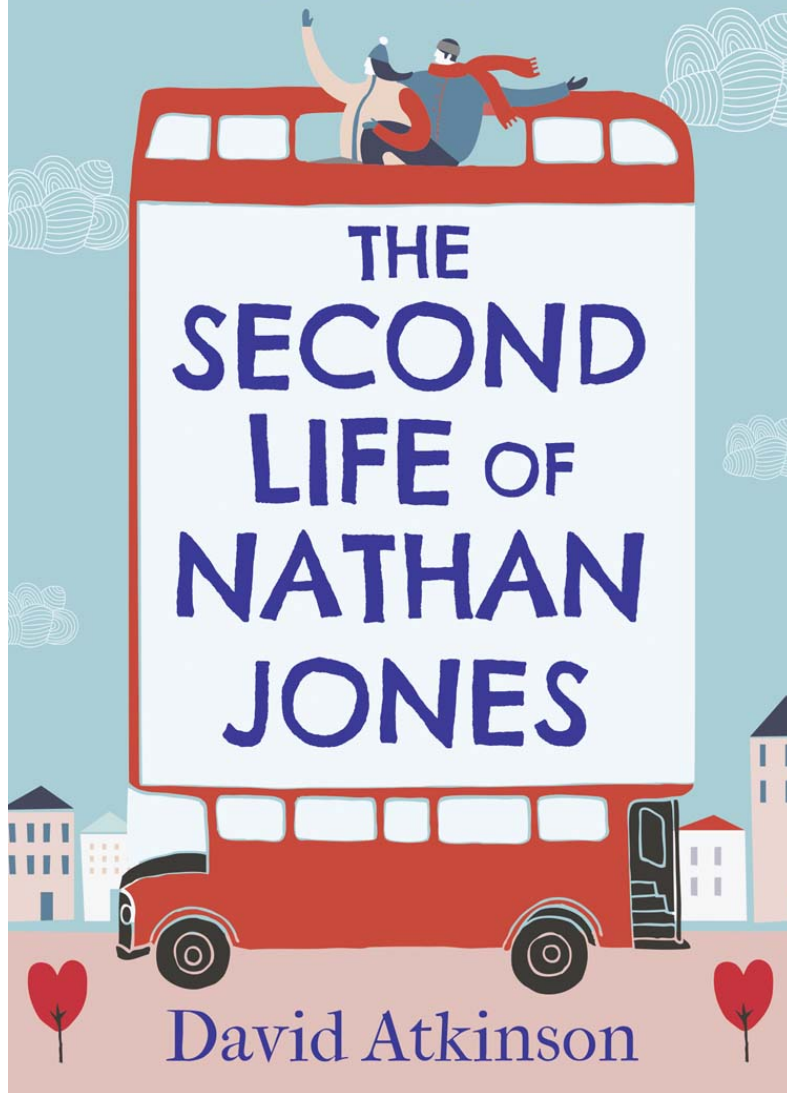


Getting hit by a bus was the
best thing that ever happened to him...



David Atkinson

**The Second Life of Nathan Jones:
A laugh out loud, OMG! romcom
that you won't be able to put down!**

«HarperCollins»

Atkinson D.

The Second Life of Nathan Jones: A laugh out loud, OMG!
romcom that you won't be able to put down! / D. Atkinson —
«HarperCollins»,

The bestselling author of Love Byte is back with this laugh-out-loud hilarious rom com! Getting hit by a bus was the best thing that ever happened to him... When one wrong step – and the poor timing of the number 19 bus – send Nathan Jones to the Edinburgh morgue his story should have ended...but then he went and woke up. Returned to real life Nathan finds a wife disappointed that he's miraculously returned from the dead and an unshakeable attraction for mortuary technician Kat – the woman who brought him back to life, in more ways than one. Now, as his world implodes and Kat leads him down an unexpected path, Nathan somehow finds himself having the time of his second life... A hilarious, uplifting story of second chances, death defying hijinks and motorhome mayhem – Mhairi McFarlane meets Eleanor Oliphant!

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The Second Life of Nathan Jones

DAVID ATKINSON



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Chapter 1

Getting killed hadn't been part of Nathan Jones's plans for Saturday afternoon. Instead, he'd mapped out a nice relaxing time for himself on the sofa catching up on *The Walking Dead* boxset he'd got for his birthday.

His wife Laura and their three children were in the kingdom of Fife, visiting her mother, and weren't due back until the evening. He pottered from room to room, still in his pyjamas, revelling in the hush that had descended upon his normally noisy life.

Nathan polished off one of his favourite toasted cinnamon bagels, smothered with some of Tesco's finest jam, whilst flicking from channel to channel making the most of having sole custody of the remote control. Had he known what was in store for him when he left his flat, he would have remained safely seated on the couch and phoned for a takeaway dinner.

Instead, he got dressed, zipped up his coat and headed out into the windy November afternoon munching a bag of pickled-onion-flavoured Monster Munch crisps. His planned destination had been the local Tesco but as he crossed the busy road adjacent to his flat he had an unfortunate run-in with a bus that subsequently changed everything.

When he pieced together the incident later, it appeared he had stepped off the pavement right into the path of the twelve-tonne vehicle. This was obviously a very silly thing to do and so unlike his normally cautious approach to life. He couldn't remember the number of times he'd drummed into his children's heads 'STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN'.

The ambulance arrived in record time, but a paramedic pronounced him dead at the scene and an A & E doctor confirmed the decision a short time later at the local hospital.

He remembered very little about dying. If pushed, he would classify it as a complete non-event. Nothing flashed before his eyes and no dead relatives stood beckoning him into the light. Even if they had, his relationship with his family had been such that the likely outcome would have been him running in the opposite direction.

If Karen Gillan had been tasked with bringing him into the fold he might have considered it, but she hadn't, probably because

1. She happened to be still very much alive and
2. He didn't merit a heavenly Hollywood A-list reception committee.

His first impression of death? A vastly overrated experience and he had no idea why everyone made such a fuss over it.

He'd felt that way about several things in recent years: the various royal weddings and births, the Brexit fiasco and the launch of the latest incarnation of the iPhone.

His poor impression of death might be down to the fact that, like many things in life, Nathan didn't do it very well. He was rubbish at lots of things. He couldn't ski, skate or work out quadratic equations and had issues with authority figures. He could now add dying to the list.

Thinking back to his childhood, Nathan recalled that his mum's main concern about death had been underwear.

'Nathan, you must make sure that every day you leave the house in clean underpants, just in case you're involved in any kind of accident. I don't want you showing me up in hospital.'

For that reason, whenever she left the house her underwear would be clean and as new as possible. Even as a relatively young kid, Nathan realised that if she ever got injured so badly in an accident that she needed hospital admission her underwear would more than likely be soiled to the point that it would have to be binned.

He never mentioned this to her, however, and had she still been alive, she would not have been happy that on the day her son's life ended, he'd been wearing very old and very threadbare boxer shorts.

Nathan first realised everything wasn't quite right with the whole 'after-death experience' when he became aware of a bone-numbing cold and that his arms had been strapped down. His face had also annoyingly been covered with cloth. Overall it felt as if he'd been swaddled in a similar way to that which his wife used with the kids when they were babies.

Initially he thought it might be a straitjacket hugging him tightly. Perhaps the increasingly fractious relationship with his wife had finally reached a stage where his sanity had cracked, leading to an extreme psychosis demanding he be sectioned and confined in a small space?

He could still breathe easily enough, though he learned his breath smelt none too pleasant as he received instant feedback from the fabric pressed against his face. He tried to move his left arm, but this resulted in such searing pain that it made him gasp and brought tears to his eyes. He tentatively moved his right arm. He felt some gentle tingling but no pain. He pulled it free of whatever restricted it, reached up and removed the fabric membrane from his face.

Free of the first prison, he then faced a second containment. He'd been enclosed in something dark, hard and metallic. As far as he knew, even the most dangerous mental patients were not placed in metal boxes. At least, he didn't think so, though he acknowledged he had limited knowledge of current UK mental health treatments.

Unfortunately, at this point some feeling started to return to the rest of his body and he ached. Not the kind of soul-ache that you got from being desperately in love with someone, which he could still recall (just), but the kind of all-over body ache that occasionally accompanied a bad bout of the flu when it felt as though a little man was running around your body stabbing your extremities with a hot needle. In fact, it felt very much as if he had been hit by a bus. Then he remembered with a start of realisation that that was exactly what had happened.

He started to shout. However, his croaky, weak voice only produced a pathetic whimper. He tried to bang the sides of the metal container with his good arm, but this only made the smallest of sounds given the lack of space at his disposal.

Nathan then discovered that if he banged his bare heels off the bottom of the metal prison it made much more noise. He did this for a few seconds then gave up, exhausted.

Then he suddenly felt himself moving forwards. It felt like the start of a roller-coaster ride but without any of the delicious anticipation, and suddenly he slid out of the darkness into a harsh white light.

As he squinted into the brightness a face emerged and peered curiously at him. An angel perhaps? If so, she was nothing like those depicted in Hollywood movies. Her hair was black, her eyes were black, her clothes were black, her earrings were black, her piercings were black, even her lips were black – although her teeth were pearly white. She smiled at him and said, 'Hello there.'

Chapter 2

My full name is Klaudette Ainsworth-Thomas (yeah, I know). I woke up on my tenth birthday, decided enough was enough and made a monumental decision. The first person I had to tell? My mother.

‘Mum?’

Janice, my mum, could usually be found behind an ironing board. She ironed every day. Ironing was one of her many obsessions. If it got to 6 p.m. and there were no clothes left in the ironing basket she got all anxious and cranky and started to press things that had already been done, like my dad's shirts or something random like the bedroom curtains. She had even been known to remove the cushion covers from the couch and press them on a low heat.

‘Mum?’

‘Yes, Klaudie?’ Now, there was another thing that annoyed me; even though my thoughtless parents had lumbered me with the triple-barrelled name from hell, they couldn't even be bothered to use it properly and invariably shortened it to Scotland's prevailing type of weather.

‘I've made a decision.’

‘That's nice, dear.’

‘Mum, I'm serious.’

My mum put the iron down and stared at me. ‘Klaudie, you're always serious, that's your problem, you—’

‘No, Mum, that's not my problem, that's your problem. I am the way I am. I've decided that I'm sick of being called Klaudette, Klaudie and Klaudia, and I'm sick of Ainsworth-Thomas as well. From now on I'm only going to answer to the name Kat, K-A-T.’

‘K-A-T?’

‘Yep, Kat is much cooler and most of my friends call me that anyway.’

Mum returned to ironing her slippers. ‘That's nice, dear.’

Despite my mum's apathy I stuck to my guns and from that day on I only answered to the name Kat. Eventually everyone, including my parents and most of the teachers, adopted my new alias, the only exception being the assistant head at my crumbling Glasgow high school, Mrs Brock, who insisted on calling me Klaudette. As a result, I ignored everything she said for the next five years.

The only issue with this impasse happened to be that Mrs Brock also taught me history for two of those five years. History, therefore, didn't turn out to be one of my strong points, not helped by the number of Harolds/Haralds mooching about in 1066.

The fault all lay with my mum. She'd met and married a John Thomas (yes, really) and they decided to join forces and hyphenate their names after they got married. I'd always thought someone who had grown up being called John Thomas would have had more awareness and sympathy about kids' names instead of lumbering his only daughter with such a mouthful. He'd even managed to become a professor of social anthropology to avoid using his first name. Even his bank cards only had ‘Professor J Thomas’ printed on them.

As a youngster, before I had the presence of mind to change my name, I had a plump, lumpy body, a squished face and little self-confidence. I used to come home from school, go into my bedroom and slip into a Cinderella or Snow-White costume from my dressing-up box and prance up and down in front of the mirror pretending I lived a different life, using clothes as an emotional crutch, an image to hide behind. I still did.

I've always felt that there was a certain cruelty involved, growing up as an only child, especially with parents like mine, who were too wrapped up in their own obsessions to notice my issues. All parents should be obliged to have two or more children or none. In my opinion, having only one kid could lead to them growing up lonely – well, kids like me who had real problems making friends

would, anyway. If I'd had a sibling, they would have played with me and banished some of my loneliness.

