

Samantha Tonge

The
New
Beginnings
Coffee Club

A heartwarming
and uplifting
romance



Samantha Tonge

**The New Beginnings Coffee Club: The
feel-good, heartwarming read from
bestselling author Samantha Tonge**

«HarperCollins»

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The New Beginnings Coffee Club: The feel-good, heartwarming read from bestselling author Samantha Tonge / S. Tonge — «HarperCollins»,

‘Pick up a latte and relax into this cosy read that’s chock-full of surprises!’ - Mandy Baggot
Everyone deserves a second chance...don’t they? Jenny Masters finds herself living the modern dream. Wife to a millionaire, living in a mansion and mother to Kardashian-obsessed ten-year-old April, there isn’t anything missing. Until, her whole world comes crashing down, forcing Jenny and April to leave behind their glittering life and start over with nothing. With village gossip following her wherever she goes, she finds refuge and a job in the new coffee shop in town. As the days pass Jenny fears she doesn’t have what it takes to pick herself back up and give April the life she always wanted to. But with the help of enigmatic new boss Noah, and housemate Elle, Jenny realises it’s never too late to become the woman life really intended you to be!
What reviewers are saying about The New Beginnings Coffee Club: ‘One of the freshest, captivating, and inspiring contemporary fiction novels that I have read in a very long time’ Books of all Kinds ‘A fantastic, charming story.’ With Love For Books ‘What a great story for your holiday reading, wonderful characters and written superbly by a great author.’ Karen’s World ‘It’s a wonderful, beautiful read.’ Whispering Stories Book Blog ‘What I truly loved about this novel was the sentiment of if you want to change something you can.’ Hayley Reviews

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Jenny Masters finds herself living the modern dream. Wife to a millionaire, living in a mansion and mother to Kardashian-obsessed ten-year-old April, there isn't anything missing. Until, her whole world comes crashing down, forcing Jenny and April to leave behind their glittering life and start over with nothing.

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The New Beginnings Coffee Club

Samantha Tonge



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About the Publishers

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New beginnings indeed – with heartfelt thanks to Angela, Karen, Mark, Mary and Michelle.

Prologue

I looked at Mum and we grinned. Every time I made fairy cakes, flour somehow ended up on my face. The giveaway? Like the Easter bunny's, my nose twitched from side to side.

'Just look at the state of you, Jenny Jarvis,' she teased and rolled her eyes. All crinkly around the edges, they looked tired. It was Easter Sunday and Mum had looked after my grandparents all weekend. They were still in bed. We'd got up early to make chocolate mini-egg cakes. They were my favourite and Mum had baked them for my last birthday, when I turned ten. *I'm not a stickler for tradition*, she would say, and we sometimes had turkey roast with all the trimmings, months away from Christmas. Dad said that was one of the reasons he loved her to bits. She'd always make a big batch of his favourite festive figgy puddings, so that he could also eat them in summer, autumn, and spring.

My chest glowed as I watched her hum a cheerful song, whilst doing the washing up. Strong. Comforting. Cuddly. Mum was like the best teddy bear in the world. I breathed in the yummy cocoa smells that wafted from the oven.

'Keep beating, sweetheart – the butter and sugar won't cream themselves.'

As Mum hummed increasingly loudly, I bit my bottom lip and my arm moved faster. Finally the ingredients came together and the icing looked all shiny and smooth.

She passed over a mini-egg and winked. 'We ought to try one each – just to check they're okay.'

I giggled. Mum could obviously read my mind as well. I popped it into my mouth. My teeth cracked the outer shell and as the gooey insides melted across my tongue, I glanced at the clock. Nine o'clock.

'Will we have time to fill the bird feeders, before Granny and Granddad come down? Those goldfinches need to keep up their strength to care for the chicks. They looked so cute, last week, hopping across the lawn after Dad mowed it.' I gazed out of the window, to see a blue sky and sunrays lighting up the oak's new leaves. Attached to the trunk was a bird box Mum had assembled from a kit.

She was clever like that. Did amazing things with craft stuff and food. Worked part-time as a receptionist, at the local vet's. The kitchen always smelt tasty and the garden overflowed with life.

'Don't worry. We'll make sure they also get Easter treats.' Mum brushed straggly curls out of her eyes. She didn't wear much make-up but, I reckoned, was the prettiest person in the world. Of course, we had our fallouts. She didn't look quite so pretty when she was cross with me for not doing my homework. And she could be annoying, like insisting I tidy my room, even though I knew exactly where I'd put everything. But Mum believed in keeping things simple. Appreciating nature. Making instead of buying. That made life fun.

I smiled to myself, at how she often brushed off compliments – or went bright red. Like when Daddy once told her that she had a heart bigger than a whale's ... Mind you, that hadn't sounded especially romantic. Playfully she'd punched his arm and we'd all laughed.

'Right, let's check those cakes, Jenny. We don't want them burnt or too flat. I'll take them out of the oven. You can press the sponge, with your fingers, and decide if they are ready yet.'

I did as I was told. 'They feel all springy – like my bed mattress.'

'Perfect. Just like you.' She took off the oven gloves and gave me a hug.

Feeling safer than a baby kangaroo in its mummy's pouch, I closed my eyes and held her ever so tight. *No, you're the perfect one*, I thought, and if I ever have a daughter, I'm going to be exactly the same sort of mum as you ...

Chapter One

Celebrity glossy hair. Cerise-pink painted nails. A beige dress with matching nude sandals. I tore my gaze away from April and felt a lump in my throat – she looked so grown-up. It was hard to believe my daughter was only ten.

My friend Chanelle, who owned this nail salon, had just thrown a party for her little girl, Skye. I say little girl, but as I gazed at the posse of mothers and daughters, preening in front of large mirrors, apart from their height they all looked the same. I'm talking designer handbags, straightened hair, and the most on-trend clothes, as if it was just a different uniform to wear, outside of the girls' posh private school. But it made me feel comfortable, contented, to belong to some sort of clan.

A border full of plants in bud promising a colourful summer caught my attention. It reminded me of my own childhood building treehouses and getting close to nature in the field behind our two-up, two-down. Once I'd caught a frog to see if it really would turn into a prince. My gentle kiss on its head left me disappointed, and with a slimy lip-gloss effect that made Mum laugh hard.

How I'd loved baking with her and making feeders for birds. It had taken me a while to get used to the highflying life of my husband. I rarely cooked now. Nor spent much time in the garden. A heavy sensation briefly tickled my chest. I'm not sure why, because times changed, right, and no one wanted to be left behind?

'April has been so excited about today,' I said to Chanelle, who bobbed forwards and air-kissed my cheeks. My face broke into a smile as I scanned her tight dress, which hugged every unnatural inch. The boobs had been a thirtieth birthday present and the bum implants marked an anniversary. The generous curves suited my generous friend.

I glanced again at April and reflected, as I often did, that life was good. More than good, in fact, with my heartbreakingly handsome husband and luxurious family home. It was the perfect scenario to safely raise a child, thank goodness, because no one warns you that from the moment you give birth, the world suddenly looks like a dangerous place.

I squeezed Chanelle's shoulder and tickled behind the ears of Prada, the pug in her arms. The horizontally striped dress also hugged every good-hearted bone in her body. Since April had joined Skye's playground clique a year ago, after her best mate moved to Dubai, clothes horse Chanelle had vigorously welcomed us both into her life. How thrilled she'd been to know me, the wife of Zachary Masters, the head of her favourite fashion house Elite Eleganz.

Chanelle gave me a wide grin with her Julia Roberts mouth – although today there were no twinkly eyes to match.

I gazed around. 'So ... how's business going? Still on the up since you found that investor?'

Her cheeks pinked up. 'Not bad at all. Thank God. It was risky of me to plough all of my divorce money into expanding the place but I can't complain now. Finally we're enjoying a decent turnover.' She cleared her throat and gave another super bright smile. Something didn't seem right. 'It's been sheer torture not being able to enjoy my yearly cruise.' She said it like it was a joke, but with Chanelle you could never be sure.

Travel was as important to Chanelle as her credit card and facials. I took her cheery cue to change the subject. You see, our conversation never went much deeper than the Clarins concealer on her face. Chanelle always veered away from really personal chat. Instead we shared countless shopping trips and dissected celebrity gossip. It was a far cry from my student days, when I used to drink cheap lager, wear homemade tie-dye tops, and analyse the meaning of life with friends.

'Thanks again for having April over.' I studied her tired face, wondering how perky it actually looked like beneath the thick make-up. 'Let me help tidy up. You must be shattered.'

'No, it's fine, thanks. It won't take long. And anyway, as if Skye would have a party without her bezzie! April's a real credit to you, Jenny. Such good taste. Always picks the classiest shade of nail varnish. Plus she understands exactly why any self-respecting female should love glamorous reality shows ...' She was rambling now.

My mind drifted as I gave Prada another stroke. A credit to me for those qualities? Unusual, perhaps, considering her young age. But then celebrity is a modern religion and it's difficult not to get sucked in. An image of my own mum popped into my head, with her straggly hair and hands always covered in flour, soil, or soap. She'd taught me the different colours of garden birds, plus the importance of cooking and reading. Jeez. I gave a wry smile. My childhood sounded like a chapter from an Enid Blyton book.

'Did you have fun?' I bent down to give April a hug. She wrapped her arms around my waist and squeezed me tight. My chest glowed. If I could bottle that happy feeling, I'd become an addict overnight. We left the salon. It was a lovely May day. The sun shone. Laventon and the surrounding area was iconically English in appearance, with yellow rapeseed fields and low-ceilinged cottages. Yet it was only forty minutes from London, near enough not to miss out on that diverse city's offerings.

April peered up at me from under her brunette fringe and gave me a lipsticked smile. 'Fab-u-licious,' she said in her singsong voice. I grinned at her new favourite word. 'We watched two episodes of the Kardashians whilst Chanelle and Skye's auntie did our make-up.'

I thought back to a few weeks previously, in the month of my daughter's name. I'd asked her what sort of trip out she would prefer for her birthday – at her age I'd gone ice-skating, pottery painting, or the cinema maybe. She'd rolled her eyes at all three, preferring a disco limo or makeover party.

'She's only ten!' I'd mused with Zak that night, as he got in late from work again. He'd loosened his tie, revealing a patch of that toned, tanned chest, and poured a whisky. My husband epitomised sexual attraction with his dark looks and undressing-you eyes. At parties, women flocked to him as if he were a sweet treat and they were flies.

'Kids grow up faster these days. April's probably imitating you, what with your weekly manicures and designer clothes.' He'd smiled. 'Where has young Jennifer Jarvis gone – the fashion student with her geometric hairstyle and outlandish dress sense?'

Hmm. Good question. But nothing stayed the same – I'd become a wife, a mum. I'd grown up. Still, over the last couple of months, I'd spent an increasing amount of time thinking about my old sketches from college. Now that April was older, a yearning had struck me to restart my studies. The very thought made my stomach flutter. I'd never finished my degree. It would have taken a woman of strong mettle – make that metal – to resist Zak sweeping her off her feet at a zillion miles per hour.

I drove my yellow Mini back through Laventon, a chocolate-box village with its cobbled pavements and window boxes. We trundled past The Coffee Club, a new café that had opened last year. Before that, the little village had only had quaint tearshops, whereas this one specialised in all things caffeine, like powerful espressos and artistically decorated lattes.

'Shall we pick up a latte for Daddy?' said April, as if reading my thoughts. 'He doesn't believe the ones at The Coffee Club could be better than Starbucks.'

I smiled. The shop's owner, Noah, might have taken umbrage at that. He lovingly nursed each cup, creating appealing designs on top. I didn't know him well, but could tell he was passionate about coffee. He'd get this boyish grin on his face when a customer told him they'd thoroughly enjoyed their cuppa.

In fact, in keeping with his shop's name, he ran a monthly club for regulars to taste new flavours for free. Chanelle and I had attended several of these sessions and I'd sat in awe as Noah talked about roasting methods and the quality of different beans. He ordered them in from every corner of the globe.

'You know Daddy – he likes to stick to well-known brands.'

'Skye's gran goes in for one every day. The heart pattern is her favourite.'

I grinned. Once Noah had let slip that it had taken him weeks to learn latte art. Yet now he could magic leaves, footballs, teddy-bear faces, and all sorts out of steamed milk. And whilst a pure,

simple black Americano was his personal favourite, he apparently spent hours researching the latest flavoured syrups that younger customers loved.

‘So, how was the party food?’ I said, as we continued to drive past.

‘We ate cans of peas,’ she said proudly.

I couldn’t help smiling. ‘Canapés? Very grown-up. What sort?’

‘Um, this pink fish and ... and I’m not sure. Cheesy bits and coloured pastes.’ She grimaced. ‘And tiny black eggs that tasted of the sea.’

‘What about fairy cakes?’

A tut wafted my way. ‘No one calls them that any more, Mummy. We had skinny muffins – with soya ice cream. They were yum.’

