

 *Silhouette*®

GUILTY

Anne Mather

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***“Why must I let go of you
before we can talk?”***

Jake's thumb moved almost reflexively against the fine network of veins on the inner side of her wrist, and Laura shuddered.

“I don't know what you think you're doing, Mr. Lombardi—”

“Jake,” he corrected, and then, on a harder note, “perhaps I'm just trying to find out what makes you tick, *Ms. Fox!*”

Laura expelled her breath in a rush. “I think—I think you're trying to make a fool of me, Mr. Lombardi,” she declared. “Perhaps it amuses you to make fun of older women, to play games behind Julie's back. Well, I don't like it. I may seem very old-fashioned to you, but that's the way I am. Now—if you don't mind—”

“Or even if I do, hmm?” he suggested, in a dangerously bland tone. “I'm not a boy, Laura. And you're not a grandmother—yet. Even if you do insist on acting like one.”

ANNE MATHER began her career by writing the kind of book she likes to read—romance. Married, with two children, this author from the north of England has become a favorite with readers of romance fiction the world over. Since her first novel was published in 1970, Anne Mather has written more than eighty romances, with over ninety million copies sold!

**ANNE
MATHER**

Guilty

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

This edition 1995

Guilty

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CHAPTER ONE

THE phone was ringing as Laura opened the door, and her heart sank. She had been anticipating kicking off her shoes, helping herself to a well-deserved drink, and running a nice deep bath in which to enjoy it. But all these pleasant prospects had to be put on hold while she answered the call. And as she could think of no reason why anyone should be calling her at this time of the evening, she was necessarily reticent.

After all, it was only twenty minutes since she had left the school, after a particularly arduous session with the parents of her fourteen-year-old students, and she had hoped to indulge herself for what was left of the evening. Mrs Forrest, who came in two days a week to keep the house in order, had, as she often did, left something simmering in the oven, and, although it was probably overcooked by now, the smell emanating from the kitchen was still very appetising. But someone, another parent perhaps, or a colleague—though that was less likely—or even her superior in the English department, had decreed otherwise, and she mentally squared her shoulders before going into the living-room and picking up the phone.

'Yes,' she said evenly, her low attractive voice no less sympathetic in spite of her feelings. 'Laura Fox speaking.'

'Mum?' Her daughter's voice instantly dispelled any trace of resignation in her attitude. 'Where've you been? I've been trying to reach you for hours!'

'Julie!' Laura's initial sense of relief at hearing her daughter's voice was quickly followed by concern. After all—she glanced at the slim gold watch on her wrist—it was almost ten o'clock. 'Is something wrong? Where are you? I thought you said you were going to New York this week.'

'I was.' But her daughter didn't sound concerned, and Laura sank down on to the arm of the sofa and tucked one foot behind the other. Experience had taught her that her

daughter's telephone calls—though infrequent—tended to be long, and Laura prepared herself for protracted explanations. 'I told Harry I couldn't go.'

'I see.'

Laura didn't. Not really. But it seemed a suitable reply. If Julie wanted to tell her why she should have chosen to turn down a proposedly lucrative opportunity to work in the United States she would do so. Laura knew her daughter well enough to know that asking too many questions could illicit an aggressive response. Ever since she was sixteen, and old enough to make her own decisions, Julie had resisted any efforts on her mother's part to try and offer her advice. Her favourite retort, if Laura had attempted to counsel her, was that Laura was in no position to criticise her plans, when she had made such a mess of her own life. And, although the barb was hardly justified, Laura was too sensitive about her own mistakes to carry the argument.

Now, however, her daughter was speaking again, and Laura forced herself to concentrate on what she was saying. Now was not the time to indulge in rueful recollection, and there was no denying that Julie had made a success of her career.

'So,' her daughter exclaimed impatiently, 'aren't you going to ask me why I've been trying to get in touch with you? Don't you want to know why I turned down Harry's offer?'

Laura stifled a sigh. 'Well—of course,' she said, looking longingly towards the sherry decanter residing on the bureau, just too far away to reach. 'But I assumed you were about to tell me.' A twinge of anxiety gripped her. 'What's happened? You're not ill, are you?'

'No.' Julie sounded scornful. 'I've never felt better. Is that the only reason you can think of why I should want to stay in London?'

Laura lifted her shoulders wearily. Her neck was aching from looking up at people, and her spine felt numb. It had been a long day, and she wasn't really in the mood to play twenty questions.

'Have you left the agency?' she asked carefully, conscious that Julie could throw a tantrum at the least provo-

cation, and unwilling to arouse her daughter's anger. 'Have you found a better job?'

'You could say that.' Evidently she had made the right response, and Julie's tone was considerably warmer. 'But I haven't left the agency. Not yet, anyway.'

