

# *The Castle of Stories*

*Matt Cain*



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'I loved it! Really heart-warming and joyful, but also so poignant. I cannot recommend this book highly enough'

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'Will put a smile on everyone's face . . . A great big hug of a book!'

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'You don't want to miss this. It's BEAUTIFUL'

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## About the Author



Matt Cain is a writer, broadcaster and leading commentator on LGBTQ+ issues.

He was Channel 4's first Culture Editor, Editor-In-Chief of *Attitude* magazine, has written for all the national newspapers, and has appeared on *BBC Breakfast*, *Good Morning Britain* and *Lorraine*. He's a patron of LGBTQ+ History Month, has received an honorary doctorate from Bolton University, and in 2025 was awarded an MBE for services to LGBTQ+ culture.

Matt's bestselling novels include *The Madonna Of Bolton*, *The Secret Life of Albert Entwistle* and *One Love*. *The Castle of Stories* is published in June 2026 as the first title from Pansy, the independent publisher he's set up with his husband Harry Glasstone, specialising in queer books by queer authors for all readers.

Born in Bury and brought up in Bolton, Matt now lives in London with his husband, Harry, and their dog, Teddy.

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**By Matt Cain**

*Shot Through the Heart*

*Nothing But Trouble*

*The Madonna of Bolton*

*The Secret Life of Albert Entwistle*

*Becoming Ted*

*One Love*

*Game On (A Quick Read)*

*The Castle of Stories*

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*For Chris Bollinghaus,  
the best man at my wedding  
and a better man than any I could invent*

## Prologue

It's beautiful. Much more beautiful than I imagined – or dared let myself imagine.

'Mr Webb,' says the lawyer in his strong Italian accent, 'I present you *il Castello Montemagno!*'

Signor Mancini gestures to a ruined castle perched on top of a little hill, a vineyard snaking along its slopes. At the bottom stands the sole remaining wall of a stone chapel, which is painted with a flaking mural of a man he tells us is *San Bartolomeo* – which I can only assume translates as Saint Bartholomew. We've already driven through an olive grove containing nearly fifty trees and Signor Mancini leads us around the side of a terracotta-tiled garage to reveal a handsome three-storey stone farmhouse, with a smaller cottage built onto the side. Both are framed by the magnificent, velvety green Apuan Alps, while in front of the property stands a paved patio covered by a pergola entwined with gnarly – and what look like very old – vines. We cross it and step onto a small lawn, which runs up to the ridge of a hill, along which have been planted bushes, shrubs and trees. From there, Signor Mancini shows us a spectacular view over the Freddana valley, the Ligurian Sea in the distance. I let out a breath.

'All of this now belongs to you!' Signor Mancini announces, waving his arm with an extravagant flourish.

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Theo gives my shoulder a squeeze. ‘Adam, I can’t believe it.’

Neither can I.

‘But you must believe it!’ protests Signor Mancini, a dark-haired, wiry man wearing a fitted navy suit and square spectacles in silver frames. ‘The *Castello* was the property of your great uncle Wilfred Treadwell and he named you his heir.’

‘But that’s just it,’ I say, ‘I never even met my uncle. I only vaguely knew he existed. Why did he leave it to me?’

The lawyer shrugs. ‘He did not have a wife or children so I do not think it is unusual.’

‘But why not leave it to friends?’ I lay my hand on the trunk of the vine. ‘I didn’t think he even knew about me.’

‘He was not in contact with your family?’ asks Signor Mancini.

‘No, there was some kind of disagreement.’ I tug at the collar of my polo shirt. ‘Well, it was more a rift, I suppose. But that was way before I was born. By the time I came along, nobody even talked about him. I didn’t know he lived in Italy till I got your email.’

I think back to the day that email arrived, just over a week ago. I’d been in the office, trying to feign interest in yet another meeting – one of the least enjoyable elements of my job as Head of Human Resources in a big insurance company. As the Chief Operating Officer ran through the latest list of employees who’d applied for voluntary redundancy, I spotted an email pop into my inbox from an Italian address. I couldn’t resist lowering my phone under the table and opening it. On reading the first line, I gave a gasp, which I quickly disguised as a coughing fit, excusing myself and ducking outside for some water. Within an hour, I’d

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called Signor Mancini – who confirmed I was the sole beneficiary of a house, eleventh-century castle and nearly fifty hectares of land just outside the village of Montemagno in the remote hills of Tuscany. I immediately followed this up with a call to my boyfriend, who was even more surprised than I was, as he'd never heard me mention a great uncle. As Theo's a headmaster and had just broken up for the Easter holidays, he suggested we fly out to Italy as soon as possible.

We landed in Pisa yesterday, picked up a hire car from the airport and drove to Lucca, which is where Signor Mancini had suggested we stay. It's the provincial capital, 14 kilometres from Montemagno, and the location of his office. By the time we'd checked into our hotel, it was early evening, but we still made time for a quick stroll around what we discovered to be a charming medieval city, before stumbling on the adorable Piazza dell'Anfiteatro. As it was warm, we sat at a table outside and shared one dish of pasta with wild boar and another of risotto with *porcini* mushrooms, accompanied by a bottle of local wine. We held hands as the sun went down and the lights in the square flickered into life. I told myself how lucky I was to have such a gorgeous man – a man who's over six foot tall, with fair hair, dazzling blue eyes and a physique that can still be described as athletic. It was such a magical evening, I convinced myself it had to be the start of something special – a special adventure for the two of us, together.