‘Well, I’m glad you had a nice time. And to make it an even more fab-u-licious weekend ...’ April giggled ‘... how about you and me go to the pool tomorrow morning?’ I said. ‘You never go outside of your swimming lessons. Laventon leisure centre is holding a big inflatable session. Daddy is playing golf but we can all meet up for a nice Sunday roast. You know how he thinks the earth will stop spinning if we don’t keep up that Sunday tradition. Dot said she’d even make your favourite Yorkshire puddings and her lovely apple and bramble crumble. Skye could come if you want.’

I smiled to myself. No point asking Chanelle, who wouldn’t dip a single one of her perfectly pedicured toes in a public bath.

April slotted a CD into the music player and within seconds Beyoncé’s confident tones rang out. ‘Nooo. We’ve just had our hair done. Swimming will mess it up for school next week. Skye says we should try and keep it nice until then. Everyone will be well impressed. And she wouldn’t want Yorkshire puddings tomorrow – or dessert. Just chicken and vegetables. Me too.’ Her voice sounded kind of sad.

‘You love desserts!’ You used to, I thought, her subdued tones pinching my stomach.

‘Chanelle says it’s never too early to start being careful about satchel-ated fat.’

‘Do you know what that is?’ I said, as we turned into our drive. I shot a look at the passenger seat before pulling up in front of our triple garage. My stomach pinched tighter. Was her dress baggier than usual? Since she’d been hanging around with Skye’s clique I was worried April had developed a concern about her size.

‘Remember that chef she once had,’ April continued. ‘He used to work for Victoria Beckham.’

My lips upturned. I knew. Chanelle had rung me after hiring him, fizzing with excitement, like an opened can of shaken lemonade. This was before her divorce and financial straits. I pressed the remote control so that the garage door lifted.

‘Why can’t we have a chef who makes sushi and healthy stuff like that?’ she asked as I parked up inside.

I unfastened my seat belt and through the dim light, turned to face April. Her lips pursed together and she suddenly looked her age, innocence radiating from eyes that knew little of life’s dangers. Or was Zak right, that my biggest problem was worrying too much? Was I looking for flaws that didn’t exist in the diamond that was our life?

‘Well, we could – but wouldn’t you miss Dot?’ I asked, softly. ‘She’s been cooking for you – for us all – since you were knee-high.’

April cocked her head and nodded. ‘And ...’ she lowered her voice ‘... I didn’t say anything to Skye, but sushi is yuk. This seaweed roll made me gag.’

‘So, the pool, Yorkshire puddings, and crumble tomorrow?’ I said. ‘You can borrow my swimming cap. And we mustn’t forget your asthma inhaler.’

April pulled a face. ‘But I hardly ever need it in the summer.’

‘Sometimes your chest doesn’t like chlorine.’

‘Okay. Yes. Just you and me, then.’ She leaned over for a cuddle. I almost choked on the strong floral whiff but suffered it for the sake of holding her tight. I gave a big sniff.

‘It’s Chanelle’s new perfume. She saves it for special occasions. Epic, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ I managed, but couldn’t stop myself from sneezing.

‘Let’s go inside, so I can show you and Daddy my goody bag! Skye says it’s filled with amazing stuff, just like the gifts at those parties movie stars go to.’

We headed into our house, called The Willows. Okay, scrub house. Think mansion. It boasted eight bedrooms, six en suites, two living rooms, a giant kitchen, and a massive nursery, which we’d now converted into a cinema room. Dot helped me run the household, along with her husband who could mend shelves or prune anything in the garden. It hadn’t felt like home for a long time, after I’d first moved in. Too much space and not enough clutter, I used to think.

April grabbed my hand and pulled me into the smaller living room, the one we used most when we didn’t have guests – the one in which I felt truly comfortable, with furniture that didn’t quite match and ramshackle bookshelves. I sat down on a floral sofa, whilst April ran over to Zak and gave him the biggest hug, almost knocking his laptop onto the floor. My chest swelled as I observed the little family I’d nurtured and helped to grow. She collapsed onto a fringed rug. He shook his head from his favourite brown leather armchair.

‘Whoa, my little princess, talk about a whirlwind.’ He gave me a tired smile, not one of his killer ones that made my insides melt. After all these years, I still admired the breadth of his shoulders under his crisp white shirt and the solid legs shown off by denim jeans. He ran a hand through chestnut hair that always looked as if he’d just showered and styled it. Slicked back, it showed off his face – the strong chin, dark eyes, and generous lips that promised – and delivered every sort of pleasure a woman could want.

My cheeks flushed at the thought. The sizzling chemistry between us had always surmounted any problem, though recently it had lost a little of its fizz, like champagne that had been uncorked too long. Zak worked hard – too hard, of late.

‘How did it go?’ he asked and stared once again at his laptop.

‘April wants to show you her goody bag,’ I said pointedly. He caught my eye. I winked and jerked my head towards our daughter. Zak was a busy man, so sometimes I prodded to let him know that little bits of attention meant so much to her.

He pushed his laptop to one side and raised both eyebrows. April grinned, crossed her legs, and dipped into the silver bag, to pull out item after glossy item.

I should have been used to the excess, after ten years of being married to a millionaire. What a difference from the party bags my mum and I used to put together for my birthday bashes. They usually contained homemade fudge, crayoning books, and pretty pens.

That’s another thing. When you have kids, you can’t help but compare their childhood to your own. And you try to remedy all the things that, over the years, you felt your parents did wrong. Yet the biggest shock is to realise that most of the time, they had it right. I used to hate Mum’s strictness over bedtimes but now saw how ratty April got if she had even one late night.

‘This make-up is ace!’ she said and cooed over a palette of metallic colours. ‘I must go and show Dot. She’s always saying she never knows what colour eye shadow to wear. Then I’ll take a photo of it with all the other stuff.’ She pouted. ‘I wish you’d let me join Instagram, Mum.’

Whilst Zak was right – kids did grow up quickly nowadays – when it came to social media, I’d always been firm. ‘You know the rules – if you have to lie about your age to join, it’s a no-no.’

‘But it has amazing filters that make you look better and all my friends –’

I folded my arms.

‘Fine,’ she mumbled and scooped up all the items. She headed out of the room and pulled the door behind her.

I stood up and stared at the door. ‘You don’t think she’s getting a bit ... thin, do you?’ I asked.

Zak looked up. ‘This again? Stop stressing, baby. She’s just aware of healthy eating. They teach it nowadays at school.’

His eyes crinkled deeply at the corners, hardly surprising with all the hours he was putting in. I'd keep my concerns to myself for the moment. He clearly had enough to worry about. I didn't want to burden him. I dealt with our domestic life. He ran the business. Team work at its best, I'd always thought. Despite the age gap, we seemed remarkably well suited.

Business must have really been booming. Mind you, even if Zak had more time to think about anything but profit margins and chasing the edgiest designs, it would take a lot for him to admit April had a problem. Despite his modern appearance, my husband had some hardened, old-fashioned views – and not taking mental health issues seriously was one of them.

I sighed but quickly plastered a bright smile on my face. Zak got to his feet. Strode over to me. Took my hands. Gently his thumbs circled my palms. I looked up into his face. Wow, he'd aged well. At forty-three my husband looked hotter than ever and not much older than me at thirty-two.

His athletic body moved forwards and I breathed in his musky scent. It prompted images of us making love to fill my mind. How his strong frame would hold me prisoner in a sensual jail I never wanted to escape. How he'd become my world after making love to me for my very first time. My heart squeezed. He looked worn down. I'd hated the distance between us lately.

'Let's go out to dinner, tonight,' he said. 'How about The Rose Garden? I'll book a table for eight o'clock. There's ... something we need to discuss.'

'Are you sure you feel like it, darling?' *Please say yes!*

My heart leapt. If our favourite Italian restaurant couldn't relax him enough to enjoy a night of carnal pleasures, then nothing could. Also, time alone together would give me a chance to broach the subject of my return to college. He was right. We hadn't talked properly for a while. His voice sounded flat but I ignored that. He was making an effort and perhaps it was time I made more of an effort too. I ... I could book us a relaxing weekend away with restorative treatments galore and –

'I'm fine. But first I've got some business associates to meet ...'

'On a Saturday? Zak! You deserve more rest. Cancel it.' I stood on tiptoe and kissed him softly on the lips but he pulled back and I sensed an air of tension. It was weeks since we'd last made love. Zak always came home shattered and went straight to sleep. Then when we did get close – like right now – he found it difficult to unwind. Good red wine and a bowl of the finest pasta would serve as the perfect aphrodisiac. My pulse quickened.

At least, I hoped it would. This feeling of a gap between us had appeared once before – when his mum got cancer. She told him first and he kept it to himself. Shut off. Avoided my company. Became irritable. More often than usual, he lost his temper. He said afterwards it was because he couldn't face talking about it. So was Zak hiding something this time around? Only yesterday he'd been sitting in the lounge and had suddenly thrown his pen to the floor. Frustration over work, he'd said. It just wasn't like him at all.

'No can do. I'll shower and change before meeting them and see you there. Get a taxi,' he said, brow knotted.

'You really can't put them off? It's the weekend. I worry about you; I wish I could help ease the pressure.'

His face flushed. 'They head back to France tonight. I need to get them to sign on the dotted line before they catch their plane home. I'll get a lie-in tomorrow.'

He ran a hand across his forehead and I didn't push further. I kissed him again and one of his hands slid up, underneath my blouse at the back. My pulse broke all speed limits as I waited for him to become more daring with his fingers and move forwards, impatiently exploring my skin. But instead, he let go and simply kissed me on the cheek. My heart eventually slowed to its usual rhythm, as regular as a clock's tick.

I bit my lip with frustration, wanting to feel his body against mine; wanting to satisfy the knot of desire in my belly that only Zak could unravel. My stomach tingled at the thought of us sharing food and an early bedtime together, tonight – at the thought of my showing him exactly how much he

meant to me. A warmth rose through my body, up my thighs, and into my neck. For the hundredth time I ordered myself to count my blessings. I had more than some people could ever hope for. What had I done to deserve such a perfect existence?

Chapter Two

Little black dress. Up-do hair. Diamond earrings. Seeing as this was effectively a date, I'd made extra effort. My stomach tingled again, as the taxi pulled up outside The Rose Garden. I fumbled with my purse and recalled the steamy nights of our first years together. Limbs entwined, urgent kisses, Zak playing my body expertly as if he were its maestro. Yet for several weeks no music had been made between us and my perfect world had seemed a little less shiny. Tonight I was hoping for an orchestral performance that would infuse my life with atomic brightness.

Moustached Marco, The Rose Garden's owner, opened the glass door on cue, just as I approached. Glad to remove my faux-fur coat, I went in. The May evening was surprisingly warm.

'Buonasera, la signora Masters, come stai?'

'Bene, grazie,' I replied, voicing the extent of my Italian.

'You meet Mr Masters?'

I nodded.

'He no here yet. Perhaps you like a cocktail, first. Your usual?'

I beamed and followed him over to the gilt bar, put my handbag on it, and sat on one of the ornate gold and mahogany swings. I know – it was pure decadence, me hanging by two golden chains from the ceiling. This was the Great Gatsby lifestyle I'd become accustomed to.

I breathed in the aroma of tomato and basil and gazed around the restaurant, loving the red and cream walls and decorative, wicker wine-bottle holders. Each table bore a candle and a single red rose. Very gently, I swung to and fro as, over the next half an hour, the laughter and chat got louder.

I texted Zak for the second time as the hands on my Rolex showed half past eight and wished I'd brought my e-reader. I blamed Zak's long hours and his empty side of the bed for my latest obsession with quality erotica. The fluttery lightness in my chest subsided a little and I was just about to press dial when a firm hand clasped my shoulder.

I glanced up. Eyes the exact colour of Marco's amaretto brownies stared back. I scanned the decisive jawline and strong nose. Zak gave a half-smile, revealing bright white teeth that contrasted with golden tanned skin. I swallowed, half tempted to suggest we skip the meal and head straight back home, to our bedroom.

'Sorry I'm not on time. I just needed thirty minutes extra to clinch the deal.'

I slipped my hand into his and squeezed his fingers as Marco escorted us to our favourite table, guaranteed by the large tip we always left. It was in the corner, away from the kitchens and intrusive windows. He pulled out the chairs and after we'd sat down, placed napkins on our laps. I squirmed, having never quite got used to such attention. My discomfort often made Zak laugh. Not tonight.

'Your favourite red?' said Marco.

Zak nodded and ran a hand through his unusually messy hair. 'And breadsticks. Please.' He loosened his scarlet tie. That was his signature fashion statement – a bright strip of colour against the understated grey and navy suits. Zak slipped off his jacket, which showed off his slim-fit shirt and the platinum golf-ball cufflinks I'd bought for his fortieth birthday. My husband was heading for middle age. How was that possible? When had I become so grown-up?

'You look great,' he said and then bit his top lip. 'I haven't always told you that. It's just that recently ... Elite Eleganz ...'

'You don't look so bad yourself,' I interrupted and wished I was close enough to kiss his dangerously seductive mouth. 'So. Tell me all about this deal. Did you clinch it in the end?' Admittedly, the financial minutiae of the business didn't always grab my interest, but I'd made an effort over the years to quiz Zak and understand as much as I could. After all, he was the man I loved. The man I cared for. As his partner, it was my job to show him support.

