

# Imperfect Strangers

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Kath Middleton, Victoria Pearson, Rosemary Oberlander and Patti Elliott for their invaluable help in producing this book, and for instilling in me a necessary portion of self-belief.

# C H A P T E R

## 1

It's just an office chair, but it's her chair, and as I press my nose into the fabric and sniff I imagine the possibility of being with Sally. A ridiculous notion, but with her smell inside me – perfume, shampoo, possibly a hint of her sex – I feel intoxicated and sigh as I curl into the seat.

Loneliness has led me to this, but what excuse is that to lighten the weight of guilt when I've been lonely all my life. A quick glance into the dimly lit corridor boosts me with the reasoning that no one else is going to know. I fixed the cameras. Besides, I'm only going to look. No harm in that. I've gone to a lot of trouble for this, so why shouldn't I? So what if I'm only supposed to enter the offices in an emergency. Patrol the floors. Punch the card on each level. Go back to the front desk. Wait for two mind-numbing hours, haunted by the creaks and groans of this empty building, before doing it over again, several times each night.

I don't feel as if I could stop myself anyway. Not now. I'm beguiled by the scent she's left behind, and I want... No! I need more. It's a craving, I imagine, that is not dissimilar to an alcoholic's need of a drink following the sniff of a cork.

My mind is set. I'm going to do it. And thinking I may as well be comfortable, I slip off my shoes and remove my cap. Switching the lamp on then off in quick succession, I settle on five. Light filters into the room and casts harsh shadows. A moment's pause and thankfully there's no presence, nothing more than a mean niff of foot odour floating from beneath the desk.

Yes, five is a good number.

Sally is not like the others. I'm certain of it. Glancing around the room I see that even her desk looks different. A snow globe holds in place a ream of paper, so neatly stacked that the separate sheets appear to be one white mass. I've seen snow globes before. They're stupid

pointless things: famous monuments such as Big Ben, or the Eiffel Tower – places of interest trapped in a perpetual winter. Sally's globe isn't pointless; it's beautiful, like her. This globe is ornamental. It encapsulates an angel who stands on her tiptoes throwing a kiss to the roof of the dome. Taking hold of the globe, I shake the snow to life and discover it's even more unusual than I first realised. The floating flecks are not white, they're silver, silver stars, hundreds of them, swirling around the angel, reflecting the lamp's glow in a myriad of colourful catch-lights.

*Wish upon a star, Keith.*

I nod to the voice in my head and place the star-globe in its original position, pressing it firmly, knowing that my touching of it has unsettled its stability. Did Sally choose the globe herself, I wonder, scanning the desk for more examples of her personality. A wire-mesh container holds a selection of pens, all but one of them purely functional: the clear plastic type with blue, black or red lids. What do they remind me of...?

Cockpits of fighter planes: same shape. Like those models—

*That I built from odds and ends.*

Again I nod to the voice, my own. Not the voice I have now, but that of a much younger self.

One of the pens is glaringly different. Purple, topped with a many-faceted-heart of plastic, it has an innocent girlish charm and reminds me of the rings in the machine next to the one that dispensed gobstoppers. Prizes for young children: plastic soldiers or bouncing balls for boys, and for the girls, bright plastic jewellery: necklaces, bracelets and rings, like...

*Like the one I—*

Memories present no problem for most people. Sometimes they do, I suppose, in that they might make a person melancholy, but that would likely be the extent of it. For me it's not so simple. Remembering is never a good thing. This recollection of a plastic ring has such baggage and comes with such force that I grit my teeth and tense my muscles against the expected pain. Triggers such as the pen lids, as innocuous as they may seem, delve deep and claw at things long ago buried. I found a plastic ring when collecting the cast-off prize-cases to use in my model making. Some boy had no doubt received it as his prize and thrown it in disgust.

I gave the ring to Heather Unwin just before she—

*Leave it be.*

I come to, feeling disorientated, sort of like I've gone missing for a moment – a bit like the altered recording of the corridor I suppose. This tends to happen, so I do my best to live in the present. When I have these episodes time moves on without my being aware. I once viewed a recording of the corridors to see what happens to me and wasn't too surprised to discover that I stood rigid like a statue. It happened to me on the high street once and I came back to reality to find a scattering of coins around my feet.

