

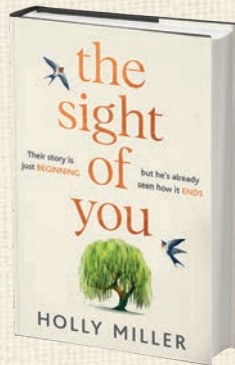


Would you
choose LOVE . . .





...if you
knew how
it would **END?**



JUNE 2020

The Sight of You

Holly Miller

First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

1

Copyright © Holly Miller 2020

The right of Holly Miller to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 9781529324341
Trade Paperback ISBN 9781529324358
eBook ISBN 9781529324365

Typeset in Bembo

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

PROLOGUE

1

Callie

Joel, I'm so sorry. To see you again like that . . . why did I get on the train? I should have waited for the next one. It wouldn't have mattered. I missed my stop anyway, and we were late for the wedding.

Because the whole way to London, I could only think of you, about what you might have written in the note you gave me. Then when I finally opened it, I stared at it for so long that by the time I next looked up, Blackfriars had come and gone.

There was an ocean of things I wanted – needed – to say to you, too. But my mind just misfired when I saw you. Maybe I was scared of saying too much.

What if today was it, though, Joel? What if today was the last time I'll see your face, hear your voice?

Time's rushing by, and I know what's coming.

I wish I'd stayed. Just a few minutes more. I'm sorry.

SECTION 1

2

Joel

It's one in the morning and I'm standing bare-chested at my living-room window. The sky is still and blistered with stars, the moon a marble.

Any minute now, my neighbour Steve will leave the flat above mine. He'll head down to his car, the baby squirming furiously in her carrier. He takes Poppy for drives in the middle of the night, tries to soothe her to sleep with the rumble of tyres and his playlist of farmyard animal sounds.

Here it comes. The sleep-slackened tread of his feet on the stairs, Poppy grizzling. His trademark mishandling of our fractious front door. I watch as he approaches the car, flicks the lock, hesitates. He's confused, knows something's not right. But his brain's still catching up.

Eventually, it clicks. He swears, puts a hand to his head. Makes two disbelieving laps of the vehicle.

Sorry, Steve – it's all four tyres. Someone's definitely let them down. You're not going anywhere tonight.

He pauses. For a moment he's a statue, lit up by the laboratory glow of the street light. Then something makes him stare straight into the window I'm looking out of.

I hold my nerve. As long as I stay still, it must be nearly impossible for him to see me. My blinds are shut, the flat silent and dark as a reptile resting. He can't know I have my eye pressed against a single slat. That I'm watching everything.

For a moment our gazes are soldered together before he looks away, shaking his head as Poppy treats the street to a timely scream.

A light springs on in the house opposite. Brightness flick-knives onto the darkened street, exasperation drifting down from the

window. 'Come on, mate!'

Steve lifts a hand then turns to come back inside. I hear the two of them trail upstairs again, Poppy wailing determinedly through her tiny clenched jaw. Steve's used to keeping strange hours, but Hayley will be trying to sleep. She's recently returned to her job at a London law firm, which means it matters if she nods off in meetings.

Still. My tasks for tonight are complete. I cross them off in my notebook then sit back down on the sofa, parting the blinds so I can look at the stars.

I reward myself with a shot of whisky, because that's what I do on special occasions. Then I make it a double and down it, fast.

Twenty minutes later, I'm ready to crash. I'm after a very specific kind of sleep, and everything I've done tonight should help me achieve it.

'He's ever so hot,' says my eighty-something near-neighbour Iris, when I pitch up at her house a few hours later to walk her yellow Labrador, Rufus.

It's not yet eight in the morning, which might account for why I haven't got a clue who she's talking about. Her neighbour, Bill, who pops round most mornings with a nugget of gossip or weird little leaflet? The postman, who's just waved jauntily at us through the living-room window?

Postmen. They're always either inanely cheerful, or miserable as sin. Never a middle ground.

'He's been sleeping on the kitchen tiles to stay cool.'

Of course. She's talking about the dog. This happens more often than I'd like: being too exhausted to make simple conversation with someone over twice my age. 'Good idea,' I smile. 'Might try it myself.'

She shoots me a look. 'That will hardly endear you to the ladies now, will it?'

