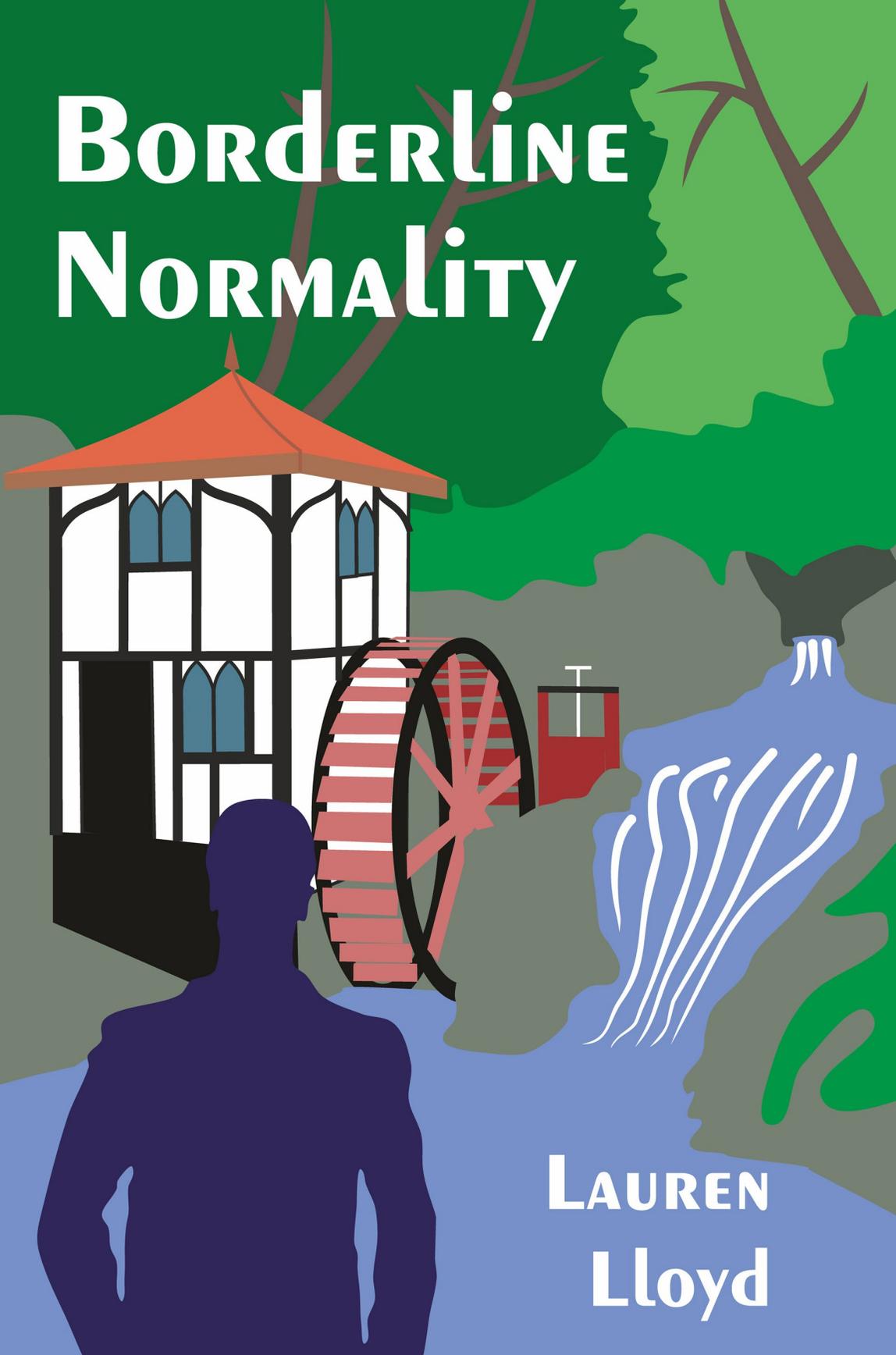


BORDERLINE NORMALITY

The book cover features a stylized illustration. At the top, the title 'BORDERLINE NORMALITY' is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font against a dark green background. Below the title, the scene is set in a lush, green landscape. On the left, there is a white gazebo with a red roof and black frame, featuring arched windows. In the center, a large wooden water wheel with red and white horizontal slats is partially submerged in a blue stream. To the right, a waterfall flows over a grey rock formation into the stream. In the foreground, a dark purple silhouette of a person stands with their back to the viewer, looking towards the water wheel. The overall style is flat and graphic, with a limited color palette of greens, blues, reds, and purples.