Zak waited whilst the waiter poured our drinks and then left. He nodded and raised a glass. They clinked. The breadsticks arrived and he munched one down straightaway. Odd that he didn't want to tell me about it, although he often said I served as a great distraction to business concerns.

I grinned. 'Goodness, you have built up an appetite. So, what did you want to discuss?' He could go first and then, totally relaxed, listen to my plans to take up my studies again. Whoop! Me designing again? Perhaps, one day, I'd develop my own range within Elite Eleganz or –

Ignoring my question, Zak cleared his throat. 'Oh, I forgot to tell you. Chanelle rang. April left her cardigan behind.'

My brow knotted. 'When did she call? You went out before me.'

He loosened his tie further. 'She rang my mobile, to pick my brains about some bookkeeping course she's thinking of doing.'

I grinned again. Zak couldn't usually stomach much more than five minutes of her chat about fish pedicures or the Kardashians – although he and Chanelle did share a love of travel. Before meeting me, Zak had skied, sunbathed, and eaten his way around most of Europe.

I sat more upright. A bookkeeping course? Why didn't that surprise me? Glamorous Chanelle was an odd mix. On the surface, she was your stereotypical trophy wife, loving the high life, the lunches, the spa trips, and manicures. Yet simmering beneath was a dogged determination to be more than arm candy – to make her own mark.

And perhaps this information was a perfect cue from the universe to talk about my prospective studies. Not that Zak would stop me. There'd been a shift in our relationship over the last few years. I'd matured. No longer saw him as the wise old man. Still loved and respected him, but was no longer so much ... in awe.

'I don't know how Chanelle balances work with looking after the kids. I count my blessings that I've been able to be a stay-at-home mum,' I said. 'A choice that I've loved – looking after you two and running Elite Eleganz's charity projects. But now April's older, I was –'

'Yes, and it's made my work life easy,' interrupted Zak, 'us not having to both juggle professional commitments.'

I brushed the tip of my shoe up his muscular leg, under the table. 'I'm so proud of how you've built up your parents' business.'

He moved his leg away and shrugged again, before sipping his wine. Hmm. It wasn't like Zak to play down a compliment.

'So, Chanelle wants to do a course as well as working and looking after Skye? She's superwoman. Although I was thinking –'

'It's strange that you two are such good friends. In some ways you're so different.' He stared at me for a moment and then studied the menu.

This was true. I gazed at him across the flickering candle. 'I've changed since you and me first met though, don't you think?' I thought back to the younger me. 'But then I was just nineteen, still worried about expectations, and your life seemed so daunting. I didn't want to let you down; be an embarrassment. All your friends were so much older and spoke a language full of words like private jets, penthouse suites, and Michelin-starred restaurants ... It took a while to get used to that.'

'Yeah, well, circumstances force us to evolve,' he muttered in a flat voice. 'Come on. Let's choose our starters.'

Knots formed in my stomach as the evening progressed. Not even the best tiramisu this side of the Channel put a smile on his face or a joke in his chat. Still, his sullen expression didn't stop young female diners and waitresses shooting admiring glances his way – something I'd become accustomed to, over the years.

'Zak – talk to me!' I eventually said after the waiter delivered our coffees. 'What's on your mind?'

He glanced down at his cup.

‘Fine, then. I’ll start.’ Anything to break this strained silence. I took a deep breath. ‘I want to pick up my studies again. Lately, what with April being older, I ... I need to design again, Zak. I’m going to get my old sketches down from the loft and –’

‘You? Go back to uni?’

I waited for him to ask why. Instead his face flushed and slowly he shook his head. He ran a hand through his untidy hair, lips firmly closed, eyes staring harder at his drink. An icy shard pierced my chest. What was going on? Zak didn’t do silence. He either agreed or disagreed vociferously, whether it was brainstorming a new charity idea or suggesting what we had for dinner. Did he really want a Stepford wife whose life consisted of being the perfect hostess and doing housework? He was in for a shock if he did.

‘Zak? I’m worried,’ I said gently and reached across the table. I squeezed his hand.

He pulled away and looked up. ‘*You’re* worried? About what? Which shoes to wear to your next lunch out? Well try living in my shoes for twenty-four hours.’

I gasped.

He held his head in his hands. ‘Sorry, baby,’ he said in a muffled voice. ‘It’s just ...’

‘Tell me,’ I almost whispered. ‘It’ll be okay.’

‘Perhaps you should get a job instead of going back to college,’ he blurted out.

I leant back in my chair. Zak had always loved our traditional set-up – him out to work and me at home. Both his parents had worked full-time when he was little, and I got the feeling that Fifties-style family life was a fantasy he’d held for a long time. So why would he suddenly want me to earn?

A shiver slowly descended my spine. My voice wavered. ‘Is Elite Eleganz in trouble? Is that why you’ve been working so late? I assumed business was booming, but –’

Zak opened his mouth but nothing came out. Finally he nodded. ‘We’ll have to get rid of the Porsche. Forget holidays for a while. Cancel our tennis club membership. And April ... I just don’t think we can afford the fees for Oakwood Towers any more. I’ve tried so hard to avoid this, but she’ll have to move to a state school.’

‘But April’s settled there!’ Was he mad? My throat went dry. Forget the material things and journeys abroad. April would hate moving. Leaving her friends. Being the new girl. ‘Surely we can work something out? Why didn’t you tell me before? And it’s mid-term ... none of this makes sense.’

‘Sorry, Jenny,’ he mumbled. ‘I ... I’ve let you down.’

‘You have.’ My eyes watered. ‘By not confiding in me all these weeks. Didn’t you imagine I could have helped, or at least shouldered the burden? I’m not just some piece of fluff who’s going to disintegrate if she can no longer afford Louboutins.’ My voice shook. ‘Look ...’ I breathed in and out for a few moments. ‘Zak. Let’s think about this. There must be a way we can sort this out ...’

‘I ... I can’t do this. Not now,’ he mumbled and stood up, scraping his chair. Without a word he left the restaurant. My jaw dropped.

I scrabbled for my purse but Marco came over to my table, carrying my coat, and muttered something about paying next time we were in. I shot him a grateful look before navigating tables as I made my way to the glass door and hurried outside. Deeply I inhaled as the evening air hit my face.

Squinting through the darkness, I saw Zak’s suited silhouette pass The Coffee Club, with its jars of beans and glass-domed plates of cake. His hunched gait made him look unusually vulnerable, as he ended up at a small park. Not long after, I caught him up but he didn’t stop walking. And a creeping, dull sensation didn’t stop slithering across my body. What had stopped him from opening up, all these months?

‘Zak! Hold up! My shoes are killing me,’ I said, but he cut right, into the children’s playground and then stood still for a second, shoulders scrunched. From behind, I wrapped my arms around his waist, but vigorously he shook them off. With a shiver – despite my faux-fur coat – I sat down on a swing. A part of my brain noticed how different this swing was from the one in Marco’s restaurant, the one I’d been blissfully enjoying only an hour before.

I waited in the darkness. Gave Zak the time he clearly needed. Kicked off my stilettos. Eventually he sat on the swing next to me. Side by side – it was the closest we'd been all evening, and the breeze carried over a familiar smell, but I couldn't quite identify it. I rubbed my nose and waited for him to speak.

'I've messed up, Jen. Big time. Risked everything my parents worked for. And ...'

A solitary orange street lamp lit up his strong features. I took a deep breath and smelt the damp, earthy evening air. 'We'll sort it out,' I said firmly, determined to show him that all the support he needed was right here, in a little black dress. 'Together. I promise. We'll move somewhere smaller. Holiday in Britain. And don't worry about Oakwood Towers. I'm sure they won't expect April to leave immediately. That'll give us time to –'

Eyes drooping at the corners, Zak suddenly looked every one of his forty-three years. 'You don't understand – we're on the brink of bankruptcy. I've ploughed so much money into the new store we opened in Manchester. As it turns out, the location isn't quite as dynamic as I'd predicted. Plus, our latest lines haven't sold well.'

Bankruptcy? I almost laughed. No. He had to be wrong. He really must have blown his worries out of all proportion. That's what happened when you didn't share your concerns. Irrationality took over. 'Oh, darling, the company has hit hard times before,' I said, calmly. 'This will just be a blip.'

'It's no blip,' he snapped.

But Elite Eleganz couldn't be broke. It didn't make sense. 'Okay. So why has everything fallen apart now?'

He turned away. 'Bad luck, a big new competitor, and investing capital in a project someone pitched me when I should have ploughed it back into the business. I've had to let some staff go to cut costs. That's why my work hours have been crazy lately, me covering for them. And I've asked around, tried to find investors, but they lose interest as soon as they see the books.' He swallowed. 'And ... there's something else, Jenny.' Zak jumped off the swing and paced up and down.

I stood up too but without my stilettos had to stare upwards more than usual to see the expression on his face. 'Whatever it is, I'm here for you,' I said, gently. 'You should have confided in me earlier, Zak. I'm your wife. It's my job to be there for you when times get tough.' My hair fell down to my shoulders. Zak tilted back my head, bent down, and brushed his lips against mine, before trailing his soft mouth down my neck. But his lips didn't press hard like they used to and he drew back as if he, too, had been hoping for something that wasn't delivered. My nose twitched ... that smell again ... I sneezed.

'Oh, Jenny ...'

I scrunched up my face as a sudden realisation washed over me. 'Why are you covered in Chanelle's perfume?'

'What are you talking about?'

'April came home wearing it after the party. It made me sneeze then too.'

He opened his arms. 'Um ... it must have rubbed off on me when I hugged my little princess.'

'No. You showered and changed before you went out. I hung up your towel and clothes, which you left on the floor,' I said, my voice gathering strength. I snorted. 'For God's sake, Zak. Have you been around to Chanelle's first, to discuss your – our – problems? I may not be a businesswoman like her, but I like to think I've some degree of common sense and perspective that might have helped.'

Zak bit his top lip. 'I just called around to pick up April's cardigan.'

'No you didn't. You only said you spoke to her on the phone before, about her course.'

A strange expression crossed his face, kind of twisted, tortured. 'Okay,' he said in a strangled voice. 'She said it was for the best that I came clean; that's why I suggested this meal ... She insisted, you see ...'

'Come clean about our finance problems? Damn right! I couldn't agree with her more.'

'No ... you don't understand ...' His voice cracked, for some reason making my body shiver.

‘You’re not ill, are you?’ I whispered, hardly daring to voice those words. ‘Oh, Zak. What is it? Honestly. I can handle it. I’m here for you.’

He threw his hands in the air. ‘No, I’m not. Oh, God, Jenny, this is hard.’ He swallowed. ‘You see, it’s helped ... talking to Chanelle ...’

‘Chanelle? Help?’ I shrugged. ‘But how? Granted, she runs a small beauty salon, but she has no experience of big business.’

‘It’s difficult for you to understand, Jen. You aren’t an entrepreneur. But the principles of profit and loss are the same however big or small your company –’

‘But she irritates the hell out of you with her celebrity crushes and happy-go-lucky attitude.’

He held his head in his hands again and then pulled those long fingers away.

‘I’m sorry, Jenny. Chanelle and I – we’ve wanted to tell you for a long time but my mind’s been on other things. Her business was on its knees so I helped her out with a loan, and then this season’s lines failed to make an impact so we had a common bond. Reproducing high-end catwalk designs for the bottom end of the market has always been our unique selling point but it just isn’t hitting the mark lately. All I’ve been able to think of these last weeks is how to save our livelihood and Chanelle’s had some ideas –’

I gritted my teeth and held up my hand, a ball of heat scorching the inside of my chest. ‘Whoa! *You* invested in Chanelle’s business? It was you? Why did no one tell me? Why keep it a secret?’

He shifted from foot to foot as my mind suddenly focused on various bits of information. Like freshly divorced Chanelle’s unrefined joy on first meeting me in the school playground, when she found out I was married to ‘sexy millionaire Zachary Masters’ (her words not mine). How she pursued our unlikely friendship. Zak’s late nights ‘working’ over recent months. How his hair had looked uncharacteristically messy when he turned up at the restaurant tonight. How recently our sex life had waned ...

A shard of realisation sliced through my body. My legs buckled. My hand rose to my throat and within seconds I was vomiting into a nearby bush. No. No! This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be possible. He came near to rub my back but I gave a muffled sob and jumped away.

‘How could I have been so stupid?’ I stuttered and gazed at leaves splattered with half-digested tiramisu, as the truth sank in. My chest squeezed tight as if my torso were wrapped in Spanx. Chanelle and I weren’t female soul mates, but hadn’t all those laughs, hugs, and lunches together counted for anything? Bit by bit my perfect life was crumbling – jagged chunks of it smashing through my ignorance.

As for Zachary ... I felt as if I’d been held upside down and had all my insides shaken out. Then a blinding white light swept across my eyes as I pictured April’s broken face finding out what I’d just deducted. My jaw clenched and I span one hundred and eighty degrees. ‘No wonder you were starving for breadsticks.’ My throat felt thick. ‘So much for meeting with a French client – although I suppose you did get a leg over the Chanelle ...’

I could hardly breathe.

‘So exactly long have you been shagging my best friend?’

Zak covered his face with his hands.

