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BLOOM

*The Time of
Her Life*

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TO SQUARE ONE
NEVER FELT
SO GOOD



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MILLY JOHNSON

THE TIME OF HER LIFE

Tracy Bloom



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No one does it like Tracy Bloom!

‘Deft and witty’

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Daily Mail

‘Likeable, funny and relatable’

Heat

‘This hilarious book will sweep you up in its sheer brilliance’

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put it down'

'Funny, totally relatable and made me laugh out loud'

'Tracy Bloom has the lightest of touches with the deepest of
understanding'

'Where has [Tracy Bloom] been all my life'

'I really loved this book, so funny and life-affirming'

'Hilarious, touching and really laugh out loud!!'

'A fab read which you don't want to put down'

'Just like catching up with a good friend'

'Utterly brilliant'

'Great story not least because it made me realize I'm not
alone'

Dedication

This one's for all you mothers out there. It's the hardest and the best role anyone could ever have. You are all heroes – keep up the good work

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Chapter 1

Kim loved the anticipation of a party. The opportunity to create memories that lasted a lifetime literally gave her goosebumps. She was sure that tonight's party would be no exception, especially as she was throwing it and the guest of honour, her husband, was totally in the dark. She couldn't wait to see his face when he walked in on his special surprise which was surely going to win her the award for wife of the century.

Looking down at the pile of napkins and cutlery in front of her, she began to count. So there were fifty-three people coming as long as Uncle George's knee wasn't playing up, and Alison and Neil from next door got back from their holiday in time. She had one unopened pack of forty cream napkins with 'fifty' written on them and one already opened pack. They'd used some of the napkins on Tuesday when it was Richard's actual birthday and his parents had come round for dinner and cake. She decided she should just wrap them around the knives and forks then she would know she definitely had enough. She drew up a bar stool at the kitchen island, asked Alexa to play some party music and began to wrap.

She looked up as she did so to check that everything was ready. She'd already laid out the buffet, courtesy of Costco, and it sat waiting under acres of clingfilm on the dining table, pushed up against the wall of their open-plan kitchen-diner. Helium-filled fiftieth birthday balloons jiggled in a line in front of the bifold door that overlooked the garden. Such a shame a glimmer of sharp autumnal weather had suddenly arrived. It would have been great to be able to throw the doors wide open and dance on the patio late into the night. A makeshift bar had been set up on the central kitchen island. Bottles of Richard's favourite red wine were lined up along with a selection of spirits. She'd got some lager in for her dad

and her older nephews, whilst an abundance of prosecco was stocked up in the wine fridge.

Pride of place over the bifolds hung a banner. Primary colours on flimsy foil shouted out HAPPY 50th BIRTHDAY in case anyone forgot which of her husband's birthdays they were there to celebrate. She'd been tempted to get another one reading GOOD LUCK to mark the departure of her son off to university the following day but she thought Harry might just murder her.

Yes, they were ready. She could relax. Not that she suffered with pre-party anxiety. Unlike her husband who tended to get agitated and pace the room, asking annoying questions like, have we got enough toilet rolls? It was one of the reasons why she had decided to make this a surprise party. So he could just arrive and enjoy it without any of the anxiety he seemed to suffer with before a big social occasion. Fortunately, Richard had been running some kind of lab experiment at the university where he worked for the past few months on Saturday afternoons so she could rely on him being out of the way until 6 p.m. guaranteed. Apparently, they were on the brink of some kind of amazing discovery in the chemistry world. Richard often tried to explain to Kim the research he did alongside his lecturing at Lancaster City University. She'd perfected the understated nod over the years because she knew it was important to him but she really didn't understand much of what he was saying. She suspected the same was true of Richard when she tried to explain the intricacies of hairdressing. She could see the glazed look settle as he tried to ask intelligent questions about feather cuts and extensions. The fact that they still both made an effort to understand each other's contrasting careers after twenty years, Kim felt was probably an important factor in them still being married.

She wondered if she should just check on Harry as she wrapped the last set of cutlery. He was supposed to be finishing his packing ready for the drive to Nottingham the following day. She'd been itching to get involved but Harry had kept her firmly at arm's length. She'd offered to take him clothes shopping, hoping that it would be an opportunity to revamp his 'never going to get a girlfriend' wardrobe of

gaming T-shirts and tracky bottoms, but he'd refused, reluctantly agreeing to a grumpy trip to Ikea instead to get essential kitchen equipment. Still, at least it was happening. He was going to university. It hadn't been an easy ride. The nerves had got the better of him during his exams – he'd come home white in the face after his maths A level, convinced he'd flunked it, refusing to even have a conversation for days. He'd thrown up the morning the results came out, declining to let his mum accompany him to school to discover his fate. He'd not flunked it but he'd not got what he'd needed to get into his preferred choice so had embarked on the nerve-wracking process of going through clearing. After a nail-biting couple of days he received an offer from Nottingham Barton University to study chemistry, following in his dad's footsteps, albeit not quite in the illustrious surroundings of Durham where Richard had excelled.

Kim, however, had been overjoyed. Her son going to university! The first of her family line ever to proceed to higher education. It was a proud, proud day. Though watching her son nearly screw up the opportunity had brought back memories of her own teenage years. She'd stayed on to do A levels but then had fallen under the spell of a bad boy – Eddie – and partied too hard with him to achieve what she needed to get into higher education. Not particularly caring at the time because she was 'in love', she grasped hold of an apprenticeship at the hairdressers where she was a Saturday girl and never looked back. When Harry started considering his choices post-school, however, she couldn't help but wonder what might have been if she hadn't met Eddie. Would she have made it to university? Would her life have been entirely different? But she'd dismissed the thought because if she hadn't become a hairdresser then she never would have met Richard when he burst into the salon that day and they never would have got married and Harry wouldn't exist. So, for that reason she was delighted with the path fate had led her down. In any case, now her son was going to university, she hoped that she could at least enjoy a small part of the experience through him.

She looked up as she heard heavy footsteps down the hall and hoped it was Harry showing signs of completing his packing.

‘Are you nearly done yet?’ she asked him. ‘Can I do anything to help?’

‘I’ll do it later, Mum, stop fretting,’ he replied, helping himself to a can of Coke Zero lined up on the breakfast bar ready for the party. She sighed. She knew that she needed to let him do it – he was about to leave home – she wasn’t going to be there to do anything for him after tomorrow. Her tall, skinny, scruffy Harry was going to have to work out the practicalities of life all by himself. She wondered if she dared ask him to just give the downstairs loo a quick clean before the guests arrived – probably not. He’d make a right mess of it.

Harry was staring down at his phone. ‘One of the other guys in my house has already arrived in Nottingham,’ he said. ‘He’s put on the group WhatsApp that the house is really grim. Reckons there are no en suites.’

‘No en suites?’ asked Kim. ‘Does he think he’s moved to the Ritz or something?’

‘I think he’s pretty posh actually. His name’s Angus and he went to a private school somewhere up in Scotland. Reckons he’d never heard of Nottingham before he got a place through clearing. He’s going to be a total nightmare to live with.’

Kim looked at her son. He didn’t seem overly enthusiastic about his departure to Nottingham tomorrow. Then again she knew he was still worrying that he’d let his father down by not getting better grades.

‘It’s meant to be,’ said Kim firmly, a great believer in fate. ‘You were meant to go to Nottingham all along. Amazing things are going to happen there. It’s like your dad coming into the salon the day before he started as a mature student up at the uni.’

Harry shook his head. ‘Please, not this story again,’ he said.

‘All right, I’ll save it for my speech later at the party. My point is that this is all meant to be. Nottingham was always

where you were meant to end up.’

‘With Angus,’ said Harry, raising his eyebrow.

‘He sounds fun. Posh and Scottish. What’s not to love? Who else is on this WhatsApp group then?’

‘Someone called Sonny who has messaged so many times with so many questions that I’m just ignoring him. The last message I saw he was asking about loo roll holders. Then apparently the fourth room is empty. Some girl has changed her mind and isn’t coming, so no idea what might happen there. The joy of going through clearing, hey?’

‘At least you’ve got *somewhere* to live. What with all the halls being full. It could be a lot worse. In any case it’s all meant to be, Harry. One of your new housemates could turn out to be your lifelong buddy, or partner or even husband.’

Harry looked sideways at his mum. ‘I keep telling you, I’m not gay, Mum.’

‘I know. I’m just trying to show you it’s okay if you are.’

‘I’m not.’

‘Shame there are no girls moving in then. You could have been meeting your future wife tomorrow.’

‘Muuuum! Enough. More than likely we are all going to hate each other and at least one of them will be a mass murderer.’

‘Can I just say again how proud I am that you are going to university?’

‘Thanks, Mum,’ replied Harry, glumly looking down and kicking the side of the kitchen unit.

There was a sharp knock at the back door, causing them both to jump. The door opened and Vicky, Kim’s best friend, poked her head in.

‘Can I come in?’ she asked.

‘Of course, come on in,’ said Kim. ‘We are just about ready.’

‘Oh hello, Harry,’ said Vicky, putting a large white box on the kitchen island. ‘You all ready for the big day tomorrow?’

‘Is he hell,’ said Kim, grinning at her son.

‘And what am I going to do with this heartbroken woman once you are gone?’ Vicky asked Harry, putting her arm round her friend.

‘I’m sure you’ll find something to keep you amused,’ said Harry.

Harry was right. Best friends since primary school, Kim and Vicky mostly saw the funny side of life and could often be found still giggling like schoolgirls at something pretty stupid. The last time had been when Kim had got her leg stuck in the cat flap because she was trying to prove how much more flexible she was since she started doing Pilates. Harry had come home from school with them both lying on the floor at the back door in fits of laughter trying to get Kim’s leg out using a bottle of olive oil. For days afterwards the cat looked like he was having an extremely bad hair day! Which made Kim and Vicky laugh even harder.

‘Vicky’s threatening to start taking me to bingo,’ Kim told her son. ‘As if my son leaving home isn’t traumatic enough.’

‘Aah, get on with you,’ said Vicky, punching her friend. ‘You know you’d love it if you came. Just come and give it a go. Leave all your prejudices at the bingo door. Now do you want to see this cake then? I’ve done exactly what you asked for. Hopefully I’ve got it right.’

Vicky carefully lifted the lid off the box to reveal a large oblong cake decorated in white fondant icing. Sitting on top of a pile of books in the middle of the cake sat a moulded figurine in a black gown that looked remarkably like Richard, albeit his heavy rimmed glasses and bald head were a gift to any caricaturist. At his feet were the beautifully iced words, ‘Happy Birthday Richard’. Underneath was the number five written large with a small three to the top right of it.

‘Why five cubed?’ asked Harry, peering in.

‘Because that equals fifty,’ said Kim, beaming. ‘Thought I’d try and be a bit different to signify your father’s profession.’

‘But it doesn’t equal fifty,’ said Harry.

Kim felt her face drain. ‘Yes, it does. I worked it out on the calculator.’

‘Five cubed is five times five which is twenty-five then times another five which is one hundred and twenty-five.’

Kim stared at her son. ‘Are you sure?’

‘I have just sat my maths A level,’ he replied.

Kim turned to face her best friend. ‘I did say that you needed to leave that stuff to Richard,’ Vicky said. ‘A normal fifty would have done the job.’ She smiled then broke into a laugh. ‘Can’t believe you got it wrong. I told you to double check, didn’t I?’ She started to snigger.

Kim felt her heart start to race. She’d never been any good at maths. She reckoned she was numbers dyslexic. The minute she looked at them her brain went pear-shaped.

‘You wouldn’t let Richard cut your hair, would you, so why do you suddenly think you’re Stephen flipping Hawking?’ said Vicky, starting to openly laugh at her friend.

‘What do we do?’ asked Kim, biting her lip, trying not to panic.

Vicky reached her hands inside the box and lifted the cake out. ‘Knife,’ she demanded, holding her hand out. Kim withdrew a sharp knife out of the block next to her and handed it over. Vicky hovered over the iced numbers.

‘Oh, I can’t look,’ said Kim, covering her eyes. There was silence as Vicky set about eradicating Kim’s miscalculation. No one dared breathe.

‘There you go,’ she said after a moment. ‘No one will ever know.’

Kim withdrew her hands and looked down. The numbers had disappeared, the remnants smudged on the end of the knife.

‘I won’t tell anyone,’ said Vicky, staring down at the cake. ‘I think I’ve got a five and a zero candle at home. I’ll bring them with me later. We’ll stick to a number we are certain of, shall we?’

‘Good job you spotted it,’ said Kim to Harry. ‘What would your father have said?’

‘Stick to the hairdressing,’ they both chimed.

Chapter 2

Richard arrived at the front door at 6 p.m. like he always did on a Saturday. Kim was grateful for a moment that he was a man of habit, allowing her to install all the guests in the house by 5.40 p.m., being careful to leave any cars parked a couple of streets away. Her family had been the first to arrive, all bringing bags of crisps and trays of tinnies despite her telling them there was a full buffet and enough drink to sink a battleship. Her mother had also brought a half-drunk bottle of sherry and two bottles of her dad's favourite Newcastle Brown, as if Kim hadn't worked out what her parents' favourite beverages were after all these years.

‘Well I didn't want to put you out,’ her mother, Janice, had said when Kim had protested at the bring-your-owns. ‘And I wasn't sure you'd bother with sherry, seeing as Richard doesn't like sherry and it's his party.’

‘You don't have to drink what Richard drinks just because it's his birthday, Mum,’ said Kim, exasperated. However much she tried to get her mother to treat Richard as just an ordinary person, her mum just couldn't get past the fact that he was a university lecturer which made her just a bit in awe of him. She was overly cautious of what she said or did in his presence for fear of showing her working-class roots. As for her dad, Graham, a machinist in a factory all his life, he'd long since decided that him and Richard worked on two different planes and with neither of them being men of many words, they exchanged pleasantries whenever there were family gatherings and then left well alone.

Her dad quickly installed himself in front of Sky Sports in the front room whilst Janice hovered nervously wondering what to do with herself. Kim's brother then arrived with his wife and nineteen-year-old twin sons and soon the air was

filled with the hiss of ring pulls being released and the glug of lager being consumed at speed. Before long Kim's mates started to pour in too, shooting the noise level way up. They were mainly her friends from way back who also grew up in this small Lancashire city dominated by the university on the outskirts. They had of course become Richard's friends in time, welcoming him in with the usual warmth laced with slight suspicion that natives of the north of England reserved especially for southerners. They all greeted her mum and dad warmly and soon got stuck into opening bottles of wine and discussing the day's sporting events or frantic transportation of children to various activities. Kim had given Richard's colleagues from the university the latest time to arrive, thinking she wouldn't quite know how to entertain them in the absence of her husband. Whenever they socialised she always felt just a tad self-conscious, worried she might say something stupid in the presence of their massive intellect. They were always perfectly nice to her and asked her about her job and admired her skill, but she wasn't sure if it was politeness of the well-educated or genuine interest. She'd invited a couple of fellow lecturers and their spouses as well as Richard's boss and his wife. Kim always knew that a hazard of this party was going to be the mixing of her working-class family, her mates from way back and the eggheads from the university as she jokingly called them. She'd tried to coax Richard's parents into staying for the party, having arrived for his actual birthday in the week. However, they were keen to get back to Cornwall and their commitments to a bridge club. His two brothers did terribly difficult to understand jobs somewhere abroad, making it impossible for them to be there. Similarly, all Richard's friends from his past lived in all corners of the UK, resulting in his fiftieth birthday party looking suspiciously more like a party for Kim with the addition of his work colleagues. But to be fair, Richard wasn't the most sociable of people. She was the one who made sure he had a social life. When they first started dating, she took him on a pub crawl around Lancaster and he couldn't believe how many people she knew and chatted to.

'I guess I just like talking to people,' she told him. 'Part of the job really, being a hairdresser and all that. The best part

probably.’

‘It’s the worst part of my job,’ he told her. ‘If I could just do my research and not have to talk to anyone that would be just perfect.’

‘You don’t like talking?’ she asked him, totally amazed.

He blinked back at her. ‘Well, I like talking to you,’ he said, taking her hand. ‘I really like talking to you.’

She’d blushed and their eyes had locked. It felt like such a compliment from him. Plus, she wasn’t used to men saying they liked talking to her. They were usually only after one thing and it wasn’t a good chat! She’d suffered a long line of Jack-the-lads only interested in talking cars or talking dirty and who spent all their money on wheel trims and bucket seats. They thought a good night out with their girlfriend was taking them to darts night so they could make eyes at the fit barmaid serving drinks. On their second date Richard had taken her to a posh Indian restaurant with stiff white napkins and tablecloths and whose peak time was 7.30 p.m. and not 11.30 p.m. She’d realised then that she was actually dating a grown-up who treated her like a human being and not just a sex object.

Kim felt her heartbeat go through the roof when her husband walked through the door expecting to come in, say hello and then head upstairs to shower away the smell of chemicals from the lab, as he always did. She knew that the shy intellectual who had stumbled into her salon over twenty years ago for a haircut would definitely not have enjoyed a surprise birthday in his honour, but she hoped that after all this time being married to her, he had learned the art of enjoying himself without it having to involve some intellectual endeavour.

‘Surprise!’ they all shouted as he walked in before immediately launching into a chorus of ‘Happy Birthday’ directed by Kim.

Kim watched the look of total astonishment cover his face as he tried to process what was happening. He looked around him taking in the faces that had joined forces to surprise him.

As they came to the end of the singsong the partygoers gathered round, slapped him on the back and shook his hand. Kim watched, grinning, until the cluster had died down then walked towards him, arms outstretched. 'Happy Birthday,' she said, embracing him. 'Hope it's not too much of a shock.'

He blinked at her. 'I don't know what to say,' he said, 'I ... I had no idea.'

She laughed. 'It's been so hard keeping it a secret from you. I thought you were going to guess the other day when I left a canister of helium in the hallway. You walked right past it. I thought you were bound to rumble me.'

'No,' he said. He actually looked a bit pale. 'I promise you, I had absolutely no idea.'

She put her arms around his waist and kissed his neck. 'I could get anything past you, couldn't I? You want to watch that. If I can keep a party a secret then what else could I get away with? Perhaps I will have that affair with Ryan Reynolds I've been promising myself.'

'Who? What?!' he said, looking flustered.

'Ryan Reynolds. He keeps calling me, begging me to go out with him but I keep saying my husband's too smart not to spot his wife having an affair.'

'Who's Ryan Reynolds?' asked Richard. 'What are you talking about?' All the colour had drained from his face.

'Ryan Reynolds is a very hot Hollywood actor,' she told him. 'I can't believe you don't know who he is.'

'And he's been calling you?'

'Of course he hasn't. Please will you start reading more *OK* magazines. He's not calling me! I'm just saying you need to be careful because if I can keep this shindig a secret from you, then who knows what else I could be hiding.'

Richard looked bewildered which was pretty common whenever she threw any popular culture references at him. Whereas she found reality TV and celebrity gossip websites relaxing, he was more likely to read the periodic table for fun.

‘Look,’ she said. ‘This is all for you. A party to celebrate you. Everyone is here because they love you and they want to say happy birthday in style. So why don’t you go upstairs and have a shower and come down and have some fun?’

Richard nodded. ‘Thank you,’ he said finally. ‘I really didn’t expect this.’

‘I know,’ said Kim, clapping her hands in glee. ‘I’m so happy I managed to surprise you. No pressure for my fiftieth in two years’ time, whatsoever.’

He nodded and started to back out of the room. ‘Right, I’ll go and get changed,’ he said. ‘Be back soon.’ He turned to leave.

‘Don’t forget to put your “I AM 50” badge on,’ she shouted after him as he disappeared upstairs.

In Kim’s opinion the rest of the party went swimmingly. The buffet was a triumph. Since she’d discovered Costco platters, her whole outlook on entertaining had changed enormously. Any excuse for a party and a Costco rolled sandwich platter, quite frankly. Her mother, however, was not so sure and she had turned her nose up at the sushi plate. Harry had dared his nana to try the raw fish at which point she had demanded it be put in the microwave before eating it.

Her and Vicky had of course got the dancing going after a few glasses of prosecco, putting on the tunes of their youth and encouraging others to join them as they bopped to the likes of Wham!, Duran Duran and Abba as well as their joint personal favourite, the irreplaceable Whitney Houston. Their version of ‘I Will Always Love You’ was something to behold wherever it occurred. Whether it be in the bars of Spain in their youth or right here in the middle of the kitchen-diner at 10.30 at night.

‘Do you think it’s time for the cake, Mum?’ said Harry, sidling up to her after the rendition, perhaps keen to get her away from the singing.

‘Yes, you’re right,’ she gasped. She had been waiting for the neighbours to arrive. Alison and Neil. They were due back

from a few days in the Lake District and said they would try and come. She hadn't told them why as she didn't trust Neil not to let the cat out of the bag to Richard. He was such a gossip and a blabbermouth. They were their closest friends as a couple and were their only friends who didn't start out originally as Kim's friends. When Kim and Richard had moved onto the new estate to much excitement – Kim couldn't quite believe she got to live in a house with a utility room and an en suite – Alison had been their first visitor from next door, bottle of wine in hand. They had hit it off straight away. Alison did some very important job in admissions at the university so she could keep Richard up to date on the inner workings of the establishment, whilst Neil worked in sales for a pharmaceutical company and entertained them with tales of his travels all over the country.

Kim looked round to see if they had arrived yet. She spotted Alison deep in conversation with the birthday boy so they must have slunk in without her noticing. Time for cake then and some obligatory toasts. They had an occasion to celebrate.

'Can I have your attention please,' she shouted, tapping a spoon on a glass after she had made sure everyone had some bubbles in hand. 'I want to thank you all so much for coming and managing to keep it all a secret from my husband. As you all know, he is a very clever man but somehow we all managed to get this past him, so well done you all.'

She gave everyone a small round of applause.

'So we couldn't let this occasion go by without a celebration. What I want to say to you, Richard, is that you need to see turning fifty as an opportunity. Take it as a new lease of life and a chance to try new things. Fifty is the beginning and not the end, and please, please replay this speech to me when I turn fifty at the surprise birthday party that you are now no doubt planning in your head for me.'

A wave of laughter rippled through the room.

'What you may not realise is that not only is it Richard's birthday, it is also the anniversary of the day we met.'

An 'aaah' floated around the room.

Harry rolled his eyes.

‘I will never forget this man literally falling into the salon, and gasping that he desperately needed a haircut before he met his supervisor for his PhD. Of course I had no idea what he was talking about. The only supervisors I had ever met were the lunch supervisors at school.’

Kim’s old school friends giggled.

‘But I didn’t question him as he looked desperate,’ continued Kim. ‘So I delayed my lunch, sat him in a chair and started to cut his hair. He had much more than, of course.’

Another titter floated round the room.

‘I asked him about his supervisor and his PhD and when I had finished cutting his hair, he still hadn’t finished telling me about his PhD.’

Richard’s fellow lecturers burst out laughing.

‘So I told him he had to let me go or else I would never get any lunch. Then he offered to buy my lunch as a thank you for cutting his hair at such short notice and at the end of lunch he *still* hadn’t finished telling me about his PhD and so he invited me out to dinner. I’d already fallen for him but never in a million years did I think he would fall for me. I thought he was just after cheap haircuts.’

Kim turned to face her husband. The tears in her eyes made them sparkle. He still looked in shock. For a split second she wondered if it had all been too much for him but she firmly pushed the thought out of her mind. Who wouldn’t love all this love and attention showered on them?

‘I’m so happy that I get to throw you a surprise fiftieth birthday party and I’m so happy that you chose our salon to walk into all those years ago,’ she continued. ‘I dread to think what my life would have been like if you hadn’t needed a haircut that day. And I know you don’t need me to cut your hair anymore, but I love you and I would like to wish you many happy returns on this great day, and I can’t wait to spend many more birthdays with you in the future.’

She raised her glass and watched as all her nearest and dearest raised their own and wished her husband a very happy birthday. This had been such a good idea, she thought. Who ever regretted a party?

There were, however, some slight feelings of regret starting to emerge as she hobbled round the kitchen just before midnight trying to clear up. Her strappy sparkly shoes had been uncomfortable but they were so pretty that there was no way that she wasn't going to wear them. She'd kicked them off the minute the last guest had disappeared and now she looked like she had some kind of disease as she limped her way around and around the island, stacking the dishwasher with dirty plates and scraping remnants of food into the bin. She had, of course, put the essential clearing up soundtrack on. Queen at full blast. Singing 'We Are the Champions' at the top of your lungs somehow seemed to make clearing up go so much quicker.

Richard brought a pile of plates in from the lounge where the teenagers had decamped to play video games fairly early on in the night. She playfully bumped her hip against his in time to the music. He walked off back into the lounge, no doubt to retrieve more debris.

She carried on her singalong clearathon, feeling smug that the night had gone so well. She'd even had a decent conversation with Richard's boss's wife who it turned out was also a *Love Island* fan. Who would have thought it? Maybe the next time they all went out the conversation wouldn't need to solely revolve around university life.

She sensed Richard walk in again behind her. She turned to see him putting clingfilm over some leftover sausage rolls. She walked up behind him and put her arms around his waist.

'I hope you had a good time,' she said into his back. 'I know you're not mad keen on surprises but I knew if I told you, you would have said no, and I couldn't bear not to celebrate your birthday. And I wanted you to see how much everyone cares.'

He didn't say anything. He didn't turn around.

‘Tell you what,’ she continued, allowing her hands to wander up his chest. ‘What say we ditch the clearing up and go upstairs and really celebrate your birthday?’ She slipped her fingers between two of his shirt buttons to feel the skin of his chest. Richard clamped his hand over hers.

‘Stop,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘I said stop.’

‘What’s wrong?’

He didn’t answer, just stood absolutely still, his head bent low. She tried to pull away but he held her hand firm against his chest, preventing her from doing so.

‘Richard?’

‘I can’t do this anymore,’ he said slowly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I ... I can’t do this. Us. I can’t do us anymore.’

Kim couldn’t grasp what he was saying. She was clearly having a stupid moment. ‘What are you saying, Richard? I don’t understand.’

He paused.

‘It might help if you looked at me,’ she said.

She saw his head shake. He didn’t move.

‘I didn’t know you were going to throw me a party, or else I would have stopped you,’ he said.

‘I know,’ she laughed. ‘That’s exactly why I didn’t tell you.’

He shook his head again, then covered his eyes with his hand. ‘I’m leaving you,’ he said. ‘I’m so sorry, but I’m leaving you.’

‘No,’ she said stepping back, pulling away from him, confused. ‘No way. No. We just had a party.’

He slowly turned round to face her. He still looked like the man she married and yet he also suddenly looked like a

complete stranger.

‘What’s happening?’ she cried. ‘What’s going on?’

He breathed deeply and looked up. ‘It’s over, Kim. Our marriage is over.’

She felt the walls cave in. ‘No,’ she said. ‘No. No, this isn’t happening.’

He nodded his head. ‘It is. Why did you have to throw this silly party? I was going to tell you tomorrow. After we got back from taking Harry. On a walk or something. Nice and calm. Not like this.’

‘So this is all my fault?’ she cried. ‘Because I threw you a party?’

‘I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant that, well, telling you after you’ve done all this makes me seem like a total bastard.’

‘And you telling me my marriage is over in a field is so much better, is it?!’

‘No, no, you’re overreacting.’

‘Overreacting! You have just told me my marriage is over after I threw you a surprise party.’

‘Oh God,’ he said, putting his head in his hands. ‘Why are we even talking about the party? The party should never have happened. Why didn’t I wait until tomorrow?’

Kim tried to slow her breathing down. Her head was still jumbling, trying desperately to grab hold of strands of information. She was at a loss for words, something that never happened. It occurred to her that there was something she needed to ask. What was it? Oh yes, of course, ‘Is there someone else?’ she demanded.

The look on his face told her everything.

‘Who?’ she gasped. ‘How? When?’

She was shaking her head rapidly now as if the more she shook it the more chance there was that the whole conversation would disappear. Richard was staring at her but saying nothing. He was completely white.

‘Who?’ she demanded, wanting to strike him, wanting to thump this terrible deed out of him.

‘Alison,’ he muttered.

The Alison who immediately sprang to mind seemed implausible. No, it was ridiculous to think that he could possibly mean their neighbour, Alison. Not her.

‘Alison who?’ she asked.

He gave her the look he sometimes gave her when he had to explain something he didn’t think needed explaining. ‘Next-door Alison,’ he added.

For the second time that evening she felt the world collapse around her. It didn’t make any sense. None at all. It was completely ridiculous. Not next-door Alison. Alison who regularly popped in with her husband for a drink. Who she’d shared her prized family Lancashire hotpot recipe with, who went with her every year on the train to Manchester, Christmas shopping. Not that Alison. Alison who came round to her house once a month to get her hair done, at mates rates!

‘I don’t understand,’ she said. ‘I only coloured her hair last week.’

‘She feels really bad about that,’ he replied.

‘She feels bad about letting me colour her hair and not about sleeping with my husband behind my back?!’ Kim yelled.

‘She feels really bad about that too,’ he said quickly. ‘She said to make sure you knew she feels absolutely dreadful about it all.’

Too much information. ‘She knew before I did that my marriage was over?’ she gasped.

‘Well, I suppose yes, unfortunately yes, unavoidable that she would know first, but I didn’t plan it. You need to know that. None of this was intentional. It just sort of happened. I didn’t mean for it to happen.’

‘Oh, your dick just fell into her by accident, did it?’

‘No, you know what I mean.’

‘No, I don’t know what you mean. How did this happen exactly? How did this monumental fuck-up happen?’

He swallowed and looked down.

‘Look at me when you are telling me how you started an affair behind my back,’ she demanded.

He looked up, breathing heavily. ‘It was the graduation ball last summer.’

‘This has been going on since then?’ She felt herself sink to her knees. She buried her head in her hands.

‘Kim,’ she heard him say and felt his hand on her shoulder.

‘Don’t touch me,’ she shouted, shoving his hand away. ‘Just tell me how it happened.’

She felt him lower himself next to her and sigh heavily. ‘Remember I got roped in at the last minute to attend. Mike Phillips was supposed to be representing the chemistry department then he broke his leg so he couldn’t go and somehow I drew the short straw. I didn’t want to go. But Alison had also got roped in and, well, she was all upset because she’d been forced to call the police because she’d found a couple of students taking drugs in the science block stairwell and it had really rattled her and so I took her back to my office to calm her down with some wine and well ...’

Too much information. Kim could picture everything so clearly in her head. She hadn’t needed to know the exact build-up to the moment it all began. She could even picture what Alison was wearing. She had a fuchsia knee-length cocktail dress that they’d bought together one day in Preston. The one that Kim had told her made her look sexy. She bet she had worn that. She could picture Richard taking it off her, over his desk in his office. She wanted to cut out her eyes, the picture was so clear.

She looked over to him. ‘But it didn’t stop there,’ said Kim. ‘You didn’t say, “Oh, that was a massive mistake. Let’s not do that again.”’

He shook his head. ‘There is no research project at the uni on Saturday afternoons,’ he said.

‘What? You’ve been shagging in the lab every Saturday?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Sometimes we just go for a walk.’

‘Oh, that’s fine then,’ she said bitterly.

‘Like I said, we never meant for this to happen. We didn’t plan it.’

‘No, it’s all Mike Phillips’s fault, isn’t it? Is that what you are saying? If it hadn’t have been for Mike’s broken leg then this never would have happened?’

‘That’s not what I mean. We just ... it just ... what can I say, neither of us could help ourselves and we tried to stop, honestly we tried, and we found that we couldn’t and well now here we are.’

Great. Kim now had a picture in her head of Richard and Alison in a shagging marathon.

‘We really are both so sorry. Alison told Neil this morning before they left the Lakes. He’s gone to stay with his parents.’

‘So, I’m the last to know. Even Neil knew before me.’

‘Alison made him promise to let me tell you.’

‘She’s so unbelievably fucking considerate. How kind of her to think of my feelings.’

‘She really is as devastated as me. We never meant for this to happen.’

‘Don’t say we,’ she said as she lashed out at him, hitting him on the arm and struggling to get to her feet. ‘You are not a *we*. You do not get to say that. We are a *we*. We are married. Did you hear that? We are married. Whereas your other *we* is just shagging behind their partners’ backs. That’s not a *we*. You do not get to call her and you a *we*.’ Tears of frustration were now pouring down her face.

Richard pulled himself up onto his feet. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘Sorry. I can’t tell you how sorry we are.’ He moved towards her to try and embrace her. She lashed out, flailing her arms at him. ‘Get out,’ she shouted. ‘Just get out. I don’t want to see you. Just get out now.’

‘But I can’t ...’

‘I couldn’t give a shit what you can’t, just get out. Leave me alone. Just go, NOW!’

‘Shh,’ said Richard, raising his eyes to the ceiling. ‘Let’s not wake Harry.’

‘Why not?’ she screamed at him. ‘So, you don’t have to tell him that you’ve decided to take a sledgehammer to the family?’ She landed a blow on his left arm. He winced and backed away, startled. She had never wanted to hurt someone so much in all her life. She picked up the nearest thing to her on the kitchen island to throw at him. The fondant figure off the top of his birthday cake bounced pleasingly off his forehead, leaving a scar of white icing.

‘Just GO!’ she screamed again. He turned and strode quickly out the kitchen. She was breathing heavily, tears running down her cheeks. She watched as he closed the front door behind him. She tried to calm her breathing down so she could listen. Sure enough, a few moments later she heard muffled voices coming from next door’s front doorstep before a bang as the door closed behind her husband seeking refuge in Alison’s house.

Chapter 3

Kim had been up since six. But she had been awake since at least four. After Richard had left, she had slumped back down on the floor for a long time, trying desperately to anchor her thoughts somewhere. But her thoughts kept flinging themselves all over the place. From crawling over every single detail of what Richard had said, to her hatred of Alison, to all the times she must have done her hair for her since she started sleeping with her husband, to last New Year's Eve when they had had them over to toast new beginnings, to raking over every moment of the party including Richard's face when he walked through the door, to seeing him whispering in the corner with Alison, to her speech, her damn speech where she praised her husband to high heaven and gave her precious thanks for the day she met him and her wonderful life she had with him and how she was looking forward to her wonderful life in the future.

All brought to an abrupt end just a few hours later.

She felt sick to the stomach. Sick to the stomach over her gushing about her oh so perfect husband and her oh so perfect life in front of everyone. And now it was all gone. Everything.

She couldn't wait for those texts to come flooding in, congratulating her on an excellent party and thanking her for her superb hospitality. How could she face them all, telling them it was all a lie? She had been living a lie and she didn't even know it. And the lie was being played out right next door. She couldn't even look in the direction of Alison's house. Couldn't even bear to see it.

How was she going to function? How was she going to bear being next door to that? How was she going to bear facing everyone? How? How? How could he do this? The man she

had married partly because she was convinced he would never do this.

It struck her at some point during the early hours of the morning that today was the day that they were meant to be taking Harry to university together. Today was a big family day. A landmark. One which she had envisaged she would need to hold her husband's hand throughout, just to get her through it.

Was that what they had planned, then? That they would take Harry to university, get back and then Richard would announce he was leaving? It was so shocking she couldn't even begin to get her head around it. Richard was her rock. Always had been. It was his steady, reliable, trustworthy nature that had attracted her to him in the first place. Richard solved her problems. Not created them. But he had been secretly planning the biggest problem of all for a married couple. That after their only son had left home he was leaving too. And not only that, he was going to move next door? Expect her to put up with him living literally on her doorstep?

She couldn't do it. She couldn't face that. She couldn't face watching the two of them begin a life together just as hers had ended. She had to get away from here.

She wracked her brains for where to go. All her friends and relations were in Lancaster. Usually, she loved that fact. Loved that her roots were so deep. But not now. Now she longed for that special friend who lived in London or Manchester. If she'd gone to uni, she'd have friends in far flung places, but not her. Hairdressers' friends tended to stay close.

She started to panic – she had to get away. There must be somewhere she could escape to just while she made an attempt to make sense of what had just happened to her life. She picked up her phone off the bedside table and began to scroll through Facebook, praying to find someone who might be able to offer her refuge. But no one came to light. She found herself straying onto her messages, already finding several from people who had attended the party. She ignored them apart from Vicky's, half wondering if she might be awake and available to offload to.

Great party, mate – smashed it. Hope Richard liked the cake. Told you he wouldn't spot the deletion! Will be thinking of you tomorrow. Hope all goes well with dropping off Harry in Nottingham and his flat is not too much of a dump! Will be here with tissues and wine when you are ready. V xxx

She must have drifted off into a fitful sleep as she woke up sometime later, confused and disorientated, until the events of the previous evening came crashing down on her again. She froze for a moment until she remembered the conclusion she had come to before she fell asleep.

Her overnight bag was in the hall by the time Harry stumbled downstairs sometime after nine. She'd been tempted to go and wake him but decided she needed him to be in the best possible mood so best leave him to wake up under his own steam. She had also been tempted to finish off clearing up from the party after her efforts had been cut short so dramatically. But then she had decided she didn't need to. Let Richard discover the congealed dip and hardened birthday cake that had been left out all night. She did, however, take some joy in picking up the fondant icing figurine of her husband, left lying on the floor after it bounced off his head, and crushing it to a pulp in her hand, letting the broken pieces drop to the ground where she crushed it into the rug with her shoe.

Harry stopped short in the hall. 'Did you want me to use that bag?' he asked, pointing to her overnight bag next to the door. 'I thought you wanted me to take the silver one?'

'No, that's mine,' she replied. 'Come on,' she said, striding over to it and picking it up. 'I want to get going. Get on the road as soon as we can.'

'But I thought we were leaving at around eleven?'

'Change of plan,' she said, opening the door and walking out. 'We're going as soon as you're ready.'

She clicked open the boot of her Vauxhall Corsa, trying very hard not to look up at the bedroom window in her neighbour's house. Harry appeared at her side in his pyjamas and without anything on his feet.

'What are you doing?' he said.

She bit her lip to try and stop the tears that were already threatening to ambush her eyes.

‘Slight change of plan,’ she said. Turning round and striding back towards the house. ‘I’m taking you to university. Your dad’s not coming. Now can you get dressed and let’s get going.’

‘What do you mean, Dad isn’t coming?’ said Harry, catching up with her back in the hallway.

‘He can’t come,’ she said.

‘Why not?’

She sniffed hard, wondering briefly if she should make up some lie until she could gather herself enough to explain the truth to her son. But she had no capacity for storytelling, no brain power for creativity, so she would just have to tell him how it was. She closed her eyes, trying to control her breathing.

‘Your dad,’ she started. ‘Your dad announced last night that he’s leaving me. That he’s been having an affair with Alison next door and our marriage is over. So that’s why he isn’t coming. Because he’s next door shagging Alison.’

‘What?’ said Harry, shaking his head, looking utterly bewildered. ‘That can’t be true. Not Dad?’

‘Yes, Dad. Your dad, my husband.’ She still couldn’t quite believe it herself even though the words were coming out of her mouth. ‘If you want to be sure then I suggest you knock on next door and ask him yourself.’

‘Not Dad!’ said Harry, sinking to sit down on the stairs.

‘Yes, your dad,’ confirmed Kim. ‘Your father. The man himself.’

Harry was staring into space with a gormless expression on his face, shaking his head.

She sat down next to him and put her arm around his shoulders.

She took a deep breath. 'I know it's a lot to take in. Believe me, I'm still taking it in, well trying to. But one thing I have taken in is that I can't sit in a car with him all day. Not today. So, I'll be taking you to uni. I thought that would be the best.'

Harry gulped, still staring into space, and nodded. 'Okay,' he said.

'And I thought I might just find a hotel for a couple of days. I can't be here, you see. I need to get away.'

'What! But, why?'

'I can't stay here, Harry. I just can't,' she said, pulling a tissue out of her sleeve. 'I can't stay here next door to that,' she said, pointing through the wall vaguely in the direction of Alison's house. 'It's fine, really. I'll just find a Travelodge or something in Nottingham. I just need to get some space. I'll drop you off and work it out. You don't need to worry about it. You just worry about settling yourself in.'

Harry looked at his mother. She wondered what he saw. She always prided herself on being fun Mum, lively Mum, always there to put a smile on his face. And here she was with tears dripping off her nose.

'Okay,' he said slowly, still looking totally bewildered.

She wished she had time to let him process what was going on. She wished they had time to talk things through, but they didn't. She wanted to be well out of here before Richard came knocking on the door. The thought of seeing him sent shivers along her spine.

'Do you think you can go and finish packing?' she said as gently as possible.

He blinked at her and nodded. He stood up and walked up the stairs.

Kim buried her head in her hands. Her son had looked so confused. He'd had such a shock. He clearly didn't know what he was supposed to do. But neither did she. She just knew they needed to get away as soon as possible.

It was an hour before Harry was finally ready to go, giving Kim massive anxiety. She was desperate to leave way before the allotted time they had discussed with Richard. She couldn't bear the thought of even seeing his face this morning. She kept offering to help her son which of course he refused. She watched, feeling her blood pressure going through the roof, as he brought out bag after bag and piled it next to her car for her to cram into her tiny Vauxhall. She started to wonder if they would have no choice but to take Richard's Volvo estate. She went to look for the keys in the chest of drawers in the hall and realised he must have them with him. So she was faced with a choice of going to get the keys from Richard or asking her son if he would take less stuff to uni.

'Is there anything we can come back and collect another time?' she asked him hopefully as he dumped a box containing his PlayStation 5 next to the car. 'Maybe this?'

Harry stared at her. 'The PlayStation is going,' he said.

'Okay, okay, anything else, do you think? It's not all going to fit in.'

Harry sighed, peering in the boot. 'What about that stuff?' he said. He pointed at a blue bag containing a full set of pans and kitchen implements painstakingly purchased from Ikea the week before in the hope that Harry would somehow cook rather than live on takeaways and toast.

'But you'll need that, surely?' she said.

He raised his eyebrows. He'd said at the time that perhaps one pan to cook beans in would be sufficient.

'No,' he said. 'Believe me, the PlayStation will get much more use.'

'Come on, Harry. You need something to cook with,' she pleaded.

She literally jumped out of her skin as she heard a door open behind them. It was the sound she had been dreading all morning.

'Dad!' said Harry, looking over his shoulder.

‘What are you doing?’ said Richard, approaching fast. Kim reached over and picked up the Ikea bag.

‘Put the PlayStation in,’ she told Harry firmly, heading back towards the house. It was time they left. Even if they did have to leave behind the frying pan.

‘I thought we were leaving at eleven?’ said Richard.

Kim stopped in her tracks on her way back into the house. She swivelled round.

‘There is no *we* leaving at eleven,’ she said. ‘You made it very clear last night you are now a different *we*. And so *we*,’ she said pointing at her and Harry, ‘are leaving as soon as we can.’

‘But ... but you can’t go in your car. There’s not enough room.’

‘There is. We are all packed up now, aren’t we, Harry? We were just about to go.’

‘So where are you taking that?’ asked Richard, pointing at the blue Ikea bag in her hand. She looked down as though she had forgotten it was there.

‘Absolutely none of your business,’ she declared. ‘None of this is any of your business anymore. You said so last night. We are done, so keep your nose out.’

‘But ... but ...’ said Richard, floundering. ‘I want to take you to Nottingham,’ he said, turning to his son. ‘We can manage that, can’t we? I’d like to explain. Well, try to. Let’s just unpack Mum’s car, put it in mine and then we’ll all go together. We can do that, can’t we?’

‘No we can’t,’ said Kim. ‘You made that simple family occasion impossible. You have ruined it. You, Richard, so go back inside to your new home and let me and Harry get on the road,’ she said, waving her free arm at Alison’s house. A movement at the front door caught her eye and to her horror Alison appeared at the door in her dressing gown.

‘Kim, please let me explain,’ she said, stepping towards her. ‘Please, I never ...’

‘No, get away from me,’ shouted Kim. She thought she might throw up. ‘Get right away from me.’

‘Please can we just sit down and talk and ...’

‘No,’ said Kim. ‘No – go away. I have nothing to say to you.’ She put the Ikea bag down and reached in for the nearest culinary weapon. She pulled out a frying pan and brandished it in Alison’s direction. She was vaguely aware that Audrey Watson who lived opposite was now on her doorstep in her dressing gown, brazenly having a gawp.

‘Kim, please,’ said Alison. ‘Please listen to me. You need to let me explain.’

‘I don’t need to let you do anything,’ declared Kim. ‘You let yourself sleep with my husband. I think that’s quite enough, don’t you?’

‘Mum?’ said Harry, edging towards her. ‘Give me the frying pan.’ He was holding his hand out towards her.

‘Please put the pan down,’ she heard Richard say.

What the fuck? she thought, as she hurled it at him and made a dash for the car.

‘Get in,’ she shouted at Harry as she ran past him. ‘We are going now.’ She jumped into the driver’s seat, slammed the door and turned the ignition key. Where was Harry? They were making their escape. Why hadn’t he leapt in the car after her?

Richard loomed in her window. ‘He’s just getting his inhaler stuff,’ he shouted at her.

She bit her lip, praying for him to disappear. She stared straight ahead, trying not to catch the eye of Audrey opposite who had now been joined by her husband to watch the spectacle.

‘This is silly,’ she heard Richard shout through the window. ‘I’ll come in the house and let’s talk. You don’t need to leave like this. Let’s talk and we’ll take Harry later.’

She turned sharply to face him. ‘I never want to talk to you ever again,’ she shouted back at him. ‘Ever.’

‘You’ll have to. There are things we need to discuss. You can’t just walk away.’

Harry finally climbed in beside her.

‘Ready?’ she asked him.

‘Ready,’ he said, sinking down in his seat as though he wanted to disappear.

She crunched the car into gear and immediately stalled it. Of course she did. The tears were stinging her eyes but she was determined to get away before Richard could see that. She started the car again and reversed out of the drive at speed. Clipping the kerb as she did so.

‘Jesus, Mum,’ muttered Harry.

She made it all the way to the edge of the estate they lived on when she stalled the car again as she attempted to pull away from a T-junction, tears streaming down her face.

‘Stop, Mum, you are going to kill us both. Get out the car and let me drive,’ said Harry.

Kim looked at her son in bewilderment. She had no idea what she was doing.

‘We are still in the middle of the junction, Mum. Do you think you can pull in over there? There’s a car right behind us.’

The car behind beeped loudly. Fumbling with the keys, she somehow managed to restart the car and pulled into the bus stop a bit further along. She slumped back in her seat, breathing heavily.

Someone’s phone started to ring. It was Harry’s. He pulled it out of his pocket.

‘It’s Dad,’ he said.

She didn’t reply.

Harry put the phone to his ear. ‘Hello,’ he said.

For some reason it crossed her mind that he would be calling to tell Harry it was all a mistake. That it hadn’t happened. That he was joking when he said he’d had an affair

with their neighbour and that their marriage was a failure and they should go back immediately so they could travel to Nottingham together.

‘Okay,’ she heard her son say. ‘I’ll tell her.’ He put his phone back in his pocket.

‘He said to tell you that there are roadworks on the A52 through Derby so you should take the A50 down to junction twenty-four of the M1.’

Kim turned to stare at him.

‘He’s worried because you don’t have satnav in this car, he says,’ her son continued.

‘He’s worried because I don’t have satnav,’ she repeated. God, she wished she’d had better aim with that frying pan.

‘I think I should drive, don’t you?’ said Harry.

She nodded and tried to get out of the car without taking her seatbelt off. Harry released her and she got out and slumped in the passenger seat and closed her eyes hoping that everything would disappear.

Harry put the radio on but soon switched it off again as Steve Wright announced his ‘Sunday Love Songs’. They drove in silence as Kim stared out the window at the cars whizzing by on the motorway. All getting on with their normal lives. All except her, who no longer had a normal life.

They didn’t speak until they were approaching Keele services on the M6.

‘I’m hungry,’ Harry announced. ‘Let’s pull in here.’

Kim merely nodded.

They pulled into a parking spot facing the entrance to the services. ‘Are you coming?’ asked Harry.

Kim didn’t reply. She was watching an elderly couple walk across the front of their car. They weren’t even holding hands or anything. They were just together and it made her want to howl.

‘You might want to go and wash your face,’ said Harry.

Kim looked at him sharply then pulled down the visor to look in the mirror. Last night's mascara was all over her face. She looked like a freak.

'Why didn't you tell me?' she wailed.

'Because ... because ... there was other stuff going on,' replied Harry.

'You've let me walk around like this all morning?' She couldn't believe it.

'I've just told you, haven't I?' he replied. 'I'm going to eat,' he said, getting out of the car and slamming the door.

She watched him walk across the car park, feeling the tears spring to her eyes yet again. What was she doing taking this out on Harry? None of this was his fault. But she had no way of managing her feelings right now and she was so tired, so desperately tired.

She kept her head well down as she walked through the busy service station, praying there was somewhere she could buy face wipes. Turns out it's hard to find something when you have to look at the floor. She somehow managed to find some in the healthcare section of the newsagents and was, for once, grateful for self-checkout rather than having to face a real sales person in a shop.

She scanned the face wipes through but suddenly felt her legs buckle when she glanced over at the treats section tempting her at the till. There were the familiar yellow bags of jelly babies. She'd had it all planned. When the three of them stopped at a service station for lunch en route she was going to buy a bag of jelly babies for old times' sake. It was the Jacobs family's sweet of choice for any long journey. Always had been ever since Harry was probably five years old. They'd fight over the orange ones, agreeing that you had to eat the orange ones from the feet up. That was the kindest thing to do. However, they would take great joy in ripping the heads off the green ones, the least favourites. Richard would make Harry break down in fits of giggles by popping a green jelly baby in his mouth and then allowing its bottom half to protrude out of

his lips before thrashing around pretending the green jelly baby was fighting to get out.

The vision of the three of them giggling stupidly over the great green jelly baby gobbler was so vivid it was like a scene out of a nightmare, just before the killer strikes and obliterates everyone. She turned and walked as fast as she could towards the ladies' bathroom, head down.

It was worse than she'd thought as she dragged the face wipes over her cheeks and under her eyes. She looked like a different person. Usually, she didn't have a hair out of place, and she never went out without her makeup done. She'd always taken pride in her appearance and that had only increased when she met Richard. Given his professional status and her lack of it, she felt like she shouldn't ever let him down by looking scruffy or unkempt. In her view most people would wonder why someone as smart as Richard had married a hairdresser and so she really needed to keep up appearances. However, as she looked in the mirror now she saw a dowdy middle-aged woman with scraped back hair, naked eyes and lips, dressed in a crumpled hoody.

Who was that woman staring back at her blankly?

She had absolutely no idea. She had never seen her before. She didn't recognise herself. And the look in her eyes. It was like all the life had been taken out of them. They looked dead. Normally her whole face, her whole body danced with life. People remarked on her energy. Often. She didn't know who this person was. Who her cheating husband had turned her into.

She walked back through the service station in a daze, avoiding everyone's gaze. Normally she would be the first to catch a stranger's eye and smile. She loved people. She loved to engage. But not now. She really wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

Harry was back at the car by the time she got back. She climbed in and went to put on her seatbelt.

'You didn't lock the car,' he said. 'You left the keys in the ignition.'

‘Sorry,’ she muttered, staring straight ahead.

‘Someone could have nicked everything. The PlayStation was in plain view.’

‘Sorry,’ she said again, leaning her elbow on the window and resting her chin on her hand.

‘Did you get something to eat?’ he asked.

‘Not hungry,’ she replied.

‘Have some of these,’ he said, dropping something in her lap. ‘You need to eat something.’

She looked down. There in her lap was a yellow packet of jelly babies.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I’ll eat the green ones.’

Kim immediately felt herself implode. She screwed her eyes as tight as she could to stop the avalanche of tears but it was no good. The Hoover Dam wouldn’t have stopped those tornadoes coming.

As Kim sobbed, she felt her son take her hand which made her sob even more.

She had no idea how long they sat like that but it felt like forever until she could get any words out at all.

‘I just didn’t see it coming,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘I had absolutely no idea.’

Harry gave a big sigh and leaned back in his seat, staring at the roof of the car. ‘I did,’ he muttered.

‘What?!’ said Kim, turning to him sharply. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I came home one lunchtime during my exams and his car was parked outside but he wasn’t in the house,’ he said, still staring at the roof of the car. ‘I thought it was a bit weird but then about half an hour later he came in with Alison. I could hear them laughing in the hallway, then they came in the kitchen and they were well shocked to see me. Didn’t know what to say, then Dad reckoned they’d had to pop back to pick up some papers from Alison’s.’

He turned to look at his mother. 'I'm sorry. I should have said something. But ... but I guess I didn't want to believe they were up to anything. But then Alison started being overly nice to me, asking me how I was all the time when she hadn't taken any notice of me before. She gave me twenty quid to go out and celebrate when I got my place at Nottingham.'

'Did you take it?' asked Kim.

Harry nodded. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I'm so sorry.'

Kim couldn't believe what she was hearing. It was all too much. Alison and Richard popping back at lunchtimes to no doubt have sex! Harry having suspicions but saying nothing about it. Alison sliming round her son in a lurid future stepmum-type fashion. Why had she not picked up on any of this? Why? Had she been sleepwalking for the past year?

She shook her head. All she wanted to do was sleep but thoughts were bombarding her weary brain.

She sighed and leaned back in her seat. 'Let's just go, shall we?' she said, closing her eyes.

Chapter 4

They didn't speak for the rest of the journey. Kim drifted in and out of fitful sleep and disturbing thoughts. Eventually they passed a sign saying, 'You are now entering Nottinghamshire'. She sat up in her seat and rubbed her eyes. Harry had managed to balance his phone on the dashboard and was using a map app to find his way to the house. She glanced over at him to see his face was set in a deep frown. She needed to pull herself together somehow. This was not how Harry should be entering student life. He should be feeling pure anticipation and excitement. She somehow needed to get into proud-mother-dropping-her-son-off-for-his-new-life-at-uni mode rather than woman-who-has-just-found-out-her-life-is-in-tatters mode.

The kind-sounding lady on the app said, 'Turn left at the next junction and you will be at your destination.' Kim literally felt her stomach flip over. She looked out of the window as they passed a line of rundown looking shops. There was a general store of the low budget chain variety, a chippy, a pizza delivery place, a betting shop, a hairdresser and a charity shop. She looked into the hairdresser's which looked similar to the one she had served her apprenticeship in in the nineties, except it clearly hadn't changed since the nineties with its dated posters of dated haircuts and a grim-looking brown leather sofa in the window. She briefly thought about her clients back in Lancaster. Thank goodness she'd decided to take next week off so didn't have the prospect of having to call and cancel a load of appointments. She knew there was no way she could face cutting hair at the moment. When Harry was born she left the salon and became a mobile hairdresser so she could have the flexibility to look after him. It had worked really well, but the plan had always been to open her own salon once Harry started secondary school and didn't need her so much. Richard had said it was a great idea until he got

offered a sabbatical at Edinburgh University for a year when Harry turned eleven, taking him out of the home for four nights a week. Kim essentially became a single mother, leaving no time for her ambitions to be realised. Then long summer holidays abroad visiting Richard's brothers made the prospect of running a salon back in Lancaster impossible. Kim had been fine with it. Family first and all that.