Ah, The Ladies. Who are they, again? Iris seems convinced there's a queue of them somewhere, keen to put their lives on hold

to hang out with a guy like me.

‘Do you think he can cope?’ she asks, nodding at Rufus. ‘Out there, in this heat?’

I used to be a vet. I’m not any more. But I think Iris takes comfort from my one-time credentials.

‘It’s cooler today,’ I assure her, as it has been pretty warm for early September. ‘We’ll go down to the boating lake, have a paddle.’

She smiles. ‘You too?’

I shake my head. ‘Prefer to commit my public order offences after hours. More exciting that way.’

She lights up like my lame jokes are the highlight of her day. ‘We’re so fortunate to have you, aren’t we, Rufus?’

To be fair, Iris is pretty awesome herself. She wears earrings shaped like fruit and has a Premium subscription to Spotify.

I bend down to clip on Rufus’ lead as he eases to his feet. ‘He is still a touch on the heavy side, Iris. That won’t be helping his heat tolerance. How’s his diet going?’

She hesitates. Shrugs. ‘He can smell cheese from fifty paces, Joel, what can I say?’

I sigh. I’ve been lecturing Iris about Rufus’ food for nearly eight years now. ‘What was our deal? I’d walk him, you’d take care of the rest.’

‘I know, I know.’ She starts to shoo us from the living room with her walking stick. ‘I just can’t resist the look on his face.’

I’ve got three dogs in tow by the time I make it to the park. (I walk two others along with Rufus, for ex-clients who aren’t very mobile. There’s a fourth too, a Great Dane called Bruno. But he’s socially unhinged and formidably strong, so I take him out after dark.)

Though the air’s freshened up overnight, I keep my promise to Iris about the boating lake. Unclipping the dogs’ leads, I feel myself brighten as they canter like horses into the water.

I pause, take a breath. Persuade myself again that what I did last night was right.

It had to be. Because here’s the thing: almost my whole life,

I've been having prophetic dreams. The kind of lucid, lifelike visions that startle me from sleep. They show me what's going to happen, days, weeks, years down the line. And the subjects, always, are the people I love.

The dreams come every week or so, the ratio of good to bad to vanilla fairly even. But it's the dark premonitions I fear most: the accidents and illnesses, pain and misfortune. They're why I'm constantly edgy, always on high alert. Wondering when I might next have to re-route the course of fate, race to intervene in someone's best-laid plans.

Or worse, save a life.

I track my canine charges from the bank of the lake, giving a group of fellow dog-walkers a smile and necessarily wide berth. They gather most mornings by the bridge, beckoning me over if I make the mistake of eye contact. I've kept my distance ever since the time they started swapping tips on sleeping well, their talk turning to home remedies and therapies, pills and routines. (I made my excuses and vanished. Haven't hung out with them since.)

The whole thing just cut a little deep. Because in pursuit of a dreamless night, I've tried the lot. Diets, meditation, affirmations. Lavender and white noise. Milky drinks. Sleeping tablets with added side effects, essential oils. Exercise so punishing I'd have to pause to spew. Sporadic periods of hard boozing in my twenties, under the misguided notion I could alter my sleep cycles. But years of experimenting proved my sleep cycles to be untouchable. And nothing I do has ever been able to change that.

Still, less sleep means fewer dreams. So these days I stay up till the small hours, aided by screen time and a pretty hardcore caffeine habit. Then I allow myself a short, sharp spell of rest. I've trained my mind to expect it: snapping out of slumber after just a few hours.

Which is why, now, I'm in urgent need of coffee. Whistling the dogs from the water, I start to head back towards the path along the river. On the road to my right, real life is grinding into gear. Rush-hour traffic, cyclists, commuters on foot, delivery vans. The discordant orchestra of a standard weekday morning.

It makes me oddly nostalgic for normality. I've not got too much headspace these days for gainful employment or friendships, girlfriends or my health. The worry and lack of sleep leaves me constantly knackered, distracted, jittery.

If only to prevent the whole thing from burying me, I live by some loose-ish rules: exercise daily, not too much booze, steer clear of love.

