

**THE
OTHER
GUEST**

HELEN COOPER

H
HODDER &
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

1

Copyright © Helen Cooper 2022

The right of Helen Cooper 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 978 1 529 33013 7
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 529 33015 1
eBook ISBN 978 1 529 33014 4

Typeset in Plantin Light by Hewan Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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

I've seen so many storms rage over this lake. I know how the water blazes as if it's on fire, how the rain blows in huge pillars between the mountains. I've watched flaming arrows of lightning dive towards the surface, and I've felt my hands clench in recognition of all that anger and energy. Like the wildest punk anthem I've ever heard, like a band trashing their own instruments, swept up in the anarchy of the moment. I've even shouted at storms the way a fan might scream during a gig – the closest I can get to that kind of freedom.

But I've never been stupid enough, before tonight, to find myself on a tiny boat in the middle of it all.

I *did* feel this storm approaching. The thrum and taste of it in the air. But the day escalated faster than the weather – confusion, arguments, suspicion, panic. By the time the sun began to set and the rain closed in, I'd run out of choices. Now I try to see the storm as a transition, washing away all the bad moments, or even as my ally, my disguise, if I can just get through it – get *away* – and not look back.

Two lightning bolts rip downwards. The jagged shapes of the mountains are briefly backlit – and something else is

illuminated at the edge of my eyeline, too. My heart thuds as I turn to squint at it. Another small boat looms out of the spray, like a mirror image of mine, lurching towards me with a silhouetted figure on board.

I

Joanna

Despite everything that had happened, there were times when Joanna loved living alone. When she woke to nothing but birdsong in the morning, and yellow light through her new curtains, and she could starfish across her bed into patches of coolness. Or when she came home after a busy day, poured a glass of wine, and sat in her shady little garden without having to talk or think. Nobody to gate-crash the quiet, to complicate that hard-earned sip of sauvignon blanc.

Then there were the other times, of course.

The nights when she would wake in chilly darkness to a house full of creaks and too much space in her bed. The weekends when all her friends were busy with their families or partners, and her Spotify kept landing on songs that were spiked with memories.

Or the evenings like this one, when a glass of wine and the last rays of June sun weren't enough to lift the darkness of a truly harrowing day.

Joanna burrowed her bare feet into the grass of her garden, trying to focus on the tickly sensation between her toes. But her head was too full of the awfulness, the guilt. The failings in her department that had almost caused something unthinkable.

Almost, she reminded herself, clenching the stem of her glass.

Still, the image blared again: a figure on the roof of the university's tallest building, on the wrong side of the safety barriers. The marks his palms had left behind on the railings from gripping so tight.

Joanna shook her head and reached for her phone, instinctively opening the WhatsApp group she had with her closest friends. She could write something and there would be a flood of compassion, reliable and lovely friends that they were. But then she'd feel guilty for attracting so much attention, and she'd start backtracking, saying oh it wasn't really that bad, and surely *they'd* all had much more stressful days with their teething babies and hectic school runs. Somehow, she felt she'd used up her quota of sympathy during her break-up with Luke. Her friends had been heroes throughout those hideous few months, but now she shied away from mentioning other troubles, even from admitting that Luke still plagued her thoughts. She'd had her unwanted limelight.

Pushing aside the phone, she took another cold gulp of wine. There were several sensible things she could do for her mental state. Things she'd recommended to many of the students she'd counselled over the years. But meditation and mindfulness now seemed much less appealing than going to a pub and getting drunk among strangers.

Joanna left her glass on the bench and ran to fetch her purse.

She had called into The Last Junction a few times since moving to this part of Derby. It was a red-brick pub next to

the station, usually full of people who were either waiting for trains or had just got off one, their suitcases parked next to their tables as they drank. Part of its appeal was that there was never anybody she knew. Although Derby was a city, it felt tiny sometimes. Joanna had been part of the same crowd, hanging out in the same places, since she was sixteen. And almost every memory from those two decades circled back to Luke.