This morning we reported to Signor Mancini's office, handed over my identification documents, and listened to him read out a translation of the will. Then we followed his car up here – to the house where Wilfred Treadwell lived for over sixty years. Sixty years during which the rest of his

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family was in Manchester. But what did they fall out about in the first place? And how did he end up here?

‘I am sorry,’ Signor Mancini says, his forehead creasing. ‘It is always sad when families do not speak.’

‘Yeah, it is,’ I answer. I remember how long it’s been since I spoke to my dad. ‘Can we go inside?’

Signor Mancini takes out a set of keys and inserts a long iron one into a pair of wooden doors that have been painted turquoise. He slowly pushes them open and we step into a stone-floored, wood-beamed kitchen with larder – both of which are probably best described as basic. The patterned brown ceramic wall tiles look like they date back to the 1960s, the wooden units are rickety – with one of the cupboard doors missing and another hanging off – and what’s being used as a sink is just a slab of stone with its middle scooped out. Along the far wall is an open fireplace, the back of which has been stained black and over which hangs a brass cauldron that looks like it belongs to a witch. As a keen cook, I’m more struck by how little counter space there is. I also notice that there’s only a small, freestanding oven. Even so, I picture myself zipping around, preparing a risotto or a pasta sauce, the room filling with enticing aromas.

We climb up a stone staircase to the first floor, where we find not one but two lounges, the first of which is snug and cosy, the second double-ceilinged and more like a hall. Both of them are filled with battered old couches and dark wooden furniture, much of it tatty or dilapidated. The floors are paved with terracotta-coloured bricks and the walls of irregular-shaped stones have been left exposed, some of them stained with patches of damp. Although Wilfred only died a few months ago, the surfaces are already covered in dust and there are cobwebs trailing from light fittings. Between the

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lounches there's a study stuffed with old books – their spines faded and their pages yellowed – and a bathroom fitted with a suite that must once have been white but is now streaked with an orange almost as bright as the Aperol Spritz I drank last night. Not just that but the sink's cracked, the toilet's so old the chain has rusted, and the inside of the bath is spattered with animal droppings. It's a grim sight. But despite this, there's something romantic about the place, something I find enchanting.

But how does Theo feel about it? I turn to see him rushing around, flinging open doors and poking his head in and out of rooms.

'Bloody hell,' he booms. 'This place is amazing!'

Relief sloshes through me.

We follow Signor Mancini through a connecting door into the little two-storey cottage, which has its own – even more run-down and less user-friendly – bathroom and kitchenette. He directs us back into the main house and up another flight of stone stairs to the third floor, which has yet another big lounge, another grimy bathroom, and a couple more rooms that have been left completely empty.

'It's so weird that there are all these rooms but hardly any beds,' I comment.

'I'm sure we could get hold of some beds quite cheaply,' offers Theo. 'The kids could have a bedroom each.'

My stomach dips. I was only making an observation: the last thing I wanted was to suggest bringing Theo's children here. It's six months since he introduced me to them but only the youngest has shown me anything other than hostility – a hostility I'm desperate for Theo not to witness. I don't want him to think that in the long term we're only going to be incompatible.

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Signor Mancini cocks his head. 'I did not know you had children.'

'Yeah, three,' says Theo, breaking into a grin. 'They're 15, 13 and 8.'

'In Italy it is very unusual for a gay couple to have children,' the lawyer observes.

'Oh, they're not mine!' I butt in. 'We've only been going out for eighteen months.'

Signor Mancini scrunches up his forehead.

'Theo used to be married to a woman,' I explain. 'He came out as gay when they split up, two years ago.'

Theo looks uncomfortable.

I'm annoyed at myself: I need to remember he doesn't like sharing the personal details of his story, especially those that have been the source of intense emotions – that *continue* to be the source of intense emotions, emotions that I know torment him and keep him awake at night.

'Did you say the house is eleventh century?' I quickly toss in. 'Or is that just the castle?'

Signor Mancini smiles. 'Both. The rooms at that end are the oldest.' He points to the section furthest from the castle. 'That part was originally a tower. Sorry, I'm not sure how to say it in English: it was where soldiers watched for enemies.'

'So it was a lookout post?' says Theo.

'Yes, exactly! Then later it was extended and became a farmhouse. Over the years, more and more rooms were added.'

'That'll be why there are no corridors and the layout's a bit random,' Theo suggests.

'But why's it so run down?' I ask. 'Why haven't the bathrooms been modernised? Did my uncle have no money?'

Signor Mancini throws up his hands. 'I'm afraid I know

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very little about Mr Treadwell. But he did not leave any savings – just a few hundred euros in a regular bank account.'

I'm desperate to know more but there's no point in persisting. 'Do you know how he died?'

'Yes: Mr Treadwell died in his sleep. His neighbours found him – Signor and Signora Fiore. I understand they helped him with jobs on the house and land.'

'Well, it's the perfect way to die,' Theo remarks. 'Isn't that how we all want to go?'