Yeah, but knowing you they would have hated you so that would've made things worse.

'Things couldn't have been much worse.'

Wanna bet?

When I get stressed I often argue with my inner self, usually out loud, which can bring me some weird glances from strangers. Well, weirder than normal. Reminiscing about my childhood usually raises my stress levels so I try not to.

Despite the problems in high school I left with some decent grades, much to the surprise of many of my teachers, especially Mrs Brock, and won a place at Napier University in Edinburgh to study nursing.

I couldn't stand the thought of working in an office. I was a practical sort of person and initially believed that nursing would be a good option. I anticipated that it would provide a stimulating and fast-changing environment that would stop me getting bored. It didn't.

My first placement in an adult surgical ward saw me dealing with patients who were either waiting for or recovering from an operation. The ward was chronically under-resourced (like so many others), which meant I felt used and abused by everyone, staff and patients alike. On my first eight-hour shift my mentor said, 'Kat, the patient in room three needs some toast and tea. Can you get that for them?'

I rushed back to the nurses' station after I'd finished. My mentor said, 'Quick work, that. Can you change the two beds in room eleven, they're covered in blood and vomit, and after that could you be a dear and nip down to the shops for some sandwiches for me and Elaine, the staff nurse, as we both forgot to bring anything in for lunch?'

By the end of the day I felt more like a waitress and a chambermaid than a nurse. I also wondered why patients were called 'patients' as they were anything but, constantly pressing buzzers and shouting for anything and everything.

I could have probably put up with all that and carried on but for me the final straw came on the last week of my first placement. Whilst I was escorting an elderly male patient to the toilet, he suddenly turned and grabbed both my breasts in his bony (but surprisingly strong) little hands, thrust his head into my cleavage, sighed and expired on the floor.

Enough was enough, so I dropped out and began a medical internship at the local mortuary. Dead patients didn't grope me, or demand things, or speak to me, or stare at me, or assault me. In fact, they rarely did anything at all – except lie still. They occasionally stink a little, but you soon get used to that.

I applied myself and with the help of day release and evening courses I qualified as an anatomical pathologist practitioner, better known as a mortuary technician. I suppose given my view of the world and my relatively serious and introverted nature, the work suited me. I'd been working in Edinburgh's Royal Infirmary for nearly six years now and there wasn't much I hadn't seen, or, more pertinently perhaps, smelled.

Initially, my mum reacted in horror at my relatively unusual career choice and couldn't understand my motivation. Over time, however, she came to recognise that I enjoyed my job – as weird as that sounds – and never complained about it, the way many people did.

Monday, 23 November started out like most other early shifts. My alarm woke me at 5.45 a.m., I showered, ate cornflakes whilst drying my hair and staring at *BBC News* with the subtitles on, so I could understand what the presenters were jabbering about over the noise of the hairdryer. My thick hair always takes ages to dry.

After that I applied my Manic Panic foundation. If I was honest I liked the name more than anything as pretty much any pale slap worked for me. However, for the last ten years I'd only ever

worn three shades of Rimmel lipstick: black, purple and, for special occasions, RockChick Scarlet but today being a work day meant boring Black Diva.

I then applied my black liner and smudged some light pink blusher on to contour my cheeks and make me look slightly less like one of my charges. In truth, as I'd got older I'd toned down the Goth persona. I supposed I'd got nobody and nothing to rebel against these days, but still liked the fact it made people wary of me.

I then pulled on my clothes, left my tiny rented flat in the Duddingston area of Edinburgh and drove to work. My workload scheduled for that morning should have been light as we had no post-mortems booked until the afternoon, so my plan had been to sort out a load of paperwork I hadn't bothered finishing on Friday. Another plus would be that I'd be working with Sid.

Sid's actual title was Dr David Ingles but his idol growing up had been Sid Vicious, so he'd taken the nickname. My only issue with this was that, in my opinion, Taylor Swift bore more resemblance to Sid Vicious than David did with his soft round face, big lips and gentle grey eyes. There was also the slight problem that as David, being only thirty-six, wouldn't have been born when the Sex Pistols were at their zenith but then who am I to criticise? Sid was my favourite forensic pathologist, which was a bit like saying he was my favourite teddy bear, given his nature. He started at Edinburgh's Royal Infirmary around the same time as me and although much more senior he didn't have the 'lording over' attitude some of the other doctors have and we got on brilliantly.

He was on my wavelength with so many things, and as we had absolutely no interest in each other physically it was easy to talk to him. I suspect he might be gay – in fact I'd stake money on it – but whenever I broached the subject (usually on a night out after a few drinks) he changed the subject of conversation immediately. He was firmly in the closet as far as I was concerned, so far in that he'd locked the damn thing and thrown away the key.

On this Monday, I managed to arrive before anyone else and opened the door to the large basement room where all the recently deceased were stored. Then, something made me stop in my tracks. I'd heard something. I didn't move for a moment, hardly breathing, then decided I must have been mistaken. I'd been alone down here hundreds of times before, both during the day and at night, and it didn't bother me any more. It had been a little creepy at first, but I'd soon come to realise that the dead couldn't hurt me (barring any kind of zombie uprising, of course), and life had taught me well that it was the living I needed to be wary of.

I quickly scanned the log, noting only one new entry, and as I turned to go and get changed I heard something coming from one of the drawers. How strange.

I cautiously approached the section where the banging emanated from and thought for a second that one of the medical staff might be playing a trick, but that sort of stuff was usually only reserved for 'newbies'. I slowly pulled out the offending drawer and peered down at the pale and bruised but incredibly cute face staring up at me. It blinked its bright blue eyes and I was immediately smitten. It had finally happened – I'd fallen for a corpse.

Chapter 3

Once I'd made sure my rather attractive 'corpse' was alive and not a figment of my too often fertile imagination, I called upstairs and got them to send down some of the intensive care staff. My 'patient' (I thought that sounded better than 'corpse' on the phone) hadn't been dead for long, if indeed he'd been dead at all. The doctors were understandably confused and fired loads of questions at me, most of which I couldn't answer.

Fifteen minutes after I'd discovered the patient – Mr Jones, according to his label – had been moved to an intensive care bed, wired up to the moon and subjected to all manner of poking and prodding. After they finished their tests, they loaded him up with painkillers and left him to sleep. The IT consultant told me that, 'Nathan Jones is a medical curiosity, a walking miracle – well, he will be. Currently, he's a lying-down moaning miracle.'

At the end of my shift I potted upstairs to see how my first 'living corpse' had fared. He intrigued me but, more than that, he'd unsettled me. I'd never developed feelings instantly for anyone before, alive or dead or maybe somewhere in between, as Mr Jones appeared to be.

I knew I'd stepped onto dodgy ground but couldn't help the way I felt.

I stopped by the nurses' station on the way and got an update from Jan, the staff nurse on duty. We'd known each other for years. She'd 'taken me under her wing' (her description not mine) when I'd first started in the hospital, and even confessed to me one night when we were both a bit drunk that she suspected she had bisexual tendencies but didn't want her husband or teenage son to find out. Given that new information, I hadn't been sure at the time whether her 'taking me under her wing' might be a sign that she liked me or a sign that she *liked* me, but – to my relief – nothing more than her drunken confession had happened.

She filled me in on what she knew and that he remained asleep. I slipped into his room and sat staring at him for a while, wondering how on earth he'd managed to get pronounced dead and yet still be alive.

I'd just decided to get up and head for home when his eyes flickered open. 'Hello there,' I said brightly.

'Can you say anything else?' he mumbled with an English accent, running his tongue around dry lips. I poured him some water and handed it to him. His left arm had been encased in plaster but his right one seemed fine and he took the beaker from me.

'Are you right-handed? That's lucky.'

He nodded. 'Yeah, I don't feel that lucky just now. I think I need to thank you ... you know, for finding me.'

'You were being very noisy. The morgue is usually quiet, like, well ... a morgue, I suppose.'

'Not too noisy, I hope – not enough to wake the dead.'

'I didn't check but I think you were the only live one there.'

'Has that ever happened to you before?'

I shook my head. 'Nope, you're my first zombie. You were definitely dead when they shut you in the drawer again yesterday.'

'Again?'

'Yeah, I wasn't in over the weekend, but it seems after your wife identified you on Saturday night, they moved you around a fair bit because they were servicing the fridge mechanisms, so you haven't been in the drawers much. Thing is, you'd think all that moving about would have woken you up.'

'I don't understand.'

'Neither do I, nor the doctors. You've got a lot of people confused and all worked up. They don't know why you're alive and that bothers them.'

'They'd rather I'd stayed dead?'

'Probably; and if you'd stayed in there much longer you'd likely have frozen to death anyway. They're saying you've been subject to the Lazarus Syndrome.'

'What's that?'

'Well, it's also known as autoresuscitation after failed cardiopulmonary resuscitation, which is the spontaneous return of circulation after failed attempts at revival.'

'What does that mean?'

'You're very lucky.'

'You said that already. What's your name?'

'Kat.'

'What, as in pussy? Sorry, that sounds rude.'

'It's fine. No, K-A-T.'

'Oh, okay. As in short for Katie or something.'

'Yeah, something like that. Look, I really came to see if there's anything you need?'

'A new body, maybe.'

I laughed. 'I can't help you there. I think your wife stopped by earlier.'

'Did you speak to her?'

'No, I was downstairs at that point helping saw the top off someone's skull.'

'I probably didn't need to know that.'

'Sorry, the staff nurse said she couldn't hang around because of your kids but they've called to let her know that you're awake. She said she'll come tomorrow.' I scratched my nose where a black piercing emerged from my left nostril. I noticed Nathan watching me intently. I must admit being overcome with a feeling of disappointment when I'd discovered he had a wife. My taste in men wasn't getting any better the older I got. 'It must have been a shock for her.'

'What? That I'd died?'

'Well, yes, that you'd died. And then that you were suddenly alive again.' I noticed his face darken and a frown appeared, making him look older. 'What's wrong?'

'Apart from being broken?'

I smiled. 'Yeah, you look upset about something.'

'No, just in a bit of pain, I think.'

I didn't believe him but whatever was bothering him wasn't really any of my business.

'Well, as your wife isn't able to come and see you, who else can I call?'

'Ghostbusters,' he said, smiling.

'Seriously – there's no one? Your mother?'

'She's been dead for seventeen years.'

'Father?'

'Dead for twenty.'

'Brothers, sisters?'

'I'm an only child.'

'Lonely child, more like. What about friends?'

Nathan sighed. 'You could have called my mate Graham, I suppose, but he's on holiday in Thailand.'

'Have you told your work you're likely to be off for a while?'

'I mainly work for myself, freelance, so no need.'

'Freelance what?'

'Just freelance. You're very nosy.'

'Are you lonely?'

'With a wife and three kids? You must be joking.'

'Outside your family circle there doesn't seem to be very much for you though.'

'I'm a very busy person.'

'That's what lonely people say.'

'Is it?'

'Yes.'

We were both silent for a moment and I noticed his eyes closing.

'I should go. You're obviously very tired and you need to sleep.'

He nodded. 'You've got to get back to work, I expect?'

I shook my head. 'No, I've just finished my shift so I'm heading home now.'

'Is your boyfriend waiting?'

I wondered why he'd asked that and it slightly annoyed me. Maybe he'd been a serial cheater, and, if so, no wonder his wife hadn't rushed back to the hospital.

I said rather sharply, 'I don't have a boyfriend. Do you think I'd be sitting here if I had anywhere better to be?' I could tell my question and tone of voice had taken him aback.

'Probably not,' he said, chastened.

Perhaps that had been a bit harsh. 'Sorry, that didn't come out as I meant it to.'

'No, it's fine, I appreciate it. I wouldn't have had any visitors at all today if you weren't here.'

'I probably won't come to see you again. I really only popped by to see if you needed to contact anyone else – now that you've told me you don't ... well, that's fine.'

'Thank you for bringing me back to life.'

I smiled and shook my head. 'I don't think I did but it's a nice idea. Goodbye, Mr Jones.'

'Nathan.'

'Goodbye, Nathan.'