But in this pub, as usual, she didn't recognise a single person under the dim lighting. Even the barman wasn't somebody she'd seen working in here before – he was younger than the other staff, though he had a face that could've put him anywhere between late twenties and early forties. Boyish dimples but crinkly eyes. Curly, soft-looking hair, but a tinge of silver in his blond stubble. He blinked as if she'd startled him, then studied her face as though there was something strange about it. There probably was. Smears of mascara always transferred themselves to her upper eyelids when she was stressed, like two extra brows. There would be sweat patches under her arms and her long skirt would be crushed from hours sat in hot rooms chairing crisis meetings. She felt too tired to fix herself, though. Too tired even to drag a finger over her lids.

'Rum and coke please,' she said.

'Which rum?' the barman asked.

Joanna looked at him in surprise. She didn't want to have to make decisions; she'd spent all day doing that, or failing to. This wasn't the kind of pub where she expected to have to show knowledge or preference.

'Any's fine.'

‘Shall I choose for you?’

‘Please.’ The idea of relinquishing responsibility, even for this minor thing, was a relief.

‘Something with a bit of spice?’

‘Something strong.’

He raised his eyebrows. Joanna flushed at how she must look, marching in alone and demanding strong alcohol. The barman scanned the shelves, swooped in on a bottle, and poured amber liquid into an ice-filled tumbler.

‘You sure you want coke in it?’ he asked.

She nodded, but then saw that he was grinning, that it was a joke. Joanna gave in to a small amount of banter: ‘But only because neat rum on a Thursday teatime isn’t socially acceptable.’

The bar man opened a miniature glass bottle of coke, surprising her again because she’d expected it from a pump. When he sloshed some into her drink before handing her the rest of the bottle, she couldn’t help twirling it in her hands, a nostalgic feeling rising in her. Picnics when she was young. Being allowed a bottle of coke as a treat. Mum, before her illness, opening one at arm’s length in case it had got fizzed up on the way there. That blue and yellow checked blanket they used to have, which they would shake out afterwards, sandwich and cake crumbs flying. What had happened to the blanket? It was exactly the kind of thing Joanna had been filling her new house with: artefacts from a pre- or post-Luke world, bracketing the chunk of her life that had been snipped out from the middle.

She realised the barman was waiting with the card machine. Not impatiently, though. He seemed to be

watching her drift into a reverie about the coke bottle, as if he understood. Maybe everybody got nostalgic about those glass bottles. That was probably the idea.

‘Sorry,’ she said, tapping her card.

‘No problem.’ He smiled at her again. ‘Enjoy.’

The only spare table was so close to the toilets it got bumped every time somebody passed in or out, so she decided to perch on a bar stool instead. The spicy warmth of the rum flooded her mouth, and the barman made a thumbs-up-or-down gesture, checking whether she liked his choice. She gave him a quick thumbs up. Because she’d hardly eaten all day, and rarely drank spirits, the alcohol surged through her, blurring and softening the evening’s edges.

‘Make sure I don’t have more than two,’ she found herself calling to him. ‘I’ve got work tomorrow, and I have to be . . . can’t be . . .’

‘Two.’ He nodded. ‘Bad day?’

‘Is it that obvious?’

He came back towards her. ‘What happened?’

At some point, the pub had almost emptied. It was another thing she’d liked about the place, the handful of times she’d been: the way a proportion of the customers would abruptly leave, en masse, presumably all catching the same train. Then there’d be another influx, but hardly anybody would stay for more than a couple of drinks. The transience was refreshing. So different from the bars she and Luke used to go to with their friends at weekends, where everybody knew one another, and the nights would follow a well-worn pattern. She had loved that at the time,

of course. In the aftershock of separation, she'd grieved for the routines of their life almost as much as for him.

'I don't really want to talk about it,' she told the barman. 'Thanks, though.'