I smile but feel a tug of sadness. I would like to die in my sleep but not on my own.

'Which was his room?' I ask the lawyer. 'Do you know?'

Signor Mancini nods and guides us downstairs. On the right he opens a creaky door into a square room that has plastered white walls, a large wooden wardrobe and chest of drawers, and a wrought-iron bed on which lies a bare mattress. Standing next to it I spot a framed photo of two men. It looks like it was taken in the 1970s, as one of them is wearing flared jeans and a paisley shirt with a wide collar. This man's probably around my age – in his mid-forties – but still has a boyish face and caramel coloured hair.

'Is this him?' I ask, picking up the photo. 'Is this Wilfred?'

Signor Mancini peers at it. 'I believe so, yes.'

'Let's have a look,' says Theo.

I hand it to him.

'You can see the family resemblance,' Theo comments. 'He's got the same dimples in his cheeks!'

I lean in to examine it. 'Oh, yeah.'

'Although he isn't as cute as you, Ads,' Theo says, handing back the frame.

I smile my thanks.

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‘And who’s the other bloke?’ I ask Signor Mancini. The second man is quite a bit older than Wilfred, with a bald head and five o’clock shadow, and is dressed more traditionally, in a crisp white shirt with beige chinos and brown leather shoes. The two men look stiff and uncomfortable next to each other. I wonder if they might have had some kind of business relationship. Except it looks like the picture was taken outside the house.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t know,’ confesses Signor Mancini. ‘There was no mention of this man in the will.’

I put the photo back on the nightstand and sit down on the mattress. The old coils squeak.

‘I must also show you the wine store,’ says Signor Mancini, exiting the room and trotting downstairs. ‘It occupies most of the ground floor.’

As Theo follows him, I remain sitting on the mattress and run my hands over its surface. So Wilfred died right here on this bed. I wonder what he was thinking before he went to sleep. Did he still think about his family?

I jog downstairs and follow the sound of Signor Mancini’s voice – and the smell of his strong aftershave – outside, then back into the house through another big door, entering a cavernous ground-floor chamber that looks like it hasn’t been used as a wine store for some time. Although there are a few empty kegs and barrels, it’s clearly been re-purposed as a dumping ground for all kinds of domestic items, such as broken tables and stools, tins of dried-up paint and varnish, and a storage heater that looks like it hasn’t worked for years. There’s also an enormous old mustard-yellow boiler, a washing machine that – thankfully – seems to be in working order, and various dustbins for rubbish and recycling. It smells damp, musty and a bit rank.

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The lawyer's phone pings and he lifts it out of his briefcase to read a message. 'I am sorry,' he states, 'I must return to Lucca. But I think you have seen most of the important things.'

I try not to look disappointed. 'But what about the castle?'

Signor Mancini leads us outside and around the wall of the chapel, where he points towards a crude path that zigzags up the side of the hill. 'That is the way. But I am afraid the castle is only a pile of stones.'

'I'd still like to see it,' I say. 'If you don't mind.'

'Not at all. But it is difficult to climb and I cannot do it like this.' He gestures to his smart suit and black leather shoes. 'If you like, I can leave you the keys and you two can enjoy more time here?'

We accept his offer and he takes us back to the house and shows us how to lock up.

'Please return the keys to my office in the morning,' he says. 'And we must start the process to get a *codice fiscale* – that is an Italian social security number. We must also deal with the issue of inheritance tax.'

Shit, I didn't think of that. I've never inherited anything before – I'm not from that kind of family, nor are any of my friends.

'What do you mean, inheritance tax?' I ask, aware that the pitch of my voice is rising. 'I'm not going to have to pay any money, am I?'

Signor Mancini rakes his fingers through his hair. 'Yes: in Italy everyone who inherits property over a certain value has to pay tax.'

'But how much?'

He runs his hand up and down the strap of his briefcase.

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'I do not know for sure but I have done a very rough calculation.' He tells me what it is.

I give a yelp. 'Where am I supposed to find that kind of money?'

He raises his shoulders. 'Most people who do not have the money choose to sell the property.'

'Sell it? But I haven't even finished looking at it!'

Theo puts his arm around me. 'Ads, let's not worry about that for now. I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to decide what to do before you have to pay.'

He thanks Signor Mancini and we shake hands. Once his car has driven up the gravelled lane and disappeared around the corner into the olive grove, Theo suggests opening a bottle of wine. 'Come on, I spotted some in the larder.'

'But can we just take it?' I ask, following him through the turquoise doors. 'None of this belongs to me yet. And I don't think I can afford to keep it!'

Theo reassures me it'll be fine, finds a bottle opener in a drawer he has to yank open, and rinses a couple of glasses under a tap that splutters out water. We fetch some chairs and sit on the patio, looking out over the valley.

As it's only April and the trees aren't yet in full leaf, the landscape contains patches of brown as well as green. And there are various greys in the stone of houses, farm buildings and churches, plus splashes of blue in the smattering of swimming pools. The blue of the sky is much lighter and broken up by a strip of little clouds, like puffs of smoke released from a stuttering engine. It's quiet, apart from the odd snatch of birdsong and the sound of the occasional car or motorbike driving through the valley.

'Cheers,' I say.