LAUREN
Lloyd

Chapter One

BORDERLINE NORMALITY

After it happens, I know I'm a fuckwit. I can smear the shame over my body. Coat myself in it several inches thick, then crumple myself into the tiniest atom of loathsome awfulness. I'm undoubtedly the worst human being who ever lived.

He's gone. Slunk out, taking his MacBook with him. I know why. He's worried I'll take a hammer to it. His life in his MacBook, typed from this spare-room. I can obliterate all his work in a split second of uncontrolled fury. More likely, I'll throw it against the wall like I've just done with the glasses and tumblers. Amy Hawes, demented glass thrower and killer of ex-boyfriends.

Oh God, the wall. There are fucking bits of glass embedded in it. Like deeply embedded. An Adam-shaped crime silhouette in shards around where he's been sitting on the bed.

I remember coming into the room. I remember asking him something. What was it I said....? I planned it so carefully. I tried three different outfits trying to get the impression right: pretty; casual; sane. Hair down, no hair up. I briefly considered naked, but last time I tried that it terrified him.

It's been a year since he moved out of our bedroom and into the spare-room - stroke office - stroke prison - stroke safe haven. Five years since we've had sex. I remember it. We made love the morning after we flew back from Japan. Since then, he can't seem to get it up around me. Because I'm fat? Because I'm a loathsome human being? I hate him for making me feel like that. Then I hate myself even more. Add it to the bottomless bucket of self-loathing.

I crave the comfort of his warm body. I crave him wrapping himself around me. Being held like he used to hold me. I ache for it so much I cry. I can't face a future without it. I can't think about being alone. It gives me panic attacks. I hyperventilate and feel like I'm dying. Without him, I will.

I'd give anything to make it right again.

What was it the therapist said?

"You're an empath, Amy. You feel deeply. You love deeply. You need to reclaim power over emotional overload. Maintain boundaries."

I remember knocking on the door, the lightest rat-tat, stuck my head around, tried to smile with my eyes. Every fibre ready to explode in joyous optimism, passionate, wild, reconciliative, me-on-top sex. Just like it was in the beginning. He said he'd fallen in love with my 'colour' and my 'energy.' I was sunshine yellow with more than a hint of untamed abandonment. The sex had been awesome. Even he admitted that.

I can make it right again. Light, Amy, keep it light and happy.

“Hey.” Small voice. See, I can do light-hearted, no drama.

He’s sitting upright in bed, working on his MacBook.

He looks up. I feel a surge of love. Is it happiness? Yes. I can sort this.

“Hi.” He shuts his MacBook and looks up. Oh God, he looks worried. Nerves make his face twitch.

“I don’t know how to start this Adam. I want to be a proper couple again. Neither of us is perfect. I’m a witch sometimes. I know I am. I fly off the handle. I drive you mad with obsessive house re-arranging. I’m working on it. All of it. I can be better.”

No response. Is that fear?

“But you’re not perfect either, you know. You do what you want to do, when you want to do it. We never spend time together. You prefer your mates over me. You brush over how I’m feeling. I feel... Dismissed. Emotionally Invalidated... Everything is always my fault. You make me feel like I’m going crazy.”

I’m getting faster. I’m building. Losing control. My voice goes up an octave. I’m at least half-way up the hill.

“Ten years is a long time. We’ve got something, haven’t we? I’ve... I’ve been thinking... You’re always telling me I overthink but I don’t think I am this time. You think we could...? Can we maybe..... give couple counselling another go?”

I am faltering and finishing weakly.

“I love you.”

I limp it home. Wait and study his face for the response I need. My face is crumpling. I am literally holding my breath trying to stop myself from crying.

And still I wait.

Is he chewing a wasp?

His mouth is contorting, but nothing’s coming out. As if he’s agonising over the words.

When he starts, it’s slow, quiet, deliberate. Jeez, autism? He certainly lacks the empathy and emotional intelligence.

Eventually.

“Amy, we’ve been here. I can’t. I don’t want it anymore. I thought we agreed. A break. You can stay here. I’m not throwing you out. As long as you need. But I can’t. I’m sorry.....” His turn to tail off.

It’s like a switch flicks in my brain.

I’m not even part of my body.

Someone who looks like me, but a monster. A loathsome wounded creature. A howling, screaming, morphing banshee from a horror movie is hurling glasses from a table at his head.

