

No-one remembers your past.

But you do.

The Wife's

Secret

CAROLINE ENGLAND

Caroline England

**The Wife's Secret: A dark
psychological thriller
with a stunning twist**

«HarperCollins»

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The Wife's Secret: A dark psychological thriller with a stunning twist /
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Previously published as *Beneath the Skin* 'I was gripped immediately' KATERINA DIAMOND, author of *THE TEACHER* 'Gripping, immersive, horribly believable' SANJIDA KAY, author of *BONE BY BONE* Three women. Three secrets. Antonia is beautiful and happily married. Her life is perfect. So why does she hurt herself when nobody's watching? Sophie is witty, smart and married to the best-looking man in town. She likes a drink, but who doesn't? Olivia is pretending to be a happy wife and mother. But her secret could tear her family apart. Their lies start small, they always do. But if they don't watch out, the consequences will be deadly.

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CAROLINE ENGLAND

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Dedication

For my three gorgeous girls, Liz, Charl and Emily. And, of course, Jonathan. Love you all.

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

‘Antonia, Antonia. My name is Antonia.’

It’s been her name for many years. But sometimes, like tonight, she forgets.

Lying in the bath, she stares at the naked razor blade. The tiny distorted reflection of a girl gazes back. If she was brave, if she was very brave, she’d use it on her wrists, two deep final lines. Then she’d close her eyes and let this masquerade slip away.

She removes a curl of damp hair stuck to her cheek. The thought of all the fuss her death would create is unbearable. Even in death, the notion of being the centre of attention, the talk of the town, even for fifteen minutes, is excruciating.

And she knows the pull is there. She can feel it inside, somewhere deep and hidden. That tiny pulse of life, drawing her back from the overwhelming desire to disappear, to become something, somebody. To live, to really live, instead of hiding in this bathroom, this house.

Rocking her head from side to side, she tries to expel the memory of the unexpected telephone call this afternoon. She doesn’t want to think of it now. She doesn’t want to think about it ever.

She adjusts the position of the razor blade, watches the imprint of her fingers disappear and takes a deep breath before slowly slicing into the soft flesh of her arm. Closing her eyes, she smiles, a small sigh escaping her lips. There’s always a moment, a throb of expectation, then the sharp pain sets in, taking her back to a moment of acute pleasure. Crisp and clear: the still of a film. Antonia and Sophie, Sophie and Antonia, smiling, naked and drunk. But today it’s of a girl on a swing, laughing with sheer happiness, her daddy pushing her high into the clouds.

But of course that wasn’t her.

Seconds pass and the intensity of the moment ebbs away to a moderate stinging sensation. She opens her eyes, shame and disgust replacing the delirium. The bath water has cooled, the mirrors weep with condensation. Her dark nipples skim her legs as she leans forward to drain the tepid water, now tinted salmon by blood. She covers the wound with a flannel, then steps on to the bathmat and into the chill of the newly tiled bathroom.

A cutter, she thinks, remembering the pretty girl in the razor blade. Cutting to cope. To forget the past. To replace the pain inside her head with one she could see. To watch it seep away. But what of the woman? The one called Antonia? Cutting to feel. To stop the numbness, the isolation. To scar the perfection. She is addicted to the high.

Or perhaps she just wants to see what’s beneath her skin.

‘My Friday night treat,’ she mutters. She glances at the woman in the mirror, flawless and perfect, no history, no past. With a small sigh, she peels away the crimson-stained flannel to study her artwork, then she blows out the candles and reaches for a towel.

‘Where’s bloody Sami?’ David Stafford asks, looking at his watch. ‘With his flunkies, do you think? Mo and Salim and the rest of his ever-changing entourage?’ He scrapes back his chair across the slate floor as he stands. ‘Same again?’

Mike Turner glances down at his third pint: it’s hardly been touched and he already feels pissed. Bloody hell, David’s going for it tonight, he thinks. David’s breath has the acrid smell of an all-day session. But that isn’t particularly unusual.

He looks up and smiles. David appears as he always does. Tall, slightly overweight, tanned. Jeans with a stripy shirt tucked in. But something’s not quite right. His eyes, he decides. David’s eyes seem lifeless.

‘No, you go ahead,’ Mike replies. ‘I’m pacing myself. You’re a thirsty man tonight. Everything all right?’

‘It’s nothing that another pint won’t cure. Come on, Mikey, it’s the start of the weekend. I’ll get you one in.’

A busy September Friday night at the Royal Oak pub, composed of the usual mix of students and the long-standing faithful. Not a convenient venue for any of them now, but David, Mike and Sami have all lived in the leafy Withington area of South Manchester at some point in their lives. 'Probably the only thing we have in common,' Sami once joked, which wasn't entirely true.

David walks away, slightly unsteady, and dips his head to evade a low oak beam. He lifts his arm and wafts his empty pint glass above the heads of several people already waiting at the bar.

'Yep, I've still got the famous left foot.' Mike can hear the deep tone of David's voice from the bar despite the clamour of the heaving pub. 'I'll be there on Sunday as usual. Of course they'd be lost without me. Are you having another? I'll get you one in.'

David can never hide for long, the boom of his voice betrays him. The benefit and the curse of a private education, Mike has decided.

'Another two pints of your best, Mrs L. You're looking as beautiful as ever, might I say? Off to Barbados for Christmas as usual?'

Mike turns his glass in his hand, wondering if he'll finish this pint, let alone another. The conversation drifts around him. 'Mrs L' is *so* David. She's Misty to everyone else, flame-haired bar manager and wife of the affable and obese landlord, Seamus. For a moment he wonders whether Misty is her real name – it seems such a cliché for a woman who once was a model of some sort but whose battle with the booze is evident from the slur of her voice to the tremor of her expensively ringed fingers.

'So you *were* thirsty,' David says, back in his seat. Mike's pint glass is empty. 'Been off with the fairies again, Mikey?'

Mike shakes his head, laughs and wonders where he's been without the dog, the black dog of depression, christened when it first snuck up on him at sixteen.

A black dog, he thinks, not a stork.

'Probably,' he smiles, shaking the unwelcome thought away. 'How's Antonia?'

'Fine, she's fine,' David answers, glancing towards the bar, the sparkle back in his bright blue eyes. 'At home with a DVD and guacamole. Jennifer Aniston's my bet. Actually Mikey, I wanted to ask you. Her birthday's coming up and I want to buy her something special, maybe something different for a change. Got any ideas? What would you buy Olivia?'

Mike scratches his chin, still smooth from its second shave of the day. He laughs. 'You mean, what do you buy the woman who has everything?'

'He treats her like a bloody doll,' his wife Olivia often remarks, spot on as ever. The statement reminds him of a cardboard dolly set his sister was given one Christmas. She asked him to play, and despite his desire to try out his new bicycle in the biting Irish winter outside, he knelt beside her and joined in the game at the warm kitchen table, detaching the paper outfits from the booklet, the dresses, the hats, the scarves and the shoes, then dressing the doll in different designs for each season of the year.

'I'm serious, Mikey.' David interrupts his thoughts. 'What would you buy Olivia?'

Mike takes a swig of his beer, then wipes the rim of the glass with his thumb. David's assumption that their respective wives fall into any remotely similar category makes him smile to himself.

'Vain and vacant. The sort of woman I can't stand,' Olivia said of Antonia after meeting her for the first time at one of David and Antonia's dinner parties. 'But as it happens, she's nice and I like her, which is really annoying.'

So what would he buy Olivia? What had he bought her last time? Mike can't remember, probably something she'd asked for, but then they don't make a fuss of their own birthdays, preferring to concentrate on their two lovely girls.

And there it is: like Winston Churchill's dog, his own black dog of despair, bounding back into the pub and sitting by him. Close, comfortable and devastating. He hears his own voice not long after it happened, trying for rationality: 'I didn't even know him. It could have been so much worse.'

There are times when Mike wonders if he's spoken aloud, made his words to the dog public. For a moment he's forgotten the question, but he's saved from an answer; David has turned towards the door.

'What bloody time do you call this?' he bellows, standing up and gesticulating towards the bar. Mike looks at his watch. It's getting on for last orders but Sami Richards grins and shrugs, holding out his palms in a dismissively apologetic gesture. Elegant and handsome, he strolls past the Friday regulars clustered at the bar, the turned-up collar of his black leather jacket matching the sheen of his skin.

'Why does he always look as though he's walked off the page of a fucking magazine?' David says, a little too aggressively, as he turns back towards Mike. He knocks back his pint, ready to get in more drinks.

'Things to do, people to see,' Sami replies easily as David walks away. He takes off his jacket and leans over the table to shake Mike's hand, careful as always not to catch his crisp cuff on the spillages. 'Hey, man, I bumped into Pete on site the other day. Sends his regards. He mentioned the Boot Room.'

Mike smiles. Bloody hell, yes, the Boot Room. It's what they named Sami's tiny office when they were working together as trainee surveyors. A happy memory. Before responsibility, marriage, kids. They'd spent lunchtimes in there: football talk over sandwiches, crisps and Coke in their city-centre office building, no women allowed.

'Was he wearing his Liverpool cufflinks?'

'Didn't catch the cufflinks. But he's just bought a Porsche 911. Lucky sod.'

'Better dash out and buy one, Sami,' David says, arriving back at the table with three pints and a whisky chaser. The whisky looks like a double.

'Might just do that, David, my man. A call here and there. You never know. Are you still driving that tank? Nought to eighty in three minutes?'

Mike watches them quietly. He's never quite worked it out, their friendship, if that's what it is. Happy-go-lucky, water-off-a-duck's-back, is David. Except when it comes to Sami. The barbed comments, the occasional belligerence. He becomes a different person.

Perhaps they're a little too alike, he thinks. In their late thirties, both from wealthy families, successful in their careers. Married to childhood friends Sophie and Antonia. Both childless. But there the similarities end. David sits back and lets wealth and fortune fall into his lap, whereas Sami's a hunter, a person who never rests on his laurels; he's always searching for something bigger, something better.

From the day they first met fifteen years ago, Mike had detected Sami's restlessness. He changed cars and hairstyles like a chameleon, but then, he could afford to. Yet as Mike gazes at him now, he seems happier, more grounded than ever before. Perhaps he's reached a plateau in life, a level of contentment which can be sustained for longer than usual. He hopes so; he likes Sami very much. Sami's one of the good guys.

He shakes himself back to the conversation, picks up his glass of Guinness, murky and dark beneath its creamy facade, and feels the dog's gentle nudge at his side.

Antonia loves the silence of the countryside, the tranquility of her and David's large home. It still feels pure and new. Yet she allows the telephone beside the bed to ring, insistent, loud and shrill, without answering. It's late and she's sleepy, drifting contentedly in and out of the final chapter of *Wuthering Heights*, another Brontë novel she should have read as a child.

She knows who's fruitlessly holding on at the other end of the telephone. Most people call her on her mobile, but years ago she decided to hold back from giving the number to her mother. It made her feel guilty. It still makes her feel mean. But it helps her feel free of the past. Just a little.

CHAPTER TWO

'I think it's Monday so I'm coming over for a coffee,' Sophie says, sounding groggy. 'Put the kettle on.'

It's what Sophie always says when she phones. Not, 'Are you in, are you busy, is it all right?' She expects Antonia to be in whenever she chooses to turn up.

It slightly irritated Antonia at one time, but it doesn't bother her now. After all, she's invariably in, alone in her huge home in the Cheshire countryside, going through the motions of being a housewife, whatever that is. Though she supposes cleaning and cooking pretty much cover it now the builders and plumbers and decorators have left. There's the highlight of the supermarket, of course, but she and David shop for clothes and the house most weekends, so she's content to stay in and order food online.

'For God's sake, what's David bought you now?' Sophie often jibes, pulling a face at the latest rug or vase or item of clothing.

'It's expensive,' she replies, feeling the inevitable and disappointing stab of Sophie's disapproval.

'That doesn't make it tasteful, darling.'

'Well, I think it's nice of him,' she says, leaving the sentence hanging. And Antonia does think it's nice. She thinks her home and its contents are really lovely. It's just that it's all a little too much. David's a little too much.

'I do love you very much, my beautiful girl,' he said as he left the house for work this morning, his grey pinstripe suit looking slightly tight.

'I know,' she replied, laughing. 'I think you might have mentioned it once or twice this weekend. Get to work, you big softie.'

Once, long ago, Antonia counted the number of times David declared his love in just one carefree night and she wrote the number in her diary to record it forever. Exhilarating and exciting, she never expected to be loved so much. But now she worries why he repeats the words. She knows he adores the person she's created, the one she sees in her reflection. But not her mother's 'Little Chinue'. He's never met her.

Making for the stairs, she catches her face in the mirror. 'Where's the trophy wife, then?' They were Olivia Turner's words, whispered to her husband Mike at the first dinner party she and David hosted. She hadn't heard the expression before, and as she hung back in the shadows of the hallway, she didn't twig that Olivia meant her.

'I'm sorry,' Olivia said, her pale face colouring when Antonia emerged with a hesitant smile. 'You must be Antonia. I've heard you're very beautiful and you are.'

But in Antonia's mind, the word *beautiful* has never stuck.

She turns away from the mirror, hoping Olivia likes her better now. She seemed tense at the last dinner party. 'Well, being the bloody office heartthrob ...' she said pointedly to Mike several times. It seemed a strange thing to say. He looked embarrassed and perplexed. But perhaps they were all a little too drunk, Sophie in particular, who turned up with two bottles. Still, the party went well. Of course Helen said the usual, 'For goodness sake, Antonia, sit here and talk. I won't bite,' but lovely Charlie was there with his genial wink, 'Oh, but she does and it's ferocious. I wouldn't risk it.'

She's still brushing her long hair when Sophie arrives at White Gables, so doesn't have time to straighten it completely.