'Oh.' Laura endeavoured to absorb the subtler connotations of this statement. 'So—it must be a man.'

There had been a lot of men during Julie's five-year sojourn in the capital, but this was the first time Laura had known her daughter give up a modelling contract for one of them.

'You got it.' Julie was apparently too eager to deliver her news to waste any more time playing games. 'It is a man. *The man!* I'm going to marry him, Mum. At least, I am if I have anything to do with it.'

Laura's lips parted. 'You're getting married!' She had never expected this. Julie had always maintained that marriage was not for her. Not after her mother's unhappy experience.

'Well, not yet,' Julie conceded swiftly. 'He hasn't asked me. But he will. I'll make sure of that. Only—well—he wants to meet you. And I wondered if we could come up for the weekend.'

'He wants to meet me?' Laura was surprised, and Julie didn't sound as if the proposition met with her approval either.

'Yes,' she said shortly. 'Silly, isn't it? But—well—I might as well tell you. He's not English. He's Italian. An Italian count, would you believe? Although he doesn't use the title these days. In any case, he's not an impoverished member of the Italian aristocracy. His family owns factories and things in Northern Italy, and he's very wealthy. What else?' Julie uttered an excited little laugh. 'I wouldn't be considering marrying him otherwise. No matter how sexy he is!'

Laura was stunned. 'But—Julie...' She licked her lips, as she endeavoured to find the right words to voice her feelings. 'I mean—why does he want to meet me? And—coming here. This is just a tiny cottage, Julie. Why, I only have *two* bedrooms!'

'So?' Julie sounded belligerent now. 'We'll only need one.'

'No.' Laura knew she was in danger of being accused of being prudish, but she couldn't help it. 'That is—if—if you come here, you and I will share my room.'

'Oh, all right.' Julie made a sound of impatience. 'I don't suppose Jake would want to sleep with me there anyway. After all, it's his idea that he introduce himself to you. That's apparently how they do things in his part of the world. Only I explained I didn't have a father.'

Julie's scornful words scraped a nerve, but Laura suppressed the urge to defend herself. It was an old argument, and Julie knew as well as her mother that she had had a father, just like anyone else. The fact that her parents had never been married was what she was referring to, a situation she had always blamed her mother for. She had maintained that Laura should have known that the man she had allowed to get her pregnant already had a wife, and no amount of justification on her mother's part could persuade her otherwise. Even though she knew Laura had been only sixteen at the time, while Keith Macfarlane had been considerably older, she had always stuck to the belief that Laura should have been more suspicious of a man who worked in Newcastle and spent most of his weekends in Edinburgh.

But Laura hadn't been like her daughter at that age. The only child of elderly parents, she had been both immature and naïve. A man like Keith Macfarlane, whom she had met at a party at a friend's house, had seemed both worldly-wise and sophisticated, and she had been flattered that someone so confident and assured should have found her so attractive. Besides, she had enjoyed a certain amount of kudos by having him pick her up from the sixth-form college, and for someone who hitherto had lived a fairly humdrum existence it had been exciting.

Of course, with hindsight, Laura could see how stupid she had been. She should have known that a man who liked women as much as Keith did was unlikely to have reached his thirtieth birthday without getting involved with someone else. But she had been young and reckless—and she had paid the price.

Looking back, she suspected Keith had never intended to get so heavily involved. Like her, he'd evidently enjoyed having a partner who was not in his own age-group, and at sixteen, Laura supposed, she had been quite attractive. She had always been tall, and in her teens she had carried more weight than she did now. In consequence, she had looked older, and probably more experienced, too, she acknowledged ruefully. So much so that Keith had expected her to know how to take care of herself, and it had come as quite a shock to him to discover she was still a virgin.

That was when their relationship had foundered. Keith had seen the dangers, and drawn back from them. Three weeks later he'd told her he had been transferred to Manchester, and she'd never heard from him again.

Tom Dalton, the father of Laura's best friend, at whose house she had first met Keith, eventually admitted the truth. He had worked with Keith, and he knew why he spent his weekends in Edinburgh. Laura wished he had seen fit to tell her sooner, but by then it was too late. Laura was pregnant, and for a while it seemed as if her whole life was ruined.

Naturally, she had dreaded telling her parents. Mr and Mrs Fox had never approved of her generation, and she was quite prepared for them to demand she get rid of the baby. But in that instance she was wrong. Instead of making it even harder for her, her father had suggested a simple solution. She should have the baby, and then go back to school. There was no point in wasting her education, and if she was going to have a child to support then she ought to ensure that she had a career to do it. And that was what she had done, leaving the baby with her mother during the day, while she'd studied for her A levels, and subsequently gained a place at the university.