*

The next morning Nathan awoke early. Mainly due to the clatter and clashing that went on in hospital wards at that time of day. He'd had a troubled sleep and his dreams had been haunted by the mortuary girl, and then pain when his medication had worn off. A nurse had stopped by to take his blood pressure at some ungodly hour, though, and thankfully administered more pain relief.

During the morning his wife appeared with their youngest daughter, four-year-old Daisy. Daisy jumped onto the bed and gave him a hug, which felt lovely. They also had Millie, ten going on thirty-five and Chloe, six.

'Where's the other two?'

Laura smiled. 'At school, of course – it's Tuesday.'

'They could have missed a morning to come and see their dad.'

'They're confused enough. I spent the last two days trying to stop them crying about you being dead. Now they think I've been lying to them about it and Millie especially is hardly speaking to me.'

'Sorry for upsetting your life.'

Laura's phoney smile vanished. 'Don't start, Nathan. I've had a traumatic few days. You've no idea how hard it's been coping with everything. We all thought you were dead.'

He nodded. 'I'm not going to apologise for still being alive, Laura. It was the Lazarus Syndrome.'

'What's that?'

'Something to do with pulman circumnavigation or ... anyway, I didn't do it on purpose to complicate things.'

Laura blinked and looked away. 'Yeah, I know. Sorry. How are you feeling?'

He sighed. 'Sore. I've got a lot of broken things.'

'Yes, I know, they told me.'

'You could have come yesterday.'

'I did but the girls were playing up and I ... might have been in shock. When they told us we had to go it seemed easier to just agree.'

'Shock?'

'That you were still alive; as I said I'd spent two days ...'

'Yeah, telling the girls I'd died, you just said.'

The next few minutes passed in silence until Daisy announced, 'I need pee pees.'

Laura went with her to the toilet on the other side of the room and Nathan took a moment to try and see things from his wife's point of view. He accepted that she'd been shocked by his death, and their three daughters could be a handful, but if the situation were reversed would he have waited patiently to see his wife? No, he would have demanded the hospital staff let them in rather than giving up, for the girls' sake if nothing else.

He sighed and tried to remember the love he'd once felt for Laura but found it difficult; they hadn't been close for so long. Occasionally they had a good day or more likely a good night when she was horny, and their love-making brought them together physically and mentally, but those episodes had become less frequent.

Laura came back and sat with Daisy on her knee. His wife had jet-black hair, her natural colour. In all the years he'd known her she'd never changed it. Even now with many grey hairs appearing she still resisted colouring it. Her small nose sat like a cute little button on her pale and lovely face. Dark emerald eyes that once captivated him and gazed upon him with love and devotion nowadays more often expressed impatience and scorn.

'Well, I suppose I'd better get home. Daisy needs her lunch and I've got to pick the girls up from school at three.'

Nathan didn't argue; the silence wasn't comfortable, and he needed to sleep. The painkillers made him drowsy and irritable. Minutes after she left he slipped into a fitful slumber. His dreams were rarely pleasant any more.

Chapter 4

Laura brought the girls to see him every evening whilst he remained in hospital and although seeing his daughters acted like a tonic, staring at his wife's stressed and unhappy face had the opposite effect. He was glad when, after four days, they let him go home.

The consultant appeared on the Friday afternoon with a clipboard and a printed list of things he wasn't allowed to do once they handed over the strong painkillers and released him from their care.

Motocross
Hang gliding
Parachuting
Rally driving
Water-skiing
Boxing
Bull riding

Nathan had never attempted any of those things and it left him wondering if he'd been missing out on life somehow. He signed the bottom of the form, promising not to do anything dangerous, though he had to remember he'd ended up in the morgue by simply trying to cross the road.

The young-looking consultant – too young to be a senior doctor in Nathan's mind – took the signed disclaimer from him and ticked another box on her clipboard and said without looking up, 'Now, you shouldn't drive or operate machinery whilst taking these pills either.'

He waited for her to look up and wafted his sling and plastered arm at her.

'Oh, yeah, sorry, I'm on automatic, but you'd be surprised at what some people try and do.'

'Like bull riding.'

'Sorry?'

'It's on your list of prohibited activities.'

'Is it?'

'Yeah, right at the bottom.'

She peered at the form then looked up and smiled. 'Yeah maybe give that a miss for a few weeks at least.'

'I'll try, but there are so many opportunities to bull ride in Edinburgh that it might be unavoidable,' Nathan informed her.

She ignored his sarcasm and left his discharge forms on the bottom of the bed.

Apart from the obvious sling and a few cuts on his forehead, Nathan looked none the worse for his experience. Underneath his shirt, his broken ribs were bound tightly, and his damaged skull bore no marks, but he'd been told to be careful because, although the linear fractures required no treatment as such, he had to return immediately if he experienced any unexpected or severe headaches. Heading home to a grumpy wife and three young kids meant the chances of developing a severe headache were somewhere near one hundred per cent.

Despite this, mentally, he felt elated. It might be down to some sort of post-death high, but he reckoned that, as there wouldn't be many discussion groups available who'd shared his experience, he'd probably never know.

Laura arrived to take him home in an unusually animated and chatty mood and did most of the talking. As his head hurt and he felt drowsy this suited him fine. He spent most of the weekend watching TV and falling asleep unexpectedly. One minute he would be watching a re-run of an episode of the *Antiques Roadshow*, the next he'd be snoring, although he suspected this might be more to do with the programme than the pills. Chloe woke him up. 'Dad, how can you sleep when you're snoring so loudly?'

'I don't know, Chloe.' He yawned, and Laura came over and made a fuss of him, which he really enjoyed.

Then Daisy jumped onto the couch and gave him a huge cuddle. Dying had certainly made his two youngest daughters very appreciative of him. It probably wouldn't last so he needed to make the most of it – once they sensed he'd recovered fully they'd be back to normal. Daisy jumped down and tripped over his foot.

'Shit.'

'Daisy, don't say that; it's not a nice word,' scolded Laura.

'Daddy said it.'

'He shouldn't have. Nathan, don't say shit.'

'I didn't.'

'Shit,' squealed Daisy with delight.

'Daisy, stop it.'

'You said shit again, Laura, that's why she's doing it.'

'Shit!' yelled Daisy again, gleefully.

'I didn't, did I? Shit, I didn't mean to.'

'Shit,' said Daisy, bouncing up and down on the rug.

Laura put her head in her hands. 'We need to stop saying shit. I hardly ever say it – it's you she's learned it from.'

'Why's everything my fault?'

'Because it usually is.'

'Shit,' cried Daisy as she walked over and picked up her doll. She took the doll into her bedroom whispering, 'Shit,' into its ear.

On Monday, Laura dropped Daisy at her day nursery and went to work, leaving him alone at home for the first time since he'd come back from hospital. His wife had been making an effort to be civil to him and he felt guilty about the recent disingenuous thoughts and feelings he'd had when she'd so easily given up on coming to see him in hospital that first day. He hoped it might be a sign that they could begin to patch things up.

Their marriage had started off amazingly well considering the circumstances under which they'd got together. After Millie had been born they'd remained close; people even referred to them as 'devoted' when they saw them together.

He couldn't put his finger on when exactly things had begun to turn sour. He supposed it had been a gradual process. Somewhere between falling pregnant with Chloe and the birth of Daisy everything had changed. They'd not had a lot of time together as a couple before Laura fell pregnant with Millie. Perhaps if they'd been given that time socialising, holidaying and doing the normal stuff that young couples did then the relationship might have run its course and ended. Kids complicated everything. They naturally became a priority and somewhere in the mix Nathan and Laura had got lost. Money had only started to become an issue after Chloe came along. At that point Nathan's work had dried up – companies took more decisions and jobs in-house meaning contractors were used less. The practice had begun to reverse in recent times, but good contracts remained elusive.

Going back further, Nathan suspected that part of Laura's initial attraction to him could be put down to the fact she'd thought him posh. True, he'd gone to boarding school, but his private education had come about more from the fact he'd been an inconvenience to his parents rather than any aspirational hopes they'd had for their son. He'd interfered with their lifestyle, so he'd spent most of his pre-school years in assorted day nurseries and most weekends with babysitters or childminders. (He still didn't understand the distinction between the two.)

Shortly after Nathan's birth, an elderly aunt had died, leaving her entire and considerable estate to his mother. He learned later that she had been waiting years for this happy event, and his parents had spent many hours planning exactly what they were going to do with the money – which included

a lot of travel, some nice cars and a holiday home in France. The inconvenience of having a brat would be something they'd deal with as long as it didn't cramp their style.

'Mum, why did you have me?' he'd asked her once.

'I don't know, Nathan.'

'What do you mean you don't know?'

'Well, you weren't exactly planned, let me put it like that.'

'So, I'm an accident?'

'Kind of. Once I found out, though, I decided to keep you. Auntie Caroline had hung on longer than anyone expected so I thought you might be a welcome diversion, something to help pass the time.'

The only family trips they ever made were to the house in France. Even then, he only got to go during the summer holidays, which he suspected had more to do with the fact it was cheaper to hire a childminder in Brittany, where they had their cottage, than to pay for one in London. His babysitters in France were more colourful than the middle-class young girls they employed in London.

One evening, just after his ninth birthday, his parents engaged Monsieur Masson to look after him while they went to a party. As soon as they were gone Monsieur Masson's mistress arrived and they left Nathan to his own devices while they made full use of his parents' huge four-poster.

By the time his parents returned home Nathan had managed to shave his eyebrows off, using his dad's razor and shaving foam. During the process, he'd nicked the skin above his eyes in numerous places, leaving his face a mask of blood. It made him resemble some demonic child from a cheap horror flick. He then attempted to make a meal by smashing eggs into a large stainless-steel bowl, adding a liberal portion of tomato sauce and grated cheese before putting the whole lot uncovered into the microwave. The resulting multicoloured explosion took weeks to scrub clean. Monsieur Masson didn't get asked back.

A few days after his fifteenth birthday his father, aged only fifty-six, died of a heart attack. Perhaps the hedonistic lifestyle he and his mother had undertaken could be blamed, or perhaps it could be put down to faulty genes. In any event, the loss of his father curtailed his mother's excesses for a while and Nathan started attending the local comprehensive in south London as there was no sense in needlessly wasting money on private education any longer than necessary, according to his mother.

Despite the disruption he found that he enjoyed the local school much more and, although his mum could never be described as 'doting', at least she took an interest in him for a while.

Laura's upbringing was in stark contrast to his. She came from a poor background in Fife, growing up in a cramped flat. The glamour of being associated with someone from his background, despite it being completely dysfunctional, might have been intoxicating for her. Nathan admitted it was possible he played the 'posh' card a little too much with Laura in the beginning, but as she had been so exceptionally gorgeous he'd felt he needed every advantage he could get.

His wife now worked for a venture capital firm. She'd started as an administrative assistant but, after taking dozens of exams to 'better herself and her chances' (her description), she'd progressed to operations manager – a remarkable achievement given she'd had three children along the way. She still wasn't satisfied with that, though, and continually moaned about how much more she could earn if she moved back to London. Nathan had grown up in the capital and had no wish to return, yet another thorn in their relationship.

The postman noisily shoving something through the letterbox pulled him from his thoughts, and he padded down the hall to retrieve the mail.

There were four items; the first two were a bank statement, which wouldn't make good reading – he left that to one side – and a small catalogue for children's books, which had Laura's name on it. He placed that on top of the bank statement. The last two envelopes intrigued him. They were of the white windowed variety and, although both were addressed to Laura, he could see underneath

the window on one of them and noticed his name and a policy number. On the back, the name and address of the sender: The Corporate Mutual Insurance Company.

Nathan opened it and read the script:

Dear Mrs Jones

Mr Nathan Jones – Policy Number CM2345GY98

We were sorry to hear about the recent death of your husband. As discussed with you in our telephone conversation on 23 November please find enclosed the requested information. We apologise for the delay in forwarding this to you but due to an issue with our systems we had not realised this request had not yet been actioned. We apologise for any distress or inconvenience this may have caused you.

Enclosed is the relevant claim form for completion to enable us to consider the claim under this policy.

Please note, in order to be able to pay the proceeds, under policy number CM2345GY98 we will need sight of the original death certificate and for this reason we recommend you return the completed form together with the death certificate by recorded delivery to ensure no delay is caused by lost documentation.