Some of the silver stars have still not settled. Seconds, likely fifteen at most, have elapsed. It was just a small episode, then. I know a memory will have brought it on, but I don't know what that memory was. I don't want to know. It's shelved for the moment, tucked away where it can do no harm. It's best if I leave it that way. Picking a scab will only make it bleed, and I've scars enough to show the error of that.

Lifting the star-globe, I take one sheet of paper and carefully place the angel back where she stood. Dead centre. A flurry of disturbed stars frisk around the angel's ankles as I watch the print of moisture left by my thumb evaporate from the surface. The angel looks up at me, seeming to blow me a kiss. The blank sheet stares back, as if daring me to ruin its pristine surface. I'm not going to write just yet, not until I have the perfect words.

When I finally press pen to paper its heart lights up with a pink glow and squeezes a smile from me. *Dear Sally*, I quickly write, wishing I wrote neater, knowing from years practising calligraphy that writing more slowly will make little difference. *Will you go for a drink with me? Keith*. I underline my name, and think of scribing a kiss, maybe capturing it with a heart. Instead I add in brackets (*the night security guard*). After scanning the words I fold the paper and on the outside, write: *To Sally*, in big letters.

The entire building is empty, and yet I feel the need to take a cautious look into the corridor before easing open the top drawer of Sally's desk.

*Bad boys need to be–*

I have to silence mother's voice quickly or risk another episode. Glaring into a dark recess I will her to be quiet. It doesn't matter which dark place receives the glare, they're all connected – all darkness is connected in some way or another. Five times in quick succession I switch the lamp off and then back on. It helps. I don't know why, but it does. The number has to be a prime though, usually five.

Prime numbers stand alone, and for that reason I have an affinity towards them. Two, for example, the smallest prime, can only be divided by itself and one, just like all other prime

numbers: 3, 5, 7, 11 and so on. They're solitary, like me. Numbers that aren't prime are like couples, or families, because they are made from individuals (primes) coming together. I think of a couple as being the number six, a composite made of the first two primes:  $2 \times 3 = 6$ . So a man and woman in a relationship have a value of six. You can't add them, that would make 5, and besides, two people combined creates something more than a sum of their parts. A family of three have the value of thirty:  $2 \times 3 \times 5 = 30$ . A family of four:  $2 \times 3 \times 5 \times 7 = 210$ . Seeing people this way helps me cope with being alone: being a solitary prime and not a factor of a larger unit is simpler. Imagine having a family of aunts, and uncles, and cousins, and nephews, and nieces, a real ants' nest, possibly adding to tens or even hundreds of people and see how complicated and scary the composite becomes.

A quick scan of this drawer's contents is enough. It contains pencils, a highlighter, a stapler, a calculator, paperclips and other such mundane stuff. This isn't what I was after. If I were to think of the items in this drawer as a set, I would title it: *things that could be found in anybody's drawer*.

The second drawer proves more interesting. I immediately title it: *things found in only Sally's drawer*. It has a promise of intimacy that fills me with expectation. A nettle-sting of excitement prickles my palms as I draw to one side the soft gloves and scarf she wore yesterday.

What to look at first?

I like the look of the mp3 player and finger its metallic peacock-blue casing before inserting the earpieces. I'm about to press the button that will display the list of available songs when I have a flash of inspiration – sheer genius actually – and change my mind. Instead of selecting the menu and choosing a random song I press play. Music floods my ears: a jangling mix of steel strings which cut through a resonating heart-beat-drum. A woman's voice curls into the music, and it warms my groin. Her voice sounds sensual: like warm caramel dribbling over ice-cream, melting smooth hollows, soothing, as she sings, *'I want you with me every move I make.'* To an alcoholic, I imagine this would be the inevitable tumbler of whisky following a sip from the opened bottle.

The music was paused, so these were the very last words she heard on this device. My connection to Sally feels even stronger now. No doubt her favourite song, sitting there, waiting, paused for me to find. It's as if Sally herself is singing the words – not merely singing them, but singing them to me.