I've confessed the truth to just two people in my life. And the second time, I swore it would be the last. Which is why I can't tell Steve that last night, I was acting on a fevered premonition about Poppy. My goddaughter, who I love like I do my own nieces. I saw the whole thing: Steve exhausted, forgetting to brake at the crossroads with Poppy in the back. I woke when his car barrelled into a lamppost at thirty miles an hour. In the aftermath of the accident, she had to be cut from the car.

So I took the necessary action. Which was worthy of that double whisky if I do say so myself.

I put the dogs back on their leads and start to head for home. I'll need to avoid Steve, for a while at least. The longer I can keep my head down, the less likely he'll be to connect me to what happened last night.

Once I've dropped the dogs off, I'll seek out a cafe to hole up in, I think. A place where I can drink coffee quietly in a corner, anonymous and unobserved.

3

Callie

‘You can’t tell me it’s never happened to you before.’ Dot and I are wiping tables in the coffee shop after closing, exchanging theories on the customer who walked out without paying earlier. This is always my favourite time of day – winding down and trading stories, restoring the shine to the room. Beyond the window, the early-September air is warm and delicate as peach skin.

‘Maybe it was an honest mistake,’ I say.

Dot pauses, pushing a hand through her crop of bleach-blonde hair. ‘Seriously. How long have you worked here?’

‘Eighteen months.’ It sounds more incredible every time I say it.

‘Eighteen months, and you’ve not yet had a walk-out.’ Dot shakes her head. ‘You must have the right kind of face.’

‘I’m sure he just forgot. I think Murphy distracted him.’

Murphy’s my dog, a black and tan crossbreed. Well, he’s sort-of mine. Anyway, he’s living the dream being pet-in-residence at the coffee shop, because there’s no end of people here willing to fuss him and gift him illicit titbits.

Dot snorts. ‘The only thing that guy forgot was his wallet.’

I’d never seen him before. Then again, I’d never seen a lot of today’s customers before. The cafe at the top of the hill usually absorbs the commuter footfall of Eversford, the market town where I’ve lived my whole life. But our rival closed this morning without warning, and its regulars began drifting mutely in as soon as we opened, all pinstripes and aftershave and well-polished shoes.

But this customer was different. In fact, I’d be slightly embarrassed to admit just how much he stood out to me. He couldn’t have been en route to any office – his dark hair was solely bed-worthy, and he seemed saddled by exhaustion, like he’d had a rough

night. At first he appeared distracted as I came to take his order, but when he finally turned his eyes to me, they gripped tight and didn't let go.

We exchanged no more than a couple of words, but I do recall that before he walked out without paying – and between bouts of scribbling in a notebook – he formed something of a silent bond with Murphy.

'I think he might have been a writer. He had a notebook with him.'

Dot disagrees through her nose. 'Of course – starving writer. Trust you to put a romantic spin on theft.'

'Yes, but if it was up to you we'd have one of those signs, like you get in petrol stations. *If you do not have the means to pay . . .*'

'Now *that* is an excellent idea.'

'It wasn't a suggestion.'

'Maybe next time I'll floor him with my best roundhouse.'

I don't doubt it would be good – Dot's recently taken up kickboxing, committing to it with an energy I envy. She's always doing the next thing, running wild through life like a creature uncaged.

By contrast, she thinks I've shrunk back from the world – that I've slunk into its corners, started blinking into bright light. She might be right.

'No martial arts moves on the customers,' I tell her. 'Cafe policy.'

'Anyway, there won't be a next time. I've memorized his face. If I see him in town, I'm demanding that tenner back.'

'He only had a coffee.'

Dot shrugs. 'Call it our tax on eat-and-run.'

I smile and head past her into the back office to print the order for tomorrow's delivery. I've been gone only a minute when I hear her calling out, 'We're closed! Come back tomorrow!'

As I stick my head around the office doorway, I recognize the figure at the door. And so, it seems, does Murphy – he's sniffing the hinges expectantly, tail wagging.

‘It’s him,’ I say, feeling my stomach skitter slightly. Tall and lean, grey T-shirt, dark jeans. Skin that hints at a summer spent outside. ‘The guy who forgot to pay.’

‘Oh.’

‘Nice detective skills, Sherlock.’

With a huff Dot unlocks the deadbolt and turns the key, cranking the door just a notch. I don’t hear what he says but assume he’s come to settle up, as she’s unhooking the chain now, opening the door to let him in. Murphy scoots backwards as he enters, tail wagging, paws dancing.