Adam has a habit of sneaking glasses of lemon squash up to the room and never bringing them down again. There are about 15 of the buggers. One after the other I fill them with venom and hurl them with super-human force. Each one shatters into a maelstrom of glittering agony. Glass three.... four..... seven..... nine. Boof, boof, boof. I must be a terrible shot. Not one hits him. I don't even know if the fragments cut him. It must have been crazy Armageddon. I don't remember. There's a red-wall of blank-fury between asking him the question and being back in my room.

When I rip my clothes off hoping to rip the shame off alongside, I find fragments of glass in my bra.

He slinks out at some point. Still naked, I set about rearranging the furniture in the house. Cleaning and getting things into a new order. I start with the bookcase. The books are out of size order. The small books look better over there. The big books here. The interesting books have to go at eye level, where people can see them. Hide the trashy ones on the bottom shelf. Intersperse them. See how our lives intertwine. We can't separate. One book of Adam's, one book of mine. Order is control. Scrub away at the shame until it's raw, sore and I've paid the price.

Ordering and cleaning always makes me feel better. So does Social Media and feigning middle-class contentment. In between ordering, I post some happy comments on other people's pictures. *'Whit-Whoooooo. Lookin' amazing girl, you sassy stunner.'* A friend's new profile pic. It gets a 'love' immediately. *'Happy Birthday, Lovely-Lady. When you coming round so we can open that Prosecco?'*

Just for good measure, I post a load of comments on Adams' friends pages, *'Gorgeous doll of a baby. Can't wait to meet her in person. Congrats Proud Daddy-Bear.'* *'Loving it. Looks amazin'!* Remember our invite to the house warming.'

Normality is returning. I'll make it up to him. I'll cook something special for dinner for us. Maybe lamb Rogan Josh. Made from scratch with all the spices ground in the pestle and mortar. No cheating jars here! It's his favourite meal and one of the first I ever made for him. Raita, mango chutney, home-made flatbread, the works. Don't mention the Glass-War and all that. I'll have a drive on being extra, extra nice.

Hope is a drug I embrace without question.

I'll sort the wall out too. I begin flicking through expensive Edwardian wallpapers that might suit the room. What the heck, I stick 3 rolls in the basket. He'll probably quite like those.

It's about three weeks after the War of The Glasses, that it happens.

I get a message via Social Media. Sent to me from someone I don't know. A girl. Woman. Whatever. I scrutinise the pages, her posts. Mostly it's private. I don't glean a lot. I get fixated on whether she's fatter than me or vice versa and bizarrely whether she has nice teeth. I read the message over and over trying to make sense of it. Losing him, losing this, here, now. It's a suffocating blanket extinguishing life.

The utter, absolute bastard. I hate him. I love him. I hate him. Terror and anger make it difficult to breathe. Already I'm dying.

Hi Amy

I apologise for the unsolicited message and hope it doesn't come as too much of a shock.

I've been seeing the guy you're living with, Adam for almost a year. He's lovely, smart, funny, charming. I've fallen hard. I really like him.

He describes things at home as 'complicated.' I still don't know what that means.

He told me when we met that he was single. Yet entertaining me at his home has been off limits for almost a year. So are most of his friends. He says you're living there temporarily as a friend until you find somewhere new to live. After a year, something doesn't feel quite right.

I was brought up to respect the sisterhood and wouldn't stand on another woman's toes.

I'm checking in to see what the situation is.

If you guys are still together, then I will respectfully bow out.

Yours
Rachel

Without warning I'm up, over and hurtling off the cliff of Emotional Dysregulation. Before I can think about counting. Let alone practice the mind focus, mindfulness or breathing exercises.

I don't remember emptying the medicine cabinet and laying the contents over the bed. Venlafaxine, Diazepam (the heavy duty 10mg bad boys and the weeny baby 2mg ones), Quetiapine, Paracetamol. The Piriton? I'm not sure what I think that's going to do. Maybe stop me coming out in hives to the other cocktail of drugs. Finally, Lansoprazole and Cerazette just to make sure I don't get heartburn, or a baby along the way.

The last thing I remember as the ambulance arrives is Adam holding my hand and crying. I don't even know when he came back or into my room. His voice is faint. It feels a long way away.

"Hold on Amy, just hold on. I'm here. I'm not leaving you. I'm not going anywhere."

The barely beating pulse of hope and love.

Hope is being able to see there is light despite all of the darkness.

Chapter Two

Borderline Normality Too

End to end, the journey was just over three years long.

A journey is full of magic things patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper. Sometimes you have to close your eyes to see them.

For us, me and Adam, the journey starts in the most unlikely of places, an online war-game called Diplomacy.