'You look gorgeous, darling,' Sophie says as she wafts past her and into the large bright kitchen. 'But then you always do.'

She turns and studies Antonia. 'Why don't you do me a favour, just for once, and have a slob-out day? Just one day when you don't brush your hair or apply any make-up. Don't even clean your teeth or change your underwear. Twenty-four hours of not being perfect. Would you do that, just for me?'

Sophie's startling green eyes are on hers just a little too long before she breaks the gaze. 'But then you'd still look gorgeous and smell of lily of the valley on freshly baked wholegrain, wouldn't you?' She picks up a magazine from a low glass table and starts to flick the pages. 'The curl's coming back in your hair, Toni. Why don't you leave it this time? I like it curly.'

Antonia turns away as the telephone starts to ring. They have the hair conversation too often and she isn't in the mood for Sophie's amateur psychoanalysis today. Sophie has always been there for her since childhood, good times and bad, but sometimes her familiarity can be claustrophobic. She rubs the back of her neck. Her strained weekend with an unusually quiet David has left her tense.

'Aren't you going to answer the telephone?' Sophie asks. 'If you won't, I will.'

'No, Sophie, leave it. It'll be a call centre. I don't want to encourage them.'

'Then unplug the bloody thing.'

The telephone stops ringing and Antonia lets out her breath. Perhaps she should unplug it. But what about her mum?

Sophie flings the magazine on to the white leather sofa, following it herself with a huge sigh. 'Sami says I broke every taboo at dinner with the Henleys on Saturday.'

'Let me guess, you asked them how much they earned as well as how much their house was worth?'

'Well, I always ask that! But apparently I talked about sex rather a lot and I asked Tim whether he'd ever been unfaithful.'

'Ouch!'

Sophie laughs. 'I didn't think anyone else could hear and we're all gagging to know if the rumours are true. But I didn't talk about religion or politics.'

'That's all right then.'

'At least I don't think so. I drank far, far too much.'

Antonia fills the kettle from the tap at the centre of the gleaming granite-topped island and then perches on a chrome and leather bar stool before swivelling to examine her only real friend. Sophie does look pretty rough today, older than her thirty-one years. Her skin is blotchy, there are dark circles under her eyes, she's wearing no make-up and her auburn hair is chaotically tied with an elastic band at the nape of her neck. She looks remarkably like Norma, her mum, but Antonia knows better than to say so.

'I look terrible, don't I?'

'Well ...' Antonia laughs. Sophie doesn't look her best, but with Sophie looks don't matter. Sometimes she looks plain, at other times dazzling, but however she appears, her personality shines through her brilliant eyes, entrancing all who come within her range.

'Well, what?' Sophie snaps.

'I was thinking about your butterfly and moth theory.'

'Bloody hell, you don't forget anything, do you? It wasn't meant as an insult. We were a winning team, Toni. You would attract the men with your butterfly beauty and I would keep them spellbound like moths around a light. Or something like that. Most people would prefer to be the butterfly!'

'I know. You ugly old moth, you.'

'Hmm. I guess some men prefer an easy win, while others prefer a bit of a challenge.'

Like Sami, Antonia thinks, still gazing at Sophie, and for a moment she drifts. Perhaps she is an easy win, but easy win or not, Sami wanted her first. It was her he wanted the night they all met. It was her he begged to go out with him, but she gave him to Sophie because Sophie wanted him so much.

'Antonia! My coffee. I'm waiting!'

Sophie is staring, her green eyes sharp. 'What are you smiling about? You really must stop that weird on another planet stuff you do. And turn off the radio, it's hurting my bloody head.'

'Our former lives,' Antonia replies, turning away and opening the white, high-gloss cupboards to take out a single pink-dotted teapot with a cup on top and a large mug with *Sophie's cappuccino*

written on it. She arranges Belgian rolled wafers on a long ceramic dish. 'Life before marriage, life before you decided we should go more upmarket.'

'Yup, we bagged a surveyor and a solicitor. Didn't we do well!' Sophie replies, throwing her head back and laughing her deep guttural laugh.

Antonia studies her for a moment before taking the lid off the teapot, giving it a stir and breathing in the smell of peppermint. 'Do you really think so?' she says as she offers Sophie the wafers.

'Sami said David had a skinful on Friday. "Unbelievably rat arsed" were his precise words. He wanted to have a fight over some harmless comment Sami made about you, apparently, which was pretty stupid when he could hardly walk,' Sophie says, ignoring Antonia's question. 'What was that all about then?'

'No idea. You probably know more than me.'

Antonia sweeps the crumbs into the sink as she contemplates last Friday night. She had been sound asleep and was awoken suddenly, the accusatory sound of the doorbell in the dead of night throwing her back to a time she tries hard to erase. She padded from her bedroom and down the limestone stairs, the sound of her heart loud in her ears, and there was Mike Turner peering through the peep hole while doing his best to hold David upright.

'Sorry, Antonia,' Mike said, and for a moment she gazed at him, her new name taking her by surprise, even after all these years. But then she rallied, shaking herself back to the dark cold night and the state of her husband.

Mike's eyes seemed watchful; she found she couldn't meet them. 'I know it's late but he's had a bit too much,' he said after a moment. 'And he couldn't find his keys. So I thought I'd better— Do you want me to help him upstairs?'

'I can get myself up my own fucking stairs.' David pulled himself upright and pushed Mike away. 'I could've found my way home too. Fuck off home and polish your halo, you fucking sanctimonious Irish prick.'

'Sorry, Mike,' she said, not knowing what else to say. Her heartbeat started to slow, but she felt panicky, that familiar metallic taste in her mouth.

Mike stood for a moment, looking unsteady on his feet and raking his hand through his dark messy hair. He opened his mouth, as though looking for the right words, but then turned away and lifted his hand. 'No problem, he won't remember in the morning. Taxi waiting. Night, Antonia. Take care.'

Antonia fleetingly wondered about David's surprising behaviour before climbing into bed beside his unconscious bulk. He could drink enormous quantities of booze, but was rarely drunk. She closed her eyes, hoping sleep would overcome the unsought memories jabbing at her mind. But just as she was finally drifting off, David woke up with a jerk. He stared at her face for what seemed like an age before starting to cry, loud, wretched sobs.

'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, please forgive me,' he wept, pushing his face against her breast like a small helpless child. But then he fell back to sleep as swiftly as he'd woken. Antonia lay there, her silk nightdress stuck to her chest from the tears and saliva, feeling nothing but a queer blankness, tinged with memories of disgust.

'You're doing it again, Toni. Stop!'

Sophie's words bring Antonia back to the muggy September Monday and to the scrutinising eyes of her friend. She feels the tightness in her stomach, the burn of her cheeks and that mild taste of panic. 'Ready for a top-up?' she asks, turning away.

'Less coffee and more cream this time. And different biscuits,' Sophie replies, picking up the television remote control, pointing it at the huge flatscreen on the wall and flicking through the shopping channels. Then, after a few moments, 'You know you'll tell me eventually.'

CHAPTER THREE

'Lunch calls. Are you ready to go?' David asks, putting his head around Charlie Proctor's office door and inhaling the familiar smell of old books and leather.

'Is it that time already? Thought the old juices were giving me gyp. Turns out it's just my stomach rumbling for lunch!'

Charlie peers at the ancient oak grandfather clock which dominates the room. He places his hands on each arm of the leather chair, hauls himself up and then steadies himself against the desk. He clears his throat and adjusts his tie before reaching for his overcoat and umbrella.

'Charlie, it isn't cold or raining and you're forty-six, not sixty!' David might say. But that wouldn't be sporting or, indeed, nice. Besides, Charlie is Charlie, a cliché of his own creation. He was wearing a paisley smoking jacket and an avuncular smile the day they first met at boarding school. The eleven-year-old David had been allocated Charlie's study. 'How do. Ten years ago you would have been my new fag. Shame they scrapped them,' Charlie said by way of greeting that morning and yet it still took David days to work out that Charlie was a pupil, albeit an eighteen-year-old sixth former, and not a benign schoolmaster.

But today David's thoughts are with Antonia and their weekend. He woke late on Saturday to an empty house, a certainty in his gut that Antonia had left him. He misbehaved on Friday night. He made a scene at the pub, though he couldn't recall the details. But worse than that he cried in her arms; that he could remember.

Charlie closes his office door with a thud. The 'Senior Partner' brass plate shakes. It's left over from the days when the position of senior partner was handed down from father to son and when it meant something. Now it's incongruous, like Charlie himself. None of the other partners went to a public school; they went to grammar school or, in the case of the young guns, to a state comprehensive. The flavour of the partnership these days is political correctness, accountability and liberalism. Gone are the days of getting on because of the 'old school tie'. Nepotism died with Charlie's old man. David has learned to adapt, to tone down the open vowels and to voice slightly left-wing opinions he doesn't believe in, but Charlie seems oblivious to it all. Or perhaps that's part of his act, his survival.

They stroll past the imposing eighteenth-century St Ann's church, past the al fresco diners huddling under chic canopies at its side, then continue through the cobbled alleyway to Sam's Chop House.

It's dark and quiet as usual on a Monday in Sam's. David brought Antonia here once, not long after they met. He wanted to show her off, his new stunning girlfriend, never dreaming that one day soon she'd say yes and become his wife. But she was withdrawn, she'd looked uncomfortable in the company of the older lunchtime lawyers and eventually asked if they could leave.

'Have you decided?'

David starts, his heart seeming to lurch out of place. Charlie is frowning at him, as though he can read his thoughts.

'Decided what?'

'What you're eating of course. The steak is always delicious here. But don't ask for rare. They don't bother cooking it at all. Are you all right, David? You're miles away.'

David glances at Charlie's face before dropping his gaze to the menu. His mind is in spasm. He's finding it difficult to focus. There are hugely worrying things to discuss, to confess, but it's all he can do not to put his head on the table and sleep. 'Yes, steak's a grand idea,' he says. He wonders if he'll manage to eat it. He worries whether he'll keep the food down. 'Shall we order? There's something I wanted to talk about. It's pretty—'

‘Let’s try a bottle of that rather nice Chianti. I’ve been stuck in the All England Reports this morning. No one reads case law any more, but they should, David. Back to basics, I say. Now at Cambridge ...’

David’s mind strays back to Antonia. Thank God, she came home. He didn’t ask where she’d been. Her absence from White Gables for so long was strange, but it didn’t matter. She was smiling; she was home.

‘Do you know what I fancy doing?’ she said, her cheek cold against his. ‘But we don’t have to if you don’t want to.’

He watches as the glossy red wine is poured and then lifts the glass to his lips. Charlie is still talking, but he can’t concentrate on anything but the wisps of chin hair he has omitted to shave, which are moving in time with his mouth.

‘And I told George Briggs what I thought. Bloody Queen’s Counsel. How they lord it over us mere solicitors. Waste of a Monday morning.’

David wasted his morning too. He sat in his sunlit office with the insurance file on his desk, staring at its cover for hours, but seeing nothing. He needed to work things out in his head, but thoughts of his wife, her fresh face and her laughter, filtered in with the rays through the blinds.

‘Been to the doctor ...’

He puts down his fork and looks at Charlie with surprise. Now that Charlie has mentioned it, he does seem pallid, his face puffy and sweaty.

‘Don’t say a word to Helen, it’s probably nothing. You know what these doctors are like, always protecting their own backs. That’s what insurance is for!’

Insurance, David thinks, loosening his tie. That’s nicely ironic.

‘My blood pressure and cholesterol are sky high, apparently. He’s given me some tablets, but he took an armful of blood for more tests and gave me a stern warning about lifestyle choices. You know the sort of rubbish they talk, less food, less alcohol, less stress. Hell, David, they’re the things I live for, so I’m not telling Helen and neither must you.’

David nods, but he’s meandered again. Ten-pin bowling, he’s thinking. He and Antonia went bowling on Saturday afternoon and then stayed in the complex to eat burger and fries. He’s nearly forty and he’d never been bowling before – and how Antonia had laughed. Like a girl. A beguiling girl he didn’t know.

‘And then there’s Rupert,’ Charlie continues, pouring more wine into David’s empty glass. ‘Helen thinks it’s normal to experiment, to misbehave, to be downright rude at times. But if anything is causing my blood pressure to reach boiling point, it’s him. We’ve got to meet the headmaster next weekend to convince the school why he shouldn’t be expelled before he sits his Michaelmas exams. My questions to him will be “Where the hell do the pupils get the drugs from? Why doesn’t the school do something about that?”’

David studies Charlie’s face. It has changed from a grey sweaty white to a livid red, all the way down to his thick neck, housed in a too-tight white collar.

Now is definitely not the time to confess, he thinks. It’ll just have to wait.

‘We’ve decided to go through with IVF again,’ Sophie says suddenly, pulling out the elastic band with some difficulty and then dragging her bitten nails through the thick mass of her hair.

Antonia raises her eyebrows but makes no comment. Nothing from Sophie’s lips surprises her any more and it’s best to allow her friend to spill it all out before making any remark. There are many occasions when Antonia is economical with the truth, or when she evades an answer by changing the subject, but Sophie can never hold anything in for long. As a child she was alarmingly honest about everything and everybody, her mum and her youngest brother targeted the most. ‘Your breath smells, Uncle Frank. That dress makes you look fat, Mum. You know Dad loves me more than you, don’t you, Harry? Does Grandpa have a foreskin?’ That was just family: girls and boys at school were easy meat. An older girl once cornered her in the corridor. ‘Do you know what a complete and utter cruel

bitch you are?' she asked. 'No I'm not,' Sophie replied fearlessly. 'I'm just honest. If you don't like it, get out of my way.'

Antonia never got out of Sophie's way. Sometimes she dearly wishes she had. 'You're mixed race, Antonia. Or black if you like. So why don't you just admit it? There's nothing wrong with it.' Honest or cruel, Antonia has yet to decide.