Our thoughts are with you at this difficult time, and if you need to speak to us directly, please call our confidential customer helpline on 0804 345 6788. The phone line is staffed between the hours of 8.30 a.m. until 5.30 p.m., Monday to Friday.

We trust that you will find this to be in order.

Yours sincerely

Mr K Stanton

Senior Claims Executive

Encs.

Relevant Claim Form

Nathan sat down on the couch, stunned. The morning he had been found alive by the mortuary girl his wife had been on the phone to the insurance company chasing money. No wonder she'd been so 'shocked' to find him still living. He knew his wife could occasionally be, well, if he was honest always, 'money orientated', but his body had hardly been cold and the first thing she'd decided to do was cash in on his death. Nathan had two life insurance policies, the one referred to in the letter and another joint one with Laura that covered the mortgage. He'd no doubt that she'd been on the phone chasing that one as well. What a cold-hearted bitch.

He decided to open the other envelope, fully expecting it to be from the other insurance company, but this one turned out to be even more bizarre as it contained his death certificate. As he sat staring at it he suddenly shuddered, as if someone had just walked across his grave. He then comforted himself with the thought that not many people got to read their own death certificate.

*

He decided to wait until all the girls were asleep that evening before confronting his wife. She'd poured herself a large glass of Shiraz and slumped down onto the couch to watch TV. Nathan sat opposite in an armchair and watched her, wondering if she really could be as hard-hearted as her actions appeared to suggest.

It was clear Laura could feel his eyes on her. 'What is it, Nathan? Why are you staring at me?' 'I opened some letters today.'

Laura sipped her wine and smiled. 'That's nice; highlight of your day, was it?'

He nodded. 'In a way, yeah. The first letter came from The Corporate Mutual Insurance Company.'

He watched the colour drain from her face. 'Nathan, I can explain.'

'Go on, then.'

'Err, well, I had concerns that they'd cancel the policies before I could register a claim – you know what these insurance companies are like, they'll try and weasel out of paying any way they can.' Laura smiled, obviously happy with her quick thinking.

'Why would they cancel the policies, Laura? They were up to date and as far as they were concerned I'd been killed legitimately, so why would there be any issues?'

'Well ...' Laura paused and chewed on her bottom lip. 'Yeah, but the premiums came out of your bank account and with you dead all your accounts would have been frozen. The bank wouldn't have paid so I wanted to make sure I got the claim in before they could cancel due to non-payment of premiums.'

'Is that why you were so fast to get my death certificate as well?'

Laura nodded. 'Yeah, they said they needed that to process the claim.'

Nathan thought that over for a moment. He really wanted to believe her, but the problem was, he knew his wife inside out. 'Doesn't exactly tally up with your earlier claim to be really upset and grieving, though, does it?'

Laura sighed and put her glass down on the floor. 'I don't know what you want me to say, Nathan.'

Neither did he. Did he want his wife to beg for forgiveness, admit she was cold and unfeeling towards him and tell him that everything would change? If she did he wouldn't believe her anyway; they were too far gone for that and he knew it. 'We could go to counselling.'

Laura stared at him for a moment, blinked several times and dismissed the suggestion. 'I don't believe in that sort of thing.'

'What do you mean, you don't believe in it? You can maybe get away with not believing in fairies, UFOs and leprechauns, but marriage counselling is real, proven and helps loads of couples.'

'I think our marriage is beyond fixing, Nathan, and has been for a long time.'

'What you mean is, you don't want to fix it.'

Laura picked up her glass, took a gulp of wine and shook her head. 'I can't be bothered, Nathan, and I think that's worse. It just seems like too much effort. I wasn't glad when you died but, I should tell you, I was relieved. I know that sounds cold-hearted and unfeeling but it's the truth. It meant I wouldn't have to deal with this, deal with you, deal with us. I wanted to wait a little longer until you were completely healed but ... well, there you are ... you forced it out of me.'

'It didn't take much.'

'No, it didn't and there's the problem, isn't it? I need to leave and move on. I need more from my life than you.'

'What about the girls?'

'It'll be hard at first, but they'll adapt. In the long run it'll be better for them not to have to live with our arguing and ... what would I call it ... apathy?'

'Indifference.'

'Yeah, see, you get it, don't you? Deep down you know I'm right. It'll let you move on too, maybe find someone new.'

'I don't want anyone new. I want the Laura I married.'

Laura smiled sadly at her husband. 'That Laura died a long time ago. You killed her slowly over time, strangled the life out of her.'

'That's horrible.'

Laura shrugged. 'It's the truth.'

'It's *your* truth.'

*

Laura looked at her husband for a moment, trying to remember what it had been like to love him. She'd changed over the years while he'd remained pretty much the same, stuck in a rut. Maybe it had been unfair of her to expect more given his family and background, the very family background

that had made him so attractive in the first place. Laura knew she had an ambitious social-climbing streak in her at a time when it had become increasingly unfashionable to admit to such a thing. In her mind, quality mattered and whatever else she thought about her husband he had quality – if such a thing existed. It helped he was good-looking, but he never seemed to realise that, which over the years had been at times a comfort and at others a curse. He attracted people to him with his easy manner and chilled-out personality. That personality trait annoyed her the most, though – he didn't worry about things. Appointments to Nathan were vague arrangements, deadlines something to work towards, the future ... what future?

She could have had anyone; at the time she probably hadn't realised that, but it had been true. She'd been intelligent, beautiful and outgoing. Nathan was so loyal, so devoted like a little puppy, and almost as cute.

Over time, though, loyalty and devotion became wearing and irritating. With Nathan dead her plan had been to sell up and relocate to London. The life insurance money would have come in handy, especially given the costs of living down there, but, in any event, she'd get by.

She sighed. 'It doesn't matter whose truth it is, Nathan. I'm going to make it easier on everybody and move out. I've applied for a transfer to London and as soon as that's approved I'll leave. You can live here with the girls and that way they don't miss out on their schooling and stuff. I'll see them at weekends and holidays.'

*

Nathan sat in shock; he hadn't known how the conversation would end. He hadn't anticipated a happy ending but Laura's returning to London hadn't even been on his radar. 'If you want out, London's a bit drastic; couldn't you just stay with your mum and dad for a bit and see how it goes?'

'I know you can't, but, if you could, would you go back and live with *your* parents?'

Nathan shook his head. 'I barely lived with them the first time around, so no. But why London? You were the one desperate to get away from there years ago.'

Laura nodded and bit her lip. 'Yeah, that was then, this is now. The world's changed, I've changed. This way life will be much more pleasant for everyone.'

'Much more pleasant for you, you mean, living it up in London.'

Laura shook her head. 'I won't be doing any of that, Nathan. I'll be working hard to try and build a better future for myself and the girls. And you know what? For the first time since I was nineteen I'll be doing it on my own.'

She waited for a reply and when none came announced, 'I'll be out of here in early January. What we need to do over the next few weeks is pretend that everything is normal for the girls' sake over Christmas. That shouldn't be too difficult for us really – it's what we've been doing for years.' She tossed back her hair and the rest of her wine and stomped out of the room.

Nathan switched off the TV and sat back in his chair, thinking. He couldn't contemplate life without Laura, despite their problems. He'd somehow always believed that things would get better, fix themselves in one way or another. Her cold determination left him reeling.

After a while he went to bed and slipped in beside his sleeping wife – well, he assumed she'd gone to sleep as she made no movement when he snuggled up beside her. He'd been sleeping like this for over a decade now, he couldn't imagine doing anything else, but some time soon his bed would be cold and empty. Would he be able to cope?

Chapter 5

Christmas and New Year passed with a black cloud hanging over the flat. No matter how he tried Nathan couldn't shake off the gloom. Even the usual manic Christmas morning present fest had a hollow feel about it. The girls returned to school and nursery and the time Nathan had been dreading was nearly upon him.

This would be his last weekend at home with his wife. He'd been trying to come up with a plan to make her stay but, so far, he'd drawn a blank. He'd pleaded with her a few times over the last few weeks, but she wasn't interested. He'd considered trying to emotionally blackmail her with the girls but didn't want to use his children so blatantly. Besides, he'd decided, if her daughters had meant that much to her she wouldn't be leaving anyway.

The whole thing had come about due to that stupid afternoon when he'd stepped in front of the bus. Laura had said it had only hurried up the inevitable, but Nathan wasn't so sure. Laura had glimpsed the potential of a life without him when that had happened, and it had been the catalyst for everything else that had followed. It wasn't as if he thought their married life had been perfect, far from it, but, in his head, they had stayed together for the good of their family. In his maybe old-fashioned view of the world this appeared to be perfectly acceptable if it meant they remained together. Miserable, but together.

He smiled at his own analysis. He didn't want a miserable marriage any more than his wife did. He wanted their old relationship back, the one they'd had when they were first together, the first few months of wide-eyed wonder they'd shared after Millie's birth when everything had seemed filled with promise and novelty.

Millie and Chloe would be home from school soon. After that he planned to cook up some steaks for Laura and himself. Millie would have a little bit and he'd do some pasta for the younger girls, who wouldn't touch steak. He'd already bought a nice bottle of expensive Shiraz; well, a tenner seemed expensive for him. He'd sauté some potatoes and serve them and the steak with green beans, pepper sauce and onion rings, the height of sophistication for Nathan. It also felt a little like the last meal for a condemned prisoner or, perhaps more fittingly, the last meal for a condemned marriage.

He'd been so busy in the kitchen that he almost forgot to get Daisy from nursery and had to zoom up the road in his car. He made it just as the last of the parents were leaving the building. When he hustled into the classroom he found Daisy sitting on Mrs Ridgwell's knee, crying. Mrs Ridgwell, a severe woman in early menopause, always appeared to be mad at everything and everyone.

'Daisy's been upset all day, Mr Jones. She says her mummy's leaving – is that true?'

Nathan frowned. They'd deliberately agreed to limit what they said to Daisy, deciding she would be too young to grasp the reality of their situation. Of course, her older sisters had been subject to no such censor and he suspected they'd been telling Daisy more than she needed to know.

'She's going to be working down south a few days each week, that's all.' He wasn't willing to share more than that with strangers.

Mrs Ridgwell looked over the top of her glasses at Nathan and pouted. 'Daisy is very upset about it. I think your wife should reconsider going if this is the effect it's going to have on her children.'

Nathan initially reacted with anger at her poking her nose in where it had no right to be, but then he realised she echoed his own sentiments exactly. So he relaxed and said, 'I'll mention it to her, Mrs Ridgwell.' He prised his daughter free from the clutches of the scowling teacher and guided her to his car.

Daisy's demeanour brightened considerably when she arrived home and into the loving circle of her sisters, a relationship so complex, enveloping and at times contradictory that Nathan, as a man and a father, would never completely understand it. However, as he stood and watched Chloe

and Millie making a fuss of their youngest sibling he decided, whatever happened between him and Laura, he'd always put his girls first.

His wife arrived home from work tired and stressed as usual. She said a quick hello to everyone, accepted a glass of wine from Nathan and disappeared to soak in the bath.

*

Later, after dinner, Laura and Nathan sat in silence at the dinner table. The plates had been cleared and stacked in the sink and Laura pulled out a notepad from her handbag. She poured the remainder of the wine into their glasses and said, 'Right, Nathan, you're going to have your hands full on Monday, so you need to make a list of what needs done and when.'

'Do I?'

'If you want to have any kind of life you do, yeah.'

'I like my life just as it is.'

Laura sighed. 'Well, it doesn't really matter what you like, does it, Nathan? It's going to change and you either accept it now, or in a week, or in a month's time. It'd be easier for the girls if you could at least pretend to be an adult and listen to me.'

Nathan bristled but checked his anger. He didn't want the rest of the weekend to be a battleground. 'I'm listening,' he said tersely.

Laura ripped a few pages out of the pad and passed them over; digging into her bag, she produced a pen and handed that over too.

Nathan picked the pen up and waited. 'So, I'm your secretary now, am I?'

Laura smiled. 'Just for a little while. Now, I know you spend a lot of time with the girls doing the fun stuff. What you also need to do now, is the mundane stuff, like ironing and prepping.'