There is a phrase in Latin, omne trium perfectum, or everything that comes in threes is perfect. Our journey was three years long. Our first game lasts three months. It starts like any other game, but sometimes magic is quiet, it sneaks up on you.

Adam drew France, I drew Turkey.

I always want to win. I'm ranked number three on the site. I win, it's what I do!

To win, I need not to be attacked. The first message in any game has the aim of catching an eye. Being noticed. Sometimes I hit a bullseye, sometimes I miss altogether.

I send him a video of the beautiful Zooey Deschanel with my

favourite Catcher in the Rye Quote, *"You don't always have to get sexy to get to know a girl."*

My second message is a photoshopped picnic basket on a rug with some golden apples and the message *"Darn it Sappho (the girl speaks to herself). You were meant to pack the Apples of Immortality, not some cheeky Apples of Immorality. Careless! Would you like one anyway, Paris?"*

Reference to Greek Mythology has a tendency go over players' heads. Poetic introductions often go down like lead balloons amongst geeky gamers.

Not here. Bullseye Plus. Keeeeerching.

In the beginning (several hours a day for three months), words and magic are one and the same. Turns out, despite the initial bullseye I am the lumbering novice at words and romance.

The first time we speak on the phone - like real people and not Greek Gods - it moves up a gear.

I am being bullied on the site by some asshole. Usual sexist nonsense from a Neanderthal.

"I feel this pain when someone hurts you. I actually can't bear it. Let's talk. Please. Let me phone you. I want to hear your voice. I need to know you're ok."

Within two phone calls, he formulates a cast-iron case for the site mods. The guy is banned from the site.

It's like having this warm blanket of love and safety wrapped around me. I've never experienced that before. I didn't think I wanted it, until it happens.

We speak pretty much daily from that point on. We phone randomly for a snatched five-minutes, just to hear each other's voice. Hours pass in a moment. Magic.

We talk about everything. I learn that his dad had been in and out of psychiatric care. That he was cited in his parent's acrimonious divorce, aged 4. I learn that he couldn't bring himself to visit his mother when she was dying. I also learn that a previous girlfriend had died tragically young around the same time as both his parents.

An inevitable hop and a skip takes us to our first date in an old abbey converted into an intimate pub with nooks and fairy lights. His choice of venue is perfect. Midway through the evening he puts his hand on my hand and tells me something is happening to him that's never happened before.

Our first date is also our first night together.

I all but stop playing Diplomacy online. I think it's sweet that Adam gets jealous. I don't send my epic introductory messages, or have sustained game-long alliances with other players. I'm not playing enough games to maintain my top three ranking. I don't care. Then comes a bombshell.

"I've thrown Amy out the house. Told her I need a break and she can't stay here. I'm managing her out permanently. She's gone to friends in

Sussex. I'm selling the house, Rachel. I want to move. I want to be with you. Can you come down for the weekend?"

Wow! That's unexpected. Amy, the lodger, ex and madwoman who bullies him. I didn't expect her to go without a fight.

I didn't expect him to offer the house up for sale either. He has a beautiful house, bought with multiple inheritances. He lost his gran, his mum and his dad over the space of a few years and bought a 5-bedroom townhouse just around the corner from his mum's old house.

"Only if we can go to your dodgy Nepalese restaurant and you spoon feed me lentil dahl (teasing ya). Of course I'll come down. I'll see if I can take the Friday/Monday off too. We can have a long weekend."

Amy is out the house for five glorious months. I don't know how Adam does it. Mostly, he manages to ignore the six-thousand daily texts and phone calls from her. During that time, she dyes her hair blue and gets herself referred to mental health services (who also try to contact Adam). She continually pesters his brother and all his mates to get Adam to contact her.

I'm either holed up in an Adam love-bubble or doing silly miles up and down the M6. I'm going into work on no sleep, having driven through the night. I'm leaving work, changing in a service station and driving straight to his. We live on sex, oatcakes, brie and a weird shared love of pickled herring, washed down with Prosecco in bed.

To this day, I don't think any of his friends, or his brother know of my existence. I'm never introduced to any of them. He knows that bothers me. It's not right. In contrast, I am bursting with Adam-

ness. He pours out of every cell of my being. I am a self-confessed Adam-bore. I guess love affects people differently.

He says he has a list of jobs to do to get the house ready for market. I can't see what else needs doing. It looks perfect. I imagine it will sell quickly.

We look at houses near me. Perfect tiny executive conversions as well as interesting 'project' properties. Both our eyes light up as we wander round a 'project' with 4 acres of ground and a pile of outbuildings.