'Don't look at me like that, Toni,' she now commands. 'I know what you're thinking, but Sami wants us to try one last time. You know what he's like about family. Mother Martha had five kids and so she expects to have a hundred and twenty grandchildren or something. And if I'm up for all the prodding and poking, those bloody hormone injections ...'

Antonia takes a breath. The real reason for Sophie's infertility is the one secret she has managed to keep. It has to be said.

'Sophie, why would you want to go through it again when you're pretty sure it won't work? Why put yourself through it? You hate hospitals! And it's hardly fair to Sami, you're giving him false hope.'

'Oh shut up, Antonia.'

Sophie stands and paces, her hands on her hips and her eyes ferocious. 'You really take your saintliness to extremes at times. Is there a Saint Antonia? Is that why you chose the bloody stupid name? Besides, you're the one with the problem if you really think having a baby is a fate worse than death. Most normal women want a child, it's what nature expects and I'm no different. You're the bloody freak, not me.'

It's ridiculous, Antonia knows, at thirty years old, but on these occasions she still wants to cry. Instead she stands, walks to the sink and turns on the tap. Sophie will never change; her best line of defence is to attack and the assault is invariably below the belt. But when it comes to babies, she doesn't care whether Sophie thinks she's unnatural or odd. She doesn't have and never has had any desire to procreate. There are enough unhappy people in the world without adding to their number. David understands. She told him from the start she didn't want children and he accepted it at face value, saying it was fine and that he'd have the snip. He's never broached the subject again and never asked why.

David, oh, David. The thought of Friday night catches her breath again. He accepts her as she is, he doesn't ask questions, analyse or dig too deep like her former boyfriends. He doesn't want to control her, thank God. He's steady and reliable. Isn't he?

She feels Sophie's breath on her neck, then a hand on her back and the inevitable flutter somewhere deep in her stomach.

'I fancy a drink, Toni. Shall we open a bottle?'

Sophie kisses her cheek, then steps away to the glass-fronted wine fridge, crouching down to select a bottle.

'This looks expensive,' she says when she stands. 'Come on, darling, don't sulk, who knows what might happen?' She places her chin on Antonia's shoulder and softly blows a curl from her face. 'You will be there to hold my hand, won't you? All the way?'

'You know I will,' Antonia replies.

There's a tremor in David's large hand which he tries to ignore as he struggles to insert the tiny key into the lock of his bottom desk drawer. He extracts the yellow file and stares at its cover where his secretary has written 'Indemnity and Claims' in red marker pen.

He blows out his cheeks. Red for danger.

He glances at his closed office door before taking a deep breath. Then he opens the file quickly, like ripping off a plaster. As though that will make a difference. As though speed will alter the fact that the renewal date for the firm's insurance has passed, undeniably passed, and he hasn't done anything about it.

'Goodness me, the renewal date has passed. The practice has no insurance in place. If there are any claims for poor legal advice or mistakes, the partners will be personally liable! How did that

happen?' He tries feigning surprise to himself, but it doesn't wash, even in his mildly inebriated state. As the partner in charge of indemnity and claims, he's always known about the date, roughly known, at least. But he's put it on the furthestmost back burner of his mind. Because. Because he knows.

He'd opened a savings account with a great rate of interest a year back. A deposit account for the firm and for the partners, but with himself as the sole signatory.

'What shall we call it, David?' the bank manager had asked over a long lunch.

'Insurance,' he replied.

'But of course!' the manager laughed.

He paid in the huge premium up front. It was a great plan. There'd be less whingeing about the cost of ever-increasing insurance premiums from the partners when renewal came. A nice little nest egg of interest to put towards the following year's premium, too. It made sense. Charlie agreed. 'I knew you were the man for the job, David. Excellent work.' The other partners concurred and he enjoyed the rare praise.

He stares at the renewal notice in the file and then circles the premium figure with a pencil, whistling softly. Nearly a hundred thousand pounds and it has to be paid now. In a litigious society the firm must be covered for negligence claims. Claims for cock-ups, in short. He nods, his mind racing with thoughts of what to do. Cheque lost in the post? Yes. A backdated letter for the file? Absolutely. But the thing is to get it paid. PDQ. But there's a problem, a huge heart-thrashing problem. Even though he hasn't been able to bring himself to look at the 'insurance account', he knows without a doubt the money isn't there.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Manchester rain hammers against the roof of Mike's car. The traffic is at a standstill, Princess Parkway chock-a-block, with no sign of movement. He looks to his left. The queue at the drive-through McDonald's is immobile with morose folk seeking their hunger-fix. Once, years ago, he and Olivia vowed their children would never eat junk. They wanted to do nothing but right for their girls. Mike sighs: how time and experience changes everything.

There must have been an accident, he thinks, as he strains to see beyond the line of traffic in front of him. No habitual impulse of a prayer pops into his head, he forced those thoughts out long ago. His Catholicism, drummed in during childhood, had once burned deep, creating a wound he thought would never heal. That profound belief or fear or superstition, or whatever it is, that there is a god. No, not a god, but The God. But that scar has healed; when he needs his faith, he finds it has gone.

He switches from Radio 4, to 2, to Capital, listens for a moment to Rihanna and thinks of his girls dancing, giggling, showing their pretty white teeth. 'Look, Daddy. Watch us dance!' It's a happy thought, he knows this, but he's lost the feeling of happiness, its sense, its touch.

He turns off the radio and watches the rain splatter and spread against the windscreen. It's making shapes he's never noticed before. Interesting, he thinks, but the ruse doesn't work for long; his bleak thoughts are too dominant, too powerful for Rihanna, or the rain, or even his lovely girls.

Shaking himself, he tries to resurface, to focus on the traffic tailback and the noise of the vehicles happily jam-free on the flyover ahead. He looks at his watch, knowing that he should text Olivia, but wondering what he should say. 'Stuck in traffic' is the obvious choice, but he can predict the reply, 'How long will you be?'

How long will this go on? The gloom, the pestering, dark thoughts. He had them before as a teenager, but they were intermittent then, somehow controlled by the guilt of the priest's regular Sunday words, 'There's always someone worse off.' But this time it's been months and he bores himself. It's truly pathetic. Always the same, it's the little things that pull him down. He can go for hours without giving it a second thought and then something will happen to make the black dog bound in. Today it was an email circulating around the office inviting the staff to contribute to a present for one of the associates, the newly proud father of a healthy son. An everyday office occurrence, but enough to throw him.

A knock on his window makes him start. His mobile is still in his hand, text unsent.

'Are you all right, mate? Need a push or has the car just stalled?'

Mike notices the blare of horns behind him and the empty road ahead. It's still raining.

'Yeah, just stalled. Sorry.'

As he slips the car into gear, the black dog lurches forward and then settles in for the ride.

'Get up to your bedroom, now!' Olivia bellows as Mike walks through the front door of their semi-detached Victorian home. He shakes the rain from his hair and puts his briefcase down in its usual place by the stairs.

'What's going on?' he asks, looking from mother to daughter. It's unlike Olivia to scream at Rachel. Or at anyone. What is it that she always says when they watch *Question Time*? 'He's shouting. Ha! He's lost control of the conversation.'

'I will not have any daughter of mine speak to me like that,' Olivia replies breathlessly.

Rachel spins round on the stairs, the knuckles of her slim hand white against the stained wood of the banister. 'Well, it's true. You tell us to be honest. You've been a cow for weeks, Mum. We can't do anything right. We might as well not exist for all you bloody well care.'

'Rachel, go to your bedroom,' he says quietly. 'Your mum's right. Don't you ever speak to her like that again.'

Rachel stares at him, her face pained with reproach. 'I knew you'd take her side,' she says, before running up the rest of the stairs.

He stands for a moment, the slam of Rachel's bedroom door loud in his ears. He shakes off his jacket and looks at Olivia. She hasn't moved and her face is set. He's never seen her so angry. 'It's raining,' he murmurs, looking for time, wondering how best to handle such an unexpected situation.

'What's going on, Olivia? This isn't like you two.' He reaches out, placing his hands at the top of Olivia's arms to draw her in. She's trembling. He can feel the anger rising from her as she pushes him away, the flat of her hand firm against his damp shirt.

'And how would you know?'

He stands and stares. Is Olivia laughing? He isn't sure. He hardly recognises her.

'How would you know?' she repeats. 'Tell me, Mike. You're never here. And even when you are here you're in some unreachable place. You don't notice me, you don't notice the girls.'

'That isn't true.' He sees his daughters in his mind, dancing to Rihanna. 'Of course I notice you all. Come on, Olivia, this isn't like—'

'When was the last time you gave me a compliment?' Olivia isn't laughing, she's crying, but the soft contours of her pale face are gone. 'When was the last time you bought me a box of chocolates or some flowers? I had my hair cut last week and you didn't even notice.'

He gazes at her hair. It's blonde, elfin short; it suits her petite face and her frame. 'I did notice. Of course I noticed. It looks lovely. But flowers, chocolates? Come on, Olivia, you don't do chocolates.'

'Fuck the chocolates, then. Fuck everything. You just continue to take it for granted that I'm going to be here, the little wife with a smiling face when you come home, your bloody dinner waiting on the table.'

He catches his breath. This is Olivia, calm, capable, witty Olivia; Olivia who takes everything in her stride. She's never been and will never be 'the little wife'. She's clever, opinionated and strong. He stares again, aware that life has shifted, that the world has somehow moved without him noticing.

'What do I do on a Tuesday, Mike? You never ask me how I am, where I've been, what I've done. I could be anywhere, with anyone. You're just so used to me I've become invisible.'

'That isn't true. Really. You never said,' he replies quietly.

'I shouldn't have to say anything. If you loved me, Mike, you'd see, you'd know.'

She stares at him for a moment, searching his face, her amber eyes wide and sad. 'What's the point?' she mutters, then walks into the kitchen and closes the door.

A wisp of a thought enters Mike's head, an impulse to turn around and walk out of the door he entered only minutes earlier. But it's only a thought and only for a moment as his eyes catch the pink fur of Hannah's favourite slippers. She's under the stairs, hidden from view, her arms around her knees and her blonde head buried.

'Is it my fault, Daddy?'

'Of course it isn't.' Mike pulls her to him, his beautiful bag of bones, breathing in the cosy smell of shampoo and baked beans. 'It's Daddy's fault. Don't worry, I'll make it all better, I promise,' he says, hugging his warm living child tightly to his heart, wondering where on earth he should begin.

It's late. Antonia is in bed, asleep, her long hair spread away from her face like a fan on the pillow. David studies her features for a while, taking in her glossy skin, the definition of her jaw and the graceful length of her neck. He longs to trace his fingers from the small lobe of her ear to the hollow of her throat, but he doesn't want to wake her and spoil the moment. He slips in beside her, the clean sheets feeling crisp and cold, much like his sleeping wife.

In those few moments when the terror of his worries relaxed their grip, he thought of Antonia again today. He had a clear image of her in his mind; that of a honey marble statue, perfectly chiselled, incredibly beautiful, but cool and impenetrable.

Sleep doesn't come and when Antonia sighs, he rests his head on one arm, stroking a finger along her naked spine, counting the tiny moles on her back. He always wants her, even when he's

too drunk to do anything about it and she's never denied him. She's soft, willing and compliant. But the reality is that even when he hungrily invades her, even when he comes with a thunderous rush of pleasure, even as she whispers, 'Please, David, please,' he doesn't really penetrate her. It's this insatiable desire, this urgent need to connect that makes him want her so badly.

'I've tried to give you everything,' he murmurs. 'I'm sorry.' He wants to add, 'I know you don't love me, but promise you won't leave me. Stay with me forever. I'm nothing without you.' But he's afraid that saying the words out loud will validate them. And if Antonia hears, she'll despise him for his weakness, of that much he's certain.

As the whisky slowly drags David into sleep, his mind replays the last two days: insurance, his bank manager; Charlie, Charlie ill; angry clients; too much alcohol, too many lies. And finally Antonia. She laughed at one of his jokes over dinner and just for an instant he glimpsed a different person, but the moment passed as quickly as it came.

As a small boy on a boating holiday abroad he'd seen the same look on his mother's face. 'Look, the sea's turquoise. Jump in, Mummy! I dare you!' He'd said those words knowing that Mummy would laugh and shake her head. But despite her carefully made-up face and her jewellery, she jumped into the sea without a moment's hesitation. He clapped his hands with delight as he watched from the side of the boat. Then he anxiously waited for his mother's copper hair to reappear from the salty depths of the ocean, caught with a sudden fear she might drown, that he might never see her again. But when she emerged from the sparkling sea, just for a second as the sun caught her face, he thought she was someone else. Someone young, happy and free. But the moment was lost when his father pulled the pipe from his mouth and cleared his throat noisily. He stared at his wife and shook his head before replacing the pipe and pointedly consulting the map.

Mike's head feels leaden on the pillow, crammed with listless negatives as he considers the day. Rachel, lovely Rachel, her face white with reproach. Little Hannah's tears. And Olivia, his wife Olivia, unrecognisable Olivia. And his associate's baby, a healthy son.

He closes his eyes, reviewing a scene at St Mary's maternity hospital from over a year ago. 'Just a routine scan,' the consultant obstetrician had said with easy charm. 'Nothing to worry about, the bump just seems a little small – probably a small baby.'

They'd strolled in for the scan, like many times before. But the face of the sonographer was blank as she looked at the screen. A face that told them everything.

'What's happened? What's wrong?' A look of panic on Olivia's face.

But Mike knew. Mike understood. There was no need to wait until Olivia had wiped the gel from her stomach and covered her naked bump. No need to wait in a room with a door, not a curtain. No need to hear the words, 'I'm sorry, there's no heartbeat, the baby has died.'

