home?' I sip at my tea, hoping to stop the morning sickness before it really grabs hold.

'Late, probably. I know it's not ideal, but after sorting the house out last week I need to make inroads into the new production. It's not going to be an easy day. Are you sure you're going to be OK?' His eyes search my face, and I swallow back the urge to ask him to stay.

'I'll be fine, I promise.' I give him a small smile, the smell of coffee in the air making the sick, queasy feeling in my belly worse. Oblivious to my nausea, Mark leans over to kiss the top of my head, breathing coffee fumes into my face.

'Jesus, Mark!' I gag, and sprint to the downstairs bathroom, only just reaching it in time. A few minutes later I hear the beep of the central locking on Mark's car as I sit back on my heels, wiping my mouth with a tissue. I was hoping that, this time around, the morning sickness wouldn't be as bad as it was with Henry, but it looks like I'm in for a rough ride again. Hauling myself to my feet, I am already feeling drained and exhausted and it's not even seven a.m. yet. Reaching the kitchen, I hear footsteps scurrying around upstairs that sound like an army of tiny mice, telling me Henry is up and ready for another day. Mark has left, his empty coffee cup turned upside down in the sink to leave a dark, tannin stain on the enamel, the dirty coffee pot left unwashed on the side, burnt-coffee aroma filling the air and making my cheeks fill with bile again. A hastily scribbled note on the kitchen table reads, 'SORRY, HAD TO LEAVE. SEE YOU TONIGHT. I LOVE YOU.' Pushing my hands through my hair, I ignore the wreck of the kitchen and head upstairs to find my son.

A few hours later, Henry has been safely dispatched to school; I have waded through the dirty dishes in the sink and unpacked the last few boxes. I have an article due in two days on 'What He Thinks About During Sex' for a controversial women's magazine, and have no clue where to start. How about the other woman he wishes he was sleeping with? I probably wouldn't be the right person to write this article at the best of times, given the way things are between myself and Mark, and now, after what has happened in our marriage, I would say I'm the last person who should be writing articles on the subject. But, as I said to Laurence, it pays the bills and that's what counts. I have just deleted the opening sentence for the fifth time and started to bash out another version when the doorbell rings. I sigh in frustration, glancing at the clock on the kitchen wall, as I only have an hour before I have to leave to collect Henry from school. Opening the door, I am surprised to see a petite, dark-haired woman on the doorstep, someone I definitely don't know.

'Hello?' I smile quizzically at her, not having a clue who she is.

'You're Steph, right? I'm Lila – your neighbour!' She gives me a wide, toothy grin and looks at me as though I should recognise her.

'From next door? Oh, you must be Laurence's wife. Nice to meet you. Sorry I haven't been over to introduce myself; things have been a little hectic here.' I pull the door fully open and hold out my hand for her to shake.

'Oh, silly! Honestly. I don't live next door; I live across the street with my boyfriend, Joe. I've been meaning to pop over and introduce myself, but you know how it is. I wanted to come over the day you moved in but Joe said I should wait a bit, let you get settled.'

I wonder if this is the curtain twitcher from the first evening, when Laurence came over? Feeling a little on the back foot, I give her a tiny smile, thinking that maybe I should invite her in – Mark would want me to invite her in for a cup of tea, at least.

‘Well, it’s nice to meet you, Lila. Would you like to come in? I mean, I don’t have long, I’m working ... I work from home, you see.’ I’m rambling, so I stop talking and wait for her response, half wishing she would refuse the invitation.

‘That sounds lovely – I bought you this, as a little house-warming gift.’ Lila holds out a foil-wrapped package and, with one delicate, porcelain-white hand, peels back the foil to reveal a home-baked coffee cake. The smell hits me before I even realise what it is and I reel back.

‘Oh, Jesus. Sorry.’ I clasp my hand over my mouth and sprint back into the house, running for the downstairs bathroom before I am sick again.

Coming out of the bathroom ten minutes later, as I wipe my hand across my mouth, I remember that I left Lila on the doorstep. Now, it seems she has made herself at home in my kitchen, the foil-wrapped package tightly resealed and stuffed deep into the bottom of the bin, and the kettle boiling merrily away as she busies herself taking down mugs and finding teabags.

‘Sorry about that.’ I sit down heavily into the nearest kitchen chair, legs still shaky after the vomiting.

‘Nonsense. Don’t worry about it. I should have realised that coffee cake is not the best gift for a pregnant lady suffering from morning sickness.’ She smiles at me and hands me a cup of steaming mint tea.