‘Tell me!’ I shouted, voice shaking. I didn’t do shouting. Not even when April was her most disobedient. But suddenly I had no control over my body, including my voice.

‘Why her?’ My arms shook as violently as my words. ‘Don’t you ...’ My voice wavered. ‘Don’t you fancy me any more?’

Did Zak prefer her firm, round fake boobs? Her tumbling *Baywatch* hair? Could she make him moan with satisfaction and make him huskily drawl her name? My eyes pricked. He’d been my only lover. Was it inevitable that one day he’d want a woman who knew more than what he’d taught me?

All of a sudden I felt nineteen again. I stepped forwards and peeled his hands away from that heartbreaker face.

‘Why her?’ I asked again.

‘Don’t do this to yourself,’ he muttered.

‘Oh, don’t pretend you give one fig about my feelings. You’re a coward; that’s the problem. Too weak to give me a proper answer.’ I was amazed my words were coherent since my throat felt as if it was disintegrating, it hurt so much.

This wasn’t happening. Zak wasn’t a coward. I loved him. We were each other’s soul mates. I wanted to curl up into a tight ball and block out all the confusion running through my head. The *hows*, *whens*, and *what ifs* ... The *this isn’t possibles* ...

‘You really want to know?’ he said and threw his hands in the air. ‘Okay. You asked. Me and Chanelle ... we laugh. Really laugh, you know? And talk business. She’s dynamic and –’

‘But I run Elite Eleganz’s charity projects. The house. Our lives. Don’t you dare dismiss that as if it doesn’t count!’

‘But you don’t take risks, Jenny,’ he shouted back. ‘You’ve been handed a cushy life on a plate and been glad just to eat off it, without hunting out your own food. When was the last time you put your reputation on the line or made a dream become a reality?’

‘Our family life was my dream.’ My voice faltered.

‘More like a comfort blanket.’

Blinking rapidly, I stared at him through the darkness.

‘Chanelle and me ... we share that spark of ambition, to make money. You ...’ His voice suddenly softened. ‘Oh, Jenny ... you’re just a housewife. And it’s not enough any more.’

A cold, suffocating sensation engulfed my body and extinguished the fire in my belly. I stood rooted to the spot, unable to move. Unable to compute. *Just* a housewife? *Just* the person who’d lovingly created a secure family life based on the routines and cuddles and family outings intended to strengthen the bonds between us and our beloved child?

With an animalistic sob, I turned and stumbled through the night, his desperate, backtracking apologies going in one ear and out other. No physical weapon could have caused a deeper wound than those words. He’d reduced my life’s work – he’d reduced *me* – to nothing at all.

Chapter Three

I waved at April who stood on the white tiled bank, at the other end of the pool, queuing up with children to slide across a giant spaceship inflatable. After a deep breath, I ducked under the water and opened my eyes as I swam hard, avoiding a maze of bare legs that looked distinctly pale compared to the golden, airbrushed ones at the private fitness club.

The isolated, ethereal sensation reminded me of making love to Zak – the heady feeling that I’d left this physical earth and was tumbling through a black hole of pleasure. With my feet, I gave a determined push and shot up from the pool’s rough bottom. Cold air hit my cheeks and I gulped it in, like reality. Me. Zak. Chanelle. The love triangle I never saw coming. How could I have been so stupid?

It was Sunday and one week on from that meal out and the revelations in the park. I was trying to make swimming a regular thing. Cheap activities would be the order of the day from now on, seeing as Elite Eleganz was at risk of going bust. It was going to take a bit of getting used to – thinking twice before I took out my credit card or went to the cash machine.

I bobbed up and down in the water and stared vacantly at the big wall tiles. I’d texted Chanelle last week. Said I knew. Insisted we meet up. She’d refused. I should have known – a traitor and coward to boot. Zak told me not to contact her again. Tears welled in my eyes at the protective tone in his words.

Of course, it all made sense now. My mind computed. Christmas. The vouchers he’d bought me instead of the usual expensive present. February ... he’d forgotten Valentine’s Day for the first time ever. Or had he? Chanelle hadn’t been able to hold back her excitement at receiving red roses from a

so-called secret admirer. Easter. A lump formed in my throat. We'd simply argued over whether to buy April a rabbit. I'd said no, she had enough responsibility looking after her guinea pigs.

In fact, April had surprised me. Chanelle said that if my daughter was anything like Skye and the other girls, she would lose interest after a couple of weeks. But she hadn't. Always fed them. Cleaned their hutch out regularly.

I squeezed my eyes shut and swam a width of the pool. Six months he and Chanelle had been together. For six months he hadn't seen me as the sexy woman in his life. I'd simply been the mother of his child. The entertainer of his guests. The company's charity organiser. And worse revelations had followed. I recalled a conversation we'd had on the Monday afterwards.

'I still don't get it,' I'd said. 'Wasn't this what you wanted? The whole domestic set-up – marriage and children? All that's missing is a white picket fence.'

'All I ever wanted was you, Jen. Of course I adore April, but kids, nappies, parents' evenings ... At that time it had never been part of my plan.'

'But you seemed so happy.' I gulped, heart squeezing so tight. 'Proposed straightaway ...'

'Yes. Because I was in love with *you*. It was all about you, baby.' His eyes had gone all shiny. 'Your crazy dress sense. The excitement when you'd designed an outfit you thought might one day sell. And ...' His shoulders jiggled up and down. 'I've been brought up to do the right thing. So marriage was inevitable.'

'You married me out of some sense of duty?'

Silence.

I swore my heart actually broke in two. All these years I'd been trying to mould myself into a new Jenny that fitted in when he'd actually wanted the original version of me ...

Without warning, tears streamed down my cheeks and I bobbed under the water to rinse away the proof of my hurt. On resurfacing I focused and passed a football to a child who had misaimed.

April still didn't know. I'd persuaded Zak to hold off telling her – and to convince Chanelle not to break the news to Skye. Nor did I tell anyone else. That would make it feel real. For the first few days I'd managed to get through in a bubble of hope that Zak would change his mind, if only for April's sake. But by Wednesday that bubble burst as he made it clear his future wasn't with me. Yet he seemed to nurture this desperate, fantastical idea that somehow April and I could stay on at The Willows. Perhaps that eased a guilty conscience.

'Are you crazy? I may not be a financial whiz, but even I can see we need to sell this place and fast. Not that I could ever live here again,' I'd snapped. 'It represents everything you hold in disdain: a happy, stable family life.'

I shook myself and wished I could stop dissecting every conversation of the last week.

With a brighter than bright smile I waved to April. We left the pool. Headed home. No, wait, not home. I couldn't use that word any more.

I dropped April off for the traditional roast and because Zak had agreed to help her with maths homework. Then I drove into Laventon. It was April's health-mad teacher's birthday tomorrow and apparently The Coffee Club's pecan brownies were her one and only vice, so April wanted to take some in. Buying gifts had been a given in my luxurious past. Perhaps now I'd have to turn into one of those mums who ... I don't know ... thriftily handcrafted gifts out of food packaging or old clothes. My stomach twisted. Would I be up to the challenge?

I parked up my Mini in the village's council car park and checked my reflection in the rear-view mirror. My hair hung in wild chlorine curls and the sunlight caught my foundation-free freckles. Would anyone else notice my swollen eyelids? After a deep breath, I got out of the car and grabbed my mock snakeskin handbag that looked out of place with my faded jeans. Not faded through wear, of course. It was a designer fashion thing. I'd never so much as darned a sock or resewn a button, in the last ten years. Nor struggled to get stains out of clothes. Anything less than perfect had just gone straight in the bin.

Wishing I'd worn a cool skirt instead, I headed down the cobbled street and veered to the right to avoid an over-friendly terrier that belonged to the tailor who altered Zak's Italian suits. I pushed open the glass door of The Coffee Club and saw Noah behind the counter, in front of a wall filled with jars and jars of beans of all different varieties. The pale turquoise walls emanated a sense of calm, punctuated with minimalist paintings of cups with saucers. Modern white tables complemented a big silver coffee machine behind the shiny glass counter. Yet a homely feel came from random shelves filled with novels for customers to borrow, plus cheerful vases of flowers.

I fiddled with my watchstrap as I headed over. It had been challenging chatting with people all week and pretending everything was fine. Noah looked up. He gave one of his cheerful smiles and yawned. My eyes scanned his torso and the bare forearms made visible by rolled up shirtsleeves. He wasn't as tall as Zak, but he was more muscly.

I approached and focused on the smooth skin and smattering of blonde hairs. Arms strong enough to build an ark? I had seen him go into the local church last Monday evening, when I'd been out for a mind-clearing walk. Perhaps his biblical name wasn't random but chosen especially by religious parents.

I breathed in the aroma of caffeine. It felt comforting. I forced a cheery hello, despite thinking I didn't belong on any ark as I was no longer part of a pair. Again Noah yawned.

'Busy morning?' I said and cleared my throat.

Noah ran a hand through his fudge-coloured, choppy hair. 'You can say that again. The weekend morning crowd have ordered countless toasted teacakes and big lattes. We really need to get in some help. I'm catching up with some cleaning now it's the post-lunch lull.' He jerked his head towards the window. 'Lovely again today. Looks like early summer is here.' He paused. 'They suit you.'

'Huh?' I said distractedly and turned back around.

'Those curls. Very *Madame Bovary*.'

I eyed him curiously. A literary reference? Zak always said my curls were very 'Carrie' out of *Sex and the City* – a programme he'd been force-fed by a previous girlfriend.

'Hmm,' I replied. 'Now that's quite a tale about marriage.'

'Noah's right. They look great,' cut in a female voice, somewhat deeper than mine. Elle appeared. She was a tall woman with a handsome face and strong features. She had a thin, black ponytail and wore a denim skirt with a baggy white blouse. I'd always thought that her feminine, fashionable name didn't quite match her unfussy appearance. I'd asked her once if her family came from France but Noah had interrupted by teasing Elle about the idea that she came from swanky Paris.

In fact, I knew practically zero about either Elle or Noah. Nothing unusual in that, but this was Laventon, where every villager knew that Postie was currently seeking a divorce and dipping his toe into online dating, and that Mrs Carlton from the corner shop was about to adopt a rescue cat and had finally been given effective medicine for her arthritis.

'I'd kill for a few waves but my hair is naturally straighter than the crease in Martini's slacks,' said Elle.

Jane Martin, known to all as Martini after her favourite drink, cleaned the cottage attached to the coffee shop, where Noah and Elle lived. I knew her a little from the Elite Eleganz's charity events I ran locally. Pets. Grandchildren. Knitting. That was her life. I have to admit, like the rest of the village, I'd tried to work out Noah and Elle's relationship. At the last charity auction, I'd asked Martini if they were an item and she'd pleaded ignorance.

'Noah, there's a sandwich waiting for you out the back,' said Elle. 'It's all I could manage to put together. But Martini popped in with a casserole for tonight.'

'Give that woman a medal. She's a godsend.' He smiled at me. 'Elle bakes the tastiest muffins, but when it comes to cooking savoury meals her best shot is a Pot Noodle.'

Playfully she punched his arm. My eyes tingled. Dot did the cooking in our house. Perhaps if I'd been a better cook or housekeeper, then Zak wouldn't have ...

I sighed, tired of the negative narrative that had occupied my head since I'd found out about my husband's affair.

'Ow!' he said and mock-glared 'You don't know your own strength!'

'What about your culinary skills?' I said, in as steady a voice as I could muster. Seeing their friendly banter reminded me of the way Zak and I used to be.

'Even worse.' Noah pulled a face. 'Elle and I take it in turns to cook. I like to think I can rustle up a mean toasted panini but there's a reason I set up a coffee shop and not a restaurant.'

They grinned at each other. 'I'll grab my sandwich later. First I want to do a quick stock-take. We had a run on caramel syrup this morning. And those small biscotti are proving a hit on Sundays with the diet-conscious customers saving themselves for their lunch.' His shoulders bobbed up and down. 'Are you stopping, Jenny?'

'What? Oh ... um, I just came in to pick up some of your pecan brownies. It's April's teacher's birthday tomorrow. Apparently they are her favourite.'

'Makes a change from taking an apple, I guess,' said Elle and grinned.

My eyes pricked. If only she knew. Every year, at Oakwood Towers, teachers were lavished with gift cards and designer accessories for birthdays and Christmas.

I brushed the thought away that this would probably be the last term April would be spending at Oakwood. I didn't know how I was going to tell her. She loved that school, and all her friends.

'You okay?' asked Elle in a gentle voice as she handed me the brownies and stared at my face.

'Fine, thanks. How much do I owe you?' I stuttered to Elle who was on the till. My eyes welled with water, like a dam about to burst. It was all too much. I tried to stifle a sob.

Noah got to his feet. He must have been counting stock on the lowest levels of his shelves. In a flash he'd moved around the glass counter. He draped one of those strong arms around my shoulders and he guided me through to the back and into their home. Without protesting, I sat down at the pine kitchen table. He passed me a square of kitchen roll and I blew my nose.

'If it's privacy you need, stay here as long as you like. We're still open for a couple of hours,' he said firmly. He hesitated, then went to leave.

My chin trembled. 'Don't tempt me. I might stay here for ever.'

