

FINGER OF AN ANGEL

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ONE

On the road that disappeared

Lily's broken air-con

GRRR...

It was the middle of a Saturday in the middle of July, the hottest hour of the hottest day of the hottest month since records began, and the air-con in Lily's old Mercedes was broken.

GRRR, it went, but instead of icy cold, the air it blew out at her was hot, scorchingly hot.

Lily swore under her breath and waved a fist at it.

'You stupid, *stupid* machine!'

GRRR, it roared back at her thunderously, tearing at her throat with the hardness of its heat.

'Come on now, old friend.'

A measure of appeasement might succeed where threats and rudeness had failed. Dissolving her fist, Lily had already soft-landed wiggling fingers on the grill of the air-con, to pet it as though stroking a cat.

'Please will you stop?'

GRRR, it carried on, if anything more loudly.

'Bloody Mary!' Lily yelled at it, affecting the retort of consolation even as she wiped off the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand, the four golden bangles that she wore on that side – on the other there were eight – jangling as they tickled her face.

Some trickles of sweat had already found their way into her eyes, but she could see. The slight blurriness – the effect was of an old-fashioned photograph fuzzy from the grain of excessive enlargement – had not yet made her driving unsafe. But left unchecked, this polluting wetness was certain to bring on one of her migraines. She absolutely could not have driven safely with a migraine. Urgently she lifted up the collars of her blouse to dry first the left side of her face and then the right, each time bending her head just a little, always with one eye on the road.

GRRR...

'Large Bloody Mary with *five* dashes each of Worcestershire sauce and Tabasco,' Lily barked at it indignantly.

GRRR...

'And lots of ice and lemon!'

GRRR...

'And coarsely ground black pepper!'

But there was no getting around it; her show of defiance increasingly lacked self-assurance. The conjuring up of her favourite drink had completely failed to stem her perspiration, and she was running out of dryness to counter it with. She looked at the clock on the dashboard suspiciously. If she could trust it to be working, it was not yet half past twelve, and on Saturdays the traffic was light. If that last left turn she had taken five or ten minutes before was the right one (all these winding roads on the periphery of Hampstead were confusing, and Lily

would be lying if she didn't own up to her lack of a watertight sense of direction), she should make it back to Covent Garden in less than an hour. In fact, in much less than an hour she was certain to be stirring into a glass her signature concoction of vodka and tomato juice with seasonings and sauces and spices, served with lots of ice and the juice of at least half a lemon - she did not go in for garlic or olives or celery sticks.

Impeccable taste

Mouth-watering though it was, this vision of tranquil indulgence fell far short of any practical solution to the menace at hand. It was personal, this all-out war. *GRRR*, Lily's old Mercedes was out of control, *GRRR*, a brazen, rebellious machine with a mind of its own, *GRRR*, a spiteful, *malevolent* mind.

Lily had pressed all the buttons and then she had turned all the knobs, first this way then that, gently, as though tuning a fragile and favourite radio, like the bright-red transistor she had owned as a child. Oh, how she had adored that small transistor radio; in those long-ago days it had always been the little things that gave her most pleasure, not the expensive, glitzy, ostentatious things that her later situation had practically obliged her to covet as an adult.

And yet this was the car she had chosen; foregoing the gadgetry and mechanical sophistication of the modern, and sacrificing safety, economy and comfort, she had quite deliberately opted for the elegance and poise of a Classic. How *dare* it be so ungrateful! Anyone would think it was bearing a grudge. Hadn't she always taken good care of it, its interior spick and span and its hubcaps brightly polished? Many a stranger, and almost every semi-stranger she had ever dirty-dated in the woods, had commended her for her impeccable taste.

'Lovely motor for a *very* lovely lady,' Master Matador had swooned after fingering his way up her skirt.

'Take us for a spin and I'll throw in a blowjob,' a dodgy-looking chav had hollered from his second floor window in a neighbouring council estate.

'Shame on you,' Lily had half-heartedly yelled back.