'I do prepping.'

'You occasionally iron a skirt or fill a water bottle. Right, we'll start with school stuff. Millie and Chloe need their uniforms washed and ironed at the weekend. I'll make sure there's a week's worth ready but next weekend you'll need to be prepared. You'll need five white blouses each, five skirts, and either tights or socks depending on the weather. Probably tights will be the order of the day most of the time.' Laura paused and nodded as Nathan took notes. 'Daisy just needs normal clothes for nursery but, if it looks like it's going to be wet, try and pick older outfits as she'll end up covered in mud. Before the girls go to school you need to do their hair. Millie likes a little side-pleat and you need to use tiny little hairbands for that—'

'I don't know how to do pleats.'

'Millie will show you; it's not difficult. You need to make sure Millie and Chloe have a snack for the morning and a bottle of water each. Yes, before you speak I know you do them, but with all the other stuff going on you might forget so write it down. They both eat school lunches, so you don't need to worry about that, but Daisy needs a packed lunch every day. She likes ham or cheese in her sandwiches but not both together, despite what she says. She also needs at least three bits of fruit, though she only ever eats two.'

'So why not just put two in, then?'

Laura glanced up. 'Because if you put in two pieces, she'll only eat one.'

'What happens if you put four pieces in?'

'She still only eats two. Now, you also need to make sure you've got the list of stuff they do after school and nursery. You already do most of this, but let's run through it anyway. Monday at 5 p.m. Millie goes to dancing and Chloe to football.'

'Daisy stays with me.'

'She does. Tuesday and Wednesday are free nights. Thursday Chloe has swimming lessons at 4.30 and Daisy goes to Gym Tots; they're both in the same place so that's easy but remember Millie's iPad. Saturday morning Millie and Chloe go to drama but I'm not sure Chloe's that keen, so you might have to let her drop out.'

'I thought she loved it.'

'She did, but now I'm not so sure. Sunday is free as you know, but instead of watching the football you'll need to catch up on your ironing and cleaning. Most evenings try and get Millie and Chloe to do their reading and homework before you put the TV on for them because, as you know, otherwise it's a nightmare trying to get them away from it.'

'It all sounds like a riot.'

'You'll cope, but I'll put everything on a list, so you don't forget. You need to Hoover every day, the kitchen floor needs cleaning with the steam mop every night after the carnage that is dinner time is over, but you usually do that anyway, and the fridge needs cleaning at least once a month and sometimes more. There's loads more, but that'll do for now. I'll write everything down on a master list for you, so you have it all handy. I'll also email it all over to you because, knowing you, you'll lose the list in a day or two.'

'I won't.'

'You will. This way you'll always have a copy.'

'A reminder of how much my wife loves me.'

Laura sighed. 'A reminder that, regardless of what you think, Nathan, we need to put the girls before everything.'

'Running away from them isn't exactly a good example of that, is it?'

'I'm not having this conversation with you, Nathan. It's pointless, we've been there already. I'm doing this for everyone's benefit. Now, tomorrow I'm taking the girls into town as I need to get some new clothes for work and there's a sale on at Clarks, so I'll try and get Chloe some new school shoes because she's nearly grown out of her last ones. Sunday we'll try and do something as a family, but we need to try and be civil to each other so that it's not a total disaster, okay?'

Nathan nodded. 'Maybe the zoo if the weather looks nice?'

'Yeah, good idea, that'll keep everyone busy and we can visit your relatives.'

'My relatives?'

'Yeah, the chimps.'

He managed to laugh.

Chapter 6

I'd just finished working with Sid on what we called a 'stinker'. Not a nice description but an accurate one. This poor old soul had died about a month ago in her council flat in Leith and had lain undiscovered throughout Christmas and New Year, until a neighbour had phoned environmental health about the 'smelly drains'.

We didn't know much about her, as was often the case with 'stinkers'. Although the weather had been very cold she'd had the heating set at maximum when she'd died so the decomposition had advanced considerably and bits of her had started to fall apart like an over-cooked Christmas turkey – except there would be no gravy, pleasant aroma or feel-good factor associated with this one.

The cause of death couldn't be established from our post-mortem and Sid hoped the lab reports would give some clue to any grieving relative that came out of the woodwork.

I felt a little sad even though I'd worked on dozens of these over the years. It always surprised me that so many people in our digital and fast-moving world died seemingly friendless and unnoticed. Maybe one day we'd all have little devices built into our bodies that sent out a signal when we were about to die. At least then she could have updated her status on Facebook with a message saying: 'sorry I can't watch the video of your daughter singing an out of tune song because I've just died'. Then she might not have lain undiscovered for weeks.

We cleaned ourselves up, changed into new scrubs and went for a bite of lunch. When I first started in the mortuary the thought of even looking at food after such a stomach-churning morning would have made me ill but it's amazing how time and exposure dull your senses. My tummy rumbled at the promise of some watery National Health canteen soup.

Sid said he'd started a diet, though I wasn't sure why as he had virtually no body fat at all. I'd asked him about it and he'd replied, 'I have cellulite everywhere' – words I'm pretty sure a straight bloke would never utter – and then he ordered a baked potato with no filling. Personally, I'd rather eat cardboard.

'So, Kat, how's your love life?' Most of our conversations started this way. He had an unhealthy interest in my love life, which tended to be a short conversation. Occasionally he'd announce, 'I'm going to a punk reunion gig this weekend.' I had real problems picturing him among some of the throng of gobbing pseudo-violent psychopaths that must attend those things. Sid always reminded me of Marcus from Nick Hornby's novel *About a Boy*, a real fish out of water at the best of times.

'My love life is still going through a dry period Sid. No, that's wrong; suspended animation would be a better description.'

'You need to get out more, Kat. You have to be seen to be dated. I mean, nobody's going to turn up at your door, are they?'

'I had two Jehovah's Witnesses around last night.'

'Were either of them cute?'

'They were both cute, smartly dressed and glowing like someone had just buffed them up with a leather chamois and a bucket of car wax.'

'Maybe you should try the internet.'

'Online dating? My friend Hayley did that. It wasn't good for her.'

'She's the hot one?'

'Yeah, so hot she's on fire.'

'But it might be different for you, Kat; you're not so ...'

I pointed my spoon, dripping with lethal minestrone, at him. 'Watch what you say here, Sid.' I laughed as he struggled to find words.

'Obvious, you're not as obvious as her, so you would probably attract less weirdos.'

'I'm Goth, Sid, I'm a weirdo magnet.'

'You're being too hard on yourself. I think you're very pretty. There's absolutely nobody on the horizon?'

The desperately cute image of a sleeping Nathan Jones flashed into my mind and for the thousandth time since I'd met him, I wondered how he'd fared since going home, but as usual I dismissed it. He had a wife and three kids to boot. 'No, Sid, nobody at all.'

'Maybe drop the Goth thing, then?'

'I don't think I can. I've never felt comfortable in my own skin. Even as a kid when my mum used to cart me off to birthday parties dressed in sequinned silver party dresses, I felt like I stood out like a sore thumb and that everyone would be staring and judging how ridiculous I looked, like a gorilla in hot pants.'

'I bet you didn't.'

'No, I know that now, but back then, well, that's how I felt.'

A few minutes of pleasant silence passed between us as we finished eating before I brought up the subject of family. 'How's your folks?'

'Mm,' Sid mumbled while swallowing a fork-full of potato. 'They've started on a new project. Recreating the Settle to Carlisle line, in 1:64 scale.'

'Sid, that made about as much sense to me as the number eleven.'

'Eleven?'

'Yeah, I've always thought it should be onety-one. I assume the thing your mum and dad are doing is something to do with trains?' Sid's parents were model railway enthusiasts and they'd met at a fair, or whatever they called places where train weirdos got together. He'd regaled me with stories of his childhood, he and his brother foraging in the fridge for food at mealtimes, sitting alone with his teacher on parents' evening because his mum and dad had become so engrossed in their latest project they'd forgotten all about everything else.

I noted the bewildered look on Sid's face as he tried to work out the 'onety-one' thing, then he shook his head and said, 'Yeah, the Settle to Carlisle line is the highest railway line in England and—'

'Yeah, thanks, Sid. I could probably have lived out the rest of my life quite happily without knowing that, thank you very much.'

'Me too, but you did ask.'

'I did.'

'What about you – have you been home to see your mum and dad recently?'

I finished chewing on a rubbery piece of bread crust. 'Not for a few weeks. I'll need to make the trip next weekend, I suppose, seeing as I'm not working.'

'“Make the trip”? You make it sound like it's hundreds of miles; it's only Glasgow.'

I laughed. 'Yeah, but a trip home always makes me feel like I've entered *The Twilight Zone*.'

Sid smiled at me. 'What's your dad got in his sheds these days?'

'I dread to think. It's an ever-changing smorgasbord.'

'Does your mum still have her ironing fixation?'

'Ironing, hoovering, washing her hands, cleaning the light bulbs ...'

'Cleaning the light bulbs?'

'Yeah, that's one of her new ones. A few months ago, the light in the hall needed a new bulb and when she went to change it she felt disgusted, that was her word, “disgusted”, to see how dusty and dirty it had become, so she's now taken to cleaning all the light bulbs in the house ... and other people's houses.'

Sid put his cup down. 'Other people's houses? I can't really imagine she goes and knocks on their door and says, “Can I come in and inspect your light bulbs, please?”'

I laughed. 'I wouldn't put it past her, but no, my dad had to take her home from their friends' house last week because she started doing it there. My dad has his foibles too, but I think my mum is getting worse; we used to think the menopause might be partly responsible but she's past that now,

so we don't have that excuse. Her latest, apart from the light bulb cleaning, is that she's got a thing going with the fridge.'

'A thing going?'

'Well, yeah, it's one of those big American models and she stood for half an hour opening and closing the door.'

'Why?'

'She wanted to make sure the light went out when she closed the door.'

'But you—'

'I know.'

'That's—'

'I know.'

'What did your dad say?'

'He took the bulb out.'

'That'll work.'

'Smart man, my dad, but it doesn't work in other people's houses.'

'No, it wouldn't.'

'They don't visit much just now.'

'No, I don't suppose they do.'

'That's why my dad spends much more time in his sheds, looking at sheds online or even better if he can sit in a shed talking online to other people about their sheds. He's going to enter "Shed of the Year" this year. Actually, that's not true. He's entering two of his sheds for the "Shed of the Year".'

Sid shook his head and gave me the same look he always did when we talked about my parents, the one that said, 'How the hell did you make it out of childhood with only a Goth persona and confidence issues?'

The worry is that one day I'll end up like my mum. True, I don't have to go back home three times every day to make sure I've switched off the cooker and unplugged the kettle or check seven times that I've locked the door before getting in my car and I don't always need to count to twenty-five when ordering a coffee from Costa or to eighty-one in Starbucks. I know that sounds kind of random, but my mum needs to multiply the number of letters in the coffee shop's name by itself (Costa – five letters times five letters equals twenty-five). If she ever visits a café in that weird Welsh village with the ridiculous name, I might never see her again.

Although I've not reached that level I have enough issues to know I might get worse and become un-dateable – perhaps I already have.

Chapter 7

The plane sat at the top of the runway awaiting clearance from air traffic control. Permission granted, it thundered down the runway and into the air. After watching Edinburgh shrink to 'Toytown' proportions then disappear into the distance from her window seat, Laura sat back and felt guilty. She knew she'd be back in a week or two but the pain she suddenly felt at leaving her daughters behind hit her like an unexpected punch in the gut. She stifled a sob, glad she had a row of seats to herself. A few minutes later Lilly, one of two BA cabin crew on the one-hour-thirty-minute flight to Heathrow, poured her a large glass of white wine, which helped numb the pain somewhat.

Her guilt extended to Nathan as well. Deep down she knew he'd be fine. He had the girls to keep him busy and eventually he'd come to realise it would be the best solution for everyone. He'd pleaded with her not to leave with tears in his eyes and she'd almost caved, before remembering that in the whole of her adult life she'd never had the chance to be by herself.