"Airbnb pods" he whispers as he squeezes my hand, "we'll square the house off with a two-storey extension. I'll buy you chickens."

He looks so happy.

He grabs me in the muddy field, behind an outbuilding, swings me round and kisses me.

"You'll always be a part of me. You know that, don't you. I will never love anyone as much as I love you. You are a bewitcher, Rachel Donaldson. You are the last and only chapter of my life worth writing about."

It's a Monday in April when Adam phones me. April 15th. I remember.

"I've just booked a train up to you for tomorrow. I get in at one o'clock. Meet me at the station?"

Well, that's kinda cool. The Hoojamama's are playing at the jazz club

tomorrow night. There's also a Korean film on at the Film House. Adam adores Korean cinema.

He keeps the reason for his visit from me until after we make love that night. In fact, it's after 1am when he breaks the news. He breaks it to me at the same time as wrapping himself around me in a post-coital embrace.

"I've got something I need to tell you."

I know by his tone it's something serious. I stiffen in his arms, bracing myself.

"Shhh... it's going to be ok. Don't go mad. Please. Just listen to me. Amy is moving back in again. Temporarily. Just for a few weeks until she finds somewhere to stay. All her stuff's at mine. She's got nowhere else to go. I'm sorry" he finishes by winding his muscular leg around my body and squeezing me hard into him. "I've been so worried about telling you."

"We've gone all day Adam, all night. We've just made love. Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"We were having such a good time. I didn't want to ruin things." He looks like a boy about to cry.

"Does she know about me?" I feel sick. I know the answer to that one already.

He shakes his head,

"I'll tell her. I promise."

“When?” We both know I’m asking about when she moves.

I know he’ll never tell her about me. Maybe he knows that I know.

“Wednesday. I need to go back tomorrow.”

He says he’ll phone me on Wednesday night, once she’s ‘settled back in.’ He doesn’t. Says they’d watched a bit of TV and he’d fallen asleep.

In fact, speaking to me on the phone from the house seems to be a problem now. He only ever phones when he’s out and walking somewhere. I call them my ‘pavement calls.’ As if he’s worried she’ll walk in or overhear him.

Weeks become months. The house is definitely going on the market in June. Then September. Then December. Then he says that maybe the market isn’t buoyant and perhaps it isn’t the best time to sell.

He cuts the phone off without answering on Christmas Day. One ring and cut.

Still, he sends me photographs of bookcases that she’s supposedly cleared as evidence of her commitment to moving.

“If you’ve changed your mind, Adam – just tell me. It’s fine. I’d rather know.”

Or

“Things feel different, Adam. This isn’t how it used to be.”
Is always met with a

“You’re being ridiculous,” “it’s in your head”, “nothing’s changed, I love you more than ever Rachel” and my favourite... “fairy-tales don’t happen if you don’t believe, Rachel.”

Adam tells me he’s going on holiday with his brother A cycling tour of the North Coast 500 with a bunch of his brothers’ mates. He’s taking the campervan and following on as the support vehicle.

“Fantastic Adam! I LOVE the North West Highlands. It’s my favourite place in the world. Wild camping, fairy pool swims, sunsets on beaches. Can I come?”

“It’s not really that kind of holiday, Rach. It’s a lad’s thing. Boy’s adventure. I’d rather go back when it’s just the two of us. How about I stop off on my way back and we spend some time together?”

The sick knot of disappointment in my tummy is becoming a regular feature. I swallow it down.

“Perfect.” I say cheerily. “Shall I book somewhere special for us? Something to look forward to after your week of roughing it? That van’s going to smell like something died in it!”

“Now that... is an awesome idea. Yes. Can’t wait to see you.”

I spend ages finding a little pub-inn on the beach. Live music, real ale and our own beach sunsets. I book two nights as agreed.

Adam parties hard. I barely hear from him. On the last night, the lads have an absolute skinful. We’d arranged to meet at 2pm. He’s late in leaving Inverness and crushingly hungover. He misfuels the

van. Fills the tank with petrol instead of diesel, then breaks down in the middle of nowhere.

“Rescue services can’t pick the van up until Monday,” he tells me over the phone. “I’m so sorry. Cancel the hotel. I’ll pay you the money.”

Not the point, but I know he won’t. It occurs to me that I’ve paid all the hotels, meals, drinks and outings over the course of our three-year journey.

“Shall I try and move the booking? Maybe we can just move it forward a couple of days and get the van fixed.”

There’s a pause.

“I’m sorry, Rach. I can’t. I told Amy I’d be back on Tuesday. She’s expecting me.”

Ah, the lodger expects him back.