Reading its label, I note that the scarf is made of angora. It has black and grey stripes that meld into each other with soft fuzzy edges. Angora... I recall reading that it's harvested from rabbits with long silky fur. I find this comforting. Taking it from the drawer, I stroke the soft nap against my cheek and imagine Sally walking towards me in a dress that matches the floating quality of the music. Barefoot, she places one foot directly in front of the other, a soft bounce in her step – rabbit-like – not quite allowing her heels to make contact with the ground. The slightest smile blossoms in the curve of her lips and sparkles in her eyes. She looks carefree, a happy little hippy-chick. She sits on the desk and leans towards me, her naked toes, delicate, placed on the chair either side of my legs. Heat from her skin radiates through the material of my trousers. Her dress, drawn into loose folds, drapes diaphanously from her exposed, slightly parted knees. The curve of her kneecap, like an upturned teardrop, looks smooth under her skin, its sharp outline softened with flesh.

I find such details fascinating. I imagine most people don't notice them. Writers draw on such details. They search for the oft overlooked, ferret out the unusual, discard the ordinary in their quest of the most sublime. I like the way writers describe things and try to think in that way myself. To simply think something along the lines of, her knees looked nice, would be doing someone as outstanding as Sally an injustice. Things of beauty have to be described in a poetic way, hence, an upturned teardrop. What do they feel like, those soft knees that women have? I envisage smoothing my thumb over the bone as my fingertips lightly probe the silken skin behind.

It's a sign, I determine: this music, the lyrics. It's a sign of possibility.

*Whoja–*

There she goes again, her jarring voice stealing into my thoughts, trying to ruin this enjoyable moment. I reach for the lamp, but mother's already silenced. Who do you think you are? That's what she'd started to say. Where was I? Signs. Yes. They're stacking up: first the smile and now the song. Just briefly, because I have the utmost respect for Sally, I dare to picture the private place hidden in the shade of her clothes.

*You can't hide under cardboard sheeting.* I brace against the expectant shudder of this voice from the past.

I don't like that memory, the memory of cardboard sheeting and all it hid. I don't want it. Quickly, teeth clenched, I skip the track back to the beginning. The music will force it away. It will push it away even better than the lamp.

I hope it will.

It does, and mother's sour voice sounds like it's falling into a fathomless pit.

Beautiful, beautiful music. Exquisite, voice-banishing music.

I don't know the tune, nor do I recognise the singer's voice. All the same, I adore it. Nothing has ever worked so well at drowning the voice of that... that bitch! There, I dared to think it. Without the music, I couldn't have done it. Usually I keep her at bay by having only pure thoughts, by not thinking about girls, and by concentrating on being good, by not giving in to my boyish wickedness. This music, though, this soothing music of Sally's, is like some kind of magic that's liberated me to think what I will.

A glance at the player's screen reveals the artist to be Leann Rimes. I've not heard of her. I know very little about music. It's never interested me much. The song is called *I want you with me*. Such perfect words. There could be none more suitable. As the track continues to play, my pulse quickens, my mouth becomes dry, my heart skips a dance in my chest and a myriad of imagined silver stars send colourful catch-lights into the darkest realms of my mind.

I should add that to my list of poetic writing.

When the song ends I immediately press the track selector, sending it back to the beginning, and shrink into the chair with my eyes closed. The singer purrs like a kitten, '*When I'm walking down the street on a quiet afternoon*', and I picture Sally walking down the street singing those very words, fascinating knees just visible below the hem of her dress. The sun is on her back. Her cheeks are flushed pink. A slight breeze disturbs her hair. Glimmers of sunlight dappled by swaying branches capture its brilliance with a gleam of copper filament. I turn my face into the chair, twisting at the waist, breathe deeply and swoon to the line: '*I hear our favourite song and it gets me in the mood*'.

Maybe there *is* someone out there for everyone. Maybe Sally is meant to be *my* someone. That hair of hers captured me first of all – six or seven inches past her shoulders, ruffling in the breeze, its mid-brown colour catching the sunlight. I don't know the colour of her eyes, which bothers me. Blue or green? I can't recall if I've even noticed.

I must have or why would I have to decide between blue and green?