'You ain't seen my dick or you'd be gagging for it,' the cheeky young man had riposted.

From a distance he had looked quite a dish.

'Need a lift?'

'Down in a minute.'

From close up, after 45 seconds, he had looked even more of a dish. And in less than half an hour his manhood had been proved and gobbled up, and twice Lily had swallowed.

'Pleasure!' the dish had declared enthusiastically as he got out of the car, shaking Lily's hand with both of his in a gesture whose palpable warmth had surprised her.

'All mine,' she had replied, driving off with a wave and a rather exorbitant smile.

'Gorgeous wheels for a *very* gorgeous lady,' Master Matador had swooned while pinching her bottom.

'The line, the finesse, the sheer sophistication,' a hitchhiking elderly gentleman's dentures had clanked, as he spread out his arms and drooled his admiration from the kerbside.

Lily had pressed down on the accelerator, without even remotely being tempted to offer a lift.

'Sexy guzzler for a *very* sexy lady,' Master Matador had swooned before biting her breast.

GRRR, buzzed more furiously the air-con of her Classic Mercedes, snapping Lily out of her daydream with its outburst of cacophonous heat; it was growling at her now, spewing fire like a bad-tempered dragon.

Thinking back, she wasn't altogether without fault; she ought to have remembered it was broken. Months before, on a particularly cold winter day, she had no sooner turned the heater on than it had rattled for a moment before belching out a gust more arctic and fierce than the wind whose frozen hiss was creeping through inadequately insulated windows - Classic cars undoubtedly did have their drawbacks. And now, half a year later, with even greater vehemence the temperatures indoors and outdoors were again in cahoots, the airlessly recirculating heat coalescing with nature as though in a conspiracy to choke her.

Lily had wound down her window already, almost automatically as soon as, with a *GRRR*, the air-con had emitted the first waft of warmth, and now the fiery squall inside and the spurt of humid wind from outside were uniting in a whirl that was furiously the opposite of cooling, ripping through the frazzle of her hair with the force of a demonic tornado. In her rush to make it to her rendezvous earlier that morning, she had singed it into a deadness that she hadn't had the time to revive. She had not been too concerned, confident that Cerberus, who had made his preferences plain (in spite of the sweltering heat, Lily found herself smiling at how smuttily specific he had been), was unlikely to be fazed by the state of her hair.

The secret of pleasure

Aside from that minor misfortune, how well the day had started - how excitingly! In her weekend assignations among the bushes of that secret little wood somewhere north of Hampstead Heath, she had at last found the secret of pleasure: sex to be enjoyed needed to be casual and brief, practically anonymous and dangerously public.

It was not that Lily desired to be watched; she was absolutely not into dogging, and far less into random joining in. Once or twice, when her one-on-one hook-ups had asked nicely and she happened to like them, she had strayed a considerable distance from the path of al fresco vanilla, giving in to some pretty unconventional requests. On one such occasion, after she had taken off her blindfold and unwound herself from round an ancient oak, green from top to toe in dewy moss, she discovered that Dick Turpin, as befitted his alias had run off with all her clothes, and she had had to drive back home wrapped in the emergency blanket she always carried in the car. Her one but quite enormous and abiding consolation was that Dick had been endowed with a namesake of really quite incredibly prodigious proportions that moreover had a very cocky mind of its own: while snaked around that tree trunk she had never been so entirely fulfilled from so many, and so unlikely, different angles. By comparison, the cheeky chav's prodigiousness had been but a snack.

In general men's fantasies were lurid, and in Lily's considered judgment, confirmed and further driven in by nearly every visit to the gloriously decadent

North London Eden, they tended to be far more perverted than women's. But, why deny it, it was fun to be occasionally wanton. What it *really* amounted to, however, this relatively recent kink she had developed, was more than just fun; rather it was an escape from her devastating history with men.