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‘Wait, how do you say that in Italian?’ asks Theo. ‘Is it *salute*?’

‘Something like that.’ I tap my glass against his. ‘*Salute!*’

‘To the Castello Montemagno!’

‘*Prego! Certo! Buonasera!*’ I say, affecting an over-the-top Italian accent. ‘Do we know any other Italian?’

‘*Mamma mia!*’ joins in Theo.

‘*Mamma mia!*’ I warble, even louder.

We both laugh.

I gaze out at the sea, which is nestled in the V between two mountains, the diminishing foothills of a third stretching behind it, as if wrapping it in an embrace. The sunlight is reflected on the sea’s surface, so it shimmers, almost winking at us.

‘It’s like something out of a fairytale,’ Theo says, rubbing stubble on his chin that – even though he’s about to turn 47 – is only just flecked with grey.

‘I know.’ I turn to face him. ‘And it’s got so much potential.’

‘Yeah but there are loads of jobs that need doing,’ he points out. ‘I’ve already spotted a few rotten window frames and missing roof tiles.’

I take a swig of my wine. ‘And there’s the damp.’

‘And a couple of leaks.’

I let out a long sigh.

The sun has started slipping down the sky. Soon it’ll be setting. When I was little – and the weather was half-decent, which wasn’t guaranteed in Manchester – I used to watch the sunset with my mum. She used to say it was our way of saying goodbye to the day. The two of us would sit on a wooden bench in our back garden and look out over the playing fields. But these have since been turned into a

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housing estate and Mum's been dead for over thirty years. Thirty-four to be exact: I was eleven at the time.

I stand up. 'You know what, if we're going to see the castle we should probably get up there – it'll be dark soon.'

Theo tips back what's left of his wine. 'Yeah, come on.'

We walk around the chapel, find the path and begin our climb. Well, Signor Mancini called it a climb but if he'd known the word 'scramble', I'm sure he'd have used that. The hill's steep and there's been no attempt to flatten the earth, so we have to cling onto stones, trunks and tree roots to haul ourselves up. When we finally reach the top, we stop to dust ourselves down then push through the thick overgrowth, taking care not to prick ourselves on the brambles. I'm glad my legs are covered with jeans but wish I was wearing long sleeves. By the time we emerge in a clearing, I've picked up several scratches on my arms.

The land in front of me is stepped and there are thin strips of wall visible between the different levels. But that seems to be all that remains of the castle – which is strange as looking up from below, the walls were several metres high. I realise that the rooms of the castle must have been filled in with earth, which would explain why they have so many bushes and trees growing out of them. I wonder if it would be possible to dig the earth out again and restore the castle's basic structure.

We find a spot on a stone wall, only half of which is intact: the other has fallen away. We sit down and go back to enjoying the view over the valley. It's pretty much the same as it was from outside the house but the higher vantage point makes it even more breathtaking. It's also much quieter up here, with none of the sounds of cars or motorbikes. And there's less birdsong – only the odd tweet.

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The sun's about to disappear behind the mountain and is spilling out rays of pumpkin, apricot and peach.

'I don't think I've ever been anywhere as beautiful,' I tell Theo.

'I know. And it's so romantic.' He takes hold of my hand. 'It makes me realise how much I love you, Adam.'

He moves in to kiss me on the lips.

'I love you too, Theo.' I snuggle up and rest my head on his shoulder.

Even though we've only been going out for eighteen months, I've already decided I want to spend the rest of my life with him. He's all I've ever wanted.

But I've always worried that the turmoil around Theo's divorce – plus the hostility from his kids – might one day get in the way, that it might lead him to the conclusion that the relationship is more trouble than it's worth, that all the negativity weighing down on him might overwhelm the love he says he feels.

I tell myself that we could come here to get away from the stress and negativity. This could be our happy place.

There must be some way of keeping it...

I sit up. 'I just thought, I could apply for voluntary redundancy. I'm sure they'd give it to me: if I went they could hire someone younger and cheaper. And you know the job doesn't make me happy. I've been bored of it for years.'

Theo blows out his cheeks. 'I've always said you're wasted in it. You could do with a change.'

'Well, now I've got one – or the chance of one.' I feel excitement taking hold. 'I've been in the job for more than ten years so I'm pretty sure I'd get a year's salary. If I threw in my savings, I'd probably have enough to pay the inheritance

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tax *and* do some basic renovations. Although we might have to chip in and do some of the work ourselves.'

Theo inches forward. 'That's OK. But what would happen afterwards? How would you earn a living?'

'I'd put it on the market as a holiday let.'

'Is there a demand for that?'

'I don't know but I imagine so – loads of people come here on holiday. And I think it's mainly posh people with money.'

Theo tilts his head so it catches the sun's rays, taking on a tinge of apricot. 'Would you manage it yourself?'

'I guess so.' I run my hands along the rough stone. 'But we wouldn't rent it out all the time: we'd keep a few weeks free so me and you could come here too.'

Theo waggles his eyebrows. 'I must admit, that does sound appealing.'

My heart's thumping. 'Why don't we come here in the summer and just get on with it? You've got the school holidays – we won't get that opportunity for another year.'

He frowns. 'Yeah but I'd still have work to do.'

'Well, I could get Wi-Fi installed and you could do it from here.' I slap out a rhythm on his thigh. 'What do you reckon?'