But he continued to hover, drying glasses with a squeaky cloth, the quiet of the pub beginning to feel like a loaded pause in a conversation.

'Work?' he prompted, and she nodded. 'What do you do?'

'I'm Head of Counselling Services at the uni. I used to be a student counsellor but now I run the department and it's—'

'Tough, I'd imagine.'

'Yep.' Joanna's eyes fuzzed with tears. That poor student, whose name she'd spoken and written and read countless times today. The student they'd almost failed – except *they* really meant *her*, Joanna, because she was in charge, it was her responsibility. And *almost* wasn't accurate either, because the young man *had* been failed, even though he was alive.

Joanna had only ever wanted to help students cope with the stresses of university. Of struggling to fit in, keep up, keep going. Being a counsellor had been hard at times, too, but every day she had felt she'd achieved something, listened to someone. Since her promotion, she'd barely spoken to a student in weeks. Her job had become a treadmill of meetings and spreadsheets and frustrations. There was never enough money or staff; there were always too many students in need. How had she never realised how much strain their services were under, as she'd sat in a little pod with tissues

and privacy blinds, focusing on each individual without panicking that there were a hundred more on a waiting list?

All she did now was think about that waiting list.

‘A student who should’ve had a counselling appointment weeks ago –’ Joanna tried to swallow her tears along with another gulp of rum – ‘attempted to . . .’ She stopped before it all avalanched out; she could lose her job for disclosing it to a stranger in a pub. ‘Sorry, I can’t actually tell you.’

The barman’s smile had faded now. ‘Sounds like you’ve got a lot on your plate,’ he said, letting her off the hook of explaining fully.

Joanna swirled her drink so the ice cubes clinked, a sound that reminded her of summer barbecues and weddings. Of Luke, because he’d always been with her at those things.

‘I’m too aware of the bigger picture, now. All the people who have to wait for help, the ones who don’t get it at all. Turns out I’m the kind of person who can help someone who’s sitting in front of me, but not the kind who can make important decisions about—’

‘*Impossible* decisions,’ he said. ‘Seems to me?’

Joanna paused for a moment. She thought of the medical student who’d reached the limit of what he could cope with alone. The lecturer who’d talked him down, her own brilliant staff stepping in afterwards. The enquiry that had been launched and the meetings she’d had to manage, while all she’d wanted was to talk to that student herself.

She didn’t tell the barman any of this. But she did talk more generally about her job – the most she’d spoken about herself in months. At intervals she thought, *what are you doing? Shut up!* But she couldn’t once she’d started. There

was something in his manner that invited confidence – an attentiveness, a stillness – as the pub got even quieter and its small windows darkened.

He kept his word, refusing to serve her a third rum. The second had seemed stronger, though, bringing a welcome anaesthesia to her brain. When she realised they'd reached closing time, and that her tongue felt almost tender from over-sharing, she snapped back to herself. He flicked on the lights and she was suddenly sober and exposed.

'Get some sleep,' he said as she left. 'Tomorrow's a new day.'

It was what her mum used to say when Joanna was upset. Maybe she had told the barman that, during the course of their conversation, and he was simply echoing it now? She murmured it as she made her way home through the dark. The streets were deserted and she kept jumping at shadows and sounds. More than once, she was convinced she heard footsteps behind her, but each time she turned, there was nobody there. She hugged her elbows and walked quickly, wishing she'd left the lights on in her empty house.

Leah

The final stretch of Leah's journey had to be taken by boat. Small ferries, exclusive to guests of *Il Mandarino* Luxury Holiday Village, departed every hour from 'the dock with the golden railings'. The smartest, shiniest dock on this part of Lake Garda.

Leah was the only person waiting there that afternoon, anxious and sweating in her weather-inappropriate black jeans. The glaring blue of the lake surrounded her on all sides. A rocky mountain reared out of the water to the north, looking almost muscular as the sun rippled over its curves and planes. Behind it, out of sight, lay the resort. Waiting to reveal itself to those who were privileged enough to be staying there.