Once again, Adam ‘forgets’ to phone me to let me know he’s safely home. His phone rings out when I try. No answer.

No answer either the next two nights when I call at the time we’d agreed to talk. He’s in the pub with mates.

Adam isn’t one person, he’s a hundred people. An empty shell that reflects back what you want most.

- The lover who wraps himself around you and contains you in an exclusive bubble of bliss
- The gallant hero and protector
- The best friend who is wonderful, helpful, caring, smart and funny – when he remembers you exist
- The creator of epic fairy-tales and ‘happily-ever-after’s’ that he never intends to action
- Someone who looks into your eyes and says you’ll always be part of him one day, then conveniently forgets you the next
- A 4 year-old boy, perpetuating a pre-wired code of dysfunction and unhappiness

I don’t know what’s lies, truth or whether it’s all bullshit. Was it ever love?

I am confused and bewildered.

The truth is hard to reconcile but unavoidable. The only person at the centre of Adam’s world is Adam.

With a sigh, I pick up my laptop and open Facebook.

Amy Hawes, I’d looked at the profile a hundred times and wondered about her.

I know the answer to what I’m writing already. How can a heart feel desperately sad, filled with grief and liberated simultaneously?

Hi Amy

I apologise for the unsolicited message and hope it doesn't come as too much of a shock.

I've been seeing the guy you're living with, Adam for almost a year. He's lovely, smart, funny, charming. I've fallen hard. I really like him.

He describes things at home as 'complicated.' I still don't know what that means.

He told me when we met that he was single. Yet entertaining me at his home has been off limits for almost a year. So are most of his friends. He says you're living there temporarily as a friend until you find somewhere new to live. After a year, something doesn't feel quite right.

I was brought up to respect the sisterhood and wouldn't stand on another woman's toes.

I'm checking in to see what the situation is.

If you guys are still together, then I will respectfully bow out.

Yours
Rachel

3.... 2.... 1.... I detonate the send button and watch the nuclear bomb fly out the window.

I flick screens on to our gaming site. Our Faraway land, the place beyond imagination where it all started. I open up my profile.

Under 'profile signature,' I begin to type:

"She wanted.... Secrets whispered at midnight, Road Trips without a map."

Whatever adventures the future holds, they don't involve Adam. I want someone real or no-one at all.

Nothing appears to be left but the pain of a ghost who once meant everything – Sappho's Eulogy.

"You may forget but
Let me tell you this,
Someone in some future time
Will think of us"

-Sappho

The bigger the scar, the better the story. Let the healing begin.

Chapter Three

Borderline Narcissim

Six months of my life disappeared when Jo died. I don't remember it. I barely left my room.

Three people died within three years. Mum, dad, then Jo.

I lay on the floor. I slept a lot. I wanked.

I fantasised about women I knew, vaguely knew or had known. If I was wanking, I wasn't thinking about horrible stuff. If a horrible thought pounced like an evil 'Stephen King Clown' jack-in-the-box, wanking made it go away. I'd sleep without dreams. If I woke and the bastard was there, ejaculating saw it off. Horrible thoughts were replaced by nothing.

It worked.

After six months, I didn't need to wank so much.

Jo was the one that got away, quite literally.

I met Jo at Bristol. We were friends. Didn't start dating until after we graduated. Didn't see the point of dating one woman at University. At one point I had four, spaced out on designated days of the week.

There was the virgin. Sociology. Red hair. Shit, what was her name again? To be fair, she didn't tell me she was a virgin. The way her eyes stared at me still freaks me out. Kerri was married. She wasn't a student, just in a bad marriage, older and fabulously liberated in bed. My flatmates thought I was an absolute legend. Maybe I still am.

It was Kerri I was texting when Jo threw me out of our flat on Christmas Day. I'm not even sure why I hooked up with Kerri again after all those years. It meant nothing, really it didn't. I was just curious. The text was apparently the straw that broke the camel's back.

I was single (after Jo kicked me out) when mum died. She had dementia. Deteriorated rapidly in the end. My brother Cal and his wife, Paula converted their downstairs. Paula did all the nursing. She likes being the martyr. They said mum enjoyed being around the buzz of the grandkids.

My mum loved Jo. Adored her. So did Cal and Paula. They were gutted when we broke up. I struggled with it all. Cal, mum, death and happy families. Blame my dad for that one. Selfish, womanizing twat. Wrote endless books of poetry but barely knew we existed. He died in the psychiatric unit of a care home not much later.

Cal phoned me exactly at the point I was stepping onto a train to go to a party.

"They reckon mum's got less than a day. You should come."