‘How did you know?’ I ask, taking a small sip. ‘I could have just had a virus.’

‘Your husband ... Mark, isn’t it? He mentioned it when I introduced myself, last week.’ Lila sits at the table next to me. ‘Now, drink that slowly. You don’t want to be sick again, do you?’

‘Mark mentioned it?’ Mark never said anything to me about the fact that he had met our other next-door neighbour. He never mentioned anything at all about meeting any of the neighbours.

‘Yes, Joe and I were on our way back indoors after we’d been out and your husband was in your front garden – he is your husband, isn’t he?’ I nod, and she carries on: ‘I introduced Joe and myself. Mark said then that you had a little boy and that you were expecting another.’ Lila sips her tea, her eyes darting all around the kitchen as if looking for something. ‘Where is your little boy?’

‘At school.’ I watch her carefully, this strangely overfriendly woman who seems to have just barrelled her way into my home, although my dashing off to be sick and leaving her on the doorstep didn’t really leave her much choice, I suppose. She must be quite a bit younger than I am, maybe twenty-eight or so, with dark, almost black, glossy hair falling in soft waves to her shoulders. Her skin is pale, alabaster-white, set off by a pair of striking green eyes. She is most unusual looking, almost like a real-life version of Snow White, and far more glamorous than I am, sitting here with my rusty-brown curls tied in a knot on top of my head, yoga pants with a small yoghurt stain on the right thigh where Henry flicked his yoghurt spoon at me this morning, and presumably the scent of sick on my breath.

‘Well, I can’t wait to meet him, you lucky thing. I’m so looking forward to when Joe and I have a baby,’ she breathes. ‘It’s going to be so lovely to have a nice family as neighbours, especially after the people that lived here before.’ Lila makes a little face, before giving me a broad smile as she pats my hand, and I hope that a little of her sparkle and fizz will rub off on me. I don’t know anything about the family that lived here before us, only that they left in rather a hurry, possibly something about a job abroad.

‘Lila, it’s been lovely, and I’m so sorry about the cake. It’s just the coffee thing. I can’t seem to stomach it at the moment; even the smell sets me off. I’m hoping that in a few weeks it’ll wear off.’ I set down my mug and get to my feet. I don’t want to be rude but I have a deadline to meet, and my boy to collect in just under twenty minutes.

‘Of course! I’m sorry to keep you. We didn’t get off to the best start, did we?’ Lila also gets to her feet, still smiling. She makes me feel like I must have a permanently miserable look on my face, compared to all her shine and glitter. I see her to the door, holding out my hand once again for her to shake. She bats it away and steps forward, enveloping me in a huge hug. I stand there stiffly, feeling ever so slightly awkward. I’m not a hugger, and certainly not one of those people who will scoop up someone she’s just met for a giant squeeze. Lila hugs me tight, until I give her the tiniest of hugs back.

‘I’ll pop in during the week, shall I? Just to check on you, OK?’ Lila says, buttoning the front of her pea-green coat. ‘Someone needs to take care of you while Mark’s working away, don’t they? It’s going to be so lovely having someone my age living across the street! I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but they all seem to be a bit *older* than us around here.’ She laughs and gives a little wrinkle of her nose. ‘And I promise, no more coffee cake. We’re going to be *great* friends – I can just feel it.’ She gives me a wink and one last twinkly smile, before marching off down the path towards her own house, leaving me standing on the doorstep, feeling slightly bemused.

I walk back into the kitchen, intent on finishing the last bit of the article I was writing, only to find that the Word document I had open on my laptop is completely blank. I must have clicked on the delete button in my haste to get to the front door. Sighing, I close the lid of the laptop, and as I’m shrugging on my coat to walk up to the school to collect Henry, I realise I don’t remember telling Lila that Mark worked away. Mark must have told her when he met her in the garden, I think, and I wonder why he never mentioned it to me.

### CHAPTER THREE

I make it to the school with seconds to spare, the walk taking me a little longer than I had anticipated. I should have driven, really, knowing that I was under pressure to get there on time, but the lure of fresh air and a brisk walk proved too much to be able to resist. This is my favourite time of the year, those few weeks between the start of a fresh new school year (odd how, even twenty years after leaving school, the first week of September still feels like a fresh start to me) and Christmas – all the giddy excitement of preparing for the festivities, made all the more fun since the arrival of Henry. The perfect time for us to re-evaluate things and make a go of our marriage after all that has happened, giving ourselves a clean slate and a chance to start over. It’s the best kind of day too – the kind that starts crispy and frosty, swirls of ice on the windowpanes and car windscreens, blades of grass turned white and crunchy with the frost. The kind of winter’s day where, even though there are bright-blue skies and sunshine overhead, the temperature doesn’t lift a degree or two above freezing, so all day long your breath puffs out in little dragon clouds as your boots slip and slide on the glittery, icy pavements. The best kind of day to pull me out of the thick, suffocating darkness that threatens to suck me under sometimes.