It was hardly surprising, given everything that she had suffered, that she had never been happy in any of her relationships, irrespective of the frequency, type, or variety of the sex they had involved, which in her marriage to Frank Hayley had amounted to a fugitive and rather negligible non-event. Ron had been her lover at two different times in her life, and had it not been for the abhorrence she had felt throughout the first, ironically there might have never been a second. But that had been the story of her life; one bad decision compounding another in what had seemed like an endless and inevitable cycle.

Well, the cycle had been broken. Supplementing her string of disastrous affairs with regular visits to the woods, Lily had managed to relieve the disappointment of the former by indulging in the casual titillation of the latter. She was still an attractive woman; a host of unsuitable suitors were longing to date her, while a motley assortment of rampant debauchees desired to engage in unspeakable things with her body. Her life since Frank had been littered with the consequences of bad choices ending in terrible break-ups, but now she was able to cruise through such mishaps with minimal fallout: after a single therapeutic visit to her secret wood, she would always be glad to move on. It was the wildlife equivalent of an enormous Bloody Mary.

Her online journey to the profile on the exclusive, strictly-by-invitation-only come-to-woody.com had been colourful and hectic, but at last, after countless bumpy rides and some very close shaves, she had made it. And although it had taken her some time to shake him off, really she was grateful to the man who had given her secret directions to that overgrown garden of degenerate excess.

'Why don't I come and pick you up, I know your area well,' Master Matador had offered.

Lily was no novice when it came to online dating, and had always religiously adhered to certain rules. Chief among them was that final arrangements before meeting for the first time had to be confirmed by phone – in a call made by Lily from landline to landline, public phones excluded. Lily sensibly wanted to hear the men's voices. If they came across as dangerous or creepy, they were immediately discounted; and in case she had been hoodwinked, a timely reminder that landline calls were logged would serve as a safeguard. It was true that no precautions were foolproof, but then nothing in life was risk-free. All was a matter of balance.

'No thank you, the drive will be good for the car.'

The last thing she wanted was for men like Master Matador to know exactly where she lived, regardless of whether or not they had passed the voice test. As a matter of fact, Master Matador was *too* polite if anything, and the plum in his mouth was off-putting. Lily too had her airs, but never in bed or in bushes - never during *any* kind of sex. And although she drew the line at heavy breathing, she did expect the men to be flirtatious when they called: "in character" already, so to speak.

'Oh well,' she remembered thinking. 'I'll just have to make sure he keeps his mouth shut. It's not like we're meeting for chitchat.'

But there was no chance of her ever accepting a lift. As with all her online encounters, she would scrupulously follow the etiquette of anonymity and distance. She might have mentioned Covent Garden in passing, but giving her address and being collected was far too familiar. Master Matador was Master Matador and she was Barbarella. Fleeting fantasies that (literally) came and went. And before that, little more than mere imaginary seeds germinating in each other's fancy. Addresses and postcodes could not but have broken the spell.

'Ah, you drive.'

'Just an old Mercedes-Benz,' Lily had answered unpretentiously.

'Really, what type?'

'1969 280SE.'

'Cabriolet?'

'Coupe.'

'Colour?'

'Maroon. Really, Master Matador, you're supposed to be a virile bullfighter, not a dreary car salesman.'

'It's a *big* car, the 280SE, with a back seat as wide as a bed. And I *love* the smell of leather.'

'Al fresco, Master Matador, that's what you promised.'

'My darling Desirée...'

Lily had almost hung up. But really the slip had hardly been cause to be jealous; she had never even met the man. In the end, the idea of what Master Matador and Desirée might have got up to had excited her.

'Barbarella,' she had reminded Master Matador firmly, sensually rolling her tongue as she spoke out the name.

Master Matador's breathing had shortened before crackling into a gasp. At that point Lily knew he would be putty in her hands, and for a brief time she had taken full advantage. But she hadn't factored into her assessment his increasingly unhealthy obsession with her car.

'Tasty auto for a *very* tasty lady,' Master Matador had swooned while slobberingly licking the interior of the 1969 280SE, long after he had strayed off Lily's flesh. The leap from al fresco had been a mistake, in spite of the rain.