He sighs and turns in the dark. There's no point in rewinding the film. There's nothing he can do to change the past. Just like with his little sister, he can't bring them back. And it's late. With or without the dog, he must sleep. A voice echoes in his ears as he drifts off. 'Our Father, who art in Heaven.' The words repeat in his mind every night, like a mantra. But the words aren't his and they're hollow.

CHAPTER FIVE

'Morning, Mike, lovely weather still,' Judith says, glancing at him as she adjusts the collar of her blouse and wondering, as she seems to every day, whether she might have overdone her perfume. She does a double take. 'Are you OK? You look terrible!' She studies Mike's handsome face. He looks tired, with shadows beneath his dark blue eyes. 'Sorry. Perhaps not tactfully put, but I guess I'm not going to start being diplomatic after twelve years. Is everything all right?'

Mike looks away towards the window, squinting slightly in the way he always does. She once asked him if he had worn glasses as a child, but he looked perplexed and said, 'No, why?' with a friendly smile. She now knows it's just his thoughtful look. She's been his secretary since she was nineteen and knows more about Mike Turner than he knows himself, or so she jokes. And the truth is that they've grown up together, in a way. She's seen him through his marriage to Olivia and the birth of his girls; he's been her 'diamond, the sort of rock I like' through two marriages, four broken hearts and breast implants that have recently been removed.

'I didn't sleep very well,' he says, still gazing at something Judith can't see. She busies herself with filing. She knows there's no point in hurrying him, especially of late.

'Bloody typist, diarist, dogsbody and counsellor!' one of the secretaries declared yesterday over lunch, succinctly expanding on what her original job description had omitted. As Judith waits patiently for Mike to embellish on his lack of sleep, she understands what her friend means.

He eventually turns with an awkward smile before sitting at his desk.

'Turns out that I'm a rotten husband and a rubbish dad, Jude.' His face is slightly flushed. 'And there I was, thinking I was perfect!'

Judith smiles and wags a finger. 'That's because I'm always telling you you're perfect. I didn't think you were listening.'

'You've got it in one. I don't listen, apparently.' He puts his head in his hands for a moment and then rubs his eyes. 'But the truth is they're right. I haven't been looking or listening. I've taken my eye off the ball.'

'Trust you to use a football analogy, Mike,' she laughs. 'Is there anything I can do to help? Go into goal? Keep score?'

She sits down in the chair opposite him. There's plenty she'd like to do to help, she thinks affectionately as she strokes her ever-increasing bump, but that would certainly get in the way.

Mike Turner has been at the top of the secretaries' 'I wouldn't kick *him* out of bed' list for years. Christmas after Christmas various young hopefuls have tried to snog him at the office party, without success. Judith is certain that he's completely oblivious to these advances and to his charm. It's the way his hair is always scruffy from raking his hands through it, she decides, it makes him look both trendy and vulnerable at the same time. Those cheekbones too, a real man with cheekbones! And of course his thoughtful Irish eyes.

'I must make more of an effort, not just with Olivia but with the girls too.' He looks at Judith and grins. 'I would ask you for suggestions, but something tells me that would be cheating.'

'And so it would,' she replies, scooping up an armful of files from his muddled desk. Shame, she thinks as she leaves the room. Mike Turner isn't and will never be the sort of man who would go in for cheating.

Sami strides in late to the site meeting, looking sharp in his new navy suit.

'You've got a smile on your face,' the quantity surveyor comments. 'You are one jammy bastard, Richards. Who's the lucky woman this time?'

Sami puts down his briefcase and places the hard hat on his head, careful not to unsettle his hair. 'Who, me?' he grins. 'Well, since you ask. The wife. Really, Jack, the wife!'

'You're joking. I'm lucky if my wife cracks a smile, let alone ...'

Sami pulls up the leg of his trousers at the knee, crouches down and spreads out the plans on the dusty concrete floor as he recalls an extremely pleasurable start to the day. Sophie was dead to the world when the alarm woke him at seven. But that's nothing new. She jacked in her job at the estate agents months ago ('too early, too boring!') and he suspects she sleeps in all morning during the week when he isn't there to cajole her into the land of the living. He'd done his press-ups, showered and finished the box of no-added-sugar muesli, and was just about to unlatch the walled garden door of his townhouse when Sophie called his name. He turned his head in surprise and there she was on their doorstep, naked save for fluffy slippers and the chunky glasses she wears first thing in the morning before her 'battle' with contact lenses.

'You haven't given me a kiss, darlink,' she called in her best Marlene Dietrich accent. He laughed. Her face looked crumpled and sleepy, her hair like a crow's nest, but her body was beautiful; rounded, plump and still tanned from their Antiguan summer.

'I haven't cleaned my teeth, so ...' Sophie mumbled as she knelt on the floor of the hallway, the front door still ajar. She slipped one hand in the fly of his suit trousers and unbuckled his belt with the other. 'So I'll give you a different kiss goodbye.'

'That was a very nice treat,' he said afterwards. He stood at the lounge door for a moment and eyed Sophie thoughtfully. She'd put on the dressing gown he tries regularly to throw out and was lying on the sofa, the *Daily Mail* propped on her knees. 'Was there a particular reason why you were kind enough to ...'

'I just like to keep you on your toes,' she replied, her face still hidden by the newspaper. 'Besides, you've been—'

'What?' Sami asked, his heart sinking just a little as he thought of the time. He knew that any heavy conversation about babies would make him very late for work.

Sophie narrowed her eyes as she lowered the paper. 'I don't know,' she said slowly, turning her head towards him. 'You seem happy.'

'I am happy. No, I'm absolutely delighted that we're going through with the IVF again. I know how hard it is for you with all the drugs, the hospital visits and stuff, but you know I'll be there. I'll be with you every step of the way, I promise.' He glanced at his Montblanc watch, which still gave him the rush of pleasure it had given him six months previously when he'd finally given in to temptation and bought it for himself. 'And I think it's going to work this time, I don't know why, but I feel sure.'

Sophie turned back to the newspaper and the horoscopes. 'OK, you can bugger off to work now. Your usefulness is at an end.'

Sami now brushes the dust off his trousers as he straightens back up. Time to focus on work. 'Shall we start, Jack? Time is money and all that. Is the client coming or not?'

'What have you got that I haven't, Richards?' the quantity surveyor replies as he removes a pen from behind his ear and jots down some figures on his clipboard. 'On second thoughts, don't answer that,' he says with a dry laugh, 'we're not paid by the hour.'

Irony one: the morning nap has made Sophie tired. She yawns and looks at the calendar before opening the fridge. 'Coffee with Christine' is pencilled in for today, but it doesn't ring any bells. Irony two: the handwriting is hers, so she can blame no one but herself. The forgetfulness can be worrying, but only if she lets it, and anyway, she never forgets anything important.

She bends to pull out the carton of milk from the fridge and then changes her mind. It would be a shame to forego a glass of Chablis when it's so beautifully chilled, and besides, she bought a replacement bottle yesterday, just in case. She makes a mental note of the level of the wine before she pours. She's sure that Sami has too. Perhaps he's sketched a diagram and slipped it in his briefcase along with his work plans. She laughs as she closes the fridge. The big question for her is whether she'll remember.

Mike barely notices the door of his office close as Judith walks away. 'Mum got over it quite quickly.' It's his daughter's voice in his head, an echo of his own unspoken, festering words.

He picks up a letter and tries to focus on work and on today. But last night is still fresh, the memory raw in his mind.

He ate dinner alone in the high-ceilinged kitchen, knowing he should talk to Olivia, to clear the air somehow after her outburst. He wanted to be honest with her, but was afraid he would be too brutal. He took her a tea, then left her alone in their bedroom, her rigid back turned away from him.

But with Rachel it was different; he needed to make peace with her straight away. He was stunned at the way she'd behaved. She was bright and funny like her mum, but usually more mature than her twelve years. She was his little companion, always nearby, even when he watched the football on television.

'Grandma, Dad's buying me a season ticket next year,' she announced at the weekend.

'Girls don't go to the football!' his mother responded in horror.

'Of course they do, Grandma,' she replied. 'This is the age of equality. Anything a boy can do, a girl can do better,' she said boldly, making them all laugh.

'Can I come in?' Mike asked, tapping gently on her pine bedroom door. She was curled up on the bed, his little girl, with her face puffy and red from so much crying. 'Come here for a hug,' he said, the sight of her making him want to cry too. But he held it in; if he started he might never stop.

The story came out in a rush: 'Mum was livid. I've never seen her so cross. As soon as I put my key in the door she was there, shouting at me. She accused me of bunking off school but I promise you I wasn't. I felt ill so I came home. I didn't think she'd mind. I thought she'd understand. I thought she'd stick up for me and clear it with the teacher. I know I shouldn't have called her a cow, Dad, but she was one, really. Her face looked horrible and she said, "You don't look ill to me. What's in the bag? Have you been to the shops?"'

Mike studied Rachel's face. Her dark blue eyes looked sincere and hurt. She'd always been a daddy's girl, but Olivia adored her. 'Look,' he said. 'I bet Mum overreacted because we've heard so many bad things, not only about your school but all schools. You know, drugs, truanting, bullying and all the other things parents worry about. You're such a lovely girl that we'd hate you to get into any trouble.'

'Mum doesn't trust me. That makes it even worse.'

He nodded. He wasn't sure what the procedure was with illness and school, but he doubted that kids were allowed to wander off without consulting a parent. 'Well, of course we trust you ...' he began.

Rachel hid her face in her hands. 'I called Mum's mobile loads of times, but it was off, so I had to go to the chemist all by myself and it was so embarrassing. Mum should have been there or bought them for me, but she didn't even care enough to ask what was wrong.'

He frowned; he'd lost the thread of the conversation.

'Dad, what are you like?' Rachel said, her angry eyes catching his for a moment before turning away. 'I had to go to the chemist to buy pads. I wasn't about to go to the school office and ask them. It's just so embarrassing.'

Mike raked his hands through his hair. He had no idea what to say. Thank God I'm not a single parent. Thank God I have Olivia, he thought. His sister Siobhan had been in and out of hospital when he was a boy. If she had started her periods at some point in his childhood, no one had told him about it. He knew nothing about a girl's puberty or menstruation, or any of that malarkey. He was rapidly discovering that he knew nothing about women at all.

'It's all right, Dad, I don't want to talk about it either,' Rachel said eventually with a small smile. She slipped her hand into his. 'By the way, I heard Mum shouting earlier. I'm not her number one fan at the moment, but it's true what she said. I mean, I don't want to upset you or anything, but sometimes you don't seem to hear what we say. You're not funny any more. You turn on the telly and just stare.'

She looked up into his face. 'Is it because of the baby? Is that why you're sad? Are you thinking about him?'

He took a breath and a moment to reply. Of course that was when the black dog returned, creeping in on its belly, almost unseen, before following him everywhere. 'How come you're so bright?' he asked, wondering how a twelve-year-old child could be so perceptive.

Rachel shrugged. 'You will get over it, you know,' she replied, blowing her nose with gusto. "Time heals all wounds." People think it's Shakespeare, but it isn't. And look at Mum. She got over it quite quickly, didn't she?

It is those words that burn in Mike's mind now, as he sips his cold coffee. He frowns and picks up another letter. Too quickly, he thinks, too bloody quickly.

CHAPTER SIX

'Toni, who is Christine and why is she on my calendar? I want to go out. Or stay in. Whatever. Should I be worried about standing her up?'

Antonia holds the iPhone between her ear and her shoulder as she sweeps crumbs from the granite work surface with one hand into the other. She can tell Sophie is being very careful to enunciate her words clearly and slowly.

'Do you want me to come over?' she replies.

'No, why?'

'Because it's a Wednesday morning and you don't usually start this early,' she says evenly. 'Has something happened to upset you?'

She unties her apron and sits down. The heady smell of the baked chocolate embraces her, but she won't be eating any. Her mother has put on a great deal of weight as she's got older; it could be genetic and she doesn't want to be fat.

'It's Sami's fault. If he didn't spy on me, I wouldn't have to drink a whole bottle. I could just have a civilised glass instead of a bloody great lecture. He's not there with you, is he?'

'No. Why, should he be?'

'No reason,' Sophie responds. 'There's the doorbell. It's probably Christine, whoever she is. I'll let you know later if she's your type, Toni. Bye.'

Antonia puts down the mobile carefully. Baking cookies earlier gave her a little high. Like a wide-eyed child she watched the TV chef make them and she copied him, stage by stage, from lining the trays with parchment, to pouring the pre-measured ingredients into a mixing bowl, to spooning the mixture out and to placing them in the oven. Then the waiting. Twenty minutes. Ping!

Of course she knows how to bake just about everything one can bake, but to do it under instruction, like an obedient school child, was surprisingly satisfying. But now she's wondering about Sophie, about what's bothering her so much that she's not letting on. The IVF treatment, she reasons, but then Sophie has already told her all about it, in every gory detail. Indeed, there isn't a lot about her life that hasn't been discussed, dissected and examined by the two of them over the years. The fact that Sophie is drinking is no surprise, it's her way of dealing with stress. But there's something else, definitely something else.

She looks at her watch and wonders whether she should nip round to Sophie's house to see what's going on. It's a twenty-mile round journey, but it's tempting because she doesn't like this uncertainty. Then again, she dislikes Sophie when she's drunk, she loathes anyone drunk, which makes her think again of David and the strange way he behaved last weekend.

'Don't look so bloody tragic,' Sophie said on the Monday, putting her arms around Antonia and holding her for a few moments before pulling away and stroking her arm from shoulder to elbow in that way she always does. 'Don't overreact. He was only pissed. It's not the end of the world.'

'I know,' she replied, thinking that perhaps it was the end of the world and feeling tense, as always, from Sophie's touch.

'He's not your dad, you know, Toni.'

She flinched at Sophie's comment, but didn't reply. It was strange, hearing her dad mentioned twice within a week. There had been the telephone call a few days earlier, out of the blue. It was a friendly female voice, but then they'd always appeared friendly, the journalists.