Getting pregnant at nineteen had robbed her of the years her friends had enjoyed partying, experimenting, travelling and learning who they were. She'd never figured out how to be comfortable in her own skin or to set her own life expectations. Nathan had denied her all of this and she'd always be bitter and resentful about that, even though deep down she knew she'd been partly responsible. She felt justified in shifting most of the blame onto him as he'd been the older out of the two of them when they'd met and should have known better, even though over the years she'd come to realise that Nathan had never really grown up – perhaps men in general never did, never had to.

She sipped her drink and tried to put the negative thoughts to the back of her mind. She settled back into her seat, loosened the seat belt and tried to relax, telling herself that for the first time in years she'd broken free from the shackles of motherhood, free from Nathan and free from the fractious nature of their relationship. The problem seemed to be, though, as soon as she reminded herself about her husband it inevitably brought the girls back into focus and she ended up trying to analyse it again. Yes, she'd loved Nathan once – back in the days when he'd had fire in his belly and ambition in his heart.

When the girls had been born, though, it felt as if each one of them had robbed him of a little bit of that fire. After Daisy had appeared it had all gone – no ambition and no get up and go. It appeared as if his mission in life had been fulfilled with the birth of his daughters and now he channelled all his efforts into them. Helping Millie with her school project work, dancing competitions and drama, spending countless hours with Chloe to make sure her reading and writing were perfect and even devoting time to Daisy's scribbled drawings and silly songs.

In Laura's mind it wasn't normal for a father to do all that. Maybe she had old-fashioned views, but she expected her husband to be a provider, a hunter who went out into the world and made a niche for himself that allowed him to bring home money, so she could kick back and take it a little easier, possibly do some of the things that Nathan took it upon himself to do. To be the care-giver, the mother, the educator, even though she much preferred being at work verbally jousting with adults across a boardroom table to arguing over who had the pink pram first and whose turn it was to choose which DVD to watch.

Now that she'd broken free, at least for a week or two, she could make some decisions. Belatedly decide where she wanted her life to lead, where she would live and maybe one day who she would live it with. Turning her musings to her new life cheered her up. It would be exciting and scary. She'd rented a small flat in Putney, south of the river and only a short journey from her new office in Fulham. Even though it had only one bedroom the rent came to nearly £1200 a month. The flat would be cramped whenever the girls came to stay but they'd manage. It would be like camping, at least that's how she'd try and sell it to them. She'd arranged everything online and hadn't yet, set

foot in the apartment. That afternoon she'd pick up the keys at the letting agency and sign the last of the paperwork.

The expectations of her bosses would be higher too, now that she'd relocated to the head office, but she looked forward to having that pressure. It would mean long hours and hard work but all of it had to be easier than being a mum.

The plane bumped down onto the tarmac at Heathrow and she noticed with dismay the rain lashing against the windows and the strong wind making the water ripple across the ground. *Great*, she thought.

She spent an hour and a half travelling across London, dragging two suitcases and a laptop bag. Thankfully the evening rush hour hadn't started yet, which made the Underground bearable. She emerged from Putney Bridge Tube station and discovered the rain still hammering down with very little shelter nearby. Even though the letting agent's office could only be a five-minute walk, she hailed a taxi. She had too much baggage, both physically and metaphorically at that point, to travel any distance on foot in this weather. Even the short time it took to clamber into a taxi left her soaked. As the water dripped down her face it hid the tears that she tried to stop spilling from her eyes as they made their way along Fulham High Street onto Fulham Palace Road, where the taxi sloshed to a stop outside the pokey letting agent's office.

She pulled herself together, paid the driver and entered the agency. Inside an older man with Greek or Turkish heritage greeted her. He reeked of stale cigarettes and stared at her cleavage the whole uncomfortable ten minutes it took to complete the last of the paperwork.

'Will you be living alone, Mrs Jones?' he asked creepily in a heavily accented voice.

'No, my husband will be here later. He had some business to attend to in the City.' She lied, allowing a small smile to creep across her face at the thought of Nathan having anything to do in the City apart from maybe drink coffee.

Laura detected an expression of disappointment flick across the man's face as he handed her two sets of keys. She almost fled from his presence and then hailed another taxi. Ten minutes later it deposited her outside a large brown sandstone building. She stood on the pavement staring at her new home. Guarding the main entrance were two wilting New Zealand palms that looked as miserable as she felt.

She entered the communal hallway, which smelled old and mildewed, and trudged up the four flights of stairs (no lift) to the fourth floor where her new home awaited.

Four numbered doors, 11–14, confronted her on the landing. Her flat, number 14, had a grey door and as she inserted the key and pushed the door open it bounced back, locking itself again. She opened it more carefully this time and discovered a badly built inner wall that stopped the door from opening fully.

She struggled inside with her cases and eventually managed to squeeze the front door shut. She left her bags where they lay on the floor and toured her new home for the first time. It didn't take long. A small living room and kitchen, an even smaller bedroom with a double bed and a tiny built-in wardrobe. The mattress on the bed displayed some suspicious-looking stains and she decided she wouldn't be sleeping on that for long.

The bathroom, just off the bedroom, only had a shower cubicle so no soaks in the tub after a long day for her. She sighed and sat on the edge of the stained bed. The whole place smelt stale and unloved, which pretty much described how she felt as well. This time she let the tears come and they flowed down her face as her body shuddered with huge sobs. She'd never felt so lonely and so alone.

Chapter 8

Nathan should have been ready for the tears and the bad behaviour from his girls on the day their mother left but how did you prepare for something like that? He didn't know. His own emotions were raw, which made dealing with his daughters' feelings even harder.

Millie withdrew to her room and cut all the hair off two of her Bratz dolls. Chloe demanded to watch a documentary about elephants. Nathan searched all the channels and the various on-demand options, finding programmes about lions, rhinos and even hippos but nothing on elephants. Chloe cried and flung herself to the ground like a two-year-old. Daisy sat and played with her Sylvanian Families, occasionally coming into the kitchen to check that her daddy hadn't left and to bash him on the head with a large plastic hammer that she'd recently taken a shine to. Then she promptly peed her pants for the first time in nearly a year.

Thankfully the first day represented the peak of their discontentment; next morning everyone had to attend school or nursery and were too busy to worry about much. Finally, left alone, Nathan sulked for a while, partly about Laura leaving and partly about the ridiculous amount of work he had to do in getting everyone ready and out of the door in time for everything.

Laura had been right about that – he really hadn't known what it involved. By the end of the week he'd managed to get into a sort of routine, only interrupted by the evening call that Laura made to speak to the girls. This went reasonably smoothly for the first few weeks, then one Friday Laura announced to Nathan, 'Next weekend I want to bring the girls down here for a few days.'

'That's a hassle, Laura. They'll hardly get there, and they'll have to turn around and come back.'

'Not really; it's only an hour on the plane and they've got an in-service day at the school on the Monday, so they don't need to be back until Monday night so that gives me an extra day with them.'

'How—?'

Laura interrupted him. 'My mum's going to bring them down; all you need to do is drop them all at the airport for 3 p.m.'

'You've worked it all out, huh?'

'I'm organised, Nathan.'

'You said your flat's tiny.'

'It is, but we'll manage as it's only for three nights.'

Nathan had detected a hint of regret in Laura's voice on the phone each evening. Perhaps having the girls over a weekend would be a good thing and she might realise how much she missed both them and him. Well, then, at any rate.

Nathan hadn't imagined Laura would completely abandon her kids, but he'd expected her to fly up and down at the weekends, not drag them all down there. So far, she'd only made it home once since leaving, but she said this had been down to having to work extra hard, including weekends, to 'make her mark' in the office.

On the following Friday he dutifully drove everyone, including his mother-in-law, to the airport and waited until the flight took off before heading home to an empty house. He hadn't made any plans to do anything so when his friend Graham phoned and suggested a beer he readily agreed.

Nathan arrived at the pub first, but, it only being five minutes from his house, this wasn't a surprise. He ordered two pints and went to sit at a table near the back where he could see the TV. Some lower-league football match played out for single lonely males who had nothing better to do on a Friday night. Nathan's local wouldn't be described as lively; it lacked the thumping dance music and flashing lights of uptown bars. The muted dark atmosphere attracted a certain clientele, older with less testosterone. During the week some of the patrons were local MSPs from the parliament building nearby.

As it was a Friday most of the MSPs had returned to their constituencies, but Nathan recognised Steven Cowley, a large sweaty man sitting alone at the bar nursing a glass. He'd been all over the news in recent weeks, having been caught having an affair with a young intern. His wife had taken their children and left.

The affair had been revealed on the Channel 5 breakfast show hosted by ex-celebrity chef Lance Donaldson. The show tended to focus on the more salacious news items and frequently wheeled in those in the public eye who'd become embroiled in some scandal or other, though Lance's team wasn't averse to using ordinary members of the public if celebrity scandals were thin on the ground.

Nathan didn't usually take much notice of such things, but this stuck in his mind because the intern had been exceptionally pretty, and he couldn't understand what a young girl saw in such a fat oaf as Cowley. Power must be a powerful aphrodisiac to attract someone like that to him. Well, he'd paid a high price, as the intern had dumped him in the end, unable to cope with the publicity.

He got pulled from his thoughts by the arrival of Graham, who waved across the bar and made a drinking motion with his hand. Nathan shook his head and pointed at the two drinks already on the table. Graham sat down opposite him.

'How's things?'

'Oh, fair to crap, I suppose.'

'Laura's taken them all weekend?'

'Yeah, the flat's so quiet.'

'I wish Alison would take our two and disappear for the odd weekend.'

Graham had two children, Jack and Emma, with his partner Alison. They weren't married, which didn't appear to be an issue for either of them.

'Yeah, but it'd be different if Alison had left you. You wouldn't be so keen then.'

'Does that mean you're going to sit and mope about for three days?'

'I like moping about.'

'It's not good for you.'

'How would you know? Have you been studying up on the dangers of moping?'

'It's not healthy; you need to get out and about, do something new.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know – maybe you should try and find a girlfriend.'

'What?'

'A girlfriend. Laura's not coming back, you know.'

'How do you know that? You know nothing about it.'

Graham smiled. 'I know enough about you two to know you've been unhappy for years. One of you had to make a move and now that she's done it, she's not going to come back.'

'She might realise how much she misses our life and—'

'You make each other miserable.'

'We don't.'

'You do. I've listened to you for years go on and on about it; so has Alison.'

Nathan sank the rest of his beer in silence, knowing his friend was right but not wanting to admit it in public. Graham went to the bar and came back with more drinks and changed the subject. 'I've got some work coming in over the next few weeks that I can send your way if you're up for it?'

'Yeah, of course, I've not got a lot on the go right now, so that would be really useful.'

'Okay, the first one is from one of our farming clients. It's not a huge account but they need a campaign put together to sell their range of nettle drinks.'

'Nettle drinks – what, like stinging nettles?'

'Yeah, they had fields full of nettles, so they decided to harvest them and make them into a range of drinks. Nettles are good for you.'

'Is that the slogan you want me to use?'

'Mm, maybe something a bit more imaginative will be needed; the public perception of nettles isn't great.'

'What kind of drinks do they make from nettles?'

'Well, they make nettle-ade, which is I suppose is like lemonade with nettles instead of lemons, and they have nettle iced tea, which is like—'

'Yeah, okay, I get the picture.'

'I'll send you some of it over on Monday, so you can try it.'

'Have you had some?'

'Yeah.'

'Well?'

'I suppose you'd say it's an acquired taste.'

'You mean it's disgusting.'

'Yeah, pretty much.'

'Thanks, mate.'

'You're welcome. The other thing I'd like you to look at is in the pet-care line, but I'll send it over rather than try and describe it.'

'Pet-care?'

'Yeah, I'll talk to you once you've seen it.' Graham smiled. 'We're definitely not out on the pull tonight, then?'

Nathan looked around the bar. Besides Steven Cowley still drowning his sorrows there were three blokes in overalls, an old chap with stained brown trousers and a large backpack-wearing tourist worrying the barman with a map and exaggerated gesticulations. 'Nah, I'm not in the mood. Besides neither of us have pulled anything for more than a decade. I wouldn't know what to say any more.'

'Nobody would be interested in you anyway in your current state. You'd scare any woman away with chat about your wife.'

