



False Starts (and a finishing line)

Chapter 1: A Quiet Weekend.

Dear Mummy and Daddy,

Catherine sighed and chewed the end of her pen. Her best fountain pen because the obligatory weekly letter home had to be written directly in pen, under the supervision of Miss Dodds, the Housemistress, who would make you do it again if there were too many blots or crossings

out. Catherine hated Letter Writing on Sunday mornings.

Thank you for your letters.

Mummy's usually arrived on Wednesdays during break and Daddy's could be expected on Saturday mornings after prep. They contained, as a rule, the minutiae of village life so that Catherine would be reasonably well-informed in the holidays. They always ended with love and kisses but she wasn't entirely convinced.

Last Tuesday we had a history test. I did quite well and am so glad you took me to York in the summer holidays. I knew all about the Jews in Clifford's Tower.

She had come top and won points for her house but it was all almost a week ago and the glamour had worn off. The other girls had been vaguely congratulatory (especially about the house points) but were mostly either jealous of her academic abilities or rivals for first place. Or, of course, dismissive, because it wasn't as if she was on any of the teams, although she'd scored a fluke goal in hockey.

I scored a goal in hockey on Wednesday and Miss Stone was pleased with me.

She wasn't sure what the parents would think. School reports at the end of term were accepted approvingly but Mummy was always quoting the old saying about 'be good sweet maid and let who will be clever' and Daddy was more of the 'if at first you don't succeed' persuasion. She suspected they didn't really read the reports.

On Thursday...

Mary-Anne had kissed Catherine good night. Not from love or lust or any kind of affection, just to have some sort of contact with another human being that wasn't either an accidental bump in the cloakroom followed by a curt 'sorry' or an apologetic and timid grasp by a 'catcher' in gym. Catherine was quite good at gym but of course it didn't count if you weren't also good at games. Mummy and Daddy wouldn't approve of the kiss and wouldn't understand.

...it rained and we didn't have games or even a walk so Mary-Anne and I got our prep finished early and played Cluedo till tea-time.

Yesterday there was a lot of fuss because...

Amanda Harton-Kell and Sophie Bennett were found kissing in the cloakroom and might be expelled. Mummy and Daddy would be shocked and worried and even less likely to approve of Mary-Anne's chaste goodnight kiss. Not that that would ever be mentioned.

...Mandy Kell and her best friend were very naughty and got into all kinds of trouble. I don't know what they did. But they aren't in our house so I suppose it doesn't matter.

She wished she did know. Really know. She wished it had been Mary-Anne and her in that clinch among the coats and outdoor shoes and hockey boots. But it hadn't been and wouldn't ever be because Mary-Anne was actually sighing over one of the village boys (dumb oafs) and she, Catherine, was too timid to try anything. Maybe she should choose someone else to

daydream about. Miss Gorton was her second choice, but even less likely to kiss her goodnight.

Last night there was no film or lecture or concert so we had dance instead.

No details. Mummy and Daddy didn't share her taste in music and presumably thought dance involved some kind of ballroom dancing practice, not realising how exciting it was to hold another girl in her arms. Of course, if she ever went to a 'proper' dance in the holidays she would be at a loss, having always taken the masculine role. It came with the territory of being tall for her age. It was bound to be exciting, as another instance of human touch in the long months of term-time, but Catherine was now not-so-faintly aware that for her, it was more than that.

This morning we woke up to find the rain had turned to snow in the night. Everything is very pretty but there will be no walks this afternoon and I expect we will play Cluedo again.

Or listen to Lizzie Stanyer's radio or read. A quiet afternoon, much like the ones she 'enjoyed' in the holidays, in the village where she didn't know any of the other girls very well, and had little or nothing in common with either them or with her own parents. To give them their due, her parents tried hard to make holidays interesting, hence, for example, the useful visit to York. But they were strangers and Catherine often longed to return to the familiarity of school, however arid it might be.

We went to church and had to wear wellies and plodge through the snow. The bells sounded muted and there were very few cars on the main road. Some snow fell from a branch onto Helena Gill's hat and she had to go back to school and miss Morning Service. That was a pity because we've started singing carols. My feet were cold.

The carols made me start to look forward to the Christmas holidays.

Not entirely true; a sort of snow-white lie.

