

COMING OUT IN 2019

The Country Lovers

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Pax and Luca's journey from hell

The nostalgic DAB station Pax's car stereo was tuned to was pumping out themed hits – 'Happy New Year' by Abba, U2 singing New Year's Day, 'New Sensation' by INXS – all fighting to be heard over the howling exhaust.

At least the noise drowned out her heaving stomach and throbbing white noise headache. It was also good at covering quiet bleats of fear.

'Steady,' she battled to stay calm as Luca sliced across three lanes of traffic to exit the M42 onto the M40, hands lifting to cover her face.

Unaccustomed to driving on the left for many years, Luca's 'just getting my eye in' had a terrifying blind spot. Horns trailed away behind them.

'Sorry about that,' he said tightly, wincing at the rear-view mirror before accelerating off the slip road, narrowly avoiding a juggernaut. 'Now where'd that big bugger come from?' With his thick beard and long hair, it was like being driven by a recently released hostage. One who had never learned to drive.

Pax kept her fingers across her mouth, voice muffled. 'Can we stop for that breakfast before I throw up?' She wasn't remotely hungry, but the puppy was whimpering, and she longed for solid ground and intravenous caffeine. Plus, her phone was in her bag on the back seat and she needed to charge it, if only to leave a final message for loved ones.

Kes. Kes, Kes. Guilty conscience at its worse in the mornings, and worse still after last night, she wanted to wail, 'What have I DONE?' but she was with the stranger she'd been sick on – quite possibly her mother's toy boy – and listening to the Carpenters singing 'We've Only Just Begun' so she pointed at the blue sign for the next exit with its reassuring crossed knife and fork, trying not to cry. Even happy songs made her sad.

The services were locals ones, not motorway, a labyrinth of roads twisting them around the edge of an industrial park to a retail mecca offered their reassuringly homogenous blend of forecourt and food court, a thin Bank Holiday crowd of hungover travellers stopping for breakfast.

Luca clipped the lead on the puppy, 'I've a call to make. I'll stretch this little guy's legs while I'm about it.'

'He hasn't had all his injections yet,' she warned, still scrabbling to plug her own phone into the car charger.

'What's he called?' he tossed the car keys onto the seat beside her.

'He's not.'

'Not's a lousy name.' With a flash of that startling smile, he strode away.

He uses it like a weapon to keep people at a distance, Pax reflected as she pocketed the keys and went in search of coffee. They weren't so different. She'd used Carry on and Keep Calm as a shield long before the poster campaign.

Luca and the puppy were still gone when she returned with a bag weighed down with coke cans and dog food pouches, plastic handles digging into her arm, and a hot coffee cup in each hand, what Mack called an 'Irish handshake' when carrying pints in the pub. Her husband had a mildly offensive cliché for every nationality and occasion.

Mack. Like a metronome tick in her head. Mack, Mack. Mack. Kes, Kes, Kes.

Shivering by the bonnet, she drank first her own coffee, then Luca's, wondering where the hell he'd taken her dog and if he was still on the phone. It was a seriously long call if so. Weren't they all still in bed in Canada? She knew nothing about the set up he'd left behind. She must be friendly, find out facts. Alice would be mad at

her for letting the opportunity slip.

At last he reappeared, phone still pressed to his ear, puppy straining to rejoin her, dark eyes gleaming and tail whipping. Handing over the lead, Luca rolled his eyes mouthing 'Sorry' and then resumed talking quickly into the handset.

She fed the puppy a pouch of food on a disposable plate she'd nabbed from a fast food outlet, trying not to listen in. It took her a moment to realise that he was speaking Italian, his voice rising and falling far more expressively than it did in his softly spoken mother tongue. As soon as he hung up, he started thumbing a message. She eyed the screen. Was that German?

The puppy didn't like his food, sitting down by the plate and looking up at her apologetically.

Luca was back on the phone, speaking French now, which he did with a marked Irish accent. They all stood by the bonnet for a while, Pax waiting for him to open the car, but as soon as the call ended, he was back to scrolling and messaging.

'It's cold out here,' she said pointedly.

'Yes.'

'Best get going.'

'Agreed. Just got one more quick call to make.'

She could feel her teeth starting to chatter. 'At least unlock the bloody car.'

'You have the keys,' he pointed out.

Feeling stupid, she felt in her pockets, then looked in the plastic bag, then in through the car windows. Finally, retracing her steps, she found she'd left them on the coffee shop counter. Just the smallest of goofs made her want to cry, crazily jittery and raw.

At least coming back in meant she could slope to the loo, bladder already bursting after two coffees. Her reflection looked ghastly. She put on some lipstick and it looked worse, matching her red-rimmed eyes.

Had Mack got as drunk as her last night? He'd sounded so. Had he kissed a stranger? If only she felt something. She was so much more jealous of his hold over Kes. That was white heat, white noise jealousy.

Kes. Mack. Kes. Mack.