Nathan supposed he might be right, but the image of Kat flashed into his head. Her dark eyes, pretty face and white teeth occasionally appeared in his dreams, but she didn't deserve to be burdened with his troubles. She probably had enough of her own to be going on with. He downed his drink and headed for the bar.

*

The next morning, he awoke with a mouth that felt, and probably tasted, like the bottom of a budgie's cage and a head that thumped incessantly. It even hurt to move his eyes. He hadn't been drunk for a long time and could only vaguely remember getting home. He still had his clothes on from the night before so obviously he'd just fallen into bed.

He very slowly made his way to the kitchen and swallowed two paracetamol and a bottle of water before returning to bed to wait for the painkillers to kick in, thankful for the first, and only, time that weekend that his girls weren't there.

Later in the afternoon he went for a walk in Holyrood Park to clear his head and ordered Chinese for dinner. He needed some stodge to make him feel better.

After his Friday night excesses, he spent the remainder of the weekend in the flat tidying and getting the girls' stuff ready for the next week at school. On the Monday, Graham couriered over some of the nettle drinks, which were even more disgusting than he'd imagined. Selling them would be a challenge. The pet-care thing he'd deal with tomorrow.

Later, with the girls back from their first long weekend with their mother, his world descended once more into comfortable chaos. Laura had brought them back late in the evening, tired and irritable, partly due to the lateness of the hour and partly due to the fact they hadn't slept well over the weekend, crammed into her tiny flat.

Nathan felt annoyed at Laura for bringing them back so late, especially with Millie and Chloe having school the next day. Despite this he bit down his irritation and they worked in partnership

once more as they'd done for years. Within an hour all three of their drowsy daughters were tucked up and asleep.

It almost felt like old times as they both collapsed onto the couch and sipped red wine whilst watching the ten o'clock news.

'I don't think I'll do that again in a hurry; my flat's too small. I'll try and get a bigger place soon.'

Nathan didn't reply as all he'd have said was, 'There's a big flat here you could stay in,' and the argument would have started up all over again. Apart from that, it felt reasonably normal – that was if he ignored the fact that, although Laura would be sleeping beside him in their bed, they'd be miles apart mentally, then tomorrow after she'd helped get the girls ready she'd be out of the door, leaving for London on a lunchtime flight. Then none of them would see her for weeks. It was an arrangement that suited only her.

*

Nathan awoke to an empty bed, which he'd grown used to by now. He could hear the shower in the en suite bathroom and glanced at the clock beside the bed: 6.12 a.m., an early start even by her standards. He rolled over, clutched her pillow and breathed in the familiar scent. He sighed and closed his eyes. A few minutes later his wife appeared wrapped in a big fluffy bath towel. She even managed a smile as she caught him staring at her legs. She walked over to their wardrobe, which still contained many of her clothes due to the lack of space in her London pad. She dropped the towel and quickly pulled on a pink G-string and matching bra. Nathan watched in rapt appreciation; he could feel himself becoming aroused simply by the sight of his wife putting on her clothes. He knew he could do nothing about it and it was a relief for both of them when he pulled a towel from the ottoman at the foot of the bed and went for a shower, possibly a cold one.

After a mad breakfast and the usual morning chaos only Nathan, Laura and Daisy remained in the flat.

'I'll drop Daisy off on my way to the airport if you want?' offered Laura. 'Spares you going out and means you can get some work done, and it would be nice to spend a little bit of extra time with her before I go.'

Nathan thought but didn't say, *You could spend as much time with her as you want if you only decided to live with her.* Instead he said, 'Yeah, okay. Thanks,' and wandered into his study and shut the door. Having her home, even for an evening, had been hard on him. He knew that she'd left him but somehow this coming and going made life difficult; it meant he couldn't ever get any perspective on his feelings. He imagined it might be like that for lots of couples with kids who split up.

An hour later she came into his study and sat on the only other chair in the room beside his desk. Nathan noticed she'd dressed impeccably in a new Paul Smith black V-necked dress with black Kurt Geiger Chelsea boots that she'd proudly shown him the previous evening. He'd commented that she worked in Fulham so she'd better be careful wearing Chelsea boots. It had made her laugh and his heart had ached when she'd smiled at him.

He noticed her make-up had been perfectly applied and her hair, which had been straightened and tumbled down over her shoulders, no longer had any traces of grey in it. Even that pained him as she'd not bothered to do that when she'd been living with him. It felt as if every action she took had been carefully designed to hurt him. She'd also changed her perfume to a subtler product that reminded him of apple blossom.

*

Laura noted his pained expression; she'd expected it. She knew her coming back to the flat to stay would be hard on him. It felt uncomfortable for her too. She found it difficult to stay angry when she didn't see him every day. Maybe the old saying about familiarity breeding contempt had more than a ring of truth to it. She missed her daughters much more than she'd expected, but she'd come to realise that she could never come home. Nathan would drive her bonkers, especially now when

she had other distractions in her life. She forced a smile. 'Right, then, that's me off. I'll drop Daisy at nursery; don't forget to get her at three o'clock.'

'I haven't forgotten any day when you've not been here so I'm not going to start now.'

'Yeah, sorry.'

He sighed. 'Laura, can we not try again? All this coming and going is silly. We could sell up, buy a new bigger place and start afresh.'

'We've been over this – all we would do is take our problems with us. It's not like we can pack them in a box and leave them in a cupboard somewhere. Anyway, we couldn't afford to move; you hardly make enough to cover the mortgage as it is with your fanning about on the internet.'

'I don't fanny about. I run a top-end advertising consultancy.'

'Any time I've ever come in here, you're on some football website.'

'I only do that whilst waiting for inspiration and sometimes it's just research.'

'You must do an awful lot of waiting for inspiration, then. Also, how many football accounts are you working on?' she asked with a laugh.

*

Nathan sighed. He found it hard to be mad at Laura when she knew him so well. He wondered if he would ever have that again with someone, that intimate 'knowing' that took so long to establish.

'What are you working on just now?'

He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a small plastic photo frame and handed it to Laura. On the bottom of the frame a tiny fan whirled around.

'Is it a photo frame that keeps you cool?'

'That would probably be easier to sell.'

'What is it, then?'

'It's a fish comforter.'

'A what?'

'Yeah, that's what I said when they sent it to me. Basically, there's a small battery inside that powers the fan, which is actually a propeller.'

'I'm still none the wiser.'

'The idea is that people who own pet fish, aquariums and the like, stick a photo of themselves in the frame, then drop it in the water and it kind of buzzes around the tank reminding the fish of what their owner looks like when they're not there; thus, comforting the fish that they've not been forgotten about.'

Laura cocked her head to one side and gave her husband a strange look. 'I don't know much about fish, but I don't think they're that bright. In fact, I would think that being chased around a fish tank by the disembodied head of an absentee owner is likely to add more to their stress levels than anything else. Who's going to be stupid enough to buy something like this?'

'Good question. One in ten UK households now have pet fish, probably because they're relatively easy to look after and make no mess.'

'And they all worry about their pets suffering separation anxiety when they're out?'

'Not yet, they don't.'

'Oh.'

'The idea is to create anxiety and then sell this to them to satisfy that anxiety.'

'Don't you ever feel, Nathan, that what you do is completely pointless?'

Nathan laughed. 'Most of the time.'

Laura stood up and kissed him on the cheek. 'Right, I'm off. I'll phone later to speak to everyone. Look after my girls.'

Nathan longed to grab her, pull her onto his knee and lock his mouth onto hers as they'd done years ago, but instead, with a whoosh of black hair and Paul Smith, she vanished, leaving behind a faint delicate scent of apple blossom, which would haunt his office for the rest of the day.

*

Later that evening, whilst Daisy and Chloe were playing in the living room, Nathan glanced up from washing the last of the dinner plates and noticed Millie fiddling with her empty plastic glass.

‘Do you want some more orange juice, sweetie?’

‘No.’

‘Have you had enough to eat?’

‘Yes.’

It felt as if his eldest daughter was growing up fast, and although he considered her to be wise beyond her years, which he deduced happened to older siblings, she hadn't yet become a teenager. Her monosyllabic answers were out of character, signifying something was worrying her.

Given their current disastrous domestic arrangements, this didn't come as a huge surprise. When Chloe and Daisy were upset they manifested this in displays of bad behaviour and petulance and had been testing his patience a lot lately. However, Millie had grown beyond that stage and now had fewer options left open to express any distress. Nathan wiped his hands, closed the kitchen door and sat down opposite her at the table.

‘What's wrong, Millie?’

‘Nothing.’

Nathan started with the easy option. ‘Is school all right?’

‘Fine.’

‘Something's bothering you.’

‘I'm fine.’

‘You're not fine. I know all this with Mum being away is hard, but I can't change it, not just now anyway; it's complicated.’

‘You and Mum haven't been getting on for ages, Dad, I get that.’

He frowned. ‘What is it, then?’

‘I don't want to move to London.’

He sat back, startled by her answer. ‘Who said you're moving to London? The reason we are living in this mess is because ...’

Now he had a problem. They'd agreed that, despite what either of them might think or feel, they were to present a united front to the kids. No laying guilt trips on them, no using them as tools to hurt the other. They were to pretend that their current arrangements were perfectly normal, but Millie knew that it had been her mother's decision to move away. ‘I just need some space,’ Laura had said countless times in those last few weeks.

Nathan took a deep breath. ‘Millie, the reason Mummy is working in London is because she can make so much more money there. One day she'll come back home and in the meantime we all stay in Edinburgh and carry on like before.’

Millie bit her lip and tears formed in the corners of her eyes. ‘I know, but what if Mummy doesn't want to ever come back here? Then she'll take us all to London and leave you here all alone.’

That puzzled him. What had Laura been saying. ‘Why do you think that?’

The tears started to pour down Millie's face and he shuffled his chair around beside her and held her. Between snuffles and snorts she said, ‘Mummy's got a boyfriend.’

That rendered him speechless.

It took a few minutes to calm his daughter down and gather his own thoughts. He got Millie some water and sat beside her. ‘So how do you know Mummy's got a boyfriend?’ he asked sceptically. Laura had only been in London for two months and he found it hard to believe she'd been able to break their wedding vows, for what they were worth, so quickly or indiscreetly – and, more to the point, to reduce their eldest daughter to such a state.

Millie smiled weakly at her dad. ‘There were two pairs of men's boxer shorts in the washing basket in her flat.’

He tried to think of an innocent explanation for that, and, although he couldn't immediately come up with one, he decided to give Laura the benefit of the doubt. 'That doesn't mean anything, Millie. She might just have bought them for me as a present and decided to wash them before giving them to me.'

Millie stared at him, bestowing a look of pity upon her father for being so stupid. 'Dad, I checked her phone as well one morning and she had loads of dirty texts from a guy called Simon Kedward – some were way beyond stuff you see online, and others were all lovey-dovey yucky stuff. There were some pictures of them together as well. They'd all been taken in London last week. He's got blond hair and in one of the pictures he's got his hands over Mum's boobs. So, I know he's not just a "friend" like she said.'

Nathan reeled from her confession and the shock that she'd confronted her mum. 'What did Mummy say when she knew you'd been looking at her phone?'

Millie narrowed her eyes and wrinkled up her nose and stared at him as if he'd gone way beyond stupid this time. 'I didn't tell her I'd looked at her phone.'

Maybe Nathan *was* stupid. 'So how ... why did she say he's just a friend if ... I don't understand, Millie.'

Millie smiled and shook her head at his bafflement. 'Because he came and gave us all a lift to the airport in his car.'

Laura hadn't mentioned anything about a Simon or the fact that she'd technically been unfaithful.

'What does this Simon guy do for a living?'

'I don't know but he makes "oodles of cash".'

'How do you know?'

'He said so.'

'He's got a bit of money, then.'

Millie smiled and wiped her eyes. 'Yeah, oodles of it.'

'Mm, this Oodles guy – that's what I'm going to call him – do you think that's why Mum likes him?'

'Dad, you're asking me about grown-up relationships – not exactly my specialist subject.'

'What is your specialist subject?'

Millie bit her lip, thinking. 'Mm, probably Little Mix or *The Voice*.'