Well, that had been the final straw. She would not be an idle prop while Master Matador got off on her car. What *was* it about seedy little wimps and "Master"? Did it give them the illusion of power?

'You must call me "Master" at all times,' he had banged his fist to howl at her on Skype, while *under* the table Lily couldn't help imagining his other hand dragging on a sagging sack of sad hairy balls.

His eyes had goggled up, and the part of him that she could see was convulsing. Lily had struggled to keep a straight face; she had *not* found his performance a turn-on. The man was deadly dull, and now that she had found her way around it, come-to-woody.com offered far juicier cherries to pick from.

Today's Cerberus, for instance.

Bob

GRRR...

Barely noticing the sour taste of sweat mixed with leftover lipstick and make up, Lily bit her lip as an awful thought suddenly struck her. Cerberus, a

monstrous, multi-headed beast – after messages had been exchanged and a face-to-face on Skype had taken place, but before the obligatory landline phone call that served as a precaution and a final sizing up, the old Greek Mythology books she had scoured in her teens had confirmed that this particular fearsome creature stood guard by its entrance to prevent escape from Hades, and that Hades was another name for Hell. Lily had always been superstitious; one might say that life had made her so. And right now, driving on like an overheating robot in that maelstrom of microwave fever (would her hair ever manage to recover?) she wondered where else she could possibly be if she wasn't in Hell.

It was all nonsense, of course. Her brain was boiling over but it hadn't yet gone bad. She had met Cerberus already, he had not been multi-headed, and there was no such place as Hell, at least not on this Earth. What she was in was a predicament, not Hell. And what she ought to do, rather than indulging in absurd extrapolations, was to simply pull over and turn the engine off. But if she did, it might not start again, and then what? Wait for hours in the middle of nowhere?

Did she even know where she was? Well, did she? She seemed to be driving uphill, and the winding narrow road was unfamiliar. Lily slowed down and looked around for any landmarks that might help her to reorient herself. On the right she could see only hedges and trees merged together into impenetrable hedgerows, and on the left... just more hedges and trees, probably the same hedges and trees she had seen on the right just some minutes before. It was as if she were driving in a cul-de-sac of curves that snaked in and out of themselves like intestines.

Clearly she was driving in the wrong direction. Back at those crossroads she ought to have turned right, not left, and now she had to find her way back to where she and Cerberus had parted. They had enjoyed themselves immensely, and holding on to that thought made it easier to continue to endure her ordeal. Sooner or later it would come to an end; she would walk back if she had to. By 6.30 pm, when Bob was coming round in his van, to pick her up from Covent Garden and drive her to a surprise destination for dinner, she would be rested, relaxed, and ready.

'And on Monday you're toast,' Lily mouthed at her Mercedes unconvincingly, her mind already drifting back to Bob.

A magical thing had happened, there was no better word to describe it. No sooner had they had their first kiss than Cerberus had metamorphosed into Bob, shedding the pretence of his alter ego to reveal himself to Lily as the wonderful man that he was. This enchanted transformation had happened right before her eyes, and the spontaneous effect it had had on her had been profound; it was as if at that same moment Lily had gone through her own metamorphosis. It wasn't Cerberus but Bob, the plain, unprepossessing man-next-door that Lily had given herself over to so entirely.

Really they had given themselves over to each other, with a passion that went far beyond lust and had caught Bob by surprise as much as it had Lily. She had a nose for these things. Even at the slenderest inkling that Cerberus had from the outset been a sham, and his amorous advances a lonely man's bait to entrap lonely women, she would have known to walk away there and then. But Bob had not been in the market for "love" any more than she had, or he wouldn't have been smutty. She had seen the twinkle in his eye as soon as he had set it

upon her; no one could have faked that. That was what the magic had been, their mutual unguarded surprise.

'Bob.'