He raised an eyebrow as a solitary tear trickled down my face. Previously I'd only ever talked to the coffee shop owner about the weather or his work. He was always so cheerful and charming. I'd never heard him utter an irritated word or seen him frown. New to the village about twelve months ago, Noah kept himself to himself, which intrigued the locals. The primary subject of gossip was whether he was dating his co-worker, Elle.

'Jenny? Everything okay? Any way I can help?'

'No. I'm fine. It's just ...' A lump swelled in my throat and – oh no – burst. Sobs racked my body. He wrapped his arm around me again but I shook it off. 'No. Don't. Please. Any act of kindness ... it might finish me off.' I buried my face in the kitchen roll until the sobbing eventually subsided and then I blew my nose.

'Do you want me to ring anyone? Your husband?'

Sobs threatened again so I bit the insides of my cheeks. 'No thanks. I'll be okay.' My eyes tingled. Who could I speak to? In the early years I'd made friends at toddlers group, but most of those women had gone back to work. The others couldn't afford to send their daughters to all-girls Oakwood Towers school and eventually their children's friendships with April had faded away.

I'd been good friends with the mum of April's best mate, but then that family headed off to Dubai. As for Mum and Dad, they lived in deepest Wales, and I didn't want to concern them when I was in this state.

I shook myself and forced my lips to upturn in Noah's direction, ignoring the voice in my head that howled like an injured animal at the thought that the two adults closest to me had carried out the worst act of betrayal. Plus we were skint. That had slowly sunk in this last week – along with all

the consequences. I'd have to get a job. Destroy my store cards. Forget my dreams of college. And, worst of all ... April. I shook my head. How could she leave Oakwood Towers?

Jeez. I was having a full-blown pity party.

I cleared my throat and tried to think of something positive.

'Come on. Much as I love coffee, there might be some truth in there being nothing a good cup of tea can't solve. So that's a necessity, not an act of kindness.' He filled the kettle. 'No arguments. Stay here until you feel better.'

I half-smiled. Here was my positivity. A nice guy making me a cuppa. But then the negative narrative started up once more and my shoulders slumped. 'Okay. I ... I suddenly feel so tired. I'm too done in to argue. You're very kind.' I gazed at his broad back. The Coffee Club was one of the few places I'd let April visit on her own, with her friends. From the first moment I'd met Noah there seemed to be something trustworthy about him. Perhaps it was his name – the biblical implication that he was something of a hero and would save the day.

I could to with a cosmic miracle today all right. Blocking out thoughts of Zak for a moment, I watched Noah take out the teabags. I wondered if he was an expert on them as well. His depth of knowledge about coffee beans was outstanding. At the last tasting session he'd introduced a bean from Colombia. It came from the highest elevations of the Andes and apparently produced a dark, slightly sweet coffee with a walnut-like aftertaste in contrast to a favourite bean of his, from Africa, which had a definite smoky flavour.

Chanelle smoked now and again. Outside of the house. Never in front of Skye. I wondered if her kisses tasted of the clandestine drags of tobacco. Maybe Zak liked that. Perhaps my kisses tasted too safe, too vanilla.

My hands trembled and I dabbed my eyes again as Noah set down two cups of tea and sat opposite me.

'Thanks. What must you think? It's just that me and Zak ... I thought he got me, you know?' I forced a smile.

Noah stared at me for a moment and then shrugged and his eyes crinkled. 'As Oscar Wilde said – "Women are made to be loved, not understood." Perhaps he had a point.'

'Well, by all accounts Wilde gave up on the fairer sex.' I gave a wry smile. 'Great writer though.'

'Agreed. His collection of short stories is ace.'

'*The Happy Prince and Other Tales*'?

Noah nodded and I studied him for a moment. Most people had only heard of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

'Anyway ...' he bowed his head '... glad to be of service.' For a second his eyes lost their humorous twinkle. 'Things will work out, Jenny,' he said, softly. 'Fate's a funny thing. In weeks to come, you might look back on what's happened and see it as fortuitous.'

My throat ached. I doubted that very much. However, I appreciated his attempt to make me feel better, with something of a profound statement. Elle entered the room and I gazed at them both.

'I won't ever see it as good luck. You see, my ... marriage is over.' Words like a punch to my stomach. For a whole week I'd not uttered them out loud. 'My home is no longer my home. And we're in financial trouble.'

Mustn't cry again. Noah and Elle would think me pathetic. And I'm not – I'm a dynamic, charity-organising, domestic-juggling mother. I gulped. Yeah, right. Now that successful image lay in tatters. I opened my handbag and took out my phone. Say what you like about modern technology, mobiles proved a great distraction if you needed a moment.

I pretended to check my messages then slipped the device back into my bag and sat more upright.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

‘Sorry. Just having a wobbly day. Honestly. Leave me to wallow. You’ll have customers waiting.’ I sniffed. ‘I mean, worse things happen in life, as I know from my charity work. I have my health and a beautiful daughter. I can’t ask for more than that.’ I thought I’d had a perfect life until days ago. Locals must think the same. So it wouldn’t do, to be whimpering in public. Other people had far bigger problems, like ... My eyes watered. I’d just lost my life partner. My future. My home.

Elle sat down next to me. ‘No point in comparing. We all have our own story. And it’s okay. The last two customers just left and I’ve closed up for a moment. The post-lunch lull will probably last another half an hour. Perhaps your friend could offer support? Talk things through. You know, the blonde lady I see you with.’

I controlled an irrational urge to laugh. Instead my voice cracked. ‘Yes. So that she could tell me all about how she’s been shagging my husband for the last six months ...’

‘Oh, Jenny, no ...’ Elle’s large hand covered mine.

Noah’s face turned red. ‘You had no idea?’

Somehow I managed to shake my head from side to side without releasing more tears.

He pursed his lips and muttered something about people not knowing when they were well off.

‘Is there no going back?’ said Elle, softly.

‘No. I hoped for a few days, but I can see now that his loyalty to her is unwavering. Apparently marrying me was one big mistake – always had been.’ I gave a loud sniff. I had to stay strong for April.

‘What will you do?’ she said.

I bit my thumbnail. ‘At first I didn’t know. The beginning of the week passed in a daze. Zak will hardly discuss the situation.’ I sighed. ‘He was just like this when his mum died last year.’ He’d thrown himself into arranging the funeral and even afterwards hardly spoke about his feelings, bottling it all up. Eventually it came out as anger. He got into a fight in a bar, over a football match, and threw a punch. And the last time I’d visited him at work staff tiptoed around him as if waiting for him to explode.

‘He’s just moved into a guest room,’ I continued. ‘Elite Eleganz has been mad busy with a last-ditch online promotion that ends today. Zak says we’ll discuss things properly tonight, when April is in bed.’ I said the word *discuss* in a hopeful tone. If the ball of anger spinning faster and faster in my chest with every passing day was anything to go by, it looked like a *full-blown shouting match* was the more likely outcome.

‘What I do know is that I can never live in that house again. All the memories – they seem fake now.’ I couldn’t believe I was telling them all this but it felt like such a relief to share what had happened and they both had such ... such understanding expressions. Perhaps that’s what made a good barista – the ability to make people feel relaxed, and to create an atmosphere that made the coffee shop seem like a refuge from the world’s worries.

I stood up and paced, admiring the cosy aura of the kitchen. I wondered how much of it was down to Martini, with the decorative wall plates and warm peach curtains. And that knitted tea cosy had to be made by her. Although the shelf filled with books was perhaps down to Noah – P. G. Wodehouse, James Patterson, Lee Child, among children’s classics and self-help books. An eclectic choice to say the least. The room was tiny compared to our kitchen at The Willows. My chest tightened with the growing realisation that my day-to-day life would have to change, now that saving money was a priority.

‘How’s April taking it?’ asked Noah. ‘She’s a nice kid. Always says please and thank you.’

‘She doesn’t know yet,’ I replied. That was the worst bit. My heart felt as if it had been broken into a thousand pieces. But April? Hers would be wrung dry and crushed to dust. ‘I’ll never forgive him for doing this to our daughter.’

‘She might be more resilient than you think,’ said Noah and he raised his eyebrows in a hopeful manner.

‘I bet a good number of her friends have divorced parents.’ Elle shrugged. ‘You’d be surprised how many separated parents bring their kids in here for a treat – even olde-worlde Laventon can’t avoid some of the trends of modern life.’

True. Out of April’s friendship group both Chelsea and Megan had step-siblings from recent second marriages. But my throat ached at the thought of April’s increasingly slim limbs. I didn’t want something like this to tip her into a dark emotional state where she did all the wrong kinds of things to cope. So that meant only one thing. I had to put on a bright face and look for the positives.

‘Have you got a paper and pen?’ I asked, eventually.

Noah jumped up and opened a kitchen drawer. He returned with a notebook and biro and placed them in front of me. I wiped my eyes and sat up straight. The cover of the pad was covered in good luck symbols – a wedding horseshoe, a dreamcatcher, a lucky number seven, and a waving Japanese cat.

‘Thanks so much. Now please. Open up the shop again,’ I said to them both. ‘I’ll be fine – if I could just stay here for a little while and formulate a concrete plan, I’d be truly grateful.’

I’d already been to the local estate agents, to see if I could find an affordable place for me and April. My voice had shaken, just a little, worried that I was going to come across as a complete fool. I’d moved from Mum and Dad’s to student accommodation to Zak’s house and never actually rented a place of my own. How would I manage if the boiler broke or the sink got blocked? Dot’s husband took care of stuff like that at The Willows. And there would be no more food shopping at Marks & Spencer. I’d probably have to start frequenting the pound shop.

With a churning stomach, I reflected on the next challenge – to find a job. ‘I searched online, last night, for employment, but after being a stay-at-home mum for ten years, it seems that I am under-qualified for just about everything.’ My cheeks felt hot. ‘I wouldn’t even have a clue what products to use for a cleaning job.’ Dot cleaned The Willows from top to bottom.

An unease shifted within my chest as I realized how pampered I’d become. Dot even did the ironing. About the only thing I’d accomplished was being a good mum. I’d searched childcare positions but they all required certificates and experience. An image of my fashion sketches popped into my head, but my dream of returning to college was over. I needed to earn money and quick. Even if Elite Eleganz had been doing better than ever, I would never accept a single penny from Zak. Not for myself. Only child maintenance.

Noah and Elle exchanged looks, as if a telepathic conversation were taking place. He was just about to say something when the sound of knocking on glass came from the shop. Elle stood up and squeezed my shoulder firmly before leaving the kitchen. Noah lifted his cup and got to his feet, before pouring his tea down the sink.

‘Not thirsty?’ I asked.

‘Can’t stand the stuff, truth be told,’ he said. ‘I only had it as a mark of solidarity.’

For a split second a wave of emotion washed over his face. I bit my lip. The unexpected camaraderie meant a lot.

‘Thanks,’ I mumbled. ‘For ...’ I looked around the kitchen ‘... for this.’

‘Any time. Mi casa es su casa.’ He smiled.

‘Gus says that to Hazel in *The Fault in our Stars* when he takes her to his basement bedroom,’ I mumbled, having read the book recently.

‘Great story,’ he said, in gentle tones. ‘And a great message.’

I stared at Noah. I knew what he was saying. Like the book’s theme of childhood cancer, there were worse problems than mine. Somehow I had to find the inner strength to deal with my situation.

Chapter Four

I picked up the biro and stared at the notebook’s cover, in particular the silver horseshoe, and thought about my own wedding day. I’d always believed nothing on this planet looked sexier than Zak

in a tux with a cream rose in the buttonhole – although if you believed Dot's women's magazines, a husband who put the bins out on time was much more of a turn-on.

Feeling as joyous as a small child skipping, I'd arrived at the church. Twenty-one years old. About five months pregnant. On the cusp of becoming Mrs Zachary Masters. Dad's eyes had glistened when he saw my white wedding dress, which could have come straight off the pages of *Vogue*. Stylish. Classy. And nothing like the dress I'd promised myself while still at the fashion college. If I ever got married, I was going to wear a multicoloured backless creation, with a big ruffled collar, and I planned to go barefoot, with wildflowers in my hair.

Where had that rebellious artist gone? Had being under the spell of Zak's love made her disappear in a puff of smoke, for ever?

My gaze shifted to the illustration of the dreamcatcher. At our wedding one of my aunts had drunk too much bubbly and kept referring to Zak as the ultimate dreamboat. Images filled my mind of Zak's face, as I'd walked up the aisle. I'd glimpsed a grave expression as our eyes met, and assumed it was the sense of occasion he must have been experiencing. Instead, I now knew it concealed his disenchantment at committing to a future about which he'd been in total denial. I bit my bottom lip. Had the last ten years really been based on a lie?

During the wedding breakfast and evening dance we'd used every opportunity to touch each other. I'd spent most of the day mentally unbuttoning his shirt. When people transferred from the dining room to the dance floor, Zak had grabbed my hand and pulled me into a cloakroom. Within seconds he'd trapped me up against the coats, lips urgently pushing mine apart.