She felt the car come to a halt and Harry start to reverse into a parking spot. She glanced over to her left and looked up at her son's new home. Number fifty-one Leopold Street. Harry hadn't seen it before today as he'd gone through clearing so there had been no luxury of previewing and selecting his accommodation. He'd had to take what he could get. Halls were full and so here he was in a random house round the corner from a chippy and a hairdresser's stuck in the nineties.

The faded red door had a rusting number fifty-one nailed to it above a rusting letterbox. The door was straight off the street, no drive, no front yard, no protection from passers-by. It was very similar to the house she had grown up in in Lancaster. Mid terrace, Victorian probably. Built for the workers. How ironic that the very houses built for the physical grafters all those decades ago were now appropriated for the study of books. Somehow it calmed Kim. This is what she had grown up with. It was like going back in time. She glanced over at Harry to see his reaction. He'd grown up in a brand-new detached, four-bedroom house with a drive and double garage, en suites, a utility room and grass in the backyard. Kim knew without having to look there would be no grass on this property. Harry gave a deep sigh and opened the car door.

They met behind the car and Harry opened the boot. Kim was itching to say perhaps they should go look round first – see the place and then unload – but she kept quiet. Best let him take the lead. He was in charge now.

He plucked the box with the PlayStation in off the top and strode up to the door. He turned the handle but it didn't budge. It was locked. He put the box down and tried again. Nothing.

'How do we get in?' he asked, turning to his mother.

This was the time when Richard would have taken control. Worked it out. Been logical. Been smart. Asked Harry to look at his emails and find forgotten instructions as to the location of a key perhaps. But Kim and Harry just looked at each other, clueless.

‘Try the doorbell?’ said Kim with a shrug.

Harry turned to the door, then back to his mother. ‘No doorbell,’ he said, a look of panic starting to appear in his eyes.

Kim studied the door.

‘Door knocker,’ she said, pointing.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Harry, blushing slightly. He knocked loudly and firmly and stood back. They stood side by side in silence.

No one came to the door.

‘What shall we do?’ asked Harry.

Kim didn’t know. She didn’t know anything anymore. She shrugged.

Harry stared at her, clearly thinking she had the answer, but he was mistaken. She had no answers anymore.

She looked down, avoiding Harry’s gaze, and noticed a lockbox fixed to the wall next to the front window.

‘Lockbox?’ she said, pointing.

‘What?’

‘Lockbox. There, look.’

Harry stared at it then slapped his own forehead. ‘Oh yeah,’ he said. ‘Angus said something on the WhatsApp group about that.’ He reached in his back pocket and started scrolling. ‘1234,’ he muttered before bending down and reaching for the box. Kim wondered at what point she should suggest they didn’t use that number to protect the security of the house.

The box popped open and Harry opened the door into a narrow hallway. Kim could already picture the layout before she went in. Narrow hallway with stairs in front leading to the

next floor. Door on the left at the bottom of the stairs leading into a lounge that in turn led to a kitchen at the back. The lounge décor was familiar from her childhood. Painted woodchip and brown leather furniture on a practical mottled brown carpet. Dominating the room were two alcoves either side of a blocked-in chimney breast which sported a tired-looking gas fire. The two alcoves were fitted with low cupboards and shelves to the ceiling which were already crammed with lines of cans of beer and bottles of wine. One shelf in particular stood out. Clearly someone had ransacked their parents' drinks cupboard and half-empty bottles of spirits jostled for room alongside a silver cocktail shaker. Kim thought about the six pack of lager she'd packed in a box for Harry to bring, thinking perhaps he could share them on his first night. The parents of this particular student were in a different league.

She wandered after Harry into the kitchen. It was long and narrow with a small table at the end in front of a French window out to the yard. It appeared to be fairly well equipped. Well, appeared to be if you could see past the carnage on the worktop. White bread was spilling out of an open packet. A tub of butter and a packet of cheese had been left out; crumbs were strewn everywhere including the floor. Kim felt her hands itch to at least put the butter and cheese back in the fridge but she stopped herself. She absolutely mustn't start that game.

Harry grunted his approval and squeezed past her, walking through the lounge to head upstairs. Kim stared round her once again and fought the instinct to clear up after someone else's mess in the kitchen. It so wasn't her job. They had to work it out for themselves.

Now what should she do? Follow Harry? She trudged up the stairs and stuck her head round the door of the bathroom at the top of the stairs. It smelt of boy/man already. The faint hint of poo mixed with competing deodorant and aftershave. She felt herself heave, trying not to think of her en suite at home and her vanity unit with full light-up mirror. She realised she hadn't seen a downstairs toilet. One bathroom for three men. That was going to take some serious shit, that bathroom. She

could hear Vicky giggle at her own joke. Kim might have laughed if the thought hadn't been so grim.

Turning onto the landing there was an empty single room on her right and a door facing her. She thought she could hear Harry shuffling round inside. She knocked tentatively on the door. 'Is that you, Harry?' she asked.

'Yeah,' came the answer.

She pushed the door open to find Harry lying on the floor messing with wires and plugs under a desk and with monitors and consoles strewn around him.

'Nice room,' she said even before she had looked round. It wasn't too bad. More woodchip, but painted fairly recently to be fair. A double bed in the corner, a decent sized desk and a classic house clearance wardrobe. Small and made of peeling orangey wood. Harry was not big on clothes so it probably made no odds to him. A large window on the far wall overlooked the street and into the house opposite where Kim could see a teddy bear hung from a noose-like piece of rope. No doubt another student house, or the home of a psychotic child.

Kim and Harry were just getting the last of the items that had been rammed in the boot of her car when a red van pulled up next to them. A boy got out of the passenger seat. He had a big round face and a riot of thick, wavy hair cut in an unfashionable nineties style, very short on the sides and too long on the top. His unremarkable face was lit up by a beaming smile and his eyes blinked rapidly behind silver-rimmed, NHS-looking glasses. His unbranded hoody was zipped right up to the top as though his mother had told him to be careful not to catch a cold. He was wearing bright red jeans.

'This is Harry,' he said to his mum, pointing at Harry. 'This is Harry. I told you about Harry, Mum, do you remember? We are on the same floor. Hi Harry. It's me, Sonny. From WhatsApp. Do you recognise me?'

'Hi Sonny,' said Harry, straightening up, looking bemused by the effervescent boy.

‘Are you sure that’s him?’ said Sonny’s mum, striding forward and peering at Harry. ‘He doesn’t look much like a student.’

Kim was aghast. Sonny looked like he’d only just had his bar mitzvah. At least Harry was sporting some five o’clock shadow.

‘What are you studying then?’ the woman demanded.

‘Chemistry,’ replied Harry.

The woman nodded. ‘Sonny’s doing geography,’ she said. ‘He wanted to do criminology but you don’t get much crime down in Devon, well not where we live anyway, but there’s plenty of geography. So, we said to him he could come to university but he had to do something useful. He can come back to Devon when he’s finished and do geography. Right, Sonny. Let’s unpack this van, shall we? It won’t unpack itself, will it?’

Sonny grinned then stepped forward and flung his arms around Harry. ‘This is going to be amazing,’ he said before shouting, ‘Coming Mum,’ in a singsong voice before he disappeared round the back of the van out of sight. Harry looked at his mother with a bewildered look on his face. Kim couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen her son physically touch someone apart from her. He certainly didn’t welcome hugs from his grandparents anymore. And to her knowledge he’d never had a girlfriend. She’d long suspected that he avoided human contact because that would require showering more. Keeping clean was not high on her son’s list of priorities and he seemed like the type of bloke who was quite happy to forsake a relationship if it meant he could keep his showering regime to a minimum.

‘That’s everything,’ said Harry, slamming the boot down.

She followed him in and up the stairs to dump his bedding on his bed. All his stuff was piled in the middle of the room. Shoes and trainers tumbled out of bags for life, video games were already scattered all over the floor, his suitcase was open and half the contents ransacked to find the hoody he was now wearing. It was already chaos. She watched as Harry sat on the

chair at his desk, picked up a gaming controller and started to play. No sign whatsoever of putting his long-awaited university room into any kind of order. She was glad she'd decided against the couple of pot plants she was going to hand to him to make his room look nice. No doubt they would have got chucked on the floor spilling soil and goodness knows what onto the carpet which would have stayed there until the end of time.

What would she be doing now, she thought, if this day had gone to plan? She and Richard had discussed taking Harry out for a meal, once they'd dropped his stuff off in the house. Fill him up before they headed back up to Lancaster. She certainly hadn't intended to settle him into his room. Put his bedsheets on for him, file his underwear away. No, she was certain she wouldn't have done that. She would have to take a deep breath and walk away. Leave him to it. She decided she would just wander down to the kitchen and perhaps unpack Harry's limited kitchen stuff. She'd packed him some tea bags so she might make herself a cup of tea, then she should really start looking on her phone for a hotel to stay in.

She was just wiping the kitchen table with a wet cloth so she could sit down and have a cup of tea without getting crumbs all over her when there was a loud tap on the kitchen door and the next thing she heard was a female voice saying, 'Cooee – can I come in?'

Sonny's mum's head appeared round the corner of the door.

'I'm Valerie,' she said, walking towards Kim and holding out her hand. 'So sorry not to introduce myself properly earlier.' Kim offered her hand back before realising she was still holding the dishcloth. She threw it in the sink and then offered Sonny's mum her wet hand. She watched as Valerie shook her hand and then wiped it on her denim skirt.

'I hear you are staying over,' she said.

'Yes, well ...' Kim started to say.

'Good for you,' she said. 'If I'd have known that room up there was for mothers I'd have been in like Flynn. Of course I would. No idea they had that kind of option available.'

‘No, actually it’s not ...’

‘I don’t blame you for getting in first and keeping quiet about it. I’d have done exactly the same if I’d have known. Exactly the same. Mind you, not that our Geoff would have been able to cope without me for more than a couple of nights, but still, if I’d known, perhaps us mums could have done a rota between us or something. You know. Me stay a few days, do a shift as it were and then you take a turn, then the other mums. Still, the rest of us didn’t know so here we are. But we have you here so that’s great. Brilliant. You can keep an eye on everyone. Let us know how they are all doing. And seeing as you’re here, well, Sonny, bless him, I love him to bits but I am worried he can’t look after himself, you know. First time away from home and all that. Maybe I’ve mollycoddled him. Some might say that, but you do, don’t you? You do with sons. It’s just a mother’s instinct, that’s all. I wasn’t like this with my two daughters. No way. They were cooking and cleaning from a very young age. Very independent, they were, but Sonny, well, boys just aren’t made like that, are they? They are not meant to be domestic animals. They are hunter gatherers. That’s how they were made. They weren’t meant to know how to look after themselves. I blame those cavemen. They started it. If the cavemen had been taught how to wash up rather than spear an ox then we might be in a very different state now. Still, here we are and I’m so glad you’re here.’ Valerie reached over and grabbed Kim’s wrist, giving it an almost painful squeeze, then she bent down and picked a bag up off the floor.

‘So,’ she said. ‘I’m going to give you Sonny’s medication. Good news is he doesn’t need his inhaler very often now and don’t panic, he has one with him, but he is prone to losing them, so if you could keep the spares then he’ll always know where to find one.’

‘I don’t think you understand ...’ began Kim, horrified.

‘It’s okay, you don’t have to keep this stuff in any special conditions or anything. Just on that shelf up there would be fine. I’ll tell him before I leave. Now also in here is his spare EpiPen ...’

‘No ...’ started Kim. ‘No, really ...’

‘I know what you are going to say,’ said Valerie, clutching her arm in a vice-like grip once again. ‘You are going to say you would be too scared to use it even if you saw my son on the verge of death from anaphylactic shock. I can assure you that once you do see someone on the verge of suffocation then all instincts kick in and you will be able to use it. I can guarantee. I’ve done it many times. You’ll find the first time a bit intimidating but after two or three you’ll soon get the hang of it, but if you are worried then I’d advise you to remind him that satay contains peanuts if he makes any hint of having a takeaway. Oh, and if you could remind him every morning when he goes, to take his EpiPen, that would be great. He is prone to forgetting it. I’ve informed the university of his condition but I’m not convinced that they have communicated it widely enough and so I am feeling very nervous about him being at risk every time he walks through the door.’

Kim was speechless. Why did this woman think she was moving in to become her son’s surrogate parent? Some serious miscommunication had gone on somewhere.

‘Now last thing,’ said Valerie, delving into her bag again. She pulled out a packet of condoms.

Kim’s jaw dropped open.

‘I was going to give these to Sonny, you know, to keep him safe and all that, but seeing as you’re here then perhaps you could keep them for him. He’ll put them somewhere and forget and then ... well goodness knows ... I dread to think ... and I don’t want any young lady trapping him or anything, you know, by getting pregnant. He’s way too good for that so I’ve told him he must always take precautions. Don’t worry, we’ve had “the chat”, he knows all about it, I’m not asking you to do that or anything, but if you could keep these for him. You know, for when the time comes. He’ll feel okay coming to ask you, I’m sure. Not as embarrassing as asking the other lads, I would have thought. And in case you’re wondering, there is one missing. Newquay last year. Geoff got a bit fruity. You know what it’s like on holiday. A bit of sunshine and some beer and it sends some men loopy, doesn’t it? Thank goodness

they sell them in toilets now. Not what it was like in our day, hey?’ she said going into peals of laughter.

Valerie looked at her watch and gasped. ‘I promised Geoff I’d leave before it got busy on the roads. Better go. Now can I ask one last favour? I’ve made up lots of meals for Sonny and put them in the freezer and I’ve told him how to defrost them and that different ones need different times but I’m sure he wasn’t listening. Can I show you where they are and what you have to do and then he can always come and ask you, can’t he? Might stop him getting food poisoning.’

Kim watched, speechless, as Valerie walked out of the kitchen towards the hallway. The next thing she heard was Valerie shouting, ‘Sonny’ at the top of her voice. A few seconds later, Valerie and Sonny arrived back in the kitchen.

‘Now Sonny, I’m going to show you how to use the microwave in front of this nice lady here so if you have any questions, you can just ask her.’ Valerie pointed at the microwave and Sonny opened the door and peered into it like he’d just discovered the door into Narnia.

‘You must remember to shut the door before you set the timer. The door cannot be open. Do you hear, Sonny?’ She was talking very slowly.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ said Sonny, waving one hand at her whilst spinning the glass plate on the bottom of the oven with his other hand. ‘Look, it spins,’ he said, grinning. ‘How cool is that? Is that to make it more interesting to watch whilst it cooks?’

‘No. Listen, Sonny, Harry’s mum, what was your name again? Harry’s mum is going to look after you so there’s no need to worry.’

Sonny looked up at her and beamed. He really was the most smiley person she had ever met.

‘It’s Kim but ...’ she began.

‘Like Kim Kardashian?’ said Sonny in excitement. ‘Are you named after her?’

‘Err no, she’s about half my age. No, look, I don’t know what’s been said but I’m not staying here at all. I don’t know why you think that. I mean, I’m staying over, but I’m going to find a hotel, I’m not staying *here*. In this house. So, I can’t help you. Sorry.’ She walked forward, holding the bag of Sonny’s life essentials in front of her.

Valerie stared at her but did not take the bag.

‘Her husband is having an affair with the neighbour,’ Sonny stage-whispered to his mum. ‘That’s what Harry said. He said she was staying over so I assumed he meant here. Sorry, Mum. My bad!’

Kim looked at Sonny, horrified.

Valerie stared at Kim before stepping forward and encasing her in her arms.

‘You poor, poor woman,’ she said, nearly suffocating her. ‘Exactly the same thing happened to my sister. Except it was our cousin he went off with. Can you imagine?’ She stepped back, shaking her head.

Sonny stepped forward and hugged her himself.

‘I’m so sorry for your loss,’ he said, taking a step back again. ‘Any time you want to talk, you can get in touch on WhatsApp, Snapchat, Insta – whatever is your media of choice.’

Valerie gave him a proud look before turning back to Kim.

‘Still, whilst you are in Nottingham then it will be no trouble, will it, to just keep an eye on this one,’ she continued, nodding at her still beaming son. ‘He’s a lovely lad and no trouble but he just needs a bit of help settling in. Would calm my mind no end knowing he had someone like you popping in over the next few days. I mean, he might just about grasp the microwave, but I can tell you that gas hob frightens the living daylights out of me. He’ll have no idea.’

‘It’s all right, Mum,’ said Sonny, putting his hand on his mum’s shoulder. ‘I’ve got this. Gas hob, no problem.’

He walked over to the hob, studied the dials for a couple of seconds and then twisted one. He turned back to face them, beaming again. 'Look, I can switch it on and I even know which one is on. It's that one at the back. I can tell by the diagram.'

He said all that to the accompaniment of unignited gas hissing in the background.

Valerie was the first to get to the dials. 'You are going to blow the whole house up doing that,' she shouted as she turned the dial back to off. She turned to face Kim. 'I really think it should be a house rule that Sonny is not allowed to touch the gas cooker, don't you?'

'House rules are nothing to do with me,' protested Kim. 'And this is nothing to do with me either.' She stepped forward with the bag, pushing it into Sonny's arms. 'You need to work this out for yourself.'

'Well, thanks a bunch,' said Valerie with a huff. 'I thought you would understand as a mother. Thought it wouldn't be too much trouble just to keep an eye out. He doesn't even know how to do his own washing.'

Kim stared at her aghast. 'Well perhaps you need to take responsibility for making sure he knew the basics before he got here. That's not my problem, it's yours.'

Kim turned to leave the kitchen.

'Not surprised her husband left her,' she heard Valerie mutter behind her.

Kim walked up the stairs to find Harry, thinking that this was probably her cue to leave. Not that she really wanted to. The thought of walking out the door and going to some faceless hotel room was not appealing whatsoever; however, the thought of going back home was even less attractive, so she really had little choice. She knocked on Harry's door and peered into the room. He was nowhere to be seen. Where had he gone? She heard a sound coming from the upper floor. Maybe he had gone to meet whoever was living upstairs. She

backed out of Harry's room and walked up the stairs to the top floor.

As she turned the corner onto the landing, she could see an open door in front of her. The room was dark, clearly curtains hadn't been drawn, but the light was still on. A damp towel sat in the doorway and clothes littered the floor. She stood stock still. She couldn't hear any voices at all. It didn't sound like there was anyone up here. She listened for at least thirty seconds. She couldn't hear a soul.

But then she had to do it. She couldn't leave an unnecessary light on, could she? Just a waste of money. Who did this child think he was, leaving electric lights on in broad daylight? She inched her hand round the door, turning her face away so as not to look in the room. She felt up and down the door post until she felt the switch and turned it off.

'What the fuck?' was the next thing she heard come from inside the room. She thought her heart would stop. She dashed into the other room leading off the small landing and hid behind the door, her heart beating loudly. She hardly dared breathe.

'Fucking lights,' she heard someone growl as they clearly flicked the switch back on.

She stood in the empty room, trembling, until there was no sound coming from next door. Perhaps he had been asleep? With the lights on? She took in her surroundings. To her right was a large window overlooking the backyard and the back of the houses in the next road. In the corner stood another classic house clearance wardrobe. This one was of more recent extraction, however. Perhaps more of an MFI vintage in black veneered chipboard. She was sure her brother had had the exact same model in the eighties. The black finish of the wardrobe contrasted heavily with the white veneered desk on the opposite wall which was so small she suspected it was actually a child's desk. Tucked underneath was an old crusty dining chair which one might find in a pub that had never been refurbished and never would be. She pitied the poor student who was destined for this space.

The single bed stretched along the entire back wall. The sight of the bed reminded her how exhausted she was. Perhaps she should just lie down for a little while. Recharge her batteries. She lowered herself onto it, hearing the strain of steel springs in the single mattress. She froze, half expecting the guy in the room next door to come striding in to see who was there. The mattress was bare and bore the stains of an active life. She dreaded to think. She'd just lie down for a minute or two though, she thought. She really was very tired. Just whilst Harry got himself sorted. Then she'd go down and say goodbye and leave. Yes, that's what she would do.

A very loud fart reverberated through from next door. That was the last thing she heard before she fell asleep.

Chapter 5

Kim couldn't work out where she was when she woke up later in the pitch black. In fact she didn't really know what day of the week it was. Was it still today, or was it tomorrow? And where was she? The room felt funny and it was a bit cold. And she wasn't really very comfortable. Something was covering her but she wasn't quite sure what it was. She reached her hand down and pulled at it, rubbing it between her fingers. Maybe it was a sheet or possibly a duvet cover without a duvet. She pulled herself up on the bed and groaned at the thumping pain in her head. She ran her hands along the wall, her heart beating fast, suddenly panicking that she might be trapped in the room forever. Her hand hit something and she heaved a sigh of relief as she found the switch and clicked it on. The bare bulb fizzed into life, causing her to blink rapidly and clutch her head to try and deaden the thumping pain. Eventually her eyes got used to the harsh light and she took in her surroundings under the cold brightness of a halogen bulb. The worst student room in the history of the planet, she thought. How on earth had she fallen asleep here?

She scabbled round on the bed searching for her phone. She needed to know how long she had been passed out for and then she really needed a drink and something to eat. Then perhaps she would feel better.

She screwed her eyes up looking at the screen. No, that couldn't be right, could it? The time appeared to start with an eleven. She couldn't have slept for that long. And why hadn't anyone woken her up? Then she spotted that she had a notification of a message from Richard.

Dear Kim. I realise you are upset and I deserve everything you want to throw at me. But please come home. Wherever you are just get in the car and come back and let's talk. Richard.

‘Wanker,’ muttered Kim, sinking back down onto the bed. She put her head in her hands. Aaaaargh! She wanted to scream. She felt empty and lost. She stared into space for a good half-hour before her stomach rumbled and she realised she had to eat something and she desperately needed water. She had no choice but to venture downstairs. She prayed that the rest of the household had gone out. She could slip downstairs without anyone noticing. Surely the first night here would involve going out and partying. She picked up her phone again to check on the time. The time had a zero in front of it now. It was tomorrow. No wonder she was hungry. The only thing she had eaten in the last twenty-four hours was a few jelly babies.

She pushed her hair out of her eyes, coughed, straightened her hoody and opened the door. She could hear music faintly in the distance. She crept downstairs just in case people were already asleep in their beds, but the further she got the louder the music became. There was somebody up. They were in the kitchen playing music very loudly and she could smell ... pizza. If it hadn’t been for the smell of pizza she may have turned round and gone straight back up to the room and hidden until the morning.

As she walked through the lounge she could hear voices, definitely more than one. A voice she didn’t recognise. Deep and gravelly and Scottish.

She poked her head round the door of the kitchen.

Harry, Sonny and what must be Angus were sat around the small table which was covered in open pizza boxes at the far end of the kitchen. So jammed was the space that tins of lager resided on the floor next to the chairs.

‘Well, here she is,’ said the one who must be Angus. ‘The phantom snorer in the room next door.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said, entering the room, actually feeling herself go red. ‘I’ve no idea what happened there. I never meant to fall asleep.’

‘I was looking for you everywhere,’ said Harry, with his mouth full. ‘Then Angus said there was someone snoring in the room next to him and there you were. Out cold.’

‘I wouldn’t let them wake you, Kim,’ said Sonny, shaking his head. ‘I told them that you needed your sleep. You know, given what you’ve gone through.’

‘How are you feeling now, Mum?’ asked Harry.

‘Better, sort of, well I’ve got a headache but I think that’s because I’ve not really eaten today,’ said Kim as she hovered by the table not knowing what to do with herself. ‘I’m so sorry. I meant to go to a hotel. I didn’t mean to get in your way.’

‘You’re not in the way at all,’ said Angus before gulping at his lager. ‘Especially when she clears up this mess, hey lads.’ He collapsed into peals of laughter.

Harry had the decency to look at his mum apologetically.

She took in Angus. Harry had mentioned he’d gone to private school in Scotland. She could see that he had already installed himself as man of the household, taking the prime seat at the head of the table so he could hold court. He was stocky and tall with light auburn hair and a ruddy complexion. He could have been your classic rugger bugger if it wasn’t for the well-cut hair and the designer jumper. Angus didn’t rock up at a barber on a Saturday morning when he was desperate, she could tell. Angus had been brought up having expensive haircuts. He wore a green jumper with a zip at the neckline with the subtlest hint of a polo player on the right-hand side indicating its not so subtle expense. Angus didn’t get dragged to the shops kicking and screaming like Harry did, refusing to try anything on and refusing anything that wasn’t black or grey. Angus had taste and an open wallet. If not Angus, then his mother clearly did.

‘Have some pizza, Kim,’ said Sonny suddenly, holding his box up to her. ‘It’s got green stuff on it. I thought it was like courgette or something, but it’s super-hot.’

Angus peered over at Sonny’s pizza.

‘They’re green chillies.’

‘Oh,’ said Sonny. ‘Right. Wow, green chillies. Wow, they are hot.’ He waved his hand in front of his mouth. ‘Try some,

Kim, really. You get used to it after a bit.'

'I err, I don't want to get in your way,' she said, looking nervously at her son.

Harry shrugged and carried on eating, which she took as a sign it was okay to have some pizza.

'Come on, sit down,' said Angus, holding out a tin of lager. It came across as an instruction rather than a request.

She took a seat and reached over and took a slice of Sonny's pizza. Pepperoni and hot chillies, her favourite. She would have liked a plate but didn't want to draw attention to herself by asking for one and she had no idea where one would be found. No one had yet put anything away; unopened boxes were scattered across the floor.

'We've had *the* best night,' said Sonny to Kim. 'Just like dream first night at uni. I can't believe it.'

'Great, where did you go? Did you go onto campus, find all the other freshers?'

'Nah,' said Angus, swigging at his beer. 'Pub at the end of the road. Been there every night since I arrived.'

'The landlord knows his name,' said Sonny, wide-eyed. 'How cool is that?'

Angus shrugged as though that was perfectly normal.

'It's brilliant,' continued Sonny. 'Two-for-one all night. All night! I couldn't believe it. Never seen anything like it.'

'It won't last,' said Angus. 'They're just trying to entice the students in at the beginning of term, get them used to going there then they'll up the prices. Mike told me he does it every year. Works every time, he says,' Angus chuckled to himself.

Wow, the chillies on the pizza were really hot. She needed a drink, fast. She balanced her half-eaten slice on Harry's box lid and then opened her can of lager, taking a hefty gulp to quench her thirst.

When she came up for air, Angus was nodding at her appreciatively. 'Good effort,' he said. He picked his own can

up and took a long gulp, shortly followed by Sonny. Harry kept his head down, concentrating on devouring his second fast food meal of the day. She felt like the worst parent ever.

‘Pub does good food too,’ said Angus. ‘I’ve eaten there every night. Basic but good. I had a great pie and chips in there earlier.’

Kim goggled at the enormous pizza that Angus was now devouring. Perhaps she wasn’t such a bad parent after all.

‘I’ll probably end up eating there most nights,’ he continued. ‘Mum’s organised some meal box delivery thing. You know, when they send you all the stuff but then you have to cook it yourself. I mean, what’s the point in that? Why would I want to do that when there is a perfectly good pub down the road?’

Kim had to stuff pizza in her mouth to stop herself from saying anything. She felt her eyes water as the chillies hit her taste buds. Who was this kid?

‘Mum tried to make me bring everything but the kitchen sink, thinking I’d be cooking gourmet meals every night,’ said Harry, giving her a look. ‘Fortunately, there wasn’t room in the car so I’ll be sticking to my bacon butty diet, I reckon.’

Kim thought she’d better not comment as she’d been the reason why the bag had to stay behind since she’d been the one to use the frying pan as a weapon.

‘You going to be making that girl who lives opposite bacon butties, then, Harry?’ Angus asked.

Kim’s head flew up. Angus was looking at her. He winked. Yes, winked.

‘No,’ said Harry, shaking his head, a shade of red creeping up his neck.

‘I reckon she’d like you to,’ said Angus. ‘She’s definitely into you. I can tell. Never looked back at me once I introduced her to you.’ He winked at Kim again. ‘Suki liked him, I swear,’ he stage-whispered to Kim.

‘No, she didn’t,’ repeated Harry. He glanced at his mother and looked as though he wanted the ground to swallow him up.

‘Didn’t she invite you over to play computer games?’ said Sonny. ‘Wow, a date on your first day at uni. You are a legend, Harry.’

‘It’s not a date,’ said Harry directly to his mother. ‘So don’t get your hopes up. She’s just stuck on a level, that’s all. Said I’d go and show her how to do it.’

Kim shook her head. ‘Of course,’ she said. ‘Nice of you to help her.’

‘Show her how to go up a level, is that what it’s called around here?’ said Angus, shaking with laughter and slapping Harry on the back.

‘It’s not a date,’ said Harry to Angus firmly. ‘We both just like computer games.’

‘I’ve never had a girlfriend,’ sighed Sonny.

‘Bloody hell,’ said Angus. ‘Where have you been?’

‘Crowshot in Devon mainly,’ he replied. ‘It’s really quiet and I’m related to half the girls and the other half seem to be my mates. They don’t fancy me. I clearly send off the wrong signals.’

Kim stole a look at Sonny. He wasn’t wrong. He looked like he got dressed in the dark and now he had tomato sauce smeared up his cheek. He had no chance really.

‘Traffic light party tomorrow night,’ said Angus, pointing at Sonny. ‘We are going to get you a girlfriend.’

‘No way,’ said Sonny, his eyes lighting up. ‘I saw that on the schedule. What is a traffic light party anyway? I assumed it was just for town planning undergrads or something?’

‘No, stupid,’ replied Angus. ‘It’s where you pick up a girlfriend. You wear red if you are unavailable, amber if you might be available and green if you are all systems go. Green means gagging for sex, basically.’

Kim tried hard not to show Harry up by looking shocked at the way he was talking.

‘Wow,’ said Sonny, his eyes on stalks. ‘Seriously, that is how it works? Wow. You make it sound so easy.’

‘It is. Piece of cake. By the end of tomorrow night, you could be losing your virginity.’ Angus winked at Kim yet again. She really wished he wouldn’t do that. It was making her feel quite uncomfortable. She daren’t look at Harry at all.

‘I can already feel that this is going to be the best week of my life,’ grinned Sonny, appearing to not give a toss about Angus’s assumption about his sexual status. ‘Are we all going to go? What colour will you wear, Harry, what with Suki opposite?’

‘It’s *not* a date,’ he said again firmly, his mouth stuffed with pizza.

‘Do you think she’ll be going?’ asked Sonny. ‘You have to wear green if she’s there. But what if she’s wearing red? What will you do then? But she might wear red because she’s interested in you and then if she sees you in green then she’ll think you are not interested in her because you’ve gone to a traffic light party basically declaring you are open to offers from anyone.’

‘I probably won’t go,’ said Harry. ‘Not sure it’s my type of thing.’

Kim was about to remind him that he had promised that he would make an effort to join in everything and make friends and not stay on his computer all day. But she thought better of it as she had no business being here to make any such comment. What she really wanted to tell him, of course, was that he should go to the party wearing green and chat up Suki. That would make her feel so much happier about leaving him here. Knowing he had found a girlfriend would really reassure her that he was settling in.

‘You have to come,’ declared Sonny. ‘Please. Just wear amber. But please come. You’re going, Angus, aren’t you?’

‘Of course. Hoping this accent is going to go down a treat.’
He winked again.

‘But you said you had a girlfriend earlier,’ said Sonny.
‘You’ll be going in red, surely?’

Angus shrugged. ‘Poppy just started medicine in Edinburgh last week and by all accounts, medics are crazy students. Like they go mental shagging each other. I’ve got mates who are medics and I know what they are like.’

‘So did you split up then?’ asked Sonny. ‘Before you came here?’

‘No ... no ... I just don’t expect that she’ll be waiting for me with a Christmas present at the end of this term, so why should I wait for her?’ He paused. ‘Don’t you think, Harry’s mum?’ he asked.

‘Please call me Kim,’ she replied.

‘Okay, Kim,’ said Angus. ‘She’s not going to wait for me, is she? You’re a woman, you should know.’

Kim looked back at him wide-eyed. She was in no position to give advice on relationships at this present time. ‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘Whoever knows.’ She bit her lip. She could not cry. Not here. Not now. Oh yes, she could. The tears fled her eyes down her cheeks like someone had turned on the tap.

‘Jesus, Mother,’ said Harry reaching under his pizza box for some paper napkins and stuffing them in her hand. ‘Sorry guys,’ he said to Angus and Sonny. ‘It’s been a really long day.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Kim added, hastily scraping the scratchy napkins across her face. No one said anything. She reached up and grabbed her tin of lager and gulped some down.

‘I’m so sorry for your loss,’ said Sonny, putting his hand on her shoulder.

‘He’s not dead,’ sniffed Kim. ‘He’s just ... he’s just ...’

‘Shagging the neighbour,’ added Angus.

She looked up sharply.

‘I told him what happened,’ explained Harry. ‘Seemed the easiest way to explain why my mother was asleep in the spare room from the middle of the afternoon.’

‘I mean on your own doorstep,’ said Angus. ‘That’s way harsh.’

Kim swallowed, the tears cascading down her cheeks. She sighed. ‘May I?’ she asked, reaching over to take another slice of Sonny’s pizza.

‘Please, please, take it all. Whatever you need. Please eat my pizza. It’s the least I can do.’

She stuffed a huge bite of pizza into her mouth and stared at the floor, tears dripping off her nose.

Angus belched.

Sonny giggled.

Harry carried on munching.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she gulped when she had finished chewing. ‘You shouldn’t be having to deal with this. It’s just ... it’s just ... so hard. It only happened yesterday and ... and ... I really don’t know what to do.’ She gulped again and looked at Harry. She couldn’t believe she was making such a show of herself, today of all days and here, in his new student house share with his new housemates. What on earth must they be thinking?

‘It’s all right, Mum,’ said Harry. He gave her a half smile and she felt a wave of relief come over her. She’d needed to hear that.

She wiped her lips with the back of her hand. Sonny handed her a piece of kitchen roll and she blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

‘I’ll get out of your way now,’ she said, standing up.

‘Where are you going to go?’ asked Sonny.

‘I’ll just find a hotel,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘It’s fine.’

‘What, now!’ said Sonny horrified. ‘No way. You can’t go out and find a hotel now. It’s after midnight. Stay here. No one is using that room. Sammy Thwaites decided last minute that she would rather work in an Amazon warehouse than move in with us so the room is empty until she can find someone to take it on. Her parents have guaranteed her rent for the whole year. Can you imagine? They must be fuming. So, you can stay for a bit. I can’t imagine they will find a replacement this quickly.’

Kim couldn’t believe what she was hearing. Neither could Harry and Angus by the looks of it.

‘No, honestly, I couldn’t do that, really. It’s not fair,’ she said.

‘Of course it is,’ said Sonny. He looked over at his housemates. ‘It’s all right, isn’t it? I mean, we can’t send your mum out onto the streets, can we? Look at her!’

Kim realised she must look a total wreck as both Angus and Harry took in her dishevelled appearance and still dripping nose.

Kim squirmed. She watched as Harry’s eyes darted between the three of them trying to work out what to do. How could she have put in him this situation, on today of all days? His first day, starting his new life at university.

‘I’ll go,’ she said to Harry. ‘I’m cramping your style. You don’t need to be worrying about me right now.’

She automatically started clearing up dirty napkins as though she had already become mother to them all and therefore was designated clearer upper.

Harry put his hand out to stop her. ‘You don’t need to do that, Mum,’ he said.

She nodded just as another tear dripped off her nose. She couldn’t even lift her head to look at them.

‘Make her stay, Harry,’ said Sonny, his voice cracking.

‘Is it all right with you, Angus?’ she heard Harry tentatively ask. ‘If it’s just for a few days?’

‘Sure,’ she heard Angus say. ‘You can let her tidy up though. I mean, don’t stop her doing that, whatever you do.’

Kim looked at her son. He gave her a tight smile. She mouthed a ‘thank you’ to him. In one moment she had become the child and Harry was the parent. She was so grateful she felt a fresh wave of tears try to overwhelm her but she fought to hold them back.

‘Brilliant, cool,’ said Sonny, clapping his hands in glee. ‘I’ll let my mum know that I’ve found a responsible adult to give my spare EpiPen to for at least a few days.’

Chapter 6

This time Kim knew exactly where she was when she woke up as the sun shone through the thin curtains straight into her eyes. She blinked then groaned, attempting to turn over in her bed but just getting ravelled up in the empty duvet cover, causing the bed springs to groan back. She lay stock-still listening. Were the others up? Had they already left the building? What time was it?

Unbelievably the hands on her watch seemed to want to tell her it was past midday. It couldn't be, surely? She rolled over to grab her phone off the floor. Yep – after midday was confirmed as the waking hour. She lay back, confused. What had happened to time since Saturday night? Everything had got cockeyed. But still – after midday – she hadn't slept in until after midday since she was, well, a teenager. She wondered if her fellow teenagers had also slept in this long. Surely not. No one sleeps in this long under normal circumstances. There had to be some extreme event such as one's husband shacking up with the next door neighbour, surely?

She extracted herself from the tangled mess of the duvet cover and put her feet on the floor. She had brought her bag in from the car before she'd gone back to bed in the early hours of the morning. She rifled around in it until she found a towel. She was so grateful that the boys were willing to let her stay but right now she needed to go to the bathroom and she could do with a shower, and the enormity of the task in this strange house felt quite overwhelming. Should she go to the bathroom in her pyjamas? The bathroom being on the floor below meant that she risked meeting a strange man on the landing, bra-less. God had been kind to Kim on the breast front and she could fill a D cup very well, but what happened when she was not

safely encased by a D cup was not a pretty sight. Lopsided and droopy was not how she wished to be caught racing across the landing. This was why en suites were invented. So no one had to see your boobs flapping around under flimsy fabric apart from your partner.

She'd just hold her towel in front of her. That would have to do. Block all observation of the lopsided and droopy. But she needed a shower. So should she put her pyjamas back on for her return journey from the bathroom to the bedroom? But that always seemed so wrong. Putting slept-in clothes back on after a cleansing shower. She'd have to take her clothes in with her. Get dressed in the bathroom and then she could walk out head held high, nothing to hide, fully bra'd up. It was her only choice. There was absolutely no way she was streaking up the stairs with just a towel wrapped round her. That was a fool's game.

She gathered up her washbag and towel and, holding them firmly in front of her chest, she ventured out of the room.

All was silent. Perhaps they had all gone out and she had nothing to worry about. She glanced to her right to see Angus's door wide open, curtains drawn and lights on. She didn't dare switch his light off again. Perhaps later when she was sure he had gone out.

For some reason she felt it necessary to tiptoe down the stairs. Past Harry's room whose door was firmly shut, then past Sonny's whose open door revealed a peek at a desk already laid out with relevant stationery next to open curtains. That was a vacated room, she was sure. Perhaps they *were* all out.

She pushed open the door to the bathroom and quickly locked it behind her. Warm damp air filled the room from a fairly recent shower and there was that smell again. Male scented deodorant or aftershave with a back note of poo. She reached over to open the window behind the sink to let some fresh air in and to allow herself to breathe. This was not good. She looked down to see a sink already awash with toothpaste not sluiced away. On the windowsill two washbags spilt an assortment of toiletries. A blue canvas washbag had Sonny

written on it in gold. Of course it did. An industrial sized two-in-one shampoo and conditioner for hair with dandruff stood next to it. No wonder his hair was a frizzy mess; she'd have to get him off the two-in-one stuff – it really was no good for some hair. An industrial sized bottle of shower gel stood next to it. It was enormous. The whole house could use it and it would still last them until Christmas. Either Sonny liked to wash a lot or his mum was keen on wholesale shopping. In contrast Angus's toiletries were very different. His washbag was black leather with many compartments. This was a man who travelled a lot and so was used to packing his washbag for every eventuality. She spotted high-end brand shampoo and conditioner as well as other hair products including wax and gel. There was also pore cleanser and spot clearer and moisturising shower gel. Someone had taught him the tricks of the trade. Angus's mother had evidently never stepped foot in a Costco; she clearly did however cruise the cosmetics aisles of department stores. No sign of Harry's washbag. Of course there wasn't. She wondered if he had washed at all since he arrived. Oh dear. What did that say about her? That she had taught him nothing about self-hygiene?

Hopefully she had taught him not to leave wet towels on the floor though as she turned around to pick up two damp towels thrown in the direction of a rail rather than draped over it.

The shower, of course, was a whole other experience. She pushed the shower curtain aside to step into the bath. At least the shower curtain was new even if its geometric purple and orange colour was quite jarring. She suspected it was an attempt to distract from the mouldy grouting around the cracked tiles. She struggled to turn on the limescale encrusted tap let alone adjust the temperature, scalding her hand which caused her to jump back in surprise. The smell of her own shower gel soothed her somewhat but it also reminded her of her en suite back at home, possibly her favourite room in the house. Her mother had been in awe when she'd shown her round. No one in the family had ever had an en suite before. It had two sinks. Two sinks! Janice could not believe it. Who had a sink to themselves? She'd never heard of such a thing. Kim used to have her own sink in an en suite in a brand-new four-

bedroom detached house. And now here she was, sharing a bathroom with three men, nervous about walking along the landing to get to the bathroom. She felt the tears start to threaten. She couldn't cry again. She was sick of crying.

Post-shower she put her now slightly damp clothes on in the cramped bathroom, trying hard to not get her feet wet from the soggy carpet as she balanced precariously to poke them through the leg holes in her knickers. Pulling her hair back into a ponytail, she gathered up her washbag, her towel and her pyjamas into a bundle and took them back to her room. Time to brave the kitchen and seek out some breakfast.

The state of the kitchen was worse than the bathroom. Boxes of kitchen equipment no doubt packed by caring parents still lay around causing trip hazards and an awkward bending over manoeuvre to fill the kettle. There was a jar of coffee next to a used spoon. It was nice instant with Gold in the title. She hoped whoever it belonged to wouldn't mind if she took just a little before she ventured out to the shops to get some supplies for herself. Pizza boxes still littered the table. She walked over and flicked open one of the lids. One piece of pizza left, congealed and stone cold. She was about to throw it away when she decided that since no one was going to eat it then she might as well. She hated to see food go to waste.

She wandered through to the living room and found the remote control. The TV stood in one of the alcoves. She flicked to find Holly Willoughby interviewing someone about which are the best crystals to improve the aura in your home. Not a subject she thought she'd find useful anytime soon. All the other channels seemed to either have house buying or house renovating programmes on. Was that all the daytime audience were interested in, their bloody home? She switched off the TV in frustration and fished her phone out of her pocket and took it off silent mode. She'd put it onto silent the previous night. She never normally did that because she needed to know Harry could contact her if needed. But she figured as he was only on the floor below he'd come and wake her if there was some kind of emergency. And she'd got sick of hearing her phone ring only to see it was Richard trying to call her.

Five missed calls that morning from him. And on a Monday too. She was sure he had lectures on a Monday morning. Or perhaps he didn't. She had previously thought he was running some important tests every Saturday and yet he wasn't. He was shagging Alison. Or maybe sometimes going for a walk!

Her phone started to light up in her hand before she had a chance to switch the silent mode off. 'Go away,' she shouted until she saw it wasn't Richard. It was actually her friend, Vicky.

'Hi,' she said, putting the phone to her ear. 'I've been meaning to phone you.'

'Where the hell are you?' Vicky screeched down the line. 'What's happening? Richard's just been here looking for you. He wouldn't tell me why, just gave that dopey surprised look he has when he doesn't know what is going on.'

Kim nearly laughed. Richard did always have a shocked expression when he didn't understand something. Like he expected to understand everything. Even the very existence of *Love Island*. Like someone like him could ever understand the joy many people got from watching young, attractive people show they are just as insecure as the next person.

'Are you all right?' asked Vicky urgently.

'I'm fine, don't worry,' said Kim. 'Well, I'm alive at least. Put it that way. Did Richard tell you what happened?'

'No! He just banged on my door at 8.30 this morning. I mean, 8.30! And asked if you were here. I tried to explain that no, you don't live with me last time I looked, that you live with him in case he hadn't noticed, but he got all uppity, told me I wasn't helping with my sarcasm and walked off. He looked like shit as well, Kim. Two days of stubble and he was still wearing the clothes he wore for the party.'

Kim gasped. Had he not been home? Perhaps he hadn't taken his house keys with him next door. Perhaps he was locked out of his own house. She felt herself smile. That news might just make her day.

‘What’s going on, Kim?’ asked Vicky. ‘You been having an affair you haven’t told me about, you swine? Because that is what it looks like.’

‘No!’ said Kim. ‘Not me, him, Vicky. Richard’s been having an affair.’

‘No way!’ gasped Vicky. She paused. ‘He’s not the type. He’s not got it in him.’

‘He most certainly has,’ replied Kim. ‘And he’s got it in Alison next door, that’s who he’s got it in.’

‘No way. Anal Alison. Not her? No.’

‘Anal Alison?’

‘Yeah, Anal Alison. Always takes her shoes off at your door. Takes you on those cosy-wozy shopping trips to Manchester like she’s your best friend or something.’

‘You were jealous! You never said.’

‘Well, not now obviously if she’s ended up doing the dirty with your husband. But Richard and Alison? I can’t believe it. It just doesn’t make any sense. She looks like the type to iron her underwear with starch, that’s all I’m saying. Do you remember when she wanted me to do her a birthday cake for her mum’s seventieth birthday? Her words were and I quote, “I want it fairly plain; you know, subtle. No fondant figures or sparklers or feathers. Just quietly sophisticated.” Quietly fucking sophisticated! Has she seen my cakes? Quietly sophisticated would be an insult to one of my cakes, I can tell you. What a bitch. Can’t believe you were friends with her.’

‘Well, not anymore,’ replied Kim flatly.

‘Shit, Kim, I’m sorry. I’m bleating on about how she insulted my cakes and she stole your husband.’

Kim didn’t reply.

‘I have to ask how? I mean. She’s nothing on you. Seriously. How?’

‘Richard said it was at the graduation ball last year. Some crisis happened, she got upset, he got her drunk and the rest is

history.'

'It's been going on since last year?'

'Apparently. He told me he was running experiments in the lab at uni every Saturday but he wasn't, he was with her.'

'Oh my God, your speech the other night,' gasped Vicky. 'You were so ... so ...'

'Stupid,' finished Kim.

'Geoff asked me why I didn't do a speech like that for him when he turned fifty and I told him if he'd bothered to even buy me a card for my last five birthdays then he may have stood a chance.'

'It makes me want to weep just thinking about it,' said Kim. 'It's why I had to get away. Imagine facing everyone to tell them that your husband has been having an affair after doing that speech.'

'Yeah, see what you are saying. Total bastard though for ditching you straight after you said all that. He must really have a thing for her.'

'Thanks.'

'Sorry, mate. So where are you?'

'I'm in Nottingham with Harry. I was going to stay in a hotel but there's a spare room in his house so they've said I can have it for a few days, just to give me some space.'

'You are in a student house?'

'Yes.'

'Miss Houseproud of the Century.'

'Yes.'

'What's it like?'

Kim looked around at the bottles lined up on the shelves and through the door at the chaotic kitchen.

'Pretty much how you would imagine.'

'A shit-hole.'

‘Nicely put. But yes.’

‘Oh my, Kim. And the other housemates?’

‘Angus is a posh Scottish rugby boy who thinks he’s going to eat out for every meal and Sonny is clueless, utterly clueless. His mother gave me his medication to look after, including condoms.’

‘You are sharing with three men?’

‘Yes.’

‘How many bathrooms?’

Kim paused. ‘One.’

‘Oh my God!’ exclaimed Vicky. ‘That’s just cruelty. After all you’ve been through. I can smell that bathroom from here.’

‘You probably can,’ agreed Kim.

‘You, in a student house,’ said Vicky. ‘Didn’t see that coming.’

‘So far it seems to be draughty, disorganised and smelly. I’m sleeping under a duvet cover on the creakiest old spring bed you can imagine.’

‘Duvet cover?’

‘I only brought an overnight bag. Sonny has lent me his spare duvet cover. At least it’s better than being on my own in a hotel.’ Kim felt her shoulders sag and she felt like bursting into tears. How had her life come to this?

‘Do you want to come and stay here?’ said Vicky. ‘I mean, you’d have to share with Ellie but I’m sure she wouldn’t mind. Mind you, she does have her boyfriend staying most weekends which is pissing me off, so you’d be doing me a favour to be honest.’

‘No, it’s okay,’ replied Kim. ‘I couldn’t foist myself on poor Ellie. Or get in the middle of one of your family fallouts.’

‘Fair enough. But you need to let me help you. Can I bring you some stuff down?’ asked Vicky. ‘I could drive down at the weekend. Put a load of stuff in the back of the cake van.’

‘No, you can’t do that. In any case I’m not staying long, I don’t think. Not that I know where I’m going to go but I can’t stay here long at all.’

‘Stay until Friday and I’ll come down and we’ll work it out. We’ll make a plan,’ said Vicky. ‘I am your best friend in case you had forgotten.’

‘Alison was never my best friend, you know that, don’t you?’ said Kim.

‘I know. I’m just winding you up. Now send me your address and I’ll make sure I get all my deliveries done early.’

‘You really would do that?’

‘Of course. Miss the chance to see you in student digs? I don’t think so. We could make a night of it. Go out on the town.’

‘I’m not sure I’ll be up for that. And I have no clothes.’

‘Rubbish. It will cheer you up. I’ll bring you something to wear.’

Kim sighed. A night out with Vicky did seem like just what the doctor ordered. But she hadn’t anticipated staying here until after Friday. She’d have to check if that was all right with the others.

‘I’ll have to check if it’s okay to stay until then. Do you still have a key? It sounds like Richard can’t get in if he’s still wearing his clothes from Saturday.’

‘Looks like it. Yes, I do have a key. You don’t want me to give it to him, do you?’

‘Goodness no,’ replied Kim. ‘Let him figure out how to get into his own home.’

‘I’ll go when I’m sure he’s not there,’ replied Vicky. ‘But I’ll be sure to make it obvious someone has been. Leave a light on, close the curtains or something like that. Really freak him out. Want me to post one of Bailey’s turds through Alison’s letterbox whilst I’m at it?’

‘Tempting,’ agreed Kim, ‘but not really my style. If Richard hasn’t been in though, he won’t have seen your amazing cake that I smashed onto the kitchen floor. I’m sorry you will have to see that. You put so much effort in.’

‘It’s okay,’ said Vicky. ‘I’ll even clean it up for you.’

‘You shouldn’t have to do that.’

‘What are real friends for? I’ll clean it up and then I’ll post it piece by piece through Alison’s letterbox. Including the fondant figurine of Richard.’

‘I threw that at him.’

‘Nice one,’ replied Vicky. ‘Look, I’ve got to go. So sorry – I’m out delivering cakes. Are you going to be okay? Shall we talk later?’

‘Yeah, thanks. I’m just in shock really, I guess. I never saw it coming, Vicky. I had absolutely no idea. I feel like such an idiot.’

‘The last thing you are is an idiot, Kim,’ said Vicky.

‘He’s taken me for an idiot though, hasn’t he?’ replied Kim mournfully.

‘He’s the stupid one, Kim. Just you remember that. Falling for old frosty knickers next door over you. Now that’s stupid.’

Vicky swallowed. She felt like a prize idiot and no one else would ever convince her otherwise.

Nothing was capable of distracting her on the television so she wandered back into the kitchen. She had thought of going out to buy food, but even that felt like a daunting task. But she needed to do something. She couldn’t sit and mope all afternoon. She would normally have done at least five haircuts by now and would be sat having her packed lunch with one of her clients who would be asking her all about Richard’s party that she had been excitedly telling them all about for weeks. She should have been saying what a great time everyone had and how Richard had no idea and he really thought it was the best surprise ever and she was the best wife ever. Only she wasn’t sat crowing about the surprise party she’d thrown for

her husband. She was surrounded by unopened boxes worrying about whether it would be the right thing to unpack them all. Get stuck in. Sort the kitchen out.

In the end she decided that she really had no choice. If she didn't do something to occupy her spiralling out-of-control head she would actually scream. They'd all be grateful, wouldn't they? Glad they didn't have to do it? They'd be pleased, surely? And if she didn't do something she thought the hands on the clock might actually grind to a halt.

And sure enough the time did go faster, not quite fast enough but definitely faster. Applying herself to the conundrum of what to put where gave her some relief from her inner turmoil. She put what she assumed were Angus's pristine saucepans in the cupboard next to the oven, adding what she assumed were Sonny's well-used overspill collection from his mother. She did consider that Angus's complete dinner service from John Lewis was unlikely to be used in a student household and would have been more suited as a wedding present, but she washed every plate and every bowl before putting it in an overhead cupboard along with Sonny's slightly chipped offcuts. She must remember to tell Vicky to bring up the Ikea bag and maybe include some additions to it for Harry. She had already noted there were no mixing bowls and a lack of wooden spoons. She began a list on her phone to send to Vicky.

She stacked all the empty boxes in a corner when she had finished before clearing up last night's pizza party and wiping down all the surfaces. She surveyed her work. Much better. They could do with a kitchen roll holder and a decent set of knives and it would actually start to look like someone might cook in here. She made herself a cup of coffee then sat down at the table to complete her list of what Vicky should bring up with her on Friday.

Harry was first back.

He walked into the kitchen, dumped his bag on the floor and reached for the kettle.

She was itching to ask him if he'd had a good day. Ask him where he'd been, what he'd been up to. Had he been to campus? Had he got his timetable? Had he met anyone? So many questions but none that didn't sound like the overbearing mother who had gatecrashed his freshers' week.

'All right?' she eventually said when he was not forthcoming with conversation.

'Fine,' he grunted. He turned round and walked out.

What did that mean? Was he fine or was that a not really fine but I'm going to say fine because I don't want to talk about why I'm not fine? She knew those kind of 'fines'. She'd often used them. What now? Call him on the mobile and ask him how his day had been? That is what she would have done had she been at home. She'd have waited until after dinner for sure but she would have been on that phone firing out the questions and getting to the bottom of what 'fine' means. Did this 'fine' mean he's found his first day at uni totally overwhelming and scary and he had no idea what he was doing? Or did this 'fine' mean that the day had gone well but coming home to his mother in his student house share had put a dampener on it? She sighed, realising she'd already used up her question-asking token for the day so picked up her cold coffee and dragged herself upstairs past Harry's firmly closed door and shut herself in her room out of harm's way.

She must have gone to sleep again because the next thing she heard was shouting outside her door. It was dark. She really needed to stop this falling asleep during the day thing, it was so confusing.

'I'm not going with you dressed like that,' she heard Angus say. 'And you're not going dressed like that. You look stupid.'

'But you said to dress in green,' Sonny protested. 'You said last night that at a traffic light party you dressed in green to show that you are available, and that's what I am. I am very, *very* available.'

'I know I said green but I didn't mean *that* green. Most people put a sticker on their shirt, that's it. They're subtle about it.'

‘But I don’t want to be subtle. What if the sticker falls off, what then? I could get missed by someone. Or what if they are colour-blind? People are, you know. Many people mistake red for brown. At least this way you can pretty much guess I’m in green even if you are colour-blind.’

‘I think someone in space would be able to see you were dressed in green.’

She had to go and take a look. What on earth was Sonny wearing?