Back in the car, Luca took one look at her pinched, wild-eyed face and insisted on driving again. Her phone came to life as soon as the engine started, a cannon fire of messages queued up, all from Mack. Pax only needed to read a few before confirming that, yes, he'd remained very drunk last night. What a pickled pair.

He called as she read through the bitter, misspelled venom written in the early hours. She sent it straight through to voicemail, anger pinching and punching in her throat, angrier still as tears started to slide. How wrong to feel so sorry for him as well as so livid.

Not wanting Luca to see she was crying, she glared out of the side window, trying to blink her salty betrayal into submission, but they came ever-more fiercely, soon joined by streaming nostrils and give-away snorts.

Saying nothing, Luca reached for the glovebox, groping for tissues. The car drifted left, tyres roaring across the white hard shoulder markings.

'There's nothing in there,' she sobbed, clutching hold of the dash as the car swerved back into lane again. 'Please don't worry. I can sniff.'

The ringtone blasting through the speakers made her jump. Mack again. She turned off her phone. Feeling she had to explain, she muttered, 'My husband. It's a bit messy. We're separating.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'It's for the best.' She sniffed and snorted noisily, desperate to deflect, to grapple a comfort blanket of calmness back. 'Tell me about you?'

'What do you want to know?'

'Are you and my mother lovers?'

He almost drove off the road, the defensive smile quick to flash up. 'I've not seen her in years, I'm a horseman. That's what I do.'

Luca heard the hiss of a can pull.

Not long into her interrogation about his relationship with her mother, his former employers, the horses he trained and anything else she could fish for, Pax started to gulp Diet Coke. Getting blood out of a stone was plainly thirsty work. Now on her fourth can, voice evermore painfully husky, she'd moved on to his roots, 'Are all your family in Ireland involved with horses?'

'Pretty much so.'

‘What fields?’

‘Same sort of fields as over here.’ He said easily.

She didn’t catch the joke. ‘It’s show-jumping, isn’t it?’

‘Pretty much.’

Being grilled made him guard his truths; easier to smile and avoid detail.

‘Hunting and dealing as well?’

‘That too.’

‘So you grew up in the saddle?’

‘You too, I imagine.’

‘Yep. No choice.’

‘Still ride much?’

‘Nope.’ Her fingers were drumming the door trim, her knees jumping, disliking the role reversal. She jangled with nerves, all leaping and ticking, like a racehorse in the stalls. Yet she had a steely calmness, that brittle Englishness which would not crack however many fissures ran through the walls. It was exhausting to share space with her. He preferred her drunk.

She gnawed at a thumbnail. ‘Where do you go after this job?’

‘Let me unpack first.’

The car was making terrible noises now they’d come off the M40. Looking in the wing mirror as they roared along the Stratford Road, Luca saw sparks and slammed on the brakes.

Pax gasped as her seatbelt winded her.

He managed to bring the car to a halt in a pitted field entrance.

The rusted exhaust, full of holes, had dropped from its clips and been dragging along on the tarmac.

‘I should have got that fixed,’ she muttered.

‘Telling me.’

Reaching underneath to assess the damage, he burned his hand, wincing and tucking it under his armpit, tilting his head to look again. ‘Sure, that’s a sieve under there. I can maybe patch it up to get us home if you’ve some wire.’

She looked down her long, freckled nose at him. ‘Wire?’

‘Yeah. There’ll be a toolkit in the boot somewhere, am I right?’

‘Search me,’ she shrugged. ‘I’ll call the AA, shall I?’ She headed back to the passenger’s door to reach in for her phone.

A few flakes of snow had started to drift down.

'I have the app,' she explained, tapping away at the screen. But no sooner had she switched on the device than it rang. She rejected the call, still tapping and now waving the phone around. 'Patchy data signal.' It rang again. 'Oh for God's sake!' The voice softened to its honeyed newsreader calm as soon as she answered. 'What is it, Mack? Is it Kes?'

Luca listened to a one-sided call between Pax and her husband, her stern, dry husk voice telling him very coolly to go to hell. She'd be hell to be married to, he imagined, all that neurosis upholstered in middle-class chintz. Thank goodness her mother was so different.

He located the small toolkit tucked in with the spare wheel, then dug around in the battered bag he'd checked into the hold on the flight, locating his folding hoof knife and spur straps. Edging past her to reach into the car as Pax demanded hoarsely into the handset to bring their son back tomorrow as planned, he picked up her discarded drinks cans and plunged the blade into them to remove the ends and create curved sheets of metal which he wrapped around the holey exhaust then secured with the straps. All he needed was a couple of twists of wire to attach it to the chassis fixings.

He looked around, but there was nothing in the muddy field entrance. Further along the road was another gateway, and he went to investigate only to discover they'd broken down beside a sewage works.

He could see Pax waving her free arm around, hand balled into a fist, landing on the car roof with a thwack that made him wince. Yet when he made his way back, she sounded no angrier than an irritated teacher telling a Year 8 boy to calm down and behave himself.