Would her sister come on the ferry to meet her? Leah had told Charlotte what time she expected to arrive, but Charlotte had been typically vague about her intentions. Since landing, Leah had been on tenterhooks. Might she meet her at the airport? she'd wondered first. No, but there *had* been a man in mirrored sunglasses, holding a sign with Leah's name on, who'd whisked her into a plush, air-conditioned car and driven her to the small town of Malcesine, the last stop in reality before *Il Mandarino*.

Stepping out into blinding sunlight, Leah had looked around for Charlotte again, before assuming she should head to the dock and hope for a ferry. It was unsettling, not knowing at what point she would clap eyes on her sister, after two years apart. It wouldn't have occurred to Charlotte that Leah might be nervous, that most people – *especially* Leah – liked to have schedules and plans. 'Charlottetime', their dad used to call it, laughing fondly at his eldest daughter's ability to be hours late and not even appear to realise. Since moving to Italy, and immersing herself in *Il Mandarino*, Charlotte seemed to exist even more in her own unfathomable world.

At least, she had done when Leah had last visited. To her shame, she didn't know who her sister might be now. How grief might have changed her. Leah reminded herself she was here to build bridges, to assess with her own eyes whether Charlotte was 'coping fine', as her strange, brief emails always claimed she was.

Her gaze was tugged towards the centre of the lake, where the blue was darker and denser, where the water seemed to swallow the sunlight rather than bounce it into her eyes. Something dragged at her stomach, like a weight trying to pull her in. She gripped the golden railings of the dock but they were scalding hot and she jolted back. At that moment, she spotted the ferry cutting a frothy path towards her, an orange and gold *Il Mandarino* flag streaming from its top deck.

At the front stood a familiar figure, with long dark hair bannered in the breeze. Not Charlotte, as Leah misidentified her for a moment, but her daughter, Olivia, Leah's niece.

Leah's *other* niece, as she couldn't help thinking of her now.

The boat drew up, gleaming with water droplets and polished chrome, its tapered prow giving it the look of a miniature yacht. It was empty apart from the man driving it – also in reflective shades – and Olivia, wearing a pale orange shift dress and high strappy sandals. She stepped down carefully, her heavily made-up face composed in a smile. Again, if Leah squinted, she could've been looking at a younger clone of Charlotte. The mother–daughter resemblance was even more pronounced than the last time she'd been here.

'Auntie Lee!' Olivia brushed Leah's cheek with a cool, perfumey kiss. 'Welcome back.'

Leah swallowed, unable to speak. Her niece was greeting her as she'd been trained to welcome all guests of *Il Mandarino*: as if they were a temporary member of a special family.

Except Leah *was* one of the family. It was just that only Amy had ever made her feel that way.

As they sped away from Malcesine, Leah gripped the damp edges of her leather seat and stared around. She'd forgotten the gasping freshness of the air out on the water, compared to the heat of the shore. How the lake narrowed and then dramatically widened, so that the villages on opposite shores seemed flung apart. And she'd forgotten how, as you began to sail around the huge rocky outcrop that hid *Il Mandarino* from the rest of Lake Garda, there was the sense of a curtain being slowly drawn back.

There was no mention of Amy during their journey. Olivia gushed about *Il Mandarino*, how much it had grown, a prestigious award they'd recently won. Silently, Leah counted the months since Amy's death. Nine. To her, it was still savagely raw. She'd only just emerged from a paralysis of shock and finally felt able to come to Italy. But perhaps she shouldn't have expected everyone here to be constantly talking about Amy. Maybe life had to resume at some point, especially for a seventeen-year-old.

'I'm pretty much in charge of customer relations now,' Olivia said, pinning down her hair against the wind.

'What about school?' Leah asked, feeling like the killjoy aunt. 'Or did you—'

'Well, that's over for the summer. My tutor won't be back for eight weeks, thank God! I can be all about *Il Mandarino* for the whole peak season!'