She opened the door to her room hoping to make it look as though she was popping out to the bathroom rather than coming to find out what the hell was going on. However, she never made it to the bathroom. She was stopped in her tracks by the sight of Sonny, dressed head to toe in a bright green leprechaun costume that consisted of a lurid green nylon suit and a lurid green top hat with a shamrock painted on it.

‘Oh,’ was all she could say, stepping back in surprise.

‘What do you think?’ said Sonny, turning towards her to display the full throttle of his green-ness. ‘I found a fancy dress shop and asked them for their most green outfit and this is what they came up with. No one is going to miss me at the traffic light party, are they?’

‘Err well no, definitely not. No doubt about that,’ agreed Kim. She noticed Harry at the bottom of the stairwell looking up nervously. He was dressed in jeans and a polo shirt which had a mustard-coloured collar which could have been interpreted as amber. She could tell he was self-conscious about that level of commitment to the traffic light theme and was probably horrified by Sonny’s all-in approach.

‘We can’t rock up with you dressed like that,’ said Angus. Angus was sporting a designer racing green shirt and dark jeans. To be fair, Sonny didn’t stand much of a chance next to him, so literally playing the joker card was maybe his only shot.

‘The Uber will be here in five minutes,’ said Harry, looking at his watch. He was jiggling his leg like he always did when

he was nervous.

‘You need to change,’ Angus told Sonny.

‘But I’ve worn it now,’ said Sonny, looking crestfallen. ‘I won’t be able to take it back. And ... and I just wanted to be clear, you know. That I’m most definitely available.’

‘Perhaps just wear the hat and then normal clothes?’ said Kim tentatively. ‘No one will miss that and you can always take it off if you get too many offers.’

Sonny stared at her and then at Angus.

‘Yes,’ said Angus. ‘Just go. Come on, hurry up, or else the cab won’t hang around.’

Sonny ran down the stairs, pushing past Harry.

Harry looked up at his mum and nodded. She read it as some kind of maybe approval of her intervention. He turned and headed downstairs. She might dare ask him tomorrow night how his day has been. Angus brushed past her. She fought the urge to shout after him that he had forgotten to turn his light off ... again.

She waited outside her door until she heard the front door slam and they were gone. She walked downstairs to the kitchen. Not a cupboard or a door had been opened. No cutlery or crockery used. Screwed up chip papers cluttered the kitchen table.

Chapter 7

The next morning Kim's eyes popped wide open. She was wide awake. She had no idea why. She had lain awake half the night listening to Angus woo a girl next door. He wooed her for so long with his Scottish lilt that she thought perhaps he had bored her to death. But he hadn't. There was silence for a few minutes and then the sounds of low moans coming from the room next door filled her disbelieving ears. Really? So these so-called traffic light parties actually worked? Angus had gone out dressed in a green shirt and returned, woman in hand, and now he was having sex! Kim lay there in despair. She grabbed her hoody off the floor and wrapped it round her head, turban-like. She didn't think she had ever been in a more awkward situation. Scratch that. Trying to leave home whilst watched by your errant husband, his bit on the side and the next door neighbour. That was right up there too.

She lay in her bed for the second morning as the sunlight streamed in, straining to hear the whereabouts of her fellow housemates. The wind blew against the window but that was all she could hear. What she really wanted to do was go and get herself a cup of coffee, in her pyjamas, and perhaps watch some mind-numbing telly whilst she avoided thinking about how to handle the rest of her life. As she'd lain in bed the night before with her hoody wrapped around her head her future seemed to open out before her like a vast gaping black hole. She realised she had spent the last twenty years moulding her life around her husband and her son. Her own life had taken a backseat. So who was she if she wasn't busy being Richard's wife and Harry's mum? She realised she had absolutely no idea.

She tiptoed down the stairs, listening carefully for signs of life as she did so. Harry's door was shut as usual, Sonny's was

open. She could see his leprechaun hat discarded on the floor. She hoped he'd had some luck at the traffic light party, albeit maybe not as much as Angus clearly had had.

Downstairs she made her way across the living room. Still no signs of life. Not a peep coming from the kitchen when she paused at the door, just to check. She pushed it open only to find that actually she wasn't alone in the house. Not at all. Sat at the kitchen table, tapping intently at a phone, was a girl. Very attractive and with long, wavy dark hair. She barely batted a fake eyelash when Kim entered the room.

'Hi,' she said, glancing up from her phone.

'Hi,' replied Kim. 'Err, mind if I make myself a cup of coffee?'

She shrugged. 'Course I don't.' Her fake fingernails tap-tap-tapped across the screen.

Kim flicked on the kettle and put a teaspoon of coffee in a mug.

'Sorry, I won't be long,' the girl said, not looking up.

'No problem,' replied Kim, leaning against the worktop. 'Take your time.' She suddenly felt very aware of the level of her drooping breasts. The girl wore a green velvet bodycon top displaying an impressive and fully supported amount of cleavage. She looked away.

'There, done,' she said, looking up and smiling whilst putting her phone face down on the table. 'Just texting my housemates to tell them where I am. I'm Isla by the way.' Kim detected a soft Scottish accent. Was this Angus's squeeze from last night? Perhaps he knew her from home. Perhaps it wasn't a one-night stand. Perhaps she should adjust her opinion of Angus and of Isla for that matter.

'I'm Kim,' she said, offering her hand to shake but quickly withdrawing it when she thought about where Isla's hand may have been.

'Angus said he had a live-in housekeeper but I didn't believe him,' said Isla, chuckling. 'I thought he was bullshitting me. Bloody hell, he really is loaded, isn't he?'

‘No, goodness no,’ said Kim. ‘No, I’m not the housekeeper. He was bullsh— lying to you. No, I’m ... well I’m ... one of his housemate’s mothers, actually.’

‘Riiight,’ said Isla looking more wary of this explanation than of the one where she had been employed by a student as a housekeeper.

‘I err, I’m staying for a few nights. Trouble at home. You know. Needed somewhere to go in a hurry. Not stopping long though. I’ll be gone in a few days.’

Isla nodded thoughtfully. ‘Abusive husband, right?’ she said, putting her hand on Kim’s arm. ‘I’m so sorry to hear that. My mum’s a therapist up in Edinburgh. She deals with that type of thing all the time. I can send you her details.’ She picked up her phone and the tapping started again. ‘Let me AirDrop you.’

‘No, no,’ said Kim. ‘He wasn’t abusive. I mean not in the violent sense. No, nothing like that. No, he just slept with my neighbour, that’s all.’

‘Oh,’ said Isla, looking almost disappointed and putting her phone back down. ‘Right. Do you want to talk about it? I mean I don’t want to pry or anything, only I’m doing a psychology degree and intend to become a child therapist so this is my kind of thing, you know. Why don’t you sit down?’ She motioned to the seat opposite her.

Kim shook her head. Sharing intimate details about the breakdown of her marriage with a stranger who she’d overheard shagging her housemate was definitely not her type of thing.

‘It’s okay,’ she smiled. ‘You know I have to ... erm ...’ the sad fact was she didn’t have to do anything.

‘Honestly, I have time,’ urged Isla. ‘Seriously, take a seat.’ She pulled the chair out for her. ‘I know these things can be painful. Heartbreaking. Tell me, is your neighbour male? Is that why you don’t want to talk about it? If that was the case then I promise you it’s more common than you think. My

mum is getting many more cases where couples are splitting up later in life like you, due to suppressed sexuality.'

Kim shook her head again. 'No,' she said. 'My neighbour was called Alison, very much female.' Kim felt like she had disappointed for the second time.

'Really,' said Isla. Like that was a surprise fact. For a split-second Kim wished her break-up was more dramatic, more contemporary. Her husband going off with the next door neighbour suddenly sounded so old-fashioned!

'I'd better go get dressed,' said Kim, pouring boiled water into her mug. 'It's been great meeting you.'

'Yeah, sure. I'll probably see you later on when Angus gets back,' replied Isla. 'We really connected. Maybe it's the Scottish thing. Us Scots need to stick together, you know.'

'Did you meet at the traffic light party then?'

'Oh no,' said Isla. 'Outside the chip shop up the road. I was with someone Angus has on Snapchat and they spotted each other on Snap Maps and we got chatting whilst he waited for his southern fried chicken and, well, you know. When you know, you know, right? I think he could be a keeper. His auntie knows my godmother. What are the odds? Meant to be, I reckon. Do you have his number? He forgot to leave it for me.'

And this woman was trying to give her advice on her relationship? Even Kim could tell that Angus was totally not a keeper. She stared at Isla – what to do? Did she stick up for this poor, deluded girl and stop her making a total fool of herself or did she stick up for Angus who was kindly allowing her to stay in the house?

'No, I don't have his number,' said Kim.

'Oh,' said Isla in an accusing manner as though Kim was deliberately trying to withhold it from her. 'Does he have a girlfriend?' she asked suddenly.

Now that really confused Kim. Surely Isla wouldn't have slept with him if she thought he had a girlfriend. Then again

there were plenty of people out there happy to sleep with other people's husbands and wives ... Alison!

'Erm ... I'm not sure. I think he was seeing someone back home. But I'm not sure it was serious. I mean, I don't know. You should ask him.'

Isla stared back at her, blinking, then said, 'He said he didn't have a girlfriend back home.'

Kim felt instantly sick. She didn't want to be in this conversation. 'Well, you know, he just mentioned someone in passing. They may not have been in a relationship. I really don't know. I mean I probably know even less about him than you do.'

She continued to blink her heavily mascaraed eyelashes then suddenly got up. 'I have a lecture,' she said. 'Forgot, it's Tuesday, thought it was Wednesday. Need to go. Bye.'

'Isn't it freshers' week?' Kim muttered after her. 'So, no lectures?' The door slammed behind her. She hoped she'd not landed Angus in it, but then again if she were in Isla's position she would so want to know exactly what Angus's relationship status was. Kim suspected that Angus actually was holding a massive flame for his girlfriend in Edinburgh. She could tell by the way he talked about her. And men who messed women around weren't exactly top of her list at the moment.

It took about half an hour for Kim to start missing Isla as a day empty of any activity or purpose stretched before her. God she was bored. If only she had said yes when Isla had offered to listen to her story of the breakdown of her marriage. That would have killed at least an hour. Who cared if she knew that Isla had nothing of value to contribute to her predicament? Isla had no life experience. She may think studying for a psychology degree qualified her to unscramble people's problems but Kim knew only too well that there was a lot more to it than that. Isla would no doubt have tried to tell her of theories and studies all designed to help people tackle how they live. Kim had always believed that the most valuable thing you can do for someone who is going through a difficult time is to listen. That's what most people wanted. Just to have

someone hear them. She'd learnt that through her hairdressing. The number of times one of her clients had sat in the chair and downloaded whilst she added the odd remark here and there. Nothing much, just the odd murmur of agreement or maybe even a suggestion of a different viewpoint. She prided herself on the fact that often her clients got up from their chair not only lighter of hair but also lighter in demeanour having shed their concerns and worries as she calmly went about her work.

She doubted very much if Isla had the capacity to just listen. She was far too sure of herself and eager to offer an opinion. Still, it would have been nice to talk to someone – anyone. Rather than sat scrolling through TV channels hoping that something would grab her attention and whisk her thoughts somewhere far away.

She was so bored that when her phone rang, she was grateful. Despite the fact it was Richard. Maybe it was time to talk. She certainly had the time.

'Hello,' she said.

'Oh, hi, you picked up, thank goodness. Why didn't you pick up before?'

'Because I didn't want to.'

'I've been worried about you.'

Kim was already weary of this.

'That's not my fault, is it? It's yours.'

'Where are you?'

'I'm at Harry's.'

'Staying at Harry's?'

'Yes.'

'In his room?'

'No! Of course not. There is a spare room.'

'How is Harry?'

'Why don't you ask him yourself?'

'He won't pick up his phone.'

Kim felt a small surge of triumph. She didn't want Harry to take sides but knowing he wasn't having clandestine talks with his father made her feel really good.

'Like I said. That's your fault, isn't it?'

Richard said nothing. She could hear him breathing heavily. She realised that she was the one who drove most of their conversations. Richard not being the most sociable of people, he relied heavily on Kim to do most of the heavy lifting when they were out and about. Well, she felt no need to drive the small talk anymore. She remained silent.

'We need to talk,' he said eventually.

'Fire away,' she replied.

She knew he would hate that. Richard reacted to the conversation; he didn't make it. She couldn't wait to hear his starter for ten.

'I need a key to get into the house,' he said. 'Mine are inside.'

She sighed. Riveting. So they were going to talk about his access issues to the house rather than his massive indiscretion with the next door neighbour.

'Mum has a set,' she replied.

'I can't go and ask your mum for a set.'

'Why?'

'Because she'll want to know why. Have you told her yet?'

'No.' To be honest she was putting it off. She needed to get her head in the right space first. She was pretty sure she knew how her mother would react. Kim was certain that her mother always thought she was unworthy of Richard. That their dramatically different backgrounds were always going to be a barrier to future happiness. She realised that she would eventually have to tell her that Richard had had an affair with the next door neighbour at which point her mother would ask her what the neighbour did for a living and then would give an 'I told you so' look when she told her Alison worked at the university.

Richard had fallen silent again as they faced this impasse.

Kim was determined not to fill the silence for him.

‘When are you coming back?’ he asked.

‘When I’m ready.’

‘I need to get my contacts prescription so I need to get into the house.’

‘So?’

‘Is there anyone else with a key apart from your mum?’

‘Don’t think so,’ Kim lied. Why wasn’t he asking how she was? Why was this blasted key to the house the only thing he cared about? Why was he showing absolutely zero concern for his wife of nearly twenty years? Her wedding day flashed through her mind. She could still picture the look on his face when she appeared at the top of the aisle in her local church. The church she had been to countless times for christenings and funerals and carol concerts and other people’s weddings. She stood there in the familiar surroundings gazing at this man who had come from afar and taken her heart. She remembered she thought he looked like he’d come home, so utterly contented was his smile. She’d asked him later and he’d said it felt exactly like that. That marrying her felt exactly like coming home.

The memory made tears swell in her eyes. She felt herself let out a sob. She didn’t want to cry on the phone to him but she couldn’t hold it back.

‘So will you post me your keys then?’ he asked, as she tried to control her emotions.

‘Oh fuck off,’ she cried, flinging her phone across the room. ‘Fuck off, fuck off, fuck off,’ she screamed, thumping her fists against the worn sofa before thrusting them into her eyes to try and stop the flow of tears. Twenty years of marriage and he couldn’t even ask how she was. If she needed anything. If she was coping okay. No concern whatsoever over the devastation he had wreaked.

She shouldn't have done it. But she felt so unbelievably alone and so unbelievably sad. She looked up at the vast array of bottles lined up in the alcove. She reached up and grabbed one, drained the last of the tea dregs out of her mug and sloshed red wine into it. It was the only way she thought she could get through the day.

Chapter 8

Kim had spent half an hour pacing the living room waiting for Vicky to arrive. The last three days had been the longest of her entire life. Devoid of anything other than keeping out of the way of her housemates and trying to free her mind of all the dark clouds that her new situation had engulfed her in. To her utter shame she had taken to stealing shots from the array of bottles that lined the shelves in the lounge. She took good care to distribute evenly which bottles she drank from so as to go unnoticed, which resulted in the mother of all daily hangovers, but she had to do something to blot out the pain and at present this felt like her only option.

She'd also snuck another one of the delicious bottles of wine that lined the top shelves. She promised herself that she would replace them as soon as she could face going into the city. She wasn't stealing them. She was just borrowing them, she told herself. For medicinal purposes.

Her extremely low profile in the house meant that no one had asked her when she was leaving but she knew her days were numbered. She couldn't possibly stay here much longer. She'd have a night out with Vicky and they would come up with a plan, and then she would get out of there. All would become clear after talking to Vicky, she prayed.

When Friday did finally arrive she was slightly concerned however that Vicky was most excited about living the 'student lifestyle' for the night, whatever she thought that was, rather than actually seeing her friend. Vicky had called twice during the day to ask what one wore for a night out in Nottingham. Kim was bewildered.

'What you would wear for a night out in Lancaster,' she replied.

‘I know, but, you know, we’ll be mixing with the student crowd. I don’t want my middle-aged dowdiness to stand out like a sore thumb.’

‘We won’t be mixing with the student crowd, I imagine,’ replied Kim. ‘I was thinking we would just go to Pizza Express.’

‘Right, right,’ muttered Vicky. ‘You’re right. Just because you are staying in a student house doesn’t mean you are a student. I guess I just thought, you know, we might pretend for the night we are students, just because we can and well it’s exciting, a new city, where no one knows you. We can do what we like without the local jungle drums beating out our bad behaviour.’

‘I’ve booked Pizza Express,’ said Kim firmly.

‘Okay, okay,’ said Vicky with a sigh. ‘Dough balls it is.’

The doorbell finally rang just after seven at night. Vicky hadn’t been able to get away any earlier because she’d had to deliver a twenty-first birthday cake in the shape of the Incredible Hulk to a party.

Kim ran to the door and flung it open. It had been less than a week since she had seen her friend but it felt like forever. So much had happened.

They embraced.

Vicky took a step back and said, ‘What in the name of the god that is Ryan Reynolds is this hellhole?’

‘Thanks,’ replied Kim. ‘I’m trying to ignore the rotting door and the windows that need painting. In fact, I’ve been quite successful. Turns out not going out at all is very effective for ignoring the fact that you’re living in the most neglected looking house on a street of neglected looking houses.’

Vicky looked up and down the road. ‘It’s not Bowland Crescent, is it?’ she said.

‘No,’ replied Kim.

‘However, Anal Alison does not live on this street.’

‘Exactly,’ replied Kim. ‘Exactly.’ She glanced at Vicky’s van parked behind her. Was that her enormous cheese plant from her kitchen sat on the front seat?

‘You brought Bjorn,’ said Kim, feeling tears inexplicably spring to her eyes. ‘Why on earth?’

‘I couldn’t leave Bjorn to fend for himself, could I?’ said Vicky, opening the van door. ‘That would be wrong. And a night out with you is not complete until we have danced around the kitchen with Bjorn to “The Winner Takes It All”. Besides, I thought it would really screw with Richard to see that he was missing.’ She lifted the plant off the seat and handed it to Kim.

It made Kim very happy. She had spent many a drunken night dancing with Vicky in her kitchen to Abba, Richard refusing to join them. So much so that Kim often picked up the plant to be her partner which had been called Bjorn after the member of the greatest pop band of all time.

‘I don’t know where we will put him, mind,’ said Kim, wiping a tear from her eye. ‘There’s hardly room to swing a cat never mind dance with a cheese plant.’

‘Shall we get unloaded?’ said Vicky, looking at her watch. ‘I sort of did a smash and grab. I so didn’t want Richard to spot me and demand the keys. So I’ve no idea if I’ve got what you said you wanted for the kitchen for Harry.’

She flung open the door to the back of the van which was crammed with what looked like everything but the kitchen sink.

‘You bought the mop bucket?’ questioned Kim, still clutching Bjorn.

‘Well,’ shrugged Vicky. ‘I thought maybe three blokes might be in need of a mop.’

‘I guess so,’ said Kim, pulling a face. ‘Right, let’s get unloaded.’

By the time they had finished there was kitchen paraphernalia all over the table and you couldn’t see Kim’s bed for the three-foot high pile of clothes.

‘Why on earth have you brought all these clothes?’ she asked.

‘I thought you’d want a choice of what to wear tonight,’ Vicky said. She turned to look at the wardrobe. ‘I have never seen such a small wardrobe,’ she said. ‘It’s like they bought it from a doll’s house or something.’

‘Why have you brought my Christmas party dresses?’ asked Kim, holding up a short red sequinned number.

Vicky turned to look. ‘I guess I thought that you’d need, you know, a pulling outfit.’

Kim shook her head as she picked up another short, backless cocktail dress.

‘I brought that one because you look as sexy as hell in that. I mean, even my Geoff noticed and you know he’s not normally tuned into these things. Pamela Anderson could walk by him walking the dog and he’d bend over and pat the dog.’

‘I wore this one to Richard’s Christmas drinks party last year,’ said Kim. ‘He must have already been sleeping with Alison. What a waste. Bet he didn’t even notice what I was wearing.’

‘Of course he bloody did,’ said Vicky. ‘He was besotted with you; anyone could see that. It’s just Anal Alison ... I don’t know ... Anal Alison perhaps does anal and he fell for it. Dozy twat.’

Kim shook her head, ignoring Vicky. ‘It’s obvious, isn’t it? Why he left me. He can talk to her, she’s smarter than me. I was always punching above my weight. Always. This was bound to happen. He was always going to find someone cleverer than me.’

‘Bullshit,’ replied Vicky. ‘You are the smartest cookie I know. So, you may not have gone to university but who gives a damn about that? That doesn’t prove anything. You are as smart as anyone I have ever met.’

‘So are you saying he’s gone to Alison for the sex?’ asked Kim.

‘Course he has. It’s always about the sex with blokes. Such dickheads.’

‘Not sure that makes me feel any better,’ replied Kim.

Vicky got up and put her arms around her. ‘You are an amazing human being. You are not to blame here. You did nothing wrong; do you hear? It’s Richard who is the dickhead and not you. Now are you going to put some glad rags on and are we going to hit this town or are we going to stand here talking about Richard?’

‘We need to put all the kitchen stuff away first,’ said Kim, looking mournfully down at the heap on the bed. ‘The boys can’t come home to find a slow cooker and a breadmaker in the middle of the floor. They’ll think ... they’ll think aliens have infiltrated the building and left strange telepathic equipment in their house share. We’ll get back and they’ll be trying to tune it in to an alien frequency. Do you want to break it to them that actually all it can do is make a healthy soup?’

‘Sod that,’ said Vicky. ‘We’ll be back before them, won’t we? We’ll clear the decks then. I’ve been looking forward to a night out all week. Come on, chop, chop, get that dress on.’ She nodded at the short black backless dress in her hands.

‘Are you kidding me? We’re going to Pizza Express not ... not ... somewhere posh or anything.’

‘Aaah, but who knows where we might end up in this brave new world of Nottingham? Who knows who we might meet? Come on, no one knows us, let’s go for it. You need to let loose, young lady, and I think that is exactly the right dress to do it in.’

Kim looked at it dubiously. She knew she needed excessive shapewear to fit into that dress, which sounded like the opposite of letting loose. But then she remembered how she felt when she last wore it. She felt amazing. And she could do with a bit of that if she was honest. It had been a while.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘But only if you dress up too. There is no way I’m going out in that and you in jeans.’

‘Well,’ said Vicky. ‘Funny you should say that. I just so happen to have that frock I wore to Cassie’s evening do last year. You remember the black lace number.’

‘Oh yes. I know the one you mean. And you packed that? Just in case you managed to persuade me that we were going out, out?’

‘Whatever happened, missy, I knew that tonight we would be going out, out!’

‘We cannot go in there dressed like this!’ declared Kim, as they peered into the window of the well-known pizza restaurant.

Vicky didn’t answer. She was looking up and down the street, anywhere but inside the pizza place. Kim peered inside again, desperately searching for some reassurance that a backless cocktail dress would blend in with the families with young children colouring in the menu and the spattering of couples staring awkwardly around, clearly on first dates.

‘There’s a man over there wearing socks and sandals,’ pointed out Kim. ‘Six-inch heels and socks with sandals do not go into the same room together. I think we should go home and change.’

‘No,’ declared Vicky. ‘We can’t go all the way back now. Why don’t we go in there instead?’ She pointed at what looked like a wine bar on the opposite side of the street.

‘But I’ve booked a table,’ said Kim.

‘So, unbook it.’

‘But we are already late for it. What with you insisting on me doing your hair.’

‘This dress needed an updo,’ replied Vicky.

‘This night did not need that dress or that hair,’ replied Kim. ‘I don’t quite know how this has happened. All I wanted was an American Hot; no one eats an American Hot with an updo.’

Vicky reached out and grabbed her friend’s hand and frogmarched her over the road, towards the wine bar. Kim halted outside the door.

‘I’ve booked Pizza Express,’ she cried.

‘Pizza Express will survive and you’ll survive without an American Hot. We’ll get a drink and then we’ll cancel the booking online. Now come on. We’ve wasted enough time.’

They tottered into the bar to be met by a very smiley waitress dressed all in black.

‘Welcome to One More Wine Bar,’ she said. ‘Have you been before?’

‘No,’ replied Vicky. ‘We haven’t been anywhere before.’

‘Great, no problem. So, this is a self-service wine bar. It’s really easy. I give you this card and you put it into any of the five vending machines located around the bar and you pick your wine. When you are ready to leave just go to the till and you can settle your bill. Can I find you a table, ladies? There’s one just come free over there.’

The very smiley girl indicated a table for two in the window as she handed over two plastic cards. Kim and Vicky were sitting down somewhat bewildered before they knew it.

‘Self-service wine,’ hissed Vicky. ‘Tell me I have died and gone to heaven. I LOVE Nottingham already.’

Kim looked over at her friend. She was getting far more enjoyment out of the consequences of the collapse of her marriage than was strictly decent. Still, trust Vicky to find an opportunity for a good time out of any circumstance!

‘So, what do you think we do?’ whispered Vicky. ‘Go up individually, or together, or do we just leave our bags on our seats? This is just like buffet breakfast at the Premier Inn. The dilemma of quite how to navigate a veritable wine buffet and not miss out on anything.’

‘There’s a board there, look,’ said Kim, pointing to a chalkboard on the wall listing all the wines. ‘I’ll have the South African Chardonnay,’ she said. ‘You go and get them. I know you are dying to play with the wine vending machine.’

‘You see, those three words sound so right together,’ said Vicky. ‘It’s like it should be a well-known phrase or saying,

“wine vending machine”. It’s almost poetry.’ She stood up and strode over to the nearest machine, grabbing two glasses from the rack above and studying the instructions.

Kim surveyed her surroundings. She felt totally like a fish out of water. Maybe that was because she was wearing the stupid dress that Vicky had told her to wear, or the fact that rather than being in good old familiar Pizza Express munching on dough balls they were in some concept bar where you served yourself £8 per glass wine. Or was it that just a week ago she would have just finished a full day at work and would be most likely sat in the kitchen-diner drinking wine with her husband, talking through their days? Her chat would be mostly about people, the lovely ones, the tricky ones, their individual trials and tribulations. Then Richard would tell her all his people stuff, never teaching stuff, she didn’t understand that of course, but she did understand people. It made her feel actually quite smart when he poured out his issues and she could offer advice. Like the time she told him to just ask his colleague why she always refused to work with him on research papers rather than fester about it. She even told him how and when to ask so she wouldn’t feel threatened. It turned out that she disagreed about one of the principles of his paper so Kim told him to take her for a coffee and ask her why. He came back delighted with her advice saying he’d had the best, most stimulating discussion he had ever had with another lecturer and they had ended up agreeing to start a research project the following year.

It was one of her favourite times with her husband. Friday nights, just chatting and drinking wine. But she wasn’t at home talking to her husband now. She was here, surrounded by happy couples, waiting for her friend to calm down from the excitement of being out in a new city, dressed like she was going on to some fancy celebration somewhere. Except she wasn’t. She was already lost on this night out. She had no idea who she was or where she was or why she was here.

Vicky plonked a large glass of wine in front of her.

‘How cool is that? Why has no one done this before?’ she demanded, sitting herself down. ‘No queue, you pick what size

glass you want and it's proper wine. You can see the bottles inside the machine. It's not coming out of some big vat out of the cellar or anything. Or a wine box. Real bottles of wine, Kim! God, this might be the best night of my life. So glad I came. Cheers.'

She held her glass up and Kim reciprocated. 'Makes splitting up with my husband so worthwhile, hey?' she said.

'Oh Kim. No! That's not what I meant. I mean, I wish I was anywhere but here with you six days after you discovered your husband was having an affair with the next door neighbour. Anywhere. But if I had to pick a place to be six days after you discovered your husband having an affair with your next door neighbour then it would be at a wine buffet. This is perfect.'

Normally Kim loved Vicky's ability to look on the bright side of absolutely everything and normally she was pretty good at it herself, but somehow even wine vending machines were not putting a positive spin on her day.

'Do you want me to ask you how you are feeling?' asked Vicky, putting a sympathetic look on.

Kim nodded. But was fearful of her answer.

'How are you feeling?' asked Vicky.

Kim swallowed. 'I can't describe it,' she muttered. 'It's like an out of body experience. I can't actually believe this is happening to me. It's like I'm watching someone else go through all this. Like a TV show or something and at some point, it's going to end, and I'll switch it off and it will all be back to normal.'

For the first time since she arrived, Kim saw the excitement die in Vicky's eyes to be replaced by concern. 'I can't imagine what it must feel like, mate. I mean, I know I moan about Geoff and all that but one thing I do know is that he's solid. We're solid. Neither of us are perfect by any means but I just know that we wouldn't let each other down. Sorry, not sure that's helpful.'

'I thought that about me and Richard,' sighed Kim. 'Thought that the last thing we would ever do would be to

betray one another.’ She looked up at Vicky. ‘Sorry. Perhaps I shouldn’t have said that.’

Vicky shrugged. ‘You say whatever you need to say, Kim.’

‘I keep going over and over it in my head. What happened? Where did I go wrong? What didn’t I see? Why didn’t I spot that he was up to something? I’m normally really good at that type of thing. You know, I can tell if one of my clients is going through it, or that something is wrong, often in the way they sit or a look on their face. And then I start cutting their hair and I’m normally right. I only have to ask how they are and it all comes pouring out. Why didn’t I see it with Richard, Vicky? I just can’t work it out.’

‘Perhaps because you didn’t want to see it. You had too much to lose. You probably saw it and chose to ignore it; the thought of something being off was too scary to face up to.’

‘Maybe,’ nodded Kim. ‘I mean, I do remember thinking this non-existent research project was preoccupying him. It was making him a bit distant. Stressing him out.’

‘There you go. You saw the signs. Totally logical to think it was the research project. That’s not your fault.’

‘I never said anything because, well, I was afraid he’d come up with some scientific jargon and I wouldn’t understand and then I wouldn’t be being very helpful. I’m pretty good when he’s got a problem with colleagues or students but I’ve learnt to steer clear if it seems like it’s anything to do with his actual subject.’

‘So, you didn’t ask what was bothering him?’

‘No. I never asked.’

‘Because you were scared you wouldn’t understand the problem?’

‘Correct,’ replied Kim. ‘Wish I’d have said something now. I should take my own advice sometimes, shouldn’t I?’

Vicky smiled at her. ‘The one where you always say, “It’s good to talk.”’

Kim blew her cheeks out. She felt tears threaten yet again. It was something she always told her clients when they apologised for offloading their woes. She didn't mind, she told them. 'It's good to talk,' she always said. Her clients who were over forty smiled in recognition at the famous slogan from the telephone ads of the mid-nineties. Those under forty just nodded, oblivious to the fact that it was possibly Oscar-nominated Bob Hoskins' most famous line. She looked at her friend and realised that it really was good to talk. She was so used to listening to other people share their problems with her that she had forgotten that it was perfectly acceptable to share her own worries with others. Maybe she should have said to Richard that she was worried about how preoccupied he was. That she felt something was wrong.

After all, it was good to talk.

'I feel like such an idiot,' she told Vicky. 'I feel an idiot for not spotting it. For not seeing something. I mean, he must have been unhappy to go off with Alison in the first place, mustn't he? If he was happy then it wouldn't have happened, would it? Why didn't I spot that he wasn't happy in the first place?'

'You can't blame yourself for that. He should have said something if he wasn't happy. Talked to you rather than dick about with someone else.'

'I suppose,' said Kim reluctantly. 'But I feel such a fool for thinking it was all great. His party. Oh my God, I can't even think about what a fool I made of myself there. In front of everyone saying basically how flipping amazing our marriage was.'

'You didn't make a fool of yourself,' said Vicky, reaching over and putting a hand on her wrist. 'He made a fool of you.'

Kim paused and stared at her friend. Okay, so maybe it was good to talk but perhaps not so good to talk to Vicky. She did have a habit of being just a bit too blunt.

'It's no better, is it?' she pointed out. 'Whether I made a fool out of me or he did, I'm still a fool at the end of the day. The biggest fool that there could ever be. And with Alison. Our neighbour. I can't imagine what everyone will say.' She

hid her face in her hands. ‘I don’t think I can ever go back,’ she said through her fingers. I just can’t.’ Kim let her shoulders slump and felt the tears start to show their face. ‘What am I going to do?’ she said, taking her hands away. ‘I’m homeless. I’ve lost everything.’

Vicky looked at her, bewildered. ‘Christ, I’m so shit at this,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry. You know me. I’m there for you come rain or shine, whatever, but the only therapy I’m any good at is of the laughter variety. You put me in a serious situation and I screw it up. I say the wrong thing. Not like you. You are genius at it. You always say the right thing when I need picking up. You need a “you” right at this very moment and not a “me”. “Me” is rubbish at this.’

Kim couldn’t help but smile. And she couldn’t argue. Vicky was her good time girl. She had only one mode of lifting the spirits and that was through having fun, not talking it out. Kim would have to seek someone else to offload to. She took a tissue out of her bag and blew her nose. ‘Tell you what,’ she said. ‘You’re better at advice and sympathy when you are drunk ...’

‘You are so right,’ said Vicky, slapping her forehead. ‘I never thought of that. I once told Mr Adler, the grumpy old git from down our street, that he should stick his clapped-out wreck of an old banger where the sun don’t shine when I was hammered. Do you know, the very next day he put it away in his garage. Even my insults get passed as advice when I’m pissed.’

‘I wouldn’t bank on it,’ said Kim. ‘But I’ll tell you what, let’s try this talking thing again later after a few more of these. We might be able to work out how I avoid going home ever again by then.’

‘Most definitely,’ said Vicky. ‘Cross my heart and hope to die,’ she said solemnly. ‘Now what do you want to try next?’ she asked, getting up.

‘Oh no,’ said Kim, indicating for her to sit down. ‘I think you’ll find it’s my turn to experience the wonders of vending machine wine. Step away from the machine. I’m going in.’

Vending machine wine proved to be a disaster to two women out on the town, one trying to drown her sorrows and one trying to have the time of her life. After five large glasses in under an hour there were some severe impediments to speech and mobility.

‘I cannot drink any more,’ said Kim. ‘Things are moving in ways they shouldn’t including my stomach and that wine glass. I think we had better head back soon.’

‘Good idea,’ said Vicky, clapping her hands together. ‘I cannot wait to meet your housemates.’

‘No,’ replied Kim, shaking her head. ‘I’ve been keeping a very low profile in the house. Trying to stay out of their way. I’ve not even told them that you are coming or staying over. I’m assuming we’ll get back before them tonight so we’ll sneak in, go to bed and you can go in the morning and they will be none the wiser. Okay?’

‘Right you are,’ said Vicky, saluting. ‘I shall be totally incognito. They will never know that I’m there.’

Kim and Vicky’s arrival back at the house had not gone to plan. They’d left the wine bar when they realised that they were spending more time going to the toilet than drinking wine. A sure sign that they were drunk. They got to their feet and hobbled on their high heels over to pay the very smiley waitress who now was not so smiley with them, which might be something to do with the fact that within the last half hour Vicky had burst into song and done a passable rendition of Ed Sheeran’s ‘Lego House’. She’d been trying to cheer Kim up with its relevant lyrics of picking up the pieces and Kim had thought it funny but clearly the very smiley waitress did not. She took the charge cards for the wine off them and delivered the cost of their evening with an icy smile.

‘Blimey,’ mumbled Vicky, staggering back slightly. ‘Turns out serving your own wine is mighty expensive. Good job we don’t have to pay ourselves a tip!’ She roared with laughter at her own joke. The now very unsmiley waitress clearly did not find it funny at all.

Having settled their hefty bill and staggered outside, they paused to consider their next move.

‘I could murder a pizza now,’ said Vicky.

‘We can’t go into Pizza Express dressed like this *and* drunk,’ said Kim, taking her turn to stagger back on her heels. ‘Wrong on so many levels. In any case it’s shut, look.’

‘What I would do for a dough ball, right now,’ said Vicky, pressing her nose against the window like some poor starving orphan. ‘Please sir, can I have some more dough balls?’

‘Taxi,’ shouted Kim, raising her arm as she saw a cab approaching.

‘I can’t leave without doughballs,’ moaned Vicky.

‘There’s a chippy at the end of my road. We’ll get some food there and take it back.’

‘A chippy?’ asked Vicky. ‘Do they do gravy or are we too far south?’

‘I’ve no idea,’ said Kim. ‘The boys have been but I never have. This is the Midlands; I think they’ll have gravy in a chippy.’

Vicky eased herself into the cab. ‘I hope you are aware this is a very high-risk strategy,’ announced Vicky as Kim got in the other side. ‘We are heading to an unknown chippy with unknown gravy facilities.’

‘Come on,’ said Kim. ‘Let’s live a little; you said you wanted to try something new whilst you were here. Well chips without gravy could be it.’

‘I love you,’ Vicky told the man behind the chip counter when he confirmed that they did indeed do chips and gravy. ‘I’ve never met you before, but I can tell you that right at this very moment, you are the love of my life.’

‘She’s drunk,’ Kim confirmed to the man.

‘We’re drunk,’ said Vicky. ‘Don’t you go pinning it all on me. We got caught out by a dodgy bar, Max,’ she informed the man behind the counter after she had scrutinised his name tag.

‘One where you could serve yourself. It’s a total hazard. It really should not be allowed.’

The man said nothing, just shovelled hot steaming chips into two trays and poured rich dark gravy on them.

‘It’s the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my life,’ announced Vicky when he handed them over.

‘She’s easily pleased,’ said Max with a smile. ‘I’m the love of her life and my chips are the most beautiful thing she has ever seen.’

‘I hate to burst your bubble but she says that to all the chippies,’ said Kim.

Max nodded. ‘Story of my life,’ he said, handing over a tray of chips to Kim who promptly staggered back on her heels and dropped all her chips and gravy on the floor.

‘Oh my God,’ she gasped. ‘Oh, I’m so sorry.’ She couldn’t believe it. She glanced back up at Max. His smile had vanished to be replaced by a resigned look as though he’d seen this scene a hundred times already. He disappeared towards the back of the shop and returned quickly with a long-handled dustpan and brush.

‘Let me do it,’ said Kim, totally mortified.

‘No, really. It’s okay,’ said Max. He shook his head. ‘It’s normally the students chucking food all over the floor, not women ...’

‘Of a certain age?’ asked Vicky.

‘I wasn’t going to say that,’ said Max. ‘I was going to say women dressed up like you.’

Kim watched in horror, the gravy oozing all over the floor.

‘We’ve been out celebrating the end of Kim’s marriage,’ announced Vicky.

Max looked up, surprised. ‘Well always a great thing to celebrate, the end of a marriage,’ he said sharply. He leaned the dustpan and brush against the window and returned to his spot behind the counter. ‘That’s £4.80, please,’ he said holding

out his hand and not making eye contact. Clearly chucking food all over the floor hadn't been the thing to upset him, but celebrating the end of a marriage was.

'I'll pay for another tray of chips,' Kim said. She was starving and she needed something to soak up the alcohol.

Max stared at her before reluctantly serving her some more chips. 'You'll keep hold of them this time, will you?' he asked, handing them over.

'Promise,' she agreed. *What a grumpy git*, she thought.

They stumbled home, munching on hot chips until they got to the front door. Kim reiterated her early warning that they were to be incognito and should be quiet even though she was sure that the rest of her housemates wouldn't be in.

They giggled their way down the hall and pushed open the living room door.

There was Angus, Sonny, Harry, and another girl sitting in the room, a couple of bottles of wine were open on the coffee table and it looked like they were playing computer games on the TV.

'Oh, shit,' said Vicky, taken totally by surprise. 'I'm not supposed to be here.' She stumbled, grabbing hold of the door frame, and dropped her chips in Angus's lap who was sitting right next to the door.

'What the hell?' he said, leaping up. Unfortunately, he was wearing light coloured chinos and the gravy instantly made unseemly marks on his groin. 'Who the hell are you?'

'Vicky!' said Harry, also getting up and looking flustered. 'What are you doing here? Mum, what's going on?'

'You look amazing, Kim,' said Sonny from his seat on the floor. 'Killer dress or what?'

'See, I told you it was the right dress to go out in,' said Vicky, trying to brush chips off Angus's groin.

'Leave me alone, woman,' said Angus, leaping back.

'Oh my God,' said Kim. 'I'm so sorry. I err, we err ...'

‘We thought you’d be out?’ said Vicky. ‘It’s before midnight. What kind of students are you?’

‘Shush, Vicky,’ said Kim. ‘Everyone, this is Vicky, my friend, she’s just popped down to see me. We only meant to go to Pizza Express,’ she turned to tell Harry. ‘Honest, but then we got dressed up and it seemed a shame to waste it so we ended up in this wine bar and ...’

‘It wasn’t our fault,’ said Vicky. ‘You could serve yourself. How unbelievably brilliant is that?’

‘Really?’ said Sonny to Vicky, his eyes wide.

‘Really,’ said Vicky. ‘Is this Sonny?’ she asked Kim. Kim nodded. ‘I can tell from your description. Sonny, you would love it,’ she told him. ‘You just walk up to a machine and put a card in and it gives you *wine*.’

‘That sounds amazing,’ declared Sonny. ‘When can we go there?’ he said, looking round at his housemates.

‘I’ll take you,’ said Vicky.

‘Would you?’ asked Sonny, his eyes even wider. ‘You look cracking too, I have to say. I’m Sonny by the way. Let’s be friends,’ he said sticking his hand out.

‘No, no, no,’ said Kim, reaching out to grab Vicky’s arm. ‘There’s nothing to see guys, honestly. We’ll be out of your way in no time. We’ll just get a cup of tea. Slide back through here as quiet as mice, you won’t even know we’ve been here. Come on, Vicky.’

‘Coming,’ said Vicky. ‘Mustn’t forget to bring Bjorn in from the yard. Do you remember, you told me to remind you. He must have dried out by now.’

‘Who’s Bjorn?’ asked Sonny, looking around bewildered. ‘You’ve left someone in the yard all night?’

Vicky laughed. ‘No, he’s a plant. Well, he’s more than a plant. He’s our late-night dance partner actually. Thought he could keep Kim company whilst she’s here. Don’t worry, he takes no looking after, he just got a bit of a dirty bottom in my van and so we thought we’d leave him outside to dry out.’

‘Enough of Bjorn,’ said Kim, shaking her head at Vicky. She needed to shut her friend up and fast, she was making them look like complete lunatics. She started to pull her towards the kitchen.

‘Mum, what are you wearing?’ exclaimed Harry as she brushed past him.

She turned back and stared. ‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s ... it’s ... got a bit missing.’

‘It’s backless,’ said Sonny, hunching his shoulders as though Harry was an idiot. ‘Do you not watch the awards shows? Standard issue. If I ever won an Oscar and I was married then I would like my wife to wear a backless dress. You know, if she wanted to. I wouldn’t make her or anything. But backless is the way to go. Especially if you have won an award.’

Everyone in the room stared at Sonny.

‘You think about these things?’ asked Angus.

‘Yes,’ nodded Sonny enthusiastically. ‘Don’t you?’

‘Is this your mum?’ said the girl, getting up and standing behind Harry.

Kim watched with horror as her son went bright red.

‘Yes,’ he muttered. ‘Suki, Mum, Mum, Suki.’

Kim tried to stand up straight and not wobble on her heels. What she would do to kick them off and just collapse. But she needed to focus despite the fact that things were swimming around her again. This was possibly her son’s first girlfriend she was being introduced to. This could be her future daughter-in-law for all she knew. She pulled down the hem of her dress then straightened up. Kim towered over Suki who was petite with dark hair streaked through with a deep red. If she had coloured it herself, she had done a decent job, Kim thought. She wore ripped black jeans and heavy boots and a hoody with a Japanese style print on the front. She had four earrings in each ear. She was clearly a smart, intelligent woman, who had a very clear idea of her own androgynous

style. Kim immediately felt uncomfortable in her short, backless dress which conformed to every stereotype of an ancient view of femininity. She couldn't imagine Suki wearing anything that so blatantly sexualised women. Suki would think she was a tart who deserved to lose her husband. That's what this young, intelligent, enlightened woman would think. She would take one look at her in her sad, middle-aged uniform of mantrap clothing and write her off immediately.

'Hello,' she said, holding her hand out to Suki. 'I'm so sorry you are not meeting me at my best. I don't normally go out dressed like this, well I do, but not for just a casual Friday night out, but you see, well Vicky, this is Vicky by the way, my friend. Well, she drove all the way from Lancaster and she told me to wear this dress because she said I looked hot in it. And well, I'm just a bit vulnerable at the moment. I don't know if Harry explained but me and his father are going through a difficult time and so it seemed kind of a good idea at the time to wear something that made me feel good ... but I'm sorry about that. I'll wear jeans next time. I have some just like yours. And I have a hoody. I'll go out like that next time. I promise. Sorry, Harry,' she said finally looking at him as she watched Suki grow more and more uncomfortable as Kim came out with incomprehensible drivel. She had no idea what she was apologising for. Actually, she did. She was apologising for everything. Especially for standing here at this very moment in the front room of his student house share, very drunk, in a short backless dress, making a total fool of herself in front of his possible girlfriend. Really life could not be any worse.

And then it was.

She felt it begin but unfortunately, she didn't have enough warning. She felt saliva fill her mouth and her stomach felt strange but she was too drunk to connect the dots. What was this a sign of? Oh yes, of course. She was about to throw up. She had an inexplicable flash back to the chip shop and the gravy oozing all over the floor and that was all it took to cause her stomach to spasm and for her to throw up all over Angus's shoes.

Chapter 9

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Kim twelve hours later. ‘I really am. I’m just such a mess at the moment.’

She was sat at the kitchen table with Harry, Angus and Sonny opposite her, the evidence laid out between them.

A carrier bag filled with scrunched up newspaper which she could only assume from the smell was her cleaned up sick from the night before.

Two empty bottles of wine.

Two empty pizza boxes.

One half drunk cup of coffee.

An empty carton of milk.

Several bottles of nearly finished spirits.

‘Shall we start with the empty wine bottles found in the recycling?’ asked Angus.

‘At least she put them in the recycling,’ said Sonny. ‘That was the right thing to do, wasn’t it?’

‘They were not hers to dispose of either down her neck or in the recycling,’ said Angus.

‘I can explain,’ said Kim. ‘Well, I can try. It’s just that Richard, I mean your dad, I mean Harry’s dad, my husband ...’

‘The one shagging the next door neighbour?’ pointed out Sonny.

‘Yes, that’s him, well, he rang a few days ago and I was bored so I answered and then it transpired that he hadn’t rung to see how I was, he rang because he can’t get in the house and the bastard, sorry Harry, but he wanted me to post my keys

and that tipped me over the edge and so I couldn't help myself and I reached for the alcohol ...'

'Couldn't you have reached for the alcohol from the shop on the corner rather than taking it from my stash?' demanded Angus.

'I couldn't face going out. I'll replace it, I promise I will. I always meant to. I'm so sorry, Angus.'

'You're going to drive to the Dordogne, are you, to my dad's mate's vineyard?' asked Angus.

'You know someone who owns a vineyard?' asked Sonny in awe.

'My godfather actually,' replied Angus.

'Wow,' said Sonny, looking at Angus as though he'd just found out he was related to Prince William.

'But that's irrelevant,' said Angus, brushing Sonny's admiring glances to one side. 'The fact remains that you have, in the last few days, stolen my wine, my coffee and my cold pizza which I fully intended to have as a mid-afternoon snack.'

'She had mine as well,' added Harry, miserably looking at the floor.

'You even stole your son's food,' confirmed Angus. 'What do you have to say for yourself?'

'You had just left it here. It wasn't in the fridge or anything. I assumed it would have been chucked away,' pleaded Kim.

'Well, you assumed wrong,' replied Angus.

'You had to eat, didn't you, Kim?' said Sonny. 'Especially after all that wine you drank. It's totally understandable really.'

'Thank you,' she muttered, gratefully. 'I put all the kitchen stuff away the other day,' she pointed out hopefully. 'In case you hadn't noticed.'

'Did you?' the three of them said, looking around. Clearly none of them had spotted it at all. Clearly none of them had needed any cooking utensils either, which was frightening, but perhaps it wasn't the time to point out that they should be

considering their nutritional needs better since recently she only seemed to have consumed alcohol, pizza and chips and gravy.

‘I’m sorry your husband was mean to you on the phone,’ said Sonny, putting his hand on his shoulder.

Kim nodded her thanks.

‘But I think it’s time you went now,’ cut in Angus, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms. ‘I mean, stealing our food and drink is one thing. I expected to maybe have to label my own milk perhaps when I moved into a student house but I never expected to need to lock up my wine store so my housemate’s mum can’t steal it.’

‘Oh God, I’m so sorry,’ said Harry, putting his head in his hands.

‘It’s not your fault, mate,’ said Angus to Harry. ‘None of us can help the parents we have. Believe me, I know.’

‘I’ve screwed up,’ said Kim. ‘I can see that. All I can say is how sorry I am.’

‘And,’ continued Angus. ‘What the hell did you say to ... to ... that girl who was here the other morning?’

Kim wracked her brains. ‘What girl?’

‘Scottish girl. Can’t remember her name,’ said Angus.

‘Do you mean Isla?’ she asked fearfully.

‘Yes, that’s it. She collared me on campus and informed me never to contact her again because she knew all about the fact that I had a serious girlfriend. Not that I was ever intending to contact her again but still, clearly someone had been shit stirring.’

‘You brought Isla back here from the traffic light party?’ asked Sonny agog.

‘Yep. Well actually from outside the chip shop,’ said Angus.

‘Do you ... did you ...’ asked Sonny.

Angus nodded.

Kim found herself nodding too.

‘What!’ said Angus. ‘You weren’t listening, were you?’

‘I ... I ... could hear you talking ... you know before ...’ she trailed off.

‘Aren’t you supposed to talk before sex?’ asked Sonny, looking very confused. ‘Isn’t talking like foreplay?’

No one answered. Kim felt like she needed to enlighten him.

‘Depends on who’s talking,’ she said. ‘Ryan Reynolds only has to open his mouth and it’s foreplay but other men, not so much. Sometimes you are better off just keeping quiet.’

‘Right, right,’ said Sonny. ‘Got it.’

‘Unbelievable,’ said Angus, shaking his head. ‘And then you thought, did you, that you should make sure she was aware of my status before she left?’

‘No!’ said Kim. ‘It wasn’t like that. I came down to find some coffee ...’

‘My coffee?’

‘Err yes, and Isla was sat here and actually the first thing she told me was that you had said I was your live-in housekeeper.’

‘How else am I supposed to explain an old woman living in the house?’

‘I’m not old,’ said Kim.

‘Okay, older.’

‘Over sixty is officially old, my mum says, so technically Kim isn’t old,’ pointed out Sonny.

‘She’s clearly not student age though, is she? And so it was just easier to tell her that she was our housekeeper rather than someone’s mum whose husband is having an affair.’

‘Yeah, because a lot of students have housekeepers, right?’ said Kim.

‘Look, it’s your fault I’m having to explain you at all so don’t have a go at me.’

Kim bit her lip and glanced at Harry. He was sat staring straight ahead looking mortified. What was she doing?

‘Look, I’m sorry Angus, really I am. We got talking and she asked me point blank if you had a girlfriend and so I was on the spot so I mentioned you might have one back in Scotland, but I told her to ask you. That I wasn’t sure. And well, I guess I was looking out for her. I just didn’t want her to get hurt. That’s all.’

‘Why would she have got hurt?’

‘You just said you were never going to contact her again. And you sort of have a girlfriend.’

‘That’s because I wasn’t into her, not because of my girlfriend, I mean Poppy. I don’t know what is happening with Poppy.’

Kim bit her lip again. What to say? Kim thought Angus actually really cared about Poppy, he just didn’t know what to do about it. All his bravado and apparent desire to sleep around was driven by a fear of rejection by her. Perhaps not the right time to point it out to him though. Not whilst they were in an altercation about stealing his property.

‘Should I send my keys to Dad?’ asked Harry, clearly wanting to move the conversation along and be free from this awkward standoff.

‘No,’ said Sonny, looking horrified. ‘Can’t you see it’s the keys that tipped your mum over the edge in the first place? She doesn’t want him to have the keys. She doesn’t want him to be able to get in the house.’

‘That’s very nice of you to offer to send him your keys,’ said Kim to her son, ‘but to be honest I really don’t see why we should make it easy for him.’

‘So instead, when he rings, you’re going to get drunk, steal other people’s food and ward off any girls Angus brings back to the house?’ replied Harry.

‘No,’ said Kim. ‘Of course not. I’m ... I’m mortified that I’ve behaved this way.’

‘I might bring a girl back to the house?’ said Sonny. ‘One day?’

‘When that happens, Sonny, we’ll hire a marching band and put bunting up,’ muttered Angus.

‘Will you?’ asked Sonny, looking excited.

‘Totally,’ agreed Angus, rolling his eyes.

Kim was looking at her son. What had she been thinking? She had only made a bad situation worse.

‘I’m so sorry about last night, too,’ she said, reaching out to touch his arm. ‘You know what Vicky’s like. She led me astray. And the stress of everything, but it was unforgivable. Coming home drunk and then throwing up all over the carpet in front of your girlfriend ...’

‘She’s not my girlfriend,’ he replied, slamming his hand on the table. ‘We just ... we just like the same computer games, that’s all.’

‘Okay, okay,’ said Kim. ‘I’m sorry. Whatever she is she seems like a really lovely girl and I’m so sorry if I ...’

‘Just stop, Mum, please. Just stop.’ He turned to look at Angus and Sonny. ‘I’m so sorry about this, guys. I never thought I’d be apologising for my mother’s behaviour my first week in university but here we are. Strange times. Really strange times. I should have given her a talking to right from the start but you don’t expect to have to do that, do you? All I can say is that this is not my real mother sitting here ...’

‘What?’ gasped Sonny. ‘I didn’t see that coming! Who is your real mother then?’

‘No, no, I mean she is my real mother, I just mean she’s not behaving how she normally does, because of what’s happened. I mean if you met my dad you’d perhaps understand. It’s been such a shock. He really is the last person you would ever expect to do this.’

No one said anything until Angus muttered, 'Not like my dad then.'

Everyone turned to look at Angus.

'What do you mean?' Harry asked him.

Angus shrugged. 'Oh, my dad is an expert at it.'

'Expert at what?' asked Harry.

'Affairs.'

A silence fell over the room.

'Wow,' said Sonny.

'I'm really sorry to hear that,' ventured Kim.

'Not your fault,' replied Angus. 'It's just how it is in my family. He has a fling. Mum finds out. He promises never to do it again. That promise generally has a shelf life of say a couple of years, I'd say.'

'Your poor mum,' said Sonny.

Angus shrugged again. 'First time it happened she chucked him out. She was a total mess. Crying all the time.' He glanced at Kim as if to say that his mother had behaved exactly like she was behaving. 'I was only about eight, I reckon. But he would come over every night and plead with her. Tell her he had made a huge mistake. Eventually I got up one morning and there he was at the breakfast table. He never left again.'

'What happened the next time?' asked Kim.