He hugged Millie and she squirmed uncomfortably. 'Don't mention any of this to your mum until I can speak to her, okay? As for you moving to London, I think the fact she's got a boyfriend probably makes it less likely as having you lot around doesn't exactly give her a lot of freedom.'

'His last text to Mum said: *I can't wait to meet your girls, perhaps one day we could all be a family, wouldn't that be something?* So, I wouldn't be so sure about that, Dad.'

Millie picked up her iPad and left the room. Nathan frowned. She seemed to have left in a lighter mood. He couldn't be sure if she'd been genuinely reassured by his words or by the fact that she'd unburdened her secret. Maybe a combination of both.

He got a large glass from the cupboard and poured himself some wine. He needed to think. He had about half an hour before everyone needed to be in their pyjamas and ready for bed. He'd been genuinely shocked by Millie's revelation, but it at least explained the newly dyed hair, clothes and perfume, plus Laura had changed in another way that he couldn't initially put his finger on; she seemed to walk taller, with more of a spring in her step ... Then it dawned on him: *she was happy*.

That depressed him, but the fact some other man wanted to form a family with his wife and kids disturbed him the most. Millie might have picked it up wrong, of course – it seemed unlikely that another man would be so ready to take on another woman's children quite so quickly. He couldn't imagine doing that, but then he didn't know anything about what had gone on. Perhaps Laura had laid down an ultimatum: *love me, love my girls*. He wouldn't put it past her.

Nathan knew somewhere deep down that one day Laura would meet someone else. In fact he reckoned it had been part of her plan in moving to London. It was always easier to jump if someone was waiting to catch you. He just hadn't expected her to jump so soon.

Chapter 9

Going home always brought about mixed emotions. I loved my parents and I enjoyed spending time with them partly because they were more bonkers than me and, in a perverse way, that made me feel better. However, this was inevitably tempered with some apprehension of discovering what new shenanigans they might be involved in.

Arriving to see them on the Saturday morning, I parked outside the semi-detached stone villa that had been my home growing up and remained so in many ways. My room still contained my old bed and the wardrobe still held a selection of my clothes that I hadn't felt the need to take with me. The chest of drawers in the corner was full of old black scarves and jumpers. Officially the room had been designated as a 'guest' room but the last guest to sleep in it had been me, four months ago, on Christmas Day. My parents didn't do 'guests' well. The bedroom door still had my name on it, 'Kat' shaped from the silhouette of a bat with blood dripping from its wing tips. I still liked that and might take it with me one day.

I used my key to open the door and found my mum standing on a pair of steps just inside cleaning the coving with a bottle of Dettox and kitchen roll.

'Hi, Mum.'

'Oh, Kat, I didn't know you were coming over today. You usually phone.'

'Thought I'd surprise you.'

My mum didn't like surprises. I once booked a weekend away to London for her and my dad for their wedding anniversary with tickets to see *Cats*. With her control issues she'd spent most of the time in the capital on TripAdvisor, investigating what the highest-rated weekend wedding anniversary trips were. At that time, it had been a spa break in Bath. She phoned me and asked, 'Why didn't you do some research and book us on a spa weekend in Bath?'

'Err, because they don't have *Cats* playing in Bath at the moment.'

'Ahh, so it's a musical theatre break you've organised for us.' The fact I'd handed her the show tickets in an envelope along with the hotel booking should have given that away really. She'd hung up but then phoned me back fifteen minutes later whilst they were on their way to the theatre to see the show.

'Kat.'

'Mum.'

'If you'd done your research you'd have discovered that *The Lion King* is the most popular show on in London now, so next time—'

I hung up on her.

That happened to be the first and last surprise break I ever organised for them.

Back in the hall my mum got down from her steps and moved them along three feet to get at the next bit of offending ornate plasterwork. 'You'd better tell your dad you're here.'

'Where is he?'

'It's Saturday morning and it's sunny; where do you think he is?'

'In a shed?'

'Where else? Number two, I think.'

I plonked my jacket onto the back of a kitchen chair and went out of the French doors. Our back garden stretched back almost ninety feet with a load of trees and shrubs clustered at the far end. Grass and sheds took up most of the space, though using the word 'sheds' to describe my father's pride and joys did them a huge disservice.

Number one had a flat slated roof, large double-glazed windows and a seven-point locking door with toughened safety glass making it very difficult to break into or, as we discovered, out of. I suppose I'd describe it as a glam-shed. Inside, mounted on the wall was an HDTV, two comfy

couches and, in the corner, a desk with a PC and internet connection. It also had independent LPG heating. Shed number one doubled as my dad's escape from reality. He'd sit in there for hours in the summer watching the test match or peering at the PC screen, researching stuff for his work or talking to fellow shed enthusiasts. Shed number one had also been the site of his run-in with authority when he'd locked the local MSP, Moira Cleethorpes, inside for not agreeing to challenge the local planning authority who'd refused him permission to build an extension onto the back of our house.

Moira had used her mobile to call the police, who had arrived and duly cautioned my father for false imprisonment despite his argument she'd had the third day of the England versus South Africa test match on HDTV to watch and a jug of homemade lemonade to keep her cool.

I approached shed number two from the 'blind side' (the side with no windows) and noticed a pile of fixtures and fittings on the grass. Shed number two had recently been decked out to resemble an artist's studio with two easels, selections of paint, acrylics, charcoal and canvases. The fact neither of my parents had any kind of artistic ability or interest whatsoever hadn't seemed to cross his mind when he'd been planning it. Now that idea had obviously been changed and a new project had started.

'Hi, Dad.'

'Kat.' My dad jumped, startled. 'I didn't know you were coming today. Does your mum know you're here?'

'Yeah, she's cleaning the cornicing.'

He nodded. 'Still? She started that yesterday. Keeps her busy, I suppose.'

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm cleaning out space for my new project.'

'Which is what exactly?'

'Llamas.'

'Llamas?'

'Llamas – they make excellent pets.'

'I'm not sure they do and why do you want a pet? No disrespect, Dad, but you and Mum have a hard enough time looking after yourselves.'

'They make very good guard animals, especially against small predators.'

'Dad, this is Glasgow; the only small predators around here usually hail from a sink estate, are malnourished, have substance-abuse issues, a bad attitude and a Stanley knife in their pocket, oh, and maybe a pit bull in tow.'

'Llamas don't like dogs.'

'What's that got to do with anything?'

'I don't like dogs either.'

'I'm not sure picking a pet based on a mutual dislike of something is necessarily the way to go about it but, for argument's sake, let's say it is – why not just opt for a cat?'

'I can't sell cat poo online.'

I stared at him for a moment. 'I'm sorry, Dad, I thought you said you "can't sell cat poo online".'

'I did.'

'I'm not following you.'

'Llama poo is called "beans" and is very prized by gardeners due to its very rich texture and high phosphate content. It retails for around £35 a kilo.'

'You're going to get a llama for its poo?'

'Two. I'm going to get two. They're sociable pack animals and like company, and two pooing llamas are better than one, and I might even breed them, so I'll get two females to start with.'

Although nothing my parents did really should surprise me any more I had to admit this had set me back a little – also if he planned to breed them he'd surely be better with a male and a female unless he'd decided to utilise some sort of artificial insemination technique. The picture dropped into

my head of my dad approaching the rear end of a female llama with a large syringe filled with llama semen. I shook my head to get rid of the image and instead continued with my llama objections.

‘Aren’t they noisy?’

‘No, they hum a little.’

‘What, stink?’

‘No, hum as in humming a tune.’

‘They hum tunes?’

‘Well, now, I don’t know,’ he said, scratching his head. ‘I don’t think so. They just make a delightful little humming noise. There’s a website that shows some llamas humming. Do you want to see?’

‘Not right now, thank you. Don’t they spit at you?’

‘No, that’s a myth. They don’t do that unless they’re badly treated or stressed out.’

I reckoned anything, llama or otherwise, living with my mum and dad would be likely to get stressed out damn quickly but I didn’t share my thoughts. ‘You must need a licence or permission from the local authority, then?’

‘No, nothing at all, they’re an administrative joy. I might even invite our local MP over to view them.’

‘She probably won’t come. Is there enough space out here?’

‘For Moira?’

‘No, not Moira, the llamas?’

‘Yeah, just about, if I provide some hay or fodder to supplement the grass, which, by the way, I’ll never need to cut again.’

I’d run out of llama objections.

‘Do you want some coffee?’ My dad smiled, having outlasted me. ‘I’ve just brewed some in the “church”. Come on.’

I followed him around to shed number three, which had been designed and built as a small scaled-down version of the original church from Salem village, Massachusetts (as depicted in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*) complete with a small, square bell tower, clock, and double oak-panelled doors. I wasn’t sure what the Reverend Samuel Parris would have made of the irreligious interior though. As you stepped over the threshold the inside was reminiscent of an old country pub, complete with a shiny mahogany bar and wooden hand pumps connected to ale caskets underneath; a large TV sat on the wall and even a fully functioning fruit machine bleeped away in the corner.

Even though I’d been in here loads of times its authenticity always made me smile. When he shut the door, blocking out the views of the garden, you’d almost swear you were privy to some old-world pub lock-in event.

‘Can I tempt you with a pint of Leg Spreader?’

‘DAD!’

‘That’s what it’s called. Look.’

He pointed to the picture on the hand pump, which depicted a smiling buxom girl in a short skirt sitting on the ground with her legs open. A strategically placed pint glass of frothy ale hid her embarrassment.

I had to smile. ‘Yeah and I’m sure you just got it because it tastes nice.’

‘It’s a good pint actually. Bob likes it too.’

‘I’m sure he does.’ Bob is my dad’s best, and sometimes I think only, friend. Bob lives a quarter of a mile away, and, as well as sharing my dad’s love of wooden huts, is a web designer and fellow lecturer at my father’s university. He’s a lover of real ales, online gaming and collecting vintage comic books. Unsurprisingly, he’s also single and stares at my boobs whenever he sees me, which thankfully isn’t very often.

‘I’m fine with coffee, Dad, and I’m driving.’

'You could always stay over; the house isn't the same since you left.'

'Dad, I've been gone for seven years now.'

'I know, and I've still not got used to it.'

'You should have had more than one kid, then.'

'We should have but that wasn't down to me; your mother had been so traumatised by your birth we barely had sex for—'

'Ouch! Too much information, Dad.' At least I knew where I got that trait from.

'Oh, sorry, Kat, anyway, we're fine now. We just miss having you around.'

He handed me a steaming mug of coffee and I sat on a bar stool while he stood behind the bar, polishing some glasses like a caricature publican. 'Any change on the boyfriend front?'

Why did everyone need to know about my sex life, or, as it happened to be, my non-sex life? 'No, Dad, no chance of any grandchildren any time soon.'

'You're nearly thirty now, Kat. You need to get out more. You spend too much time mooching about at home and, let's face it, your job doesn't exactly offer up the opportunity to meet anyone, does it?'

'I had a cute corpse in recently. He sat up and said hello.'

He didn't believe me. 'Yeah, sure, Kat. You could tone down your make-up as well – you probably scare most men away.'

'Dad, I'm Goth. It's not a werewolf mask or anything. Underneath I'm a nice person. If I have to change who I am to try and attract someone, what does that say about me and what does it say about that person who'd only want to be with me if I pretended to be something I'm not?'

My dad blinked at me a few times, put down the glass he'd been polishing and said, 'I've obviously hit a nerve again; maybe we should go back to talking about llamas?'

I laughed; my dad had always been great at dealing with my outbursts. 'I think we've exhausted the llama dilemma. What does Mum think about it?'

'She's not said much. I suspect she thinks I won't go through with it, but I will. I need a new hobby.'

I drained my mug and for the briefest of moments considered trying the Leg Spreader, but opted for another coffee instead. 'I did actually meet a cute corpse, Dad.'

My dad stared at me for a moment, then shook his head. 'Kat, that's not even funny. You spend too much time in the morgue; it can't be good for the mind, staring at corpses and doing whatever ghastly things it is that you do to them.'

'Ghastly?' I spluttered in disbelief, choking in laughter. 'Did you actually say *ghastly*? Have we gone back to 1952?'

'Ghastly is a perfectly respectable modern word, especially in relation to what you do to those poor dead people.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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