‘I walked out without paying earlier,’ he says gruffly, with disarming remorse. ‘Completely unintentional. Here.’ He hands Dot a twenty, rubs a hand through his hair, glances at me. His eyes are wide, dark as damp earth.

‘I’ll get your change,’ I say.

‘No, keep it. Thanks. Sorry about that.’

‘Take something with you. Another coffee, some cake? As a thank-you for being so honest.’ Aside from anything else, something in his demeanour seems to plead for kindness.

There’s some *drømmekage* left, an airy Danish sponge topped with caramelised coconut that roughly translates as *dream cake*. I box up a slice and offer it to him.

He pauses for a moment, rubs the crescent of stubble along his jaw uncertainly. Then he takes the box, his fingertips nudging mine. ‘Thanks.’ He dips his head and leaves, a warm breath of velvet air drifting into the shop as he goes.

‘Well,’ says Dot. ‘*He* was a man of few words.’

‘I think I threw him with the cake.’

‘Yeah, what was that all about? *Another coffee?*’ she parrots. ‘*Some drømmekage?*’

I only just resist the urge to blush. ‘At least he came back to settle up. Which proves you to be an outrageous cynic.’

‘Hardly. With that slab of *drømmekage* you’re still barely in profit.’

‘That’s not the point.’

Dot raises a micro-bladed brow. 'Our boss might disagree. Or at least his accountant would.'

'No, Ben would tell you to have more faith in human nature. You know – give people a chance.'

'So, what are you doing tonight?' Dot has a smile in her eye as she moves past me into the office for her jacket. 'Sleeping rough for charity? Launching a pop-up soup kitchen?'

'Very funny. I might just hang out at Ben's for a bit, see how he's doing.'

Dot doesn't reply. I know she thinks I'm weighed down by worrying about Ben, that I spend too much time mired in my memories.

'How about you?'

She reappears, sunglasses propped on top of her head. 'Water-skiing.'

I smile. *Of course – what else?*

'You should come.'

'No, I'm inherently clumsy.'

'So? Water's soft.'

'No, I'd better –'

She levels a look at me. 'You know what I think, Cal.'

'I do.'

'Joined Tinder yet?'

'No.' *Please don't nag me.*

'Or I can set you up with someone –'

'I know.' Dot can do anything. 'Have fun tonight.'

'I'd say the same to you, but . . .' She winks affectionately. 'See you tomorrow.' And in a parting cloud of Gucci Bloom, she's gone.

After she leaves, I knock the lights off one by one before taking my customary final pew near the window, to breathe in the fading scent of bread and coffee beans. Like a reflex, I slip my phone from my pocket, tap through to Grace's number and dial.

No. You can't go on like this. Stop.

I shake my head, cut off the call and snap the screen back to lock. Calling her is a habit I've been trying hard to break lately,

but the sight of her name on my phone always gives me a lift, like a bright blast of sunlight on a rubble-grey day.

Allowing my gaze to unspool through the window, I unexpectedly find myself staring into the watchful, peat-dark eyes of the notebook man from earlier. With a jolt I start to smile, but I'm too late – he looks down at the pavement and makes himself a shadow, striding swiftly away into the evening's mellow light.

He's not carrying the cake box any more. Either he's already eaten it, or he tossed it into the first bin he saw.

Joel

I lurch awake at two a.m. Easing out of bed, I grab my notebook, try not to wake her.

Last week's heatwave has dissipated, and the flat's a bit chilly. I pull on a hoodie and jogging bottoms, head for the kitchen.

Sitting up at the breakfast bar, I scribble everything down.

My younger brother Doug will be chuffed, anyway. I dreamt about his daughter Bella, gaining a sports scholarship to the local private school, the year she turns ten. An outstanding county swimmer, apparently, winning fistfuls of medals every weekend. Strange how things work out. Doug was banned from swimming at our local pool as a kid, after one too many dive bombs and flipping off the lifeguards.

Bella's not even three yet. But Doug's view is that it's never too early to schedule in potential. He's already got four-year-old Buddy playing tennis, watches *Britain's Got Talent* for tips on pushy parenting.

Then again, it seems like it's going to pay off. I make and triple-underline a note about mentioning local swimming clubs to him, asap.

'Joel?'