By the time I arrive at the school, the bell has rung and children are beginning to stream out of their classrooms, looking for their mothers waiting patiently in the playground. Half of the parents there don’t seem to pay any attention to the children pouring out of the school, not looking eagerly for their offspring, preferring instead to catch up with the school gossip with the other yummy mummies congregating in the playground. I stand to one side, away from the gossiping masses, my nose red from the cold, my cheeks flushed from the race to get there on time, and unzip my thick winter jacket as pregnancy and the brisk walk make me warmer than I should be. As I push my hat further back on my head I see Henry come out of his classroom, holding tight to his teacher’s hand. I feel my heart squeeze at the sight of his little face, a serious frown crossing his brow as the teacher leans down to speak to him. As she stands, she catches my eye and beckons me over with one finger. My heart sinks a little; today has obviously not been a good day for Henry. I make my way across the playground, dodging small children on scooters, their mothers still yakking away about nothing to their playground counterparts. I reach Henry and Miss Bramley, and lean down to give Henry a quick squeeze and a kiss on the cheek.

'Is everything OK, Miss Bramley?' I ask, knowing full well that something will have happened today at school. Henry is only in Year One, and this is only his first week in his new school, but he doesn't seem to be settling in as well as they would like him to.

'We just had a slight incident today with Henry, Mrs Gordon, nothing too serious, but I thought we should let you know.'

'What is it? What happened? Henry, are you OK?' He gives a small nod and a sniff, not raising his eyes to meet mine.

'It seems Henry was pushed over by another child in the playground today, Mrs Gordon. It may have just been a little rough play that got out of hand, but I did think I should make you aware of it. Henry wasn't hurt, just a scraped knee, and this is not the kind of behaviour we at the school condone, I assure you.' Miss Bramley almost looks embarrassed at having to tell me my child has been hurt at school, her eyes looking everywhere but at me.

'Henry, is that what happened? Was it just playing?' Henry nods, a small, slight nod, and I look down at him helplessly. 'OK. OK, fine. Thank you, Miss Bramley.' I take Henry's hand and lead him away towards the black railings at the far end of the playground, to collect his scooter and get us out of the gate before I can speak to him properly. Henry is a sensitive boy, much more like me than Mark. I think when he was born, Mark thought he would be getting a rough-and-tumble boy, one he could play football with in the garden and take to the green to play cricket in the summer. A boy who would appreciate vigorous play, wrestling on the living-room carpet with his dad, instead of one who preferred to sit quietly, drawing or painting. Since he started school and discovered the joys of reading, he has become a voracious reader, devouring all the picture books I collected and read to him when he was tiny and clamouring for more every time we venture into a bookshop.

As we begin the walk back down the hill towards home, he scoots a little ahead, using his school shoes as a brake – something that would normally infuriate me, but today I don't mention it. We cross with the lollipop lady, a cheery soul who stands there morning and afternoon in sunshine and torrential rain, always with a smile on her face. She waves to Henry and hands him a lolly as he crosses, which brings the first smile to his face that I've seen today.

'Henry, wait!' I shout to him as he whizzes along the path, narrowly missing a lady walking a yappy Chihuahua that snaps at Henry's legs as he passes. He slows and I catch up with him outside the small convenience store, panting slightly. 'Leave the scooter there. We need milk. And some hot chocolate, if there are any good little boys about?' I peer around and Henry giggles, his laughter tickling my skin like summer sunshine, pulling a smile onto my face. Henry chatters on as I fill my basket with milk and other little bits we've run out of. I am only half listening, concentrating on packing my shopping bag as the man behind the till scans the items.

'Eight pounds forty, please.'

I smile at the man behind the counter and give him a ten-pound note. He hands me my change before reaching under the counter and popping a small purple packet into my hand.

'Your change. And a treat for the young man.' He winks at Henry, and I give him a small smile, nudging Henry into a 'Thank you' before adding the bag of chocolate buttons to the rest of my shopping.