The snow had been a snowball thrown by Vincent, one of the village oafs, at Helena's pink-and-white porcelain prettiness but she wouldn't tell Mummy and Daddy that. They'd been at that curve in the path where they were just about out of sight of any adults so Miss Dodds hadn't known, either. They'd all been giggling occasionally ever since, except Helena, who was embarrassed.

The snow seems to blanket noise as well as the ground. So far, it has been a quiet weekend.

Love,
Catherine

Chapter2: Failure.

Miss Stone, the games mistress, was adamant. Girls, she said, should be grateful to their parents whose nature and nurture had provided the basis for any success. Failure, on the other hand, was completely due to a girl's individual inability (or unwillingness, implied but not spoken) to benefit from her privileged position. Catherine sighed. Hockey and lacrosse defeated her. She felt inclined to run away from the terrifying balls rather than rush in with stick held correctly to meet the threat. She didn't think her parents cared about her prowess on the games field but even so it was galling to be made to feel so inept. And so many of the others shone. Susie Brown, for example, was Hockey Captain as well as Tennis Captain. They always played hockey in the Christmas term and lacrosse in the euphemistically named spring one.

"The trouble is," she told Mary-Anne, on their way back up to the main school buildings from the games pavilion, "it seems I can't even take any credit for my high marks in all the academic subjects. That's just down to heredity."

"On the other hand," Mary-Anne agreed gloomily, "I get blamed by both the teachers and my father for my low marks in maths. I wish I could please someone some time."

Catherine glanced at her friend and thought she was very pleasing indeed, with her waving blonde hair and her delicate features. But of course she couldn't say so. She couldn't even call her by her name. It was the custom to use surnames only, perhaps emulating famous Boys' Schools, she thought.

"You're really good at art," she said. "You did that wonderful portrait of Richardson last week. Barty was thrilled." Barty was Miss Barton, the art teacher.

"There you are!" Mary-Anne was not to be consoled. "That's just a skill I inherited from my mother. Nothing to do with me." They walked on in silence, contemplating the unfairness of it all. As they passed through the shadowed lane that led to the main school path Catherine put an awkward arm round her friend's shoulders.

"I think you're a success," she said softly, but Mary-Anne shrugged out of the semi-embrace.

"That's no good," she said. "It might help if Brown or one of that lot thought I was OK." And Catherine felt her own failure all over again.

Chapter 3: Aftershave.

Ever since she was little Catherine had loved the smell of her father's aftershave with its hints of spice and musk. It had spelled warmth and security to her senses, especially after she had been packed off to boarding school. So when she was old enough to want perfume, and nobody had thought to buy her any or point her in the right direction, she had simply borrowed one of the bottles in the bathroom cabinet and refilled a small bottle of her own. If her father noticed that the level dropped more than it should, he never said anything. Now it was her signature scent, one she put on before clothes, which told her she was herself.

Only in the holidays, of course. She would be in trouble if she tried that at school. The Christmas party seemed the right kind of occasion and fortunately the weather had improved so it was even mild enough for them to spill out into the garden.

She was never sure whether the other girl had thought at first that she was talking to a boy. In the cool dusk outside the party, sitting on a low wall, her gender was anything but obvious. Her hair was held back in a rough pony-tail and she was wearing unisex jeans with a jazzy T-shirt that said more about her taste in pop-stars than something more personal. Her voice was deep, and husky. And there was the aftershave.

Later, in the deeper shadows of the even cooler summerhouse, Jenny made it quite clear that she knew exactly what she was getting and what she wanted. But that was once their clothes were tangled around their feet and their breathing was ragged and uncontrolled. Jenny smelled of honeysuckle and summer nights and her skin was warmly soft, like the fuchsia they'd scraped past on the way inside, its ballerina flowers bursting with pride as it touched them. It was managing to treat the summerhouse as a kind of greenhouse, and the temperature was at least bearable.

Afterwards, Jenny commented on Catherine's hair, pulling it from its constraining band and running her fingers through it, playing with the heavy, crimped strands.

"If you'd worn it loose," she said, "I would have thought you were one of the rest, just waiting for your boy to join you. I wouldn't have spoken." She shook her own short curls and her smile was in her voice.

"Think what you'd have missed!" Catherine laughed softly and disengaged herself, ready to go.