'Oh she was upset, really upset, but a bit less than when it first happened. She gets angry every time, throws stuff around, makes threats and then there he is still sat at the breakfast table the next morning. Normally, of course, not long after my mum suddenly has a new car or a new piece of jewellery.'

No one knew what to say.

'So I do get it,' said Angus to Harry. 'Dealing with dysfunctional parents – not fun, not fun at all.'

'Thanks, mate,' said Harry.

‘I once caught my mum shaving my dad’s backside,’ said Sonny. ‘I think that screwed me up pretty bad for a while.’

‘I would have thought that you come from a pretty dysfunctional family,’ said Angus.

‘Thanks,’ nodded Sonny. ‘I appreciate that.’

Kim bit her lip. This was a nightmare.

‘I’ll go,’ she said, getting up. ‘I’ll go and pack my stuff now and get out of your hair. I really shouldn’t be here.’

‘No,’ said Sonny, grabbing her arm, looking genuinely stricken. ‘You can’t go. You can’t go and live next door to your husband and his fancy woman. You just can’t. It’ll kill you.’

‘I’ll just have to deal with it,’ she said. ‘It’s not your problem. I’ll pay for the wine and the coffee and the milk,’ she said to Angus. ‘It was unforgivable. And I’ll scrub the living room carpet and leave you money to buy pizzas for everyone tonight. Why don’t you have a party or something, invite some people round. Pizzas on me.’

She swallowed as they all stared back at her. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said again. ‘You’ve all been brilliant and I’ve been shit. I’ve been the worst possible guest and the worst possible mother,’ she continued, glancing at Harry. ‘I’m just grateful that you put up with me for a little while, when I needed it. It really was very kind of you. I should have acted more like a grown-up but instead I was a mess. So, thank you and if ever in the future any of you are in a mess then I owe you. Okay? I mean that. I owe every single one of you and you can turn up on my doorstep anytime you like and I’ll take you in. I really mean that.’

Sonny’s lip started wobbling.

Harry was staring at his mother shaking his head slightly like he had no idea what he was supposed to do. ‘I’m sorry, Mum,’ he said. Kim thought her heart would break. He had absolutely nothing to be sorry about.

Angus was glancing between the three of them. ‘Look, maybe if we set some house rules,’ he said, leaning back in his

chair.

‘House rules?’ said Sonny, turning to him. ‘I’ve always wanted to live in a house with house rules.’

‘I meant for Kim,’ said Angus. ‘*We* don’t need house rules, *we* should be able to do what the hell we like, but clearly if we are going to continue in this situation then boundaries need setting. Agreed?’

Kim stared at him in disbelief. What was happening?

‘Okay then,’ said Angus, leaning forward and pointing at Kim with his index finger. ‘Rule one is that you are not to treat this place like a hotel. You need to buy your own food and drink.’

Kim had her mouth open; she couldn’t speak.

‘Next rule is that you wear earplugs at night,’ continued Angus. ‘I don’t want an oldie next door putting me off my stride because I think she’s listening.’

‘I’m ... I’m s-s-s-sorry,’ she stuttered.

Sonny was staring at Angus aghast, as was Harry. They all looked as confused as Kim.

‘Talking is still good before sex though, right?’ asked Sonny. ‘Just so I know. And does this mean Kim is staying?’

‘Next rule,’ said Angus, ignoring Sonny. ‘Is that under no circumstances do you talk to any girls who enter this house, do you understand?’

‘What about if I bring a girl home?’ interrupted Sonny. ‘I mean I’d like to introduce her to Kim. I think she would feel more comfortable if she thought there was another woman in the house to make friends with.’

‘We will cross that bridge whenever in the next millennium we come to it,’ said Angus. ‘Anything else apart from the obvious?’ he asked, looking at Sonny and Harry. ‘And by that, I mean she should feel free to clean up and sort the kitchen out and generally keep the place tidy. I mean it’s the least she can do if she’s going to stay, right?’

Kim had no idea if he was joking or not so she said nothing. She looked at Harry who was staring at Angus.

‘It would be strictly on a temporary basis, of course. Just until Kim gets herself together,’ continued Angus. ‘I mean, I really couldn’t imagine anything worse than starting university life with someone’s mother in the next room, but ... well ... as long as she abides by the house rules then I think I can cope for a short time.’

Harry was clearly contemplating Angus’s words. She held her breath. It would solve her immediate problem of not wanting to go home. Anything would be better than that.

Harry turned to look at her and after what seemed like an age, he opened his mouth.

‘There’s one more rule,’ he said to her. ‘If you are going to stay, you need to get out, Mum,’ he said. ‘You can’t stare at a screen all day. It’s not good for you. You need to get out every day. Be around people or else you are going to go mad and drink too much and do stupid stuff.’

Kim stared back at her child. The boy who she had told countless times over the course of his life to switch off the screen and get out. Perhaps he had listened. Perhaps she wasn’t as bad a mother as she thought.

‘I promise,’ she whispered, trying very hard to stop herself from reaching over and taking his hand. This all had to be so difficult for him. And he was right, she did need to get out more, if not for her sake, for her son’s.

‘I promise I’ll be better, really, I will. I’ll find something to do to keep me busy, I promise.’

‘Temporarily busy,’ pointed out Angus. ‘Shall we set a limit until the end of this term? How about that? One term and then you are gone, vamoose, this house then returns to its rightful bachelor pad status.’

‘Of course,’ gushed Kim. ‘I can’t believe you are giving me this chance.’

‘We’ll need to check it’s okay with the girl who’d originally rented the room, of course,’ continued Angus. ‘But I would

think she'll be grateful to get some of her rent back,' he said. 'I'm assuming you'll stump up for her rent if you want to stay?'

'Yeah. Of course,' spluttered Kim. 'Absolutely. Yep – no problem. Thank you. Thank you so much.'

'I'll message her,' said Angus. 'Let her know we've found someone to have her room until Christmas.'

'This really is amazing of you,' said Kim. 'I've no idea how to thank you.'

'Yeah, well,' said Angus getting up to leave. 'Last warning. Pull yourself together or else.'

Chapter 10

‘What do you mean you haven’t posted the keys?’ demanded Richard when he called her the following day. ‘Are you driving back today then? When can I expect you?’

‘No, I’m not driving back today.’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘No. I’m not coming back for a while.’

‘You can’t stay with Harry, Kim. It’s not fair. And you’ll never cope living like a student.’

‘I will. I’m staying. We’ve just agreed some house rules. They’ve said it’s okay.’

‘No, they haven’t.’

‘Yes, they have. I’m going to pay rent and everything.’

There was silence on the end of the line. Then Richard said, ‘And how do you expect to do that?’

‘Out of the joint account, I guess,’ she said after a moment’s thought.

A heavy silence hung again.

‘You want me to pay your rent in a student house share when there is a perfectly good house here that I’m paying the mortgage on, that currently neither of us are living in?’

‘That’s not my fault.’

‘It is, because you won’t send me the keys.’

‘I won’t send you the keys because of what you did.’

‘So this is revenge? I thought you were better than that, Kim.’

‘Well, you thought wrong then.’

Richard paused for a moment.

‘Send me the keys and I’ll pay your rent,’ he said. ‘But don’t say I didn’t warn you that living with three boys in a student house is not going to suit you in the slightest. You’ll be back here before you know it.’

She knew it was petty but she didn’t want to send Richard the keys – why should she? Why should she do anything to make his life easier? She could, of course, point out that he could get a locksmith in but that was up to him. Knowing Richard, he would have thought of that but would have considered it desperate measures and a waste of money given she had a perfectly usable set of keys.

However, that left her with needing money in order to pay her rent. She had her own account, of course, but nowhere near enough in it to pay substantial bills. And she didn’t want to have to go cap in hand to Richard. Not really. That would only prove what he was saying, that there was no way she could survive living down here. No, she had to think of something else.

It came to her in the middle of the night. What to do. She realised what an appalling example she was setting her housemates. She was doing exactly what she had lectured Harry about not doing. Sitting around, wallowing, getting bored, getting drunk, not standing on her own two feet. And Harry himself had told her it was a condition of her staying that she got out more and found something to do. She needed a job, is what she needed, and she knew where she was going to get one. There was a hairdresser’s at the end of the road who was clearly in dire need of someone with all her skills to get the punters in. She’d go down there the very next day and ask them if they had any work available.

By the time she got up she had it all planned. The first thing she had to do of course was message all her existing clients in Lancaster. She decided to tell them that she was taking a break from hairdressing until after Christmas due to unforeseen circumstances. Typing the text, she gave her unreserved

apologies and said she would be in touch in the New Year. She of course had no idea where she would be in the New Year, which was a frightening thought, but she hoped that at the very least she would be in a better place than she was now.

With that done she set to work on her own hair, creating an elaborate updo to showcase her talents to her new prospective employer. She held back somewhat on the makeup; she didn't want to look too bridal after all so she went natural and was pleased with the final effect. How could anyone turn that blow down for a job, she thought as she looked in the mirror.

She had to admit that she did have butterflies in her stomach when she stepped outside the door. What would they think of her Lancashire accent? Would she have to explain that she was here because her husband was sleeping with her next door neighbour? Would they guess she was doing the insanely terrible thing of staying in her son's student house share? Would they judge her?

She wouldn't tell them. She'd lie. She couldn't deal with the judgemental looks. She'd make something up and all would be fine.

She checked her appearance in the shop window before she pushed the door open and walked in.

'No walk-ins today, love,' said the lady without looking up, stood behind a Perspex glass counter. There were products on display that Kim hadn't seen in ten years. She also hadn't been in a hairdresser's in a long time that had a twirly stand of dangly earrings on the countertop that looked like they had been there since the nineties. 'Brenda's gone in for a knee op so it's just me and I'm fully booked.'

Kim looked around. The salon was completely empty apart from the lady behind the counter who was studying what looked to be an old-style appointments book. 'I haven't come in for a haircut,' announced Kim.

The woman finally looked up. She was maybe in her sixties. She had a stout figure and was wearing a blue nylon tabard. Her glasses were attached to a chain around her neck and she wore her hair in a big, jet-black dyed bun on the top of her

head. Kim's immediate thought was that she needed a decent colourist round her. The black was too harsh. Her hair needed taking back to her natural colour which she guessed was possibly brunette and then she would look great with some honey and blonde tones to blend more with the inevitable grey that was lurking at the roots.

'Oh,' said the woman taking off her glasses and peering at her. Kim wondered if she might have gone over the top with her elaborate updo.

'We don't do ear piercing,' stated the woman. 'I know it says on the sign outside, but we haven't done that for a good ten years.'

Kim waited for an explanation as to why it was still on the sign but none was forthcoming.

'Actually, I've come in to ask if you have any jobs going?'

The lady blinked back her. 'No,' she said, looking back down at her bookings ledger.

Kim stood stock still. She hadn't factored that answer in. She really needed this.

'Erm, I've all the qualifications,' she continued. 'I've recently done the Gold Triple Star course on colouring and I can do extensions and weaves. Wedding hair, that's my speciality, I've done a huge amount of wedding hair.'

The woman looked up at her again and gave her a withering look. 'We don't do wedding hair here. Not the demand, see. It's all pensioners and students.'

'Okay, well what about prom hair or Christmas ball hair? There's always an occasion for a great hairdo. And I'm a whizz with a blow dry for your pensioners. Honestly, I can make the thinnest strands look like a lion's mane if you just give me five minutes with a dryer and some mousse.'

The woman gave a big sigh. 'Me and Brenda cater for our ladies perfectly well, thank you. Now as you can see, I'm very busy so if you wouldn't mind.' She raised a hand to indicate the location of the door.

‘Didn’t you say Brenda was having a knee op? Don’t you need someone to cover for her? I could do that. Temporary would be great, perfect in fact. Did I mention that I also do eyelash and eyebrow tints? Cheap as chips to do. You could put a sign in the window, start with a special offer or something. Eyelash tints are amazing, once you’ve had them you cannot understand why you never had them before. Look,’ she said, striding forward to show the lady her own tints. She fluttered her eyelashes in her face whilst explaining they were blue/black and had been done a month ago and still looked great.

The lady leaned back as Kim leaned in closer. She had a curled lip that would indicate that she was not impressed by Kim’s tinted eyelashes. Aaah well, in for a penny.

‘I could sort those grey roots out for you no problem too,’ she said. ‘When’s your next appointment? We could do it now and I could show you my skills. I am a whizz at grey hair, you ask my mother. She’s as grey as a badger but you would never know. Everyone compliments her on her hair. What do you say?’

The woman thought for a moment and then said, ‘I think you’ll find that I don’t have grey roots. I am perfectly capable of sorting out my own hair, thank you very much.’ She walked out from behind the desk in slippers which was possibly the most shocking thing Kim had ever seen in a hairdresser’s. The lady walked to the door and held it open for her.

Kim had no choice but to leave. That had gone really badly. She’d never had to apply for a job in her life. She’d started as a Saturday girl when she was fifteen and worked her way up until she got poached by Sharon to go and work in a new salon in the city centre. Then when she’d had Harry, she’d set herself up as a mobile hairdresser accumulating clients through word of mouth and recommendation. Her excellent skills were all she’d needed. She’d never had to ask for a job before. Clearly it wasn’t her forte.

She stood outside the hairdresser’s feeling totally and utterly dejected, not quite knowing what to do. By the time her housemates came home tonight, she needed a job. Fact. She

needed to show them that she was moving forward, that she wasn't going to be under their feet. And she needed money.

Perhaps she should head towards the city centre, try her luck in some other hairdressers. But she wasn't sure where to go and really couldn't face the idea of rejection again. She trudged along the row of shops thinking she should really go to the corner shop and get some replacement coffee for Angus. But then she stopped in her tracks. There in the corner of the window of the chip shop was a sign.

HELP WANTED – MOST NIGHTS
– THAT MEANS UNSOCIABLE HOURS –
NO TIME WASTERS!

Kim gulped. Not the most welcoming of job adverts. And really, did she want to work in a chip shop? Perhaps she did. Working nights could actually take away the loneliness of the endless evenings in alone. And she wouldn't have to think, would she? Wouldn't have to talk like she did when she cut hair. Come to think of it, that could be good. Inevitably you ended up becoming a bit of an agony aunt when you were a hairdresser. When people sat down to have their hair done some of them treated it like being with a priest in a confessional. Everything came out with the implicit knowledge that it would go no further. Hairdressers never told, right? Just listened and added the odd word of encouragement here and there. Agreed with the bride-to-be she had been totally right not to invite her stepmother to the wedding. Nodded when Mr Brown mulled over having a word with his son about the company he was keeping. Shook your head in horror at the way Shelia had been treated by her boss over sick pay.

That's what you were as a hairdresser. You didn't just cut people's hair. You listened to their lives. Normally she loved that. Loved talking to people. But maybe not at the moment. Maybe at the moment she didn't need to hear other people's woes. She had enough of her own. Actually, standing in a chip shop not really having to talk to anyone would be okay just at the moment.

For the second time that morning she took a deep breath and wondered why her heart was banging on her ribcage.

‘Hello,’ she said, striding up to the counter. ‘I’m here about the job.’

‘What job?’ asked the spotty youth slouching behind the counter who could barely raise his eyes from his phone.

‘The one in the window,’ replied Kim. She stepped aside so he could see the back of the sign behind her.

He looked at her blankly.

‘Is the manager around?’ she asked.

‘Max,’ he hollered at the top of his voice, staring at Kim.

There was no response.

‘Max,’ he shouted again.

‘What?’ came the reply from somewhere out the back of the shop.

‘There’s a woman here asking for you,’ he shouted.

Kim could feel herself go bright red. All this felt so uncomfortable. She’d forgotten that she’d dropped chips on the floor just a few days ago. How embarrassing. She prayed Max had forgotten her.

Max came bustling out. He was short for a man, maybe five seven, the same height as her, and had a shiny face. He wore a blue and white striped apron over a plain white T-shirt. He was frowning. She got the impression he frowned a lot.

‘Yes?’ he demanded. There was no hint of recognition on his face, thank goodness.

‘Err, I’m here about the job,’ she said. ‘The one in the window.’

His eyebrows immediately flared up and she could see him taking in her wedding-ready updo and pristine makeup.

He swallowed. ‘Are you having a laugh? Did someone send you in? Was it that idiot Binky that I fired last week? You can go back and tell him that he was fired for thinking it was funny

to deep fry the card reader. Are you his mum? Is that who you are? Has he sent you to get his job back, because I can tell you your son is a useless waste of space.'

'No, I'm not Binky's mum,' said Kim. 'I'm Harry's mum but you won't know Harry, he's just moved in down the road, I mean I know he's been in here; he wears gaming T-shirts but I'm not sure you would remember him, not that it matters. I've come for the job.'

The man stared back at her.

'It says very clearly no time wasters,' he replied.

'I'm not a time waster, I promise. I just need a job. An easy one.'

Max was staring back at her. 'You think working in a chip shop is easy, do you?' he demanded.

'God, no, that's not what I meant at all.' Why did this have to be so hard? 'It's just that I've just moved to the area and well, I need something quick. I'm actually a hairdresser by trade but I asked next door and well, the old bat there kicked me out so I saw your sign and I just thought, well, you sound desperate so I thought you might give me a chance.'

'She kicked you out next door?' Max asked.

'Yeah. Sorry, shouldn't have called her an old bat, I mean you are probably friends.'

'No,' he said reaching forward and pulling up the partition. 'She is an old bat. Why don't you come through to my office and I'll talk you through the gig.'

Kim scuttled through before Max could change his mind.

She followed him through the tight space, past a rotating kebab spinner and some deep freezers. He showed her into his office which was really just an alcove under the stairs. He shifted a large cardboard box off a seat and indicated for her to sit down. He took his chair behind the desk facing a computer. Despite his short stature he had to bend so he didn't bump his head. He reached up to take a form out of the rack on the wall.

'Name?' he asked.

‘Kim,’ she said. ‘Kim Jacobs.’

‘Age?’ he said next. ‘Actually, don’t worry about that. That’s just for the kids. We get some sixteen-year-olds here which affects the wage. But I don’t expect you’re sixteen, are you?’

‘Err no,’ she said. ‘What is the wage by the way?’

‘Minimum. If you last a month it goes up by ten per cent but you’ll have to remind me because, well, no one seems to last more than a month so I never have to remember. I get all these promises from these students that yes, they are committed. They won’t let me down and then you ask them to work a couple of Friday nights on the trot and commitment goes right out of the window. Committed to the drink more like. But you being more mature, now I’m sure that won’t be a problem, will it?’

‘No,’ said Kim shaking her head. ‘Not at all. I’ve no social life, zip, none, you can work me all the Friday nights you like.’

‘Good,’ he said, nodding and studying her as though properly for the first time or perhaps he was trying to work out why she had no social life. ‘You say you’re new to the area?’

‘Yes, I’ve, err, moved down here with my son because ... well let’s just say it’s complicated. I really, well, I really don’t want to talk about it.’

‘Brilliant,’ replied Max. ‘Suits me down to the ground. If I have to listen to one more lightweight student moaning about how hard their life is I might put the next one in the deep fat fryer.’

‘Mmm, tasty,’ she quipped.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘Deep fried student,’ she said.

‘Right,’ he said slowly. He clearly wasn’t a man of banter or lightweight conversation. He looked down again at his form. He asked for a phone number and an address.

‘On the same street,’ he nodded. ‘Always helpful. I can come and hammer on your door when you don’t turn up or when you say you’re sick and then when I ring the doorbell you don’t answer.’

‘I’ll turn up,’ she said. ‘I’ll be here.’

He nodded.

‘Tomorrow night then. Be here for 5.30. Wear flat shoes, rubber soles ideally so you don’t slip on the fat. Wear old clothes because they will stink by the time you get home and you don’t need to do anything fancy with your hair. Just up and out of your face.’

‘Yes chef,’ said Kim, ‘Absolutely. I can be here tomorrow, chef.’ She smiled at her sudden remembrance of how to address the person in charge in a commercial kitchen. She’d seen them do it many times on *MasterChef*.

‘You are not coming to work in a Michelin restaurant,’ said Max. ‘You will be mostly trying to put stuff in hot oil without burning yourself and shaving rotating dead meat. Understood?’

‘Understood,’ nodded Kim. ‘Thank you. I won’t let you down.’

Max openly sighed and waved her away. She made her way past the rotating meat and spitting fryers. The spotty youth was nowhere to be seen so she lifted the counter and let herself out. She walked out onto the street and gulped in the fresh air. Fresh air never tasted so good. She reached up to touch her hair and it already felt slightly sticky from the grease-filled atmosphere. Still, it was a job, it was a start, it would get her out of everyone’s way and give her something to do. That had to be progress.

Chapter 11

Kim knew she had to talk to Harry.

It was overdue. In fact, she had a mental list of things in her head that she wanted to talk to him about and she had no idea how she was going to broach them. Her being here with him had changed the dynamic. She could no longer play the role of caring parent who had a right to know how her son was. That had all got messed up. She didn't feel like she had a right to ask anything of him anymore. He was sharing his new home with her. She didn't have a right to ask him more than that.

And yet there was stuff she needed to know. She required reassurance as to what was going on in his head. And so she had to talk to him. Or at least try.

She decided she would have to deploy the tactic that seemed to spark their best conversations in the past. When they weren't facing each other, when there was no eye contact. When they were together for another reason other than to talk.

She knocked tentatively on his bedroom door then popped her head round when she heard a 'yeah' grunted.

'I've got five minutes,' she said. 'Do you want your hair cutting?'

He was sitting at his desk staring at a computer screen. Joystick in hand. Many shots were being fired.

He shrugged. 'Fine,' he replied. He made no indication of movement, just carried on with what he was doing.

She was about to ask him to come downstairs and sit in the kitchen because then the hair would be easy to brush up. He didn't really think it was okay to cut hair in a carpeted room, did he? That would be stupid. But she bit her tongue. Asking him to move might lead to a refusal and she couldn't risk it. So

she went back to her room, picked up her scissors and black gown and re-entered her son's room. Thank goodness Vicky had thought to bring her hairdressing gear with her when she came, although Kim suspected that was only so she could get a cheeky haircut whilst she was here.

She tried to ignore the still packed boxes littering the floor and the suitcase splurging its contents all over the carpet in front of the wardrobe. Harry had made no attempt to organise his room at all. It was almost as if he didn't expect to be staying. She felt dismayed that he cared so little about his surroundings but perhaps now was not the ideal time to bring it up.

She put the gown round his neck as he continued to play his game and laid a towel on the floor surrounding his chair, hoping that would capture most of the hair.

She took a deep breath and set to work.

'So I got a job today,' she began. 'I'll be out of the house a lot more. Took your advice. You were totally right.' She knew she was jabbering but she was nervous.

'Great,' he said.

'It's at the chip shop at the end of the road,' she continued. 'It's not much, I know. I mean it's nothing very special or anything for your mum to be doing.'

He shrugged again. 'Sounds great,' he said, like he hadn't even registered what she'd said as he stared into the screen in front of him. 'Do we get free chips?' he asked. So he was listening.

'No idea,' she replied. 'I'll have to see. Max doesn't strike me as the overly generous type but I would have thought he'll be wanting to get rid of leftovers at the end of the night.'

Harry nodded.

Kim gulped.

'So, are you sure you are all right with me staying?' she asked. 'I mean, I know this is all such a mess and it wasn't

meant to be for long, but is it okay for you? I'm just so grateful, I really don't know what to say.'

She swallowed and looked up to see his reflection in the screen. He looked grim.

'It's fine,' he said. 'Fine. As long as you stick to the rules and as long as it's okay with Angus and Sonny. If either of them comes and says they've changed their minds though then I'll have to take their side. You understand that, don't you?'

'Yeah. Of course. Totally.'

Harry looked at her reflection in the screen. 'And don't expect me to talk about what's going on with Dad or anything. I can't do that. I don't want to be caught in the middle of it.'

'That's fine,' she said, pulling up the strands of hair on the top of his head and snipping in with her scissors. 'Absolutely, totally understand that. But just so you know, if you want to talk to your dad it's okay by me. I won't be offended or anything. If you want to talk to him, talk to him. He is still your dad is all I'm saying.'

Harry nodded. 'I know,' he said.

'Angus and Sonny have been really kind to me,' she continued, deciding to change track. 'I'm really glad you are sharing with them. Are you?'

Harry shrugged. 'Sure,' he said. 'They're better than the guys on my course. Thank goodness I'm not sharing with chemistry students.'

'Why? What are they like? Did you meet them today? Did you have your first lectures today? How did it go?'

Harry gave her a look. She'd clearly exceeded the limit of how many questions a mother can ask a teenager in any one go.

'Everyone is so brainy,' said Harry, looking back at the screen. 'They all looked like they understood everything the tutor said.'

Kim felt her heart sink. When was Harry going to stop being so insecure about how smart he was?

‘I’m sure they didn’t,’ she said. ‘They’re all bound to be pretending. You’re not going to say you don’t understand on day one, are you? I bet they all felt exactly the same as you.’

‘Maybe,’ said Harry.

‘It’s all bound to be really strange at the beginning. But you’ll get used to it. And to them. I’m sure you’ll come home in a few weeks’ time and they will all be your best mates.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Harry, slumping further down in his chair. He was at an awkward angle, making it difficult to get the scissors in the right position, but she didn’t think a ‘sit up straight, will you’ would go down very well.

‘I just want you to know that I’m so proud of you. I know I keep saying it, but it’s true. At least you will never end up working in a chippy at the end of the road like your old mum, eh?’ She let out an awkward laugh.

‘There’s nothing wrong with working in a chippy, Mum,’ he said. ‘Nothing. Most people have normal jobs like that, you know. Not everyone wants mega brainy jobs like Dad. It’s not the be-all and end-all to do something really important. Working in a chippy sounds great.’

Kim felt quite taken aback. That was quite a speech from her son. She wasn’t entirely sure where that had come from.

‘Of course,’ she replied. ‘You’re right. Not everyone can be like your dad. Career wise, I mean. I’m just saying that I wish I’d worked hard like you and gone to university. Don’t get me wrong, I like hairdressing, but it would have been nice to have had options like you have.’

‘Do you think?’ said Harry. He was looking at her reflection intently now in the computer screen.

‘I do,’ said Kim. ‘Just make the most of it, hey?’

Harry said nothing and resumed shooting.

She took a deep breath. She had just one more subject to cover.

‘And how are things going with Suki?’ she asked as innocently as possible.

Harry got up abruptly and shook the black cloak off his shoulders.

‘What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?’ he said. He didn’t look very happy. ‘I said she’s not my girlfriend, didn’t I? So don’t ask me about her or anything in fact. If this is going to work, you staying here, then you cannot be bombarding me with a million questions every time you get the opportunity. Don’t ask me about Suki and don’t ask me about my course. Okay? That’s another rule. Do you understand?’

She swallowed and nodded.

He headed out of the door.

‘But you’ve got a wonky left side,’ she muttered as he left. She sank onto the bed and put her head in her hands. She’d not played that very well. She should have kept quiet. Laid low. Too many sensitive subjects. She was forgetting that it wasn’t that long ago that Harry was fretting that he might not even get into university, given his disappointing results, and now she was giving him the third degree. And he was clearly sensitive about Suki. Why hadn’t she kept quiet? And why was it that the people you were closest to were the hardest ones to talk to? Particularly your children. Your words got all tangled and mixed up. She should learn to keep her mouth shut for a while when it came to her son. She needed to give him his space, at least whilst they were sharing the same house.

Chapter 12

Kim had to ask Angus if he had a full-length mirror to check her appearance before she started her first shift at the chippy as she didn't have one in her own room.

'Be my guest,' he said as he stood aside at his bedroom door and waved her in. His room was surprisingly tidy, a far cry from Harry's. Clothes were out of sight and his desk showed neat piles of books rather than the jumble of cables and computer paraphernalia that cluttered her son's. She tried not to look round for fear of being accused of being nosy so headed towards the wardrobe on the back wall and the full-length mirror on its front. She felt her shoulders sag as soon as she caught sight of herself. She'd scraped her hair back into a bun, knowing it was likely that she would have to encase it all in a blue nylon net. She wore a black long-sleeved T-shirt which totally washed her pale skin out, her 'Fat days' jeans so she would feel comfortable but made her thighs look as wide as the M6 and her black and pink trainers. She reckoned the look aged her by at least ten years but there was nothing she could do about it. Max had said to dress down and she feared seeing his face if she arrived in anything fancy.

'You got a date?' asked Angus with a smirk. 'Looking smoking.'

'Very funny,' she replied, walking past him.

'Don't forget to bring us free chips back,' he shouted after her as she left the room. She couldn't believe the excitement that the potential of free chips had caused in the house. When she'd told Sonny and Angus they both had reacted in exactly the same way as Harry. 'Do we get free chips?' was the most they could say about her new job and she wasn't at all hopeful that she would be able to deliver.

When she arrived in the chippy ten minutes later she was surprised to be greeted by one of the most glamorous young ladies Kim had ever seen, stood behind the counter. She looked around, confused. Where was Max in his greasy apron and who the heck was this?

‘Sorry,’ the girl said grinning at her. ‘Not open yet.’

‘Actually, I’m Kim. I’m supposed to be starting work here.’

‘Shit, yes, sorry. So sorry,’ she gasped. ‘Dad said we had someone new coming in. Sorry. I’m Annie. His nib’s daughter. Sorry, it’s just me until Dad gets back from the wholesaler. Shouldn’t be long. Won’t you come through?’ She lifted the hatch and stood aside to let Kim through. As she brushed past her she felt even more underdressed. For under her work apron Annie had on a full forties-style tea dress complete with a full net underskirt. It looked at odds with her apron which strained over her generous curves but totally fitted in with her elaborate curler-set dark hair and full red cupid’s bow lips. She looked like she was about to walk onto the set of a World War II film. Kim was itching to know how she had done her hair like that, but the bigger question had to be what on earth was she doing dressed like that working in a chip shop.

‘Did I get the dress code wrong?’ asked Kim. She had never felt so dowdy.

Annie looked at her confused for a moment, then laughed. ‘God no,’ she said. ‘Not you. It’s me. I pride myself on getting the dress code wrong. Unless it’s forties, of course, then I’m bang on the money. You look wonderful, you really do, perfect. I’m just, well, a forties nut and I like to dress like this.’ She shrugged, still grinning. ‘I’m at art college if that explains it any better. You know that place where you go if you are a bit mental and want to live a bit crazy by pretending you live in a different era? I can thoroughly recommend it actually. Keeps me amused, I can tell you. Now, Dad told me to show you round so let me give you the guided tour.’

Kim followed Annie to the back of the shop, not knowing what to say. This was not what she had been expecting.

‘So, let’s start with the absolute essentials,’ Annie said. ‘See this chair?’ she asked, pointing at a rickety wooden chair wedged between two fridges.

Kim nodded.

‘This is the staff room. Where you get to go on your break. Dad keeps promising to stop one of the legs wobbling but you know, other priorities.’

‘Now, the toilet is through there,’ she continued, waving at an open door which housed the toilet as well as a mop and bucket. ‘Fire exit is through that door but it sticks a bit so you need to shove it with your shoulder if you really want to escape. What else?’ she said, pausing to think. ‘Oh yes, the first aid kit. Really important for new starters. You will become very good friends with the first aid kit, believe me. Burns cream is in there. Just slap it on, works wonders. Now there is an accident book which you must fill out, nudge, nudge, wink, wink, know what I mean.’

Annie winked at her, giving Kim a chance to take in her gloriously thick false eyelashes.

‘Oh, and in case you’re wondering, this is where the magic happens.’ She pointed at Max’s office under the stairs.

‘Yes, I know,’ said Kim. ‘I had my interview there.’

‘Really,’ said Annie wide-eyed. ‘You had an interview and you still came back. That old misery guts didn’t put you off?’

‘Err, err ...’ Kim didn’t know how to answer that one.

‘It’s all right,’ said Annie. ‘You don’t need to be nice about him. I tell him to his face that he’s a misery. He just needs to get out more. Period. Actually, you don’t have any single friends, do you? It’s a never-ending task trying to set him up. Jesus, there must be someone out there who can put a smile on his face.’

‘Err ... err ... I’m new to the area so I don’t know anyone, sorry,’ said Kim.

‘No worries. Husband’s job, was it, brought you here?’

‘Err, not exactly, no. No, we split up actually. That’s kind of why I’m here.’ Kim felt herself wince. Is that what she was now? Husbandless? She didn’t know. Her entire life felt in this very weird suspension where she wasn’t sure of anything.

‘I assumed with the wedding ring that you were married,’ said Annie, looking down at Kim’s hand hanging by her side.

Kim looked sharply down at her hand. She’d forgotten all about her wedding ring and its significance. It was so familiar to her. Yet now as she looked at it, it looked like something totally alien had attached itself to her finger.

‘I’d forgotten I was still wearing it,’ she said, forgetting Annie was there.

‘Was it quite recent then?’ asked Annie. ‘Sorry, I’m so nosy. Tell me to shut up.’

‘It’s okay,’ replied Kim. ‘Like a week or so ago, I think. Time has sort of run away with me.’ Kim suddenly had an urge to take the ring off. Right now. The sight of it made her want to cry and she didn’t want to cry. She needed it off. So in front of Annie, standing in the back of the chippy, she pulled her wedding ring off for the first time in twenty years.

‘What should I do with it?’ she asked Annie, as if she should know.

‘What do you want to do with it?’

Kim shook her head. ‘Throw it in the deep fat fryer?’

Annie shook her head. ‘Might not comply with health and safety, I’m afraid. We’ve got a safe that Dad uses for cash. We could put it in there?’

She nodded and then followed Annie to the back of the shop and to Max’s office under the stairs. Annie scabbled under the desk and opened the safe then held her hand out for Kim to hand her ring over. And that probably would have been fine had Max not chosen to return from the wholesalers at that very minute.

‘What’s going on?’ he asked. ‘The front door is wide open, the fryers are not on yet and you’re stealing cash from the

safe?’

Kim swallowed. This was not a good start.

Fortunately, Annie reappeared from under the table.

‘We were just putting Kim’s wedding ring in the safe so that she didn’t throw it in the deep fat fryer,’ she announced, as though that were perfectly reasonable.

Max glanced between the two of them, clearly not knowing who to blame for these shenanigans.

‘I need help unloading the van,’ he said eventually, turning his back and heading towards the back door.

‘And get those damn fryers sparked up,’ he shouted over his shoulder.

Kim helped Annie get out from her awkward spot under the table.

‘He’s a cuddly bear really,’ said Annie. ‘Honestly. He just needs to get out more.’

Kim didn’t think it would be possible but her shift went from bad to worse. She started off on the fryers with Max, watching carefully when the right time was to cook and for how long and how to manoeuvre the heavy baskets and dump the contents without causing yourself damage. She thought she was getting the hang of it until she dropped a basket, spilling chips all over the floor. Horrified, she bent to pick the basket up, grasping the hot metal with her hand and giving herself a burn. Max looked at her as though he had seen the same charade played out a million times. He asked his daughter to show Kim how to use the first aid kit. Annie tended to her wounds and told her to take time out in the staff room/rickety chair for five minutes and then go on the till in the front of the shop.

Kim watched in awe as Annie dealt with the steady stream of customers with speed, efficiency and a massive smile on her face. After a while Annie got her wrapping chips in paper which she got the hang of quickly, her dextrous hairdresser’s hands helping her out. She could, however, soon feel sweat pouring down her back and pimples literally breaking out onto

her face. All was going better until Annie got her taking the orders at the till whilst she stood by her side. An old man in a trilby and a raincoat came in and Kim asked him what he would like.

‘My usual,’ he said.

‘And what would that be?’ she asked.

He stared at her. ‘I’ve been coming in here for ten years – surely you can remember what I have.’

Kim looked nervously over her shoulder. Annie appeared to have disappeared, right when she needed her.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said to the man. ‘It’s my first day. Could you tell me what your usual is?’

The man frowned, clearly displeased his usual order wasn’t up in lights somewhere for all to see. He was just about to speak to hopefully share this apparently top secret information when Sonny came running into the shop completely breathless as though he was being chased by aliens.

‘Kim, Kim,’ he gasped, doubling over in order to try and get his breath back. ‘You need to come home.’

‘Why? Is it Harry? What’s happened?’

‘No,’ he said, rearing up. ‘It’s your husband. He’s here. He says he wants the keys to the house. What should we do? I offered him a cup of tea but Angus told me off. Said you wouldn’t like that.’

Kim stared at Sonny. The old man was also staring at him. Sonny was wearing a bright orange sweater that Kim suspected his mother had knitted for him, red cargo shorts and black workmen’s boots. A look that was not easy to carry off.

‘We’ve called Harry,’ continued Sonny, ‘but he’s not answering and now your ex has gone up to Harry’s bedroom and we can hear him going through his drawers. Angus said to come and get you.’

Kim was trying to grasp what Sonny was saying. The thought of Richard being in such close proximity sent a chill through her bones. Anger was also rising up inside her. He

couldn't just arrive out of the blue. And he definitely had no right to be going through Harry's things. What was he playing at?

'It's battered sausage, a fresh one mind, small chips, mushy peas and gravy. Large peas, small gravy,' said the old man looking at her. 'You got that?'

She hadn't heard a word of it and looked at him blankly.

'Annie!' exclaimed the man as she thankfully reappeared. 'There you are. This new woman here won't take my order.'

'She's new, Bill, give her a chance. Now what do you want?'

'My usual,' he replied.

'No, let's not play this game,' replied Annie. 'You know you don't have a usual. You change your mind most weeks.'

'Battered sausage, small chips, large peas, small gravy,' said Sonny, beaming at Annie. 'That's what he wants. I heard him. Didn't mean to interrupt or anything. Just trying to be helpful because I interrupted his order, you see. I came barging in because Kim's husband is at our house turning the place upside down. I'm Sonny by the way.' He continued holding his hand over the counter for Annie to shake. 'Sonny Benjamin Wallace. I'm from Devon. It's wonderful to meet you.'

Even Annie was lost for words at Sonny's introduction. Sonny was grinning like he'd set eyes on the greatest thing he had ever seen. She took his hand and smiled back. 'Great jumper,' she said.

'I knitted it,' replied Sonny.

Everyone's eyebrows shot up including the old man still patiently waiting for his chip supper.

'Really?' asked Annie. 'That's so impressive.'

'Really,' replied Sonny. 'We were snowed in once for five days so Mum taught me to knit and me and Dad rewired the house. There are some amazing similarities between house electrics and knitting.'

Everyone was still lost for words. Including Annie. For a moment.

‘I’ve always thought so,’ she finally agreed with a grin.

‘Do you knit?’ asked Sonny.

‘Of course,’ replied Annie. ‘Absolutely.’

Kim watched as Sonny blushed bright red and suddenly became awkward.

Bill rapped his pound coin held in his hand hard on the counter. ‘Have you got my order then?’

‘Sorry, what was it?’ asked Annie, still looking at Sonny.

‘Battered sausage, small chips, large peas, small gravy,’ murmured Sonny.

‘Fresh cooked sausage, mind,’ demanded Bill. ‘Don’t want one that’s been hanging around in that cupboard for a few hours.’

‘Right,’ said Annie, finally turning away to pull together the order. ‘Can you put that through the till, Kim?’ she asked.

‘Of course,’ said Kim still in a daze, still trying to process what was happening right in front of her and what was happening back at the house. What should she do? She couldn’t just leave on her first shift but she couldn’t let Richard wreak havoc over the road either. Likewise, it wasn’t fair on Sonny and Angus to have to sort her mess out. Albeit Sonny appeared to have completely forgotten the reason for being here as he gazed doe-eyed at the back of Annie’s head.

It would all come back to him immediately when Richard appeared at the door.

Kim looked up from the till and there he was. Her husband standing in the doorway of the chip shop where she now worked. Where she now stood sweating and pimply with greasy, pulled back hair. Richard on the other hand looked good. He had a new coat on! He must have had to go shopping without access to his own clothes. She wondered if Alison had taken him. Certainly the coat was of a modern style that he would not have chosen himself. Kim had often tried to gently

steer him towards slightly more fashionable attire as she knew it would suit him but he had always refused, appearing to be desperate to stick to the safety of plain, unobtrusive items. This coat he was sporting was pretty cool and sophisticated, deep blue with dark green stitching. Clearly Alison had succeeded where she had failed in bringing Richard's look into the twenty-first century.

He hovered at the door clearly not sure what to do. Eventually he joined the now oddly forming queue of Bill and Sonny.

Sonny turned as he approached and caught sight of him. He gasped and turned back to Kim.

'I didn't tell him where you worked,' he gasped. 'Honestly I didn't. You've no right to come here,' he said, turning back to Richard. 'No right at all.'

Richard looked at Sonny like he had no right to talk to him.

'Just go away, Richard,' said Kim. 'Just go away.'

'I came for the house keys,' he said. 'Since you couldn't send them to me. You left me with no choice.'

The sound of his voice cut through Kim like a knife. So familiar and yet so strange to hear it, here in these strange surroundings in utterly bizarre circumstances.

'Battered sausage,' Bill shouted at Kim. 'You've not put it in the till yet. Do I need to tell you the order again?'

'Battered sausage, small chips, large peas, small gravy,' said Kim, not taking her eyes off Richard. 'I'm just serving this gentleman,' she said to him. 'You'll have to wait.'

'Do you know what,' said Sonny. 'I'll have what he's having too. Can you do one of those for me as well?' he said to Annie as she turned round to wrap Bill's supper.

'Sure,' she smiled.

'That's four pound eighty-two,' Kim said to Bill. Bill looked at her aghast.

‘It can’t be,’ he said. ‘It’s normally four pound thirty-eight. What have you done?’

‘Me?’ said Kim. She looked down at the till as though it was an enigma machine and she had no idea how to work the code. She had no idea what she had done.

‘Put it through again,’ said Bill. ‘You must have put it in wrong.’

Kim was staring down at the till but tears were now swimming in front of her eyes. She couldn’t see anything. She couldn’t think straight.

‘Battered sausage, small chips, large peas, small gravy,’ repeated Bill. ‘You put large gravy in, didn’t you? I bet that’s what happened. You can’t do that, you know. I asked for small gravy for a reason.’

‘For goodness’ sake,’ Kim heard Richard mutter.

Annie gently pushed her aside and cancelled the previous order and set up a new one.

‘Four pound thirty-eight, please,’ she said to Bill, holding out her hand. ‘Give her a break, eh? She’s new,’ she added.

Bill grumped and handed over his accurately counted out money and shuffled out of the door.

‘Are you going to come and get me the keys?’ Richard asked as soon as Bill had left.

Kim looked at him open-mouthed. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I’m at work.’

‘Really?’ he said, looking round. ‘This is what you call work. I know you were only a hairdresser, but seriously, frying chips? What are you doing?’

‘I’m trying to earn a living so I can pay my rent,’ replied Kim.

‘She has to,’ chipped in Sonny. ‘We’ve told Sammy, who was going to live with us but went to work in an Amazon warehouse instead, that we’ve found someone to take her place so Kim is going to pay Sammy’s rent. And now that Kim

has stopped getting drunk and throwing up on Angus and we've set some house rules for her then it's all going to be fine, really it is.'

Richard looked at Sonny in the same way again. Like he had no idea why he was speaking to him.

'Are you just doing this to make me look bad?' he said, turning back to look at Kim, a look of total confusion on his face. 'Why on earth would you want to work here?'

'Hey you,' said Max, suddenly appearing from behind the fryers. 'There's nothing wrong with working in a back street chippy. It's an honest living and can you stop distracting my workforce. And no, Kim cannot do what you want her to do, right this minute, because as she said at the very beginning, she's at work.'

'You've not exactly got them queueing out the door,' pointed out Richard. 'Surely you can spare her for ten minutes.'

Max appeared to consider the request. He glanced at Kim. Kim gave him a look that she hoped conveyed that she needed him on her side. He turned back to Richard.

'She's at work. Now if you don't want to buy any chips I suggest that you get out.'

Richard blinked at him. Kim held her breath. Richard was used to winning arguments. Whenever she argued with him, he was a master at expressing extreme logic in a calm and precise manner, making it impossible to win. It drove her mad sometimes. He never lost it. Never reacted emotionally, never appeared to be irrational. Unlike her who was the opposite. Emotion always beat logic when push came to shove for her. Always. Kim could see Richard formulating any number of rational reasons why Kim should go and get the keys but Max had overridden him. Max had played the boss card and he couldn't beat that.

'I'll be in the pub on the corner unless Harry shows up,' said Richard. 'If he does, I'll ask him for his keys. But then he won't be able to get in, of course, if he wants to.'

Richard looked at her calmly.

She reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out a set of keys. She unclipped a single Yale key then handed a green jelly baby key ring with three keys attached to it, to Richard.

‘Are those your house keys?’ gasped Sonny as Richard took them.

Kim nodded.

‘Are you sure about this?’ said Sonny. ‘I mean, you said the other day that you would give him your keys over your own dead body?’

‘I’m sure,’ nodded Kim.

‘And Angus’s dead body, I believe,’ Sonny told Annie and Max who were watching. ‘He’s our housemate. His godfather owns a vineyard in France.’

‘You had them in your pocket the whole time?’ asked Richard, incredulous.

Kim nodded.

He looked back at her, speechless, as if he didn’t know what to do now. Like he wasn’t done yet but didn’t know what his next move was. ‘I thought that we would have the opportunity to talk,’ he said eventually.

‘Talk about what?’ asked Kim glancing awkwardly over at Max and Annie. She was very aware that your errant husband turning up in the middle of your first shift was not ideal.

‘About what has happened. I thought that you might find that helpful,’ said Richard.

‘Helpful?’ asked Kim. ‘You don’t really mean that, do you? You mean helpful to you. You want to have the opportunity to explain it all rationally so that I have absolutely no reason to be upset with you. Well you don’t get to do that. You don’t get to explain to make yourself feel better. Nothing you can say can make me feel better, so go away. Take your keys and go away.’

Richard stood for a moment not moving.

‘I think you’d better do as she asks, don’t you?’ said Max. ‘You got what you came for. Now you can go.’

Richard gave Max his best confused look. He wanted to dispute Max’s opinion on the matter but something stopped him.

‘We will have to talk at some point,’ said Richard, turning his gaze back to Kim.

‘It is good to talk,’ added Sonny. Kim glanced at him. ‘But only when you are absolutely ready,’ he nodded vigorously. ‘Not before.’

‘Okay,’ Richard swallowed. ‘Bye then.’ He shrugged, not knowing how to sign off his departure. Kim hoped he wouldn’t try.

‘I’ll show you to the door,’ said Sonny completely unnecessarily. ‘Here, it’s this way.’ Sonny strode the five yards to the clearly positioned glass door and held it open for Richard. ‘You be on your way,’ he continued. ‘It’s a long drive back up north. Oh gosh, I’ve gone all Jane Austen,’ he said, giggling to himself.

Richard turned and walked out the door. Kim watched as he pulled his new designer coat around him and walked off into the darkness.

‘Well,’ said Sonny, coming and leaning on the counter. ‘Interesting turn of events, I feel. You okay, Kim? Do you need a hug?’

‘What she needs is ten minutes in the staff room and then back to work,’ said Max sternly. ‘I think your home life has caused enough drama for one evening, don’t you? I’m hoping every shift won’t be like this. Leave it at home next time – okay?’

‘Of course,’ said Kim, feeling stunned and out of sorts, the image of Richard walking away into the darkness burned onto her brain. Seeing him again in the flesh had for some reason brought flashbacks of the early days of their relationship into her mind.

‘I’m not sure he’s your type,’ Vicky had said when she’d first introduced him all those years ago.

The truth was she was sick of her type. Bad boys who constantly let her down. She was done with her type. It had never been heart palpitations and overexcited fumbblings in the backs of hatchbacks with Richard. This was a grown-up relationship, she’d told Vicky. One born of mutual respect and trust and that was the type of relationship she wanted now. Richard was her keeper. He had been the one who she had thought would actually mean it when he stood in church and committed to her until death do us part.

However, a relationship built mostly on respect and trust doesn’t have much left to hold it up when someone destroys that by sleeping with the next door neighbour.

Chapter 13

Kim got home at the end of her shift wanting to totally collapse. She staggered in weighed down by leftover chips and a couple of pies (turned out that Max was only too pleased to get rid of food that was left over at the end of the evening). The hallway was cluttered with all manner of trainers and sports shoes scattered where they had been left and a hockey stick stretched from one side of the narrow hallway to the other as if to barricade any visitors out of the building. She entered the living room to find Angus and Sonny watching *Captain Marvel* so loud it was all she could do to grab the remote and turn it down. They were both spreadeagled across the two couches with kebab boxes spilling their debris on the murky brown carpet and several bottles of lager upended on the floor. There was also a tub of Ben and Jerry's ice cream at Angus's feet. Half-eaten and melted to a sticky goo.

Kim realised that Richard may have seen this. This absolute domestic chaos. He may have smelt it as well. Lamb meat, mint sauce, grease, feet and some gases that had clearly been released into the air via the two lumps reclining on the sofas.

It was all Kim could do not to gag.

She caught sight of herself in the mirror above the gas fire. Her hair was limp and dejected, her face was flushed with the heat coming off the fryers, and her mascara had smudged under her eyes.

'Is that free chips I can smell?' asked Angus, leaping up and grabbing the bag from her.

Kim was surprised he could smell anything above the odours they had accumulated during their evening.

Angus delved into the bag and chucked a packet of wrapped up chips at Sonny.

‘How did it go?’ asked Sonny. ‘I mean apart from your husband turning up and all that.’

‘Epic,’ said Angus, stuffing his face with chips and peering round Kim to continue watching the film.

‘Just peachy,’ said Kim. ‘I think I’ll just get a cup of tea and go to bed,’ she said, not willing to rake over the evening’s events with two of her housemates. ‘Is Harry in?’

‘Shagging the neighbour,’ replied Angus, nodding towards the front of the house vaguely in the direction of where Suki lived.

‘Is he?’ asked Sonny, turning sharply to Angus. ‘Is he really? Has he told you? Are they shagging?’

Kim turned to look at Angus. Angus looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

‘Well if he isn’t shagging her he’s wasting a hell of a lot of time over there,’ he said with his mouth full of chips.

Kim bit her lip. She couldn’t comment. Not on any level. She’d been warned off that department very clearly.

‘I think they just like hanging out,’ said Sonny, nodding vigorously at Kim. She smiled at him gratefully.

She sighed and went into the kitchen.

Carnage.

Once again, breadcrumbs, sugar, coffee granules and milk littered the work surface. A damp tea bag sat on the side next to the bin. Not in the bin. Next to the bin. Pizza boxes were piled high next to the bin. Not in the bin. Next to the bin. Salt and ketchup stained the table. Dirty pots attempted to approach the sink without actually reaching it. She’d tidied up before she went and did her shift but it didn’t take long in a house of three boys for it to get in a state again.

All she could think was that Richard had seen this. Seen how they were living. And that actually Harry’s room was the worst of all. Richard in his lovely new coat had observed all this.

Kim couldn't get it out of her mind that Alison and Richard had bought a coat together. And it was a really nice coat. And that really bothered her. She knew they must have bought it together because there was no way on this planet that Richard would have bought a coat like that on his own. It showed taste and skill in the clothes shopping department which Richard didn't have but she knew that Alison did have as they had been shopping together many times. Their annual trip to Manchester had been a treat that Kim had really looked forward to. Alison had lived in Manchester so knew all the cool boutique shops and best coffee houses and great little lunchtime eateries. Kim had loved it. She'd felt so cosmopolitan with her worldly-wise companion. It was a far cry from trawling the high street chains in Lancaster then popping into Greggs for a sausage roll.

Consequently, Kim could picture the entire scenario of Alison and Richard buying a coat together. With lack of access to his wardrobe, Kim had given Alison the golden ticket to revamp Richard's look. There would have been no option but to suggest that Richard buy new clothes because heaven knows how long Kim would take to send him a set of keys. She had given Alison free rein to pull out all the stops and take him on a joyous trip to Manchester. There would be a quick stop at Foundation Coffee House with its cool intellectual vibe then a cruise down Cathedral Street leading to Harvey Nichols where they could peruse the designer labels before a leisurely lunch on the second floor overlooking the city. The distressing thing was that Kim knew that had she suggested to Richard such a day out he would have turned his nose up. Said he wasn't interested in shopping. Told her to go but he had better things to do, implying that spending time shopping and eating was not for someone of his intellect. He wouldn't have said that, of course, but she would have most definitely felt it. Rather than shopping and eating he would have suggested a good solid walk in the Lake District, which she really enjoyed to be fair. It would involve a 6.30 a.m. departure from Lancaster to beat the crowds swarming to the national park. Then there would be a bacon butty at a roadside café before stomping up a massive peak with a sandwich stop at the top.

Then back to Lancaster for a late lunch cooked by Richard. He did do a fantastic roast.

They were good days. Great days in fact. But it would have been nice to intersperse that type of leisure activity suggested by him with the odd day of fancy shopping in Manchester. She occasionally could persuade him into a sale in an outdoor clothing shop in Keswick but she knew that never in a million years would he have agreed to frequent the designer shops that adorned the streets of Manchester.

But Alison had clearly managed it. Convinced him it was a necessity and then she would have made the experience so lovely and enjoyable that Richard would be left wondering why he had never partaken of the pastime before.

It would have been a dream day for her to spend with her husband.

And Alison had stolen it. Along with her husband.

The image of Richard in his lovely coat was absolutely burned on her mind and the whole backstory of how he got to purchase the coat kept rotating over and over in her head, causing her sleepless nights and a near total disappearance of appetite.

For the next couple of weeks she moved around like a zombie as she attempted to set herself some kind of civilised lifestyle.

She bought fresh fruit and vegetables and put them in the fridge, fearing for their safety amongst the aggressive bottles of lager and industrial sized butter and cheese and half-eaten cans of beans.

She set about keeping the house clean and tidy, in gratitude for them letting her stay and in accordance with the rules set by the boys. It soon became clear that the task was in some ways similar to the painting of the Forth Bridge. When she got it all shipshape it unravelled again the minute they all got home. But she never complained. Never ranted in the way she would have at home. How could she?

In truth she barely saw her housemates. Partly through consciously trying to avoid them so as not to get in their way and partly due to the fact that their timetables totally clashed. When they were getting back from university she would be heading out to work. When she came home late in the evening they would be either out or barricaded into their rooms. She slept in in the morning purposefully getting up late to avoid any kind of awkward chat. She was relieved to work pretty much every night. Sadly, however, she was reminded every time she approached her place of work of the altercation with Richard when he arrived to retrieve the house keys. The image of his lovely new coat rotated round and round in her head along with some of the things he had said that kept coming back to haunt her.

'I know you were only a hairdresser, but seriously, frying chips? What are you doing?'

She'd not thought much about it at the time but as she raked over and over the evening, day after day, that short statement was sending her into all kinds of confusion.

'Only a hairdresser.'

The more she thought about it, the more it stung like Richard had slapped her. Was that what he really thought of her all along? She couldn't decide if she was angry or disappointed. Angry that that was Richard's view of her profession. Disappointed in herself that she had married such a man. That she had believed all along that Richard did not look down on her, that he respected her job, but with that one word, Richard had stuffed her way down below him. That word had confirmed all her fears that she had fought so hard throughout their entire marriage to deny. All along he had thought she was *'only a hairdresser'*. His polite enquiries about her work and how her day had been were just that – polite. Not genuinely interested, not concerned over what was happening in a major part of her life.