It had not been an easy life, Laura recalled without rancour. Julie had not been an 'easy' baby, and when her parents had died in a car accident during her first year of teaching it had been hard. Coping with the pupils at an inner-city comprehensive during the day, and still finding the energy to cope with a fractious five-year-old at night. But Laura had managed, somehow, although at times she

was so tired that she'd wondered how she was going to go on.

Of course, much later, when Julie discovered the circumstances of her own birth, other complications had arisen. As a young girl, Julie had always resented the fact that she only had one parent, and as she grew older that resentment manifested itself in rows and tantrums that often escalated out of all proportion.

But Julie had one consolation. Her features, which as a child had been fairly ordinary, blossomed in her teens into real beauty. Not for Julie the horrors of puppy-fat and acne. Her skin was smooth and unblemished, her height unmarred by extra inches. Her hair, which she had inherited from her mother, was several shades darker than Laura's, a rich, burnished copper that flowed freely about her shoulders. She became the most popular girl in her class, and, although Laura worried that she might make the same mistakes she had made, Julie was much shrewder than she had ever been.

Laura hated to admit it, but when Julie left school before she was eighteen, and took herself off to London to work, she was almost relieved. The effort of sharing an apartment with someone who was totally self-absorbed and totally selfish had been quite a strain, and for months after Julie had gone Laura revelled in her new-found freedom.

And then, not wholly unexpectedly, Julie became famous. The secretarial job she had taken had been in a photographic agency, and not unnaturally someone had noticed how photogenic Julie was. Within months, her face began appearing on the covers of catalogues and magazines, and all the bitterness of the past was buried beneath the mask of her new sophistication.

Of course, Laura had been delighted for her. The guilt she had always felt at being the unwitting cause of Julie's illegitimacy was in some part relieved by her daughter's success, and it meant she could stop worrying about her finances, and buy herself the cottage in Northumberland she had always wanted. These days she lived in a small village about fifteen miles from the city, and only commuted to Newcastle to work.

Now, pushing the memories away, and ignoring her daughter's bitterness, Laura addressed herself to the present situation. 'Do I take it you plan to come up here tomorrow evening?' she asked, mentally assessing the contents of the freezer and finding them wanting. If Julie and this man, whoever he was, were coming to stay, she would have to do some shopping tomorrow lunchtime.

'If that won't put you out,' Julie agreed offhandedly, and Laura hoped she hadn't offended her by reminding her of the differences in their current lifestyles. Julie now owned a luxurious apartment in Knightsbridge, and her visits to Burnfoot were few and far between.

'Well, of course you won't be putting me out,' Laura assured her quickly, not wanting to get the weekend off to an uncertain start. 'Um—so who is this man? What's his name? Other than Jake, that is?'

'I've told you!' exclaimed Julie irritably. 'He's an Italian businessman. His family name is Lombardi. Jake's the eldest son.'

'I see.' So—Jake Lombardi, then, thought Laura nervously. Would that be short for Giovanni? Would Julie be living in Italy, after they were married?

'Anyway, you'll be able to meet him for yourself tomorrow,' declared Julie at last. 'We'll probably drive up in his Lamborghini. Personally I'd prefer to fly, but Jake says he wants to see something of the countryside. He's interested in history—old buildings; that sort of thing.'

'Is he?'

Laura was surprised. What little she had learned about her daughter's previous boyfriends had not led her to believe that Julie would be attracted to a man who cared about anything other than material possessions. But perhaps she was maturing after all, Laura thought hopefully. Was it too much to wish that Julie had learned there was more to life than the accumulation of wealth?

'So—we'll see you some time after five,' Julie finished swiftly. 'I can't stop now, Mum. We're on our way to a party. 'Bye!'

'G'bye.'

Laura made the automatic response, and she was still holding the phone when the line went dead. Shaking her

head, she replaced the receiver, and then sat looking at the instrument for a few blank moments, before getting up to pour herself the long-awaited glass of sherry.

Then, after taking a few experimental sips of the wine, she pulled herself together and walked through to the tiny kitchen at the back of the cottage. As she had expected, the casserole Mrs Forrest had left for her was a trifle overcooked. But, although the vegetables were soggy, the chicken was still edible, and, putting it down on the pine table, she went to get herself a plate. But all her actions were instinctive, and she had the sense of doing things at arm's length. The prospect of Julie's actually getting married, of settling down at last, had left her feeling somewhat off guard, and she knew it would take some getting used to.

Nevertheless, she was not displeased at the news. On the contrary, she hoped her daughter would find real happiness. And maybe Julie would learn to forgive her mother's mistakes, now that she loved someone herself. Or at least try to understand the ideals of an impressionable girl.

