

Emma Cooper is a former teaching assistant, who lives in Shropshire with her partner and four children. She spends her spare time writing novels, drinking wine and watching box-sets with her partner of twenty-four years, who still makes her smile every day.

Emma has always wanted to be a writer – ever since childhood, she’s been inventing characters (her favourite being her imaginary friend ‘Boot’) and is thrilled that she now gets to use this imagination to bring to life all of her creations.

Praise for *The Songs of Us*

‘Quirky, clever and original, this will break your heart, but put it back together again’
Katie Fforde

‘A warm and touching novel about love and loss, and the healing power of family’
Woman and Home

‘Poignant and beautifully written’
Woman

‘[A] sweet, moving debut’
Good Housekeeping

‘This is a very special book indeed: funny, powerful, heart-wrenching and so poignant. I have laughed and cried and cried . . . it reminded me to hold my family close and tell each of them how much I love them’
Jo Thomas

‘*The Songs of Us* is an emotional rollercoaster of a book that made me laugh and cry in equal measures. A tragically beautiful story of love and loss, family and hope. Emma Cooper has been swiftly added to my list of authors to read’

Fiona Harper

Also by Emma Cooper

The Songs of Us

The First
Time I
Saw You



EMMA COOPER



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First published in Ebook in 2019 by Headline Review
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

First published in paperback in 2019 by Headline Review
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4722 6502 9

Typeset in Garamond MT by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.



HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

An Hachette UK Company
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

'Life is not about what you get, but what is taken from you. It's in the things we lose that we discover what we most treasure.'

– Adriana Trigiani – *The Shoemaker's Wife*

Chapter One

Sophie

At the beginning of our life, we see things differently. As a small child, I would look at the world and it was innocent. I could see the smile on my mother's face as she sang to me, see the creases in her skin as she smiled, see the love in her eyes as she kissed me goodnight. The scene before me had been clear and pure, but as we get older the image changes: like a hologram, you tilt the scene one way and you see a woman smiling, tilt it the other way and she is crying.

My damp feet pad into the hotel bedroom; the reflection in the mirror catches my attention and my mum stares back at me. It's happening a lot lately – the older I get, the more I look like her. I trace the shape of my face with my finger, the same shaped face, the same point at the tip of the chin, the same dimples either side of my mouth.

I know how I must have seemed to everyone when she died. Cold and indifferent. Someone at the trial said that my heart must have been made of stone; after all, how can someone not attend their mother's funeral? How could I not scream and shout, or cheer and whoop when her killer was put behind bars? I did cry, though. I did scream and shout, but then, after I hit the darkest waters in the deepest depths of grief, I suddenly realised that he was winning: he was still hurting us. So, I stopped. I closed the door on the what-ifs

and the whys and instead just accepted that it was: that's how I am still so close to Helen, that's how I still call her my sister.

My back turns on the mirror; I don't have time for this today. I have to be the woman that I have worked so hard to become, who no longer speaks with the Welsh accent of her childhood, who can walk into a company and exploit its faults; who lives a life without close friends because they take up too much time.

I slip into my underwear, the silk camisole sliding over my pale skin: the first layer of the armour. The white blouse eases off the hanger, expensive material eradicating my memories of cheap, supermarket-bought school shirts, sharp creases protecting my bare shoulders from the images of being teased at school; the buttons fastening firmly across my chest, enclosing my heart. The stockings glide over my legs, legs that walked me into the school that I hated, legs that were grazed as I tried to pull him off her. I step into the winter-white pencil skirt – zipping myself in – before sliding my feet into shoes that my mother would only have ever dreamed of, the heels like daggers, their soles the colour of blood.

I cover my freckles with concealer, cover my eyelashes with heavy mascara and apply a deep crimson lipstick. With each subtle layer, my armour becomes tougher; the natural waves of my hair are straightened and sprayed, my natural scent covered in a mist of perfume that I haven't acquired by rubbing my wrist on the inside of a magazine advertisement.

Before I leave the room, I reach for my calf-length yellow coat – a coat my teenage self would have shied away from; the colour too bold, the style too confrontational. I shrug on this final piece of my defence and turn back towards the mirror: my mother's reflection is gone.