'Hi, is that Jimmy Farrell's daughter? You've been difficult to track down! My name's Zara Singh. I'm a journalist and I'm looking into—'

She'd put down the phone as though it burned.

Antonia now sits silently at the kitchen table and stares through the open patio doors at the glinting fields and the hills beyond. It's still a bright September. She can see glowing green meadows,

horses and cows, huge trees and stone walls. This is her life. There's nothing to say about her dad. He doesn't exist. She won't let him creep into her thoughts. And yet here he is today, looming large in her sunlit kitchen, amid the smell of cookies. 'She was asking for it, girl. She can go back to where she fucking belongs if she doesn't like it. And so can you.' Each memory is filed away, but still clear and in colour, like a series of framed photographs.

She remains motionless on the leather chair, the peppermint tea lukewarm in its cup, her mind cramped as it tries to regain order. It's just the alcohol; it changes people from normal decent human beings into something else, she reasons slowly and calmly, like a mother to a child. David isn't bad. He isn't a monster and nor is Sophie. There's nothing to worry about. She isn't afraid of them.

As she strides down the science faculty's main corridor, Helen Proctor thinks about snowmen. *The Snowman*, in fact, the film she watches every Christmas. She's never really understood the expression 'walking on air' until today. There's no doubt about it, today she is indeed walking on air, or perhaps in it, like *The Snowman*. She has to fight back the desire to announce it to her students, to blow her own trumpet (another silly expression) or to sing out loud (which she is known to do). They'll probably think she's completely deranged, but Helen is fully aware of her reputation for mild eccentricity and doesn't care.

Ted Edwards asked for a quiet word first thing. 'I have something to say to you, Helen. Perhaps a spot of lunch at the usual?' he said, lifting his black eyebrows which no longer matched his hair and adjusting his glasses. 'When all will be revealed!'

The reveal was unexpected but thrilling. Ted had clearly been pleased as he patted her hand.

It's only a secondment, nothing particularly special, she now chides herself. Another professor walking the other way gives her a sidelong look beneath his varifocals and she wonders whether she has spoken the thought out loud. But it's special to me, she continues with a shrug, an opportunity to teach and to research in America!

She looks at herself in the lavatory mirror as she washes her hands. She no longer notices the streaks of grey in her hair or the odd sprouting growth on her chin. She tried to pluck them at one time, those hairs, but they only grew back twofold, wasting time in which she could be doing something useful, like marking or reading, or chatting with Charlie.

'Oh, Charlie!' she says to the mirror. Her reflection looks startled, and a little downcast, as it wonders how on earth to break the news to him.

David puts his head around Charlie's office door to wish him goodnight, but to his surprise the room is dark, cold and empty. He strolls in and swings round in Charlie's newly upholstered chair before opening the leather-bound diary to see where he is. It's an office rule that work diaries always stay on the premises on top of the fee earner's desk. David regularly 'forgets' this rule, preferring to risk censure than be pinned down. He studies Charlie's week: his 'school tie' handwriting shows he's been busy, but the page for this afternoon is blank, which means he's gone home early, which is unlike him, or that he's doing something he doesn't want the rest of the office to know about.

David gives a low whistle. The doctor. God, Charlie. He hopes he's all right. Charlie has always looked older than his years, even at school, using his bumbling act to hide the sharp intellect behind. But he isn't old really; David doesn't want him to be.

He sits back and gazes at the signed painting of a Lancaster bomber that Charlie has recently acquired as he tries to steady his breath. 'Lancaster Under Attack', the painting's called, and he knows how it feels. Over the last few days his heart has started to race, suddenly, without warning, like the hammer of a machine gun. Low blood pressure, high blood pressure, lack of fitness, whatever. It doesn't last long, so it really doesn't matter. The important thing is for him to focus. Not on the problem (which he's finally accepted exists), nor the fucking, fucking consequences (which make him want to vomit), but on the plan. And today he has focused. He's come up with a plan. At least a temporary one, which he now needs to put into action. *Velle est posse!* he remembers from school. Where there's a will, there's a way.

It's time to go home, but David isn't ready to do that. He wants to avoid his wife and her watchful eyes a little longer. It's as though Antonia knows. Her brown eyes are huge when she looks at him: perceptive, worried, knowing. 'Robbing Peter to pay Paul?' they say. 'Don't do it, David.'

Eyes like saucers, he thinks, to deflect his churning thoughts. The Tinderbox story. I have a wife with eyes like saucers. Who would have thought?

He picks up a gilt-framed photograph from the desk and smiles. It's of three generations of Proctors: Charlie, his father and his son Rupert, with only a nose in common. He remembers Charlie's father well. Harold, Harry to his friends, so much like Charlie, fair and genial, old fashioned to a fault. He thinks fondly of Charlie's mother, Valerie, a horsey woman both in hobby and looks who is still going strong. Always such a warm and welcoming family, eager to draw him into the fold of their love when his parents were absent.

'What would I have done without you, eh?' he says to the photograph.

A memory strikes him, of being clutched to Valerie's huge bosom. She was wearing a coat with a real fur collar and it made him sneeze. He'd been holding back the tears and the sneeze was such a relief.

'I was only a boy,' David mutters. The sneeze allowed him to cry.

He wonders when he last looked at a photograph of his own parents. Indeed, does he still have any? Has he ever shown one to Antonia? He doubts it; she's never asked. Their meeting at a night club and their simple yet heady marriage only months later at the registry office was like a natural start. They've never looked back to a life before then. It seems to suit them both.

And yet he'd adored his parents. He can still vividly recall the frenzied beating he'd given Smith-Bates at boarding school when he'd taunted that his father shagged his mother from behind. David called him a bloody great liar, told him to shut his ugly face. His father was stern but kind. He was certain his dad would never do such a repugnant thing to his flame-haired flawless mother, but Smith-Bates refused to back down. So David struck out, fuelled by longing and need for his parents, who were in Singapore at that time. When he was forcefully peeled away from Smith-Bates, the master asked him to explain why he'd done it, but he couldn't bear to repeat the profanity and so instead faced the consequences. Even as the lash was brought down on his small palms he was resolute. His pride at defending his mother's honour had been worth it.

'Live with honour. Die with pride,' he remembers, looking at his grown-up palms and desperately wishing the adult could match those words.

He glances at his watch and a thought occurs to him. He remembers Charlie's chuckle when he opened the desk drawer to show David his stash. 'There for times of trouble and strife, David!'

Leaning down he pulls open the drawer on the bottom right. The Glenfiddich bottle is more than half full. 'To trouble and strife! Cheers, Charlie,' he declares to the photograph, settling back down in Charlie's chair and taking his first liberal swig.

The ringtone penetrates the evening silence and Antonia answers immediately from her bedside telephone.

'Hello, Chinue, love. How are you keeping?' Candy Farrell asks in her small voice.

'It's Antonia, remember? I'm fine. How are you, Mum?'

'I was wondering if you were coming to visit. I haven't seen you for so long ...'

'I was there on Sunday. I brought you some lovely flowers. And I'm coming again this Sunday, just as usual.'

'Will Jimmy be coming?'

Smoothing her hair, Antonia tenses, but keeps her voice even. 'No, Mum. Dad's dead. Remember?'

'Are you sure, love? I thought I saw him.'

'I'm absolutely sure, Mum. *EastEnders* will be on the telly soon. Why don't you check the television page and I'll see you on Sunday.'

Antonia replaces the receiver carefully and gazes at the tree whose branch taps at the shuttered bedroom window, reminding her to stand and view the garden from upstairs, to appreciate its size and splendour and to remember just how lucky she is.

‘Human beings, we’re all different, either inside or out,’ her mother used to say. ‘But we’re all the Lord’s children. There’s good in everyone.’

She used to be full of wise words, her mum, even when she was bowed and bruised. But now that same person telephones her two or three times a day, forgetting a conversation she’s had only moments earlier, sometimes completely oblivious of her daughter’s weekly visits and yet still seeing the man who had no good in him at all.

She turns away from the window with a sigh, recovers her book from the pillow and continues to read.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Olivia is at the sink with her back turned as Mike enters the warm kitchen. He's come home from work earlier than usual and feels ridiculously nervous. A few days of staccato conversation have passed since her rollicking and he's been saying and doing nothing on the basis of least said soonest mended. It's one of his mother's many wise words, though she rarely practises what she preaches. But mid-afternoon at the office today, Judith tucked her blonde bob behind her ears and gave him one of her mind-reading looks. 'Still a crap husband?' she asked, handing over the post for signing.

'Possibly,' he replied. He couldn't help but smile as he looked at her. She was trying to find a hip on which to place her hand, but she was huge, far larger than he remembered Olivia being when pregnant. 'Why do you ask?'

'Well, you've worked late the last couple of days and I haven't seen you come back from lunch with a Thornton's bag or with a huge bunch of M&S flowers, and you don't seem the Interflora type of guy to me.'

Mike felt himself flush.

'Oh God, don't tell me you resorted to flowers from Netto. That's grounds for divorce!'

He sat back and raked a hand through his hair. 'To be honest, I've done nothing. Olivia hasn't said anything and I thought it might make things worse.'

So, Judith put him straight with her round, open, friendly face. She didn't know what the problem was, but doing or saying nothing was not an option. 'Venus and Mars and all that crap. It's true, men and women don't understand each other. But speaking on behalf of womankind, while chocolates and flowers don't solve anything, they certainly help. From the way you look, my guess is that you need to clear the air. So go home early, surprise her, tell her that you love her.'

So here he is. Olivia turns from the sink just as he reaches her. She looks worn and so very pale.

'For you,' he says, handing over a bunch of yellow roses with a wry smile. 'Not very imaginative, I know. It's just a token to say sorry.' He kisses her cheek and can sense the stifled sniggers of his girls sitting at the wooden table behind him. 'Can we talk later?'

Olivia smiles faintly, nods and takes the flowers.

'Aren't you going to snog?'

'Hannah!'

'Well that's what they do on the TV.'

'I think you mean kiss, young lady,' Olivia says. 'I'll put these in water.'

As Olivia moves away, Mike looks at Rachel, his face a question, but she shrugs her shoulders. 'I don't know,' she whispers.

'Well, these are for you two,' he says, pulling out two chocolate bars from his pocket and hiding them behind his back. 'Which hand? You go first, Hannah.'

Hannah pulls at his right sleeve. 'That one.' He brings out an empty hand. Hannah starts to cry. 'That's mean, Daddy. It's not fair if Rachel gets two!'

Confectionery distribution woes salved, Mike sits down, pushes away the empty plates and studies his girls as they eat their treats. They're so different in looks and build and in chocolate-bar-eating technique, he thinks with a smile. No black dog today; he feels a sudden lightness, a sense of expectation, almost like optimism. I'm lucky, very lucky, he thinks. I must remember this more often.

'So, how was school?' he asks Hannah. 'Do you still fancy Dylan whatshisname?'

'I do not!'

'Yes, she does!'

'How do you know? You're not at St Theresa's any more. You go to Loreto where they all snog and smoke!'

'Well, I don't, you idiot.'

Olivia is back in the room. 'Don't call her an idiot, Rachel.'

'That's hardly fair, Mum. She just—'

'Life's not always fair, Rachel,' Olivia replies, sitting down at the table.

Mike feels a shiver and for a few moments they're all silent, but then he takes Olivia's hand and looks at her closed face. He still feels strangely buoyant. He squeezes gently. 'My darling wife ... I would say you look a bit tired, but something tells me that wouldn't be a good thing to say.'

Olivia smiles, seeming to relent, just a little.

'However, since I'm home early, instead of going for a run, I can be your personal slave for the rest of the day. Feet up, cup of tea, dinner to follow. Your wish will be my command. What do you say?'

'And don't forget the snogging!' Hannah adds helpfully before bursting into giggles.

'My mother always called it stew. Very working class, I expect. You're looking old, Charles,' Helen says over the beef and kidney casserole in their Edwardian Cheshire home. 'Or is it my eyes? Turning fifty didn't bother me a jot, but I had twenty-twenty vision until then,' she adds, pouring Charlie another glass of claret. She's pulled the bottle out of the cellar so she knows it's a good year. She feels that perhaps he will take her news better if he's drunk a glass or two of the mellow, as he describes it.

'I suppose five years younger classes me as your toy boy, but sadly I've always looked old,' Charlie replies easily, wiping his plate with a crust of white bread. 'Perhaps you never noticed. Did you think you'd married a matinee star?'

Helen smiles. Neither has any delusions about their appearances and they often banter easily on the subject, ruminating at length about Rupert's unexpected good looks. 'He must have skipped a generation or two,' Charlie invariably comments. 'Or perhaps he's the butcher's son. He was a good-looking fella before he fell off the roof. Poor old chap, better not to survive than get old really. Like Rod Hull.'

'Oh yes, the chap from the *Marathon Man*. I like him.'

'Ah, film stars. Laurence Olivier? The mad Nazi dentist?'

'No. *The Graduate*. Little fellow with a nose, but something about him. One of those method actors.'

'Robert De Niro?'

'Charles, you are silly at times. What would I do with Robert De Niro?'

'You have your talents ...'

'Which I save just for you! Birthdays and Christmas.'

They both laugh. 'Wouldn't mind another spoonful of the stew if you'd do the honours. Does Barbara still make these casseroles in that plug-in device?'

'I think she does. But don't ask me how it all works. I just eat what she leaves. We must never lose her, Charles. Clean house, dinner, home-made bread. As if by magic.'

'Agreed. But she must be eighty, at least. Now *she* is old!'

Helen studies Charles's face as he wipes his chin with the napkin Barbara has laundered and laid. 'No, you're right. Old was the wrong word. Tired or drawn would be a more accurate description. More so than usual. Are you feeling all right?'