Leah felt a deep, uneasy pang. Even since her last visit, there was a ramped-up corporateness to Olivia's turns of phrase, her measured smile, the fact that her dress was the same shade of orange as the flag flying from the boat.

'Aren't you hot, Auntie Lee?' she asked, eyeing Leah's standard outfit of black jeans and black T-shirt, as if she was a dark smear on the sunny landscape.

'I'm fine,' Leah lied.

The boat lurched and she slipped in her chair. She'd forgotten this bit, too: the sudden direction change as the ferry cleared the outcrop and angled itself to approach the resort. At last, *Il Mandarino* dazzled into view. A dozen or so white buildings climbing one side of a lush mountain, fanning upwards from a private bay. Castle-like villas rose

on stilts out of the greenery of the slope, and the sun flashing off their pools gave the impression that the whole place was glittering. It was hard to squint at it for any length of time, yet looking away wasn't easy, either; *Il Mandarino* demanded your gaze. Leah's eyes travelled upwards. At the very top of the resort the trees gave way to a craggy ridge, naked and almost brutal in contrast. A single cloud hovered like something that should've been airbrushed out.

As the ferry pulled up to a twin of the dock they'd just left, the wind carried down the scent of the place. The thick sweetness of the olive groves was undercut by hints of rich coffee and cologne. Leah stalled as she disembarked. Olivia gave her a curious look and offered her a hand off the boat, as if she were a dodderly relative come to stay rather than a fell runner, a climber, activities she never spoke about with her family because she didn't think they'd understand why she needed them. Leah shook herself, leaping to shore. Why did this place always chip away at her pride?

A chauffeured golf buggy whizzed them up the path that snaked through the middle of the resort. Even as they rose, and the lake dropped away behind them, the villas were always taller, their white turrets shimmering in a haze of heat. Lemon and olive trees were planted strategically in between, for perfect aesthetics and shade, while sprinklers rotated in a constant dance. Leah glimpsed some guests sat out on their balconies, sipping drinks beneath gold-trimmed umbrellas, their faces shrouded by sunglasses. Beside her, Olivia smiled and waved and scrutinised everything.

'That hedge needs trimming,' she murmured, whipping an iPad from her handbag and tapping frantically. 'And,

God, that laundry really needs collecting from outside *Casa del Fico*.' She put a hand up to her mouth, as if a canvas bag of dirty laundry was a shocking eyesore, and immediately made a call.

All Leah could see was Amy, incongruous among the perfection. Resisting it. She pictured her climbing a tree to see the world beyond her boundaries. Running up the mountain in her frayed shorts and Bikini Kill T-shirt, shaking her head at each golf buggy that offered to pick her up.

The family's large villa was at the top, overlooking the resort and the lake at its feet. Leah's eyes went straight to the first-floor balcony, where Amy used to sit with her headphones on, music crashing in her ears, her parents barking at her to 'get changed or get inside' if she wasn't wearing acceptable clothes. She would often text Leah from that spot, describing clouds and birds, the music she was listening to, whether the lake looked choppy or calm. Now the balcony was deserted. Even the orange deckchair she used to sit in was gone. Leah battled to get a grip as they left the buggy and Olivia exchanged a few words with the driver. Then they were walking between the thick white pillars of the villa's entrance, stepping into the abrupt coolness of its terracotta hallway. Passing from sun into shade, Leah was momentarily blind. It was only as her vision adjusted that the tall, slim figure of her sister took shape.

Charlotte flung out her arms, bracelets clinking. '*Lee!*'

Her hug was so effusive that Leah stiffened inside it – then, seconds later, was overwhelmed by guilt. How could she not have come sooner? The scent of her sister's skin and hair bombarded her. Exotic fruits, wild flowers. She

used to have a theory that Charlotte's bouts of flightiness were a side effect of too much heady perfume, but that felt unkind now. Charlotte was just Charlotte. Her ability to detach from the world and then snap back was enviable, in a way. Necessary, perhaps. And Leah had failed to be there when she'd needed her most.