It's not like me to miss such detail. I pride myself on it, noticing the small things, categorising them, placing them in sets, making lists. Her eyes are not dark. That's for certain. Nothing about Sally is dark. But are they blue or green? Maybe there are notes of both



colours. Both? Yes. Blue and green, rippling like the colours of a tropical ocean. Inviting. Like her lips: the cherry-gloss beauty of her smile that struck a blow to my chest as it radiated from her face, reflecting my own when I passed her on the steps to the building. Women never smile at me, but she did. She returned my smile, and the sky became a sizzle. For that reason, if for that reason alone, she must be my type. She has to be. Why else would she smile at me? Sally actually saw me. She actually noticed me. Chose me.

A beginning.

With it came the realisation of what loneliness truly feels like.

That smile was the first sentence of a story; the first piece of a jigsaw; the first item on a list; the first, most important piece of a picture not yet complete: a corner piece: a perfect place from which to start. First came the smile and now the song.

Up until that moment we had been perfect strangers.

That phrase rankles. I have difficulty attaching the word *perfect* to myself. For me it is not an appropriate word and it jars because I know it's untrue. It doesn't do to lie to oneself. Sally is perfect. For her the word fits... perfectly. Though I don't like to think so, strange suits me better. *There's none stranger than my Keith*, mother always used to tell people.

Strange and Perfect. Can they ever fit together? Stranger perfection. Perfect strangeness. Strangely perfect. Perfectly strange. The two words combined take a new meaning in my mind. They fit in an altogether new fashion: an unexpected, recently birthed collocation.

Intoxicated with imagined promise, I listen to the track eleven times before placing the player back in the drawer. Rummaging deeper, I find a paperback novel – *Bound to open on passages of smut* – and flick through the pages.

Mother *would* expect it to, wouldn't she? She *would* expect it to open on well-thumbed pages of smut. It doesn't, and I myself am not surprised. I'm pleased to show mother she was wrong. This proves that not all women other than her are coquettish, self-absorbed sluts. More pleasing still is the artful way in which I managed to ignore mother's acid tongue. With my mind a flood of sublime music, her words had no grip and slipped away like... like... like something particularly slippery.

Slugs, maybe? Yes. Slugs, slugs soaping in a sluice full of bleach.

Sally is not a slut. Sally is a good girl. Sally is an angel. Sally is perfect.

On the back cover it says: "*A must read for any woman searching for the meaning of true love.*"

Sign number three.

Perfect.

Add it to the list.

A corner piece and two well-defined edges make for an excellent start.

Where the book had been, sitting beneath it, as if specifically hidden, and I can see why she would be ashamed, sits a box of tampons – half empty. For some reason I can't quite fathom, I flip the lid and take one and place it in my pocket. Mother would disapprove. I suppose that's reason enough. A shudder grabs me as I recall her monthly ritual: rags hanging from a rope strung over the bathtub, dripping acrid-bleach into my bathing water. Rags far too soiled with shame to be dried outdoors in the wind. The memory doesn't bring on an episode, but it does sketch a sensation of spider's web on my cheek. It's nothing but a trace of memory on my skin, but as quickly as a thought I brush it away. I have to.

Smoothing away the recollection, rubbing the pains that come to my wrists, I drag my attention back to the drawer. From under the box of shame, its corner only just visible, a thin diary beckons. Yesterday's date has a reminder, written in the most exquisite handwriting, to collect photographs of a cousin's wedding. The words: *Remember to bring to work*, follows, in a different hand, *by order of Colleen. Ha Ha!!*

This unsettles me somewhat.

Replacing everything in exactly the same position, I close the drawer and determine to check at a later date to see if I can find the photographs. I put on my shoes and twist the cap to my head. *You'll grow into* Arthur had said, when I was new to the job. That was eleven years ago, and now, at the age of twenty-eight, it's still too big. Turning off the lamp three times, I glance at the window. From thirteen floors up – 12B, though I prefer the most feared of primes – the spread of the sleeping city takes on a strange, far-removed quality, as if viewed on a cinema screen. In the middle distance there is an expansive patch devoid of light: a large area of darkness enclosed by the park's boundary.

Sally lives just beyond the park – her home nestled on the edge of darkness.

She'll be in her bed, all warm and comfortable and safe. I can't see the house, but I know exactly where it sits. There's a light near the park-gate that's brighter than those lighting the pavement. A few days ago I walked from the gate to her house and counted the number of streetlights.