'Don't be ridiculous, Mack. I'm not going to talk to you about this if you say things like that. Oh, for God's sake, don't start that again. There is nobody else,' she caught Luca watching her, glaring at him as though he was the unseen husband. 'I was in a hotel, yes, but I—' her eyes rolled as she waited out a lot of shouting. 'Is that really what you think I was doing? You know what, you're so wrong. Yes, you are. You want the truth? You do? I picked up a complete stranger and spent the night with him. Isn't that amazing?'

Apart from bright spots of colour in her pale cheeks, she gave

away no trace of emotion. She could have been telling him she bumped into an old friend in Waitrose.

‘You do that,’ she said after a long pause through which Luca picked up a stream of obscenities from the voice shouting out of her phone. ‘I think lawyers are a very good idea. Yes, I do actually. How clear must I make it that our marriage is over? Do I need to run along Princes Street twirling my bra around over my head singing “I Want to Break Free”?’

Without warning, she hurled her phone over the gateway into the field, turning angrily to face him, her pale face livid. For an alarming moment he thought she was going to attack him, but she hissed, ‘Do you still need wire?’

‘It would help.’

Hands burrowing under her sweater and around her back, she unhooked her bra and fed it out through a sleeve, small-cupped and conservative cream. Within seconds, she’d sprung out the underwires and handed them to him. ‘There.’

‘Thank you.’ They were still warm. ‘Are you going to twirl it around your head and sing now?’

‘No.’

His gaze automatically went to her chest where two angry nipples pointed accusingly at him through the thick cable knit of her sweater.

Catching him looking, she tutted under her breath and blew her nose noisily on the bra, then turned on her heel and limped to the front of the car to get back in. He could see her silhouette through the rear windscreen, knees drawn up to her chin, arms round them and shoulders high as she tried hard to hide the fact she was crying again.

He fixed the exhaust back up with the bra wire and tried the engine which, whilst far from smooth urban purr, was at least sounding less like a tank. Pax had regained her composure and was gazing blankly out to the road ahead.

‘You’d better get your phone,’ he told her.

‘I don’t want it.’

‘For Christ’s sake, at least don’t litter the bloody thing!’

She was seriously getting on his nerves now. He climbed over

the gate and tracked it down easily enough because it was ringing again. The screen was smashed. It stopped ringing as he carried it back to the car, tossing it on the back seat.

But as soon as they set off, the Bluetooth rang echoing around them.

Cursing under her breath, Pax unbuckled her belt and half-climbed into the back to retrieve it. 'Press the red button on the steering wheel.'

Murderously, Luca pressed the green button.

'Patricia?' A deep Scottish voice demanded. The husband sounded like Sean Connery. He could do calm voice too.

'I can't turn it off,' she growled in frustration, turning back round with the phone in her hand.

'You're bleeding everywhere,' Luca realised.

'Patricia, what's going on?' demanded the deep voice.

The broken screen had cut her, scarlet drips landing on the gear shift. 'Press the red button,' she hissed.

'Do not hang up on me, Patricia!' boomed the voice. 'My son deserves better than this!'

'Respectfully, Muir, this is between me and Mack.'

Luca noticed with alarm the blood was dripping down her slim, pale wrist.

'That's where you are wrong. We are your family. We are your son's family, and we are—'

'Watch the tractor!' Pax gasped, grabbing for the wheel. Luca realised too late that he was driving straight at an oncoming John Deere.

'Shit!' he pulled the steering wheel hard right. Pax was pulling it hard left.

At the last moment the tractor mounted the verge, taking out most of the hedge as it passed, driver gesticulating wildly. The puppy started barking. Pax slumped back in her seat. There was blood all over the steering wheel.

'You could have killed us!' Luca fumed.

'Who is that?' demanded the deep boom.

'Listen, fella, I'm sorry your marriage is on the rack, so I am, but having spent just a few hours in the company of your lady wife, I

have to say it's a fucking miracle it's lasted as long as it has. Now bring the kid home to his mum.' He pressed the red button.

'Stop the car.' It was so deathly, he thought she must be about to pass out or throw up again.

But, clambering out, Pax hurled the phone into an industrial wheelie bin on the edge of a village.

Cut hand wrapped in her bra, she reclaimed her seat and fumed quietly beside him. 'That was my father-in-law you were speaking to. I'll thank you not to interfere again.'

'Willingly.'

'You should have let me get the AA.'

'You certainly need that.'

'I've quit.'

'I'll believe that when I see it.'

'You won't be sticking around long enough.'

'I'm contracted for six months.'

'So you've signed a contract?' She was fishing again. He rolled his eyes.

'Watertight.' Ronnie was as good as her word.

It was snowing thickly now, billowing into the windscreen.

'Pax, can we just make friends?' he sighed.

'Not right now.'

'At least give the dog a name.'

'I already did,' she said stubbornly. 'He's called Knot.'