"I'll always think of you when I smell that fragrance. What is it?" Jenny was sliding away into the darkness.

"It's aftershave. I steal it from my father. You'll smell it on a lot of men."

"Then they will remind me of you." The words were a whisper and then there was no-one and nothing, and Catherine found herself walking home alone through a winter night that ached with honeysuckle and stars.

Chapter 4: Unrequited.

Catherine flicked back her hair and pretended to concentrate on her text book. In fact, under lowered eyelids, she was surreptitiously concentrating on her teacher. Not that teachers don't like to have their students' eyes fixed firmly, but Ms. Melanie Mercer B.Sc. had just asked them to look at page 94 and might feel sad or dubious about her teaching ability if Catherine looked at her instead.

Catherine had looked at page 94 last night. She usually prepared conscientiously for the day's lessons, feeling that she owed it to her position as head girl, as well as herself, to do well. She was quite familiar with page 94 by now. Indeed she was looking forward to the chemistry experiment it outlined, and to working with her lab partner, Ruth. Until everyone had reached the same stage in relation to the page as herself, however, she would continue to look at Ms. Mercer.

Catherine found the chemistry teacher delectable. It was quite common for young graduates from prestigious universities to spend a year or so teaching at the expensive boarding school where Catherine was a pupil. There was some kind of pretence that they were following an on-the-job training programme, but really, everyone knew they were whiling away time before marriage to other young graduates. It was more convenient to take a temporary post that came with a flat and full board than to try to find a job and accommodation in what people referred to as 'the real world'. The wrench, when they followed their husbands to Singapore or Seattle or Dubai wasn't as great and they could tell themselves and their families that they were sharing the fruits of their education with eager young minds.

But school was the real world, after all, in microcosm, and there were people who looked, liked, flirted, seduced and even stalked. Catherine didn't think of it as stalking, of course. Ms. Mercer was probably unaware of her interest. She was quite certain that seduction would be easy. Melanie would fall into her hands like a ripe peach, all red-gold hair, rosy cheeks and skin dusted with fine hairs that would feel warm and sensuous. Melanie didn't strike her as a strong character and she was sure she could twist any encounter to her advantage. It couldn't even be called paedophilia on Melanie's part. Catherine had turned eighteen in December and it was now mid-January. So there was nothing to stop her, except...

Except that the idea of a teacher-student relationship would probably horrify even those who wouldn't bat an eyelid at under age sex or same gender affairs. And then Ms. Melanie Mercer with her lovely curls would be out of a job and Catherine might very well find herself with nowhere to take those all-important exams that would admit her, in turn, into a prestigious university.

So she looked, and longed, and plotted. It would be easy enough to wait till September and then sweep back on a flying visit in all her undergraduate glory, and invite her very favourite teacher to join her for a drink at the 'local'. Normal, in fact. But Ms. Mercer might be gone. She had no idea how long her idol's tenure of the post was; there might be a move afoot. She would have to use her considerable expertise and call on the services of her prefect spies to find out.

When she found out, she would make her plans. Meanwhile, she looked her fill and even managed to get Ruth to do most of the boring, initial work so that she could feast her eyes and fantasise about removing Melanie from her virginal white lab coat with as much care as she would devote to a fragile test tube or a volatile substance.

“Catherine, are you still with us?” Melanie’s voice was, Catherine decided, like a bell, calling her homewards.

“Yes, Ms. Mercer,” she replied, and turned back to the world of lab work, ‘prep’ and exam revision. September would come soon enough.

Chapter 5: Writer's Block.

Catherine had been trying hard. She knew she and Lisa had very little in common except immediate physical attraction but she hadn't expected the long November weekend at Lisa's farm to be quite so difficult. At least she had vague memories of riding lessons when she was little and knew enough not to upset the horse. But hours at the computer and in uni lectures had done little for her figure or her general fitness levels and mounting was an almost insuperable problem. It seemed likely to be an even worse disaster than collecting eggs (she'd broken three) or feeding the dogs, who had understandably been less than pleased about the cattle feed she'd doled out. Their walk to the stream last night had been farcical, too, because her smooth-soled town shoes slipped and slid on the mud and ice and Lisa's smaller wellies didn't fit. There were plenty of them, scattered all round the hall. Probably breeding in cupboards, Catherine decided, seeing a couple of unmatched ones lying forlorn in the stable yard.