Friday was always a busy day for Laura. She had no free periods, and she usually spent her lunch-hour doing some of the paperwork that being assistant head of the English department demanded. It meant she could spend Saturday relaxing, before tackling the preparation she did on Sundays.

Consequently, when she went out to the car park to get into her small Ford, Mark Leith, her opposite number in the maths department, raised surprised eyebrows at this evident break with routine.

'Got a date?' he enquired, slamming the boot of his car, and tucking the box he had taken from it under his arm. 'Don't tell me you're two-timing me!'

Laura pulled a face at him. She and Mark had an on-off relationship that never progressed beyond the occasional date for dinner or the theatre. It was Laura's decision that their friendship should never become anything more than that, and Mark, who was in his early forties, and still lived with his mother, seemed to accept the situation. Laura guessed he preferred bachelorhood really, but now and then he attempted to assert his authority.

'I'm going shopping,' she replied now, opening the door of the car, and folding herself behind the wheel. 'Julie's coming for the weekend, and bringing a friend.'

'I see.' Mark walked across the tarmac to stand beside her window, and, suppressing a quite unwarranted sense of impatience, Laura wound it down. 'A girlfriend?'

'What?'

Laura wasn't really paying attention, and Mark's mouth turned down at the corners. 'The friend,' he reminded her pointedly. 'Is it a girlfriend?'

'Oh...' Laura put the key into the ignition, and looked up at him resignedly. 'No. No, as a matter of fact, it's a boyfriend. Well, a man, I suppose. She rang me last night, after I got home.'

'Really?' Mark arched his sandy brows again, and Laura felt her irritation return. 'Bit sudden, isn't it?'

Laura sighed, gripping the wheel with both hands. It was nothing to do with him really, and she found she resented his assumption that he could make remarks of that sort. It was probably her own fault, she thought wearily. Although she hadn't encouraged Mark's advances, she supposed she had let him think he had some influence in her life.

Now she forced a polite smile, and shrugged her slim shoulders. 'Oh—you know what young people are like!' she exclaimed dismissively. 'They don't need weeks to plan a trip. They just do it.'

'It's a bit hard on you though, isn't it?' Mark persisted, his chin jutting indignantly. 'I mean—you might have had other plans.'

Laura nearly said, 'Who? Me?' but she didn't think Mark would appreciate the irony. His sense of humour tended towards the unsubtle, and any effort on Laura's part to parody her own position would only meet with reproval. In consequence, she only shook her head, and leaned forward to start the engine.

'I was going to suggest we might try and get tickets for that revue at the Playhouse,' Mark added, as if to justify his aggravation. 'I've heard it's jolly good, and it finishes on Saturday.'

Laura squashed her own resentment, and managed a warmer expression. 'Oh, well,' she said, 'we'll have to catch

it some other time. And now I really must go, or I won't have time to get everything I want.'

Mark's mouth compressed. 'You could still——'

'No, I couldn't,' declared Laura firmly, and put the car into gear. 'I'll see you later.'

He was still standing looking after the car as Laura turned out of the car park, and lifted her hand in a reluctant farewell. Really, she thought, concentrating on the traffic on the West Road, there were times when Mark could be such a pain. Surely he could understand that as Julie paid so few visits to her mother Laura couldn't possibly desert her to go to the theatre with him? Besides, it wasn't as if Julie were making a convenience of her this time. She was bringing her future husband to meet her, and, even if it was more his suggestion than hers, it might presage a new closeness in her relationship with her daughter.

But Mark and Julie had never seen eye to eye. From the beginning, he had found her spoilt, and headstrong, and on the rare occasions when they had all been together Julie had gone out of her way to be objectionable to him. So far as she was concerned, Mark was a stuffed shirt, and her comments about his bachelor lifestyle wouldn't bear repeating.

The supermarket was heaving with people doing their weekend shopping, and Laura, who generally supplied her needs from the small store in Burnfoot, gritted her teeth as yet another mother with toddlers blocked her passage. 'Excuse me,' she said, trying to edge along the aisle, and was rewarded with a smear of ice lolly all along the sleeve of her anorak.

'Oh—sorry!' exclaimed a smiling matron, drawing her child's hand away, and examining the lolly for damage. 'These aisles are so narrow, aren't they?'

Laura glanced at the sticky red confection adorning her sleeve, and then gave a resigned shrug. There was no point in getting angry. 'Yes, very narrow,' she agreed, and, unable to prevent herself from smiling at the cheeky toddler, she moved on.

It was after one by the time she had loaded her purchases into her car, and striking half-past as she turned into the school car park. One or two stragglers were still sauntering