As for the wedding night, I still recalled every minute. How we'd practically run to our bedroom, having said the final goodbyes to friends and relatives wishing us all the best for our Maldives honeymoon. Me joking about how I'd married an old man who wouldn't have the stamina to consummate the marriage. I'd trembled with anticipation as he'd unlaced my wedding dress and trailed his expert tongue down my hips and across my thighs ...

'You, me, for ever, babes,' he'd said hours later, in a husky voice, before we eventually fell asleep.

Tears pricked as I focused again on the notepad and the lucky number seven. Perhaps if we could recapture the fire of the early days, our relationship would survive. I thought back to a seven day summer break we'd taken in Europe, on our own, a few years ago. At heart I was something of a homebird, but Zak had a huge lust for travel. I hadn't wanted to leave April but Zak had persuaded me to go. Perhaps even then he'd sensed something going awry between us.

I recalled a late-night beach walk, the rose-and-peach sunset, the lapping of tropical waves. How we'd sat down behind some secluded rocks and, perspiring with the evening's humidity, watched the moon rise. Guitar music from a beach restaurant had accompanied my giggles as Zak gently pushed me flat onto the sand. With one swift movement he'd removed my sundress, my heart pounding hard. Had I mistaken sexual attraction for everlasting love? Had my naivety and lack of romantic experience come back to knock me sideways, one decade on?

I put down the pen, the memory of that trip now giving me a feeling heavy enough to sink the *Titanic*. Just the thought of his strong, capable hands caressing another woman ...

My throat hurt and constricted to fight a wave of nausea.

My mind flicked back to our other luxurious trips and how I'd occasionally thought it might be fun, for a change, to try camping. However, now that I was faced with the real prospect of swapping tents for cruise boats, the budget lifestyle didn't seem nearly so appealing.

'What am I going to do?' I whispered and tears streamed down my face. 'I still love you, Zak. Despite the bravado, I don't want to let go. I'm scared.' I covered my face with my hands. After a few moments I sniffed, took away my fingers, and refocused. It was exhausting, the continual push and pull I now faced between feeling as vulnerable as a young sapling's stem, yet needing to be as sturdy

as a grown tree's trunk. Come on, Jennifer. There had to be a positive in this. Maybe not a glass half full but a glass containing at least a few dregs.

Perhaps, I don't know, splitting from Zak was a chance for me to gain some independence – to carve an identity for myself, separate from being Zachary Masters' wife and charity organiser. My eyes tingled again. Thing was, I'd always loved both those labels, and didn't want to swap them for waitress or lodger or someone who had to actually check receipts and regard lunch out as a rare treat. I knew I sounded incredibly spoilt. My cheeks flushed.

'Get over yourself, Jenny,' I said sternly and hoped that talking to yourself wasn't actually the first sign of madness.

I managed a wry smile and reflected on my pampered, materialistic life.

Just imagine you suddenly couldn't afford your favourite brand of chocolate or moisturizing cream. Marriage, parenthood, it had all been so easy, with Zak taking care of the bills and me controlling the domestic front. I'd become used to the best of everything. It had felt uncomfortable at first, but soon I started taking things for granted like ... like not having to worry about money when August came and we'd have to kit April out with a new school uniform.

I'd said it myself, recently, whilst thinking back to my college days – I needed to stop gliding through life. I swallowed. Perhaps this was opportunity knocking at the door – or rather, ramming a hole through it; maybe it was the wake-up call I needed.

'Boom!' I said and thumped my fist on the table, for one second coming over all Theresa May, a Prime Minister determined to see Brexit as a new beginning and not an end. I know. A bit up and down at the moment, wasn't I, like an electrocardiogram reading, zigzagging into peaks and troughs? One minute distressed, the next defiant. I guessed that was how my life would be for a while.

Noah entered. 'Everything okay? Just wondered if I had any kitchen roll left.' He smiled, voice sounding warm and sunny like honey, lifting the sinking feeling in my chest.

'I'm fine. Thanks. It's becoming clearer, what I have to do. First up – concentrate on taking charge of my own life.' I went to stand up. 'Right. Better go. Sorry for ... intruding. You've been exceptionally kind.'

He came over and gently pushed me back down, then rolled up his sleeves, as if he would help me tackle any challenge. Mad thought really, as we barely knew each other. I was just one of his customers. Noah was simply my local coffee shop owner. He sat down next to me.

'Finding my own place to live and getting a job ...' My voice wavered. 'At the moment it seems like a tall order but lately I've realised it's time I faced a challenge. Maybe this *is* fate. Everything happens for a reason, right?'

'What, even a breakup, after ten happy years together?' he said gently. 'That's how old April is, right?'

'Yes. And they were happy years. Or so I thought. Turns out Zak and I had different expectations about our future ...' I really tried to keep the self-pity out of my voice. Luxuriating in the *poor me's* felt comforting, but ultimately would achieve nothing.

Noah looked uncharacteristically serious. 'Expectations are a difficult thing to manage.' He paused. 'If your heart says so, then go for it. It's always worth trying to change.'

I stared at him. What was the story behind that ever-cheerful veneer? I used to think that he was just one of life's optimists. Now I wasn't so sure. We were hardly the best of friends, yet he was being remarkably supportive. Had he, too, once faced life-changing events?

'There's really no going back?' he said.

'No. I don't think so.' Guess I'd know for sure after our imminent *discussion*. I gazed at my wedding ring.

Elle came in. 'Everything okay?'

I forced my mouth to upturn.

Noah went over to the kitchen bookshelf and his fingers skimmed the contents until he stopped at a paperback. 'Take this,' he said. 'It's about a shepherd boy finding his own destiny. I find it very inspirational.'

I glanced at the cover. *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho.

'Thanks,' I said, my voice feeling scratchy again. I grabbed my handbag and slipped the book into it as I hurtled out of the shop. Eyes down, I headed towards the car park and almost slipped on a spilt ice cream. Finally I reached my yellow car, wondering if, ever again, I'd feel as sunny as it looked. I scrambled to let myself in and collapsed onto the seat. I lowered my chin to my chest for a moment.

And breathe.

Eventually I pulled the door shut and stared vacantly into the distance. I could, of course, escape to Wales and move in with my parents, but that wouldn't be fair on them. They'd love seeing their granddaughter but would only worry about our future – and Dad wasn't in the best of health since his stroke. Plus, April would want to see her dad regularly. I could never deny her – I sighed – nor him, that.

I groaned. And I couldn't ban her from seeing Skye. That meant I'd have to learn to be civilised in front of my ex-friend. But I could do this, right? I looked back for examples in my adult life of where I'd succeeded in overcoming a difficult situation. I shuffled in my seat. Nothing came to my mind. Was Zak right? Had I relaxed into my cushy life so much that I'd simply stagnated?

I reached into my handbag, to check that I'd got the pecan brownies. I had but, urgh, my phone wasn't there. I must have left it on Noah and Elle's kitchen table. Reluctantly I left my car and hurried back. I entered The Coffee Club, my spirits once again warmed by the tempting smells and hubbub of friendly chat. I approached the glass counter. Noah stretched out his hand, holding my mobile.

'I would have come after you,' he said, 'but I wasn't sure where you'd parked and you left so quickly I probably wouldn't have caught up.'

'I'm sure you could – I've seen you jogging around the village.'

Elle rolled her eyes. 'Obsessed he is. Goes through about four pairs of trainers a year. He's taking part in a race in the summer.'

'Gosh. That's a serious proposition.'

'And talking of serious propositions ...' Noah looked at Elle and she nodded, just before serving a customer who'd appeared at the counter to pay. Noah took me to one side, fingers against my arm, revealing a combination of strength and gentleness. 'We've just been talking. I don't know if you've noticed the advert on the shopfront. I've been looking for extra staff for a fortnight now and found no one suitable. The café is becoming busier and busier with caffeine-mad customers now coming from other villages to try our different beans. Despite not being local, a few have even joined the tasting club. I'm chuffed to bits, but it means we urgently need help. Someone we can trust – and even better if they know the locality. We can't pay top rates but, well, we'd be willing to throw in accommodation for the right person.'

Why was he telling me all this?

'The cottage has a loft conversion with twin beds and a tiny living area. We keep meaning to do it up and rent it out. Don't get me wrong. It's clean and has a good view of the stream behind the cottage. It just needs a lick of paint. And it's private – there's a lock on the door. We have two bathrooms downstairs. Obviously we'd share the kitchen.' Those mellow, tawny eyes stared at me. 'The job and room are yours if you want, Jenny. Until you find your feet. Or for longer, if you wish. Just let me know when you've one hundred per cent decided about your future with Zak.'

I gasped. 'No. I mean ... me? I don't even know how to operate a till and ... That's so generous but it's ... it's too much. I'm grateful but ...' My head swirled. I blushed as the thought entered my head: *Zachary Masters' wife working in a coffee shop? What a come-down. Never.*

Those comforting eyes crinkled for a second. 'You'd be great, Jenny. You know all the mums and kids – in fact everyone in the village. You're personable. It takes a while to learn how to make

all the various coffees, but you could do the till and clean tables until you found your confidence. Of course, my actual role is super-complicated and important ...'

We smiled at each other and I swallowed. Who was I to turn down any job? And this could really be a thing – me and April moving out. A job. A place to stay. A small kitchen with no Aga or fridge full of champagne. But hope. A – my chin trembled – a new beginning.

'But you hardly know me,' I mumbled. 'Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful.' Okay. I had a lot to learn about impressing potential employers, but to invite an overemotional mum in with her young daughter? That was quite a generous act. His domestic set-up would change dramatically. And he hadn't had time to give it much thought. My brow furrowed.

He fiddled with the cuff of one of his rolled-up sleeves. 'Like I say, we've been meaning to rent that room out,' he said eventually. 'And ...' he shrugged '... The Coffee Club means the world to me. I'd much rather employ someone who's part of the village and who understands how things tick in Laventon.'

'Like how Steph, the hairdresser, complains about EVERYTHING but doesn't really mean it?'

'Exactly. And how Postie likes to drink his coffee out on the front pavement –'

'So that he can smoke?'

Noah gave a thumbs-up.

'Oh, I don't know. It's such a decent offer.' It was. Pride had no place in my life now. And The Coffee Club had the warmest, friendliest ambiance I could hope for. 'I wouldn't want to let you down.' My cheeks flushed. 'What with being a student and then moving in with Zak, I've never actually had a job.' Heat spread down my neck. 'Ridiculous, isn't it, for a thirty-two-year-old woman?'

He leant forward and squeezed my shoulder. 'Don't underestimate yourself, Jenny. You've been working as a stay-at-home mum. Like thousands of other women. That means you are a counsellor, an organiser, and a diplomat all rolled into one. Plus, I saw you serving refreshments at that charity catwalk show you arranged in the town hall last month. You did a great job.' He pulled a face. 'Elle dragged me along.'

I raised an eyebrow, surprised that simple dresser Elle had such an interest in clothes.

'I heard you charm everyone into buying a plateful of mini fish 'n' chips with their wine. There's a skill to dealing with the public like that.' Her shoulders bobbed up and down again. 'Why not think about it? Take a few days. Honestly, you'd be doing us a huge favour. But ...' He took his hand away. 'I understand if you've still not made up your mind about leaving. We don't want to be a catalyst for the breakup of your family.'

A lump formed in my throat and my vision blurred as I gazed around the shop.

Noah caught my eye. 'I know it's no mansion, but we've got storage space in an outhouse and a good-sized garden for April, right in front of the stream.'

I sniffed. 'No, it's great ... your offer ... it ...' I gulped. 'It's so kind.'

Yes, it was small. And a garden? I couldn't remember the last time April had played outside. Plus, how would she cope with sharing a bedroom, let alone one that didn't contain her own television and walk-in wardrobe? Yet Noah and Elle had offered me a solution, if the worst happened, and I felt grateful.

'What is it?' Noah raised an eyebrow. He wrapped his fingers gently around my elbow and he led me into the back kitchen again. That honey-toned voice made my shoulders relax.

I looked at him. Bit my lip.

'It's scary, isn't it? Change?' He smiled. 'And I guess it doesn't sound like the most glamorous job in the world, making coffee.'

Stomach in knots, I leant against the pine table. 'Yes, it *is* daunting, taking on a job, but ... like you say, I'm a mum and run the books for Elite Eleganz's charity, plus organise the fundraising events ...' I straightened up. 'Guess I might not be totally devoid of skills. Yet managing totally on my own,

that's a whole different ballgame. And the stakes are higher – if I mess up, April will suffer and I'll be beholden to Zak's goodwill. Although working for you would be a speedy and easy option ...'

Noah's eyes sparkled with humour.

'Easy?' he said. 'You haven't seen the size of the pay cheque. It's hard work, on your feet all day, serving customers, and we often have to get up early to bake cakes. Plus the boiler has a mind all of its own. Stone-cold showers are occasionally the order of the day. And Elle loves reality shows – it's not worth being under this roof if her favourite contestant doesn't win. So, you taking the easy option? Don't kid yourself about that.'

His eyes crinkled. 'Quite the opposite. I think it would be brave.' He shot me an earnest look and his tone lowered. 'I admire you, to be honest. Some might say you had a perfect right to legally take your husband to the cleaners after what he's done, force him to sell off all his assets and live off whatever is left. And ... recently I've had to start over. If I've managed it, you can. I often think life is just a series of lessons. Perhaps this is your next one.' He smiled. 'Wow. Sounds like I'm getting serious in my old age.'