She felt stupid and clumsy but Lisa had a broad grin on her face and was whistling when she came out of the tack room. So she, at least, was happy, which was something, Catherine supposed.

"I thought this might be useful." Lisa was carrying a lump of wood; a section of tree stump. She placed it near the wall with a flourish. "Now we can get going," she declared.

Catherine frowned. None of her fantasies about Lisa or nightmares about Lisa's horses had so far involved chunks of timber. "What..." she began, but Lisa interrupted her, giggling.

"It's to help you mount. I could see you weren't going to manage. You spend too much time indoors, you know! This is a writer's block." She stood back to watch Catherine climb successfully, if a little ungracefully, into the saddle, then mounted her own horse, and they were off, riding into their immediate future.

Catherine thought the weekend might be a success but was not so sanguine about the longer term. Mere lust was not going to last beyond Christmas.

Chapter 6: Reunion.

Could it really have been so small?

Catherine didn't think she'd grown. In fact, she knew she hadn't. Last summer the gym she belonged to had held a party with a 'back to school' theme and she'd worn her old uniform. It fitted perfectly; she'd lost the pounds she'd gained at uni and the length was exactly right.

Now the huge building that used to loom over her at the beginning of every term (and the end of every morning break spent walking round the grounds) looked somehow diminished, nestling in the fold of the northern hills rather than dominating the landscape.

She took a deep breath and went in to join the rest of the reunion group. No old uniform today. She'd even bought a new outfit. Silly, perhaps, to try so hard for a lot of girls she grew up with, but there was still that element of competition, the edginess that had made her beg new weekend wear every summer to show off in the autumn. There were other adults standing around in the entrance hall and she was surprised by the prevalence of grey hairs. She'd paid so much to cover her few.

Could that really be Mary-Anne? That dowdy, plump woman with the flat heels and the old-fashioned make-up? She remembered kissing Mary-Anne after lights-out and marvelling at the other girl's silky lips. Dreaming about how they could run away, set up house together, let the world go hang. She didn't remember what she had thought they could do for money.

It was definitely Mary-Anne; the woman was turning towards her, face suddenly lit by memory and a smile that made the corridor glow. And so of course she had to spend time answering questions (yes, her computer business was doing well), admiring photographs (three awkward teenage children and a lumpen husband), and reminiscing (the time we climbed out through the dormitory windows and met the boys from the village). Catherine skimmed through her own photo gallery on her new smartphone: Charles and the babies.

Mary-Anne's lips were slightly dry, flaking a little under their heavy coat of lipstick. Mary-Anne's eyes were another story but one she no longer wanted to read. She smoothed down her silk skirt and sighed. Who was she kidding? She'd hoped. Just a little bit. And that was why she'd spent the earth on the skirt and the long embroidered jacket. Not competition at all. Ah well, the meal at the local hostelry ought to be good; the place was mentioned in The Good Food Guide, with prices to match.

But who on earth was that, with the gorgeous trouser suit and the long bleached plait? Not Millicent Mouse who never spoke and always wore her sister's hand-downs? A quick query established that Millicent remembered her. She wasn't convinced this could really be the same Millicent she remembered. But suddenly the silk skirt didn't seem like such a waste of money.

Coming back might just have been a good idea after all.

Chapter 7: In your room.

Catherine contemplated the email and sighed.

>>Thank you for sending me the photographs. I can see your room from every angle, enlarge the pictures and admire the poster advertising Pirates of the Caribbean, the carved bowl on the windowsill and the deep shade of blue draping the bed. You sent me your photographs, too, and I can imagine you there, undressing, hanging your clothes in the walnut veneered wardrobe, turning back the covers, lounging on the bed. You haven't, yet, emailed shots of yourself naked but I hope it's only a matter of time.

I've told you I haven't got a digital camera or a scanner and so far you've accepted my excuses. Your words are getting more eager. We're seducing each other in letters, like the Victorians used to do. Except that I've given myself an androgynous name.

When you realise, if you realise, will you mind? Your friend, Sam. >>

Sam couldn't know how very much Catherine wouldn't mind if her suspicions were true. Now to compose a reply but not until she'd fed Charles and the children.