Theo chuckles. 'It does sound superb. But what about the kids?'

I feel a clutch of fear. 'Didn't you say Kate's taking them to the States?'

'Yeah, she's taking them to her sister Shona's. So I'll probably only have them for a week anyway.'

I release a breath. 'Well, you could always fly home for that week.'

'Or I could bring them here...'

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Shit.

I suddenly realise my plan could backfire. What if Theo finds out how much his kids hate me? I wouldn't be able to cover it up if we were together all the time. And then he might get scared. He might realise how difficult the relationship's going to be, long-term. He might look to the future and decide the relationship's impossible.

'But do you think they'd like it?' I attempt, meekly.

'Ads, how could anyone not like this?' His forehead puckers. 'Alright, they might moan a bit at first but I'm sure they'd fall in love with it in the end.'

I pause and watch the sun disappear behind the mountain.

I smile back at him. 'Go on, let's do it.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah. It's only a week. What could possibly go wrong?'

**Three months later**

# Chapter 1

‘Six weeks?’

We’re in my kitchen and Theo’s on the phone, talking to his ex-wife. He has her on speaker as he irons his work shirt for tomorrow. At the start of the conversation, I was happy to listen in, sitting at the island pretending to do my online Italian course. But then Kate told Theo she’s had a change of plan for the summer: her sister in Atlanta has found her an interior design job and it runs over the entire school holidays, so she won’t be able to take the children after all. She said they’ll have to come to Italy for the whole six weeks. At which point Theo stopped ironing and I spilled my glass of wine – thankfully not on my laptop. I stand up and grab some kitchen roll to wipe it up.

‘Kate, it’s not as if I don’t *want* to spend the summer with them,’ Theo says, resting the iron in the cradle. ‘You know I was gutted when you said I could only have them for one week. But all six? It changes our whole summer.’

‘Well, what do you want me to do about it?’ snaps Kate. ‘I can hardly dump them on Shona.’

I put the sodden kitchen roll in the bin as quietly as I can and tiptoe back to my seat.

‘I’m not suggesting that,’ protests Theo, un-plugging the iron. ‘But couldn’t we split the time?’

Kate huffs. ‘Theo, I can’t leave them with her for *three* weeks. She’s got a job, remember?’

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‘Oh yeah.’

He widens his eyes at me as if to say, ‘What can I do?’

I slosh more wine into my glass.

‘And before you ask,’ Kate steams on, ‘I’m not saying no to this job. I put my career on hold for years to have *our* children, to bring up *our* family. And you threw it back in my face when you walked out on us. So now I need to claw something back and build it up again. And I won’t let you stop me!’

Theo rubs the crease between his brows. ‘I understand, Kate. And I’m not trying to stop you. But this isn’t just my summer – it’s Adam’s too.’

Bad move, Theo!

Kate makes a sound as if she’s being strangled. ‘Right, so you’re not satisfied with making me put my career on hold for *you* – now you want me to do it for your *boyfriend*!’

I can just imagine the face she’s pulling as she says that word. I’ve only met Kate once – and that was briefly when she came to Theo’s flat to drop off the kids. He was on the phone and I had to answer the door. I have to admit, part of me was glad I had an excuse to see what she looked like in real life. And she was pretty, slim and stylish, with honey blonde hair cut in an asymmetrical bob. But she refused to say hello and looked at me as if a bird had just shat on my face.

‘That’s not what I’m saying, Kate,’ Theo insists.

‘That’s *exactly* what you’re saying!’ Kate fires back. ‘You know, you really are unbelievable. You want to dump your kids on *my sister* so you can go swanning off to some castle in Italy with your rich boyfriend!’

I want to point out I’m not rich. But if she finds out I’m listening, it’ll only make things worse.

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Thankfully, Theo does the job for me. ‘Kate, Adam’s not rich.’

She scoffs. ‘That’s what all rich people say.’

‘He grew up in a two-up two down.’

‘Well, he’s not living in a two-up two-down anymore. From what I hear, that place in Italy is enormous. And he can hardly be strapped for cash if he’s giving up his job.’

I feel a kick of anger but try not to let it take hold.

Theo lets out a sigh. ‘Kate, Adam’s taking redundancy.’

‘I’m not interested, Theo! The point is, he doesn’t need to work. And you’re not going to be working over the summer, so what’s the problem?’

Theo kneads his eyelids. ‘We’re supposed to be renovating a house. And I’m just not sure the kids will enjoy it – at least not for six weeks. And, you know, they were excited about America. They were excited about the pool.’

‘Oh stop pretending you’re thinking about the kids,’ Kate barks. ‘As usual, you’re just thinking about yourself. You know, you didn’t used to be so selfish. It’s like you’re a different person now you’re gay.’

‘He’s always been gay!’ I want to yell at her.

But Theo looks as if he’s been wounded: she’s hit him in his weak spot.

I move over and give his back a rub.

‘I suppose this is Adam’s doing, is it?’ Kate blasts on. ‘Is *he* putting you up to this?’

I take a step back.

‘Bloody hell, Kate,’ says Theo, ‘how can it be Adam’s doing? You’ve only just told me about it.’