By then they had gone far into the bushes, and his deep, resonant voice had taken Lily aback; it was raw, so entirely natural that it had seemed out of place. Gone was the fakery of role-play.

'Lily,' Lily had answered plainly, pushing the foliage aside.

If Bob's voice had taken her aback, her own had left her astounded, stirring in her something she had thought long dead.

'Hello, Lily.'

His thick arms had wrapped themselves around her, and she had rested the side of her face against his chest. The rhythm of his heart was pounding to the beat of reassurance, tick-tock, tick-tock, but somehow not monotonous at all, and soft, like the lapping of waves as they washed against the shore... It was then that she had known that in this ordinary man she would at last find redemption. Her life would never again be the same.

'Lily,' she repeated without thinking. 'It makes me feel so silly.'

It was funny, feeling silly being Lily when she had never felt the least embarrassment at being Barbarella.

'You're blushing. Would you rather I still called you Barbarella?'

Already Bob was reading her mind, and as he stroked to one side the dry wisps of deadened hair that had made her so self-conscious, Lily could see the apprehension in his eyes – a large expanse of brownness, clear and unblinking, fixed as though yearning for her to say no. He was tall, muscular and uniformly thickset like a bear, with greying black hair and a well-tended goatee. Words laughed themselves out of his mouth as he tenderly spoke them.

'No, I think I'd rather blush,' Lily had retorted. And then, as though the words had been planted in her mouth by someone else, infinitely braver than herself: 'I hope this is the end of Barbarella, and of Cerberus, too!'

'You're beautiful,' said Bob.

In his polo shirt and shorts, he looked like a builder.

'I'm a middle-aged woman.'

Lily too was simply dressed; at the very last minute she had fought her way out of the far-too-skinny jeans and tight-fitting top that had been Master Matador's favourite outfit (he had unflatteringly likened her to an Amazonian delicacy bursting at the seams), and thrown on instead an oversized blouse that she often wore in bed. It buttoned (and unbuttoned) in the front, easily, and underneath it she had put on neither panties nor a bra. Invariably they got in the way and were often torn to shreds.

'You're beautiful,' Bob said again.

He was fresh, unspiring; a middle-aged man but so youthful!

Lily was sixtyish and plump. She had nearly always been plump, but she wore her plumpness well. Her height (tall but not too tall), by giving her plumpness elongation had guarded her from dumpiness and furnished her with pleasant definition. Neither squat nor square, she was, on the contrary, solidly curvaceous (the gym had kept her firm), and the fullness of her face, so perfectly unblemished and wholesome, not round but proportionately ovoid, gave it a remarkable glow, with features that basked in understatement.

In her own estimation, which had often been confirmed in the most effusive terms, she looked at least ten years younger than she was. At its best, her very fine hair, an expertly concocted shade of dark silver blond, had an almost imperceptible curl, washing over her shoulders like a Japanese wave. And her eyes, impenetrable wells of luminescence whose depths had claimed so many unwary souls in the past, could still, if Lily wished, by dint of just a flutter become utterly beguiling.

'I lied in my profile,' said Bob, looking more contrite as he set about unbuttoning her blouse than in Lily's lax opinion was called for.

'About your age?'

She felt her breasts explode into a million different tingles of sensation.

'I'm not fifty-five.'

Bob's entire body – his hands, his neck, his hairy legs, had not so much enveloped as swathed her, and his contortionist's hardness – robust, fierce, determined – pressed itself as though on every part of her at once.

'Sixty?' Lily managed to ask, her breath now so heavy that she found it a struggle to speak.

That would make him almost the same age as her.

'Fifty.'

That made him the same age as she looked, and she had answered by slipping both her hands under his polo shirt, massaging him with extra vigour as she inched towards his chest. Then as her eyes fixed onto his by a rapid, deliberate movement, instantaneously a mutual yielding up had occurred.

'My toy boy,' Lily said in a soft exhalation.

Her eyes now lightly shut, she had tilted her head backwards and half-opened her mouth, to offer Bob the tip of her tongue. The truth about her age could wait.