A short while later, via a small diversion to the green, leafy park that we pass on the way home, we let ourselves in and Henry busies himself putting away his scooter and tugging off his school coat. I wait until he's finished and then follow him through into the kitchen.

'So then, hot chocolate?' I ask, turning to the shopping bag and pulling out a large carton of milk.

'Can we have marshmallows?' he begs, his face lighting up. 'And squirty cream?'

'Well, of course,' I reply. 'Is there any other kind?'

He giggles and I pour the milk into a saucepan and set it on the hob to boil.

'Is everything OK at school, kiddo?' I ask him, watching his face carefully for any clues. He is just like me, so insular. Neither of us likes to open up unless we have to, both of us preferring to

keep things bottled up and deal with them in our own way, something I've started to realise is not always healthy. I want to encourage him to start to be more open, to let him know that I'm his mum, that he can always tell me anything and I would never judge him. Something I didn't have growing up, which I think has contributed to the way I deal with things. I have to encourage him, even though I know it means I'll have to force myself to do the exact same thing.

'Yeah. Mostly.' He carries on scribbling away, colouring in a drawing of a tiger. I turn to the milk pan, catching it just before it boils over and splashes all over the hob. I wait a moment, leaving him a chance to expand, but he carries on colouring, taking painstaking care to make sure he doesn't go over any of the lines. I pour the milk, whisking in the cocoa powder, topping them both off with squirty cream and marshmallows. It turns out that baby number two is far more partial to horrifically calorie-laden hot chocolate with all the trimmings than he or she is to coffee. Placing the mug in front of him, I try again.

'Just mostly?' I ask, nudging him gently. 'Why just mostly? Is it something to do with what happened in the playground today?'

'No.' He grasps the hot chocolate in his hand and blows gently on the top, like I showed him. 'That was just silly. Bradley doesn't know how to behave himself. He always *GOES TOO FAR*, that's what Miss Bramley says. He's not my friend, anyway. I don't care if he doesn't want to play with me any more.' Henry takes a sip of his hot chocolate, managing to slurp up several of the mini marshmallows dotted on the top at the same time. I give him a small smile and pat his hand, turning back towards the kitchen sink to blink away the tears that rush to my eyes.

Later that evening, once Henry is safely tucked up in bed, I tell Mark about Lila coming to visit.

'She seems nice,' I say, neglecting to tell him how my first instinct was to close the door in her face. 'She said she had met you already.'

'Hmmm?' He looks up from his laptop, pushing his glasses back on top of his head. 'Come here.' He pats the sofa next to him and I slide along until our thighs are pressed together. 'That's good – you know, that you had tea with her and everything. It'll be good for you to have a girlfriend; you don't seem to have anyone close, not since Tessa left for New York.' He puts his arm around my shoulder and pulls me towards him.

'So, you never said you'd met Lila already.' Although I know we said it's a fresh start, I can't help the spark of ... what? Jealousy? Mistrust? I don't even know what it is that flickers inside of me. Mark rubs his hand across his forehead, tiredly.

'I didn't really think about it, to be honest. She introduced herself and I told her about us, that we had a little boy and a baby on the way. Nothing exciting. Now come on, up to bed with you, you look exhausted. I'll be up in a minute. I just need to send a couple of emails.' He kisses my head and I shuffle off the couch to head upstairs.

While Mark is downstairs finishing off emails or whatever else it is he has to do on the rare occasions he gets home from work before midnight, I sit in bed and slide my hand between the bed frame and the mattress to pull out my diary. I used to keep a diary, years ago, when all the bad stuff happened, but once I sorted myself out and met Mark I let it lapse. Now, though, following on from everything that has happened between Mark and myself, including after Henry was born, and on the instruction of the counsellor Mark found, I've started to write in it again. The counsellor, Dr Bradshaw, recommended I document how I feel about certain things that happen, in an attempt to keep at bay the dark feelings that threaten to overwhelm me sometimes, so now I sit in my pyjamas and write about today. I write about how sad I feel for Henry, as he struggles to fit in at school with the other kids; I write about how I wonder what Mark is doing downstairs – he says he's checking emails but how do I know that's really what he's doing? I write about Lila – about how she brought a little bit of sunshine into my day today with her bouncy demeanour and her vomit-inducing coffee cake, and about how, maybe, after so long avoiding making new connections and new friends, I should learn to trust other people again. Maybe I should make an effort to make a new friend. Maybe if I

pretend for long enough that everything is going to be OK, it *will* be OK. *In fact*, I write, *I think Lila might be good for me.*

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