My foot was already on the train. It was a split-second decision. I couldn't face her. The thought made my stomach lurch. She had Cal,

she didn't need me. Cal had the wife, the family. Now him and Paula had the inheritance too. Cal had always been the favourite one.

I phoned Jo from the train. Despite her best efforts, I carried on to the party, got hammered and didn't see my mother again.

About a year after that I met Amy. Rather, I sort of crashed into the chaos that is Amy. She was working in a local Government office where I landed an IT contract.

Amy got into strife at work. Amy-Strife was not unusual. When she was good, the world loved her. When she was bad, she'd start a fight in an empty room. She had an opinion on everything. I sorted it. I always sorted it. She hugged me for sorting it. She ground her hips in. I got a hard-on and well, the rest is history. The Amy thing was never meant to be long-term. I actually thought Jo and I would get back together. That's what I wanted.

Then Jo died.

I think I'd blown my nose into the sink or something. I was bunged up. Amy went Amy-Ballistic. Called me a disgusting cretin, threw a casserole dish at my head, then threw me out the house Amy-style.

I tried to phone Jo from the pub. It rang out.

I tried three times.

It rang out because Jo had been dead in her flat for three days. It wasn't suicide. She wanted to live. I know she wanted to live. They found letters from a fertility clinic in her flat. She wanted a baby. People who want babies want to live. She'd been drinking quite a bit.

Got herself hospitalised with pneumonia. The post-mortem said scarring on her lungs due to chronic pneumonia. Recurring chest infections. Heart failure is a common complication.

The family didn't want me at the funeral.

Amy left me to wank and to sleep.

Probably wise.

Beyond wanking, I didn't feel anything.

In my kinder moments, I think of myself as a free spirit: *"Don't be a wage slave;" "Climb that mountain (virtually from your bedroom);"* *"Do what makes you happy;" "Admire me from the ground or fly with me."*

I'm also a procrastinator. I've not had a contract in a while, years. Not my fault. It's a young man's game.

I need to decide what to do with the rest of my life. Networking on LinkedIn, where people think I'm Steve Jobs, doesn't really pull the money in. I'm what they call asset rich – I have a big house in a nice area – but cash poor.

"How much are you drinking, Adam?"

I look at my GP quizzically.

"How many units of alcohol do you drink in a typical week?"

"20? – ish?" As long as you say something under 21, they don't hassle you.

“How often are you having 8 or more units in a single sitting?” He was consulting a chart as he was speaking to me. “You’re borderline diabetic.”

Shit.

Nerve problems, blindness, amputation, heart attacks, strokes, erectile dysfunction. It’s a funky list. I’m having palpitations walking home already.

I turn my MacBook on and flick onto the Diplomacy site.

Message.

I open it and a gif of some attractive female winks at me. *“You don’t always have to get sexy to get to know a girl.”* Cute! Catcher In The Rye.

Rachel has a bit of a following on Play Diplomacy. The mysterious female player that everyone wants to play. No 3 player. A catch.

She’s flirting with me. Of course she is.

Cal and I used to compare notes on getting women into bed. Cal says it’s a numbers game. Chance your arm with fifty women, one’s bound to say yes. I say I can get any girl into bed by the end of an album. Three things. Right words, right moves, right time. I call it the dance.

I take Rachel to the ‘The Monk and Minstrel’ for a first date, although we’d been chatting for months. It’s really nice. She’s nice. Reminds me of Jo. Easy company. Fun. Smart. The dance is perfect.

Bosh! Turns out I’m not suffering diabetic impotence. Turns out I’m still rather good despite the lengthy sexual lag. I’d been worried. Performance anxiety droop.

This could go somewhere.

I think she’s feeling it too.

I let the emotion wash over me. She has amazing eyes. I love the way she talks to everyone. Marry her? I probably could, you know. She’s got a great job. Decent salary. Probably building an awesome pension. Would impress my mates.

Amy?

I feel a bit bad about that.

Amy’s away for the week with her sister, mum and a few hangers on. They always go to some spa place for her sister’s birthday. It’s the opportunity to create a bit of distance. I send her a text and within five-minutes I get the phone call back.

“I just need some space Amy. A break for a while. No, it’s not the end. Just some time to myself. No, you can’t come back. Not just now. A break. Then we’ll talk. No, there’s no-one else, I promise.”

Sheesht. Then I get the sister on the phone, pleading. Then the bloody mother phones me, hysterical, telling me that all Amy’s stuff is there. She has a right to come back and they’re going to get a lawyer. It goes on for hours. I hate drama. It gives me sick knots in

my stomach. I feel four years old. I want to hide in my room and lie on the floor under the bed.