Melissa's watching me from the doorway, still as a spy. 'Bad dream?'

I shake my head, tell her the dream was good.

Melissa's wearing my T-shirt, and she'll probably wear it home, too. She thinks it's cute, doing that. But I'd rather not have to keep an inventory of my own wardrobe.

She approaches me now, hops onto a stool. Crossing her bare legs, she runs a hand through her mane of sandy hair. 'Was I in it?' She throws me a wink that manages to be both coy and outrageous.

That would actually be impossible, I want to say, but won't. She knows nothing about the nature of my dreaming, and that's the way it's going to stay.

For almost three years now Melissa and I have been seeing each other every month or so, usually with little contact in-between. Steve's stopped her for a chat more often than I'd like, as though he thinks it might be worth getting to know her. Even Melissa finds this idea amusing, has started talking to him in the hallway just to provoke me.

I nod up at the kitchen clock. Stifle a yawn. 'It's the middle of the night. You should go back to bed.'

'Nah.' She sighs languidly, picks at a fingernail. 'I'm awake now. May as well stay up with you.'

'What time do you start tomorrow?' Melissa works in media relations at the London branch of an African mining company. Her early shifts kick off at six in the morning.

Her eyes pinwheel displeasure. 'Too early. I'll call in sick.'

I've arranged a dog-walk with my friend Kieran in the morning, was hoping to have breakfast at the cafe. I've been back several times now, following last week's non-payment debacle.

At first, I admit, I felt some kind of moral duty to return. But now it's more about the dog-in-residence and great coffee. And the warm welcome I get, despite being a less-than-exemplary customer the first time I set foot in the place.

'Actually . . . I've sort of made plans.' My stomach flexes with guilt, even as I say it.

She tilts her head. 'Charming. You know, I still can't figure out why you're single.'

The best thing about Melissa is that I really don't care if she thinks I'm weird.

'You're single,' I point out, like I do every time she comes over.

'Yeah. But I want to be.'

It's one of Melissa's theories. That I'm desperate for a relationship, dying to be someone's boyfriend. I'd been single for

five years before meeting her, a fact she delights in like a cat with a mouse. Sometimes she even tells me off for being too clingy, when I message her after a month of radio silence to see if she fancies a takeaway.

She's wrong, though. I was straight with her from the off, asked if she was okay with keeping things casual. She laughed and said yes. Told me I was full of myself.

'You know, one day, I'm going to open that notebook while you're asleep and see exactly what it is you write in there.'

I half-laugh and look down, not quite trusting myself to reply to that one.

'Is it something I could sell to the papers?'

Maybe she could: everything's in there. A dream every week for twenty-eight years, and I've been keeping notes for the past twenty-two.

I write it all down in case I need to act. But from time to time, I do have to watch a bad dream play out. I let them slide if they're less-than serious, or when I can't see a way to intervene. Neither option's ideal, for a man with my mindset.

Still. Like diamonds in the dirt, happier dreams do glimmer between the bad. Promotions, pregnancies, little twists of good luck. And I have dull dreams too, of life's mundanities, routines. Haircuts and food shops, housework and homework. I might see what Doug's eating for dinner (*offal, seriously?*). Or find out whether Dad will top the local badminton league, or if my niece will forget her PE kit.

In my mind whenever I wake are the relevant dates, times. They lodge there like knowing my own birthday, or on which day in December Christmas falls.

I pay attention to everything, even the dull stuff. Keep track of it all in my notebook. In case there's a pattern, a clue in there somewhere. Something I can't afford to miss.

I glance now at my notebook on the worktop. Brace myself in case Melissa tries to snatch it. She clocks me straight away and smiles creamily, tells me to relax.

'Do you want a coffee?' I say, to try and dull the glint in her

eye. Still, I feel a twinge of remorse. Despite her swagger, I'm sure she wouldn't mind coming over here just once and getting her full eight hours like a normal person.

'You know, with all your money you could afford to buy a proper coffee machine. Nobody drinks instant any more.'

From out of nowhere, a vision of the café drifts into my mind. Of Callie setting down my drink, and the cobbled street view from my window seat. It alarms me slightly and I push it away, spoon coffee between two mugs. 'All my what money?'

'I love how you make out like you're poor. You used to be a vet, and now you don't work.'