There’s a beat. ‘Wait a minute, is he *listening*? Is that why you’re on speakerphone?’

Theo picks up the phone and trudges out of the room.

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I can't hold my anger back any longer. Theo stayed in the closet for years to protect his family. We've talked about this a lot so I know that when he was younger he was confused about his sexuality: he knew he was attracted to men but also thought he was attracted to women. When he slept with Kate, he felt good about himself. But he didn't realise this was because he desperately didn't want to be gay. By the time he'd worked that out, they were married with a baby – and he wanted to do the right thing. That's why he ended up sacrificing his own happiness and living a lie for years. Until he couldn't do it anymore. And I do understand that it must have been really difficult for Kate, but she's showed Theo no compassion – and still refuses to forgive him.

I fill my lungs and let out a long breath. I decide to empty the tumble dryer and start pairing the socks and piling them on the worktop.

The kitchen's my favourite room in the house, a house I moved into five years ago, when I became a first-time buyer at the age of forty, just a few years after finally paying off my student debt. It's a small townhouse in Prestwich, a short distance from Manchester city centre, and couldn't be more different to the property in Montemagno. First of all, it was a new build when I bought it so has no period features. There are three bedrooms – the smallest of which I use as an office – and one lounge. The kitchen is the biggest room, with a separate dining area, so it's perfect for hosting dinner parties – which is my favourite way to socialise.

As the pile of socks builds, my anger fades. Some of Theo's clothes have sneaked into the wash, which doesn't surprise me as he's spending three or four nights a week here. When he split with Kate, he couldn't afford to buy anywhere for himself – at least not anywhere big enough for the kids to

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stay – so he rents a place in Sale, not far from the family home in Altrincham. But it's characterless and not very comfortable, which is why he spends so much time here. Although I'm more than happy about that. After our trip to Italy, we've been closer than ever. And making the decision to spend the summer together has given us a shared short-term future. That is, as long as his ex-wife doesn't ruin it.

Theo comes back into the room, looking crestfallen. 'Ads, I'm so sorry.'

I leave the socks and go over to hug him. His hold is strong and I can feel the hairs on his forearms tickle the back of my neck.

'It's alright,' I reassure him. 'It's not your fault.'

We break out of the hug and sit at the island.

'No, but I know how much this means to you,' he says. 'I know how much you're giving up.'

I take a sip of my wine. 'It wouldn't be so bad if she'd given us more notice: we leave in ten days. The flights are going to be expensive.'

'Don't worry, I'll deal with that. And hire a bigger car.'

I force out a smile. I don't like to remind him that he hasn't got much money – ever since he gave in to pretty much all Kate's financial demands.

Theo spreads his hands on the table. 'But you know, maybe it's happening for a reason. I know it's going to be a challenge, but it could work out for the best.'

I can tell how desperately Theo's trying to convince himself as well as me. But I'm not going to argue. And I'm not going to criticise his kids. I can't: I hardly know them. After all these months, I've still only managed to establish a bond with Archie. He's eight and is into Marvel superheroes, WWF wrestlers and Top Trumps. We're not an obvious

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match but I like playing with his action figures – it’s surprisingly imaginative – and we’ve managed to find a set of Top Trumps called Great British Bakes that works for both of us. But the older two – Callum, who’s 15, and Mabel, who’s 13 – just refuse to engage with me. Their barriers are up the whole time. Last weekend, we took them to an Italian restaurant to try to get them excited about the holiday – which at the time we thought was only for a week. That’s when we told them about the house and castle, information they must have passed on to Kate. The irony is, when we showed them pictures, they didn’t seem remotely interested. They said the house looked boring, that the castle was just a load of rubble, and moaned that there was no swimming pool. No, I can’t see how this is going to work out for the best.

‘I suppose I was just looking forward to us having some romantic time together,’ I venture, diplomatically.

Theo sips his wine and swirls it around the glass. ‘I’m sure we can still do that. Callum’s older now and very responsible. He’s been babysitting for the other two for a while.’

Great, so we’ll get the odd evening out.

But I can’t say that. I force out another smile. ‘I’ll look forward to it.’

Theo inches his stool closer and gives me a serious expression. ‘Ads, I know it isn’t ideal. I know Callum and Mabel are still struggling with all the changes. But they’re great kids, I promise. They just need to get to know you. And this could be the perfect opportunity.’

I remember the state of the bathrooms, and the fact that the builders have told us the kitchen will be out of action for two weeks. I remember that the earliest I can get Wi-Fi installed is mid-August – which would have been fine when

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the kids were joining us at the end of the holidays but not when they'll be there from the last week of July. And I remember how hot it was the last time I was there, which was only June – and there's no air conditioning.

I have a premonition that sends a chill down my spine: the kids turn their dad against me and he dumps me – just like all my exes have in the past. All those exes who told me I was insecure, over-sensitive, *needy*... Wait a minute, is that what's happening now? Am I getting in my head, worrying needlessly and am going to end up scaring him off?

Whatever's going on, it's not as if I have any choice; if I want to spend the summer with Theo, I'll just have to accept his kids. And if I don't make an effort, that'll be a sure-fire way to lose him.

'You're right,' I manage, brightly. 'Let's see this as an opportunity. Let's make the most out of it!'