Sally has nothing to fear from shadows.

I look beyond her house and notice the occasional flash of emergency-blue, before wandering back to the streets below where traffic lights command empty junctions. The damp tarmac shows a distorted reflection, the colours muted as if the tarmac has absorbed and destroyed some of the brilliance.

The thought disturbs me, so I turn away from the window. When I shine the torchlight onto Sally's desk my note stares back. Torch off. Torch on. The writing, *To Sally*, shouts loudly in my mind. It's my own voice this time and I can't seem to shut it up.

Off. On.

TO SALLY, the voice in my head yells.

TO SALLY!!!

And through my voice, as if I've awakened her from the slumber of soft music, comes mother's.

*IDIOT*, she screams, laughing, before launching an abusive string of put-downs. *STUPID. FREAKING HEADCASE. Whojathinkyar?*

Off. On. Off. On.

Five now. It's not working. I could try seven, or eleven or thirteen. I could keep going to the thousandth prime of 7919, but I suspect it would make no difference.

'Shut up.' I blurt, but I can't drown her out. More and more foul words stream into my head. 'Shut up, shut up,' I cry, trying to be louder than her. I know what she wants; I know it's the only thing that will silence her. I try to hear the music, but I can't, it's gone. Lost to my mind already.

I have no choice other than to give in to her, so I pick up the note, screw it into a ball and stuff it in my pocket. This isn't the end though. One way or another, I will have Sally. She's under my skin now, like a splinter. It's only a small part of her, but small splinters are the most difficult to remove. The flesh sucks them deeper, holds onto them, and, refusing to let go, eventually absorbs all trace.

# C H A P T E R

## 2

Waking more readily than me, Steve keeps the alarm clock on his side of the bed and usually stops it at the first wail. “Steve!” I grumble. “The alarm!” I use a low, warning voice, clenching my eyes against the pulsating pain in my temples. “Steve!”

The alarm continues its cry. Why the hell doesn’t he turn it off? I fling out an arm, backhanding Steve’s side of the bed, and discover why. He’s not there, and it all rushes back to me then in a rapid flood of recollection. My fingers outstretched, head pounding, I waver around the vicinity of the rude noise, only to knock over the wine glass.

“SHIT!” The echo of the expletive pounds through my skull, cave-like amid the drip drip drip of abandoned wine. Finally, I find the elusive off button, flop back to the pillow, and just lie there looking at the ceiling painted orange by curtain-filtered streetlight.

Through the resulting silence whirs a milk float, the sound of tyre on tarmac suggesting a heavy fall of rain in the early hours. A little bird song accompanies the clink of bottles. I say a little, because most birds have already flown away to winter in warmer climes. My parents have flown away too: have done ever since I first left the nest. Five months in Cyprus, spanning every winter. Yes, I wanted my own place. Yes, I desired my own space, room to breathe, some distance from my parents, but I didn’t want this much.

“I still need you,” I whisper.

Right now I couldn’t be any further removed from my little-Sally-lying-awake mornings. My parents are not preparing breakfast in the kitchen, their voices muffled by ceilings and closed doors. They’re not singing along to the breakfast radio. There’s no rumbling boil of the kettle. No clatter of crockery. The heart of this house is silent. Those little-Sally-lying-awake mornings that were so comforting are now so long gone that they seem to have belonged to another. I felt safe, cared for, and would only come down when the smell of bacon became

too strong to resist, its sweet yet charred scent drawing me like a bear to a picnic. I miss it so much, I realise, as I lie here, listening, my lips pinching tighter with every drip that falls onto the recently new carpet – *Ivory-velvet-plush* – £38 a square metre.

When I reach for the bedside lamp an orchestra begins tuning-up in my head. A wash of pink-haze floods the room, and despite its muted quality the light rips through my pupils like razor wire. Screwing my eyes I listen to the drip, drip, of rich-red Barolo: a robust wine—according to the label – complex on the nose, with subtle notes of violet and pencil lead accenting the cherry and plum fruit. Its fragrance reminds me of the recent break to Florence. The street-music is absent, however, as are the art galleries and the man who took me there.