It felt like he had made a mockery of her entire existence. She loved being a hairdresser. Sure, maybe if things had gone differently, she may have gone down a different path, but she genuinely enjoyed it and besides it worked for the family. Her

being flexible in her career had afforded them the type of family life they both wanted. The ability to spend time with their son.

Knowing Richard saw her as ‘only a hairdresser’ made her question entirely how he saw her and even why he had married her.

She was contemplating all this as she spent yet another depressing afternoon watching gameshows and marvelling at a man from Colchester not knowing where the 2012 Olympics were held when her phone rang. Her heart leapt and she realised with dismay that she hoped it was Richard calling. Calling to help her make sense of the thoughts that were circling her mind. Had he ever really loved her? Why had he married ‘only a hairdresser’?

Unfortunately for Kim she could see from her phone screen that it wasn’t Richard calling. It was her mother. This was bad, really bad. Kim’s mother never called her. She always waited for her to call then complained that they hadn’t spoken in so long. Kim had called her the week after she’d left Lancaster, to be met with utter disbelief and lack of any understanding. In the end Kim had rung off, not being able to cope with her mother’s lack of support for her leaving her beautiful four-bedroom house to move to a terrace in a strange city. Kim couldn’t really explain it to herself, never mind her mum, and so she had ended the call, promising to call back another time.

‘Hello, Mum,’ Kim said when she picked up the phone.

‘Hello,’ said Janice. ‘Just ringing to see how you are. You’ve not been to see us. Your dad’s just said you’ve not been to see us since Richard’s party.’

‘I’m still in Nottingham,’ she told her.

‘Oh. Why? Shouldn’t you be back by now?’

‘I’m going to stay a bit longer than I thought,’ replied Kim.

‘Why’s that then?’

‘Still trying to sort myself out, Mum.’

‘Can’t you do that back here?’

‘Not really. I can’t really face anyone at the moment.’

‘But what about your job?’

‘I’ve called them all. Told them I’m taking a break for a while. Given them Sheila’s number.’

‘I could do with you coming to do my roots.’

Kim paused. ‘Sheila will do it. She’s on Park Road. She’ll fit you in.’

Janice stayed quiet for a moment.

‘Who’s looking after Richard?’ she asked eventually.

‘What?’

‘Who’s looking after Richard whilst you are away?’

‘I don’t know, Mum,’ she replied. She figured she could say Alison but she really didn’t think that Alison would be looking after him. Alison wasn’t that type of woman. Her and Neil had had a strict cooking and cleaning rota that Kim had thought was a bit unfair on Neil if she was honest given that he travelled so much with his job. She figured that Alison wouldn’t be taking up all the domestic chores that she had, at the time, happily taken on. Richard, for the first time since they’d been married, would probably be having to look after himself.

‘Perhaps he’s looking after himself?’ she told her mother.

There was another silence at the end of the phone.

‘He’ll never manage that big house on his own. Though I suppose there’ll be less cleaning without you and Harry there. How’s he eating? I hope he’s not living on takeaways. I’m not sure leaving him to manage that house on his own is wise, Kim. Not with his big job and everything. He’ll need to get someone in, I imagine. Until you come back.’

Kim stared at the phone in disbelief. What planet was her mother on? She sounded like she was feeling sorry for her husband.

‘You were listening, were you, when I told you that Richard had an affair? With Alison next door.’

‘Yes, I heard you. Of course I did. But you’ll get him back. He’ll see sense. They always do. But you won’t get him back whilst you are down in Nottingham. You need to get back here. Look after him. Make him realise what he is missing.’

‘Is that what you think I should do, take him back?’

There was a pause. ‘Of course you should, Kim. That lovely house and those lovely holidays you go on. I couldn’t believe it when you brought him home. I thought, my Kim is set for life here. Now he’s made a mistake. I understand it would have been a shock, but don’t dwell on it too long, hey, or else you may have missed your chance. He might think you don’t care. You get back up here, Kim. That’s my advice. You can’t get back together if you’re not there.’

Kim felt all the energy sap from her. This was her mother talking. Her own mother. Telling her to go back to a lying cheat because he gave her a nice lifestyle and he had a good job. She wondered if Richard had been a bin man she would have reacted in the same way. Janice had always been in awe of Richard and it was the only time Kim could remember her mother talking about her daughter with any pride, when she’d overheard her tell their neighbour that she was engaged to a professor. Her voice dripped with delight that day. Was it any wonder that Janice was desperate for Kim to stay married to a man with such an esteemed profession?

‘I’ve got a job in a chip shop,’ Kim told Janice, wishing to change the subject. She couldn’t quite process the level at which her mother was hurting her right now.

‘A job where?’ she asked.

‘In a chippy,’ replied Kim. ‘It’s just at the end of the road. Just temporary so I don’t have to rely on Richard for money.’

‘A chippy?’ her mother questioned.

‘Yes.’

Her mother sighed. ‘And you with a son at university. It’s hardly setting him the right example, is it? And I’m sure Richard doesn’t want to see you working in a chip shop.’

‘He already has. He came down to get his keys.’

‘He saw you working in a chip shop? Heavens, Kim. What would he have thought?’

Kim shook her head. Her mother’s morals clearly had taken a hike somewhere whilst she’d been away. Or maybe they had always been this wayward; it was just that this situation had brought them out in a bad light.

‘Look, I’ll have to go, Mum,’ she said. ‘I need to go to work soon and I need to eat before I go or else I’ll end up eating chips again.’

‘Now don’t go letting yourself go and put weight on,’ chipped in Janice. ‘That won’t impress Richard either.’

‘Right, thanks Mum,’ said Kim, feeling close to tears. ‘Gotta go. Bye then. Say hi to Dad.’

‘Bye love. And come back soon. Just you think about what I said.’

Kim spent another hour thinking about it and the more she thought about it the more she felt depressed. It seemed like her biggest achievement in life had been marrying Richard, according to her mum.

How was that supposed to make her feel?

And so now she wasn’t with him, was she worth nothing? Should she be trying to get him back?

But he’d bought a new coat, with Alison. And she was pretty sure that after that there was no turning back. She wouldn’t be able to get him back even if she wanted to.

Chapter 14

Three weeks went by and she found herself wandering into the kitchen to find the Ryvita and low-fat cream cheese as she did every lunchtime. It was easy, required no preparation and she could kid herself that she was being healthy. She was just spreading the last of the Philadelphia over a cracker and wondering if she had the energy to go and buy some more when Sonny came barrelling into the kitchen.

‘Will you cut my hair?’ he gasped, bursting into the kitchen.

Kim had been dying to cut Sonny’s hair ever since he arrived. It was too long, curls bouncing over his collar and on the top of his head like an overexcited crowd at a Harry Styles concert. It was the perfect reflection of Sonny’s personality, bouncy and cheery, a bit in your face and a bit quirky. Totally unique, it just needed a decent stylist like her to pull it into order.

‘Of course,’ she said, happy to have something to focus on. ‘Shall we do it now? My kit is upstairs.’

‘Oh, would you?’ gasped Sonny. ‘You are such a lifesaver.’

‘Why don’t you go and give it a wash and I’ll set up in here. I’ll be ready as soon as you are.’

‘Brilliant, just brilliant,’ he said, walking up to hug her. ‘Absolutely brilliant.’

Kim felt a tiny sigh of contentment as she unrolled her cloth case surrounding her scissors and combs. They gleamed at her as if to say, ‘welcome back,’ and she felt a tinge of regret that she hadn’t gone further afield to try and find a job in a salon. Still, she was committed to the chip shop now so would have to content herself with perhaps being on hand to do the boys’ hair whenever they needed it.

Sonny bounced in, wet hair dripping on his T-shirt, blue towel clutched in his hand.

‘Wow,’ he said, stopping in his tracks. ‘You have a cape and everything. So you are actually like a real hairdresser?’

Kim laughed. Sonny really was the best person. Even when he was half insulting you, you couldn’t take offence.

‘Yes, I am a real hairdresser,’ she said, indicating for him to sit down. ‘I had over fifty clients back home.’

‘Mum kind of cut mine,’ said Sonny. ‘Well I told her what to do whilst I watched in a mirror. I was kind of going through a whole New Romantics thing, you know, a bit Spandau Ballet and Duran Duran. I even dyed it once. That was fun.’

Kim draped her black cape around his shoulders and picked the blue towel up from his lap and lightly dried his hair with it as he carried on with the history of his hair.

‘I put some highlights in,’ he giggled. ‘Dad went mad. Said I looked like an idiot.’ Sonny shrugged. ‘But I thought they looked dead cool.’ He looked up at Kim. ‘You would have been horrified at them, I would imagine. I’m sure I did them all wrong.’

‘Not at all,’ said Kim, grinning back. ‘I bet you looked a knock out. Now, tell me,’ she said, running a comb through the curls on the top of his head. ‘What brings you to the salon today?’

‘Well,’ said Sonny, with a sigh. ‘It all needs to go. I think I need it super short, you know, sharp, like super tidy. Make me look more grown-up. Make me look like an honest, hard-working student, make me look ... make me look ... well, make me look more “geography student”,’ he said, holding his fingers up in quote marks.

Kim paused her combing, listening to Sonny’s request. He was being very specific but she wasn’t quite sure what motivation lay behind the drastic change he was requesting. She had a slight taming in mind whereas he seemed to want a total identity change.

‘And may I ask what is motivating this change of style?’ she asked.

Sonny didn’t answer immediately. She couldn’t see his face but she sensed a frown; certainly his shoulders were frowning. His body language was always so up but now it was most definitely down.

‘I just ...’ he hesitated. ‘I just ... I just think I need to grow up a bit, you know. I’m at university now. I need to show some maturity. Make an effort to fit in.’

‘Fit in?’ asked Kim. She looked at Sonny’s particular ensemble today. He was wearing a bumble bee striped sweater which was possibly knitted by himself. Underneath was a wing collared shirt, the type you’d wear with a dicky bow, and he was wearing red cargo shorts with Timberland style boots. It was all way too much and he may have got away with it on a more creative course packed with students trying to stand out, but Kim imagined he was three colours over the allotted accepted number for geography students.

‘You want a geography student haircut to try and fit in?’ she asked him.

Sonny nodded vigorously. ‘Yes,’ he said. But all the joy had gone out of his voice. When he’d talked about his home styling efforts he’d spoken of fun and laughter. His request did not strike her as coming from a place of joy.

She raised her scissors to start and then paused mid-air.

‘Has something happened?’ she asked.

‘What do you mean?’ he said, turning to look at her sharply with a look that said he knew exactly what she meant.

‘Well, I just wondered what had sparked this sudden decision, that’s all.’

‘Nothing,’ he said with a shrug, turning his face away.

But she knew there was more to it. She carried on combing.

‘You know you have a lovely wave in your hair,’ she said.

Sonny nodded, his shoulders still slumped. Kim brought her scissors up to begin to cut but something stopped her. She knew it wasn't right. This hair did not want to be cut. She needed a change of tack. She carried on combing, pretending to look at lengths. Stalling for time.

'So how was uni today?' she asked.

Sonny shrugged again. 'So, so,' he said.

'Right,' replied Kim. 'You meet anyone nice on your course?'

'Not really,' he answered. 'They all seem so ... so ... serious. We had a tutorial the other day and they were talking about maps and I made a joke about how much I love maps and I'd be lost without them and nobody laughed. Nobody. They just stared at me. So I don't really say anything in tutorials anymore.'

'Doesn't sound like you,' said Kim, pretending to snip but not taking anything off.

'Just easier that way,' he sighed. 'But ...' he paused.

'But what?' she asked.

'Well, we had to split into groups to work on a project and well, no one wanted to work with me, which you know I should be used to by now, I mean it's not like it's not happened to me before, but I just thought coming to uni would be a fresh start away from all that, you know?'

'So you didn't get picked and now you want to look like them so you get picked next time?' stated Kim.

Sonny shrugged. 'Guess so,' he muttered. 'Thought it was worth a try.'

Kim sighed. This was heartbreaking. Sonny was one of the most genuine, unique people she had met in a long time. And the idiots around him were going to ruin him. Just because he was different, then he was feeling the need to conform. But Sonny different was good. Sonny different was an absolute breath of fresh air. Sonny different brought a smile to her sad face pretty much every day. Why couldn't everyone else see

that was special? Why couldn't Sonny see that that was special?

She continued to comb and part hair, trying to work out what to say, but no words came. She made to try and start cutting but she just couldn't do it.

'I worked with Annie yesterday,' she said casually. 'She asked after you.'

She hadn't, but Kim was desperate to divert Sonny in any way possible.

He spun round. 'Did she?' he asked, his eyes lighting up.

She nodded. 'She had another amazing look,' she continued. 'She looked like Elizabeth Taylor. She's dyed her hair jet black and blow dried it out. She looked brilliant.'

'I bet she did,' said Sonny, nodding.

'I so admire her,' Kim continued. 'I mean she's eighteen and I've never seen someone more comfortable really standing out in a crowd than her. She rocks up to the fish and chip shop with the biggest smile on her face and serves pie and pea suppers in diamanté earrings for goodness' sake.'

'She's a legend,' sighed Sonny.

'She totally is,' said Kim, shaking her head. 'I wish I'd have worked out at such a young age that the only thing that matters about how you look is that you feel good. Not how it makes others feel. She's totally nailed that.'

'Well I think she looks brilliant too,' said Sonny. 'Like the most amazing person I have ever seen.'

'So if you could look like anyone, who would you want to look like?' asked Kim. 'What would be the look that would make you feel great?'

Sonny shook his head. 'I'm not sure,' he said. Then he laughed. 'I dressed up as Elvis Presley once,' he said, his eyes shining. 'I had the moves and everything.' He stood up and did the perfect Elvis style hip thrust. 'It was the best night ever. My mate Cassie's sixteenth birthday. It was so cool.'

‘Did you have a quiff?’

‘Oh yeah. I so looked the part. Sequinned jumpsuit and everything.’

‘Right,’ said Kim. ‘So let’s do a quiff then.’ She raised her scissors. ‘If it’s a quiff that made you feel good then let’s do a quiff. That’s much more suited to the Sonny I know than the boring geography look.’

Sonny stared at her open mouthed. ‘Do you think?’

‘Of course I think. You haven’t the face for short hair. Just won’t work. Whereas a quiff? Wow, that’s going to knock them dead. And imagine how Annie is going to react. It’s going to blow her mind.’

‘Do you think?’ said Sonny again, starting to look excited.

Kim nodded. ‘I do. She’s going to see someone with some fun and imagination, not someone who can only muster up a dull, boring, uninspiring look. She is going to see a kindred spirit is what she is going to see.’

‘Do it,’ said Sonny, nodding vigorously. ‘Just do it.’

Kim set to work. She started by trimming the untidy sides, cutting his hair close to his head whilst leaving a hint of sideburn. Then she gave the same treatment to the hair on the back of his head before getting to work on the top. She thinned it out, giving it shape and texture before creating a cool-looking contemporary quiff, using some wax and gel then finally adding a touch of hairspray. She stood in front of him and smiled. It suited him. Gave him attitude, enhanced his out-there personality.

‘Go and have a look,’ she said.

He went into the lounge to look in the mirror above the gas fire. He came back grinning from ear to ear.

‘I feel great,’ he said in wonder.

‘And that is what matters,’ said Kim. ‘Oh and you look great by the way.’

He nodded. He stepped forward and put his arms around her. 'Thank you,' he said. When he stepped back she thought he might have had a tear in his eye.

'My absolute pleasure,' she replied. 'And by the way, you will get picked. But by the people worth picking you. You'll see.'

He nodded then bounded back into the lounge to take another look.

'Isn't this just like going to the real hairdresser's? he shouted through to Kim. 'You go in, determined to ask for what you want and come out with something entirely different.'

Kim laughed. 'You're right,' she said. 'Just like a real hairdresser's.'

Sonny bounded back in again and hugged her. Kim could feel a tear spring to her eye. She was so touched but all she could think of was that she wished her son would hug her like that.

'Would you like to share one of Mum's frozen meals with me?' he asked.

'No, I couldn't do that,' said Kim. 'They're yours.'

'No, really. You would be doing me a favour. I can't remember how to defrost them so I'm behind on eating them. Please help me eat them, Kim. Please. And show me how to defrost them again. Please,' he pleaded.

Kim looked at him for a moment. She thought about the packet of mince she'd bought that she was going to turn into spaghetti bolognese and freeze in one-person portions in an entirely depressing way. The thought of it made her want to cry. Eating alone was something that she just wasn't getting used to. There was nothing lonelier than cooking for yourself and then sitting down at a table with your Hotmail.

'Tell you what,' said Kim. 'How would you like it if I taught you how to cook a meal, then you can go home to your mum at Christmas and cook for her?'

Sonny's eyes grew wide. 'Would you?' he asked. 'Wow, if I went home and cooked my mum a meal she would so think the university fees were worth it.'

Kim laughed. 'Well come on then. Let's show your mum you are really being educated.'

After Kim had got Sonny to wash his hands and don an apron she announced the first rule of successful cooking. Picking the right music to cook to.

'Is it really?' asked Sonny, wide-eyed and innocent as usual.

'Well technically, no. Actually the first rule of cooking is to pour yourself a glass of wine but it's perhaps a bit early for that so let's stick with the music first and I'll introduce wine at our next cookery lesson. Now what are you going to ask Alexa to play?'

'Oh God,' said Sonny, putting his head in his hands. 'The pressure. The pressure. I don't want to get it wrong. Wow, so much pressure.'

Kim was already starting to think this was a bad idea. They could be here some time. 'How about some Queen. Can't go wrong with Queen and we could start with "Under Pressure"?''

'Oh that's brilliant. Of course. Great idea. Let's start with that.'

Once the music had been lined up, Kim told Sonny to find a knife and a chopping board whilst she hunted down the carrots and onions she had bought earlier. Sonny successfully produced a chopping board but arrived at the kitchen table with a cutlery knife. Kim managed to find a sharp knife which was of course dirty having been used to butter toast sometime in the last week. She scrubbed it clean whilst also digging out a vegetable peeler which of course hadn't been used in the month since they had all moved in. She handed Sonny the peeler and told him to peel four carrots. It soon became apparent that Sonny had never peeled a carrot in his life and she was forced to take the carrot and the peeler off him and give him a close-up demonstration.

‘How come you have never peeled carrots before?’ asked Kim, trying hard to keep the judgemental tone out of her voice.

Sonny looked at her. ‘I have two older sisters,’ he replied with a shrug. ‘They are going to be busted to know I can peel a carrot, I cannot tell you. Totally busted.’

It took Sonny some time to get the carrots done and Kim was already feeling a knot in her stomach thinking about how she was going to show him how to dice an onion. In the end she did half then handed the knife over as she hardly dared watch as he totally butchered the other half.

‘It just takes practice,’ she said. ‘Remember I have been doing this for what ... nearly forty years. You’ll get the hang of it.’

‘Wow, forty years cutting onions,’ said Sonny, shaking his head. ‘There is a frightening thought.’

It was a good job that Kim was actually starting her shift later on that night or else they would have needed to pause the bolognese cooking and resume it the following evening. As it was it took nearly an hour before the bolognese sauce was bubbling gently on the stove top with Sonny staring at it as though he had just invented a cure for the common cold.

‘I did that,’ he said, pointing at it in glee.

Actually I probably did most of it, thought Kim but she wasn’t going to discourage him.

‘What’s going on in here?’ boomed Angus as he walked in the kitchen door. ‘Do I smell grub?’

‘I cooked, I cooked!’ said Sonny, bouncing up and down. ‘Look at it, Angus. It’s real food. And I did it. Can you believe that?’

Angus peered into the pot and sniffed. ‘Frankly no,’ he replied. ‘Looks way beyond you.’

‘Kim helped, of course, told me what to do, but I actually did it, didn’t I Kim?’

‘He did,’ agreed Kim looking cautiously at Angus, worried that she had overstepped her position in the household. She was trying to be ‘insignificant’ and here she was teaching Sonny how to cook.

‘Wow – your hair,’ said Angus, pointing at Sonny’s head. ‘Where did you get that done? You actually look like you might get a girlfriend with that hair.’

‘Really?’ gasped Sonny, his eyes wide. ‘Do you think so? Kim did it. I wanted a geography haircut but she convinced me to go with something more ... more ...’

‘Suited to your excellent personality,’ added Kim.

Sonny beamed at her. ‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘That’s it. Hit the nail on the head.’

‘So when is it ready?’ asked Angus.

‘What?’ said Sonny.

‘When will it be ready? When are we eating?’

‘You are going to eat my food?’ questioned Sonny.

‘Well you’re not going to eat all that, are you? So when are we sitting down for dinner? I could do with a quick shower. So shall we say fifteen mins?’ He looked at Sonny then at Kim. Sonny looked at Kim.

‘Perfect,’ said Kim. ‘Sonny can put the spaghetti on and I’ll set the table.’

‘Great,’ nodded Angus. ‘Spag bol, is it? A nice glass of red will go down well with that, I reckon. See you in fifteen.’ He turned and left the room.

Kim thought she might faint, so excited was she by the thought of sharing a meal with two other people. And with her two new housemates at that. How she had missed sitting down and eating a meal with someone. Eating alone should be banned.

She talked Sonny through cooking the pasta step by step as she cleaned up the table and set three places. She wondered if she should text Harry to see if he was around to join them but

didn't dare given during their last conversation he had been very clear. She needed to stay out of his way.

Angus arrived back in the kitchen with a bottle of red wine in hand, just as Kim was showing Sonny how to drain the pasta. She wondered if Angus was actually missing shared meals as much as she was. She hurriedly got three wine glasses out and put them on the table and filled three glasses with water. She really shouldn't arrive at the chip shop for a shift a bit drunk – that would never do. Max would not be impressed.

'So,' she said to Sonny. 'Why don't you put both pans on the mat and perhaps we can help ourselves or shall I be ...' She stopped herself short. She was about to say 'Shall I be mother,' before realising that would perhaps not go down well.

Angus instantly rose from his chair and grabbed some utensils and started serving out spaghetti expertly. No mean feat. My, she'd like to meet his mother. There really was some excellent breeding there underneath all the macho type stuff. He knew how to handle himself in many a situation including doling out pasta.

It wasn't long before they all had full plates in front of them and Angus had poured them all a large glass of delicious-looking red wine. Kim thought this might be the first time she had felt anything close to happiness since she had left the family home. The only thing that was missing was Harry. She wished with all her heart he was there and smiling like the rest of them.

'To spag bol,' said Angus, raising his glass.

'To my spag bol,' said Sonny, beaming.

'Cheers,' said Kim, raising her glass and digging in.

There was a companionable silence as the three of them tested the food followed by some mmms and then Angus announcing that it wasn't half bad.

'Picture!' said Sonny suddenly, bouncing out of his chair and grabbing his phone off the side. 'Need to take a picture.'

This will send my friends wild back at home. Come on, lean in for a selfie.'

Sonny put his arm around Kim's shoulders and extended his arm out to take a photo. Kim instinctively leaned in the opposite direction.

'Come on, Kim, I can't get you in,' said Sonny.

'You don't want me in your student photos,' she cried. 'Your mates will just want to know who the old bat is.'

'Oh they know all about you already,' said Sonny.

'Do they?' asked Kim. 'What have you told them?'

'Well, the truth, I guess. That your husband is a twat and you're staying here a while. Oh, they loved the chip shop stand-off by the way. Kept them all mightily entertained.'

Kim wasn't sure that she was comfortable being the gossip amongst Sonny's circle of friends from Devon.

'Don't worry,' said Angus. 'I've not breathed a word about you to anyone outside the house. Not since the whole thing with that girl I brought home. No one knows you exist.'

Kim stared at Angus, equally horrified. Just about summed up her life. No one really knew she existed.

She heard the front door slam and her heart lifted. It had to be Harry. Great, he was home to hopefully join in the fun, but she wasn't exactly sure how her son was going to react to her sat down for a meal with his two housemates. She had, of course, consciously made sure that there was enough spaghetti cooked and bolognese sauce left for him to join them. She was his mother after all.

'Harry!' cried Sonny as soon as he walked in. 'Your mum is the best. She taught me how to make this food. I cooked a meal; can you believe it? I used the cooker and everything. Come and have some. There's so much left. It's good, isn't it, Angus? Tell Harry how good it is.'

'It's well edible, mate,' agreed Angus.

Kim looked at her son. She'd not really been able to scrutinise him recently. He looked pale and drawn. Like he wasn't getting nearly enough sleep. His clothes, whilst appearing clean (thank goodness) – albeit dark clothes hide a multitude of sins – looked crumpled as though they had been repeatedly thrown on the floor and picked up again the next day to wear. She wondered how he would smell if she ever got close enough.

He slung his bag on the floor and sauntered over. She jumped to her feet and got him a dish. She just couldn't help herself. She piled on the spaghetti and then the sauce and placed it in front of him. She noticed immediately that all the cheese was gone to sprinkle on the top. She knew there was none left in the fridge. They'd used a whole slab of parmesan. She felt herself start to panic. She knew of course that Harry always had a heap of parmesan on his bolognese. Always. She'd have to go and buy some. There was no way he was going to eat that without his customary huge pile of parmesan that he would definitely stir in until the dish became almost half parmesan/half bolognese.

'I'll pop to the corner shop and get more parmesan,' she said in a high-pitched voice. 'We ate it all. I'm so sorry, Harry.'

Angus bellowed with laughter. 'Parmesan,' he said. 'The shop won't have parmesan. Dairylea maybe, but not parmesan.'

'Oh,' said Kim sitting down suddenly. 'I'm so sorry, Harry. Can't believe we ate it all.'

Harry shook his head. 'It's fine,' he said, speaking with his mouth full, spitting shards of mince and pasta. His breeding clearly wasn't half as good as Angus's and that was all her fault, of course. And he was eating like he hadn't had a decent meal in days. And that was all her fault as well, of course. She was here. Right under his nose and she couldn't even feed her son.

There was an awkward silence that Kim felt the need to fill. This was an occasion to celebrate. Them all sitting and having

a meal. She hoped very much they could do this more often.

But then she ruined it.

She uttered the immortal words no child ever wants to hear and no parent should ever utter. The phrase should be absolutely banned the world over. But she just couldn't help herself. It just came out.

'Have you had a good day?' she asked her son.

'Jesus, Mum,' he gasped, sweeping his dish off the table and getting up whilst still shovelling hot food into his mouth. 'I told you not to ask.' He turned and left the kitchen.

Kim was mortified.

'Teenagers,' said Sonny, shaking his head sadly.

Chapter 15

By the time Kim arrived for her shift at the chippy she thought she had got herself back together after Harry's outburst. Harry being upset with her brought into sharp focus what a mess her life was in and how her mess was encroaching on Harry's life. She didn't know what to do about that but she had a shift to do and so even though her face was puffy with tears she had to gather herself enough to function as a normal human being. Thankfully it was just her and Max on today so as long as she kept her head down, she should be okay.

Of course emotions don't listen to firm instructions. Serious talks about not escaping at inopportune moments seem to somehow go unheard. 'Do not cry in front of the least appropriate person during this difficult time,' somehow is a command that tear ducts take very little heed of and so it only took Max asking her to help him unload some stuff from out the back of the van for that simple request to inspire a tsunami of tears. She tried to hide the turmoil as she hauled a pack of Tango through the door but the tears were flowing so freely that even the most unsympathetic man on the planet – i.e. Max – had to comment.

'Your husband been visiting again?' he asked as they passed in the backyard.

'No,' she gulped. 'No, actually. Just ignore me. I'll be all right.'

And so he did. They passed each other several times marching in and out of the shop with goods piled high. Kim continued to sniff hard in a desperate hope to suck her tears back in whilst Max looked stony faced as he handed her a six-pack of ketchup bottles.

‘Is he begging you to come home?’ Max asked eventually when it was clear ignoring the tears wasn’t going to make them go away.

Kim looked at him agog. ‘No!’ she said. ‘They bought a coat together.’

She didn’t elaborate, assuming it was obvious that the fact they had bought a coat together meant her husband had no intention of wanting her back.

‘Who did?’ asked Max.

‘Richard and Alison.’

‘Who are they?’ he asked, furrowing his brow.

Jesus, thought Kim. How can he not know the key villains in her story?

She sighed. ‘Richard is my husband, the guy who came to get the keys ...’

‘Right, yeah. Of course. So who is the other person?’

Kim shook her head. Richard and Alison occupied so much of her thoughts that it was impossible to believe that her main work colleague did not know them intimately as well.

‘Alison,’ she said. She still hated saying her name. ‘Is my next door neighbour who my husband Richard is currently shacked up with and is out on the town buying coats with.’

Max stared at Kim, still looking confused.

‘Why is he living with her and what’s the big deal about buying a coat? It’s just a coat.’

Now Kim was confused. What the hell did Max think was going on here?

‘He’s living with her because they were having an affair.’

‘They were having an affair?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ said Kim. ‘Of course they were. What did you think was happening?’

Max shook his head looking totally flummoxed. ‘Well I assumed you had left your husband because you were having

an affair.’

‘I most certainly wasn’t.’

‘Right, I’m sorry about that. Erm ... err ...’

‘How could you think that?’ Kim was starting to feel angry.

Max was still looking startled and confused.

‘Err ... err ... because that seems to be what normally happens. Good-looking woman like you and a not so good-looking chap like your husband. I just assumed you had a better offer. It often happens like that, doesn’t it?’

‘No!’ cried Kim. This altercation had certainly dried up her tears. Nothing like a bit of discord to stop yourself wallowing in your own self-pity.

‘Oh,’ said Max. ‘Right. Well, best get the rest of the soft drinks out the van.’ He turned round and headed outside.

‘I’m totally the injured party, here,’ she said, running after him. ‘None of it was my fault at all. The night he told me he was having an affair I’d thrown him a surprise fiftieth birthday party and said in front of everyone there how much I loved him and how he’d made my life complete. I very nearly quoted bloody *Jerry Maguire*. You know, “you complete me”. The only reason I didn’t was because he’s never watched a romcom in his life.’

‘He’s never watched *Jerry Maguire*?’ said Max, turning round and looking almost as horrified about this revelation as about the fact Richard had an affair.

‘No, none of them,’ she confirmed. ‘Not one. Not *Pretty Woman*, not *When Harry Met Sally*, not *You’ve Got Mail*, not *Sleepless in Seattle*, not one of them. Zilch.’

Max hauled a massive cannister of oil out of the back of the van and strode back towards the back door. But Kim wasn’t finished with him. Her anger at being assumed the perpetrator of her own sorry destiny was providing great relief to her sadness.

‘So none of it is my fault, you see,’ she said, striding after him. ‘He’s totally put me in this position. He’s humiliated me,

forced me out of my home, meaning I've had to move in with my son in his student house share and now, not only is my relationship with my husband totally ruined, my relationship with my son is because he hates me and won't talk to me and I have absolutely no idea what to say to him.' She paused, breathing heavily. 'And you assumed it was me who got me into this mess?' she said, standing in front of him with her hands on her hips.

Max turned to look at her. She wasn't sure if he'd zoned out and not even heard her tirade. He wrinkled his brow.

'I still don't get the coat,' he said.

Why were some people so dense? 'Because Richard didn't have the keys to the house he didn't have any clothes, so him and Alison went clothes shopping together, which Richard always flatly refused to do with me, and bought this lovely coat that makes him look great and he never would have done that with me so ... so ...'

'It's definitely over?' asked Max.

'I think so,' said Kim.

'Because they bought a coat together?'

'Yes!' said Kim, feeling even more exasperated.

'I think there is probably more to it than that,' stated Max.

'Of course there is,' she said. 'I'm just saying that buying a coat together is like another level in a relationship.'

'More so than having sex?' he asked bluntly.

That knocked the wind out of her sails. She audibly gasped.

'Yes,' she said eventually. 'It is. Anyone can shag someone. Taking someone on a successful shopping trip is an entirely different ball game.'

Max stared at her. 'It was Annie's birthday present for me,' he said, nodding.

Now what is he talking about? thought Kim.

‘My ex – Rachel – came home with this massive Lego set for Annie’s tenth birthday. I knew we couldn’t afford it. We’d agreed a smaller set but this massive *Harry Potter* themed kit arrived. She reckoned she’d been saving her tips and it was in the sale. We’d just bought this place and we were really strapped for cash. She was working as a receptionist in a hotel. I couldn’t believe it. I knew it was a fancy hotel, but tipping the receptionist? Anyway, I took the box out of the bag to have a look and the receipt fell out. I thought I’d see how good a deal she’d got which is when I noticed it hadn’t been paid for in cash. It was on someone’s credit card. Not ours. I asked her what card she’d used and she just crumbled. She told me Mr Paul Hargrave had bought the Lego on his card. He was one of the partners in the hotel. I’ve since learnt that hotels are a hotbed of affairs apparently. Must be all those empty bedrooms you have access to. It had been going on for six months and they were waiting until after Annie’s birthday to tell me. Do you know what she said? She wanted to make sure we all had one last happy birthday together. One last happy birthday? They went shopping together and bought my daughter’s birthday present. It still blows my mind.’

‘See, shopping,’ sighed Kim. ‘So intimate!’

Max nodded grimly. He’d stopped charging from the van to the shop now.

Kim didn’t know what to say. Her anger had been dissolved by Max’s sorry tale. Then it struck her. No wonder he’d been so unfriendly. He’d assumed she was just like his ex-wife. He’d assumed she’d cheated on Richard just like his wife had on him. She looked up at him. He was still clearly in pain, even after all these years. Christ, is that what she had to look forward to eight years from now? Still reliving the whole coat purchase story?

‘Is your ex still with him?’ Kim asked.

Max shook his head as if he was trying to get rid of some awful image in his mind. Probably a Lego model of Hogwarts, she thought. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘They live in West Bridgford in a big old Victorian mansion whilst I’m above the chippy. No wonder she left me really, is it?’

Kim didn't reply. They both stood in silence for a moment.

'You are meant to say that you have absolutely no idea why she left me as I'm such a charming bloke and what's wrong with living above a chippy,' said Max, raising his eyebrows.

Kim wasn't sure if he was joking. And it was all a little bit close to home.

'I know why Richard cheated on me,' she said gloomily.

'Why's that then?'

'Because I'm just a hairdresser.'

'Why? What does he do that's so clever?'

'He's a university professor.'

'Oh right. Pretty smart then.'

Kim nodded.

'I'm sure there were other factors,' said Max. 'Having said that, I reckon Rachel definitely ditched me for the glamorous lifestyle that money can buy. I mean, I know I'm no oil painting but Mr Paul Hargrave is no Adonis.'

Kim didn't know what to say. It wasn't often you heard a man show insecurity in his looks. Sure, he was on the short side for a bloke but he had a nice face atop his slightly cuddly body. He was no showstopper, but when he wasn't frowning he came across as your average decent guy. She wasn't sure that was what Max needed to hear right now though.

'Amazing how a bottomless credit card can make the ugliest men suddenly wildly attractive,' said Kim.

'Exactly,' agreed Max.

'Alison has bottomless stimulating conversation,' sighed Kim.

'Yeah, I'm sure that was it,' agreed Max, raising his eyebrows.

'Well, can I just say, you've done a brilliant job with Annie,' Kim told him.

Max smiled. Possibly the first time she'd seen him genuinely smile. 'She's made my shitshow of a marriage worthwhile. I have no idea what I would do without her.'

Kim nodded. 'How long did it take her to kind of get over what happened, do you think?'

'Years,' said Max. 'But we screwed it up to start with. Battled for custody, the whole shebang. Rachel claimed that living above a chippy was no fit place to send a child so didn't want her to stay over. I guess you've got none of those worries with your son. You've taken full custody of him in every sense.'

'Oh don't,' said Kim, burying her head in her hands. 'I should move out. I know I should move out but ...'

'You are still in a mess. You don't know where you should be?'

Kim raised her head and nodded.

'Has he asked you to move out?'

'No,' she said.

'I reckon if he wanted you out, he would have said,' said Max. 'Kids are selfish like that. Annie made me shave off my beard, and I loved my beard. The little minx.'

'Maybe you're right.'

'After Rachel left me I spent two years only talking to Annie about Justin Bieber,' Max told her. 'What I don't know about Justin Bieber is not worth talking about. And I hate Justin Bieber. Anyway, all I'm saying is you need to find some neutral ground with your son, something uncontentious to talk about. Just to take the pressure off.'

'I'm doomed. He only loves computer games and I am utterly shit at computer games.'

Max looked at her. 'Yep, doomed,' he agreed. 'Something will come up. Just be patient.'

'Annie doesn't look much like a Justin Bieber fan now,' commented Kim.

‘She certainly doesn’t,’ said Max, raising his eyebrows again.

‘Well, I think she’s brilliant,’ said Kim. ‘And so confident in her look. Amazing at her age.’

‘Oh I reckon that’s all to defy her mother.’

‘Really?’

‘Yep. It may surprise you to know but Rachel is like mega glam, skinny, always on some faddy diet and Mr Paul Hargraves is definitely funding some high-end plastic surgery. Last time I saw her she looked proper trout-faced and her forehead, you could have used it as a chopping board to cut chips on. Rachel basically wants to be Kim Kardashian and wants her daughter to be another Kardashian. When we first split she was forever taking Annie to Bridlesmith Gate and buying her designer clothes because she wanted to show off she had a rich boyfriend who bought her daughter two-grand leather coats.’

‘Shopping has so much to answer for, doesn’t it?’

Max nodded.

‘But Annie wasn’t keen on all that kind of gear. And because she’s never been a beanpole, I think it made her feel even worse about her curves. But her mum couldn’t see that. Thought she was being kind dressing her up in these fancy clothes when actually she was being cruel.’

‘So she rebelled,’ said Kim. ‘Found a different way to be glamorous that your ex-wife doesn’t get.’

Max nodded. ‘You know, all her clothes are from charity shops. Makes me laugh so much. Rachel begs to take her shopping but Annie’s having none of it. She’s found her way. And she did it all on her own.’

Kim thought about Harry at home in his room on his own in his dark hoodies and sweatpants and his unwillingness to have any conversation with his mum whatsoever.

‘Should I move out?’ she asked Max.

‘Out of where?’

‘Out of Harry’s house. I’m not sure our relationship can survive.’

‘It will and as I said, something will come up. You’ll find some mutual ground somewhere that will force a conversation and then you are away. Mark my words. Your Justin Bieber is just around the corner.’

They were just about to shut the fryers down at the end of the night when Sonny came dashing in like the little ray of sunlight he always was.

‘Hey Sonny,’ said Kim. ‘Everything okay?’

‘Is Annie in tonight?’ he asked. ‘Thought I’d come and show her my new haircut.’

‘Sorry, no,’ replied Kim. ‘Just me and Max tonight.’

Sonny nodded thoughtfully. ‘It’s okay. No problem. I also came in to ask you a question. Do you like quizzes?’

‘Well, I guess so,’ replied Kim. ‘I mean the amount of daytime TV I’m watching you’d think I was obsessed with them.’

‘Perfect,’ said Sonny. ‘Want to join our quiz team at the pub next Monday night?’

‘Oh,’ replied Kim. Wow. A night out? Well, yes, she could really do with a night out. Not that she was any good at quizzes of course and Sonny must be mad to invite her, but a night out was a night out after all. And the chip shop happened to be shut on a Monday so no worries there.

‘Well, yes I guess so,’ said Kim. ‘Well, of course. I’d love to come to a quiz. But I have to warn you that I’m pretty rubbish. I mean, I have zero general knowledge. Are you sure you want me to be on your team?’

‘Oh, I’ve not invited you for your general knowledge,’ he said. ‘Do you think Annie would like to come?’

Kim had to smile. Of course, she wasn’t being invited for her knowledge, she was being invited because she worked with Annie and Sonny fancied Annie and inviting Kim allowed him to invite Annie.

‘I don’t know,’ replied Kim. ‘You’d better ask Max.’

‘Ask me what?’ shouted Max. ‘Sorry, no jobs at the moment. I for once have a fully competent and reliable workforce.’

‘No, I don’t want a job,’ said Sonny. ‘I haven’t got time for a job.’

‘But aren’t you a student?’ asked Max.

‘Exactly,’ said Sonny.

‘Then I’d have said you have all the time in the world but there you go. So what did you want to ask me?’

‘You know that girl who works here? The really pretty one who dresses like a Hollywood starlet?’

‘You mean my daughter?’ replied Max.

Sonny’s jaw dropped. ‘You didn’t tell me that,’ he mouthed at Kim.

‘I’m sorry ... I-I-I didn’t realise,’ stuttered Sonny. ‘But now you have said, I can see the family resemblance.’

‘You think I look like a Hollywood starlet?’

‘No ... no, just you have the same ... the same ... hairline.’

Max was wiping his hands and coming out from behind the counter. Kim noticed Sonny go pale.

‘So what did you want to ask her?’ he said.

‘I wanted to ask her if she would like to join our quiz team next Monday night at the pub. Kim’s coming, aren’t you Kim, so it’ll be, you know, like a family, fun thing, not like a ... a date or anything.’

Max nodded. ‘So you won’t mind if I come too then,’ he said, ‘if it’s not like a date thing?’

Sonny’s eyes flared wide. ‘No, of course not, if you want to come that would be just brilliant.’ He looked at Kim in a panic.

‘I happen to be partial to a quiz,’ said Max. ‘So I’ll come and see if Annie wants to come too. If not it will just be me. I

assume that's okay?'

'Of course, Annie's dad,' Sonny replied.

'You can call me Max,' he said. 'What time is it?'

'Starts at seven,' said Sonny, 'although me and my housemates are going straight from uni so we'll be in there from about six.'

'Is Harry coming?' asked Kim.

Sonny turned to her almost as if he had forgotten she was there.

He nodded. 'And Suki, but Angus said not to tell him I'm inviting you; you know after his outburst earlier. We thought, well, we thought he might not come if we told him.'

Kim nodded.

'Just a lovely fun family evening then,' said Max.

'That's the plan,' said Sonny. 'That's the plan.'

Chapter 16

Kim had spent all day feeling anxious about the pub quiz. She realised she was only really invited in order to get Annie there, but knowing that Harry and Suki were also going to be there, she didn't want to screw it up. This was a social occasion where she might just get the chance to have an easy-going conversation with her son. How amazing would that be? After a day binge-watching *Tipping Point* in the vain hope a question might come up and she might look vaguely intelligent, at 6.45 p.m. she pulled a clean T-shirt over her head, zipped up her hoody and headed off to call on Max so they could arrive together.

Max hadn't confirmed if Annie was coming too so Kim was pleased to see her waiting outside the chip shop with her dad and even more pleased to see that she hadn't followed Kim's dress code. Her hair, as always, was beautifully piled up on her head complete with a green bow perched on the front. She wore a very smart green forties style dress coat and was sporting some funky winged glasses. She also, as ever, wore a smile that never failed to make Kim smile back.

'You been revising?' asked Annie, blowing on her hands to keep warm.

'Might have watched a few episodes of *Tipping Point*,' said Kim. 'So I'm really hoping that counts.'

'We're in the midst of twentieth-century cubism at college,' she replied. 'I reckon there will be a few questions on that so I'm feeling pretty smug.'

'I've read all the back pages of the paper today, so I'm all over that sporting category,' said Max. 'I reckon we'll give those university nerds a run for their money. Shall we go,

team?’ he said. Kim couldn’t help grinning. It felt so good to be part of something even if it was just a pub quiz team.

The rest of their team members were already a couple of pints ahead of them when they arrived. Thankfully Sonny had already let the cat out of the bag as to who was joining them. Harry nodded at his mum when she walked in and rose to shake Max’s hand when Sonny did his introductions.

‘This is Annie,’ he said excitedly. ‘The girl I told you about. Here, sit next to me, Annie, here. And this is Max, Annie’s dad, although I didn’t realise he was Annie’s dad until last week, but then when you look at them you can see they have the same hairline. And you all know Kim, of course you all know Kim. And this is Suki, she’s err, Harry’s friend. Have I got that right, Harry? You are friends, right?’

‘Yes,’ said Harry through gritted teeth.

‘You met Suki, didn’t you, Kim, or did you? Can’t remember.’

Kim felt herself go red. She could remember vividly meeting Suki. Just before she’d thrown up all over Angus’s shoes.

‘We’ve met,’ said Kim, nodding at Suki. ‘And I’m so sorry, still, I mean, I hope Harry apologised for my behaviour that night. It was totally out of character and ... and it’s never happened again and never will ...’

‘What happened?’ asked Max, sitting down.

Oh no, thought Kim. She’d didn’t want to drag that all up now.

‘Of course, that’s when Kim threw up all over the floor,’ said Sonny, slapping his forehead. ‘But we have set some rules up since then, haven’t we? We said if Kim wanted to stay she had to not treat the house like a hotel, buy her own food and drink ... what were the other ones?’

‘I believe we said she couldn’t talk to any women who came to the house?’ added Angus, arching his eyebrows at Kim.

‘Oh no,’ said Suki. ‘I hope that wasn’t because of me, was it? I mean it was fine, honestly. Harry told me what you had been going through.’

‘It wasn’t because of you,’ said Sonny. ‘It was because she told a girl that Angus bought back to the house that he already had a girlfriend, when he didn’t.’

‘Wow, you really made an impact in that house,’ said Max, grinning.

‘Not since,’ said Kim. ‘Ever since I have abided by the rules and tried to stay out of everyone’s way. That’s what I have been doing.’ She looked at Harry. He gave her a glimmer of a nod. She allowed herself to heave a very small sigh of relief.

‘Well it’s good to have you on the team tonight,’ said Suki.

Kim could have hugged her. ‘I hope I won’t let you down,’ she said. ‘I mean, Harry’s probably told you that I never went to university or anything so I hope you are not expecting too much?’

‘Aah, I reckon that’s all bollocks,’ piped up Max. ‘I reckon us non students will turn out to be a lot more switched on than these so-called clever people. Now, can I get a round in as the only full-time earning person here actually contributing to the economy?’

‘Yes please,’ piped up all the students round the table.

Sonny handed Kim the picture round that had been circulated to all the teams prior to the quiz starting. On it were a number of photographs of celebrity faces, some well known and some not so well known. Each team needed to write underneath each picture who they thought it was. The sheets would be marked at the end of the quiz then the number of correct answers added to their final score.

Kim looked at the sheet. Many of the answers had already been filled in by those who had been there earlier. She looked through them, some she recognised, some she didn’t, until she spotted one that she thought might be incorrect. Someone had written William Shatner of *Star Trek* fame, but looking closely after she had dug her reading glasses out of her bag she was

pretty convinced it was Lee Majors who actually starred as the Six Million Dollar Man back in the seventies.

She looked up wondering if she dared contest the answer. She wasn't sure who had written it down. If it was Harry it would be a bad move. He wouldn't want her showing him up. But it didn't look like his writing, it was far too neat. She peered at the picture again. Yes, it was definitely Lee Majors, she thought. No doubt about it.

'You know, I reckon this one is actually Lee Majors,' she said to the group. 'I don't think it's William Shatner.'

'Oh,' said Suki, taking the sheet back off her. 'Are you sure? I grew up watching *Star Trek* with my dad. It was our thing. I was sure it was William Shatner.'

Now Kim felt really bad. She'd dissed Harry's girlfriend's/not girlfriend's answer.

'Well I'm sure you're right then,' said Kim. Happy to step back but then instantly worrying about Suki if she was humiliated when they found out it was actually Lee Majors.

'Who's Lee Majors anyway?' asked Angus. 'Never heard of him.'

'Oh, he was in a big TV show in the seventies, I think, called *The Six Million Dollar Man*,' said Kim.

'So was it the *Billions* then of the seventies? Was he super rich?' asked Sonny. 'God, I love that show.'

'No,' said Kim. 'No, he had like bionic implants so he had superpowers. He could run super-fast and he had super long vision and bionic hearing, I seem to remember.'

'So like a Marvel hero?' asked Suki.

'Well no. Not really. I mean, he didn't have a costume or anything and I don't think he could tell anyone he had these superpowers. And I seem to remember he finished every episode in the bath outside his ranch. Or was that *The Fall Guy*?'

'*The Fall Guy*?' asked Sonny.

‘Another show Lee Majors was in. I think. It was a long time ago.’

‘Well we should put Lee Majors on the sheet,’ said Suki. ‘I’m sure you must be right. I mean, I wasn’t even born then.’

Thanks for pointing that out, thought Kim.

‘No, you should leave William Shatner on,’ said Harry. ‘You were really certain when you said it and Mum, well her memory isn’t that great.’

‘But your mum is of that era,’ protested Suki. ‘She must be right.’

Oh God, thought Kim. *Please don’t force him to choose between his mum and his new girlfriend/not girlfriend.* That would be a nightmare. Maybe it had been a bad idea to come. A pub quiz was guaranteed to cause arguments between the closest of friends and family.

Max arrived back at the table with Annie and a trayful of drinks. As they were handing them round, Sonny came up with the bright idea of asking Max.

‘As one of our older teammates,’ said Sonny to Max. ‘Do you think that’s William Shatner?’ he asked, pointing at the picture.

Max squinted, then got his glasses out of his pocket and looked again.

‘Sure,’ he said with a shrug. ‘I reckon so.’

‘Well there you go then,’ said Kim. ‘Must be him.’

‘Why, who did you think it was?’ asked Max.

‘Well I just thought it might be Lee Majors,’ said Kim. ‘You know, the Six Million Dollar Man?’

Max took a long drag of his pint before he looked again.

‘I think you might be right,’ he said. ‘I’d forgotten all about that show but now you’ve said it, I think it is.’

‘Think, or sure?’ asked Angus.

‘Erm,’ said Max, taking another look. ‘I think it is Lee Majors. Yes, definitely Lee Majors.’

‘Is that your final answer?’ asked Angus.

Max looked slightly scared but stuck to his guns. ‘Yes, final answer,’ he confirmed before taking another long drag of his pint, giving Kim a quizzical look.

‘Sorry, Suki,’ said Angus, taking the pen and putting a line through her answer and writing Lee Majors. ‘You guys had better be right,’ he warned Max and Kim.

She looked at Suki apologetically. She looked unfazed but Harry was frowning. Kim prayed they were right as well.

Kim spent the rest of the evening trying to only interject to confirm someone else’s answer or to offer a guess when there was clearly nothing else on the table. She didn’t want to put herself in the firing line to be responsible for another answer. Oh no.

She almost sighed with relief when they announced a science and nature round. She could totally sit this one out and be excused of any responsibility.

‘I’m useless on anything to do with science,’ she said, holding her hands up before a question had even been asked. ‘I’m not the scientist in our family. Harry’s the one doing the science degree. This is your round, Harry.’

Harry reluctantly took the sheet off Angus in order to be in charge of writing the answers down.

‘Not my thing either,’ said Suki. ‘Not much call for science in an art degree.’

‘Are you doing art?’ asked Annie, turning to her. ‘Do you like it? I’ve applied for next year after I finish my foundation.’

‘Oh really?’ said Suki. ‘It’s a really good course. I love it. But I wish I’d done a foundation though. That’s so smart. The foundation undergrads are so much better prepared than the rest of us who came straight from school.’

‘I honestly can’t wait,’ said Annie, her eyes shining. ‘As long as I get in, of course.’

‘Harry says you’re a hairdresser,’ said Suki to Kim to try and include her in the conversation. ‘That must be so interesting.’

Crikey, this girl was absolutely lovely. Kim prayed that Harry would make a move and marry her.

‘It is, really,’ said Kim. ‘But I am a bit jealous listening to you all. I do sometimes wonder what would have happened if I’d have thought it possible to spread my wings a bit. Can you believe this is the first time I’ve lived outside of my home town my entire life?’

Suki shook her head. ‘I couldn’t wait to get out of Kettering,’ she said.

‘I miss Devon,’ said Sonny. ‘But you don’t get YO! Sushi in Devon and now I don’t know how I’ve survived without it.’

‘Nottingham’s a bit shit compared to Edinburgh,’ said Angus. ‘But only because there’s too many English about.’

‘My dad really wanted me to go to Durham,’ said Harry. ‘That’s where he studied chemistry, but I’m glad I ended up here,’ he said. Kim noticed him glance at Suki. That was a good sign.

‘You are way too thick to get into Durham,’ piped up Angus.

‘Cheers, mate,’ said Harry with a sigh. ‘You are not wrong.’

‘And they are all arseholes,’ continued Angus. ‘Poppy went for an interview there. She said they were all English wankers. She might not have said wankers but that’s what she meant.’

‘Did you go to university, Max?’ Sonny asked.

‘God no,’ said Max nearly spitting his beer out. ‘What do they call it? The University of Life. That’s where I went.’

‘Oh,’ replied Sonny. ‘Where is that?’

Max stared at Sonny in disbelief. ‘All around you, my friend,’ he said. ‘All around you.’ He grinned at Kim. ‘Reckon education is wasted on the young, don’t you?’ he asked.

‘Not at all,’ she replied. ‘I think I just wasted being young.’

They were a few drinks down by the time they got to the last round. Kim had started to relax a little although her contribution to the quiz had not improved. She was relying on Lee Majors to come through for her at the end. But her ears pricked up when they announced the subject of the final round. Music! Maybe now she could add some value.

The quizmaster played intros to famous songs. The first few were ones she had never heard of but all the younger ones seemed to have. She gave a sad look to Max. They actually stood no chance in this round whatsoever.

But then Max pricked his ears up. It was vaguely familiar to her but she could not have said who it was or the name of the song. The rest of the table also looked perplexed. Apart from Annie. Annie was grinning from ear to ear looking at her dad. They both stood up and started doing a little jig as the intro built before they collapsed into giggles at the end.

‘Wow, that was amazing,’ said Sonny. ‘Will you teach me that routine?’ he asked Max.

‘Err no,’ said Max. ‘Absolutely not.’

‘So what’s the song?’ asked Harry who was still holding the pen.

‘Go on, Dad,’ said Annie, grinning. ‘You tell them.’

‘It’s Justin Bieber,’ said Max, ‘and it’s called “Love Yourself”.’

‘Hell yeah, Dad,’ said Annie, giving him a high five.

‘I have to admit it’s a great track,’ said Max.

‘You will never regret the time you spent with me and Justin,’ said Annie.

‘Never,’ said Max, smiling back at his daughter.

Kim watched jealously as Max and Annie shared a special moment. The sooner her and Harry found their Justin Bieber, Kim thought, the better. She would put some serious thought into working out what, or who it could be, next week.

The quiz was coming to a close and the quizmaster had announced the scores on the doors prior to revealing the results of the all-important picture round. ‘The Oldies and The Goodies’, the team name that Angus had conjured up for them, were doing very well, sitting right up near the top of the leaderboard, mainly thanks to a blinding sporting round which Max had totally nailed and a remarkably flawless music round given the breadth of ages in their team.

Now it all hung on the picture round.

Kim felt a knot in her stomach. She prayed that Lee Majors was not going to let her down.

They swapped sheets with the next table who were their main rivals, a table of locals who had given the young students the odd dirty look when they got overexcited. Max had glared back at them on their behalf.

Harry marked their sheet as the answers were called out by the quizmaster. Annie was delighted with her correct identification of Greta Garbo and Angus did a fist bump when the grainy portrait of Robbie Burns gave them another tick where their neighbours had failed.