I stared into those eyes, past the twinkle to the more obscure depths underneath and wondered why he'd been pushed to make a fresh start. Was that why he was so quick to help me? Noah glanced at the door as he heard the voices of new customers. 'Mull it over anyway. It's a starting point.' He shrugged. 'Who knows ... perhaps you and your husband will sort out this mess. Maybe things won't seem so hopeless with him, once you have talked things through.'

'Thanks. I really appreciate it,' I mumbled.

He nodded his head.

More slowly this time, I headed back to my car, feeling ashamed of the niggling voices in my head that still popped up, saying that Mrs Zachary Masters couldn't possibly work in a café. It would be embarrassing. My pace quickened. Yet what choice did I have? Those voices were wrong. A job was a job – especially for someone like me who was considered unsuitable for most employment. And Noah was right. Now, at least, I had a plan, even if the thought of it made my legs feel weak.

I liked Elle and Noah, and they'd become familiar – if vaguely intriguing – members of the village, but I didn't know them well. And April and I were used to Dot's meals. To comfy bedrooms. To not worrying about paying for the next food bill or tank of petrol. My marital home was a cosy space where April and I had everything we wanted.

Tracing my steps back to the car in a daze, I tripped over a steep cobble. If April was here how we would have giggled. How long would it be before we found the little things funny again? Whatever Noah said – however much my heart was breaking – I suspected, deep down, that my marriage had no future. Not after all these months of deception regarding Chanelle and our finances.

Halfheartedly, I hummed April's favourite pop song to myself, hoping it would cheer me up, but it didn't work.

Did I really have what it took to go it alone?

[Chapter Five](#)

I strode onto the decking porch of the summerhouse at the bottom of our garden. It was seven days on from the Sunday when Noah had made me the job offer, two weeks since Zak had dropped his bombshell. Yes, time moved slowly and I counted not only every day, but every painful hour as well.

I'd returned home to a massive argument. Zak had decided any more discussion was pointless and simply wanted all the new arrangements quickly set in place. No doubt Chanelle was the driving force behind this. Whenever I asked for details about exactly when he'd developed feelings for my ex best friend and all the places he'd taken her, and what their intentions were, he just raised his palm in my face and refused to answer. He said that dissecting the past wouldn't help us plan the future. That what was done was done.

Cue the last one hundred and sixty-eight hours of stony silence. I don't think he believed I'd move out, take a job, start over. This helped me reach a rapid decision about accepting Noah's offer

– for April’s sake. She needed stability, not to exist in an uncomfortable limbo. When I mentioned the job at The Coffee Club, Zak pursed his lips – and confused our daughter by rolling his eyes every time I broached the subject of her and me leaving The Willows. Honestly, Zak needed to face reality. If I pressed him he would talk of impatient creditors and trying to avoid more layoffs. Our house had to be put on the market as quickly as possible.

Reality bit him firmly, yesterday, when he spied the packed bags that I’d started to move over to Noah’s cottage. Cue another argument, thankfully out of April’s earshot. Although I didn’t need to worry too much about my daughter overhearing – these days her earphones seemed permanently stuck in her ears. Time and time again I’d insist she remove them, with Zak remaining tight-lipped, clearly thinking I was making a fuss over nothing. I swallowed. Perhaps the more laid-back Chanelle was a refreshing change from me, especially lying on sheets, enticing him with her surgically perfect figure.

I sighed.

I needed to get a grip. A sob unexpectedly rose in my chest. Zak and I were two halves of a whole, weren’t we? With April at the centre? I pursed my lips, determined not to let that bubble of emotion escape my lips. We’d decided not to tell our daughter about the money problems – understanding our separation would be tough enough. That meant, as far as she was concerned, Mummy being cross with Daddy was the sole reason I’d got a job and found a new home. I was prepared to be the bad cop if it protected her – even if her anger towards me made me want to curl up and die.

Feeling a bit shaky, I sat down in one of the chairs. The summerhouse stood just in front of a weeping willow tree. I remembered how a very young April used to love hiding under the drooping branches. She’d chase next door’s cat across the lawn or play dead whilst butterflies landed on her colourful summer clothes. I gave a small smile. What fun we used to have, when she was a little older, lying in deckchairs, me with a book, her with a ‘tween’ magazine. The garden had served no purpose to her over the last year, now she’d become part of Skye’s sophisticated set. I closed my eyes. However, over the last week it had been home to her bewildered sobs.

‘I don’t understand, Mum. You tell me to make up with friends after fallouts. Why can’t you and Dad do the same?’

My stomach churned. What response could I possibly give?

‘When you marry someone there has to be more than friendship ...’

‘You mean the love stuff?’ Her voice had wobbled slightly, as we’d sat next to each other, on her bed.

I’d nodded.

‘And the love stuff has gone?’ Water had pooled in the corners of her eyes and trickled down her cheeks.

I’d held my breath, not wanting to affirm this. ‘Yes,’ I’d finally whispered, unable to ignore her piercing stare. My throat had ached as if someone was strangling every last puff of breath out of me, and as if I, and I alone, had thrust a spear through my daughter’s heart.

‘Can’t you get it back?’ she’d asked, panic rising in her voice.

I shook my head. ‘No. Magic like that usually only has one life.’

‘Will your magic feelings for me run out one day, too?’ she’d mumbled, brow furrowed.

‘No! Never. Parent magic never dies. You will always be the most loved thing in Daddy and my lives.’

‘I don’t understand,’ she’d sobbed and burrowed her face in my chest.

Me neither, I’d secretly added as I hugged her tight. Oh, so tight. She didn’t deserve this pain.

Then she’d pulled back and wiped her eyes. A determined look had crossed her face. ‘But Daddy says we can still live here. You’re more cross with him. He must have magic left for you.’ She’d folded her arms. ‘It’s so unfair. You’re ruining everything. I want to stay.’

Cue a week full of sulks and small pointed fingers – at me. Doors slammed. Feet stomping. It was as if she'd been propelled into early teenage-hood. This was all Zak's fault, but I didn't want April to know that.

I opened my eyes and gazed at the summerhouse again. Zak had built it for me as a first anniversary gift. I'd squealed and jumped up and down at the time, gushing over the gingerbread-house windows, slanted roof, and flowerpots on the decking. Plus the front door bore a metallic butterfly that glinted in the sunshine.

'It's too much,' I'd said, after being led down the garden to see it, eyes shut, still not used to Zak's wealth. 'You are the best husband ever.'

My shoulders drooped now, at the thought of how I'd subsequently thanked him, under the nearby weeping willow tree. I always remembered every detail of our lovemaking. Yet ... funny, wasn't it? Other memories of our relationship seemed blurry in comparison.

'Has April actually packed?' said a tight voice that brought me back to the present as Zak sat down in a chair. Sunlight fell on our faces. Birds chirped. The grass still smelt fresh after being mown yesterday. Everything was idyllic – apart from the fact my husband was in love with another woman.

'Almost,' I said as he wrung his hands, dressed in a bright polo shirt and trousers. 'Although why you're suddenly so bothered about her welfare I have no idea.' I faced him, anger that had been simmering for days really starting to bubble.

He leant forwards and held his head in his hands. 'It's such a mess. This has come out of nowhere. I wouldn't blame you for thinking me a complete bastard.'

Wow. An ounce of remorse at this late stage? I should have felt touched but it just made my fists curl tighter.

'I didn't believe you would actually leave our home to work in a poxy coffee shop,' he said in a muffled voice. 'Don't go, Jenny. Stay here. You need to find work but you can find something better than that. Think of April's needs.'

'You sound just like the people who voted for Brexit and then complained that they never really thought it would happen.' I snorted. 'Honestly, Zak. *Me* think of April? *You* should have thought of April before you failed to keep your fly zipped outside of marriage,' I snapped. Talk about double standards.

Zak looked up and shrugged. 'Guilty as charged. But you'll always be the mother of my daughter and ... despite the difficulties ahead of us, I'll do right by you, financially, when I can.'

Financially? My nails dug into the palms of my hands. As if that meant anything to me. It was his *love* I'd wanted, not his wallet. 'That's what got us in this mess in the first place – you thinking you were doing right by me, just because I was pregnant.' I gulped.

'Jenny. Look, why exactly can't you stay here?'

I stared at him. Denial should be his middle name.

'Apart from anything else, we're practically bankrupt. We can't pay the mortgage, the bills, the staff. How *can* we stay here?' I was incredulous.

He stared at the wooden slatted floor.

'Look at me.'

Finally his eyes met mine.

'The Willows needs to be sold. End of. Creditors have to be paid. It's time to fly out of cloud cuckoo land and face these problems head on.'

'Don't you feel anything for our home?' He shook his head.

'How dare you! You questioning *my* feelings for the life we've made together? This home meant everything to me, but how could I stay and imagine you and Chanelle doing it on our kitchen table, on the sofa or in front of the fire?' I raised my eyebrows. 'My mind's been like a search engine, picking out all the times April and I were out of the house. I found an earring once under our bed. You said it must have belonged to Dot – but she hasn't got pierced ears. And the lounge once smelt of smoke

when we returned from an event at the school. Chanelle must have visited.' I'd known a golfing buddy hadn't been the culprit, as Zak had claimed, but I'd closed my eyes to the truth. I'd been such a fool. If Zak's middle name was Denial then mine was Gullible.

His bottom lip stuck out, just like sulky April's had all week. 'I suppose you're after a half share. But like you say, creditors come first.'

I sniffed. 'As much as I despise your behaviour, I won't be going after any so-called share. I won't have this bankruptcy on my head.' I pursed my lips. 'Your parents were the best; they welcomed me with open arms. Elite Eleganz is their life's work. I don't want to play a part in its failure.'

We looked at each other again and his eyes glistened. 'I've let them down big time, as well. The business is everything they worked for. The Willows, my parents ... so many memories.'

Yes, so many memories you've now trampled over. Past images of family meals and celebrations in the house flicked through my mind.

My voice wobbled. I had to ask, just to make sure, even though every vein in my body throbbed with his betrayal. 'You're sure you want to break up our family; you're sure you and I couldn't ... you know ... try again,, for April's benefit?'

My eyes widened. I could tell the answer was a no, but I'd had to ask. I needed to know that there was nothing I could have done to save our marriage, our family.

'You know the hardest thing? Looking back, Chanelle's excitement at finding out who I was married to the very first time we met ... It wouldn't surprise me if she had this planned from the start. And you've fallen for her plan hook, line, and sinker. Led by your balls instead of your brain. What a cliché. You've been played. So have I. This love affair didn't just innocently happen. With that level of deceit from the start, what future can it possibly have?'

He looked up and his nostrils flared. 'Think that if you will.'

'Call in her loan, Zak. Chanelle's business is doing well enough at the moment.'

Cheeks flushed, he shook his head.

'Why not?' Okay. Mustn't shout. April might hear.

'Her repayments are the only thing keeping Elite Eleganz afloat at the moment,' he muttered and broke eye contact.

'Liar! For Christ's sake, Zak. Just be honest. You can't bear to ask her, can you? Can't bear to upset your sweet little bit-on-the-side ...' Love really did make people blind. 'Is that really it? We're over?' I said, hating myself for those words.

But I had to persist, even at this last stage. How could he just toss ten years down the drain? And – an uncomfortable sensation shifted inside my chest – I was afraid. Afraid of leaving behind those cosy memories and striking out on my own. I admit it. Things weren't perfect, but maybe our relationship would improve? People got back together after worse things, right? Only last week I read in the paper how a man in the States murdered his in-laws for money and his wife still visited him on Death Row.

I swallowed, trying to ignore the voice in my head that said cowardice was never the best option; that I had to accept my situation and let go.

'You and me, we're done? You aren't even going to put up a fight?' I said, in an oh-so-small voice.

'Oh, Jenny.' Dark circles were etched under his eyes. 'April will always link us together.'

Once more, anger inflated my chest. What if our split screwed up our daughter? You read about it in the papers. Being fussy about food might just be the start of a whole gamut of problems. Maybe we could work things out, make do, until she was just a bit older?

I swallowed – swallowed my pride, fingers curling at the words I was about to emit.

'I'll say it again – what about counselling? Let's try and get past this – be a family again. We could, I don't know, move away from the village. Start afresh.'

He met my gaze and my spirits rose. Was he going to say yes? My shoulders relaxed at the glimmer of hope that this was all a horrible mistake and we could get our lives back on track. Deep down Zak loved me. I wouldn't work in a coffee shop. April and I would continue to enjoy a luxury life. My comfort zone would be reinstalled. He reached across the gap between the chairs and his strong fingers curled around mine. My hand betrayed my broken heart as, despite my anger, I automatically squeezed his fingers back.

His kiss-me stare used to melt my insides, along with the strong mouth that reminded me of the first time our lips had met. I was interviewing him for my college's student magazine. Over the weeks of my placement at Elite Eleganz, we'd become closer. When he supervised my work, he stood nearer, his body close to mine, a hand occasionally brushing my back. We laughed. Shared a few secrets. I told him about my teenage crush on Piers Morgan. He revealed an old school admiration of Doris Day music. I'd asked him the final question for my interview: what fascinated him most about fashion? His answer? How he loved making women feel good about themselves, as he truly believed you had to love Number One first before being ready to love another.