I sit up and slope against the faux-suede headboard.

*Faux?* I think. *Faux!* with a snipe of sarcasm.

*Faux!* meaning false. Fake. Manufacturers and retailers using the French to make their product sound fanciful. *Oh it's faux-suede madam*, the assistant had said. Why not just call it fake, I had replied, not quite meaning to, not realising I'd even spoken out loud until I noticed the look on the assistant's face.

I have no problem with what it is, but it isn't suede, so don't pretend that it is. At least be honest. Call it fake. False-suede. Like Steve: a false boyfriend. Faux boyfriend: not as reliable, luxurious or long lasting as the real thing. Looks good initially but soon wears out. Faux: not genuine – a fancy looking lie.

In the mirror, my eyes not yet fully functioning, I see only tempestuous hair around a grimacing expression as I command my lids, heavy with yesterday's makeup, to attention. On the dressing table, my perfumes, ornaments and brushes stand before a bevelled mirror; I have them arranged just as one would expect them to be in a shop display. And from the mirror, as I lean forward, my eyes coming to focus, stares back the image of what looks to be an Alice Cooper fan who's woken in the wrong room.

The cause of the breakup is scattered across the floor. The photographs. Tears begin to roll, adding to the mascara tracks on my cheeks. Torn into pieces, is the image that caused my fury and led to me kicking Steve out and downing two bottles of Barolo – well almost two. The carpet has absorbed the last half-glass of the second bottle. Ivory-velvet-plush with a splash of burgundy blush! *It's the latest trend madam, produced with only the finest vintage and guaranteed not to fade. Faux-spillarge. Lends a certain decadence to the room in which*

*it is fitted, therein demonstrating a kind of devil-may-care disregard for convention, no? I almost laugh.*

Almost.

“Shit!” I snap at the carpet, and, “shit, you shit,” to the section of the photograph that captured Steve’s image – him in the background, his lips melting into the bridesmaid’s face, his hand attached to her bottom, the pale blue satin reflecting light around his fingers demonstrating the depth of his grope.

I had been taking a photograph of my young nieces, innocently oblivious to Steve’s skulduggery in the back-of-the-room-shadows. Bad things happen in shadows, I think, before recollecting the fun I’ve had in them too.

It had been a good night. I’d envisaged my own wedding; I often do when attending someone else’s. My heart had actually fluttered while imagining the day Steve would ask me to marry him. How would he do it? Where? *This might come as a shock*, he had said, back in Florence the month before. This is it I’d thought, as he sat there, gently taking hold of my hand. *Don’t be mad*, he’d continued. Odd! I recalled thinking, as I carefully adjusted my posture into the perfect pose for accepting. *But, the thing is... I know we said we were going to be a bit more careful with money, but... the thing is, I’ve ordered a case of that Barolo we liked*. What! I’d yelled. *The guy said it would store well. Ten or even twenty years. A bargain at the price. An investment really.*

An investment!

Yes, I should have said, SO ARE DIAMONDS! I hadn’t even liked the Barolo. I found it rather heavy. Too rich. I would have preferred something more subtle, like a chianti. Or something stronger. Like, a DIAMOND. I’d fumed inside, but smiled accommodatingly, demurely, as I always did when he disappointed me.

A scratch at the door pulls me back from the bustling street in Florence to the present near empty silence of the house, back to the half-warm, half-empty bed. I swing my legs from the mattress, and for a moment I sit there, motionless, letting my toes sink into the plush pile of the carpet.

The scratch at the door becomes more demanding.

“Alright, Sukie,” I grumble with impatience before adding in a softer tone, “I’m coming.”

Placing a hand to the mattress, I steady myself before walking across the room and opening the door. Sukie, my parents’ West-highland terrier, rushes in. Her kinked tail

wagging eagerly, she scampers around the room, sniffing at the carpet while looking nervously up at the bed. “Go on Sukie,” I say, “sniff all you like, that nasty man has gone.”

A quick glance through the curtain shows the park in darkness. Through skeletal tree-fingers a fringe of light grey tinged blue indicates the approach of another new day, the first day of my new life as a single woman. I’ve had enough of fakes, I determine, no matter how good they may look, no matter how enticing their sales patter.