

Weekend

The perfect

Brilliant page-turners for summer escapism

AN ITALIAN SUMMER

★★★★★

by Fanny Blake

Orion, £8.99

SANDY'S life seems to have come to a standstill. In her 50s and widowed she is a successful and well-respected teacher. But she is beginning to feel threatened by her younger colleagues and fears she will be passed over for the position of deputy head.

Then Sandy's mother dies, leaving behind a sealed letter addressed to an unknown "Anna" in Naples, Italy. And Sandy is mystified.

As she reads the accompanying diary, written by her mother in the 1950s and recounting a visit to Italy, she cannot reconcile the voice of the carefree young girl with the mother she knew.

So on a whim Sandy signs up for an escorted tour to Rome, Naples and the Amalfi coast in the hope of tracking down Anna.

The mystery of Anna's identity gives the novel its momentum. The reader becomes absorbed by Sandy's mission to find her and she uncovers a few other secrets along the way.

Fanny Blake's writing is absorbing, intelligent and an absolute joy to read, transporting the reader to Italy with vivid descriptions of the country's irresistible sights, sounds and smells: the stifling heat of the summer, the noise and bustle of Rome and the lingering smell of garlic and herbs as the group shares meals. Her characters are drawn with warmth and humour, even the bad apples who add depth to the group dynamics and the plot.

Building to an unexpected and clever twist, this heart-warming and compelling novel is the perfect summer read. **AC**

ONE THOUSAND STARS AND YOU

★★★★★

by Isabelle Broom

Penguin, £7.99

ALICE always does her best to please everyone in her life. She never takes risks and while she secretly longs to throw caution to the wind, she knows just how much her boyfriend Richard and her very protective mother worry about her.

However, Alice will soon turn 30 and she cannot resist the prospect of a trip to Sri Lanka with her two best friends. For once she ignores the protests of Richard and her mother and sets off for one last adventure before settling down for ever.

Max has also travelled there with his good friend Jamal. He has been left disabled by a devastating injury and wants to prove to himself and to the rest of the world that he is still as fearless as he always was.

When Alice and her friends meet the pair, there is an instant spark and connection, all of them recognising something in the others that binds them together. They abandon their plans so they can spend the holiday together, discovering new and exciting places while learning more about each other.

As Alice and Max grow closer they find themselves opening up to



one another, revealing more about their innermost thoughts and feelings than ever before.

Isabelle Broom sweeps her readers away to an exotic destination with a vivid sense of place and wonderfully evocative descriptions.

One Thousand Stars And You is an irresistible love story with an eclectic and lovable cast of characters.

Unashamedly romantic and touching it reminds us all that love and relationships are never as straightforward as we would wish. **AC**

THE REST OF ME

★★★★★

by Katie Marsh

Hodder, £7.99

ALEX Fox is a mother, a wife and a high-flyer with a demanding job working for a charity. But her

husband Sam is suffering from a chronic kidney disease and in recent years she has juggled her hectic job with being his carer and looking after two young daughters.

She just about holds everything together by writing endless to-do lists.

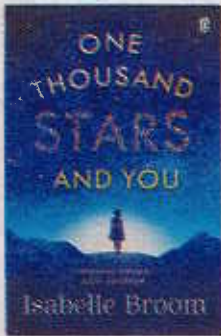
Now Alex has donated one of her kidneys to Sam and thankfully he is starting to recover. But her world is beginning to crumble around her.

Her new boss treats her with contempt and hostility and his attitude brings long-buried memories of her lonely, unhappy childhood back to the surface.

Little does she know that history is repeating itself with her youngest daughter experiencing similar misery. But as football-crazy Izzy struggles to cope with being an outsider, she is determined she will not tell Alex or Sam what she is going through. After all, they have enough to worry about.

The Rest Of Me is a sensitively and beautifully written story that is sure to touch every reader's heart.

As Izzy experiences the pain of rejection and the humiliation of being the girl whom no one wants at their party, Alex is reliving her almost identical childhood experiences.



holiday liaison

ITALIAN JOB: The Amalfi coast is the backdrop to Fanny Blake's *An Italian Summer*



Vividly written and packed with emotional punches *The Rest Of Me* is devastating yet uplifting. The characters are brilliantly crafted and their vulnerabilities and flaws beautifully observed. **AC**

THE PLUS ONE ★★★★★
by Sophia Money-Coutts
HQ, £12.99

WHEN Polly Spencer is sent to interview Jasper, the Marquess of Milton, it is fair to say her expectations are low.

As a writer on *Posh!* magazine, Polly is used to hobnobbing with the great and the good of British society. At the behest of her eccentric editor Peregrine she goes from one bonkers job to the next, interviewing a social-climbing sheik one minute and sneaking into an upper-crust sex party the next.

So when she is dispatched to Norfolk for the weekend to get the inside scoop on Jasper, a blue-blooded playboy famous for loving and leaving the women he dates, she does not expect to like him, let alone find him attractive.

But sparks fly and Polly, whose love life has been sparse over the past couple of years, is catapulted into a situation she had not bargained for.

Add to this the fact that she is trying to juggle her beloved mum's health problems and bridezilla demands from her soon-to-be-married best friend Lex and it is no surprise that Polly is not sure which way to turn.

Could Jasper be *The One*? Polly is not even sure he could be the plus one for Lex's wedding.

Sophia Money-Coutts' five years spent working at society bible *Tatler* clearly gave her plenty of inspiration for her debut novel.

While the plot does not offer much in the way of big surprises it is dished up with warmth and wit and there are plenty of laugh-out-loud moments.

As fun and fizzy as a chilled glass of prosecco and with a ringing

endorsement from the queen of bonkbusters herself, Jilly Cooper, this is the perfect read for your holiday. **MG**

THE LOST LETTERS OF WILLIAM WOOLF ★★★★★
by Helen Cullen
Michael Joseph, £12.99

WILLIAM WOOLF works as a letter detective in London's Dead Letters Depot where he and his colleagues do their utmost to trace the original intended recipients of letters and packages that have lost their address labels or have damaged and smudged addresses.

Surrounded by undelivered letters and packages William and colleagues endeavour to reunite lovers and to deliver news or gifts that have gone astray.

Years ago William took the job of letter detective as a temporary position to tide him over while he wrote a book. But he is still there and the book remains unfinished.

At the same time William can sense his distant, preoccupied wife Clare slipping away from him. The two fell deeply in love many years ago but these days she is focused on her work and impatient with him, making him feel like a disappointment to her.

Then William discovers a letter signed by a woman called Winter and addressed to My Great Love. His interest is piqued. The letter is passionate and beautifully written and as more letters from Winter arrive he begins to wonder whether he could be the "great love" Winter is writing to.

The reader follows William as he makes every attempt to track Winter down while his wife Clare tells her side of the story of their marriage.

The Lost Letters Of William Woolf is lyrical, warm and wise, an enchanting story of lost love, new love and reignited love, capturing the magic of writing and receiving letters. **AC**

ANNE CATER AND MERNIE GILMORE