She's wrong, actually. Yes, I've got savings. But only because I realized in time my job was hanging in the balance. And they won't last for ever.

'Sugar?' I ask, to steer her off-topic.

'I'm sweet enough.'

'That's debatable.'

She ignores me. 'So – will you?'

'Will I what?'

'Buy a proper coffee machine.'

I fold my arms, turn to face her. 'For once a month when you come round?'

She winks at me. 'You know, if you actually started treating me properly, you might be in with a chance of this going somewhere.'

I return the wink, clink spoon against mug. 'Instant it is.'

I had my first prophetic dream at just seven years old, when I was as tight with my cousin Luke as it was possible to be. Born only three days apart, we spent every spare moment together. Computer games, bike rides, roaming wild with the dogs.

One night, I dreamt that as Luke took his usual shortcut across the playing field to school, a black dog charged at him from out of nowhere. I woke at three a.m., just as the dog was clamping its jaws around Luke's face. Thumping through my mind like a migraine was the date when this was all going to go down.

I had just hours to stop it.

Over an untouched breakfast, I told Mum everything. Begged her to call Dad's sister, Luke's mother. She quietly refused, projected calm, assured me it was just a bad dream. Promised me I'd find Luke waiting for me at school, totally fine.

But Luke wasn't at school, totally fine. So I ran to his house, hard enough to taste blood at the back of my throat. A man I didn't recognize answered the door. *He's in hospital*, he told me gruffly. *Got attacked by a dog this morning over the playing field.*

By now unnerved herself, Mum rang my aunt that evening. All the details came out: a black dog had attacked Luke on his way to school. He needed plastic surgery on his face, left arm and throat. He was lucky to be alive.

After putting down the phone, Mum took me into the living room, where we sat quite still on the sofa together. Dad hadn't come home yet. I can still remember the scent of the chicken noodle soup she'd made me. The weirdly comforting sound of my siblings bickering upstairs.

'It's just coincidence, Joel,' Mum kept saying. (I wonder, now, if she was trying to convince herself.) 'You know what that is, don't you? That's when something happens by chance.'

Mum worked in Dad's accountancy firm back then. She earnt her living like he did, from dealing in logic, looking at facts. And the fact was, people were not psychic.

'I *knew* it would happen,' I sobbed, inconsolable. 'I could have stopped it.'

'I know it seems that way Joel,' she whispered, 'but it was just coincidence. You need to remember that.'

We never told anyone. Dad would have dismissed me as delusional, and my siblings were still too young to understand or possibly care. *Let's just keep it between us*, Mum said. So we did.

Even today, the rest of my family still don't know the truth. They think I'm anxious and paranoid. That my garbled warnings and manic interventions are down to unresolved grief over Mum. Doug

thinks I should take a pill for it, because Doug thinks there's a pill for everything (spoiler: there isn't).

Does Tamsin, my sister, suspect there's more to it? Possibly. But I deliberately keep the details vague, and she doesn't ask.

I can't say I've never been tempted to confide in them. But if the urge ever comes, I only have to think back to the one time I was naïve enough to consult a professional. The derision in his eyes and the sneer on his lips were enough to make me vow I would never tell anyone again.

Callie

A Friday night in mid-September brings with it a typically dispiriting call from my letting agent.

‘Bad news, I’m afraid, Miss Cooper.’

I frown, remind Ian he can call me Callie – we’ve had enough dealings, over the years.

He repeats my first name slowly, like he’s writing it down for the first time ever. ‘All right then. Now, Mr Wright has just informed us he’s selling his property.’

‘Which property? What?’

‘Your flat. Ninety-two B.’ There’s a pause. ‘No, wait – C.’

‘It’s okay, I know my address. You’re really evicting me?’

‘We prefer to say you’re being given notice. You get a month.’

‘But why? Why’s he selling?’

‘No longer commercially viable.’

‘I’m a person. I’m viable. I pay my rent.’

‘Now, don’t get upset.’

‘Do you think . . . he might sell it to another landlord? I could be a sitting tenant.’ I like how it sounds, at least – enhanced rights, making demands on my landlord for once and not the other way around.

‘Oh, no. He definitely wants you out. He needs to spruce the place up.’

‘That’s good to know. Except I don’t have anywhere else to go.’

‘Not on benefits, are you?’