'I'm fine. In fact I'm delighted to be tired and drawn rather than old. It makes me feel like a boy!'

Charlie tucks into his second helping of Barbara's casserole, hoping Helen will change the subject. At times during their marriage, he's tried to deflect her long-winded inquiries, but generally to no avail. Her tendency to see only the black and white in life means she can detect a lie or indeed a deflection a mile off. It's better to keep a low profile and eat up. He likes eating dinner with Helen, it's a wonderful combination of the three things he loves best in the world: food, wine and his wife.

A bloody diabetic, he ruminates inwardly as he savours the warmth of the wine on his throat. How preposterous. These women doctors don't know a thing.

Charlie's usual doctor, Simpson, is away, or so he was told by the fearsome receptionist when he visited the surgery that afternoon for his test results. One of the junior associates sat looking a little too comfortable in Simpson's seat, gazing at a computer screen. She looked so very young, like barbers and builders and general office staff.

He furtively glances again at Helen across the worn mahogany table. In either law or medicine, mistakes are easy to make when looking at other people's cases, computer or not. There's no point making a fuss until he speaks to Simpson. He'll worry about it then if he has to. For now his stomach is speaking. A touch of something sweet, it says, and then perhaps a small glass of golden dessert wine to finish.

'Now, what about pud?' he asks, lifting his spoon.

'I'm going to New York City in January, Charles,' Helen says bluntly. 'To New York University. I've been selected by Ted Edwards to teach and do some research on a secondment and I'm thrilled.'

'That's nice. Shall we move on to—'

'I'll be there for a year, Charles,' Helen interrupts firmly.

He puts down his spoon. 'Good God, Helen,' he replies. 'That's preposterous.' Charles Proctor doesn't need to be told anything twice.

The girls are in bed, Mike and Olivia are alone in the bay-windowed lounge and they have no more excuses. Mike takes a deep breath and looks at his wife on the sofa opposite. 'I'm sorry, Olivia. I realise I've ...' he nearly uses the football analogy again, but he doesn't think Olivia will be amused. 'Well, I've had my mind on other things, I suppose. I didn't realise it until now. But I can see that I've neglected you and the girls and I'm sorry. I'll stop.'

Olivia examines her neatly trimmed nails. She speaks quietly and he has to lean towards her to hear. 'I need to know why, Mike. I don't want to know, but I need to know.' She's silent for a moment, and then she lifts her head to look him in the eye. She looks unbearably sad, her face pale, tears about to spill from her eyes. 'Please be honest with me.' She takes a deep breath. 'Are you having or have you had an affair?'

Mike almost flinches. It's the last thing he expects to hear. 'What the ... no! Where on earth have you got that idea from?' he says, almost laughing with relief at the absurdity of her suggestion.

'Be honest, Mike.'

'I am! Absolutely.'

Mike prays the sincerity is showing on his face, and is rewarded when the relief almost visibly flows from Olivia's body. Limp and shaking, she bows her head, burying it in her hands.

For a moment he sits back in the armchair and watches, a surge of panic stopping him from reaching out to her. She's been so tense and unhappy, now she's so relieved at his reply. They live together, they sleep in the same bed. How has he missed all of this?

Olivia lifts her head, but still averts her eyes. 'I thought you'd stopped loving me,' she says quietly, the tears rolling down her ashen face. 'You seemed so disinterested, so remote. Then I thought of how Judith has thrown herself at you for all these years and it all made sense.'

'Jude's just friendly,' he replies with surprise. 'You know that. She's friendly with everyone, you included.' He feels mildly irked at the idea; it seems so silly. 'Besides, she's having a baby in two months.'

He sees Olivia's face harden and the penny drops. 'You didn't think ...?' He can feel the heat rise, angry now, offended and alarmed that Olivia can even imagine such a thing.

'A devoted secretary who's always fancied you, pregnant with a man she won't name, you away with the fairies, what was I supposed to think?' Olivia's words cut through him like knives.

Much later, after Mike has been on a long run in the dark and drizzle, the black dog running alongside him on the wet pavements of Chorlton, the irritation he feels at Olivia's logic starts to recede. The idea of anyone he knows, let alone he or Olivia, having an affair is ridiculous. He knows some men occasionally have a quick shag if the opportunity presents itself, to satisfy a small desire, like the

need to scratch an itch, but not the planning, the lies, the awful betrayal of a full-blown relationship. But his head has now cleared, and in fairness to Olivia, he understands he has been distant, something he didn't fully realise until a twelve-year-old told him straight.

Life still isn't all right, but there's some sense of relief that Olivia's strange behaviour has been explained. And when she steps naked into the shower beside him, his anger is replaced by an urgent desire to have her, to mark her, to show her he loves her, there in the shower, rough and fast, the water expunging her tears.

'I love you, Olivia,' he roars as he climaxes. 'I love you and only you. Do you hear me?'

Olivia nods and smiles, but as he wraps her in a towel and holds her in his arms, he thinks she looks sad.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sami leans back in his chair and puts his feet on the office desk. For a moment he studies the shine on his shoes. They cost him a hundred and fifty quid, but they're worth every penny. 'Because quality really does count,' he mutters before going back to reading *Luxury Auto* magazine. He thumbs through the glossy pages, but he isn't really looking at it as he usually does, pawing over each photograph and article before comparing performance. He's too distracted for that, his mind swamped with thoughts of his afternoon meeting out of the office.

His eye catches the heading 'Size Has Clout' and he smiles for a moment before a mild but nagging anxiety sets in. 'Oh, piss off,' he says out loud. It's an unwelcome emotion, one which hasn't really bothered him since the day he discovered he was attractive. An overheard conversation between his eldest sister and her new friend from university when he was fourteen. 'Ramona, your little brother. His face – he's stunning!' he'd heard. He'd rushed to the bathroom and locked himself in, dared his eyes to the mirror expecting to see a fat boy, but had been astounded to find that the girl was right. His chubby cheeks had grown thin, his face was bony and chiselled. It was a turning point for Samuel Richards. Samuel became Sami. He stood tall and put anxiety behind him. But now it prods at him from a distance and he isn't entirely sure what it means.

He takes his feet off the desk and leans on the table, careful not to crease his tie. 'Why am I anxious?' he scribbles on the writing pad with the fibre-tip pen he bought to match his watch.

Reclining again, he swings in his chair, the pen to his mouth. Perhaps it's the huge project at Trafford and the commission he'll lose if it doesn't go through. Or maybe it's Sophie, his mother and the IVF. Or even the suit he forgot to collect from the cleaners. But he knows it's Friday, last Friday, when he should've been in the pub. The memory catches his breath and makes his skin tingle. It just isn't like him to care so much.

He crumples the paper into a ball and lobs it into the waste-paper bin, expecting to score as usual. It hits the edge and lands softly on the carpet. He stands, bends to pick it up and looks at it thoughtfully in his palm before dropping it directly into the bin. Then he stoops to look at himself in the mirror hung next to his surveying qualification certificates. Replacing one of the certificates, it's really too low for Sami's height. Everyone in the office laughs at this token of vanity, but he doesn't care. 'Have to keep up the standards,' he always says to anyone who comments. 'You should try it.' But the reality is that standards don't come into it, he's one handsome bastard and the mirror is there for him to strut and to preen, to confirm what he already knows. But today his reflection doesn't look quite right. It's as though his slight emotional imbalance is reflected in his striking face.

'No, really, piss off,' he says again before collecting his jacket and keys and then checking one last time that the words 'site meeting' are clearly legible in his diary for anyone who might look.

David feels breathless as he studies the backlog of letters that have accumulated on his office desk. He has work to do. Proper everyday work. Searches to make, title deeds to check, leases to read, contracts to exchange. But he has been preoccupied for days. Paralysed, almost.

'Routine commercial conveyancing isn't rocket science, David,' one of the other partners frequently goads. But that isn't entirely true. Conveyancing has its challenges, it can go pear-shaped, just like everything else in the law. And if a date is missed, a search omitted? Well, he's only human. One or two mistakes are easy to make.

His secretary has attached the letters to the front of their respective files with a yellow paper clip, in order of importance. 'I don't think there's anything imminent. Well, no exchanges this week, anyway,' she said earlier.

Yet every file he opens seems to sneer at him, to laugh and to say, 'I could be another mistake, David. Dig beneath the surface and you'll find me waiting for you.'

The sudden noise of the telephone makes him start. Everything makes him start. It's all he can do not to retch.

'Hi, David, it's Colin. A problem with one of my files seems to have come up. Can I have a word about it? How about in ten, fifteen minutes?'

He rests his head in his arms. God knows why the other partners have put him in charge of indemnity and claims, the majority seem to be on his own files. Perhaps that's why, he thinks wryly, they're so used to his cock-ups, they decided he may as well have the hassle of everyone else's as well.

'That's what insurance is for, David,' Charlie says whenever David confesses to another small mistake over a glass of wine at the end of the day. 'Don't worry about it, it's only money. We all make mistakes, even me.'

Of course Charlie has never made a mistake. At least not one David is aware of. He wishes that he could be like Charlie, intelligent and able, ploughing through the work with simple ease. Yet if he's honest, he knows Charlie's success comes from hard graft as well as ability and that he's stupid and lazy in comparison. Every hole he finds himself in is his own bloody fault. Forgetting to diarise important dates, cutting corners, occasionally being less than honest. David knows it, and he despises himself for it.

But at least his initial desperate need to confess to Charlie has abated slightly and is on the back burner again. He and the Glenfiddich accessed the client accounts on the computer the other night. They found a commercial property transaction with a substantial amount of money waiting in the account, one that wouldn't be completed for months, and then put the temporary solution into play, transferring the money from that account to the insurance account and then paying the outstanding indemnity premium with a click of a mouse. Indemnity insurance paid, claims will now be covered, immediate problem rectified.

David picks up another file, feels the battering of his heart and tries to breathe. He can't bear to contemplate what will happen regarding claims arising before today or how he'll repay the funds he has borrowed from Peter to pay Paul. That's something he needs to discuss with Charlie. The trouble is that Charlie doesn't seem to be in the mood for listening.

Antonia's stomach rumbles for its lunch as she pulls off her green buckled wellies on the steps. Her mum called three times before nine this morning, so she escaped to the garden with her secateurs. Snip, snip, snip. She's been savage with her pruning, savagery that usually works.

She steps back for a moment in her socks, lifting her head and taking in her home's clean white facade. Bless David. She never asked for a house like this, but as he often says, he'd promised it from their very first date. She can still picture it clearly.

It was a Sunday. He'd arrived ten minutes early in a low sports car. She couldn't have told you the make, but it was small, shiny and sleek, and rather than soundless as she expected, it was loud, booming with noise, much like the man who drove it.

'Hope you like poussin,' he'd said at the traffic lights. Then after a moment, putting his hand on hers, 'Only chicken. We're having a picnic. The hamper's in the boot. Is that OK?'

She'd nodded, feeling foolish. She hadn't dressed for a picnic. Not knowing what to expect, she'd worn a pale pink shift dress and high heels.

David had driven towards Derbyshire, chatting all the way, then turned off the main road at some gates, parking up, jumping out to open her door and holding out his hand.

'Welcome to Lyme Hall!' He'd deliberately said it as though it was his and she'd laughed, pleased he was so easy to be with despite her *faux pas* with the heels.

Spreading out a blanket on a manicured lawn at the front of the house, David had opened the basket. Not just tiny chickens, but glossy pork pies, Scotch eggs, stuffed peppers and champagne.

'Please take a seat,' he'd said, gesturing to the ground. For a moment she'd frozen. The shoes were sharp-heeled, the dress fitted. Then, thinking what Sophie would do, she'd slightly hitched up her dress and slipped off her shoes. 'This is lovely,' she'd said.

‘And so are you,’ he’d replied.

Much later, topping up her wine, he’d grinned at her. ‘I’ve done nothing but talk. Now it’s your turn. Tell me about you.’

The mild panic was there as always, but he hadn’t told her anything really. He was a solicitor, he lived somewhere in Cheshire, he played football on a Sunday, but nothing personal, somehow. She found she liked it; she liked that he talked incessantly, but didn’t say anything profound.

‘Well ...’ she’d begun, but as though sensing her hesitation, he’d put up his hand.

‘No, don’t tell me anything. You’re perfect just as you are.’

But after all the arguments with her last boyfriend, she hadn’t wanted to appear odd, wanted to get it out of the way. ‘I run a hair salon, share a flat with two friends. My dad died way back, but I still have my mum. She’s a bit fragile so she’s in a care home.’ She’d smiled, embarrassed. ‘No brothers or sisters, so there’s pretty much just me.’

David had gazed at her, but after a few moments the intensity in his eyes was replaced with a smile. ‘Me too. Parents died long ago. See? I knew you were perfect.’ He’d leaned back and stretched out his legs. ‘Told you last night you were the woman I’d marry.’ Turning to the grand facade of Lyme Hall, he’d nodded. ‘Did I mention I’m going to buy you one of these?’

Antonia now smiles and shakes her head at the memory. It had been the first time she’d visited a National Trust property and David had watched her face as she’d gazed wide-eyed and open-mouthed at its magnificence and splendour. Though considerably smaller, it’s what his clients and visitors say of White Gables all the time: ‘The renovation is magnificent. Must have cost a fortune.’ She can see that and she’s proud, but it’s the garden which pleases her. She feels she’s had more of an input. Not planting, necessarily, though she did all the bedding plants herself, but nurturing. She nurtures the plants, the beds and the bushes and they respond in kind.

‘Antonia, darling, you do have green fingers!’ Naomi the neighbour shouts from over the fence, her voice startling Antonia as she stands on the doorstep. She feels suddenly shy.

‘Perhaps I do,’ she replies with a guilty clutch of conceit as she blushes in acknowledgement.