My heels clip along Pennsylvania Avenue just west of the White House, my reflection in the towering buildings showing a confident woman in charge of her destiny. I stop and look up at the Greenlight regional office, but I don't enter the building. I'm here just to get a feel for the city, to visit Greenlight's competitors and to see what we're up against.

I never set out to do this job; I just fell into it. Funny phrase, 'fell into it'. How do we just fall into something? We don't fall, don't tumble like a gymnast with a CV in our hands, we don't jump off the end of a cliff and land in the cradled arms of an interviewer; we don't 'fall' in love, we just find ourselves part of something that we didn't know we were missing from in the first place.

My job found me, I suppose. I have always been good at maths, always been able to analyse problems and see a solution. It was a natural path for me to go into accounting. It suited me; I liked the solitary, irrefutable answers it gave me, until the small company that I worked for after university, gave me the wrong answers. Answers that revealed money being hidden in the private accounts of my employer. After I exposed this, I was approached by the agency – Sandwell Incorporated. It felt strange to be sought after, to have somebody asking me to work for them, and at first, I didn't think I could do it, but I soon found out that I could. I could work up to eighteen hours a day, analyse their data and find a gap, a thread; a hook to make it easy for us to help them – or if not, for us to make them an offer they couldn't refuse.

The afternoon is spent in meetings with other small loan firms. I ask difficult questions, find holes in their processes, manipulate conversations with smiles and understanding nods.

My throat is dry, my work for the day is done and so I find a café, take a seat outside, grateful to be breathing in the fresh air after an afternoon in stuffy offices. I'm confident

our new software is a strong enough tool for us to merge with Greenlight. It will put them head and shoulders above their competitors, and if they fight us, I know we will win.

Unfamiliar accents and unfamiliar smells surround me. I watch the couple on the opposite table; they aren't speaking a word to each other. She slurps her soup as he sits, devouring a giant pretzel, which he intermittently dips into sauce. They look past each other, that place just above the shoulder where life carries on even if you can't quite see it. How odd that they should both be watching life pass them by, but from opposing views. The man begins to cough – a rogue piece of pretzel, lodged where it shouldn't be. His companion is out of her chair, passing him water, rubbing his back, wiping away the tears that have formed around his eyes. The coughing stops, he pats her hand, she strokes his face and then sits back down. The world beyond their shoulders continuing.

I watch the concern on her face; the gratitude and love on his.

Nobody knows where I am.

This thought startles me. I haven't spoken to Helen for weeks; I've told work that I'm having an informal visit to our next project – the details of which are, at this moment, still very much under wraps. A few people know I'm in DC, but other than that, nobody knows that I'm here, sitting outside a restaurant; invisible to the lives around me just as I am invisible to the lives back home.

What if a photographer were to pass by this café today and take a photo – the scene frozen: not a sound, not a blink, not a breath. The woman leaning towards her soup; the man with the pretzel halfway to his face; a waitress looking out of the corner of her eyes at a blond businessman drinking beer and laughing loudly; the group of women on the pavement, smart shopping bags in mid-swing, their heads thrown

back in laughter . . . and me. A thirty-year-old English woman in a stylish white suit, sitting still with an almost cold cup of coffee in front of her. A click, a close of the shutter, the image captured as an advert for the café, perhaps? Perhaps the photographer would see the English woman in the centre of the frame and decide to take her out of it; she doesn't quite fit there. He crops the photo, cutting the scene in two, then drags the halves back together: the woman is gone. He sips his coffee, smiles at the screen at a job well done, pleased with the result: it's as if she was never there at all.

It is starting to rain. The colours that surround me are drenched in grey, as though the photographer decided on a black-and-white filter. People scurry away, their plates are discarded, their chairs scrape back, their glasses carried inside; but I remain still, watching the chaos. I pull on my yellow raincoat and open my green umbrella. If the photographer had stayed, he would have seen the English woman sitting in the middle of the scene . . . the yellow of her coat and the green of her umbrella no longer invisible. Because across the road, through the black-and-white filter, a man is looking straight at me.