Although my expression is cheerful, I'm feeling dragged down by dread.

My dream summer is turning into a nightmare and it hasn't even started.

## Chapter 2

It's the day after my work leaving do but I'm not remotely hungover. We just went to a few bars around the corner from the office in Spinningfields. And there were several people leaving, two of them because of ill health, so the evening fell a bit flat. I ended up slipping away after a few hours, which suited me fine. Although I've been in that job for more than ten years, as soon as I made the decision to leave, in my head I moved on. I started looking forward to the future – and the next chapter of my life in Montemagno. This time next week, we'll be on the plane.

As I've listed my house on Airbnb and rented it out for pretty much the whole summer, I'm going from room to room packing up everything personal. My Auntie Julie's going to manage the lettings for me and has said I can leave a few boxes of belongings in her garage. So I'm taking down framed photos, clearing the bathroom of toiletries, and wrapping up breakable vases and ornaments. I don't really like the idea of strangers staying in my home but will have to get over it: if I'm paying two sets of bills for six weeks, I'll need the extra income.

Since Easter, I've been back to Italy twice, once with Theo during half-term, and once on my own in June. When my *codice fiscale* finally came through, I set up a bank account, with the help of Signor Mancini. Then we had to attach a value to the estate, work out the duty and complete a

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tax return. Only once this was done could he arrange for the deeds to the Castello to be transferred into my name. And I could start filling out – with the help of my translation app – several online forms to set up accounts for the utilities, plus the Italian equivalent of council tax.

Signor Mancini also introduced me to the Italian couple who live in the property closest to ours – Stefano and Luisa Fiore. They're the couple who found Wilfred dead in his bed, but I decided against bringing that up at our first meeting. Stefano's a farmer and Luisa a history teacher in the high school in the closest town of Camaiore – and, thankfully, she speaks excellent English. Not that we had much time to speak at all as they were on their way out when we called. Although we did have just enough time to learn that Stefano used to maintain the vineyard and olive grove for my uncle – keeping 75 per cent of the harvest for himself and giving 25 per cent to Wilfred – an arrangement I was happy to renew. And for Luisa to explain that she runs the local history society, following this up with a request to do a dig of the castle – something she's been trying to set up for years. I pointed out that the deeds to the property state the castle is protected by all kinds of regulations, but Luisa reassured me she'd be working with the staff from the local museum, who know all about this kind of thing. I gave my permission and they've set up a dig for the summer: as she's a teacher, our dates coincide perfectly.

Other than that, Theo and I bought three new beds from a branch of IKEA near Pisa airport. We also met with several builders and gathered their suggestions and quotes for the renovations. In the end, we hired a man called Giuseppe. Giving him the edge was the fact he's married to a British woman and so he speaks good English. But I've told him we

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don't want him to start until we're actually staying in the house, just in case anything goes wrong.

In the meantime, I've doubled my efforts to learn Italian – although I keep getting distracted so haven't made much progress. But everyone tells me the easiest way to learn is through immersion in everyday life so I expect that'll become my plan.

I've also researched the lettings market in Tuscany and it's more lucrative than I expected. Even without a pool, if the property is rented out for the full season I should be able to stay off work. If not, I'll have to pick up some contracts as a freelancer or find a part-time job. But I want to give myself the best chance of avoiding that – and that's one of the reasons I'm putting the house in Manchester on Airbnb.

I take down a photo of me and my best gay friends – who I call my sisters – on a wild singles' holiday to Gran Canaria. There's a selfie I took of me and Theo on Canal Street a month after we met, on the night he asked me to be his boyfriend. Then there's my favourite photo of my mum.

It was taken the summer before she died, when she and Dad took me on holiday to Newquay. I remember we'd just eaten our tea in the caravan when Mum insisted we all go outside to watch the sunset. Dad said she looked beautiful in the soft light and went back in to find his camera. In the photo she's smiling, relaxed and tanned, holding a glass of gin and tonic, sitting at a table on which stands her usual jar of Nivea handcream and packet of Silk Cut cigarettes, around her neck the silver S she wore for her name, Suzanne – an S she'd often run up and down the chain as she was talking. Mum's hair was naturally fair but she dyed it butter blonde and had just had it permed, which was the height of fashion in the late '80s.

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She was beautiful. I'm sure everyone thinks their mum's beautiful but I know mine was because everyone said it – not just Dad but shop assistants, bus drivers and strangers who'd stop her on the street. She loved the attention but would giggle and pretend to be embarrassed, then catch my eye and give me a wink.

I wrap the photo in old newspaper and slot it into the box. I've got lots to do. There's no time to be sentimental.

That evening, I take the boxes to Auntie Julie's. As an only child, I don't have much family and after Mum died, Auntie Julie brought me up. All these years later, we're still close.

Although they got on well, Mum and her only sister were very different. If Mum was known as a beauty – with an enviably slim figure – Julie was often called 'big-boned' or people would comment on her 'lovely personality'. Unlike Mum, Julie didn't dye her hair, which I always thought was the same shade of brown as the sugar we used in baking. And while Mum liked nothing more than getting dressed up to go out, Julie preferred to stay in wearing her slippers and an apron. She's always been happiest in the kitchen – and inspired my passion for cooking and baking.