'How have you been?' she asked tentatively, drawing back.

'Busy!' Charlotte twirled her manicured hands. 'Summer season madness. Aren't you *boiling*, Lee? All covered up as usual!'

Leah blinked and didn't respond. Charlotte floated into the main part of the villa with Olivia in her wake. Taking a breath, Leah followed. At some point, without her even noticing, her luggage had been taken from her and presumably – hopefully – deposited inside. She felt naked without her laptop bag – repurposed as hand luggage – bumping its familiar weight against her hip. She was used to being laden down with client notes, hefty contracts, articles on copyright law that were interesting to almost nobody but her.

Now she watched her sister's natural sashay and well-cut linen dress, her fluttering necktie in orange and gold *Il Mandarino* stripes. They passed through several high-ceilinged rooms that never seemed to get used, into the heart of the villa. Even there it was almost magazine-centrefold tidy, with neutral colours and hard glossy surfaces, but there were signs of couches having been sat on, coasters having hosted drinks. As Charlotte and Olivia went to fetch refreshments, Leah glanced around, wary of Gordon emerging from a side room and taking her by surprise.

Her gaze was drawn to a family photograph on the wall, one she hadn't seen before. Charlotte and Olivia's swept-back hairstyles were near-identical, as were their pearly smiles, their caramel tans. Gordon stood between them, broad-chested in a cream shirt with gold cufflinks and an orange tie. In the background, the resort framed them as if it had been arranged around their shoulders. The picture must've been taken from a boat, to get the whole of *Il Mandarino* in the shot, but the impression was that the three of them were an island, levitating just off their private shore.

Amy was absent from the photo. In fact, as Leah glanced around, she couldn't see a single picture of her.

Goosebumps broke out on her skin. Her eyes zigzagged, desperate to land on one trace of Amy, one thing she didn't have to conjure from her memories. There was a framed photo of Olivia holding a glass trophy, and a picture of the family pug who'd died a few years back. But no Amy. For a few panicked seconds, Leah couldn't even bring her niece's face to mind. It became blurred and formless, when Amy had always been, to her, the only one with any solidity.

Charlotte burst back into the room holding a bottle of champagne. 'To celebrate your arrival, Lee!'

Olivia followed with three crystal flutes, arranging them on the table while Charlotte removed the cork with a pop like a gunshot. Leah's mouth dried up. *Champagne?* For a moment she was convinced none of this was real. That she would jerk awake in her London flat to the roar of the traffic and the fade of a bad dream.

'Oh . . .' Charlotte said. 'Fetch another glass for Daddy, Olivia.'

Leah startled as she clocked what Charlotte had seemed to sense with her back turned: Gordon's materialisation in the doorway.

'Hello, Leah.'

Leah lifted her chin – the closest thing to a greeting she could muster. Gordon looked much older than the last time she'd seen him, much older than in the touched-up photo on the wall. He was the only one whose ageing seemed to have accelerated since his twenty-one-year-old daughter had drowned. He still carried himself with confidence, but his hair was thinner – though raven black, surely dyed – and there were new shadows and grooves in his face.

'None for me,' Gordon said to Charlotte.

'It's the good stuff,' Charlotte rushed to assure him. 'Not the case you were going to send back.'

'I've got things to do. I just stopped by to say welcome to Leah.'

Charlotte wavered over the rim of a glass. 'Perhaps it is a little . . .' Leah thought she was going to say inappropriate, but instead she said, 'early,' and glanced at the thin gold watch on her wrist.

'Don't let me stop you,' Gordon said, striding away.

Charlotte hesitated for another few moments before resuming her pouring. The bubbles seemed to die in the flutes rather than frothing to the top. When Charlotte raised her glass towards Leah's, there was something collapsed about her mouth, and her toast appeared to have deserted her.