It relaxes her usually; the garden, the fresh air, the birds and the hills reaching up to the steep ridge of The Edge. But today she’s agitated and even gardening hasn’t settled her. She goes inside, takes off her waxed jacket in the hall and strokes her arm. The cut has started to scab and it’s itchy. It always is when the healing process is underway. Like a little reminder.

‘The Chablis has been staring at me again,’ Sophie joked the other day.

‘Then don’t have it in the house,’ Antonia replied sternly.

But she understood completely. A tempting treat at the tip of one’s fingertips. It’s just a question of how long each of them can resist.

‘That’s a nasty cut,’ David had commented, not so long ago. ‘How did you do that?’

They were in bed and a shaft of light slanting through the shutters lit her naked body.

‘Gardening. Those hawthorns can be vicious,’ she’d replied brightly, turning towards him and pulling him into an embrace. But she’d caught his troubled look, that frown of love he has when he doesn’t know she’s looking. She must be more careful.

The answerphone light in the kitchen is flashing. She sighs and stares for a moment, then walks briskly to the telephone, quickly presses play, turns her back and busies herself loudly at the sink as though that will swamp the sound of the inevitable.

‘Hi, it’s Zara Singh again. The journalist? I think we got cut off. I’d really appreciate it if you could call me back?’ The rise in tone makes it sound like a question. And then she hears Candy’s hesitant voice, for the fourth time today. ‘Hello, Chinue, love. It’s Mum. Are you there?’

Olivia pushes the washing-machine door to, programmes a light wash and then leans against it, staring out of the utility room window which, she notes with a sigh, needs cleaning both inside and out. She knows she’s been moody and uncommunicative with the girls again today and feels vaguely guilty, but the truth is she can’t help herself.

She looks at her hands, which still have a slight tremor. Her jaw is aching from clenching her teeth. She's seething. She seethed silently all night and all day and the churning hasn't abated, not even a drop.

'The bastard, the absolute bastard.' The sheer anger and frustration brings tears to her eyes while his words repeat in a galling loop in her head. She marches into the kitchen and puts on the kettle before collapsing on to a chair. 'Fuck you, Mike,' she says out loud.

She considers phoning her sister, regaling her with last night's conversation word for word. But she knows what her sister will say. 'Come on, Olivia. He's only human. Everything's fine now you know he's not having an affair with his tarty secretary or anyone else. I told you so.'

Her sister likes Mike. Everybody likes bloody Mike. But not everyone agreed to bear him another child. She really didn't want a third child but she did it for him. She went through yet another amniocentesis to check for Down's Syndrome and then experienced the worst of her pregnancies with horrendous sickness and overwhelming tiredness while having to care for two other young demanding children. It was she who gave birth to a dead baby; it was she who felt the pain and the fear, the impotence, the failure.

'Fuck you, Mike!' she declares again. And then, 'God, what a cow' as she leans down to pick up a piece of ceramic she's missed from the floor. She looks at Hannah's empty seat and feels another wave of emotion. Hannah is only five, accidents are bound to happen and it's only a broken cereal bowl. How she wishes she hadn't shouted quite so loudly and for quite so long. Hannah cried so much at school that the teacher had to peel her away from Olivia's arms. Then she walked away swiftly, down the long corridor, past all the happy pictures and paintings and books, fearful that the teacher would call her back and suggest she take Hannah home.

Olivia sighs loudly. An awful mother and murderous to boot. Focusing on Hannah, her anger recedes for a spell. She'll make it up to her after school, she thinks, her mind racing with ideas. She'll make her a cake or buy her a treat and say sorry. She'll try to be patient, she'll try to be kind.

Lifting her head, she glances at the clock to check the time, but her eyes catch the wedding portrait of her and Mike hanging against the dark red wallpaper in the hall, still not replaced from when they moved in nine years ago. That couple was happy, she thinks, look how they laughed.

Stepping forward, she studies the photograph. She hasn't looked at it, really looked at it, for a long time and yet she walks past it maybe twelve times a day. Perhaps that's what's happened to their marriage, she thinks, perhaps they've grown so used to each other that they just walk past without seeing.

She gazes at Mike's striking face in the photograph. She can see no resemblance between him and the man who said those hurtful words about the miscarriage to her last night, even though they look much the same. The person in the photograph was fun, he was open and loving, a man who wore his heart on his sleeve. Not a man given to irrational deep thought.

Olivia shakes her head as the anger resurfaces. The bastard implied she was somehow responsible for the miscarriage, for the death of their son. She still can't believe it; it was an unforgivable thing to say, but an even worse thing to actually believe.

Antonia looks at her watch and continues her pacing from the lofty hallway, around the staircase to the lounge. She feels guilty. Hot and guilty. She's aware that it's a terrible betrayal, but she can't help herself. She's spent half an hour reapplying her make-up and has changed her clothes twice. It's ridiculous, she knows, but she's nervous, more nervous than she ever expected. She catches her face in the hall mirror and somebody else stares back with long, straight, dark hair looking polished, calm and relaxed.

It's not as though I don't know him, she thinks. It's me who instigated it and now I must see it through with no regrets.

She glances at her watch one more time, the white-gold strap bright against her honey-coloured skin. He'll be here any minute and it wouldn't do to be waiting at the door. She walks into the silent

lounge and puts on an Adele CD for company. Standing for a moment, she listens, but even Adele's intoxicating voice doesn't seem right, so she turns it off and plumps up the sofa cushions yet again.

The doorbell is shrill in the silence. Antonia stands up, touches her hair and then takes a deep breath. Then she walks to the front door, straightens her shoulders and opens it.

'Hello, Sami,' she says.

CHAPTER NINE

Olivia is running late as she leaves her untidy house to collect Hannah from school. The afternoon has flown by as it always does and she feels hot as she searches for her keys, but the cold air swipes her cheeks at the door, so she turns back to fetch her coat. It's only then that she stops to study the wedding photograph again. She doesn't look at the man this time, but at the girl. She has pale hair and pastel eyes but a bright, confident smile. She holds a single bunch of yellow roses and her dress is traditional but plain. There are no feathers or frills in her hair. This isn't a girl who needs chocolates or flowers to tell her she is loved. This isn't a girl who craves flattery or attention to give her self-worth. This is a girl who's said 'for better or for worse' and who means it.

'Here's the post for signing, Mike,' Judith says as she neatens a letter escaping from the tidy rectangle of her long day's endeavours.

Mike looks up at her and nods, then drops his head again, continuing to punch numbers into a calculator, which spews out digits on a tiny receipt. She turns away towards the filing cabinet, feeling contemplative. The filing is up to date, but she hovers for a moment, busying herself by opening cabinet drawers, tidying the hanging baskets and closing them again. Mike hasn't said much to her at all today. He looks tired and unhappy, and she wonders how the flowers fared last night. Pretty badly, by the looks of it, she concludes.

She casts a final glance at Mike and notes that his frown line seems more pronounced than usual. It is, she reflects, the one slight imperfection in an otherwise perfect face.

She has her hand on the handle when he abruptly speaks. 'Who's the father of your baby, Jude?' he asks.

Judith turns, blurting out a laugh of surprise. It's the first time in all the years she's known him that he's asked such a personal question. 'Bloody hell, Mike. Am I dreaming or did you really ask me that?'

He drops his intense gaze and picks up a pen. 'Sorry,' he says. 'None of my business.'

Judith studies his slightly flushed face. There's something vulnerable about him, she thinks, like a little lost boy who needs a big cuddle from the wicked witch or the snow queen, to be led by the hand into the land of temptation ... he just doesn't know it.

She toys with the idea of teasing him, perhaps asking if he realises his question is tantamount to sexual harassment, or something similar, but he looked so sincere when he posed the question that a straight answer seems only fair.

'No, that's fine,' she says, pulling out the client chair and sitting heavily, grateful to be off her feet for a minute or two. 'Actually, no one in particular, as it happens. Just someone who was tall and pleasant for an evening or two. With hair and good shoes. And, of course, with straight white teeth.' She smiles. 'Some things you can't compromise on.'

She watches him absorb her reply and then laughs at the look of mild shock on his face when he realises her answer is serious. 'For a leftie, you're very conservative at times. I don't know why you're surprised, Mike. You of all people know I've tried them all, big, small, black, white. I even married a couple and they all ended in disaster. So I figured there's me and my mum and that's all the baby needs.'

She stops for a moment, her head cocked. She can almost see the slow chug of Mike's mind trying to keep up, to understand. 'Ask yourself this, Mike: what's better, to have a dad who buggers off after two minutes, to have one who gives the odd slap, or not to have one at all? Well, I know which one I'd prefer, the one with the least heartache.'

It's dusk outside, the office empty save, perhaps, for one or two other surveyors who are still at their work stations clocking up chargeable hours before the end of the month. Mike sits at his desk for a long time without moving. It's the first time in twelve years of marriage that he doesn't want to

rush home at the end of the day. He has no idea what awaits him. Olivia busied herself with the girls and their school bags when he left this morning, avoiding all eye contact with him.

It has been a day of maybes, his mind fit to burst with the awful uncertainty of it all. Maybe Olivia will forgive him for the things that he said. Maybe life will go on as before. He wants it to, of course, but there's an iota of a maybe that still hangs around, suggesting there's no smoke without fire. Maybe he was right.

Last night everything was fine. After the frisson of the shower he took Olivia to bed, dried her body with kisses and eventually she smiled and said, 'Yes, just there. That's so nice. Oh, Mike, where have you been?' It was love at its best, hearing her come, the sweetest of sounds and one he can never get enough of, before releasing himself.

'You didn't explain why,' she said later as they lay entwined in the dark. 'Why you went away in here,' she said, kissing his temple.

Mike sighed. His fears now felt foolish and childish. He'd hoped she wouldn't ask. 'It doesn't matter now,' he said, drawing her close.

'It matters to me,' Olivia said, pulling away from him. She turned on the bedside lamp and looked intently at his face. 'What was it, Mike? Was it the miscarriage? I thought we grieved together and put it behind us.'

He sat up, staring ahead at nothing in particular. He suddenly felt angry, really angry. He could feel the heat rise in his body, the colour flood his face. 'You put it behind us, Olivia. You wiped the slate clean and said "never mind".'

He could feel her flinch, heard her intake of breath, but he knew he wouldn't stop. 'But you didn't pause for one moment to consider how I felt. Everyone was there with their condolences and their sympathy. We're so sorry, Olivia, how are you, Olivia, can I do anything, Olivia. He was my child too, my loss. It was me who wanted him, not you.'

'That isn't fair, Mike. You have no idea what it's like to be pregnant, let alone give bloody birth. I was as sick as a dog, in and out of hospital with the vomiting. It was bloody awful but I did it for you. Because you had some stupid hang-up about wanting a son. How do you think the girls would feel if they knew that they weren't good enough for you, just because of their gender? We live in the twenty-first century for God's sake, women are equal and our girls are wonderful.'

He turned his head and stared at Olivia. He could feel a throb in his temple. 'That's crap and you know it. I wanted another child, Olivia. Another *child*. It might have been a girl, and that would have been great.'

'But it was a boy, Mike, and you couldn't conceal your delight, could you? It was written all over your face when they told us, your son and heir, just what you always wanted. Until that moment I didn't realise how much I'd disappointed you with mere daughters.'

Part of Mike wanted to shout. Part of him wanted to take Olivia by the throat and shake the unfairness of her words out of her. But instead he dropped his head, the cold despair he'd felt for months seeping through his body, dispersing the heat. 'Don't you dare say that. You're not being fair. I adore my girls, you know I do.'

They sat for a moment and listened to the gentle thrum of the traffic from the far-off motorway.

'Then why the total withdrawal and the silent treatment for so long?' Olivia asked quietly.

He looked at her then. The harshness had gone from her face. Her pale eyes were sad, soft, concerned. He was hurting her. He was hurting himself. He understood this and yet he knew he had to push ahead through the numbness, to at least try to focus his mind and put his thoughts into words.

'Because try as I did, I couldn't put it him to rest, Olivia. I've spent months asking myself why. Why did our little boy die? No one had a reason, he wasn't Down's or disabled. He was perfect, wasn't he?'

Olivia nodded, her head propped on her knees, her fingers playing with the quilt and so he continued, trying to marshal his thoughts and frame them into words. 'And because we got no answers from the hospital or the consultant, my mind has tormented me with its own.'

'And they are?' Olivia asked slowly, turning her head to look at him.

Mike was silent for a while, but he had come so far, he knew it had to be said, to exorcise those ugly pestering thoughts, if nothing else. The frequent picture he had in his mind of Olivia with a glass of wine in one hand and a cigarette in the other flashed before his eyes. She hadn't touched a drop of alcohol when pregnant with the girls. Prawns and eggs and all manner of other foods had been off the menu too. 'That you did something. God, I don't know. It sounds so stupid now, but I felt that by thought, or by word or by deed you did something. Something to cause the miscarriage.'

For a moment Olivia didn't move, her unfathomable gaze fixed on his face. Seconds ticked by as he waited for an answer, a reaction. The moment he had voiced his innermost ugly thoughts, he knew how unworthy and pathetic they were.

She eventually stood from the bed and walked into the en-suite bathroom, closing the door quietly behind her. He watched and waited, numb, wretched and unbelievably tired. He had wanted to say it for so long that the desire to confess had become overwhelming. But now the words were out, he felt bereft and empty. As though someone had put their hand in his chest and pulled out his heart.

He'd started to drift off by the time Olivia returned to the bed. 'You bastard,' she said, quite clearly, as she turned off the lamp.

The unmistakable and sickening sound of two cars colliding on the busy main road outside Mike's office building jolts him back to the present. 'You bastard', he still hears, but he knows it's time to go home.