Chapter 8: Waiting.

Catherine was beginning to be furious. She could feel the resentment bubbling beneath the sunny exterior she presented to the world. If Samantha couldn't even be bothered to organise herself to get to the station on time, what did that say about the future of a relationship that was tenuous at best? This was supposed to be their weekend away; the time they would take to get to know each other properly, to see if it was worth carrying on with the white lies and subterfuges, maybe even taking things further. And Samantha was late.

She wheeled her case to the lift but there was a notice saying it was out of order and to ask station staff in case of problems. Well, she wasn't exactly disabled and her case didn't weigh a ton. The station staff would be completely unable to deal with the problem of a missing travelling companion.

She hauled the case up the stairs, careful to follow the notice there that admonished passengers to take care because it had been snowing and the steps might be wet. They were. Slippery, too, like her affair.

The train was due and there was a chime from the loudspeakers, followed by something incomprehensible that Catherine assumed must be an announcement of the arrival. The train drew in and as it did, a flurry of black scarves, long hair and an open trench coat at the top of the damp steps resolved itself into Samantha. She had the grace to look just a little abashed but this satisfactory state of acknowledgement vanished as soon as they had found a seat.

"Just in time!" she said cheerfully.

"Yes." Catherine's one word reply was meaningful and might have been ominous to anyone less carefree than Sam. The miscreant settled herself in a window seat opposite her lover, shedding scarf, bag and gloves.

"I left it till the last minute," she said. "I don't like waiting around. Do you?"

Chapter 9: Sun and sea.

They unpacked a little. At any rate, Catherine colonised the wardrobe and laid the contents of her sponge bag carefully on one side of the bathroom shelf. Sam, having strewn her belongings across most of the bed and at least two chairs, stood at the window, admiring the view and commenting on the people outside.

Catherine wanted to scream. She had no desire to share Samantha's attention with the ice cream man (selling hot chestnuts in keeping with the weather) at the quaint little kiosk or the children taking a Great Dane for a walk, or perhaps being taken, depending on how you looked at it. They had forty eight hours. Nowhere near long enough. Or perhaps an eternity if it turned out that sexual compatibility didn't extend to being together for more than a few snatched meetings.

Eventually Samantha turned, eyes sparkling, looking as delectable and shining as she had in the club when they'd met. Catherine felt herself weaken and melt all over again. Perhaps, after all...

"We could go for a walk on the beach!" Sam sounded like a child given the keys to a particularly rich playroom.

"We didn't come to walk," Catherine began, then stopped as she saw Samantha's face fall.

"So why did we choose such a gorgeous place?"

"Because it was cheap, available and somewhere we could talk," said Catherine patiently, adding silently that it was somewhere they could do things other than talking, in peace, without forever looking at the clock. Surely her lover understood that.

"We're going to need to have something we can tell people about our weekend away." It sounded reasonable and Catherine almost agreed then remembered the show they'd booked to see the next night. That would be quite enough to relate to people at home. Something in her expression must have warned Sam, who quickly came and put her arms around her.

"Cheer up," she coaxed. "You're all jittery because of getting here without anyone guessing and the possible pitfalls on the way. But we're here now. A whole weekend, all to ourselves!" Catherine wavered. She was trying not to fall under the spell. It was so obviously a spell and it wouldn't, couldn't last. But it was strong magic. She found herself smiling and they kissed, taking a long time over the act, instead of rushing as they usually did.

"See! You're happy now, and I'll make you happy for a whole weekend! But I still think a walk would do us good!" The sun outside the hotel window added its pleas and Catherine nodded, mesmerised. The Christmas lights strung high above the street were beginning to glow in late afternoon and they promised sparkle and excitement.

"Yes," she said. "A walk now, but only if we spend the whole evening back here." Samantha was dancing to the door when Catherine added, "Something else. You'll have to learn to use

a wardrobe. I have other plans for the bed.”

Chapter 10: Sorry.