'Your *man*,' Bob had answered emphatically, before his mouth took in Lily's and the wetness of their tongues became as one.

GRRR...

Over the boom of the windy air-con heat wave, Lily heard herself laugh, but what had started as the chuckle of delicious harking back had soon taken on the nervous crackle of something more akin to hysteria. In a foreshortening so sharp that for a moment Lily took it for an optical illusion, the stretch of road ahead narrowed abruptly as it ended in the blue of the sky. Lily hit the brakes, and the wayward Mercedes jerked to a stop. With the engine running and the handbrake up, Lily collapsed over the steering wheel and burst into tears.

They were unnecessary tears, easily stemmed. All roads eventually lead somewhere. As long as she drove on, inevitably at some point she would come across someone who could tell her where she was, and then she would be able to call for a recovery vehicle to come to her rescue. Over a stiff drink and then dinner, tonight she and Bob would merrily make light of her adventure, before driving back to her apartment for more, much more than just a nightcap.

GRRR...

Lily thought about stepping outside, just for a breath of fresh air, but in the end she decided against it. "Stay inside your vehicle," wasn't that the official advice? She opened her door just a crack, but the deathly still solitude frightened her, and she closed it again. In the rear-view mirror she could only see a blur of

grey and green, and ahead a slope of grey that led to the sky. She felt like a transgressor, a trespasser in a forbidden land.

GRRR...

It was as if her car had been afflicted as a punishment.

Really, what nonsense! What she needed was some water, but today of all days she had not brought water with her. Her mouth, already dry from kissing, was parched. To moisten them a little in an effort to prise them apart, she dabbed her lips with sweat by running them over the length of her forearm, and when she had succeeded, she sucked along the other arm too, at last managing to also wrench her tongue off her palate.

GRRR...

The sooner she set off again the sooner she'd find help, and the sooner she'd be home getting ready for Bob. Even in her state of extreme dehydration she couldn't help feeling aroused, not in any narrow, purely sexual way, but *holistically*. The thought of Bob sustained her in a primal, elevated state in which she felt complete.

She leaned over to wind down the other front window, but again she changed her mind. If the rush of hot air became stronger when the car began to move, like sand from the desert a vortex of dryness would envelop and desiccate her totally. Now feeling her thirst more intensely, she lowered the handbrake, and after indicating switched to "DRIVE" and pressed the acceleration - her traitorous Mercedes had the decency to at least be automatic.

Even with three windows shut, the arid whirl of wind from outside brought home clingingly the wetness of her blouse, which had now become fully transparent; Lily looked down at it aghast but then quickly snatched her eyes back, to fix them again on the road. This lapse of concentration was a sign.

Perhaps she should try and turn around after all. Barely half an hour had passed since she had last looked at the clock; if she followed the road back to where she had taken the wrong turn, which should take, give-or-take, another half an hour, she could then turn the other way and be home half an hour after that. Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, now it was the clock inside her head that was ticking, harshly, bewilderingly, paralytically, and yet not muffling by any fraction of a decibel the constancy of that infernal *GRRR*.

Gemma

GRRR...

Lily drove towards the sky still unable to decide. Bob had made her morning momentous, and he would make her night momentous, too. By not even the most tawdry, spiteful persecution could the day retract the gift that unexpectedly it had bestowed on her already. If anyone had dared suggest to her that Cerberus, the horny bulk who had so colourfully catalogued his fetishes on come-to-woody.com, could have ever turned out to be the needle in the haystack - at *her* age the first man in her life she would be able to trust - she would have cynically laughed in their face. Well, how wrong she would have been. As the length of road in front her shortened, making it unsafe to turn around until the horizon had levelled again, all the certain consequences of today opened up in front of her in a cascade of hopefulness. She had much to make up for, so much to atone for...

Her first concern was Gemma.

'Mother, I hope you're not being serious!'

'But it's so much safer if you know who I'm meeting.'