Kim was annoyed when she realised she hadn’t spoken up and made a guess at an eighties soap opera actress. She hadn’t been absolutely sure and was also embarrassed in this esteemed company to admit that she used to watch the soaps. Sadly, it lost them the lead as their neighbours drew level, and so it inevitably all came down to Lee Majors or William Shatner.

‘They put William Shatner,’ Harry announced, nodding his head at the table next to them, his pen poised over their paper.

‘I’m so sorry if I’m wrong,’ Kim said to the team. She felt physically sick.

‘It’s all right,’ said Suki, touching her arm. ‘It’s just a quiz.’

Was it though? This could be her totally showing her son up in front of all his friends.

‘And so for the final answer of the night,’ announced the quizmaster. ‘Sometimes trips people up, this one. The last

picture on the sheet is ...’

Kim held her breath.

‘It’s actually Lee Majors. How many of you wrote down William Shatner?’

The table erupted. Sonny leapt out of his seat, taking the opportunity to fling his arms around Annie. Angus raised both fists in the air in the direction of the table next to them. Harry ceremoniously put a cross on the paper and handed it back to the next table. Max raised his glass in congratulations to Kim.

Kim had never been more relieved in her life. Thank goodness for all those hours wasted watching telly in her youth.

‘It’s a good job you were here,’ Suki said to her.

‘Damn good job,’ said Angus, clinking her glass. ‘What a team! What a team! Damn good job you were here.’

Kim grinned. For the first time in a while she felt like it was.

Chapter 17

It took another week for Kim and Harry's Justin Bieber to arrive on the scene. However, it wasn't quite the Justin Bieber she was envisaging. Turned out she was going to be forced to engage with her son on a much more serious level.

It all started when Richard's name flashed up on her phone screen. She didn't know if she wanted to answer it. The triumph of the pub quiz had successfully blurred away her thoughts for a while on Richard. She didn't know if she wanted them back in focus.

The ringing stopped. She'd dithered over answering for too long. Then it immediately started again. She sighed and tapped the button responding with a non-committal, 'Hello.'

Richard was breathing heavily as though he were trying to calm down or had been for a run, which was extremely unlikely.

'I've just had a message left for me,' he said without any introduction. 'It was John Sinclair from Harry's university. This is really very serious, Kim. What the hell is going on down there?'

He paused like she should understand instantly what he was getting at. All she could muster was that he was criticising her in some way which was unfathomable and extremely uncalled for in the circumstances.

'I have no idea what you are talking about,' she replied.

'John said that Harry isn't turning up,' said Richard.

'Isn't turning up where?'

'At uni. He's not been to any tutorials since the start of term and he suspects he's not going to any lectures. John also said

he hasn't turned in any work.'

'Who's John?' she asked, struggling to keep up.

'Harry's tutor.'

'Right.' How was she supposed to know that? Was a mother supposed to know the name of her son's tutor? Was that a thing? Was it yet another thing that she didn't know about university life? And what was going on then? She couldn't understand. Harry was leaving the house every day.

'Have you just let him wallow in bed every day?' accused Richard. 'I'd have thought the least you could do if you insist on living with our son during his first term at university would be to make sure he actually goes?'

Kim was speechless. When would Richard realise it was his fault they were all in this situation, not hers?

'He leaves the house every day,' she protested. 'What am I supposed to do? Take him up there and hold his hand until he walks into the room?'

Richard was quiet for a moment. Kim's mind was whirring. What was going on? Where was he going if he wasn't going to uni? Why wasn't he going to uni? It was all her fault. Of course it was all her fault.

'Have you not asked him how's he getting on?' said Richard. 'How's his course going? Basic questions like that?'

Kim shook her head. 'Of course I have,' she snapped. 'Well I've tried but ... but ... he snaps my head off. Says I'm interfering so I've backed off. It's ... it's complicated. The last thing I want to do is crowd him right now. Come over as the overbearing mother.'

'You are living with him during his first term at university. If that isn't the definition of overbearing mother I don't know what is,' replied Richard.

'But I'm not living with him to keep an eye on him, am I?' protested Kim. 'I'm living with him because I have no choice. Because my husband cheated on me with my next door neighbour.'

Richard's heavy breathing returned. 'But you didn't have to move in with Harry. You didn't have to do that. Why didn't you go to one of your friends, or your family?'

Kim swallowed. Did Richard not think she went over this a million times a day in her own head?

'Because I couldn't face them. I couldn't face any of them. Not after that speech I made at your party. Not after you made such a fool of me.'

Richard was silent.

Kim didn't fill the gap.

'I'm sorry,' he said.

Kim thought she had misheard.

'My timing wasn't great,' he added.

Inexplicably, the image of him wearing *that* coat popped up in her head. The coat he had bought with Alison on his amazing shopping trip to Manchester. Was he wearing it now? She wanted to ask him but didn't want to know the answer.

'They could chuck him out,' stated Richard when Kim didn't say anything. 'They'd be well within their rights to chuck him out if he doesn't show up.'

'They can't do that, surely?' said Kim. She felt herself start to panic. She couldn't let that happen to Harry. She would never forgive herself. 'What was the tutor's name again?' she asked.

'John Sinclair.'

'And you've tried getting hold of him?'

'Yes. But the number just rings which is pretty poor. Not even an answerphone. Mind you, I read his last research paper and I can't say it was very inspiring. Not sure he's actually got a good grasp of his field.'

'I'll go and see him,' said Kim, ignoring Richard's comments on the quality of John Sinclair's tutelage. Richard probably could have been condescending about Stephen Hawkins' brain power. 'I'm here so I'll go and find him,

explain what's been happening. Tell him to cut Harry some slack.'

'You are going to tell him what exactly?'

'I don't know. That he's got PTSD or something? Anything to stop this John Sinclair bloke throwing him off the course.'

'Harry doesn't have PTSD,' said Richard.

'He might do. His father sleeping with the next door neighbour is enough to give someone PTSD, isn't it?'

Richard gasped on the other end of the line. 'I think you'll find that there are far more serious incidents that trigger PTSD. Like being on the front line of a war or prolonged abuse. I hardly think our affairs would be seen as a big enough trauma to cause Harry to have PTSD.'

'What do you mean "our affairs"? Only you had an affair. Not me.'

'Oh, you know what I mean. I meant our circumstances. Our position.'

Kim could sense Richard getting exasperated with her. She could feel her anger rising.

'Okay then, I won't say he has PTSD. I'll just say his father had an affair and so that's why he's all over the place and that he needs help and support rather than getting chucked off the course.'

'That's totally unfair to blame me. I don't want my name dragging through the mud in the faculty. These things get round. Can't you just explain that you are living with him and this is causing him some distress and affecting his ability to turn up to his lectures.'

'Ooh, that sounds good,' said Kim. 'I'll write that down, shall I? Now just tell me how to spell lectures?'

'L ... E ...'

'I was joking,' raged Kim. 'I will go down there and explain Harry's circumstances and ask John Sinclair for help and support.'

‘But you won’t tell him about ... about ...’ hesitated Richard.

‘Damn right I’ll tell him you had an affair with another member of staff at your university, so is it any wonder that Harry has a slight phobia of setting foot on any kind of campus at the moment.’

She pulled her phone away from her ear and pressed the end call button.

Her phone immediately lit up with Richard’s name, trying to call her back. She rejected the call and put her phone on silent, throwing it on the sofa and heading to the kitchen to make a strong coffee and to think.

After her anger at Richard had subsided she tried to put her contempt aside and work out how to tackle the problem at hand.

She needed to talk to Harry. But ... she was fearful that he wouldn’t tell her anything and zero progress would be made. Worse, he would be angry and it would further damage their fragile relationship. She needed intervention from another angle. Perhaps she should ask Sonny or Angus. See if they could have a word with him. Find out what was happening. Yes, that was a good idea.

No, it was a rubbish idea, she decided sometime later. She couldn’t use Sonny or Angus as a go-between. Not fair on them or Harry. What if it soured Harry’s relationship with them? He clearly got on well with them. She couldn’t do anything to jeopardise that. No, she should go through the official channels. Keep it all above board. She’d go and see Harry’s tutor, John Sinclair, and get to the bottom of it. See if he could help. That was the sensible thing to do.

However, calling clearly didn’t work. Richard had failed there. She had no choice but to go in and see him. Track him down before they made a decision on Harry’s future that they couldn’t pull back from.

She would venture onto campus and find John Sinclair. It was a prospect that filled her with horror. The few times she

had ventured onto the campus at Lancaster City University for functions with Richard she felt like she had a massive sign over her head saying 'No degree', and that everyone was looking at her as though she wasn't clever enough to be there. She absolutely knew that she would feel exactly the same at Nottingham. Whilst some people feared hospitals and the way they made them feel, Kim had exactly the same feeling about university campuses. Like she wanted to get away as soon as possible.

She googled 'John Sinclair, Chemistry, Nottingham Barton University' and soon tracked down where the science faculty seemed to be based on the campus. She knew that there was a bus that went from the end of the road several times a day. She went upstairs, had a shower to calm her nerves and then contemplated her wardrobe. She wanted serious, intelligent, confident. Sadly when Vicky had come up and brought her extra clothes she hadn't deemed any such outfits useful for her current situation. Vicky delivered only party gear and outfits to have fun in. Kim didn't think the backless sequined dress would send the appropriate signals to Harry's tutor. After much contemplation she settled on a silver cardigan which she tried to tone down with a white fitted T-shirt and some smart black trousers. It was more Christmas drinks after work with your colleagues than meeting with your son's university tutor but it was the best she could do. She picked up her bag and left the house, hoping she wasn't going to do something that she would later regret.

The minute she boarded the bus she regretted the silver cardigan. Everyone was dressed in dark, serious colours and looked a bit scruffy. They were also all student age. She'd never felt so old and overdressed in her life. Sadly the only shoes to go with the smart black trousers were some black patent court shoes which contrasted horrendously with the practical boots and flat shoes that adorned every other person on the bus.

She practised what she was going to say to John Sinclair over and over in her head, staring out of the window, not wanting to catch the eye of any of her fellow travellers, fearing

their puzzled looks as to why on earth someone who looked like her was on her way to a higher education establishment.

She followed everyone's lead when they poured out of the bus at the entrance to the campus. She looked around, bewildered. She'd studied the map online of the layout but in the flesh it looked entirely different and she couldn't see any signs or handy maps. What they needed was one like they had at theme parks, she decided, with intelligence restrictions for each area rather than height restrictions. She knew she would have to ask for help which filled her with no joy at all.

'Excuse me,' she said to a group of girls heading down some steps towards her. 'Could you tell me where the science block is? Block, I mean err, faculty?' Christ, she sounded like she was at a local comprehensive. She was sure universities didn't call their buildings anything as basic as a block.

'So it's past the new theatre,' a very smiley girl piped up. 'You go all the way down this path and turn left at the end and you'll be in an open quad next to the library, and science is next to the library. I can take you if you want?' she grinned.

'Oh God, no,' replied Kim. 'That's really kind, but I'm sure I'll be okay. Thank you.'

'No worries,' said the girl and went to catch up with her friends.

Kim thought she must look like a total imbecile if the girl was worried about her getting from one side of the campus to another.

She continued down the path indicated by the girl and soon found herself in front of the library and confronted by the space age-looking structure of the science faculty. The building sported brave and funky architecture with statuesque pillars and soaring glass windows. Nothing like the grubby sixties science block she remembered from her school days. This was a building to inspire the next generation of scientists if ever she saw one rather than inspire them to use a Bunsen burner to set light to a wooden stool in order to stay warm.

She spotted that people were using access cards to get into the building. Well, some were. She realised that if she just joined onto the back of a crowd entering at the same time then they would hold the door open, allowing as many people to glide in unannounced as desired. She joined onto a gaggle of male students and smiled gratefully as one at the back held the door open for her. She suddenly panicked thinking what if Harry saw her here. He would go absolutely ballistic – until she realised the reason she was here was because he wasn't coming here so she was very unlikely to bump into him.

The grand foyer of the building was awash with indoor plants and funky seating where students were gathered, no doubt discussing scientific things. It was so lovely. Not what she was expecting at all. She couldn't imagine why Harry would not want to spend his time here.

She spotted a large sign with pictures of all the staff on it. She walked towards it and gazed up, searching for Mr John Sinclair. She soon spotted him. He was older than she expected. Maybe late fifties, early sixties. Grey hair, glasses (of course), he was smiling at least, which was more than could be said for some of them. He looked fairly normal for a lecturer. But then she supposed that Richard looked normal until she started talking to him and you realised he had one massive brain.

Now what?

She noticed a sign at the bottom of a staircase and quickly located that chemistry appeared to be on the first floor. Maybe she would find Mr John Sinclair there, or at least some kind of reception or secretary that might track him down for her.

She headed up the stairs and turned right following further signs. Through another foyer with funky seating and a botanical tribute to life on earth but sadly no reception or administration type person to guide her on her way. She wandered down a corridor reading out plaques on doors. Kitchen, Storeroom, Faraday, Einstein, Pasteur until she started seeing full names, not just the surnames of famous scientists. She wondered if, when they made their amazing discoveries, they dreamed of having their names on doors in

universities the world over. She kept following the doors of full names hoping that these were the offices of the lecturers and if she kept going, she might just chance upon John Sinclair. And she did. Suddenly she was stood in front of John Sinclair's door, her heart beating wildly as she wondered if she dared knock, totally unannounced. She'd be hoping it might be a bit like going to A&E. You'd arrive, give your name and your problem and then you'd be sent to triage to ascertain the best way to solve it. Once through triage you'd get to your final destination fully prepared and ready to present your problem to the exact person who would make it go away, that person having already been briefed on exactly why you were there.

Meeting the person who you wanted to solve your problem totally cold, with them having no idea who you were or why you were there was terrifying. She wanted someone to introduce her first. Do the preamble and then she could dive in. Her doing the introduction was not what she had planned for.

She took a deep breath and knocked. She couldn't walk away. Her son's future depended on it.

There were a few seconds' delay before the door was pulled open. There was John Sinclair but he was not alone. Two students were perched on chairs next to a low table behind him. Oh my goodness. Had she just interrupted some terribly important conversation? She felt herself go red.

'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'So sorry, really, I'll go. I'll come back another time. Really.'

'Are you Steph?' asked John Sinclair. 'Don't worry, they said you would pop in today. Come in, sit down.' He stood to one side and gestured for her to go in. 'We were actually just discussing the law of conservation of mass. No doubt you'd have some interesting comments to make on that one.' He chuckled as though he'd executed a fabulous in-joke of the highest scientific level. 'Come on in, Steph. This is Joshua and Louis. Two of our finest second years. This is Doctor Steph Albon, a visiting lecturer from Cambridge.'

‘No, no,’ cried Kim, now feeling herself shaking. ‘I’m not Doctor Steph, I’m Kim Jacobs, I’m, I’m a visiting hairdresser from Lancaster,’ she blustered. What did she have to go and say that for? Probably desperation that she wouldn’t get caught up in some heavyweight conversation about the conservation of something.

John Sinclair’s eyes were wide, as were Joshua’s and Louis’s, sat behind him.

‘And pray tell what can I do for Kim Jacobs, the visiting hairdresser from Lancaster?’ said John Sinclair with a smile emerging on his lips. ‘I have absolutely no doubt you would also have some interesting views on the law of conservation of mass should you like to join us?’

‘Oh crikey no,’ she cried. ‘No idea, not a clue. Nothing. I have nothing to say on conservation whatsoever. I just was hoping to, err, catch you and talk to you about my son Harry Jacobs, but I’ll come back another time. If that’s all right, of course.’

‘Your son?’ asked John Sinclair, screwing his face up. ‘Oh yes, of course, I know who you mean. First year.’ He looked at Kim in astonishment. ‘Have you come all the way from Lancaster this morning? I only left your husband a message a few hours ago.’

‘Err, no,’ she said. ‘No, actually I live in Nottingham, kind of, sort of, it’s complicated, you see. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. About my son and well ...’ she glanced nervously over at Joshua and Louis who were openly staring at her.

‘Yes, right, okay, yes,’ said John Sinclair, scratching his head. Clearly the penny had just dropped as to why she was there, despite the confusion of her introduction. She knew she’d needed triage.

‘How did you find me?’ he asked.

‘I err, I err, googled you and then just sort of came looking,’ she replied.

‘Fair enough,’ he said, nodding. ‘Right, okey dokey, what to do?’ He looked Kim up and down. Kim yet again regretted her sparkling silver cardigan.

‘I’ll come back another time,’ she said. ‘If that’s okay. I’m sorry to just turn up. I just didn’t know what to do.’

‘No, no,’ said John, clearly not used to his students’ mothers turning up at his door. ‘Right, why don’t you give me your number and I’ll call you and we’ll work out what to do, how’s that?’

‘Really? Is that okay?’ she asked.

‘Really,’ nodded John Sinclair, grinning. ‘Write it on here and I’ll call and we can talk then.’

‘Brilliant,’ said Kim, grasping the pen and paper from him. ‘That’s really so kind of you. Really.’

‘The pleasure’s all mine,’ he said, taking the paper from her and smiling warmly. ‘Now I’d better get back to teaching these knuckleheads something.’ He nodded at Joshua and Louis.

‘Of course,’ she said, backing away. ‘So sorry to interrupt.’

‘Speak soon,’ John Sinclair said, waving and closing the door with a broad smile.

Well, that could have gone worse, she thought to herself as she exited the building. Progress had been made and he’d been very smiley. Yes, she had definitely done the right thing coming. Even though parts of it had been quite humiliating. If it saved Harry’s place here then it would be all worthwhile.

Chapter 18

Kim felt a bit shell-shocked sitting on the bus on the way home. Stepping into Harry's world had been unsettling. But then again she had no familiar environments at the moment. None whatsoever. Being in the university felt just the same as everywhere else. Unusual, unfamiliar and as though she didn't belong. As she wistfully looked out the bus window she wondered if she would ever feel like she belonged anywhere ever again.

It would be wrong to say that she didn't feel just a bit tearful, just a bit emotional when she turned her key in the door of the house. She could hear voices coming from the kitchen as she pushed the door closed behind her. A deep voice. A man's voice. Not one of the boys. She was tempted to just go straight to her room but she supposed she had just better check they hadn't been invaded by a chatty burglar.

When she stepped in the kitchen she immediately regretted it. There was a man there. Pacing up and down the kitchen on his mobile phone, talking in a concerned voice. A woman was perched on a chair at the table. Immaculate in a two-piece suit. She'd clearly just had an excellent blow dry and her makeup was perfect. Natural but you knew it was there. And then leaning against a countertop stood Angus, chewing his nails, looking slightly nervous. Which was new. She'd not seen that look on him before. When she walked in he looked up at her in horror. He gave her a pleading look and then turned to his mother.

'So err ...' he faltered. 'I forgot to mention. This is Kim. She lives with us.' He gave Kim another pleading look that Kim had no idea how to fathom. What did he want her to do or say? 'This is my mum, Lorraine, and my dad, Duncan,' he

continued, nodding at the man still on a mobile phone pacing up and down.

‘Oh,’ said Lorraine, standing up. ‘Are you a mature student?’

Kim glanced at Angus. He shrugged. What did a shrug mean? She had no idea.

‘No, actually,’ she said. ‘I’m Harry’s mum. Harry who also lives here.’

Lorraine looked at her son with a quizzical look. Angus offered her nothing by means of explanation so Kim was forced to plough on.

‘I’m staying in the spare room for a while. Not for long. Just until Christmas. Just until I get myself sorted out.’

Lorraine’s eyebrows flew up.

‘Sorted out of what?’ she asked.

‘Just, erm ...’ Kim sighed. She really didn’t want to be going into the detail. ‘Just a tricky domestic situation.’ Oh goodness, thought Kim, now this woman would think she was being abused or something. She couldn’t bear that. ‘Me and my husband split up and I’m staying here temporarily.’ She hoped that covered it.

Lorraine had sat back down in her chair looking a little pale as she gazed around the kitchen, perhaps trying to make sense of the situation.

‘I realise that perhaps it’s a shock to see me here and I’m sorry about that, especially if Angus hadn’t mentioned it.’

Lorraine turned to look at her, her eyes still like saucers. ‘What I absolutely don’t understand,’ she said in her gentle Scottish accent, ‘is how you let them live like this.’ She cast her hand around the room. Kim turned her gaze to what she was indicating. The kitchen was in its usual state of chaos. It was completely tidy the day before. She’d seen to it, as agreed, but it only took a day for dirty pots to be piled everywhere, the butter to be open and out on the counter and a Chinese takeaway carton left on the table behind Lorraine spewing

chow mein over its edges. It was disgusting but Kim knew none of it was her mess. It was all down to the three boys and their hideous habits in just twenty-four hours.

‘Duncan is on the phone to an industrial cleaning company right now,’ said Lorraine. ‘To fix this mess.’

She got up from her chair and strode over to Duncan and tapped him on the shoulder. ‘Duncan. You can get off the phone. We don’t need them anymore.’

‘What?’ said Duncan, pulling the phone away from his ear.

‘Look,’ said Lorraine, pointing at Kim. ‘We don’t need them to come now.’

Duncan shrugged and made his excuses on the phone before stepping forward and shaking Kim’s hand vigorously.

‘So there is a cleaner, brilliant,’ he said. ‘Right. Can we take you out for some lunch now then, son, now that that crisis is over?’

It was time for Kim’s eyes to be like saucers. ‘No, no, I’m not the cleaner.’ She looked at Lorraine, bewildered. ‘I’m Harry’s mum, Kim. I live here. That’s what I do. Just like the rest of them. I do clean as part of the agreement for me staying here and I can assure you that this place was tidy yesterday, but this is what happens in a student house with three boys over twenty-four hours.’

Lorraine looked back at her, still confused. ‘Yes, but how have you let it get in this state?’ she said. ‘How can you live like this?’

‘I haven’t let it get in this state,’ said Kim. ‘They have.’ Kim looked at Angus for some admission of culpability or for help in explaining the simple fact to his mother that he didn’t clean up in the kitchen.

‘But I just don’t see how a woman of your age could live in a kitchen in this state,’ said Lorraine. ‘Surely you would have to do something about it?’

Kim didn’t know what to say. She felt indignant that Lorraine could not see the unfairness of what she was saying.

That her son Angus was let off all accountability for his actions because there was a female in the house who would of course clear up after him.

‘Why didn’t you tell us that someone’s mother was living in the house?’ Lorraine said, turning to her son.

‘Harry,’ interjected Kim. ‘His name is Harry, and I’m Kim.’

‘It never came up, did it?’ said Angus. ‘And it’s no big deal,’ he shrugged.

‘You may have already covered this,’ said Duncan, ‘but can I ask why you are living in your son’s student house share?’

‘My husband had an affair with the next door neighbour, if you must know,’ said Kim, exasperated. ‘So I’m staying here just for a while until I get myself sorted.’

‘Oh,’ said Duncan, looking Kim up and down like she was a piece of furniture. ‘Shouldn’t we have been informed of that or something? Is that allowed?’

‘Jesus,’ said Kim under her breath. ‘I’m a middle-aged woman. You could have had a whacked-out weirdo studying an ology who deals drugs in his spare time.’

Lorraine blinked at her then looked over at Angus. ‘Tell me there has been no drugs in this house.’

Angus sighed. ‘Of course not, Mother,’ he said.

‘Or anywhere else?’ she asked.

‘No!’ said Angus firmly. ‘I mean, there are drugs around, like everywhere, but I haven’t done any.’

Lorraine shook her head. ‘I knew we shouldn’t have let you go to an English university,’ she said.

Angus shook his head. ‘You think there are no drugs at Scottish universities?’ he said. ‘Seriously?’

‘If you’d got your results you could have been at St Andrews, not here,’ she said looking around at the mess. ‘Living in this squalor.’ She looked at Kim again as though it was all her fault.

‘Well,’ said Duncan, clapping his hands together. ‘As long as the whole cleaning debacle is sorted then it must be lunchtime. Where are we going, son? Let us give you a good feed, shall we? Tell you what, let’s all go. How about it?’

He flashed Kim a smile. Well actually Kim noticed he flashed her chest a smile. She swallowed. Perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps he didn’t. No, he can’t have done.

‘I reckon we need to get to know Kim, don’t you?’ he said, looking at his wife. ‘If she’s living with our son.’ He moved across and put his arm around her shoulders. She instantly froze.

‘And,’ he said squeezing her shoulders, ‘she can fill us in on all Angus has been up to. I bet there are some stories, aren’t there?’ he said. ‘I bet my lad has been up to some shenanigans, hey? How many girls have you had back here then, son? Come on, tell us the truth. I bet you’ve had to turn a blind eye to some goings-on, hey Lynn?’

‘It’s Kim,’ she said, stepping to the side. ‘We all keep ourselves to ourselves, don’t we?’ she said to Angus as she extricated herself from Duncan.

‘Right, right, of course you do,’ said Duncan, laughing. ‘Of course you do. If he’s anything like me at university then he’s having a right old time of it,’ he said, giving Angus a punch on the arm.

‘Doing my best,’ said Angus, grinning. ‘Doing my best.’

‘That’s my boy. You make sure you have some fun now, get it out of your system.’

‘Duncan, please just shut up,’ said Lorraine, looking embarrassed for the first time. Kim was relieved that her disdain was no longer focused on her.

‘Just making sure he doesn’t waste this opportunity,’ said Duncan. ‘Now are we going to the pub or what? Come on, we are wasting valuable drinking time here! You coming, Lynn?’

‘It’s Kim,’ she repeated. ‘Err, no thank you. I have to go to work.’

‘Work?’ asked Lorraine. ‘You’ve got a job here?’

‘Yes,’ nodded Kim. ‘At the fish and chip shop. So I can pay the rent. Though I’m actually a hairdresser by trade.’

Lorraine looked unimpressed by anything she had said.

‘That reminds me,’ said Angus. ‘The landlord at the pub says he wants his hair cutting just like Sonny’s. Will you do it for him?’

‘Well, I suppose so,’ said Kim, taken aback.

‘Don’t worry, he’ll pay. I told him you worked at a really flash salon and so you were really expensive. He’s loaded so he can afford it. I’ll just take a ten per cent commission. Seeing as I know you.’

‘That’s my boy,’ laughed Duncan. ‘Millionaire by thirty, I reckon.’

Angus nodded. ‘I reckon the lads on my course would be up for a cut too, you know. They are starting to look a bit shabby. I’ll sow the seed,’ he said, tapping his finger to his nose.

‘I’ve got you booked in to see Maurice at Christmas, remember,’ said Lorraine. ‘You’ll wait to have your own hair cut, won’t you? Maurice would be so disappointed if you let anyone else touch your hair.’

‘Kim’s brilliant, Mum,’ said Angus enthusiastically. ‘She gave Sonny an Elvis cut and he actually looks cool. Which is nigh on impossible. He’s half a chance of losing his virginity now, thanks to Kim.’

Lorraine’s eyebrows shot up. Again.

‘That’s not why I cut his hair,’ Kim tried to explain.

‘Well I think it’s time we went,’ said Lorraine. ‘Get some decent food inside Angus,’ she added as though it was also Kim’s fault that he was living on takeaways.

‘Oh, I’ve been using those food box things,’ said Angus. ‘All the time. It was just Sonny’s birthday yesterday so we treated ourselves to a Chinese, didn’t we, Kim?’

Such a blatant lie. She nodded and smiled.

They heard the front door go. Kim looked at Angus, hoping it wasn't the 'birthday boy' arriving, for Angus's sake.

Harry and Suki appeared in the kitchen. Kim scrutinised her son now she had the knowledge that he was living a completely different life to the one he was supposed to be. He looked a little dishevelled. He looked like he didn't care. His black joggers were crumpled and his green hoody had the saggy look of something that hadn't been washed in some time. He clearly took no pride in his appearance and Kim couldn't take any pride in her son's appearance either.

'Hi Harry,' she said. 'This is Angus's mum and dad, Lorraine and Duncan.'

He nodded and said 'Hi.'

'And this is a friend of Harry's,' said Kim. 'Suki.'

'Nice to meet you,' nodded Suki.

Kim watched as Lorraine looked the crumpled mess up and down. Angus by contrast was, as always, looking sharp in his designer gear.

'So this is your son?' said Lorraine, looking at Kim.

'It is,' said Kim. She wanted to wipe the judgemental look off Lorraine's face.

'Well, we really should go,' said Lorraine to Angus. 'I think we are done here.'

'Sure,' replied Angus. 'See you guys later.' He turned to leave.

'It was good to meet you,' said Kim, sticking out her hand to Lorraine.

'Yes, it was,' said Lorraine. She gave her a thin smile and walked out the door.

'Good to meet you too,' said Duncan, stepping forward and giving Kim a full-on hug. 'You take care now,' he said as he released her. 'Goodbye,' he nodded to Harry and Suki.

They waited until they heard the front door close before any of them spoke.

‘Angus looks just like his dad,’ said Suki.

‘Doesn’t he,’ agreed Kim.

‘What was with all the hugging?’ asked Harry.

Kim sighed. ‘That kind of bloke, I guess,’ she said. ‘I can see why Angus feels like he should be chasing women all the time if that’s the example he has.’ She shook her head.

‘Err, Mum,’ said Harry. ‘Suki was wondering if you would cut her hair?’

‘Of course,’ said Kim. ‘I can do it now if you want?’

‘Well, if it’s not too much trouble. I really just want the ends cutting off, that’s all. I mean, I can come back another time if that’s more convenient.’

‘No, no, take a seat. Now is perfect.’

She was just about to offer Suki a cup of tea when a cunning idea came to mind.

‘We’ve run out of tea bags, Harry,’ she said to her son. ‘Would you go to the shop and get some? I’m sure you’d like a cup of tea, wouldn’t you, Suki?’

‘Well, that would be great if that’s okay.’ She looked nervously between Harry and Kim.

‘Erm, are you sure?’ asked Harry, also looking nervous. Kim thought she knew why. He didn’t want to leave his mother alone with Suki.

‘Go on, Harry,’ interjected Kim. ‘I could really do with one. It’ll only take five minutes.’

Harry sighed. ‘Okay,’ he agreed. ‘I won’t be long.’

Kim had already got the gown around Suki’s shoulders and was combing through her hair by the time she heard the front door shut behind Harry.

She felt bad. She had been warned about talking to any girls in the house. It was one of the rules after all. ‘No talking to any girls that we bring into the house.’ But this was too good an opportunity to miss. Maybe she would be able to find out

something from Suki about why Harry wasn't going to university. But she had to be quick. He'd be back really soon.

'So how's your course going?' asked Kim.

'Oh it's brilliant, honestly. I'm so glad I came here. They really do push you to try so much. Totally next level to A level art. And the facilities are amazing.'

Right, that was enough about Suki's course. Could she jump straight to asking about Harry? She would have to. She had no choice.

'I hope Harry's enjoying his course as much as you,' she said. 'He doesn't really talk much about it much. Has he said anything to you?'

Too direct perhaps. She would just have to see how that landed. She'd said it now. She felt Suki's shoulders tense. She didn't reply immediately.

'I think ... I think ...' she stumbled. 'I think you'd better ask him.'

'Oh,' said Kim. 'Sorry. I didn't mean to put you in a difficult position. Is he okay?'

Suki turned to face her, her usual smiley countenance evaporated.

'Not really,' she replied. 'But I've not told you that. He's begged me not to say anything to you. So please don't say I've said anything. Please? Seriously?' She was panicking now, making Kim feel terrible. She'd put the poor girl in a horrible position.

'Of course not,' said Kim. 'I won't say anything.'

Suki turned back to face forward. Kim bit her lip. But how could she not say anything? What on earth was wrong?

'Thank you,' she said to the back of Suki's head.

'For what?' said Suki, still facing away.

'For being there for him.'

She didn't reply, just nodded her head ever so slightly.

They both jumped as the front door banged. Harry was back. They both had their backs to the kitchen door so weren't facing him as Harry walked in.

'Hiya,' said Kim overly cheerfully, not wanting to give away the tense atmosphere in the room. 'That didn't take you long.'

'Well, I didn't want to leave poor Suki exposed to your haircutting chat for too long,' he replied, raising his eyebrows at his mum as he put the kettle on.

'Suki's been telling me all about her course, haven't you Suki?' said Kim. 'Sounds amazing.'

'Yep, it is,' nodded Suki. 'I'm really lucky.'

Harry looked over at them both suspiciously.

'You getting that kettle on or what?' asked Kim quickly. 'Mine's white, no sugar, in case you have forgotten. Now Suki – what were you telling about print making?'

Chapter 19

When she got home from her shift later that night the house was quiet. Goodness knows where they all were. The kitchen was still in the state that she left it in. She sighed and poured herself a cup of tea and listened to her voicemail messages that had landed whilst she was at work.

There was one from John Sinclair. *Damn it*, she thought. How had she missed that call?

‘Hello, it’s John Sinclair here. Calling for Kim, visiting hairdresser from Lancaster.’ Kim heard him chuckle. She hoped this meant he had a good sense of humour. ‘Sorry I couldn’t talk earlier but well done you for tracking me down. Universities are designed to keep their staff well-hidden so top marks for ingenuity there. So give me a call back and we’ll organise something so we can talk properly. Speak soon. It’s John by the way, John Sinclair.’

Too late to call him now, she thought, looking at her watch. She’d give him a ring in the morning. He sounded friendly, cheery in fact. She hoped that was a good sign.

She then listened to the message from Richard.

‘Hello, it’s me. Any news? What happened? I’ve carried on trying to contact John Sinclair but to no avail. Let me know if you have spoken to him. Bye.’

Kim put the phone down. It was too late to call Richard too. She couldn’t help wondering what he would be up to. Cosying up on the sofa with Alison watching an intellectual documentary? She could picture the scene vividly. Red wine open on the coffee table. Maybe some cheese and crackers out. They were probably wearing matching Arran jumpers bought on the amazing shopping trip to Manchester when they bought Richard’s new coat.

The next morning she decided to call John Sinclair first and then she could inform Richard of the progress she had made where he had failed.

She felt nervous dialling his number. Any conversation with him seemed so important, like the slightest word out of place could ruin her son's entire future. She rehearsed her opening lines in her head, hoping to give herself some confidence.

'Hello, John, it's Kim, Harry's mum, thank you so much for calling me back last night. I'm sorry I couldn't take the call. When would it suit you for us to get together?'

Yep – sounded okay. She was good to go. She finished dialling the number and took a deep breath.

'Hello, Kim, visiting hairdresser from Lancaster, how the devil are you? Thank you for calling me back. Sorry to disturb your evening.'

'No, err, it was fine. No, great. I'm sorry I didn't pick up. I was at work and must have been in the middle of an order.'

What was she doing? Already too much information.

'An order? What kind of order at that time of night?'

'I don't know. I was probably up to my armpits in Gordon's fish and chip supper. He likes his curry sauce on the chips but not on the fish. He's very particular about that so I would have had to concentrate.'

Shit, shit, John Sinclair does not need to know about Gordon's curry serving preferences.

'Well of course,' said John Sinclair. 'And may I say Gordon is absolutely right. Curry sauce on fish, not good.'

'So he tells me,' agreed Kim. 'Erm, so, thank you for calling me and it would be great to come and talk to you about Harry. I had no idea he wasn't turning up.'

'No, no, I'm sure,' said John Sinclair. 'Parents are always the last to know. There's normally some underlying problem that needs to surface.'

‘Well that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. His life is a little complicated at the moment.’

‘Well, sounds like we need to have a chat and see what we think the best course of action is. We never want to remove students from a course, but something has to change here so let’s meet up.’

‘That’s unbelievably kind of you,’ gushed Kim. She couldn’t believe he was being so understanding.

‘So how about we meet at Lillie Langtry’s?’ he asked.

‘Where on campus is that?’ she replied.

He laughed heartily. ‘I forgot you are visiting from Lancaster. It’s a lovely pub with excellent beer in the centre of Nottingham. Really. It’s an institution. How about 7 p.m. tomorrow night?’

Oh, thought Kim. She hadn’t been expecting that. A pub. Well, she supposed that would be less formal. Allow them to have a relaxed chat.

‘Well that would be great but I’m working tomorrow night.’

‘Of course you are. So what night do you get off?’ he asked.

‘Mondays and Wednesdays,’ she said.

‘I have department meetings on Mondays so how about next Wednesday? Seven p.m. in Lillie Langtry’s. Looking forward to it. See you there, Kim, visiting hairdresser from Lancaster.’

‘Okay. See you there.’ She ended the call and stared at the phone.

Not what she had been expecting. Wednesday was a whole five days away. A long time in a crisis. Which is what she felt this was. Five whole days to continue to worry about Harry’s fate. Not ideal. And in a pub. She was confused. Was this how lecturers normally dealt with this sort of stuff? In the pub? She had been expecting a formal chat in John Sinclair’s office whilst she pleaded her son’s case and promised to do better. Not a chat over a pint in a pub.

She sighed and searched for Richard's number. Better inform him of her progress before he started pestering her.

'In a pub?' said Richard when she had relayed the events of the previous day and her visit to the university and her conversation with John Sinclair that morning. 'He asked you to meet him in a pub?'

'Yes,' she replied. 'He said it was a Nottingham institution.'

'The university is an institution, not a pub,' he replied.

'Is it okay to meet a parent of a student in a pub?' she asked.

'Well, I guess it's highly unusual to meet a parent of a student full stop. Can't say I've ever met anyone's parents the whole time I've been lecturing.'

'Right,' said Kim.

'Did you suggest the pub?' asked Richard.

'No!' exclaimed Kim. 'Of course I didn't.'

'What does he look like, this John Sinclair?'

'I don't know. Early sixties maybe. He was quite jolly actually. Kept calling me the visiting hairdresser from Lancaster because he got me mixed up with some Doctor Steph someone or other, a visiting professor from Cambridge.'

'Doctor Steph Albon?'

'No idea. Could have been.'

'He got you mixed up? She's like the leading lecturer on conservation of mass in the country.'

'Well, he was expecting her and it all got a bit confused.'

'Are you sure he's asked you for a drink and not Doctor Steph Albon?'

'Of course I am. We are meeting to talk about Harry. That was very clear.'

'Mmmm, well I suppose there is nothing else we can do except wait for this pub meeting. God, I wish I was down there. Come and talk to Harry myself. Maybe I would get something out of him.'

‘No,’ said Kim. ‘Trust me. It will make matters worse.’

Richard went quiet for a moment. ‘We’re really screwing this up, aren’t we?’ he said.

She didn’t correct him over the ‘we’, he sounded so dejected. She did of course blame him but she was only too aware that her being here in Nottingham was probably not helping matters.

‘I know I can’t stay here forever,’ she said. ‘I know I shouldn’t be here at all but the thought of coming back ... I just can’t face it, not yet.’

Richard didn’t reply. The silence fell heavy. She didn’t know what to say.

‘Can I ask you a question?’ he said.

‘Yes.’

‘Which compartment on the washing machine do you put the liquid in? There are three – why are there three? I’m worried I’ve put it in the wrong one because my clothes aren’t getting very clean.’

Kim couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She had no idea how to respond.

‘Why don’t you ask your girlfriend?’ she spat out eventually.

Richard didn’t respond.

‘No need to be like that,’ he said eventually.

‘There is every reason to be like that.’

‘Alison has got her daughter staying so I can’t ask her.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because Olivia won’t speak to me. She’s taken it all really badly.’

‘Shocking. I mean, just rude of her to be upset with you for splitting her mum and dad up.’

‘It’s really upsetting Alison,’ continued Richard.

‘And you are telling me this, why?’ asked Kim.

‘Sorry, sorry. You’re right. Sorry. I guess I’m just used to talking to you about stuff. I’m an idiot. Ignore me.’

The comment made Kim sad. It brought back memories of late night chats over bottles of wine when Richard would open up about problems at work. She missed those chats too. It was probably when they were closest, if she was absolutely honest.

‘Right. I’d better go,’ said Richard. ‘Well done with tracking down John Sinclair. And do you know what, I’m sure you talking to him will make all the difference. You’ll know exactly what to say. I know you will.’

She swallowed.

‘Well, I’ll do my best.’

‘Of course. Well, say hello to Harry and call me after Wednesday. The fact he’s happy to wait until then hopefully means they are not on the verge of chucking him out anyway.’

‘Hopefully.’

‘Bye, Kim.’

‘Bye, Richard.’

Later Max arrived at the door with his hair wet, having just washed it ready for a haircut. He’d shyly asked her the previous evening if she wouldn’t mind cutting his hair as Sonny had been so evangelical about her skills at the pub quiz.

‘Wow, I nearly didn’t recognise you without a greasy apron and a hairnet,’ she said to him as she opened the door to let him in. He was wearing a smart striped shirt tucked into dark denim jeans and he smelled amazing, nothing like the weird usual mix of gravy and curry sauce.

‘Well, I like to make an effort outside the shop. You do get a bit sick of looking and smelling like you run a fish and chip shop,’ he replied.

‘Apologies for the obstacle course and the tip-like nature of the household,’ she said, kicking a random trainer out of the way. ‘I do live with three teenage boys, don’t you know.’

‘I’m surprised it’s this tidy, to be honest,’ he said, looking round the kitchen which actually wasn’t looking too bad as she had just had a tidy up.

‘Right, welcome to my salon,’ said Kim. ‘Take a seat and we will see what we can do.’

Max sat down and she took a closer look at his hair. It was very dark with some flecks of grey. Good condition. He looked after it well or he was just lucky. She ran her fingers through it, immediately knowing he needed some layers putting in and the sides and back shaving into his neck. Then it needed thinning a bit. That would take some of the grey out. It could take years off him.

‘What are you after then?’ she asked.

‘I’m in your hands,’ he said. ‘Whatever you think. I normally go to the barbers where you queue up and wait. Cheap as chips. Ha, ha, do you get it? Actually I think my large chips might cost more than my haircut there so it’s even cheaper than chips.’

She didn’t like to say she could tell it was a cheap haircut.

‘I can’t remember the last time I had, you know, a proper hairdresser cut it. Always been a bit intimidated by them. And you have to talk, don’t you? Discuss your holidays and all that.’

‘Well you don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. If that’s what puts you off hairdressers.’

‘Oh no, it’s fine talking to you. I know you. I don’t see you as a hairdresser.’

‘Right, I’ll take that as a compliment.’

‘I did want to talk to you about something actually.’

‘Oh really,’ said Kim, snipping away. She was all ears. She hoped he would open up a bit. She realised that she knew nothing about what he did outside of the chippy. She’d be really interested to know what else he got up to.

‘So I’m thinking of introducing tofish to the menu,’ he said. ‘What do you think?’

‘Tofish? What the hell is tofish?’

‘It’s a vegetarian alternative to fish.’

‘Right. Well I don’t know,’ said Kim. ‘What does it taste like?’

‘Absolute shit.’

‘Oh,’ replied Kim.

‘It’s just that, well, everyone’s doing it, aren’t they?’ said Max.

‘Doing what?’

‘Going veggie. Especially the students. Well, they’ve been going that way for years if I’m honest, but it always felt like there were enough meat-eating drunkards to keep me in business, but I think the balance is shifting. I think I need to do something. Move with the times. Attract a new audience.’

‘Do you think you’ll ever get the vegetarians in when you’ve got a rotating hunk of lamb on full display?’

Max turned to look at her. ‘Good point,’ he said.

He turned back to face the front, his shoulders sagging. ‘I don’t think I can get rid of the kebab. It’s still a good seller.’

‘I think you’re right,’ agreed Kim. ‘I don’t think you’ll ever sell as much tofish as you do kebabs. I see what you’re saying though. You’ve no vegetarian option at all, have you? Apart from chips. What you need to be doing is getting the vegetarians who are coming in to spend more than what they spend on just chips. What about a halloumi kebab? You can charge a fortune for them. Me and my mate Vicky went to see Inspiral Carpets in Williamson Park last summer and they had loads of street food there and I spent ten quid on a halloumi kebab.’

Max turned round to look at her in total awe.

‘I know,’ she said, feeling embarrassed. ‘It was a festival atmosphere. My common sense on how much to spend on a filled pitta bread went totally out of the window. What can I say?’

‘You went to see Inspiral Carpets?’

‘Yes.’

‘I *love* the Inspiral Carpets.’

‘Really? You like your music then?’

‘I do,’ he said. ‘It’s how me and Rachel met. Well, our mutual appreciation of Shed Seven actually.’

‘Shed Seven? Now there’s a blast from the past. Remind me of what they did again.’

‘“Chasing Rainbows”, “Going for Gold”, “Disco Down”.’

‘“Chasing Rainbows”, I remember that.’

‘You should hear it live. Everyone chanting. It’s amazing. It really is the best concert moment I think you can have.’

‘Wow. That is some recommendation.’ Kim had never seen Max so animated. ‘So when did you last see them then?’

She sensed Max’s shoulders tensing. ‘Not since December 2014,’ he replied.

‘Oh, how so? Do they not tour anymore?’

‘Oh yeah, they come to Rock City here in Nottingham every other year.’

‘So why have you not been? If they are that good?’

‘Well, me and Rachel met at a Shed Seven concert, you see. It was our thing.’

‘And now it’s ruined. That’s terrible.’

‘I know. She denied me my marriage, my family and the joy of seeing Rick Witter giving it some to “She Left Me on Friday”. Do you remember that one?’

‘Oh I do. That’s a great song.’

‘Well, ironically she left me on Friday and ruined my weekend. Well, she pretty much ruined the rest of my life actually.’

Wow, thought Kim. Sounded like Max had never really recovered from his wife’s affair.

‘Does it ever get easier?’ she asked.

He paused. ‘Eventually,’ he said. ‘I think I’m nearly at the stage where I miss Shed Seven more than I miss her.’

‘You should go and see them, Shed Seven. It might help,’ offered Kim. ‘Closure and all that. Especially if you loved them that much.’

Max shook his head. ‘Funnily enough they are in Nottingham around now,’ he said. ‘They always tour near Christmas, but no. I couldn’t. It does still hurt.’

Kim carried on cutting in silence and thanked her lucky stars that her split with Richard hadn’t involved any of her favourite music. That would be unbearable.

Kim’s phone suddenly rang, making them both jump. She glanced over to it sat on the table and she saw that it was John Sinclair calling again.

‘Sorry, Max,’ she said, putting her scissors down. ‘I’d better take this, it’s Harry’s tutor.’

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘Hi Kim,’ he responded cheerily. ‘Everything’s fine. I just wanted to let you know that I’ve had a meeting cancelled so I can get out earlier next week. Would 6 p.m. be okay?’

‘Err, of course, that’s absolutely fine.’

‘Jolly good. See you next week then. Lillie Langtry’s, you got that?’

‘Yes, Lillie Langtry’s. See you there.’

She put the phone down.

‘Everything all right?’

‘Yes – well no – well,’ she sighed. ‘Turns out Harry isn’t turning up at uni so I’ve arranged to meet his tutor to have a chat with him.’

‘At Lillie Langtry’s?’

‘He suggested it. It’s not a strip club, is it?’

Max laughed. 'No, it's a decent pub actually. Why aren't you meeting up at the university?'

She shrugged. 'It was his idea to meet there.'

Max looked at her. 'Does he know your circumstances?' he asked.

'What do you mean – my circumstances?'

Max squirmed in his seat. 'Well, that you are, you know, single, as it were.'

'I have no idea,' replied Kim. 'What does it matter anyway?'

'Well, it sounds a bit like a date to me,' he said.

She gasped. 'No way,' she replied. 'No way. It's not. Honestly.'

Max turned round to face her. 'You are a single woman now. A man wants to meet you in a bar. Just be careful, that's all I'm saying.'

Chapter 20

Kim was still sat at the kitchen table pondering Max's assertion that her 'meeting' with John Sinclair was actually a date when Angus poked his head around the door.

'I've got a sort of date tonight,' he said. 'Can you cut my hair?'

'Err, okay,' she replied. She hadn't cut any hair in weeks and now several on the trot! 'Take a seat,' she said.

Angus dumped his bag on the floor and sat down on the chair that Max had vacated less than an hour ago.

She looked down at his dark red mop, worrying about the fact his mum had been very clear that she would not encourage Kim cutting his hair. She ran a fresh comb through it to assess the situation. She needed to go carefully. He certainly didn't need a radical change like Sonny. Angus needed entirely different handling to his housemate.

'So just a tidy up then?' she asked. 'Just needs sharpening up, yeah?'

'Yep,' agreed Angus. 'Nothing radical. Just been noticing a few stray ones when I put the gel on in the morning.'

'Sure,' she replied. 'Not a problem. We'll soon get you ready for that date of yours.'

'Like I said, not really a date,' pressed Angus.

'Of course,' replied Kim. 'Of course.'

'Just getting together to discuss coursework, that's all. Well that's what she thinks but you know she's pretty hot, so you never know, do you? Always best to be prepared is what I always say,' he laughed. Kim didn't.

'Of course,' she replied.

Angus took his phone out and looked down at it and Kim couldn't help but notice the picture of a very attractive girl on his home screen.

'So have you heard from the girl in Edinburgh?' she asked. 'Poppy, was it? Is it definitely all over? Just so I know. Don't want to put my foot in it. Not that I will talk to this girl, of course, if you bring her over. I know the rules. Sorry, didn't mean to pry.'

Kim watched in fascination as the back of Angus's neck grew bright red.

'Well, yes, I mean, I don't know really, it's sort of in the air. I mean we message each other all the time but we haven't actually talked about us really. And she's up there, I'm down here, so it's not worth carrying on with really, is it? I'm sure she feels the same.'

'Clippers?' Kim asked.

'What?'

'Clippers? Does your hairdresser normally use clippers on the back?'

'Oh yeah. Right. Yes, he does. Number four, I think.'

'Sounds about right. So will you see her when you go home at the end of term?' she ventured. It felt like he wanted to talk about it.

'Course, yeah. I'm hoping we'll be hanging out. Won't be the same being back in Edinburgh and not seeing her. That's if she wants to see me, of course, and hasn't shackled up with some brainy cretin who likes to name all the bones in the body. Jeez, what a boring bastard. Why would she want to spend time with someone like that?'

'So has she met someone then?'

'No idea.'

'Have you asked her?'

'No. I just know she's been out partying a lot so she's bound to have met someone, hasn't she? How could she not? I mean

she's stunning. Have you seen her? Here, look at a picture.'

He lifted up his phone to show Kim the picture of the girl on his screen.

'Look at her. There's no way she hasn't been snapped up by some boring twat of a doctor, is there?'

Kim peered at the photo. Indeed she was a beautiful girl. A stunning girl in fact, but in a natural way. Dark brown curls surrounded a smiling face with a cheeky grin. She looked fun, she looked smart. She looked like an absolute catch.

'She's gorgeous,' agreed Kim. 'You've got her as your background still?'

'Well, yeah, you know, not got round to taking it off.'

'So tell me about this girl you're meeting tonight.'

'Well, she's on my course. And we have to do a project in teams and well, I can tell she's really smart and will do a ton of work and so I picked her. And as I say, she happens to be quite hot.'

'What's her name?'

'Err, not sure. Ellie, I think. Or Evie? Something like that.'

'And she's worth getting your hair cut for?'

Angus shrugged. 'Might as well, seeing as you are here. And Poppy's going to FaceTime me over the weekend too and I don't want her to think that I'm letting myself go. There's some uni ball she's going to. Wants to show me her dress or something.'

'She wants to show you her dress?' questioned Kim.

'Yes.'

'What's Poppy like?' asked Kim.

'What's she like? Well, she's gorgeous as I said. But she's also really smart and funny. She's just like great, really.'

Kim nodded.

Angus went quiet.

‘So does she have a date for this ball?’ asked Kim.

He shrugged. ‘I don’t think so. It’s a medical school thing, I think. She hasn’t mentioned going with anyone. But like I said, I’m sure she’s not short of offers. She must have guys falling round her.’

‘How long were you seeing each other before you came to university? If you don’t mind me asking.’

‘Not long at all. We actually hooked up at our high school graduation dinner. So like a few months. Nothing really.’

Kim nodded slowly.

‘And she wants to FaceTime you to show you the dress she is going to wear to a ball this weekend?’

‘That’s what she said in her text, yeah. Look.’

Angus tapped on his phone then held it up to show Kim.

HEY – HOW ARE YOU? NERVOUS ABOUT THIS DRESS I’VE BOUGHT TO GO TO THE MEDICS BALL. CAN WE FACETIME TO SEE WHAT YOU THINK? HOW WAS HOCKEY TRAINING? P XX

Kim took it in.

‘So you can see why I need to get my hair cut?’ said Angus. ‘She’ll be looking amazing and I’ll be looking like a right scruff if I’m not careful.’

‘I thought you were getting your hair cut for Evie?’

‘Who’s Evie?’

‘The one who you are meeting later to talk about your project?’

‘Oh yeah. Sure. Yeah, for Evie.’

Kim carried on cutting.

‘So your dad’s a bit of a card,’ said Kim. ‘Sounds like he enjoyed himself at university.’

Angus laughed. ‘Oh yeah, he sure did. He was a bit of a lad at uni. Let’s just say that.’

Kim watched him glance down at his phone and the picture of Poppy. Kim was convinced Angus thought he should be

playing the field like his dad had done in his university years. Trouble is that playing the field is all well and good as long as you own your own heart. If someone has stolen it then the field actually is not that much fun.

They both heard the front door open and voices in the hall and they were soon joined by Sonny and Harry in the kitchen.

‘Wow, amazing. You’re cutting Angus’s hair,’ said Sonny, stating the obvious. ‘So cool.’

‘I’ve got a hot date tonight,’ he said, winking at Sonny.

Kim shook her head in despair.

‘What! Who with?’ said Sonny, looking at him in awe.

‘A girl on my course. She’s so hot. I can’t tell you.’

‘How do you do it? I mean, what do you actually say? I mean, what do you actually do to get these women?’

‘Just part of my natural charm,’ said Angus, winking at Sonny again.

‘But tell me the actual words,’ pressed Sonny. ‘I need to know how you do this.’

‘I just walked over to her and said do you want to do this eco study project together. I reckon we could do a decent job between us. And she said yes so I said let’s meet at the Student Union at 7 p.m. and she said yes and there we are. Voila!’

‘So much easier if you have a shared interest like a degree, I guess,’ sighed Sonny. ‘The trouble is I have no idea what our shared interests are.’

‘Sex,’ said Angus. ‘That’s the shared interest, matey boy.’

‘Angus!’ exclaimed Kim.

‘What?’

Kim shook her head. She knew she had promised not to get involved with any women the boys brought back to the house but she simply couldn’t stand here and listen to Angus treat her sex so carelessly.

‘This girl, Evie, is it? Well, don’t forget to treat her like a human being. You know, like a person with feelings. Treat her like ... well, like Poppy if she was here, or like you would want Poppy to be treated.’

‘If anyone screwed over Poppy I would absolutely deck them,’ said Angus, looking angry. ‘No one would get away with treating her badly. I would kill them, I swear.’

Kim had to take a step back he shook his head so violently. It was so clear that Angus had really deep feelings for this Poppy. He just didn’t know what to do about it.

She looked down and Angus was staring at his phone screen again.

‘Have you shown Harry and Sonny the picture of Poppy?’ Kim asked.