Charles was devastated without being quite sure why. If Catherine was going to have an affair with anyone he could hardly complain; he hadn't been exactly attentive over the last few years and she must be feeling frustrated. Or was that the problem? She had never appeared interested and he had strayed, and now it seemed she was interested after all, but not in him. That shouldn't matter. He was no longer interested in her. Would her choice of partner reflect badly on him in the eyes of their friends? He didn't think so. Some men would probably shrug at their wives having another woman in their lives, might ignore it, and might even try to turn the whole thing into a threesome. Their parents were no longer around to fret and fuss. Their children were growing up.

Of course, his life fitted him as comfortably as an old glove, and change always made him nervous. If Catherine insisted on leaving him things would inevitably change. Why couldn't she just have her affair quietly? She said it was no longer an affair, that it was 'the real thing' whatever she meant by that. And that she had to leave, had to alter everything, had to be 'true' to herself. He thought he could be perfectly true to himself in their present house, with the dog and the garden and the huge television they'd just bought last year.

And why, he asked himself, had she taken so long to tell him? Her plans for moving were obviously well advanced. This was no spur of the moment decision. She had even thought about custody of the dog, telling him her new landlord wouldn't allow pets and that she and Sam wouldn't be able to take Bozo. And why had she waited till after Christmas, dropping her bombshell of news as a kind of New Year's gift or resolution?

He had felt shock when he realised that Sam was short for Samantha and not Samuel but he couldn't criticise, especially when he thought about his own evenings with the young man he'd met at the club. But that was in a convenient compartment in his life; it didn't interfere with dogs and the pruning of roses or planting of lettuce. His lover ministered to his needs and didn't change his life in other ways.

Catherine was standing in the doorway, looking quite delectable, really, in her new trouser suit with her hair all held up on her head in a mass of curled topknot.

"I'm meeting Sam at seven. I'll tell her I told you. Then I'll come back tomorrow morning and start packing. We can move into the new flat as soon as we want. I'm sorry, Charles."

"But you aren't. Sorry means never doing it again and you're walking out to do all of it again. That's the whole point."

"Not that kind of sorry. Just sorry that you're so upset. I didn't think you would be." And she was gone, the door swinging to and the car crunching on the gravel.

He phoned him - maybe they could meet - but the telephone rang in an empty house. How could you always tell? He tried his mobile but got the voice mail service and rang off without leaving a message. They met on Thursdays as a rule. Perhaps waiting till Thursday would be best.

Nick enjoyed chatting to his pretty colleague who was so obviously waiting for someone. Her bubbling happiness was infectious and he felt cheerful for the first time in days.

“So you’re moving in with your partner and all’s well with the world?”

“Yes! I’m so happy - I want everybody else to be happy too! And you’re not, are you? I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault - your happiness hasn’t taken mine away!”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to imply guilt, just a sort of pity. But you’re too young and handsome to need pity. I just hope you find someone perfect, like I have.”

“I found them. They don’t want the sort of permanence you have.”

“Then I’m truly sorry for you. Look round again and find someone else!”

“I might do just that. Meanwhile, I hope your guy’s truly worthy of you. You’re quite a special person, Sam!” And she was - he’d worked with her, known her, for years now, and felt a momentary pang of envy for whoever had won her heart. He realised his mistake as the blonde vision in a lemon trouser suit came up and kissed Samantha very thoroughly on the lips.

“I’m sorry,” he stammered, but they were too wrapped up in each other to notice him.

He checked his phone on the way out of the bar - one missed call but no message. Never mind, it would soon be Thursday.

Chapter 11: A quiet Christmas.

The tree winked at them, its ornaments and fairy lights adding to the celebratory atmosphere. The children were happily occupied. Jessica and James, her twins, stayed with Charles during the week to avoid having to move to a new school, but weekends and holidays were all Catherine's. They sat close together as usual, fair heads bent over a video game on the tablet.

There was a delicious smell of roast dinner wafting from the kitchen. Catherine hadn't known Sam was such a good cook. Most of their interactions had, after all, been in hotels, bars, and restaurants.

They had opened stockings (for all of them, not just the twins) after breakfast, and later there would be the more expensive gifts. She hoped Sam would like the earrings she'd bought her.

They might go for a short walk first. There'd been snow, but not a lot. The world was very pretty, but still navigable.

Then there'd be television, and snacks if anyone felt the need.

Catherine didn't feel a need for anything. She had all she wanted here.

She wondered what Charles and Nick were doing for Christmas then realised that she didn't much care.

The End