Then he'd stood up, come around to my side of the desk, and sat down on the chair next to me. Gingerly, I'd stretched out my hand and run my fingers through his chestnut hair. He'd leant forward and I'd closed my eyes in anticipation. His mouth met mine and he tenderly kissed me back. In an easy fashion, he had slipped his arms around my back and he pulled me onto his lap. I had wrapped my legs around his waist and I'd pushed my body against his, weeks of attraction willing him to satisfy my desires.

I shook myself as Zak spoke in a stiff voice.

'I'm sorry, Jenny, but no. Counselling? I see no point. Remember, at your insistence, I tried it after Mum's death.' He gave an ugly laugh. 'It didn't bring her back. It didn't change a thing.'

'You only lasted for one session.'

'And that was enough.' He sighed. 'But I promise, April will be all right. She won't be the only one of her friends to have divorced parents.'

I pulled away my hand. 'And that makes it okay?'

His jaw clenched. 'Of course not, but –'

I threw my hands in the air and got to my feet. 'Zak. Come on. We can't just throw away ten years of marriage,' I finally shouted, tears running down my face.

He stood up too and folded his arms. 'For God's sake calm down, April might hear.'

'Ha! And we can't have that now, can we?' I wiped my eyes with my arm. 'Oh no. Far better to pretend that her father isn't the two-timing philanderer I've recently come to know.' My voice shook. 'What's happened to you, Zak? Where's the man I married? The man I admired?' I stretched out my arms. 'Zak! You were my world!'

He gazed at the floor. 'Jenny – I don't want to hurt your feelings, but like I've said ... the marriage wasn't something I'd planned.' He looked up. 'We've grown apart. You must have felt it, too. Please. Don't make this more difficult than it needs to be.'

'*Me* make things difficult? I love how you've turned this around.' I bit the insides of my cheeks. Never again would I give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry. 'We were happy, Zak,' I said and my voice wavered. 'Couldn't keep our hands off each other in the beginning. Isn't that spark still there? How can you be so robotic? Isn't there an ounce of emotion in you for your wife of ten years?'

He stared at the floor again, where shortly afterwards my self-esteem joined his gaze.

'When was the last time we talked?' he said. 'Really properly talked? Like we used to, at the beginning, sitting up till the small hours, arguing over stuff like who was the best UK fashion designer? The last few years, I don't know, it's felt like we've just been going through the motions.'

My breath caught in my throat because he'd voiced what I'd recently wondered, but hadn't liked to admit. I slumped back into my chair. Zak sat down in his. 'But ... I mean ... We never really ... I always thought the chemistry was enough?' I whispered, pulse thumping loudly in my ears.

Zak raised one eyebrow. 'In your heart do you honestly think that?'

I stared at him.

Yes. No. I don't know.

This was all new to me – questioning our relationship. 'You really do like Chanelle, don't you?' I said, quietly. 'It's not just a physical thing.'

He nodded.

'Maybe you're right. I've thought about this too.' And not just a bit, but night after night since he revealed his affair. 'Especially at the beginning, life was busy; evenings we both just chilled in front of the telly, you exhausted after work, me relaxing from a day of nappies and feeds. But that's normal, right? And April's getting older now. Surely we can take more time for us and put things right?'

'I'm sorry, Jenny. I just don't think we've that much in common any more.'

'We've got a daughter,' I snapped. 'All couples grow apart when bringing up kids. But we've got retirement ahead of us and –'

'I'm not writing off my life until then!'

My stomach caved in as if he'd punched me square in the navel. 'I'm sorry that's how you'd see staying with me.'

'It's not enough,' he muttered. 'Not any more. Sorry, to be so honest but –'

'Better late than never,' I said, with a generous dose of sarcasm.

He sighed. 'Look, I'm moving in with Chanelle tonight.'

My hand flew to my mouth. 'Zak. No. Please not that. Don't move in with them. Imagine how April will feel, knowing her dad is living with her best friend.'

'April will get used to it.'

Oh God. This was like some twisted parallel universe.

'At least do me this one thing, Zak. You owe me.'

He raised an eyebrow.

'Hold off moving in with Chanelle. Let April get used to our breakup first. You live here until the house is sold.'

'Then you'll stay?'

'No,' I said, in measured tones. 'If you and I are really over then I can't. I need to get away from this place.'

He thumped his fist on the table – some emotion, at last, yet a sign of the temper that had emerged since the passing of his mum. Zak's eyes blazed. 'You moving her out of here is going to be more of an upheaval than me moving in with Chanelle, what with April leaving her bedroom and everything familiar.' He folded his arms. 'Go if you must, but our daughter stays put.'

'I'm not staying in this house a minute longer than necessary,' I said, heart racing. 'And neither is she. What's the point? The house will be on the market as soon as possible, so she'd have to move out then anyway.'

Zak's chair scraped back and he stood up. 'You are making it very difficult for us to just sort all this out between ourselves. April should stay in her home with a parent who has a decent job.'

'As you know, I have a job, thanks to Noah. It's local. And it comes with accommodation. And I'm sure any court would be more sympathetic to the parent who had stayed loyal to the family unit. And your job could hardly be called decent if it's based on a business that is on the brink of going bust.'

'You barely know that Noah guy!' shouted Zak. 'I won't allow it. He could be an axe murderer or ...'

'Don't be ridiculous. The only way he could kill someone would be death by caffeine. There's a lock on our door and it's no different to renting a bedsit because, you know, that's how ordinary people manage, Zak ...' My voice shook. 'Not everyone lives in a mansion with more personal space than a moonwalker and alarmed doors with a direct hotline to the local police station.'

He snorted. 'How would you know? I've provided you with a life of luxury. You'll never manage on your own.'

My body tensed. It was one thing me thinking that. Quite another him being of the same opinion.

'Don't you dare judge me! I'll manage just fine. As I've proven. It hardly took me long to find a job and accommodation.'

'You can't do this,' he said, quietly.

'I think you'll find I can,' I said, in tones more confident than I felt. 'Don't even think about trying to stop me. I mean it.' I stared at him hard. 'My work hours will be shorter than yours. I have an excellent case for being the hands-on parent. You're always working late or entertaining. And you've got to let Dot go. Who will be around to look after April?'

'Okay, then Chanelle and Skye can move into The Willows, temporarily, and perhaps with her income –'

I winced. 'You'd really throw that on April, at this early stage?'

He paused and then said, 'I'll fight you on this, Jenny. Every inch of the way. You'd never beat me in court. I'll beg or borrow, call in every favour owed to me, to hire a top solicitor. April will hate leaving her comforts behind. You'll see. Give it a few days and she'll be desperate to come back.'

'I think you underestimate our girl,' I said stiffly and left the summerhouse. 'And I still think you're deluded about just how much our circumstances have changed, so I've already started to look into her attending another school, next term. It's been hard, but I've finally accepted she'll have to leave her friends. Not now, though. It's mid-term. Too disruptive. At least we've paid up until the end of this year.'

Silence. I stopped and turned around. Zak stared at the lawn.

'What?' I asked.

Slowly, he looked up and ran a hand through his hair. 'She's got to leave as soon as possible,' he muttered. 'I ... I've been putting off telling you. I hoped the school might change their minds, give me more time to –'

An icy sensation pierced my chest. 'Zak? We have paid for this term, right?'

He bit his lip. 'No. In fact ...' his face crumpled '... we're two terms in arrears. Our chances have run out. April has to leave as soon as possible. The head's been really generous about it, but she just can't extend her goodwill any further.'

I gasped. 'Zak! Why didn't you tell me? Instead of sticking your head in the sand?' Wasn't I a good listener? Couldn't he trust me with bad news? Did he really think me so fragile?

'Guess I didn't want to face the truth,' he said. 'And if I told you I'd have to.'

I shook my head. Stood open-mouthed. I had no words and turned back around.

My throat felt dry as I stalked across the garden, biting the insides of my cheeks again. I'd show Zak how I could provide for myself and for our daughter. And I'd sort out a new school, too. Yet a heavy, uncomfortable sensation weighed down my chest. I had niggling doubts as to how well April would settle into a new life. As a desperate last measure, I'd even tried to moot moving to Noah's cottage as something of an adventure.

'We're really going to leave here, then? Leave Daddy? Leave my walk-in wardrobe and Dot?' she'd said.

'There's a river at the bottom of the garden, sweetheart. And imagine living in a loft. You'll be sleeping higher than Rapunzel.'

'It's more like the dwarves' cottage in Snow White.' She'd gulped. 'Small. And it will stink of coffee.'

'And of cake,' I'd continued, in the same cheery tone. Yet it killed me to see her mouth pucker and those eyes fill.

‘It won’t smell as good as Dot’s baking.’ Tears had run down her face as she stamped her foot. ‘Why are you being so selfish, disagreeing with me and Daddy? Don’t you care what I want? I won’t do it! Go on your own. I’m not moving. You can’t make me!’

She’d stormed off to her room. I dreaded telling her that her home was going to be sold and belong to another family, so I’d held off. Perhaps that sick feeling inside was how Zak had felt about sharing bad news with me – but then I was an adult. My fears were based on April being a vulnerable, confused child. My knees had given way after she’d left and I’d collapsed onto the lounge floor. Head in my hands, the sound of my muffled sobs was almost as loud as the rapid beat of my heart. I recognised her anger for what it really was – pure, unadulterated hurt caused by the adulterous acts of her dad. The hurt at leaving behind Zak and the trappings of our extravagant, familiar life.

Would she ever adapt? Could she and I really pen a new life map? Or would her tears water an ever-growing need in her to return to the spoilt existence we’d both enjoyed before? Could I manage a budget? Could I still succeed in being the best mum I could be, without money? The answer should have been a no-nonsense ‘yes’ but doubting voices niggled my conscience, voices that knew I was scared of the unknown.

Chapter Six

I gazed at April’s bed and the pink headboard in the shape of a giant crown. A glittery chandelier hung from the ceiling and fairy lights trailed the coving. Heart motifs lined the wall above the entrance to her walk-in wardrobe and matched a shaped fluffy rug on the floor. Over the last year, more grown-up aspects had appeared, like a poster of her favourite pop group. April and her new friends dreamed of belonging to a girl band.

I stole a glance at my daughter who stood by my side at the door, mouth downturned. What a contrast to the day she’d first seen her newly decorated bedroom. Squeals had filled the air and she’d given Zak and me the tightest hugs ever. I smiled. At that point she’d still played mostly with toys. Zak and I had listened at the door as she explained to her dolls that the wardrobe was their own particular new home.

‘Are the guinea pigs packed?’ she asked in a flat voice.

‘Yes.’ It was good of Noah to let us keep them in his garden.

‘Tell me again why we have to leave. I don’t understand. The house is big. Skye had a good idea – why can’t you and Daddy just have half each?’

I knelt down and took her hand. Her gold nail varnish was peeling. Her bottom lip jutted out.

‘Daddy and I can’t live in the same house together any more, sweetie.’

‘Why don’t you love each other any more?’ Her voice cracked.

My chest squeezed at red blotches around her eyes. I’d heard her sobbing in bed last night but when I’d gone into her room she froze and pretended to sleep.

‘We will always care for each other because of our gigantic love for you, but ... you know Daddy and Chanelle are together now.’

‘But you and Chanelle are friends, aren’t you? And Daddy doesn’t want you to move out – he wants to stay friends too.’

Inwardly I sighed. I still hadn’t seen that woman since I learned of the affair. Us adults had tried to make things as pain-free as possible for the children. I’d avoided words like fault and hate. At least it was one thing Zak and I agreed on – not to play the blame game. Although now and again I reached screaming point, and just wanted to stamp my foot, bawl and yell that yes, I *hated* my ex best friend and it was Daddy’s *fault*.

‘We just all want what is best for you and Skye,’ I said. ‘Me and Daddy separating has got nothing to do with you. In fact, you are the most fab-u-licious bit of both of us.’ I stood up. ‘And so it just means ... things will be the same but different. Skye still sees her dad, doesn’t she? Just not at the same time as her mum.’

Her chin wobbled. 'It *won't* be the same at all. Daddy won't come in from work every night and let me fetch him a bowl of crisps. Dot won't cook for us any more. And where will I put all my make-up and toys?'

I squeezed her hand. I'd answered these questions a hundred times already, over the last few days.

'You now have two homes,' I said brightly. 'And in one you'll have a room in a really cool loft, right next to a coffee shop.'

'I don't even know Noah that well. Stupid name,' she muttered. 'But two homes will be cool. Daddy's staying here. That means that one day we might be able to sort something out and move back.'

I stared at her. Hardly breathed. Shivered as dread filled my chest. In that moment I realised it was time to tell her the truth. Well, a watered-down version, that left out scary words such as bankruptcy. She had enough to worry about as it was. I stiffened my body and prepared myself for the sight of her crushed hope – the broken face, her understanding that everything familiar she'd come to love would end up belonging to someone else.

'No, sweetie.' I cleared my throat. 'Even if Daddy stays here, it won't be for ever.'

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