'Who you're meeting to have sex with *in a wood*?'

'A very *special* wood.'

'I mean, what kind of people do that?'

'Do what, dear? Have fun?'

'But you're not having fun, you're having sex with total strangers in bushes.'

'Oh, it's so much more than just sex, and I *am* having fun, believe me!'

'For God's sake, Mother, you're hardly a young woman any more!'

'I'm as young as the young men who feel me. They don't have a problem with my age, and I don't see why you should. Please don't tell me I've raised you to be a prude.'

'I'm *not* a prude. I just can't see the attraction.'

'The attraction of what?'

'Of meeting up with perverts in some godforsaken forest for sex.'

'And that's *not* being a prude? Anyway, it's not exactly a forest. And these "perverts", as you call them, are perfectly respectable professional men who are carefully vetted. Not just anyone has access to come-to-woody.com, it's a *very* exclusive site.'

'If they're all so "perfectly respectable", then why do I need to know who you're meeting?'

'Because no amount of vetting is foolproof; it's a risk one has to take.'

'No, Mother, it isn't.'

'So you'd rather I was safely tucked at home, drinking Bloody Marys on my own and feeling old.'

'If you want to meet strangers, do what *normal* people do - meet them in a restaurant for dinner.'

'Darling, that's just *so* last century. And obviously I'm doing that as well. But while I wait for Master Right, I don't see what's so wrong...'

'With having fun.'

'Precisely.'

'And these... men you meet, do they offer you drugs?'

'Sometimes, but I usually say no.'

'*Usually*?'

'I may have had the odd snort of something.'

Silence.

'Gemma dear, are you still there?'

If Lily had mentioned her habit to Gemma, who *was* a prude, that was how the conversation would have gone. Not surprisingly she had decided not to, and how glad she was now that she hadn't. Meeting Bob had changed everything. In her new state of wholeness, she had grasped that the wood was already behind her, a thing of the past.

Lily's relationship with Gemma had always been strained, and given the complexity of "the circumstances" it was hardly surprising. To protect her, there were so many things Lily hadn't told her, so many things she had allowed Gemma to blame her for unfairly. Which wasn't to say that she thought herself blameless. Lily was aware of her shortcomings. Life had made her hard, and there were things – unspeakable things - Lily had kept to herself out of self-preservation.

GRRR... VRRUM, VRRUM...

The engine of the aging Mercedes, maroon (almost aubergine), with a dashboard of chrome and solid wood (probably walnut), and luxurious leather seats that absorbed neither heat nor perspiration, was revving on and off underfoot, as though of its own, impertinent accord. *VRRUM, VRRUM*, the engine revved, while *GRRR*, the broken air-con continued to gush heat indefatigably. *VRRUM, VRRUM*, until at last Lily came to with a start at the top of the hill, where she had brought the wild Mercedes to a standstill she wouldn't have been able to say when. Struck by unimaginable awe, against the vivid brightness of the day she gaped with bleary eyes at an incomparable vista. It was worth getting lost to have seen it.

Its magnificent beauty was curiously not in the detail. It was another indivisible wholeness, like a painting. This was the day when everything was coming together: Lily's past, for so long suppressed, was uniting with her present to encompass her future. Without Bob, everything would have remained apart, in compartments held separate by grief and subterfuge and lies.

VRRUM, VRRUM...

'Your foot, Lily, off with your foot, you silly fool!'

She had spat the words out in a hiss, but the action they required seemed like an impossible task.

VRRUM, VRRUM...

'Bob!' she said loudly, and then, 'Bob!' she said again, and as though Bob had waved a magic wand from afar, her foot at last was off.

Her head was heavy now, but not far ahead, in the foreground of that beautiful pointillist painting, there seemed to be a place where she could turn. Soon she would be driving in the right direction; soon she would be home; soon she would be having dinner with Bob. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, she wondered if she mightn't have fallen asleep. The heat had exhausted her, and the monotonous *GRRR* was hypnotic.