He looked up sharply. ‘Err, no.’

‘You’ve got a picture of Poppy?’ said Sonny, immediately leaping forward and peering at Angus’s phone. ‘Let me see.’

Angus handed the phone over and Sonny peered at it.

‘Really?’ he said, looking back at Angus in wonder. ‘That’s the girl you’ve got back home?’

‘Well, not really. I mean, we weren’t going out for long.’

‘Look at this hubba, Harry. Would you be cheating on that?’ asked Sonny.

Harry gave the screen a cursory look. ‘Guess not,’ he shrugged.

‘Who is this date tonight, Beyoncé or something?’ asked Sonny. ‘She cannot be any better than that. And if she is then – just wow – wow is all I can say.’

Sonny sat down next to Harry looking in complete shock.

‘I can’t bring myself to ask anyone out and you ... you ...’ said Sonny. ‘My mind is blown. I mean, I’ve hovered outside the chippy so often to see if Annie is working that Max thinks I’ve permanently lost my key and I’m coming to check if you are there, Kim. But every time I see her, just absolute drivel

comes out of my mouth. I told her she was wearing nice socks the other day. Nice socks! Best chat-up line known to man. I'm such an idiot.' Sonny hit himself on his forehead with the palm of his hand.

'You invited her to the pub quiz,' said Kim.

'That was different. That wasn't a date,' said Sonny. 'I wasn't inviting her to spend time with just me. I was inviting her to spend time with all of us. I knew she would be up for that. But just me? I'm not so sure. How did you get Suki to like you?' Sonny asked Harry, nudging him on the arm.

Harry glanced up at his mum.

'We're just friends,' he said firmly. 'We both like *Tomb Raider*. That's all.'

'You like her though, don't you?' said Sonny. 'You'd like her to be your girlfriend? You know, if she asked.'

'We're just friends,' said Harry again, looking back down at his phone.

Maybe they were just friends, thought Kim. But maybe Harry wanted more and he didn't know how to go about it. Or maybe he didn't want more and was fed up with the pressure. Or maybe not going to uni was stopping him wanting to get too involved in anything? Perhaps he was a commitment-phobe. Unwilling to commit to a girlfriend or his course?

Jesus, life was complicated as an eighteen-year-old boy. And she thought that being a forty-eight-year-old woman was bad. She looked round at her three housemates. What a crowd. Angus trying to live up to his father's misguided reputation when what he really wanted was right under his nose. Sonny just desperate to have a girlfriend and trying to emulate Angus when all he really needed to be was himself. And Harry. Struggling with goodness knows what that was stopping him living his life.

If only she could find a way of helping them.

She caught sight again of the beautiful, fun-loving girl on Angus's phone.

‘Do you have a dinner jacket?’ she asked him.

Angus turned sharply to look at her. ‘Of course I do,’ he said.

Kim knew he would have. He was just the type to be used to attending functions that required a dinner jacket.

‘Why don’t you wear it when you take Poppy to the ball?’

‘What?! I’m not taking her to the ball.’

‘But you could. You could go and see her and take her to the ball.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘Sure,’ she shrugged, trying to act casual. ‘Do you want to take her to the ball?’

Angus paused for a moment. ‘Of course I do. I mean I’d love to. But I’ve no idea if she would want to go with me and I don’t even know if someone else is taking her. I mean, what if she said no?’

‘Why do you think Angus should ask Poppy to the ball?’ asked Sonny. ‘I don’t understand.’

Kim took a deep breath. ‘Because Poppy wants him to ask her to the ball.’

All three boys stared at her.

‘How can you know that?’ asked Harry, looking sceptical. ‘You cannot know that.’

‘Yeah,’ said Angus. ‘There is no way you can know that.’

‘Well,’ began Kim. ‘She said she wants you to FaceTime her so that she can show you the dress she’s planning to wear, yeah?’

‘Yeah,’ nodded Angus, looking very confused.

‘Now if that is not a plea for you to take her then I don’t know what is. Why else would she be showing you her dress? For goodness’ sake, Angus, take her to the damn ball! Because if you like her, and I think you really do like her, then you need to do something about it, rather than assuming the worst

and acting as though it doesn't matter by messing around with all these other poor girls.'

Angus stared back at her.

'I'm not sure you giving me relationship advice was in the rules we drew up?' he said.

'Okay,' she said, putting her hands in the air. 'I take it all back. I apologise. I've overstepped the mark. Ignore everything I said.'

She moved round to the back of his head and resumed her snipping.

'Do you really like Poppy?' asked Sonny, his face agog.

Angus said nothing. Even Harry was waiting for an answer.

Slowly Angus nodded his head.

'But ... but ... why all these other girls?' he asked.

Angus looked to the floor and shrugged.

Kim squeezed his shoulder. 'Fear of rejection,' said Kim. 'Just the same as you, Sonny. We all fear rejection when it's someone we really care about.'

Sonny had never looked more stunned. 'Even Angus,' he whispered.

'Even Angus,' replied Kim.

'You have to ask her to the ball,' said Sonny, suddenly jumping up and down. 'Just ask her. If you love her you have to ask her. Doesn't he, Kim?'

'No one said anything about love,' said Angus, looking stern.

'No, they didn't,' said Kim. 'But if you do really like her, then you should ask her to the ball.'

'Oh my God, this is so romantic,' said Sonny, clutching his heart. 'It's like Prince Charming asking Cinderella. Come on, Angus, we need the fairy tale ending. Ask Poppy to the ball. Tell you what, if you ask Poppy to the ball I'll somehow grit my teeth and ask Annie out. Which is way harder as she will

say no but, you know, anything for you, mate.’ He put his hand on his shoulder.

Angus eventually turned to look at Kim.

‘Well?’ she asked.

‘Will you iron my dinner shirt for me?’ he asked.

‘Hurray!’ said Sonny, jumping up and down. ‘You go get her, man!’

‘I’m not ironing your shirt,’ grinned Kim.

Even Harry had a small grin on his face.

‘I’d offer to iron your shirt,’ said Sonny, ‘but I don’t know how. Anything for romance.’

‘You don’t know how?’ said Angus. ‘Have you done, Kim?’

‘Yes,’ said Kim.

‘Then, follow me, Sonny, and I will show you how to iron my shirt.’

‘Will you?’ gasped Sonny. ‘Wow, thanks Angus. And thank you, Kim. You know, for helping Angus realise he loves Poppy.’

‘No one said anything about love,’ repeated Angus. ‘Now get up those stairs and iron my shirt.’

They exited the kitchen leaving Kim and Harry alone together. How she ached to solve his problems in the same way but she didn’t know where to start. She didn’t really know what his problems were.

She hadn’t realised that she was looking at him intently until he looked up at her and met her gaze.

‘Don’t you dare start trying to matchmake me,’ he said, getting up. ‘I’m not Angus, I’m not Sonny. Just leave me. Me and Suki are just fine.’ He picked up his phone and walked out of the room.

Chapter 21

Kim was feeling particularly churned up as she began her shift at the chip shop the following week. Sonny had decided that tonight was the night that he was going to ask out Annie. They'd discussed his strategy at length the night before. He'd asked her question after question about what to say and what to wear and how to do it and whilst Kim had been tempted to give advice, she felt like he needed to be confident in himself and what he thought was the right thing to do. After all his personality was his biggest asset and he needed to be true to himself. As she told him, it was his personality that was going to secure the date, not hers. He needed to let it shine.

‘What’s your gut feeling about her?’ she asked. ‘How do you think she would like to be treated? What first date would appeal to her?’

He looked back at her, bereft. Panicked.

‘You can do this,’ she told him. ‘Come on. You promised Angus. You need to have at least tried before he gets back from Edinburgh.’

That was the other reason why she was feeling nervous. Angus had left for Edinburgh in a flurry on Friday after deciding he was just going to surprise Poppy. Turn up on her doorstep in his dinner suit and ask her to the ball. He was hyper. Totally excited. Which was great. Kim just prayed that her hunch had been right and that actually Poppy wanted to be with Angus and was not off shagging every medical student in sight. They'd heard absolutely nothing from him since he left which could be a good or bad sign. He was having such a good time that he had forgotten to report back to base, or it hadn't gone to plan and he was wallowing in misery somewhere. Possibly even gone back home to lick his wounds with his mum and dad whilst his father told him he was an idiot for

trying and he should get back to Nottingham and get back in the saddle so to speak. She really hoped that she had given Angus the right steer because if she hadn't then it was sure going to make life difficult in the house again.

She gave the chips a good shake in the fryer. She couldn't believe how quickly she had got to grips with everything after her initial poor start. She actually felt quite at home there. It was almost her refuge. Her chance to escape her everyday worries around Harry and his future and her own future come to that.

She was just putting a new batch of chips in the fryer when she caught sight of something bright out of the corner of her eye. She looked up and the bell over the door went and in walked Sonny. She swallowed. 'Wow,' she mouthed to him. This was either genius or catastrophic. Maybe she should have offered more guidance, she thought.

Sonny had gelled his hair to a stiff peak and was wearing a shiny red bomber jacket with white jeans. She couldn't see his face as it was obliterated by an enormous bunch of flowers in all the colours of the rainbow.

'Wow,' she mouthed again.

He moved the flowers away from his face so he could cover his mouth as he coughed. An anxiety rash was spreading up his neck to his face. She wanted to go over and hug him. She wanted to go over and hold his hand but she knew that would be wrong. All she could do was watch.

He stepped towards her and cleared his throat again.

'Is Annie working tonight?' he asked.

He knew full well that Annie was working as that was the sole reason for him being here.

Kim nodded, keeping up the charade of this not being completely planned and manipulated.

'Yes,' she said. She turned round and shouted, 'Annie!'

Annie and Max were behind the counter behind her, both staring open-mouthed at Sonny.

‘Oh, there you are,’ said Kim. ‘Err, Sonny would like to, err, talk to you?’ she stumbled. Christ, she was more tongue-tied than Sonny. What a shambles. She scurried to join Max, allowing Annie free rein at the front counter.

Annie glided forward, looking a little bewildered. Today she had on a pink fifties ensemble, complete with black netting underskirt underneath her apron. Her hair was tied up in a polka dot scarf and her makeup was as immaculate as ever. Bright red rosebud lips and a fake beauty spot on her left cheek.

Kim stood next to Max and held her breath.

‘Hello Annie,’ said Sonny. ‘I err, hope you don’t mind me dropping into your place of work like this?’

‘Of course not,’ replied Annie. ‘I mean, you drop into my place of work quite often.’

‘Well yes,’ said Sonny. ‘I suppose I do. But your dad’s fish is my favourite. It’s even better than the Codfather down in Devon. Have I ever mentioned the Codfather? It’s right on the seafront. It’s amazing.’

‘You have mentioned it actually,’ said Annie. ‘I almost feel like I’ve been there.’

‘Oh, you would love it. You would so love it. They have these benches outside but you have to be careful of the seagulls because once a seagull swooped down and just took a chip right out of my hand.’

‘Wow, really,’ said Annie. Kim knew for a fact that Sonny had told Annie this story before during one of his many trips to the chippy to see her.

‘Nothing like as good as this place though, of course. I mean, this must be the best chippy in Nottingham, mustn’t it – at the very least.’

‘Dad doesn’t do awards,’ replied Annie. ‘Doesn’t believe in them. I’ve told him he’s an idiot but there you go. The older generation, hey?’

Kim felt Max was about to speak up and she put her hand on his arm to stop him.

‘So did you want your usual?’ asked Annie. ‘Fish, chips and gravy?’

‘Err, no, I mean yes, I mean I do but I wanted to ask you first, I mean I wanted to give you these first,’ he said, thrusting the flowers over the counter into Annie’s face. So much so that she had to take a step back.

‘Oh wow,’ she said. ‘Wow. That’s lovely. Thank you. Is this what you do in all your favourite chippies? Has the Codfather got a steady flow of flowers coming from you down in Devon?’

‘Oh no,’ gasped Sonny. ‘No, I’ve never given someone who works in a chip shop flowers before.’

‘Right,’ nodded Annie.

Get to the point, thought Kim.

‘What I mean is that I’ve actually never given anyone flowers before, apart from my mum on Mother’s Day but only the ones you get free in church, it wasn’t like I bought them or anything, so that doesn’t count, right?’

‘Still nice though, to give your mum flowers.’

‘Yep.’ He coughed again and took an envelope out of his inside pocket. ‘I also wanted to give you this,’ he said.

Oh goodness, thought Kim. What the hell was in there? She and Max exchanged a nervous look.

‘Err, do I open it?’ asked Annie.

‘Yes, yes please. I need an answer now. So yes, open it.’

The chip shop was suddenly deafeningly quiet as Annie tore open the envelope and extracted a card. She appeared to read it and then looked up to Sonny.

‘The pleasure would be all mine,’ she said.

Sonny literally jumped in the air and did a swirl on the ground.

Kim gripped Max's arm in delight.

'Ow,' he said, leaping away.

'Sorry,' she said.

'What just happened?' he asked.

'Sonny just asked your daughter out.'

'What!'

'Don't worry, he's going to treat her like a princess.'

'He'd better,' mumbled Max.

Kim decided it was safe to return to the front counter as she really wanted to know what was in that envelope. 'Do you want me to put those flowers in the staff room?' she asked Annie.

'Yes please,' said Annie, handing them over. She was beaming, thank goodness.

'You okay?' she said, looking at Sonny.

Sonny nodded. 'She said yes,' he said, looking slightly shocked.

'Lovely,' smiled Kim, trying to sneak a look at what was written on the card.

'Afternoon tea,' said Annie, showing the card to Kim. 'Can you believe it? I've always wanted to go to Josephine's for afternoon tea. Did you suggest it?' she asked. 'Was it your idea?'

'No,' said Kim, holding her hand up. 'Nothing to do with me, I swear.'

'Kim just told me to be true to myself,' said Sonny, still grinning from ear to ear. 'She didn't tell me what to wear or what to do. She just said be me because that was enough.'

'Of course it's enough,' said Annie, putting her hand on his arm. 'More than enough.'

Sonny looked like he might cry.

Hold it together, thought Kim. Crying at this point might not look good.

‘Brilliant on the afternoon tea,’ said Kim. ‘How on earth did you come up with that?’

Sonny grinned. ‘Two things,’ he said. ‘I’m from Devon. Devon is me. And what else is from Devon?’

‘Cream tea?’ said Kim.

‘Exactly. And then I thought, well I thought, Annie always looks so amazing and pretty and I thought it would be great to take her somewhere pretty to, you know, show how pretty she is and every time I pass Josephine’s I always think it looks so pretty so it was obvious really, wasn’t it? A pretty place for a pretty lady.’

You smooth-talking bastard, thought Kim as she watched Annie literally melt in front of Sonny’s adoring gaze. Now that was how to sweet-talk a lady. She looked up at Max who had heard every word of Sonny’s reasoning around taking Annie for afternoon tea. He was looking at Annie’s face that was literally glowing with the full-on compliment. Kim didn’t think that Sonny would have any problems with Max now.

Max cleared his throat. ‘Well, I’m sorry to break up this little interlude but we do have a chip shop to run, so can we all come down off cloud nine and get back to work?’

‘God, sorry, sorry,’ gasped Sonny. ‘Didn’t mean to interrupt. I’ll go. Just need to do this.’

He jumped up onto the counter and enveloped Kim in a massive hug.

She laughed and hugged him back. ‘What’s all this for?’ she asked.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘Thank you for not doing what my mum asked, for teaching me how to cook spaghetti, for cutting my hair, for ... for ... for being my friend. You may have just changed my life.’

Kim shook her head. ‘I didn’t do anything of the sort. You did. You did it all.’

‘Not without you though.’ He gave her a cheesy thumbs up and then turned to go just as Angus chose that moment to burst through the door.

‘I’m back,’ he roared, literally beating his chest.

‘Yey,’ said Sonny. ‘Angus is back.’ He ran at him and jumped into his arms.

‘What the hell,’ Kim heard Max mutter.

They hugged then Angus released Sonny to the floor.

‘I’m king of the world,’ declared Angus, quoting Leonardo DiCaprio’s famous line.

Kim felt herself relax slightly. The weekend must have gone well.

‘Did you take her to the ball?’ asked Sonny, literally jumping up and down. ‘Did you, did you?’

‘Oh yes,’ grinned Angus.

‘She said yes?’ asked Kim urgently.

‘Oh yes,’ said Angus. ‘Like so happy to see me. And we went to the ball and I showed all those doctor pimps that this is my lady. It was epic.’

Max was staring at Angus bug-eyed. Suddenly his chippy had been turned into teen romance central.

‘He does tend to trash talk when he’s overexcited,’ Kim said to Max.

‘Are you taking the piss out of my Scottish accent?’ asked Angus.

‘No,’ said Kim. ‘Just not sure you should be calling doctors pimps.’

‘Doctors *are* pimps,’ said Angus.

Kim sighed. She had some work to do there.

‘That’s so amazing,’ said Sonny. ‘I’m so happy for you. No need to chase after all those other girls any more then?’

‘Oh no. One woman man, me now. Poppy has it. Now I know she wants it, she can have all of it.’

‘So you were right then,’ said Sonny to Kim. ‘Angus loved Poppy all along.’

‘No one said anything about love,’ said Angus firmly.

Kim looked at Sonny and raised her eyebrows.

‘You are the best,’ declared Sonny, pointing at Kim. ‘You are so clever!’

Kim shook her head. ‘No I’m not,’ she said. ‘You’re the ones studying at university, not me. You just remember that. I’m just a hairdresser who works in a chippy.’

Sonny shook his head. ‘You are so much more than that.’

Kim looked back at him. He really was the sweetest guy.

‘And by the way there is nothing wrong with being a hairdresser who works in a chippy,’ shouted Max. ‘But at this precise moment she needs to get back to being a hairdresser who works in a chippy rather than the world’s greatest matchmaker. We have chips to serve, guys, so isn’t it about time you ordered some food and then cleared off?’

‘Wow, yes, forgot, sorry Max,’ said Sonny.

‘Mr Lawrence to you,’ said Max.

‘God yes, of course yes, sir I mean, Mr Lawrence, I’ll have fish, chips and gravy, please.’

‘Large or small?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Large or small?’

‘Oh, erm, small actually, is that okay? I can order large if you want me to.’

‘Annie, serve the lad what he wants, will you, and then get rid of him.’

‘Yes Dad,’ grinned Annie.

‘I’ll go large,’ said Angus.

‘Of course you will,’ sighed Max, returning to his station behind the fryers.

When they were clearing up after the shop had shut and Annie had cranked up the radio and was dancing as she swept the floor, she asked Kim to tell her the whole story of why Angus had cantered off up to Edinburgh to invite a girl to go to a ball.

‘It’s so romantic,’ she sighed, leaning on her broomstick. ‘But how could you be so sure she would say yes? How did you know?’

Kim shrugged.

‘I could tell by the way Angus talked about her that he really cared about her. He just didn’t know what to do about it. Then he showed me that text from her where she wanted him to see her dress and I realised that was his opportunity. It was a pretty clear signal from her. I might have read it wrong but I knew that whatever way it went then at least Angus would have got it out of his system and then he could move on either way.’

Annie was staring at her. ‘Wow. That is so insightful. Like really. You should do this sort of stuff for a living.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Listening to people and helping them sort out their problems.’

Kim shrugged. ‘It’s just what I do when I’m cutting people’s hair really. Just listening.’

‘But you’re really good at it. You should be like a counsellor or something.’

Kim wrinkled her nose. ‘No one is going to pay me to listen to them. They pay me to cut their hair.’

‘But you are so easy to talk to. People would pay for that. And you listen, you *really* listen. That’s kind of rare.’

‘Not really, is it? It’s just what I do. And in any case you need qualifications for proper counselling, don’t you?’

‘Sure,’ said Annie. ‘Of course, but you’d sail through that.’

Kim laughed. 'I don't think so. I've not studied for nearly thirty years. No chance. Studying is for young people like you. I'm way too old for that.'

Annie raised her eyebrows. 'Not too old for dancing whilst sweeping though,' she said, handing the broom to Kim.

Kim laughed. 'Never too old for that.' She took the broom from her and spun around just as a familiar track from the nineties came on. That reminded her of a thought she had had. She looked round to make sure that Max was out of earshot.

'You bought your dad a Christmas present yet?' she asked Annie.

'No,' sighed Annie. 'He's such a nightmare. I never know what to get him.'

'I could give you an idea. Something that really he would only accept from you and you would absolutely need to go with him. That would be really important. But I think he might absolutely love it.'

'Wow, tell me, tell me,' begged Annie.

Annie leaned in to hear Kim whisper to make doubly sure that Max wouldn't hear. A grin spread across her face.

'Kim,' she said when she had finished. 'You are a genius.'

'Second time I've been called that tonight,' she said. 'You'll have to watch me. I'll be getting too big for my boots.'

Chapter 22

Exactly the right person called when Kim was staring at her wardrobe in despair. It was taxing her for no apparent reason as to what to wear for her meeting with John Sinclair. It was probably the juxtaposition of having a meeting with her son's tutor in a pub that was giving her such angst, and Max's whole assertion that it was in actual fact a date that John Sinclair had set up. She had absolutely no idea how to dress for a meeting that she needed to be clear about was not a date but was also in a pub. However, she knew that there was one person who just might have the answer.

'Hi Vicky,' said Kim, picking up her phone. 'You have called at just the right time.'

'Really. You not about to head off to fry some chips then?'

'No. Now listen carefully, this is a tricky one.'

'I'm all ears.'

'So I heard via Richard that Harry hasn't been turning up to any of his lectures.'

'Ah yes. Richard told me.'

'You've seen Richard?'

'Yes. That's why I rang. I was just coming out of Greggs yesterday. I was mortified. No one needs to see a qualified baker coming out of Greggs with a steak bake. It's not good for my business.'

'Was Richard going into Greggs?'

'Yes,' gasped Vicky. 'Can you believe it? Never would have thought he was a Greggs man.'

'And he told you about Harry?' asked Kim.

‘He asked me to go and have a coffee with him. I’m sorry, mate. He looked awful and kind of desperate. What could I say? And he said he needed to talk and I thought I might learn something that might be useful to you so I said yes.’

‘So did you go for a coffee in Greggs?’

‘God no. I made him take me to Costa. If he was paying then I wanted a large cappuccino in a proper mug and chocolate on top.’

‘Fair play. I would have done the same.’

‘Thought so. I also took him for a lemon muffin. Hang the calories. Anyway, so we sit down and you will never guess what he told me.’

‘What?’

‘Him and Alison are no more.’

‘What!’

‘Yes. It’s over.’

Kim sat down hard on the narrow single bed. She felt totally winded. This was the last thing she was expecting.

‘Why? When?’ she asked.

‘Well of course I asked a gazillion questions. Knew you’d want to know all the gory details.’

Kim wasn’t so sure.

‘But I’m not quite sure if even he understands what happened to be honest. But from what I could gather it all started falling apart the minute they moved in together.’

‘I guess I did kind of force their hand on that.’

‘Yep. Good move as it turned out. Moving out and taking the keys so he had no choice but to move in. Genius. Anyway he was mumbling on about grapefruit at breakfast and ...’

‘He always has a bacon butty. I know it’s bad for him but look at him, he’s as skinny as a rake,’ interrupted Kim.

‘And then he said she sent him to the supermarket and he’d come back with the wrong stuff and she’d told him off.’

‘Richard hasn’t a clue about food shopping,’ replied Kim. ‘He’d come back with a week’s worth of ready meals and twelve packets of biscuits.’

‘And he kept going on about some shopping trip to Manchester to buy clothes and she made him buy all this designer gear that he hates and traipse round all these shops that he had no interest in at all and he just couldn’t understand what she was trying to do.’

Kim went quiet, her mind swirling. For so long she had built up Richard and Alison’s clothes buying trip into something magical. In fact she had already visualised in great detail Richard and Alison’s forthcoming Christmas shopping trip to Manchester where they would buy the perfect gifts for all the family whilst sipping mulled wine at the German market and share warm fuzzy hugs and kisses under the sparkling Christmas lights. It was so lovely in her head it was like something out of a Richard Curtis film. It made her so jealous she wanted to scream. But it sounded like the fantasy Christmas shopping trip was not going to happen because actually Richard didn’t like that sort of thing whether it was Kim he was going with or Alison.

A bizarre sense of relief at the realisation flooded over her. It wasn’t her that put him off such experiences. Alison hadn’t succeeded where she’d failed at all.

‘So ... so,’ said Kim, trying to gather herself following the relief of being able to pop the fantasy shopping bubble. ‘What else did he say?’

‘Well it sounded like it all came to a head when Alison’s daughter came to visit. She didn’t want anything to do with him apparently. Totally understandable if you ask me. Anyway, so he moved back into your house and he said he realised that he was relieved to be home. That it made him realise that was where he wanted to be and, get this, Alison comes over and says she’s managed to talk her daughter round and he needs to go back next door and talk to her and make nicey-nicey and get the daughter on side and he said he realised he didn’t want to. He didn’t want to go back and he didn’t want to have to suck up to Alison’s daughter. He just

wanted to be home. Which of course went down like a bag of sick with fancy pants Alison, so I imagine there was a big bust-up and they split up.'

'Really?'

'I made the big bust-up bit up actually. He didn't say that. He just said that they decided that clearly it wasn't right and they should part ways.'

'I was going to say. Richard doesn't do big bust-ups. It's not his style.'

'He probably wrote a hypothesis on why he thought the relationship was no longer tenable and then handed it to her and asked her to mark it,' said Vicky.

'Probably so,' Kim agreed. 'I don't know what to think. I mean I'm glad it's over. I didn't want it to work out. Of course I didn't but ... but where does that leave me and Richard?' she asked. 'I mean, I don't know who he is anymore after all this. Oh, I don't know what to think.'

'Well, don't think anything. Just let it sink in. You must be a bit shocked, I imagine. This is a twist in the tale no one saw coming.'

Kim sighed. 'Too right. Talk about blindsided.'

'Do you want me to come down?' Vicky asked. 'Take you out again.'

'Not sure my liver or my housemates can take that again,' said Kim. 'I'll be okay, I should probably talk to him, I guess. I don't know. Did he say anything else? Anything about me?'

She wasn't sure why she was asking that. Not sure at all. She was so confused it was untrue.

'Well he told me he'd talked to you about Harry and him not turning up at uni. What's going on there then?'

'I don't know,' admitted Kim. 'Harry won't talk to me at all. He's so defensive. I can't get anything out of him and you know living here complicates it which is hard. But I went to see his tutor to see if I could learn anything, but he was busy so I'm seeing him tonight actually.'

‘Oh yeah, Richard mentioned something about that. He was rattling on that he wasn’t sure you were doing the right thing seeing him and then he said he didn’t rate the tutor and he was a bit of a ladies’ man so he’d heard when he’d done some digging. But he was rambling so I had no idea what he was talking about.’

Kim bit her lip. So Richard had done some digging. What had he done that for? Now she was even more confused.

‘So this tutor has asked to meet in a pub in the centre of Nottingham,’ Kim told her friend.

‘Oh yes. Does it sound like a lap dancing club?’

‘Yeah, it does. Lillie Langtry’s. But it’s like a proper ale pub, I think. That’s what John said anyway.’

‘John?’

‘Harry’s tutor. The guy I’m meeting tonight.’

‘Is he hot?’

Kim sighed. ‘Not really. In any case, it’s irrelevant. Not interested. This is all about Harry. And sadly when you brought my clothes down all you brought was pulling gear which gives off totally the wrong impression, which is why I’m sat here scratching my head wondering what to wear. Any ideas?’

‘I see your dilemma,’ agreed Vicky. ‘I had not factored such a scenario in when I was selecting from your wardrobe. Look, you know what we say?’

‘If in doubt go glam.’

‘Exactly. It will give you confidence and it’s not an invite to a man to come on to you just because you have made an effort.’

‘I hope you’re right,’ said Kim. ‘I hope you’re right.’

In the end Kim decided she would stick with exactly what she wore when she went to the university to see John Sinclair. Even though the ensemble included a silver cardigan she hoped it would communicate that she had made no more of an

effort for this evening's meeting than she had for a casual trip to campus.

She was ready by 5.15 p.m. and was attempting to vacate the building without any of her housemates spotting her. She didn't need to be asked any awkward questions by any of them, least of all Harry. She felt bad enough about seeing his tutor behind his back as it was. She waited until it all seemed quiet outside on the landing, hoping they were all downstairs.

She tiptoed out and got downstairs to the first floor just past Sonny's door when he flung it open and called her name.

'Is that you, Kim? I wanted to ask you if green jeans are too much for afternoon tea – ooh, where are you off to? You look ace. Loving the shiny jumper thingy.'

Kim stopped in her tracks and turned round slowly.

'Green jeans – fine,' she said. 'Whatever you think. Annie will love it.'

'Thanks,' nodded Sonny. 'So are you going to the chippy like that?'

'Err, no. It's my night off. I'm just off out.'

'Where?'

'To meet someone.'

'Who? Is your friend Vicky back in town? I love her. Can I come with you?'

'No. It's not Vicky.'

'Oh. Who then?'

'Just someone I'm meeting for a drink, that's all.'

At that point Angus came running up the stairs from the ground floor and screeched to a halt outside the bathroom looking up at Kim.

'Wowser – where you going?' he asked. 'Hot date, is it?'

'No!' screeched Kim. 'I'm just meeting someone for a quick drink, that's all.'

‘Like who?’ he asked. ‘You don’t know anyone. Oh I get it. You been on the apps, haven’t you – you sly devil.’

‘The apps?’ asked Sonny. ‘What do you mean, the apps?’

‘Dating apps, you mongoose. You know, Tinder, Grindr, Plenty of Fish or whatever the old persons’ version is,’ said Angus.

‘Excuse me. I’m not old and I haven’t been on Tinder,’ said Kim.

‘Good,’ said Sonny. ‘If you’re meeting someone from Tinder then we would be forced to accompany you. You can’t trust anyone on there. Did you know people lie about their age, their height, about everything. You think you’re meeting a six-foot-tall carpenter from Stevenage and it turns out they are a five-foot-two Cornish winkle picker and believe me, you don’t want to date a five-foot-two Cornish winkle picker.’

‘So, who are you meeting then?’ asked Angus.

‘An old friend from way back who happens to be in Nottingham,’ she mumbled.

Kim clearly was doing a very good impression of a rabbit in the headlights. Angus didn’t look convinced at all.

‘Oh how lovely. Are you going to bring her back here to meet us all? I like meeting your friends,’ he said sarcastically.

At that point of course Harry came out of his room. Of course he did. She attempted a warm smile at her son which he didn’t return.

‘Tell your mum to bring her friend back to meet us,’ said Sonny.

‘What friend?’ asked Harry.

‘Err, I’m, err, just going into town to meet an old friend who happens to be in Nottingham,’ explained Kim. Her heart was thudding by now. She was not a natural liar.

‘Who?’ asked Harry.

‘Err, you’ve never met her,’ said Kim. ‘We were at primary school together. Then she moved to, err, Derby aged ten and

she heard I was in Nottingham and got in touch, see, and said we should meet up. So we are. Tonight.'

She bit her lip.

'Are you meeting Dad?' asked Harry.

Blimey, where did that come from?

'No,' said Kim, shaking her head. 'No, of course not.'

'He's split up with Alison,' he said, looking her right in the eye.

Wow. How did Harry know? Had Richard told him?

Kim nodded. 'Yeah, actually I knew. Vicky rang to tell me.'

'What, so ...' said Sonny, his head swivelling between the two of them. 'So your dad isn't shagging the neighbour anymore?' he asked Harry.

Harry nodded slowly, still staring at his mother. 'Looks like it,' he said.

'Shiiiiit,' said Sonny slowly. 'What does that mean?'

Kim didn't have an answer to that question. She had absolutely no idea.

'It means he's still a jerk,' said Angus. 'You can't go around treating women like he does.'

Kim thought she wouldn't point out that Angus had been treating women appallingly up until very recently.

'Did he call and tell you?' Kim asked Harry, wishing they weren't discussing this on the landing that really needed hoovering, in front of Angus and Sonny. However this was the longest conversation she'd had with her son in some time and so she was loath to walk away.

Harry nodded. 'A few days ago.' He swallowed. 'He wants to come and see you,' he continued. 'He wanted to know what I thought.'

'He wants to come and see me?' she said, surprised. 'I'm sure it's you he wants to see really,' she said.

Harry shrugged.

‘What if he wants you back,’ Sonny gasped. He had his hand over his mouth and his eyes were swivelling between all three of them.

Kim kept her gaze on Harry. She couldn’t read him. Was that what Harry thought? What exactly had Richard said to him? Did Harry want them to get back together? She had absolutely no idea and no time to work it out. If she didn’t leave now she’d miss her bus and that would look bad for her meeting with John Sinclair.

‘Look, I’ve got to go or else I’ll miss my bus,’ she said. She put her hand out and touched her son’s arm. ‘I’m glad you spoke to your dad. Would you like him to come and see us?’ she asked.

He shrugged. ‘Not bothered,’ he claimed.

‘I’ll talk to you later,’ she said.

He nodded. Like in agreement. She would talk to him later. She made a promise to herself. She’d talk to John Sinclair and then she’d talk to Harry and get him back on track. And then maybe she’d talk to Richard and find out what the hell was going on. Wow, she had a busy evening ahead of her. Little did she know that none of that was going to go to plan.

Chapter 23

Lillie Langtry's turned out to be an attractive-looking pub in an old building in the heart of Nottingham opposite the Theatre Royal. To Kim's relief it appeared to be frequented mainly by a more local, older crowd rather than by students who all seemed to be roaming the streets in fancy dress that evening. She had already bumped into a Spiderman and a Robin Hood as well as a hen party out in full cowgirl gear. She walked through the door and looked around, relieved to see it wasn't crammed and noisy, so she wouldn't be forced to shout her family's woes into John Sinclair's ear as they were squashed together in some tiny corner. She was, however, ten minutes late due to her getting slightly lost on her way from the bus stop so she felt somewhat flustered as she scanned the interior of the pub.

'Visiting hairdresser from Lancaster,' she heard a cry from behind her. That joke was beginning to get old now, she thought. She turned round and John Sinclair had secured a small table for two in a cosy corner and had a nearly drunk pint in front of him. He also had a massive grin on his face.

He stood up and beckoned her over.

'I'm so sorry I'm late,' she gushed.

'What can I get you to drink?' he asked. 'The beer is excellent but please feel free to have what you want.'

'Err, gin and tonic would be great. Thank you. Would you let me get them?'

'No, you sit down,' he said, grabbing his pint to take with him to the bar. 'I won't be long.'

Kim watched as John Sinclair went to the bar and leaned across it smiling warmly at the barmaid behind the counter.

They appeared to know each other, that or else John Sinclair came here a lot. She watched as he sank the rest of his pint and put it down on the bar only for a new one to arrive immediately. He lifted it to his lips to drain the top off before putting it down and handing his credit card over to the barmaid to pay for the drinks, chatting away. He was wearing jeans and a blue checked shirt under a navy jumper. The standard uniform for a man of his age out meeting his mates for a night in the pub. Kim had been hoping that he would be wearing similar to what she'd seen him in on campus. What she had been hoping for was a man in smart trousers and open necked shirt and jacket. What she had been hoping for was a man who looked like he'd just left work from being a lecturer at university and he was just calling into a pub for a quick chat with a concerned parent. John Sinclair looked like he was ready to settle in for the night. This did not bode well.

He walked towards her, grinning, and settled his pint on the table before placing her gin and tonic in front of her. Then he sat down and took a long swig of his drink. Kim sipped hers and launched into her carefully rehearsed story.

'Thank you so much for this, Mr Sinclair,' she said.

'John, please call me John,' he responded, putting his hand on her arm.

'Err, okay, John,' she said.

He took his hand away.

'So err, I just wanted to explain what's happening with Harry and see if there is anything we can do to get him back on track, because you see it's not his fault, none of it, and I think if you knew what he's been going through then that might explain his lack of attendance and maybe we can do something about it.'

John Sinclair leaned back in his chair and smiled. She noticed that his cheeks were slightly rosy. Like he may have had time for more than one pint whilst he was waiting for her.

'Well, fire away,' he said grinning. 'Let's see what we've got, shall we?'

Kim wasn't sure if he was taking her seriously. He was smiling too much. But what could she do? All she could do was plough on.

'So, you see, erm, Harry's not had the greatest start to university life because, well he found out, well we all found out that his dad, Richard, was having an affair with the next door neighbour, the day before he was due to come to Nottingham.'

John Sinclair nodded. 'Well, yes, I had heard on the grapevine that there had been some sort of scandal up in the science faculty at Lancaster,' he admitted.

'Really?' gasped Kim.

'Well, these things get round, you know, and well, a good friend of mine is a physics lecturer there and people talk, I guess, and also your husband had been in touch to let us know his son was coming and to keep an eye on him so, you know, I guess it meant that Richard Jacobs was on my radar, as it were.'

'Right,' nodded Kim, trying hard to keep up. Richard had never said he'd contacted Nottingham before Harry went.

'You'll understand then that Harry was having to deal with finding out about his father's affair just as he was leaving for university, which was tough enough, but then you see there was a spare room in his student house and I needed to get away so I came with him, to Nottingham. So just at the point where he thought he was getting away from his parents, Mum came too.'

'Hence the visiting hairdresser from Lancaster?' smiled John.

Kim nodded. 'Only not so visiting. I didn't mean to stay for long but I just couldn't go back and now I've got a job here so I kind of ended up staying longer than I thought I would. But you see the point is that it's been incredibly difficult for Harry and neither me or Richard have made it easy for him, and I think he just needs someone like you to talk to him and tell him it doesn't matter that he hasn't been to any lectures and

that he can start getting back into it now and that he just needs to turn up and do the work and it will be okay. Would you ... would you be able to do that?’

John Sinclair nodded. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘If, of course, he will come and see me. I can’t make him, you need to understand that. But if we can get him in then I will of course talk to him and try and see how we can get him focussed. Sometimes freshers arrive and are just intimidated by the whole thing and so it’s a case of welcoming them in. Making them feel comfortable. Perhaps Harry is feeling that he just can’t face it all at the moment given what is going on in his home life so he just needs to understand that actually coming into university is a safe space and actually an escape from other things he may be dealing with.’

Kim nodded vigorously. ‘That could be it,’ she agreed. ‘That could so be it. I can imagine he’s just thinking he can’t face it. That sounds like him. He can get overwhelmed. He did when he did his A levels which is why he didn’t get the grades he needed to get into the university he wanted to and ended up here instead. Last minute.’

‘Well, I’m sorry to hear that we were second choice,’ said John Sinclair.

‘No, no, that’s not what I meant,’ said Kim, getting all flustered. ‘It’s like I said at the time, there is a reason you’re meant to go to Nottingham.’ She looked at John thinking that maybe he was the reason. That actually Harry needed to be somewhere with compassionate tutors like John who would look after him, not write him off as a no-hoper. ‘Thank you,’ she said to him. ‘I can’t tell you how grateful I am that you have agreed to help us. Really. I so appreciate it.’ She smiled and felt herself relax for the first time that evening. If John could help Harry then that would be such a load off her mind.

John Sinclair took another sip of his drink and licked his lips. ‘It’s surprisingly common,’ he said, shaking his head.

‘What is?’

‘Affairs in a university setting. I think it’s to do with dealing with the same pressures and stresses of work. There’s some

kind of connection there that can lead in the wrong direction.'

Kim looked at John Sinclair. What was he talking about? It seemed quite straightforward to her. It was to do with weak men wanting a shag. That's really what it was to do with but perhaps she shouldn't say that right now.

'But of course that's no consolation to you, is it?' he continued. He patted her arm again. 'I'm so sorry this happened to you. It must have been devastating. How long had you been married?'

'Twenty years,' she replied.

'Wow,' said John. 'A long time. Would you mind me asking how you met?'

'I cut his hair,' replied Kim, not wanting to go into the full detail. It made her too sad.

John Sinclair laughed. 'Of course you did. Is that what you are doing here, cutting hair?'

'No. I'm working in the chippy at the end of the road.'

'Of course you are. You did tell me,' said John, looking bemused.

Kim nodded. 'They've been really good to me actually. Given me something to do,' she said with a shrug. 'And I'm keeping my hand in with hair cutting. I do the boys in my house share and the guy who owns the chippy. So you know, I'll go back to it someday.'

'Incredible,' said John. 'You are an inspiration.'

'Not really,' she replied.

'You are. What you have been through and you keep going. I mean, being left by your husband after twenty years. That's a blow. That's horrendous. And you seem to be picking yourself up amazingly.'

Kim didn't actually feel like she was picking herself up at all. She suddenly felt tears spring to her eyes. She wished she could control when the unhappiness of her situation overwhelmed her. Now was not the time, but being reminded

that your marriage had dissolved after twenty years was enough to tip her over the edge.

To her utter mortification she felt a tear slip down her cheek.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, whisking it away with the back of her hand. ‘I didn’t mean to get emotional.’

‘It’s okay,’ John Sinclair said, putting his arm over her shoulder. ‘It must still hurt. I mean, what he did to you. What a terrible thing to go through.’

‘It was. It is,’ she agreed, scrabbling for a packet of tissues out of her bag. ‘Not sure I’ll ever get over it,’ she mumbled, blowing her nose. A fresh set of tears found their way down her cheeks.

John Sinclair squeezed her shoulder blades.

‘You will get over it,’ he said firmly. ‘Look at you, you have everything going for you. You look amazing. You are beautiful. You won’t be alone for long.’

Kim wanted to point out that she wasn’t actually bothered about being alone. She was still grieving for her marriage.

‘You don’t need to be lonely, you know,’ he said, turning in his seat to look at her. His face was quite close to hers now. She could smell beer fumes. She felt herself lean back. He was too close.

‘And well, I was wondering if you might like to cut my hair one night?’ he asked as he put his hand on her knee.

Kim scraped her chair back super-fast. Unfortunately there was a wall behind her so she did not have far to go.

John Sinclair was leering at her and still had his hand on her knee.

‘What the hell do you think you are doing?’ came an all too familiar voice as she blinked at John Sinclair.

The next moment Richard had appeared at John Sinclair’s shoulder and was pulling him away from Kim. This did nothing to relieve Kim’s confusion. What was Richard doing

here, out of nowhere? John had staggered up out of his chair, thankfully taking his hand away from Kim's knee, and was now facing off against Richard.

'Who the hell are you?' he demanded of Richard.

'Richard Jacobs, Kim's husband, Harry's father, Director of Chemistry at Lancaster University.'

Not sure the last bit was necessary, thought Kim. Perhaps that was how all lecturers greeted each other. With their full intellectual credentials.

'And your point is?' asked John Sinclair, his eyes wide.

'My point is that you need to get off my wife.'

John Sinclair laughed in his face. 'The wife that you cheated on with a colleague?' he asked. 'Hardly qualifies you to still call her your wife.'

'And nothing qualifies you to come on to her,' said Richard. 'And in any case. You have no room to talk. I hear you've had that many affairs with students there is practically a whole Mills and Boon series dedicated to you.'

Kim gasped. He'd seemed so angry on her behalf that Richard had done the dirty. And yet ... and yet ... he was just as bad. What was it with these professors?

'Well,' said John, 'I didn't see the lady protesting too much,' he said, turning to address Kim. 'She was just offering to cut my hair, weren't you?'

'No,' said Kim, shaking her head. 'You were asking me to cut your hair. I never offered to cut your hair.'

'Good job I arrived when I did,' said Richard.

'Erm, what are you doing here?' asked Kim.

'I was worried about you meeting John alone,' explained Richard. 'Thought you would need some moral support.'

'You mean you didn't think I was capable of having the right conversation?'

‘No, no, not at all. I just thought, you know, since I’m more aware of the university system then I should be here with you, to help. And when I heard of John’s reputation then I thought that perhaps you are a little vulnerable right now, that perhaps I should be here.’

Kim shook her head. None of this made any sense. She’d come for a meeting to sort out her son’s future and ended up with a leech trying to come on to her and her two-timing husband turning up to defend her honour.

Maybe it was time to leave.

‘I think it’s time I went,’ she said, ‘I mean, we’ve discussed what we needed to, haven’t we John? So, no need for me to hang around. I’ll be going home. Maybe the two of you can stay and have a drink or something,’ she said, trying to sidle around them to make her escape. ‘Talk about science type stuff or something.’

‘But I thought that perhaps we could go out to dinner,’ said Richard, catching her arm as she tried to squeeze past them.

‘What?’ she asked.

‘Go out to dinner, talk, you know?’ he said. He furrowed his brow. She noticed he wasn’t wearing the designer coat. Just an old walking jacket he’d had for years. One she suspected she’d bought with him just after they first got married.

John Sinclair threw back his head and laughed heartily. ‘My, Jacobs, you want to have your cake and eat it, don’t you? Do you seriously think this fine woman has any time for you since you did what you did? Now Kim,’ he said, leering into her, so close she could smell beer fumes again on his breath. ‘I know this lovely little Italian round the corner. I booked a table. You’ll love it. Only the locals know it. You come with me and have a good old moan about Jacobs here and get it out of your system.’

For the third time that evening she felt herself leaning back to try and get away from John Sinclair.

‘Is everything all right?’ came the most welcome voice of the night. Kim swivelled her head around. It couldn’t be. It

was. She had never been so relieved to see anyone in her life.

‘Max!’ she shrieked, shaking Richard’s hand off her arm and side-stepping John Sinclair. ‘What are you doing here?’ She flared her eyes at him in what she hoped portrayed a strong message of ‘help me’.

‘Annie’s just getting a drink,’ he said. ‘We’re off to see Shed Seven.’

‘Really!’ said Kim, unable to help herself. ‘She got you tickets for Christmas then? That’s brilliant.’

‘Who’s this?’ asked Richard.

‘Hello,’ said Max, glaring at Richard. ‘We met before. I own the chip shop.’

Richard looked back at him blankly.

‘Where Kim works,’ he added.

‘You actually work in a chippy?’ asked John Sinclair, incredulous. ‘I thought you were just saying that to add to the sob story. To get me on side. But you actually do work in a chip shop?’

‘I actually do,’ said Kim. ‘Max’s Fish.’

‘Oh yes, I remember,’ said Richard. ‘You were stood in the back somewhere, slicing a big sausage thing.’

Max ignored him and turned to Kim.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked again.

‘She’s fine,’ said Richard. ‘I got here in time.’

‘I didn’t ask you,’ Max said to Richard. He turned back to Kim. ‘Do you want to come with me and Annie?’ he asked.

‘Yes!’ declared Kim. An escape route from the hell brewing in Lillie Langtry’s. It was all so confusing. She still didn’t understand why Richard was here and she had no grasp of what the hell had just happened with John Sinclair. She just needed to get out and have time to think.

‘Have you got a spare ticket for Shed Seven, then?’ she asked.

‘Where’s Shed Seven?’ asked John Sinclair. ‘Is that a new place?’

‘It’s a band playing at Rock City,’ said Max to John Sinclair as though he were the greatest dullard to walk the planet.

‘Oh,’ said John Sinclair. Clearly the chippy owner had made him feel like a total dullard too.

‘I’d really like the chance to talk to you,’ said Richard, looking at her imploringly.

Kim didn’t know what to think. She looked to Max. He shrugged. ‘It’s up to you – do what you need to do. But you are very welcome to join us.’

‘And there is always my offer,’ said John Sinclair. ‘A little pasta alfredo and candlelight rather than a sticky club floor and deafening music or time with your cheating husband.’

‘Will you stop doing that?’ said Richard to John Sinclair angrily. ‘This is nothing to do with you.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ Kim said to Max. ‘If that’s all right?’

‘Of course,’ said Max. ‘Let’s go and find Annie.’

‘Tomorrow,’ said Kim, looking at her husband. ‘Let’s talk tomorrow?’

‘But ...’ he began.

‘Tomorrow,’ she said firmly. She turned to John Sinclair.

‘I’ll talk to Harry,’ she said to him. ‘Find out what is going on. I’ll get him back into uni.’ She suddenly didn’t want this lecherous oaf helping her son. She would do what she should have done in the first place. She’d talk to him.

‘Let’s go,’ she said to Max. She brushed past her son’s tutor and her husband and headed straight for the door where she gasped for fresh air. Gulping it in. Max and Annie soon joined her on the pavement. Annie put her arms around her excitedly.

‘I can’t believe you are coming with us,’ she said. ‘This is so brilliant. Dad said he had to rescue you from two arseholes. Are you okay? Lucky we were in there, hey?’

Max shook his head. ‘She rescued herself,’ he said. ‘I didn’t do anything.’

Kim smiled at him gratefully. She had to wonder if Max had called in just to check she was all right. Whatever, she was glad she was out of there.

‘Are you sure you can get me in?’ she asked Annie.

‘My mate’s dad, Felix, is on the door. I’ve already texted him. We are good to go.’

It was hard to say which were her highlights of the concert. Rock City was a smallish club holding about two thousand people with a sticky floor for moshers and dancers and an enormous balcony for chanters and cheerers.

The three of them chose the sticky floor option. Bouncing up and down furiously to ‘Going for Gold’ and ‘Disco Down’ and laughing their heads off to the lead singer’s expletive-ridden banter as he read out a tweet from someone who couldn’t make the gig due to having to have a triple heart bypass. He also found the time to take the mickey out of a fourteen-year-old who had been brought along by his nineties-music-loving parents. He was the envy of everyone present, however, when the singer handed over his maraca to the lucky boy as the crowd cheered in delight.

Kim caught Max’s eye as they launched into ‘She Left Me on Friday’. He gave her a wry smile. Kim nodded at Annie who was belting out the lyrics in complete abandonment and watched as Max joined her, holding her hand high in the air and punching the air with his other hand. Shouting the lyrics at the top of his voice.

Before too long it was encore time and the unmistakable first few bars of ‘Chasing Rainbows’ filled the room. Every single person had their hands in the air and were soon chanting the chorus back to the lead singer as he stood back in awe. This middle-aged crowd joining him in the shared admission that they had all just been chasing rainbows all their lives.

It was a euphoric crowd that streamed out of Rock City. Not a downhearted one. They had all travelled back to their youth

for a couple of hours, sung their hearts out, punched the air and jumped up and down. Felt as one as they remembered who they had been and who they were now. And gained reassurance from the feeling that they were not alone. That many people felt just as they did. Many people had had someone leave them and hurt them and almost all of them felt they had just spent their lives chasing rainbows.

Kim sat behind Annie and Max on the bus as they talked excitedly about the gig. Max was full of it. She was relieved. It could have been high-risk telling Annie to take him to get over his vivid memories with Rachel. But it looked like all that was banished. He'd had a great time with the product of his happy meeting with Rachel all those years ago. Thank you, Shed Seven, she mouthed silently to the sky.

Max and Annie insisted on walking her to her door.

'Thanks for suggesting this Christmas present,' said Annie before they left.

'Best one I've ever had, I reckon,' said Max, looking at his daughter adoringly,

'Will you be okay?' Max asked Kim.

She nodded. She'd seen that Harry's light was on upstairs. He must be in. She'd go and talk to him now.

'I'll be fine,' she said. 'And thanks again.'

'What for?'

'Rescuing me in the pub.'

'I didn't do anything,' he said. 'Have a good night.'

As she closed the door behind her she hoped the rest of the night panned out just as well as she climbed the stairs towards Harry's bedroom.

Chapter 24

Kim knocked on the door. She could tell by the flickering of the lights under the door that he was in there playing computer games. She couldn't hear voices so she hoped that Suki wasn't in there with him.

'Yeah,' came a shout from inside.

'Can I come in?' she asked.

There was a pause then a quiet, 'Yep.'

'Hiya,' she said cheerily. 'Just thought I'd let you know I'm home.' She walked into the room. No sign of Suki although it looked as though she had been there earlier as an empty chair was positioned right next to Harry. 'Had such a good night,' she said, sitting down in the empty chair.

Harry continued playing.

'How was your *friend*?' he asked with emphasis on the friend as though he knew she had lied. She decided to embrace it.

'Oh, well, that was a little lie. I actually went to meet Max and Annie. We went to a concert. We went to see Shed Seven at Rock City,' she continued.

'Who?'

'Shed Seven. Band from the nineties.'

'Never heard of them.'

'Well you're not middle-aged, are you? They were brilliant. The place was buzzing.'

'You didn't dance, did you?' he asked.

'God yeah. We were moshing and everything. It was just a big sweaty crowd of middle-agers trying to grasp hold of their

youth.'

'Sounds delightful.'

'It was,' she replied. 'It really was.' She paused. 'Do you know, it's the first time in ages I felt like I wasn't alone, that there were a million other middle-aged people out there alongside me jumping up and down wishing we could do it all again, wishing that we could have our youth back, wishing that crap hadn't happened to us during the course of getting older.'

Kim gave Harry a sideways glance. He was listening, she knew he was.

'For the first time since we moved here I almost felt like I belonged.' She looked at Harry again. 'Do you feel that?' she asked him. 'Do you feel like you belong?'

She watched him swallow and then a tear slid down his face. She gently took the controller out of his hand and wrapped her arms around him and let him sob on her shoulder. Her heart was breaking. What on earth was wrong? She just prayed that this release of emotion would lead to him telling her what was going on.

The sobs gradually abated and Kim tried to wipe her own eyes without Harry noticing. He leaned back in his chair, shoulders slumped.

'I'm so sorry, Mum,' he gasped. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Why? What on earth have you to be sorry about? I'm the one who should be sorry. I'm the one here screwing up your life. You have absolutely nothing to apologise for.'

He gave a deep sigh and looked up at her, shaking his head.

'I've not been going to uni, not to anything,' he said. 'No lectures, no tutorials. Nothing.' He looked down at his hands clutched in his lap.

'But why haven't you?' she asked gently. Maybe too gently. This was supposed to be a surprise after all. She held her breath.

He looked back up at her. ‘Because I can’t do it,’ he said. ‘I ... won’t get it. I won’t understand it and then you’ll be disappointed and Dad will be mad and I’ll disappoint everyone.’

‘Of course you can do it,’ said Kim. ‘Of course you’ll understand it. You are so smart. You take after your dad, you’re so clever.’

Harry was shaking his head firmly now. ‘I don’t take after him. I really don’t. He just gets it. He doesn’t have to work at it. He just knows. Whereas I have to bust a gut and I still don’t get it. I don’t get it, Mum, and ... and the truth is, I don’t really want to get it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I thought I was interested in it; chemistry, I mean. But I don’t think I am. Not at all. In fact I think the only reason I’m here at all doing chemistry was because everyone assumed I would be great at it and I never found anything that I was interested in more. So it was just easier to do chemistry. But I went to the first lecture and realised what a huge mistake I’d made. I hate it, Mum. I really do.’

The tears started to slide down his face again and Kim lunged forward to hold her son.

‘Why didn’t you say something before?’ she said into his hair.

He pulled away. ‘You had enough going on. And you are so proud of me for getting to university. I’m so sorry I’m letting you down,’ he said, breaking down in tears yet again.

‘You could never let me down,’ she said, wiping away her own tears. ‘I let you down. I should have spotted you weren’t happy. You should have been able to talk to me. I shouldn’t have put any pressure on. Christ, I shouldn’t even be here. I’ve so screwed everything up.’

‘I’m glad you’re here,’ said Harry, taking her hand. ‘Really I am.’