'When you're feeling sorry for yourself, remember there's always someone worse off,' his grandpa often said when life had gone awry and little Michael sought him out for a hug. Same words as the priest, but delivered so much more kindly. Mike nods in acknowledgement, hoping that no one has been hurt in the collision below. He collects his jacket from the back of his chair. But still he can hear the tip-tap of the dog's claws on the laminate behind him as he turns off the light and heads for home.

Olivia smooths the clean sheets on the bed, then stares into space for a few breathless moments before trudging wearily down the stairs. She waits for Mike in the lounge, her head resting on the sofa's curved arm. She's exhausted; complete physical and mental exhaustion. Anger has sapped her and she wants to sleep. But at least it's gone, or even if not completely, it has receded, to be replaced by that old, familiar feeling of self-loathing.

As a small child her temper was the family joke, her tantrums legendary. 'Short-fuse Olivia,' her dad regularly teased with his soft Geordie accent. As much as she tried, she was unable to count to ten, to bite her tongue, breathe deeply or any of the other things she knew she should do to control it. But coming down south to university in Manchester changed her. By writing, debating and using self-styled anger management, she stopped her knee-jerk reactions, she put her sharp mind and sharp tongue to good use.

But 'short-fuse Olivia' is still there, she fears, increasingly pestering to break free. She hates being a cow, even when she's being a 'justifiable' cow, she hates it. She despises herself for allowing short-fuse Olivia and her knee-jerk reactions to escape.

She checks her mobile again. Still no word from Mike. He always sends a text when he's leaving the office. Perhaps he's still working; perhaps he's angry; perhaps he's bugged off forever. It's difficult to judge. Last night she was a cow. Last night they were strangers.

She's tried to make amends with the girls by buying Hannah a chocolate cake from Morrisons, undoubtedly full of hyperactivity-inducing additives which they'll pay for tomorrow, and then covering it with sweets to make it look home-baked. She's given Rachel a 'don't tell Dad' expensive mascara. But with Mike it's more difficult. Now that she's calm she knows everything is fine, actually.

He said some crazy things last night, but he was honest. Wasn't that what the couple in the wedding photograph used to do? Be honest and open and talk? Talk for hours. About everything. Sometimes all night. She needs to say sorry, to get things back on track. 'Sorry, Mike,' she should say. As simple as that. And as difficult. Olivia struggles with that word. She always has.

She feels the vibration of her mobile under the cushion. Holds her breath as she opens the message from Mike.

On my way home, it reads.

CHAPTER TEN

'Mum's driving over on Sunday. I thought we could eat out. Catch a bite in the village,' Sami shouts from the bathroom.

Sophie marks the page of the book club choice with a bookmark from Waterstones. She hates it when people fold the corner of the page. It's just about the only thing she's fastidious about and she vaguely wonders what that says about her.

She stretches and yawns, still sleepy from her afternoon nap. 'You know she'll think I'm not looking after you if we do that,' she calls back. 'She'll think I'm a bad wife.'

'No she won't. Mum likes to go out.'

Sophie reaches for her glasses and regards Sami as he rubs his hair dry with a thick stripy towel. She's pretty sure he has no inkling of how much his mother dislikes her. Martha made it clear from the start that she didn't approve of her beloved only son's choice of wife. Sophie doubts any woman would have been good enough, but a neat, compliant and privately educated posh girl might have done the job. 'I know what you are,' she once hissed when Sami's back was turned. 'You're a fraud and you're not good enough for my son.' And the hostile relationship has continued unabated in private ever since.

Sophie has no intention of making Sami aware of his mother's barbed comments, however bad they get. There's just the tiniest fear at the tips of her toes that if Sami knows his mother's real feelings he may be swayed by them and she isn't going to take that chance.

She pulls back the duvet and stands up. Her breasts seem huge, but so do her legs and her belly; too much Chablis is making her fat. She needs to rein it in.

'Whatever you want, my handsome husband. But if you'd like me to cook, it's not a problem. I like to make the effort for Martha.'

Martha and her comments are better ignored. She finds that fairly easy, but wishes she could do the same with Sami's occasional dalliances. 'So, you don't mind my son sleeping with other women?' Martha had asked conversationally, having drawn her to one side during their third wedding anniversary celebrations. If anyone was looking, they'd have seen mother and daughter-in-law, happy, smiling, chatty.

The pain was intense, deep and physical. Sophie extracted herself from the tête-à-tête with her head held high, a smile on her face, but threw up moments later alone in the bathroom. She stared at her blanched face in the mirror, bewildered that she didn't know. Sassy, streetwise Sophie, who knew everything and everyone, didn't know that her husband was unfaithful. She could picture schoolgirl faces laughing, taunting and gleeful. It was all she could do not to run to her mother, despite their differences, to howl in her lap, to beg her to make it all go away. But she knew that she had to be strong if she wanted to keep Sami, she had to be willing to fight. 'As long as he isn't fucking you, Martha, it's not a problem,' she'd replied.

'I'll rustle up something tasty,' Sophie now says, wondering which ready meal to buy from the small M&S local in the village. She'll do the usual, buy soup or a casserole and throw in some fresh mushrooms and herbs to make it look authentic. It never fools Martha, but if Sami's aware that his wife hasn't spent hours over a hot stove just for the love of his mum, he isn't letting on.

'A touch of arsenic on toast for the good lady, I think,' Sophie jokes with Antonia. But of course she's never mentioned Sami's infidelity, not even to her.

The thoughts of his unfaithfulness are there, always there, like a blade in her heart, but Sophie isn't going to dwell on them today. She stands next to Sami in the mirror and looks at him with narrowed eyes. I'll never let you go, never, she thinks, watching carefully as he splashes aftershave liberally on his newly shaved chin.

'It's only the lads' Friday night in the pub, Sami. I don't suppose they give two hoots how delicious you smell.'

'It's all to do with standards, woman. How many times do I have to tell you?' he replies laughing, catching her around her waist, then kissing the side of her head. 'Thanks for offering to cook for Mum. I appreciate it. She's really excited about the IVF.'

He pauses for a moment before turning back to the mirror, carefully stroking strands of his fringe back into place, then collects his watch and slips it over his long, slim fingers. All without making eye contact with anyone but himself.

Sophie takes a deep hot breath. 'Sami? We agreed not to tell your mum about the IVF. What have you—'

'Talk later,' he interrupts. 'Can't be late for the lads.' And with that he leaves.

Helen puts down her fork. She knows Charlie hates her to eat with only a fork. 'So bloody American. Too lazy to use both hands,' is his usual comment. But it's only pasta and a bit too al dente, in her view. She has difficulty either scooping or stabbing the shells, she'll use a spoon next time.

She looks at Charlie. His face has all the charm of a petulant three-year-old and his accusing stare follows the fork. She almost wants to laugh, but she's never pandered to Charlie's silly whims and she isn't going to start now.

'There's no point in sulking, Charles. Ted Edwards nominated me out of a whole department of very clever people. I'm not going to change my mind,' she says, wondering how long he's going to play his puerile game of silence.

She's been patient up to now, but Charlie's juvenile behaviour is starting to annoy her. After her New York announcement on Wednesday, his face became worryingly tomato-hued and he briefly tried to argue with her. He even said, 'No, I won't allow it!' to which she replied, 'Don't be ridiculous, Charles!' Then he stomped out of the dining room and didn't say another word until he discovered, mid-evacuation, that the toilet roll had run out.

There was something of a tussle with the duvet when they eventually got to bed that night, but Charlie maintained his silence all the way up to and then throughout breakfast, which Helen thought was absurd when he made so much noise eating his toast. She decided that ignoring him was the best policy. Rupert had occasionally sulked as a child and she found that disregarding it was best. He soon realised that it simply wouldn't work and wasn't worth the effort. Helen hopes that's precisely what Charlie will do, but so far the strategy isn't working.

She stares a moment longer at Charlie before rising from the table. She and Charlie hardly disagree on any matter and she doesn't like it when they do. Of course she's aware of his stubborn streak, but she's seldom been subjected to it. It's Friday now and he's still sulking but she sees no other way than holding her ground.

She deftly operates her new espresso coffee machine. Helen rarely spends money on frivolities and this has set her back three hundred pounds, but she can't get enough of it. It's like a shiny new toy at Christmas and has even aroused feelings of empathy in her for Rupert and his hoard of electronic gadgets. She'll miss her coffee machine, but she supposes that they have such luxuries in New York and, if they don't, it won't be the end of the world. She pours an espresso into the tiny cup, the caffeine from the last one already working its magic, and then she frowns at her husband, her patience almost gone.

'For goodness sake, Charles, it's been days, you'll have to speak soon. We can't possibly drive all the way to Staffordshire without saying a word and it'll look rather odd in front of the headmaster if we don't agree a riposte. He'll think that Rupert's a druggie because of bad parenting.'

'Well, he'd be right, wouldn't he?' Charlie blurts.

Helen's tempted to crow for having provoked him into speech, but she thinks better of it and silently watches him take a large gulp of air before his inevitable onslaught.

'You are a bad parent if you're buggering off to America without giving us a second thought. Rupert needs you here. I need you here, as well you know.' Charlie's face goes from frenzied to truculent. He puts his hand on his chest and makes a small cough. 'Besides, I'm not going to see the headmaster or anyone else.'

'Why on earth not? Do you want him to be expelled?' Helen replies with surprise. It's a response she hadn't expected.

'Perhaps I do want him to be expelled if it'll stop you from waltzing off to God knows where. I have a job, Helen, an important job and I couldn't possibly be left in charge of a juvenile delinquent on my own. I don't suppose you've given a second's thought to what we'll do with Rupert in the holidays.'

'Oh, for goodness sake, Charles, our son is not a juvenile delinquent, as you so generously put it, he's just growing up and experimenting. It's natural. Don't tell me you didn't try the odd puff or tab at university. I certainly did.'

Charlie stares at Helen for a few moments. She thinks of Paddington Bear and his hard stare, except Charlie's eyes are grey, not brown. The blue dressing gown he usually likes to wear for breakfast adds to the mental image and she has to try very hard not to chuckle.

'Well, that explains a lot,' he eventually replies before scraping the chair back and stomping off in his slippers, slamming the oak-panelled door behind him.

Sophie waits for the click of the front door, then lowers herself on to the toilet seat, puts her hands to her face and weeps. Heavy tears. Frustration, anger, anxiety and despair blending with the intoxicating aroma of Sami's aftershave. The tears soon stop, but she doesn't move, she doesn't have the energy. Or the inclination. And it's only the ladies book club. She can go back to bed and ignore the doorbell. They can all sod off somewhere else. But eventually Sophie remembers the glorious chilled wine waiting in the fridge and by the time Antonia arrives, first as always, she's cleaned her teeth, done battle with her contact lenses, applied make-up, got dressed in a too-tight lycra bodycon dress, danced to some Beyoncé and drunk two large glasses of wine.

'He's told his fucking mother!' she announces at the open front door.

'Can I get in first? He's told his fucking mother what?'

'About the IVF.'

'Oh.' Antonia shakes her umbrella and looks at it doubtfully. 'It's raining. Where should I put this?'

Sophie ambles to the lounge. 'It pisses me off. He pisses me off. It's always the same. If he's got something to say that he knows I won't like, he lets it out as a parting shot when he's halfway out of the front door. He's afraid of confrontation. He's a fucking coward.'

'Aren't we all?'

Sophie follows Antonia's eyes and shrugs. 'I couldn't be bothered with tidying. But I did buy Kettle Crisps. Oh, and wine. I've started, join me. Of course he knows I'll simmer down. No doubt he thinks I'll be nicely caramelised by the time he gets home. More like anaesthetised.' She looks thoughtful for a moment, then smiles. 'But it's the book club, so Sami can't possibly complain about wine, sweet wine. At least that's a result.'

Antonia stoops to the coffee table, collects some dirty mugs and heads for the kitchen. 'Shall I open the crisps?' she asks.

'And why has he told her now?' Sophie continues, following Antonia into the kitchen. 'He didn't before. Understandably. He hates failure. I mean, what does one say to one's mother who has so many kids that she obviously couldn't say no?'

'Sophie! That's not—'

'He's told her because he doesn't want me to back out. Of course that's a joke; it shows just how little he sees. If he understood anything at all, he'd know that the last thing his mother wants is the tie of a grandchild, she'll never get rid of me then.' Sophie puts her hands on her hips and frowns.

'I'm sure Martha—'

‘Oh God. The fat old cow’ll put her oar in every step of the way. What if she wants to come to appointments and pretend to hold my hand when Sami’s at work? Suppose she asks the doctor questions?’

Antonia puts a hand either side of Sophie’s shoulders and holds her firmly. ‘Sophie, calm down. Everything’s fine. Really. And there’s the doorbell. I hope you’ve read the book this time.’

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Antonia drops David off outside the Royal Oak as usual, but after waving her off, he walks away from the pub, past Aladdin's, the deli and Cartridge World towards the huge Victorian houses on Parsonage Road, most of which have been converted into flats.

David had lived in Withington as a student at Manchester Poly and he still feels a tremendous affection for it, for its buzz, its strange mix of young and old, its pubs and late drinking clubs. The best kebab take-out in South Manchester too, still going strong at midnight over twenty years on.

He'd got a place at the polytechnic through clearing to read law at pretty much the last moment and had to search for digs. It had been a lonely search. School and the Proctors had been his family until then, but suddenly he was eighteen, he had three duff A levels and the trustees who'd carefully nurtured his parents' wealth just handed it over to him, job done. Still officially under his aunt's roof in Matlock, he'd gone a little wild at first, buying a silver soft-top MG and spending the summer visiting school mates dotted around the country, dishing the dosh. But Charlie intervened when David crashed the MG on a lonely Derbyshire lane. He'd taken to the narrow tree-lined lanes when he was bored at his aunt's, 'to test the motor to its limit', and on one of those days of boredom, 'a bend appeared in the road which hadn't been there before', as he laughingly told Charlie.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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