When I arrive at the house, Julie's partner Jason is just leaving. He works nights as a security guard in the Trafford Centre, even though he's a talented carpenter and is always building things in the garage. But he also has a stutter and is shy around people he doesn't know – and this has held him back. As a tall, well-built black man, he's always managed to find work in security, which I worry could be a sign of racial stereotyping but he insists doesn't bother him. And, as he often points out, working in the Trafford Centre introduced

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him to Julie. She works in the shopping centre's HR department – which is another area in which she's influenced me. On Jason's first day – just over twenty years ago – he had to report to her to fill in some forms, something that made him nervous. But Julie immediately put him at ease, so much so that shortly afterwards he asked her out for a drink. Possibly because of his stutter, Jason had never married or had children. I wonder if Julie never married because she had to look after me.

I give Jason a hug and together we load the boxes into the garage. Once he's left for work, Julie puts the kettle on and makes us both a mug of tea, which we take through to the lounge. It's a cosy room, with lots of scatter cushions – all in Julie's favourite pink – plus several well-tended house plants and a vase of magenta roses. As this is the house where I moved to live just before my twelfth birthday, it still feels like home.

'So are you all set, chuck?' Julie asks, as she makes herself comfortable in her favourite armchair.

'Yeah, pretty much.' I sit on the sofa opposite. 'This thing with the kids has thrown a spanner in the works but I'm still excited about it.'

'Good.' She blows on her tea. 'You know, I still can't get over it. It still doesn't feel real.'

'You're telling me. A few months ago, I didn't even know where Wilfred lived and now I'm moving into his house.'

Julie arches an eyebrow. 'Wilf, I think they called him. I've just remembered. Or at least my mum and dad did. On the rare occasions they mentioned him.'

'That's interesting.' I stand up and walk over to the windowsill, where I pick up a photo of Julie's parents – my grandparents. I peer closer and examine the face of my

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grandma – Wilf’s sister – to see if she looks like him. I think there may be a resemblance.

‘So do you still have no idea why they fell out?’ I ask, sitting down again and pulling some of the cushions out from behind me.

Julie lifts a hand to tidy her hair, which is shorter than it used to be and much lighter. ‘I’m afraid not. I was four years younger than your mum, remember. Nobody told me anything: they treated me like a kid who needed protecting. That is, until I started working things out for myself...’ A shadow scudders across her face.

‘What are you talking about? Working out what for yourself?’

She has a sip of tea. ‘Nothing. I’ve told you, I don’t know anything about Wilf. I always just assumed he got some Italian girl in the family way.’

‘But the lawyer in Italy said he had no kids.’

Julie puts her head to one side. ‘Then maybe he just ran off with one. This was only a few years after the war, remember. And my granddad – his dad – wouldn’t have liked him seeing anyone from Italy. He fought the Italians and for a long time was a prisoner of war.’

‘Oh yeah, I didn’t make that connection.’ I have a gulp of tea. ‘The only thing is, the lawyer said Wilf wasn’t married. So if he did run off with an Italian girl, it can’t have lasted. In those days wouldn’t they have got married?’

‘Not if she was married in the first place.’

I turn my mug between my hands. ‘I didn’t think of that.’

Julie sits back and puts her feet up on the pouffe. ‘I remember once, when we were kids, your mum mentioned Wilf to our granddad. He went berserk and clipped her round the ear. Afterwards, Grandma took us to one side and

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said he didn't want to talk about Wilf as he found it too upsetting.'

I frown. 'So whatever happened, it must have been bad.'

'Especially as beforehand, Wilf was a bit of a golden boy. He was the first in our family to go to university and was an English teacher.' Julie takes a swig of tea and sets her mug on a pink coaster. 'That must have been a big deal for someone from our background. We lived in a council house, remember. My grandma and granddad – Wilf's mum and dad – left school at 14 and worked in the mill.'

Now I'm even more intrigued. 'So were you never tempted to look him up on social media?' I'm not sure why I'm asking that question – I've already looked him up several times and found nothing. I just told myself that he was 89 when he died so it was hardly surprising.

Julie screws up her nose. 'I'm sorry to say that by the time social media was a thing I hardly thought about him.'

'It's just such a mystery.'

'I know, chuck.' Julie folds her arms under her ample bust. 'But you've got a good chance of solving it. You've just inherited his house – and presumably all his stuff.'

I remember the wardrobes and drawers in Wilf's bedroom stuffed full of old clothes, his study stuffed full of bills and bank statements, and the wine store stuffed full of everything but wine. 'Honestly, there's loads of it,' I say. 'I wouldn't know where to start.'

'Well, maybe you should forget about Wilf and just enjoy what you've got,' says Julie. 'Maybe it's better not to dwell on the past. What good can it do? Start afresh. A big old house like that is going to be full of ghosts. Sweep them out and make it your own.'

## Personal note from Matt Cain

Thanks very much for reading!

To find out what Adam and Theo get up to next, please visit the link below to order your copy of the full version of *The Castle of Stories*.

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I can't wait to hear what you think!

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the name 'Matt Cain' written in a cursive, flowing style. The 'M' is large and loops around the 'a', and the 'Cain' is written in a similar cursive script below it.



*The Castle of Stories* by Matt Cain is the first book published by Pansy.

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