And now she was gone. Sobbing on her son’s shoulder. The pain and the heartache clutching at her as well as the

absolutely unbridled love for her son. They held onto each other tight until they had both let go of some of the multitude of emotions running through them. Kim was glad she was here too.

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes, both processing and recovering from what had just happened. Both trying to find the words to take the first steps into the aftermath.

‘So we need to get you out of this course then,’ said Kim. ‘Is that what you are saying? You need to leave?’

Harry looked at her and nodded. The tears started to spill again. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘No more sorrys,’ she said. ‘Been there done that. You have nothing to be sorry for.’

‘But what do we tell Dad?’ he asked. ‘He’ll be so upset.’

Kim shook her head. ‘We’ll explain. He’ll just have to deal with it. And he will. He loves you, you know, whether you carry on his legacy or not. It might take him a bit of time but he will get his head around it. I’ll make sure of it. You leave your dad to me.’

‘But you are barely talking to him,’ said Harry.

‘Not your problem,’ she said firmly. Then she suddenly remembered. ‘He’s here, you know?’ she told Harry.

‘What do you mean, here?’

‘In Nottingham. I bumped into him earlier. He wants to talk to me about something. Not sure what. I said he could come round in the morning. So, I’ll talk to him then.’

Harry nodded. He looked absolutely drained, but also relieved. He was actually looking her in the eye which he hadn’t done for so long.

‘Do you have any ideas as to what you would like to do instead?’ she asked.

Harry shook his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I just don’t know. That’s really terrible, isn’t it?’

‘Not knowing what you want?’ she said. ‘No, Harry, that’s absolutely normal, believe me. I can guarantee there are a cagillion people out there feeling exactly the same as you do now. You are not alone.’

Harry looked at his mother. ‘You know that cagillion is not a real number, right?’ he said.

She smiled. ‘See, you really are smart. Now I reckon I’ve got some jelly babies in my room that are begging to have their heads bitten off in agony if you are up for it?’

Harry smiled back.

‘You’ve not got a bottle of vodka stashed in there, have you? That’s what I could really do with.’

Kim cuffed him over the head with her hand. ‘No, I haven’t, and that is the last thing you need. I am still your mother, you know, even if we are housemates.’

‘And a lousy example of a housemate when you have been stealing other people’s stuff, including vodka!’

‘Good point,’ agreed Kim. ‘I reckon Angus owes me since I got him together with the love of his life. Shall we go and raid his wine rack and see if there is any leftover pizza in the kitchen?’

‘Now you are talking,’ he replied and stood up out of his chair. He towered over her and took her in his arms.

‘Love you, Mum,’ he muttered into the top of her head.

‘Love you more,’ she said into his chest.

Chapter 25

It was 9.30 the following day when Richard knocked on the door. Even though she had been expecting him she still nearly jumped out of her skin. She was extremely tired. She'd spent half the night tossing and turning going over the events of the previous evening in her head. From the chaos of her meeting John Sinclair in the pub to Richard arriving out of nowhere and then Max and Annie's rescue mission to take her to the utter shared joy of music and dance. And then to of course the grand finale when she finally got out of Harry what was wrong.

What a night. What a night indeed.

How to explain all that to Richard? She told Harry to get up early and go out. Let her talk to him first. Sonny and Angus were both already at lectures so she was confident they had a good chunk of time to themselves.

She showered and scraped her hair back ready for her shift later on that evening in the chippy. She put on a touch of lipstick. She wanted Richard to think that she was holding it together and hadn't totally fallen apart.

'Hello,' she said to Richard when she opened the door.
'Come in.'

She watched as he picked his way past the usual obstacle course of footwear. She guided him into the kitchen where an empty bottle of Angus's wine, that she'd shared with Harry the night before, was still on the table. She whipped it away quickly thinking she'd have to confess later and hope that his union with Poppy still had him in a good mood.

'Coffee?' she asked, automatically putting the kettle on.

‘Sure,’ said Richard, looking around nervously as she peered into mugs to try and find one that was clean.

‘How was the concert?’ he asked.

‘Brilliant,’ she replied. ‘Do you remember Shed Seven? “Chasing Rainbows”? “Going for Gold”? Big in the nineties.’

‘Err, no,’ said Richard, ‘Can’t say that I do.’

‘My feet are killing me,’ she continued. ‘Moshing for two hours solid.’

‘Right,’ said Richard.

She wondered if Richard knew what moshing was.

She plonked two mugs down on the table and sat down. ‘Did you stay and have a drink with John Sinclair?’ she asked, trying not to smirk.

‘No,’ said Richard firmly. ‘No, I just went back to the hotel. We had nothing to say to each other.’

Kim nodded and took a deep breath. She needed to talk about Harry. Best get it over with.

‘We need to talk ...’ they both said at the same time.

‘Oh,’ said Richard. ‘Go ahead. You first.’

‘Okay,’ she said, taking another deep breath. ‘It’s Harry. I came home and managed to talk to him last night.’

‘I thought you said he wasn’t talking to you?’

‘He barely was but after the whole thing with John Sinclair I wasn’t confident he was going to help so I decided I just needed to tackle him.’

‘And?’

‘Well, turns out, how do I put it ...’ she faltered.

‘Go on,’ urged Richard.

‘Turns out he hates chemistry.’

‘What?! How? I don’t understand.’

‘Look, we’ve been pushing him in the wrong direction all along. He said he used to like it and he actually does quite like it, hate is probably too strong a word, but my point is he doesn’t like it enough to study it at university and he doesn’t think he’s smart enough for it and basically he wants to quit his course.’ Christ, she wasn’t handling this very well at all. She was talking drivel.

‘Quit his course!’ exclaimed Richard, standing up. ‘He can’t quit his course. What do we tell John Sinclair?’

‘Who gives a damn about John Sinclair? It’s your son you need to worry about. He’s been so busy trying to live up to our expectations that it’s sent him on entirely the wrong path. He was doing what he thought he should be doing, not what he wanted to do.’

‘So, what does he want to do?’

‘He doesn’t know.’

‘He doesn’t know?’

‘No. He just knows he needs to get out of this course. Give him room to breathe. He’ll work it out. He just needs time, that’s all.’

Richard took his chair again. He was pale and shaking his head.

‘But I always thought he loved chemistry. I had no idea.’

‘Look, I know it’s a lot to process,’ she said, laying her hand on his arm hoping to calm him. ‘It’s a shock but he needs our help to get him through this. We need to be understanding. We need to be there for him.’

He nodded his head slowly, putting his hand over hers.

‘Does he blame me for pushing him in that direction?’ he asked.

‘I don’t think he blames anyone, but we are both guilty of putting too much pressure on him.’

‘Why didn’t he say something before?’ he asked her.

She gave a deep sigh. ‘Too much going on. Us splitting up. There was a lot happening.’

Richard looked deep into her eyes. He was wearing an old Pringle jumper she’d bought him for Christmas in 2012. The light blue triangles matched his eyes.

‘Me and Alison split up,’ he said. ‘That’s what I came to tell you.’

‘I know,’ she replied.

‘What? How?’ For the second time that morning he looked totally shocked.

‘You told Vicky. Do you really think she wasn’t going to get on the phone as soon as you’d spoken to her?’

He looked surprised.

‘I told her not to tell you. That I wanted to tell you,’ he said.

‘Of course she was going to tell me, Richard. She’s my friend not yours.’

He nodded.

‘What happened, then?’ she asked. She felt herself instinctively pull away. She leaned back in her chair and removed her hand from underneath Richard’s.

‘I just ... I just ... realised that it wasn’t right.’

‘It sounded pretty bloody right when you allowed it to destroy our marriage,’ she said.

‘I know, I know,’ he said, putting his head in his hands. ‘I can’t believe I’ve been so stupid. I just, I don’t know, I got carried away with the thrill of it all somehow.’

‘The illicit sex, you mean?’ demanded Kim.

He looked up at her in shock. Then nodded. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I suppose yes, you are right. But then after a while, after you left and we moved in together, well there was nothing else. It was weird. There was just nothing and she kept trying to fill it with ... with stuff like shopping trips and weekends away and visits to meet her old school friends but there was just nothing.’

I *felt* nothing. I felt like I was on some weird vacation the whole time with someone I didn't know that I had to make polite conversation with and do what they wanted to do when all I wanted was to go home. I just wanted to go home and ... and ... and talk to you.'

Kim stared at him. The irony of ironies. It had just been about sex with Alison all along. Alison the university scholar, whereas he needed Kim the hairdresser for conversation.

She didn't know what to say. She didn't know how to articulate the thoughts running through her mind. She was still so angry with him for what he did. But then she was so relieved to see him and to hear that it was all over. That Alison hadn't succeeded where she had failed. She hadn't made him happy.

Richard looked up at her and took her hand. Fully in both of his.

'I'm so sorry,' he said. 'I've been an absolute fool. I have no idea what got into me. I'm a prize idiot. And I know I have no right to ask your forgiveness but I have to. Because I can't not. I have to ask you if there is any way you can forgive me and if there is any way you would consider coming home.'

Kim was speechless. And in shock. She had absolutely no idea what to say. On the one hand she was desperate to go back to her life. Back to where she was a few months ago. But she wasn't sure if she could forgive her husband. She wasn't even sure who her husband was anymore. So much had happened, so much had been said that had totally thrown off how she saw him that she wasn't entirely sure there was a road back. In short, she didn't know what she wanted. Just like her son.

'I just don't know,' was all she could say. 'That's a hell of a lot to take in after all that has happened.'

He nodded. 'I understand,' he said.

Kim swallowed. Her head was swimming. She heard the door go. Shit. That was Harry back.

‘That’s Harry,’ said Kim, standing up and withdrawing her hand.

‘Right, okay,’ said Richard, gathering himself and standing up. He straightened his pullover as if he was about to meet someone’s parent.

Harry poked his head around the door. He looked like he hadn’t had much sleep either or perhaps it was the unusually early start for him.

‘Harry,’ said Richard, striding towards him. Kim watched as Richard flung his arms round their son. She had never seen him do that before. Richard was not the most tactile of people. Clearly his affair had brought out the nurturing side in him.

She watched as he released Harry and held his shoulders at arm’s length. ‘It’s fine,’ he said. ‘It’s all going to be fine.’

‘I’m so sorry, Dad,’ said Harry, his face crumpling.

‘No need,’ said Richard. ‘Your mum has explained it all. You don’t have to be sorry. I realise that chemistry is not the be-all and end-all. Well I’m just starting to realise that, actually, but it’s fine. We’ll get you off that course and then ... well, plenty of time for all that. But it’s good, excellent. We’ll work it out.’

Harry stared at his father as though he had turned into an alien.

‘Are you sure?’ he asked.

‘Of course, son,’ he replied. ‘We’ll get through this. I’m right behind you.’

‘Thanks, Dad,’ said Harry falling into his arms again. ‘I can’t believe you are taking it so well.’

Kim walked over and put her hand on her son’s back. She smiled at Richard. He really had taken it surprisingly well.

‘So you are welcome to come home, if you want to,’ said Richard. ‘I’ll speak to the university, sort all that out and you can come home with me if you like?’

Harry looked at his father. ‘Well, I don’t suppose there is much point in me staying here,’ he said. ‘And I can’t expect you to keep paying my rent when I’m not doing the course.’

‘Well no,’ said Richard. ‘That would be a waste of money. And it would be rent free in Lancaster. Gives you time to figure out what you want to do. Take all the time you need.’

Harry glanced over at his mum. ‘What do you think, Mum?’ he asked.

Kim didn’t know what to think. She felt sick at the thought of Harry leaving but it did make total sense. Richard was right. They couldn’t justify paying rent on his room here and being at home would give him time to rethink his future.

‘You could come too,’ Richard said to Kim. ‘Come home with Harry and let’s just see what happens. No pressure. Separate rooms, whatever you want.’

Now Kim really didn’t know what to think.

‘What do you want to do?’ she asked Harry.

Harry shook his head. ‘It’s the only option really,’ he said. ‘So back to Lancaster it is.’

He was right, of course. Now he had decided to quit university he did need a roof over his head, and a job quite frankly. She certainly couldn’t afford to pay his rent here as well. It made sense to go back home. Of course it did. But where did that leave her?

She looked at Richard. His cool blue eyes reflected in the Pringle jumper. The one that he’d worn every Christmas Day since 2012. It was his jazzy jumper as he called it. For special occasions. And he’d chosen to wear it today. Christmas was looming. Did she picture herself in their home on Christmas Day, the three of them and Richard in his jazzy jumper, reserved for special occasions?

Yes, she did, she thought. She could see herself at home on Christmas Day. It was a nice thought. Surrounded by all that was familiar. All back to normal with her husband and her son.

‘Let’s go home,’ she said.

Richard pulled her in for a group hug. His eyes closed tight.

Kim felt stunned. This was big. She was going home.

‘Just to see,’ she said to Richard, pulling back. ‘Not promising anything. But let’s see.’

Richard nodded enthusiastically. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Of course. However you want to play it.’

She wasn’t sure. She wasn’t sure at all. But she felt she owed it to her family to give it a go. See what it felt like. Going back home.

Chapter 26

Soon afterwards Richard left to go back to his hotel. They agreed that he would come back to the house that evening and pick up Harry and his stuff and they would drive home together. No point in hanging around and they'd never get all their stuff in Kim's car again. Not now that Kim had kitted out her room. In any case she had to go and hand her notice in at the chippy and she was due to work that night. She couldn't just leave Max in the lurch. She said she'd go and talk to him and see how soon he could replace her and then she would travel back to Lancaster after her last shift.

After Richard left, her and Harry sat at the kitchen table.

'You okay?' she asked.

He nodded. 'Just relieved that you and Dad are fine with it. Me giving up uni. Can't believe how well Dad reacted to be honest. What did you say to him?'

She shrugged. 'Said we had to take responsibility for not spotting sooner that you were unhappy. And I guess I used the affair card. He really has no right to be angry with you given what has happened over the last few weeks.'

Harry nodded. 'It's going to be weird,' he said. 'Going home.'

'Sure is,' she replied. She glanced around the, as usual, wrecked kitchen. 'Imagine being in a clean kitchen!'

He grinned. 'I'm going to miss Angus and Sonny,' he said.

She nodded. 'Me too. We'll tell them when they get back from uni, shall we? At least our rent is paid up until Christmas. And I was always supposed to be out of here by then anyway. We'll need to look into finding them some new housemates ready for the new year.'

‘Yeah,’ said Harry. ‘Guess so.’ He got up suddenly. ‘I’m going to go and see if Suki’s in,’ he said.

‘Of course,’ said Kim. ‘Good thinking. I’ll go and see if Max is at the shop. Let him know he needs to find a new worker. See you back here later?’

Harry nodded and Kim noted for the first time that morning that he looked sad again. Clearly the prospect of saying goodbye to his ‘gaming buddy’ was not a happy one.

Kim put her coat on and walked towards the chippy, hands deep in her pockets, shoulders hunched against the cold. She wasn’t sure quite what she was going to say to Max. After all, she had said in her ‘interview’ that she was fully committed and would not let him down and now she was heading over there to hand her notice in. She could see his resigned face already that told her she was just like all the others.

She headed round to the back door, hoping that Max was in there early prepping for the day ahead. She pushed the door open and could see that he was in his office under the stairs staring at a spreadsheet on his laptop.

‘Hiya,’ she said cheerily, walking in. ‘Am I disturbing you?’

‘No way,’ he said, looking up, a big smile spreading over his face. ‘Come to complain about how sore your feet are after all that moshing last night?’

She sat down in front of him gratefully, realising that yes her feet were really sore. ‘I haven’t danced like that in ages,’ she said, grinning at the memory.

‘Me neither,’ he replied. ‘It was so amazing. I just can’t believe I avoided it for this long and Annie, oh my God, she absolutely loved it. She’s already looking at what festivals they are playing next year. She wants to go to a festival with me, Kim. Her dad. How cool is that? You did that,’ he said, pointing at her. ‘You made that happen, suggesting Annie took me.’ He shook his head again. ‘You really are a smart lady. You have given me, what do you call it ... closure?’

‘Maybe,’ said Kim.

‘Yep, that’s it’s, closure, after how long? Not only that, you have given me a new Justin Bieber to share with my daughter which is just brilliant seeing as it’s my favourite band. And ... and ... I’ve seen what you’ve done for Sonny and Angus. Christ, you haven’t half sorted them out. Different kids from when they arrived.’

‘I didn’t really do anything,’ she said. ‘All I do is listen really. Years of being a hairdresser, you see. You’ve heard it all.’

‘Yeah well, I can’t thank you enough and I’m so glad you could come with us. That worked out great.’

Kim looked at him. ‘Were you really just in Lillie Langtry’s for a pre-concert drink?’ she asked.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I just kind of heard alarm bells and I know you are more than capable of looking after yourself but I just wanted to check you were okay. Sorry. Didn’t mean to be overbearing or anything.’

‘No. I’m glad you came. Really. And it meant I got to see Shed Seven, so you know, brilliant. Wouldn’t have missed that for the world.’

‘You should come with us to this festival Annie’s banging on about. You’d love it, I reckon. Next May, I think it is. Go on, come with us, then I won’t feel like the only geriatric.’

Kim swallowed. ‘Might be difficult,’ she said, shifting in her chair. ‘That’s why I’ve come over actually. You see, erm, I’ve come to tell you that I’m going back to Lancaster.’

‘What?! When? Why?’ He looked truly shocked. ‘I thought you were here until the end of term?’

‘Well, the truth is that Harry is dropping out of uni. He hates it, you see. That’s why he wasn’t going to any of his lectures. He was only doing it because he thought that was what we wanted him to do.’

‘I see,’ said Max. ‘That’s a shame.’

‘It’s all been agreed with his dad this morning. So Harry’s going back with him tonight and I’ll follow as soon as you can

replace me.'

Max's face returned to a totally confused look. 'Why do you need to go back?'

'Err, well, so it turns out that it's all over with Alison and ...' Kim was now really sweating. 'He wants me back, so what's happening is me and Harry are going back to Lancaster because Harry can't stay in the house because it's pointless carrying on paying his rent if he's dropping out, and I'm going to go back too, to kind of see what happens. Give it a go ...' she said, trailing off under Max's increasingly confused glare.

'You are going back to him even though he cheated on you?'

That was so the question she didn't want him to ask. The question she had been desperately trying to shove out of her head all morning.

'Like I said,' she replied. 'I'm going to give it a try. See how it feels. See if I can forgive him.'

There, that sounded reasonable, didn't it?

Max said nothing, just blinked at her.

'You would have given it a go too, wouldn't you?' she asked. 'If Rachel had come back to you, if it had all gone wrong with the other bloke?'

He didn't reply.

'For Annie? You'd have at least tried for Annie?'

His eyes flickered. He was going to say yes, she thought. She needed him to say yes.

'Depends on whether I wanted to go back to being that person I was before she left me.'

Interesting answer, she thought. Did she want to go back to being the person she was before all this happened? She thought so. Lovely life, lovely family, lovely home. What wasn't there to like?

'Well it's your decision,' he said, getting up quickly as though he suddenly had better things to do than talk to her. 'I

take it tonight will be your last shift then?’

‘Well, err, well I can stay until you find a replacement. I don’t want to leave you struggling.’

‘It’s fine. I’ve been there before. Normally people just leave without telling me at all, so this is actually great. I’ll put a notice up now. I’ll have some penniless student being trained up by tomorrow lunchtime. No bother. Now, better get on. I need to go to the wholesaler.’

‘Right, sure,’ she said. ‘I’ll get out of your way. Err, but I just wanted to say how sorry I am, Max, to be leaving. Really sorry.’

He finally looked at her, eyes glistening. ‘Not as sorry as me,’ he said and walked off into the front of the shop.

It was her cue to leave which she did, a little bewildered and confused and strangely upset.

Chapter 27

Kim turned her key in the door of fifty-one Leopold Street with a heavy heart. The fact that Max clearly didn't approve of her decision had unsettled her. She thought he would be supportive. After all he had been in her position. But no. It was very clear that he thought she was doing the wrong thing. She hadn't even realised she wanted his approval until she didn't get it, and now she felt incredibly alone and the thought of facing him tonight was not appealing.

She picked her way over the obstacle course of boots and trainers and went to make herself a cup of tea in the kitchen. She didn't know quite how she was going to fill the rest of the day until Richard arrived to pick up Harry and she needed to go and do her shift. She supposed she should start to pack her stuff up. After all she could leave for Lancaster tomorrow now that Max had made it clear that he didn't want to see her after tonight.

She wandered upstairs with her cup of tea and sat down on her bed. She looked round her tiny little room and thought about what she could pack up that Richard might be able to fit in his car. Maybe the cheerful curtains she had bought from a charity shop all those weeks ago. The ones that had felt so impossible to hang but she'd done it and without injury! No, she would leave those here for the next tenant. Make them feel at home. She'd leave the mirror that she'd bought as well. The house in Lancaster had an abundance of mirrors so no need to take this one away. Hopefully Angus and Sonny would be able to find two other students to take their rooms. Angus had mentioned that often students came back from placements in January and so he was confident that they would get someone for Kim's room, so they should be able to replace Harry too. She hoped that they would be good to Angus and Sonny. That

they'd get them, understand them. She hoped they would be good friends to them. The last thing they both needed was a horror story moving in. She'd keep her fingers crossed for them.

She could pack up her clothes, she figured. Especially the party dresses. Unlikely to need them before tomorrow. Yes, Richard could take those back with him. Oh and Bjorn the cheese plant, of course. Bjorn needed to go back with Richard and Harry. He would never fit in her car. Yes, she could gather some stuff together for Richard to take back. That would be sensible. She sat staring at her room that had been so transformed from when she moved in. She'd definitely put her mark on it and made it her own. She took out her phone and took some selfies of her there in her own student house share. Just so she wouldn't forget. Perhaps she'd get her stuff together later. She couldn't face it quite yet. She'd perhaps just have a quick nap. It had been a late night last night and she could just do with a little snooze.

She had no idea how long she had been asleep when she heard the front door bang. She woke up with a start. She reached for her phone to see what time it was. Three o'clock already! Christ, she'd better go and see how Harry was getting on with his packing.

There was no sign of him in his room so she carried on downstairs to see if that had been him coming in.

She found him in the lounge on the sofa, his head bowed over his phone.

'Hi,' she said. 'Do you need some help with packing your stuff up?'

'Suppose so,' he said, not looking up.

'You okay?'

He shrugged.

She took a seat next to him. 'How was Suki?'

He shrugged again. 'Okay,' he said flatly.

'Tough saying goodbye?'

He didn't reply but she watched as a single tear bounced on to his phone screen.

She put her arm around him. He leaned in and sniffed hard.

'I didn't expect her to be upset,' he mumbled.

'Well that is generally what happens when you care about someone and they leave.'

'I know but I didn't think she cared that much.'

'Of course she did. You're good mates, aren't you?'

He nodded. 'She said she'd miss me,' he said as though he couldn't believe what he was saying.

'Of course she will. You'll miss her, won't you?'

He nodded. 'She's the only thing that has kept me here this long really. I never thought that I would meet someone like that. You know, in freshers' week and everything. Didn't think that sort of thing would ever happen to someone like me. I might have quit a lot sooner if it hadn't been for her and her being here.'

'Will she come and see you?' Kim asked.

'She says she will, but it won't be the same, will it? Not the same as living opposite each other.'

Kim squeezed her son tight. 'It won't, I'm afraid, but you'll find a way – if you really care then you always find a way.'

They heard the front door slam and the arguing tones of Sonny and Angus come bursting through the door.

'I am not helping you put a blow-up Santa on the roof,' they heard Angus say. 'No fucking way. You will kill us both and you are not doing it either, do you hear. I'm not spending the next day in A&E with you because you fell off a roof putting a stupid fucking blow-up Santa there.'

'But it might make Kim and Harry stay if we make the house look all Christmassy and cosy and lovely. How can you leave a house with a blow-up Santa on the roof? Just not possible.'

They burst into the living room.

‘Thank God you are still here,’ said Sonny. ‘Please stay,’ he said, falling to his knees in front of Kim and adopting the praying position. ‘You can’t go. You are both the best housemates in the entire world. You cannot leave. Please don’t leave.’

Sonny was virtually crying.

‘Oh get up, man,’ said Angus brusquely, sitting down on a lounge. He turned to Kim and Harry. ‘So what the fuck,’ he said, raising his arms in surprise. ‘A WhatsApp message saying Harry’s dumping his course and you are both going back up north. What the actual fuck?’

Kim was taken aback. This wasn’t the reaction she had been expecting.

‘I WhatsApped them,’ explained Harry. ‘Thought they should actually know as soon as possible.’

Kim nodded. ‘Look, I’m really sorry, guys,’ she began. ‘But with Harry giving up his course then there is really no reason to be here any longer.’

‘I hear Harry’s excuse. If I hated my course I would get the chuff out of here too but what about you?’ Angus said, pointing at Kim accusingly.

‘Well,’ said Kim, swallowing. ‘I was going soon anyway. Remember the rules? And err, Richard has ended his affair with the neighbour and so ...’

‘You are going back to him? What the ...!’ exclaimed Angus. ‘What the actual hell?’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Sonny. ‘You’re getting back together?’ Sonny looked like he had been physically wounded. He’d recoiled from her as though he had just learned she had an infectious disease.

‘Well yes, well sort of, well it’s like I’m just going to move back in and see how we go.’

‘Bullshit!’ said Angus. ‘Utter bullshit. You’ll move back in and he’ll have you back in that bed shagging him in no time

and then he'll think you've forgiven him just in time for him to start another affair.'

Kim stared at Angus, shocked.

'Richard's not like that,' she said. 'He's genuinely sorry. He really wants it to work.'

'You think?' said Angus. 'It's what they all say.' He paused. 'It's what my dad says. Every time he has an affair. He says he's sorry, oh so sorry, and then a couple of years later it happens again.'

'I cannot believe he's like that,' said Sonny, shocked. 'He seemed so nice when I met him. He bought me a McDonald's. And he got my order right. I asked for no salad and he got it perfect. He really listened to me. I still can't believe he cheats!'

Angus shrugged.

'And your mum, she seems way too smart to get cheated on,' continued Sonny. 'She's smart, like really smart. She wears matching clothes and everything. I bet she wears matching underwear as well.'

'Sonny,' said Angus. 'If I didn't know you better, then I would think that comment came from a very bad place but I know that it doesn't at all. But please, Sonny, think what you are saying, mate.'

'Sorry,' said Sonny, looking deeply confused.

'And in any case, you are wrong. No one's too smart to get cheated on,' said Angus grimly, looking sideways at Kim.

Sonny turned back to Kim and Harry. 'Please don't go,' he said. 'I don't want you to go.'

'I really don't have any choice,' said Harry. 'If I could stay I would. I really would.'

'But it makes me so sad to think of this place without you both,' said Sonny.

Kim felt her heart swell. She was so going to miss this pair.

‘It’s the right answer,’ she said now, having to fight back the tears. ‘We have a life up there. In any case I can go back to my hairdressing, back to my friends, my family.’

‘You have a life here,’ said Sonny.

‘Do I?’

‘Yes! You have a job in the chippy, you have friends, Max and Annie, and you have family, me, Angus and Harry. But we need Harry to stay too. We are a family now; we have to stick together.’

‘But the rule was I had to be out by Christmas – it’s what we agreed?’

‘Sod the rules,’ said Sonny sulkily.

Kim was beyond touched. She looked at Sonny and then at Angus. She couldn’t believe they were so desperate for her to stay. She couldn’t believe they thought that this odd little household had become a family. She’d been here less than three months. How life could change in such a short time.

‘Look Sonny,’ said Kim, putting her hand on his shoulder. ‘I cannot tell you how grateful I am that you have put up with me for the past few months. I will honestly never, ever forget it.’ She swallowed. ‘But I have to go back,’ she said. ‘I have to go back and see if I can pick up the pieces of my old life.’

‘You were more than happy to leave it behind a few months ago,’ said Angus.

Kim turned to look at him sharply. ‘I had no choice, because of what Richard did, did I? But now it’s all over with Alison then it has to be worth a shot.’

‘If you say so,’ he shrugged.

‘It’s the right thing to do,’ she said, getting up. She couldn’t take any more of this. ‘Thank you,’ she said earnestly. ‘I can’t tell you how much it means to me that you want me to stay. Seriously. Especially considering how I behaved when I first arrived. I am going to miss you, you know.’

‘Yeah, whatever,’ said Angus, getting up and thrusting past her towards the door.

‘You coming, Sonny?’ he said, turning round at the last minute.

‘Where to?’

‘The pub. I think we need a drink.’

‘Yeah, right, okay,’ said Sonny, getting up. ‘What time are you leaving?’ he asked Harry.

‘Dad’s coming to pick me up about 5 p.m.,’ he replied.

Sonny nodded. ‘I’ll make sure we’re back to say goodbye,’ he said. ‘But I think that Angus needs me right now. He’s very upset. I know he hides it well but he’s devastated that you are both going.’

Harry nodded. ‘You go,’ he said. ‘Hopefully I’ll see you later.’

Sonny nodded. ‘You will,’ he promised.

Kim and Harry packed up his room mostly in silence, both lost in their own thoughts as they dragged out rucksacks and suitcases and bags for life to pile all of Harry’s worldly goods into. Kim noted that he hadn’t accumulated anything in the nine weeks he had been here. No books, no clothes, no trinkets to make it home. It was almost as if he always meant it to be temporary.

They shifted everything down into the lounge and Kim left Harry to find all their crockery in the kitchen whilst she went and packed all her party dresses ready to put into Richard’s car. She’d only worn one of them after all. The black sequined backless number when Vicky had come down and she had thrown up all over the floor.

Goodness she was a mess back then. She realised she had behaved so badly. Getting drunk all the time, stealing Angus’s wine and cold pizza. She had been so utterly lost. She had no idea what to do with herself. What a long way she had come since then. Got herself a job, actually managed to fit into the household pretty well in the end, to the point where they were begging her to stay. She couldn’t believe it. It brought a tear to her eye when she thought of Sonny sat at her knees pleading

with her. And the look on Angus's face. She'd felt wanted, really wanted.

Yes, things hadn't turned out too bad in Nottingham after all. Something to be proud of. But it was time to go home. Time to go back to see if she could recapture the remnants of her old life that she had been so devastated to leave.

She opened the door to Richard at 4.55 p.m. Despite the cold he still wasn't wearing the coat that Alison had bought him. Kim wondered where it was. Would she find it on the coat rack when she walked in the door? Her stomach lurched at the sudden thought that she would have to face Alison at some point. And all her family and friends. All eyes would be on her as she returned home. That wasn't going to be easy but she figured she had nothing to be ashamed of. It was down to Richard to smooth the way and do the explaining and not her.

Richard thrust an enormous bunch of red roses in her face.

'I know this is not enough, nowhere near enough,' he said, 'But I need you to know I'm going to do everything I can to make you happy again. This is just the start. I promise.'

She smiled back. She didn't think Richard had bought her flowers since their very first date. They were daffodils, she remembered, and she thought they were the most beautiful flowers she had ever seen.

She wondered if Richard had bought Alison daffodils. She shook her head trying to dispel the thought.

She walked back towards the kitchen to put them in water before realising they didn't have a vase in the house. There had not been much call for one during their first term. She found a jug and filled it with water and put the roses in there. She'd work out what to do with them later.

She walked back into the lounge to find Richard and Harry already relaying to and from the car with Harry's belongings. She spotted Bjorn the cheesy cheese plant in the corner of the lounge and picked it up and carried it out to ask Richard if he could fit it in.

She dumped it on the path outside the house, huffing and puffing slightly. It was heavy. Richard and Harry were busy reorganising boxes and bags to try and get more in.

‘Can you fit Bjorn in?’ she asked.

Richard turned round to look. ‘How did that get here?’ he asked in surprise.

‘Vicky brought him down in her van with her when she came to visit,’ said Kim. ‘She decided I needed company. That I was missing my dancing partner. Did you not notice he was gone?’

Richard shook his head. ‘I’m not sure how we will get it in. It’s big.’

Kim was inclined to agree. They already had the seats down in the back of Richard’s car and the plant was tall. But she also knew that there was no way Bjorn was fitting in her car. It was far too small.

But there was no way she could leave Bjorn behind. No way.

‘It may have to stay behind,’ suggested Richard.

‘I can’t leave him behind,’ stated Kim.

‘Well, I don’t know what we are going to do then,’ said Richard.

‘We’ve got an idea,’ came a voice from behind them.

Kim whizzed round faster than a spinning top, her heart racing. But she wasn’t prepared for the sight that greeted her.

She’d recognised Max’s voice immediately. But she wasn’t prepared to see him there alongside not only Annie, but also Angus, Sonny and Suki.

‘Wow,’ she cried, delighted to see them all. ‘So glad you all came to say goodbye,’ she said.

‘We haven’t,’ said Max. ‘Like I said, we’ve got an idea.’

She felt confused. Max looked pretty grim, as did Angus. Annie was grinning, Sonny was jumping up and down as

though he was bursting for a pee and Suki was gazing imploringly at Harry who had stepped to her side.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked.

‘Yeah, what’s this all about?’ said Richard, stepping forward alongside Kim.

Kim’s heart was beating so fast now she could barely breathe.

‘Well,’ said Max, glancing at Richard and then turning his eyes back to Kim. ‘So we have had a meeting,’ he started.

‘In the pub,’ added Sonny, grinning. ‘I’ve had a couple of pints so apologies now if I have to dash off to the loo.’

‘No problem,’ said Kim. ‘Carry on,’ she urged Max.

‘Yep, so we had a meeting ...’

‘It was all my idea actually,’ said Sonny, putting his hand up. ‘Thought we might be able to think of something between us.’

‘Shut up, Sonny,’ said Angus, punching him on the arm. ‘We agreed that Max would do the talking.’

‘Sorry, yes, sorry,’ said Sonny.

‘We really need to be getting on the road,’ said Richard, checking his watch.

‘This won’t take long,’ said Max. ‘If Sonny lets me get a word in edgeways. Now we had a meeting and we have come up with a plan, an option as it were, that would mean you could stay here.’

‘It’s brilliant,’ said Sonny. ‘Genius.’

‘Look ...’ said Richard.

Kim put a firm hand on his arm. ‘Let them speak,’ she said.

‘Continue,’ she said again to Max.

‘So, Annie wants to cut her hours in the chippy,’ said Max. ‘She’s been offered a job in a vintage dress shop.’

‘I wasn’t going to take it because I didn’t want to let Dad down,’ she said, ‘but ... but ... well, I’ll let Dad tell you.’

‘So I was wondering if Harry would like her job, in the chippy, and then he can afford to stay and earn some money whilst he decides what he wants to do.’

Kim felt Richard let out a deep sigh. She looked over at Harry who was blinking at Max, trying to grasp what he was saying. She noticed that Suki had taken his hand in hers.

‘I should be able to give you just enough hours to cover your rent and food,’ said Max. ‘The job’s yours if you want it.’

Kim glanced at Richard. He clearly could not understand what was happening.

‘You can’t stay here,’ Richard said Harry. ‘Come home and you can live rent-free and you won’t need to work in a chippy. And I can help you decide what course to apply for next year. I can help you with your application. Have you thought about biochemistry? I was thinking that might be right up your street. I was going to get the lecturer at Lancaster to talk to you about it. See what you thought because you’ll need to apply soon. Applications will need to be in by the end of January.’

Harry looked at his dad. Then he looked at Suki. Then he looked back at his dad.

‘Thanks, Dad, but ... but ...’ he looked at Suki and Max again. Then back to his dad. ‘But I think I’d like to stay here. If I can afford it, then I’d like to stay. Have a complete break from study. Do something completely different. Whilst I decide what I really want to do.’

Richard clearly could not comprehend his son. ‘You want to stay here and work in a chippy?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ said Harry. ‘If Max is all right with that?’

Max nodded. ‘You work hard, you can have a job as long as you like,’ he said.

‘So you’ll stay?’ said Sonny, barely able to contain himself. ‘You’ll stay? Just say it. I need to hear it. Will you stay?’

Sonny was clutching onto Harry's shoulder jumping up and down.

Harry looked around him, a small smile on his face. 'I will,' he said.

Sonny and Angus exploded, jumping up and down, slapping Harry on the back. Suki grinned and held tight onto his hand then leaned forward and kissed Harry square on the lips.

'You kissed, you kissed!' exclaimed Sonny. 'Are you together now? Like a couple?'

'Of course they are, you numpty,' said Angus. 'Always have been.'

'But no one told me, no one said!' said Sonny, totally aggrieved. 'I thought you were just playing games?'

'You actually fell for that one?' said Angus. 'It was as clear as day, from day one.'

'Sorry, Dad,' said Harry, turning to his father. 'But I really would like to stay. Is that all right with you, Mum?' he said before Richard had the chance to comment.

'Of course it is,' she said. 'As long as you earn the money you can do what you like. You are eighteen now after all.' She paused. 'I'm proud of you,' she said, flinging her arms round her son. And she was. He was making his own decisions and he looked happier than he had since he arrived. And that was all that mattered.

Richard was left looking bewildered stood by his car. 'So I guess I will be able to fit your plant in,' he said to Kim, going to pick it up.

'Hang on a minute, we haven't finished quite yet,' said Max, turning to Kim. 'You see, I've still got your job to fill, which I could do without quite frankly as I'll need someone to be training up Harry here and I think you'd be good at that, and so we were wondering if you would consider staying too. But I would have to cut your hours to give Harry enough, so we were thinking that you could do with something else so we came up with another idea.'

‘It was Annie’s idea this time,’ said Sonny. ‘And it’s absolutely *amazing*. Like the best idea anyone has ever had since the beginning of time.’

Annie took her phone out of her pocket and showed Kim a screenshot from the Nottingham Barton University website. ‘We think you should apply for one of these at the university,’ she said. ‘Look, it’s an apprenticeship-style degree in counselling. It’s part-time so you’d be able to earn money at the same time, and it’s a much cheaper way of doing it, and we all think you are brilliant at listening and helping people so maybe ... maybe you should do it professionally?’

Kim couldn’t take in what she was saying or what she was showing her. She must have been looking totally stupid in front of Annie who changed her expression to one of concern.

‘But only if you want to,’ Annie stumbled. ‘We also thought you might want to go back to hairdressing and we were all going to go round the hairdressers in town for you and see if we could get a job for an excellent hairdresser, but we thought ... well, we thought that actually you might want to go to university. That this could be your chance to go, if you wanted to.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Kim, struggling to take it all in. ‘I can’t go to university. I’m not clever enough.’

‘Of course you bloody are,’ said Angus. ‘You’re smarter than any person I know. You’ve helped all of us one way or another since you moved in. That’s why Annie found this course at the university to be a counsellor so you could help people all the time.’

‘Me, go to university?’ repeated Kim.

‘Yes,’ said Angus. ‘You. We’d help you apply. Look, if I can get in, anyone can. Believe me.’

‘It’s a great idea, Mum,’ said Harry. ‘They’re right. You would be brilliant at it. You really would. And that’s the pressure off me then, isn’t it, if you’re at uni?’ He grinned.

Kim was still in shock. She just couldn’t take in what they were suggesting, it seemed so improbable. She never in her

wildest dreams thought that she would ever get to be a student ... at university.

‘We checked the qualifications,’ said Annie. ‘You did A levels, right?’

Kim nodded. ‘Not very well,’ she admitted.

‘Well, they are desperate for mature students on this course. Life experience they want, not just some green eighteen-year-olds like us who know nothing.’

‘That’s right,’ nodded Sonny. ‘I knew nothing until I moved in with Kim. She even taught me to cook spag bol.’

Kim still couldn’t comprehend. ‘Me, go to university?’ she said again.

‘Look,’ said Richard, putting his hand on her shoulder. She jumped. She’d forgotten he was there. ‘It’s a lovely idea really but I bet you want to get back to your hairdressing, don’t you, Kim? Back to your clients. I’m sure they have really missed you and you love hairdressing, don’t you? You always have.’

Kim looked at Richard, trying to work out what he was saying. Sounded like he wanted to erase what had happened and have his old life back. Where she was conveniently ‘just a hairdresser’.

She could see that Richard was starting to panic that she wasn’t instantly dismissing this crazy idea that Annie had come up with.

‘In any case,’ he said. ‘You don’t want to be scraping by just working in a chippy, do you, living in student digs? Come home, Kim. Come home. Call your old clients, they’ll be delighted to hear from you, you know they will. You’ll be able to pick up just where you left off. You were born to be a hairdresser, you know you were.’

Kim screwed her nose up at him. ‘When you last came down you called me “just a hairdresser”,’ she said. ‘Like it was an unworthy career.’

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘Yes, you did,’ said Max, Annie and Sonny in unison.

‘And you just said that it was “just” a chippy, like that was an unworthy place of work.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ said Richard.

‘Yes, you did,’ said Max, Annie, Angus, Sonny and Suki.

Richard looked away under their glare. ‘I didn’t mean that,’ he said.

‘Yes, you did,’ said Max, Annie, Angus, Sonny and Suki.

‘You so did,’ muttered Max.

‘Are you sleeping with my wife?’ Richard suddenly blasted at Max, losing his cool. ‘Is that what this is really all about?’

‘What!’ screeched Kim and Max.

‘No,’ said Max firmly.

‘So, what is it then?’ demanded Richard. ‘Do you want to sleep with her, is that it? All this nonsense about going to university. Kim doesn’t want to go to university. She’s a hairdresser. Always has been, always will be. She loves it, don’t you Kim? She doesn’t want to be working in a chippy and studying all hours. That’s not her. You don’t know her. That’s not her at all.’

‘Well why don’t you ask her?’ said Max. ‘I think it’s about time you let Kim speak about what she wants, don’t you?’

‘Of course,’ swallowed Richard. He looked at her. ‘Tell them, Kim. That them you want to come home,’ he said.

Kim looked back at him then round at the rest of the group. At Max, her boss and friend, Annie, possibly the daughter she never had, Sonny, the wonderful amazing ray of light that was Sonny, Angus, her troublesome mate who perhaps just really had a heart of gold, Suki, her son’s girlfriend who was her own woman through and through, and Harry, her amazing, brave son who’d just made some really tough decisions.

‘I already am home,’ she told Richard.

Epilogue – New Year’s Eve

So here she was wrapping napkins round cutlery again. It brought back the memory of Richard’s surprise fiftieth birthday party so sharply that she couldn’t help but wince. What a party that had been in more ways than one. This evening’s celebration would be dramatically different, she was sure. For a start she was using serviettes from the chip shop instead of the thick cream squares embossed with the birthday boy’s age. The thin crispy paper would barely clean up a little finger but she knew that none of this evening’s guests would give a monkey’s. She put the six sets of wrapped cutlery into an empty pint glass and put it in the middle of the table. There, party preparations were done.

She’d arrived back in Nottingham earlier that day, having spent Christmas up in Lancaster with her parents. It hadn’t been the best Christmas, she couldn’t lie. Her mum was still struggling to understand any of the decisions that Kim had made in the last few weeks, most of all her decision to stay in Nottingham and not return to her hometown.

‘But this is your home,’ Janice never tired of reminding her.

‘It is,’ Kim told her. ‘It will always be. But I’m just doing what I should have done at eighteen. Gone away. Tried something new. Experienced more things. Found out who I wanted to be. Chased some rainbows.’

‘Chased some rainbows?’ asked Janice, never having looked more confused by her daughter.

Kim shook her head and smiled. ‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘Aren’t you at least pleased that I might be going to university?’

‘You had a perfectly good job and a husband who provided well for you. I have absolutely no idea why on earth you need

to go to university.’

Kim sighed. She daren’t mention the rainbows again.

Seeing Richard had been difficult, of course. He was even more confused than her mother, albeit he recognised he had no right to be since his actions had been the catalyst for changing the course of Kim’s life. She’d gone over to the house two days after Christmas to collect some things to take back to Nottingham with her. It had been weird knocking on the door of her previous home. Even weirder walking in. It felt empty and echoey. Far too big for a man living on his own. And dusty! Clearly not much cleaning had gone on since she left. There were no Christmas decorations evident either, but then he had spent Christmas down in Cornwall with his parents and Harry. So no need to deck the halls here but it made her feel a little sad that he’d made no effort when she had always totally gone to town on making sure that the house looked magical and festive. Maybe he’d never cared? Maybe he’d actually never noticed?

They’d sat and drunk an awkward coffee whilst they mainly discussed Harry. Richard had at least appreciated seeing his son over Christmas and bridges seemed to have been built. Kim was relieved about that. Richard also appeared to have stopped harassing him about his future. No mention was made of the need for Harry to decide on alternative course options or make university applications. He appeared to be letting him be for now. However, disappointingly, Richard didn’t ask about her future either. She was desperate to talk about it to him now, sat in the kitchen of her old home. Just like they used to before all the mess came. They would sit at that island and talk through what was going on in their lives. But he never asked. He clearly didn’t want to know if she had successfully pursued the crazy idea of getting herself to university.

And so it wasn’t with sadness that an hour later she loaded her car with clothes and a few personal items to take back to Nottingham. It was with relief that she had made the right choice. This really wasn’t where she belonged anymore. Everything had changed. Most importantly she had changed.

As she drove away she stole a glance at Alison's house. It looked empty and cold. She noticed no Christmas decorations there either. Perhaps she had gone away. Perhaps she was avoiding spending New Year in the house where last year she had spent it with her husband, her lover and her lover's wife, as it turned out.

It was clear from the outset that this New Year's Eve celebrations were going to be very different to last year's for Kim. Sonny had insisted that they begin their celebrations with pre-dinner drinks and so Kim, Max, Annie, Sonny, Harry and Suki were all gathered in the lounge drinking sherry. That was what Sonny deemed to be the drink of choice for such an evening. He then proceeded to give them an early rendition of 'Auld Lang Syne' on the ukulele that Annie had given him for Christmas. It was so bad they were all very relieved to hear a knock at the door.

'Who's that?' asked Sonny, pausing his tune and cocking his head. He leapt up and dashed for the door before anyone could get there first.

The next minute Angus walked through the door followed by Poppy, the gorgeous girl from his phone background.

'Oh my goodness,' cried Kim, leaping up to embrace him. 'What are you doing here? We thought you were celebrating in Edinburgh with your family.'

'What happened?' Harry asked Angus.

'Dad screwed up and mixed up his Christmas presents,' he explained. 'Gave Mum a box with see-through size six underwear in, clearly meant for his mistress. All hell let loose. And I mean *all hell*. It's been grim ever since so we decided to ditch the fancy meal in the hotel in the middle of Edinburgh and join you guys.'

'Bloody hell,' said Sonny. 'Size six, you say? Your mum is at least a twelve.'

'Again, Sonny,' said Angus. 'It's a good job I know you. Poppy, this is Sonny. Ignore everything he says.'

‘Good to meet you,’ grinned Poppy. ‘I hope you don’t mind me tagging along.’

‘Of course not,’ said Sonny, wide-eyed. ‘I’ve got a girlfriend,’ he announced.

‘He means me,’ said Annie, getting up. Annie had really dialled it up for the evening’s celebrations in their humble abode. She’d gone full on Marilyn Monroe with a figure-hugging soft pink dress and a blonde wig. ‘You look incredible,’ said Poppy, grinning. ‘I feel like I should change.’

‘She always looks amazing so I wouldn’t bother if I were you,’ said Sonny. ‘You won’t look better than her.’

‘As I say,’ said Angus to Poppy. ‘Ignore everything he says.’

‘No. I think he speaks a lot of sense,’ laughed Poppy.

‘Oh wow,’ said Sonny, suddenly jumping up and down and waving his fingers at Poppy. ‘You are a doctor, aren’t you? My fingers really hurt with all the ukulele playing I have been doing since Christmas. What do you suggest?’

‘Sit down and shut up,’ said Harry, getting up and holding his hand out to Poppy.

‘I’m Harry,’ he said. ‘Angus’s other housemate. Don’t worry, I’m the sane one, well almost sane. And this is Suki. She’s my, well, she’s my girlfriend,’ he said, beaming with pride.

‘Hi,’ said Suki, waving. ‘Glad you are here. Please tell me you can play the ukulele better than Sonny?’

‘Sorry, no,’ said Poppy.

‘It’s my fault,’ admitted Annie. ‘I thought it would be good for Sonny to have somewhere to focus his energy.’

‘I’m this idiot’s father,’ said Max to Poppy, indicating Annie. ‘I’ve clearly brought her up really badly for her to have decided to inflict Sonny on the world of music.’

‘Max is a big Justin Bieber fan,’ Kim told Poppy with a smirk.

‘I love Justin Bieber!’ exclaimed Poppy.

‘Really?!’ said both Angus and Annie with entirely different levels of enthusiasm.

‘Alexa, play Justin Bieber,’ shouted Annie.

‘This is your fault,’ Max whispered to Kim as the sound of Justin Bieber filled the room.

Kim laughed. ‘Do you want to come and help me sort the food out whilst these kids listen to young people’s music?’ she asked.

‘What can I do to help feed these extra mouths?’ asked Max as he walked into the kitchen. ‘Do you need me to go and fire up the fryers and get some fish and chips on?’

She looked over at the enormous pan of bolognese.

‘I think we are all good for food,’ she said. ‘Sonny went a bit overboard chopping carrots now he’s learnt how to do it, so there’s plenty.’

‘Good old Sonny,’ said Max, shaking his head. ‘Listen, I’ve been meaning to ask how your meeting went at the university before Christmas,’ he asked. ‘I kind of didn’t want to mention it in case it went badly but did it go okay? I’ve been dying to know.’

Kim looked at him gratefully. Finally someone asking her who clearly wanted her to succeed in pursuit of this crazy plan. She gave him a full update on her meeting with the course leader for the apprentice counselling degree course at Nottingham Barton University.

Martha Bennet could not have been more encouraging, she told him. Although quite rightly she had been very honest about the challenges that going into counselling would present.

‘Being a counsellor is an extremely difficult role to have; however, the rewards can be enormous. You need to think very hard as to whether you can deal with the very difficult situations you will be faced with,’ she’d said.

Kim had thought about barely anything else. She knew that the situations she had helped her clients with, and indeed her

housemates, would be nothing compared to the situations people might come to her with as a counsellor. But the thought of being able to help people who really needed it, well, it gave her a real sense of purpose, something she had never really felt before, and she felt so drawn to it, so fired up that people actually thought she might be able to do it. She had never in her life felt more motivated to do something and her meeting with Martha had only helped confirm that. She had written her application with help from the seasoned application writers, Angus, Sonny and Harry, and hoped to hear early in the new year if she had been successful. Martha had reassured her that she saw no reason why she would not be accepted if that was what she really wanted to do and was prepared to put the work in.

‘I can’t wait for the day I next visit as a real bona fide university student,’ Kim said to Max, her eyes shining. ‘I still can’t quite believe it.’

He was smiling at her as he leaned against the worktop.

‘Believe it,’ he said. ‘It’s happening.’

‘But just a few months ago I was dropping my son off to be a student and now he works in a chip shop and *I’m* going to be a student.’

‘You both work in a chip shop,’ pointed out Max.

‘Correct,’ said Kim, grinning. ‘And I could not be prouder.’

‘Of who?’ asked Max.

‘Both of us,’ said Kim. ‘We’ve both come out of the year happy. We’ve both found ourselves really, haven’t we?’

‘Found a better rainbow to chase?’ suggested Max.

Kim looked at him. Boy was she grateful they had met, for so many reasons.

Max raised his glass to hers, ‘Here’s to chasing better rainbows,’ he said.

She grabbed her sherry glass off the counter. ‘Exactly,’ agreed Kim, clinking his glass with her own. ‘To chasing better rainbows,’ she said.

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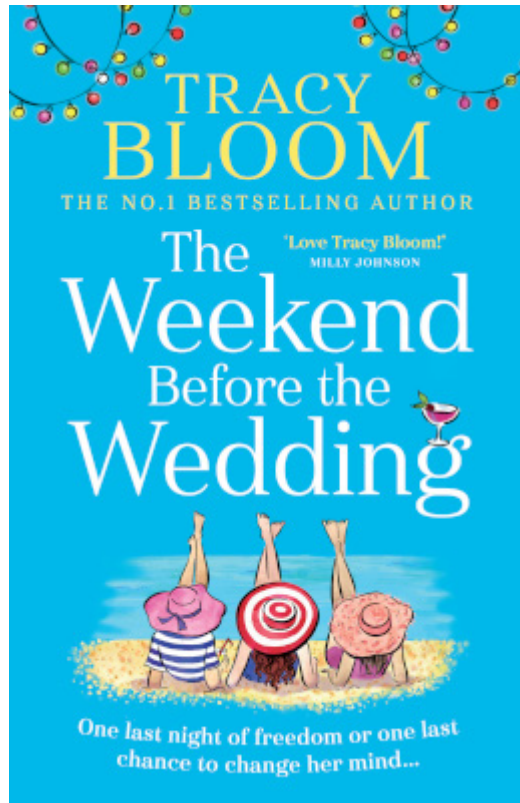
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Writing this book has reminded me of the time many years ago when I started university. I just want to thank my mum and dad for never pushing me in any direction and having faith that I would find my way. I've been lucky enough to have some great jobs over the years, including being a writer, and I have you to thank for that.

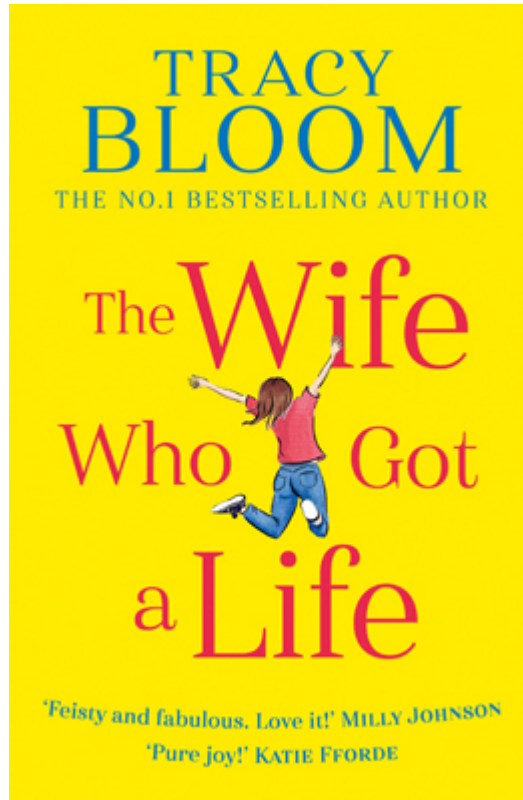
Finally – as always – thank you readers for reading. Without you I wouldn't be doing this, so thanks to you, every single one of you. I really do appreciate it.

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Tracy started writing when her cruel, heartless husband ripped her away from her dream job – shopping for rollercoasters for the UK’s leading theme parks – to live in America with a brand-new baby and no mates. In a cunning plan to avoid domestic duties and people who didn’t understand her Derbyshire accent, she wrote *No-one Ever Has Sex on a Tuesday*. It went on to become a No. 1 bestseller and publishing phenomenon. Since then, Tracy has written many more novels and been published successfully around the world. She now lives back home in Derbyshire with her husband and children.

To keep in touch with Tracy, visit her website and follow her on social media.

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