‘No, but –’

‘Plenty of properties on at the moment. I’ll email you.’

Nothing quite matches being evicted, I realize, for making you feel like a complete and colossal failure.

‘Way to start my weekend, Ian.’ I wonder if he makes all of his eviction calls on Friday nights.

‘Yeah? No worries.’

‘No, I was being . . . look,’ I say desperately, ‘could you find me somewhere with a proper garden?’ My flat’s on the top floor, so I don’t have access to the one here – but even if I did, it would be like hanging out in a scrap metal yard. It’s covered almost completely with tarmac, and filled with various items of junk – rusty sun loungers, a broken rotary laundry line, a decaying collection of kitchen chairs and three out-of-service wheelbarrows. I don’t mind scruffy, a touch of mess – so much better than a sterile show-home garden – but this one’s an ongoing tetanus risk.

Ian chortles. ‘Budget still the same?’

‘Less, if anything.’

‘Funny. Oh, and Callie – I take it you got those bees sorted?’

‘Bees?’ I say innocently.

Ian hesitates. I hear him tapping furiously. ‘Yeah, here it is. They were going in and out of the soffits, next to your living-room window.’

They were indeed – the couple next door reported it, I think. I palmed Ian off when he called, told him I had a friend who could help. It comes as no surprise at all that he’s only thinking to follow up now, months later.

I was so desperate to protect it, that happy little home the bees were building. They were doing no harm – unlike their detractors, who had brick-weaved their front garden and replaced all their grass with the fake stuff within days of moving in.

‘Oh yes,’ I say, cheerfully. ‘All sorted.’

‘Nice one. Don’t want them hibernating over winter.’

I smile. The nest will be empty now, the bees long-gone. ‘Actually, bees don’t –’

‘What’s that?’

‘Never mind.’

Ending the call, I sling my head back against the sofa. Turfed

out at the age of thirty-four. Well, there's an excuse for a full pint of ice-cream if ever I heard one.

There was a hawthorn tree in the next-door garden, before the couple ripped it up to accommodate their makeshift car park. It was in full blossom at the time. The cloud of petals as they launched it into the skip they'd hired brought to my mind the windy spring days of my childhood – the sweet joy of a dash through nature's confetti, cheered on by my dad.

It reminded me, too, of the hawthorn tree I could see from my desk at the paint tin company where I used to work. I loved it, that solitary spur of life on the concrete boundary of the industrial estate. Perhaps it was planted by a bird, or someone as desperate as I felt back then. For years I watched it through the seasons, admired the buds of its blossom in spring, its rich commotion of greenery in summer, and autumn's rusty splendour. I even loved it in winter, the geometry of its leafless branches as pleasing to me as a gallery sculpture.

I'd walk over to it each lunchtime, sometimes just to touch the bark or look up at its leaves. On warmer days I'd eat my sandwich beneath it, perched on the edge of the verge. By my third summer someone had clearly taken pity on me, dumping an ageing wooden bench out there.

But at the start of my sixth summer, the tree was cut down to make room for a smoking shelter. It tugged at my gut in a way I couldn't explain, to see a huddle of grey faces where leaves and branches had once stood, staring blankly into space from beneath that lifeless dome of Perspex.

I look out of my window now, down at where the neighbours' hawthorn used to be. I should probably get online, start searching for somewhere else to live. Funny how easy it is for one person to uproot another's life, just when they least expect it.

An unforgettable and life-affirming story,
that will make your heart soar on one page
and break on the next.



Joel is afraid of the future.

Since he was a child he's been haunted by dreams about the people he loves. Visions of what's going to happen – the good and the bad. And the only way to prevent them is to never let anyone get close to him again.

Callie can't let go of the past.

Since her best friend died, Callie's been lost. She knows she needs to be more spontaneous and live a bigger life. She just doesn't know how to find a way back to the person who used to have those dreams.

Joel and Callie both need a reason
to start living for today.

And though they're not looking for each other, from the moment they meet it feels like the start of something life-changing.

Until Joel has a vision of how it's going to end . . .






HOLLY MILLER

was born and grew up in Bedfordshire.

Since university she has worked as a marketer,
editor and copywriter. Holly currently lives
in Norfolk with her partner and their dog.

 @ByHollyMiller

#TheSightOfYou