Anyway, it's done. I turn my phone off.

Not joking, those five months are the happiest of my life.

Sadly it comes to an end over a giant cake.

Amy drives up from Sussex, leaves a huge cake on the doorstep and drives away again.

A note says "*Cake forgives anything. I'm sorry for being a pain. I'm working on it.*" By the end of the day, she wheedles an agreement out of me to move back in.

All her stuff is here. I can't keep her out forever. I'm exhausted from trying. I lie on the floor, I wank, I sleep. I don't know what I'm going to say to Rachel.

Jo once called me weak. Said I always drifted, taking the path of least resistance. I think I'm pushed along the path by whoever shoves hardest. Amy was an expert shover. You had no choice but to go along with the plan, or have glassware and casserole dishes flung at your head. Sometimes I agree to things without even realising I've agreed to them, just to get peace. Sometimes I agree to things by saying nothing. Sometimes I don't even hear what I've agreed to.

I'm doing the best I can. I don't know if Rachel believes that, but I am.

Rachel's conversations go from magical and happy to anxiety provoking. I get the sick knots.

She calls them pavement calls. Asks when I'm going to tell Amy? When's the house going on the market? When can she come down?

Sometimes I go to the pub to get away from both of them. Often I ignore the phone. Frequently I want to lie on the floor in my room and wank.

Amy gets more and more obsessive about organising and re-organising the house. The space I occupy gets less and less. All that's left is my body-space on the floor in the spare room.

I'm out at Sainsbury's buying beer when Rachel sends her message and Amy does what she does.

I don't understand why the fuck Rachel did it. It makes no sense. I thought she was better than that. She's not. I'll cut her off for a few months. No contact. Punishment.

I'm sitting in the foyer of a hospital ward. Amy's in a room somewhere. They won't let me see her. I have uber-knotty-sickness. I think I'm going to barf. I'm furious. Beyond furious. I could wring Rachel's neck. Throw her against a wall. She knows I despise drama. Fuck's sake, where's the loyalty. Single most important thing in a relationship – loyalty. Everyone knows that.

Amy won't even have taken the tablets. It's her usual Oscar winning performance for sympathy. Attention seeking. She does it to manipulate me. Once again everyone will love her, hate me. It will

be all 'poor Amy, unfeeling Adam.' My friends will blame me. She does it all the time. That's why she doesn't want me in the room. Doesn't want me to know it's a scam. Bet they're not even pumping her stomach.

Amy's sister appears. I didn't even know she was here.

"Go home Adam. She doesn't want to see you. She doesn't want to go back to the house again. Ever. She's adamant. It's over."

"What?" Has someone taken Amy and replaced her with someone else? Doesn't want to go back to the house? Sorry, brain does not compute. *"Can I just see her for five minutes?"* I've got it all worked out. I'm telling her Rachel was just some random online gaming interaction. I've spoken to her, like twice max, in a game. No intention of speaking to her again. Mad woman Rachel. Crazy. Stalker-Girl. Internet's full of weirdos. I'm the victim here. Bish-Bash-Bosh. Sorted.

"You've done enough damage. Go home, Adam. I'll be in touch about picking her stuff up. GO. She doesn't want you here."

Amy's sister turns on her heels and leaves me.

I'm alone. It must be late, the place is empty. The sick feeling won't leave. Emptiness and desolation begin to settle. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I've got palpitations. My heart is fluttering, irregular, stopping. Fucking diabetes.

Rachel, I need to speak to Rachel. With the decision to do something. To speak to someone who can comfort, who can understand. I feel calmer. She'll know what to do.

I pick my phone up, find the number and hit the button.

It rings out.

It rings out another twice.

Three calls, Omne Trium Perfectum.

"Where are you Rach? I need to speak to you urgently. Please, I need help."

The message isn't delivered.

Actually, I can't see her profile picture.

The penny drops. I stare at the phone.

Rachel has blocked me.

I try her on Diplomacy. Our place. She's blocked me there too. I have no-one. I have nothing.

It wraps round me like a suffocating blanket. I can't breathe. I feel my heart pulsing in my head. It still sounds irregular. Like a pause, then a mega-beat. I'm having a heart attack.

A life without love is a prison. Emptiness overwhelms me. I'm sinking into myself.

What I need is beer. Then a wank. Then sleep. Maybe I need all of Amy's tablets. The one's she didn't take. An overdose.

More than anything, I need nothing.

Feeling is fucking horrible.