

Amanda James

BEHIND THE LIE

Not all secrets stay hidden...

Who can you trust, if you can't trust yourself?

Holly West has turned her life around. She's found a successful and loving husband in Simon and is expecting twins. She is definitely a woman who has taken back control of her future.

Until she gives birth, but for only one twin to survive. Holly can't let it go.

Holly's world is in a tailspin and suddenly she can't trust herself or anyone else. No one believes her, not her husband or her best friend. Because she thinks she knows the truth... her son is still alive and she won't stop until she finds him.

Behind the Lie

Amanda James



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

AMANDA JAMES

grew up in Sheffield but her dream was to eventually live in Cornwall. Having now realised that dream, the dramatic coastline around her home inspires her writing and she has sketched out many stories in her head while walking the cliff paths.

Known to many as Mandy, she spends far more time than is good for her on social media and has turned procrastination into a fine art. Amanda has written many short stories for anthologies and has five published novels. Two, *A Stitch in Time* and *Cross Stitch*, are about a time-travelling history teacher; three are a mixture of suspense and mystery – *Somewhere Beyond the Sea*, *Dancing in the Rain* and *Summer in Tintagel*.

Amanda left school with no real qualifications of note apart from an A* in how to be a nuisance in class. Nevertheless, she returned to education when her daughter was five and eventually became a history teacher, though she never travelled through time, apart from in her head.

When Amanda is not writing she can be found playing on the beach with her family or walking next to the ocean plotting her next book.

Follow her on Twitter @akjames61 and on Facebook at mandy.james.33

To Brian – my biggest champion

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Prologue

I close my eyes. I want to shut out the bright lights, to block from my ears the incessant beep of monitors, the clink of instruments on metal trays, the rustle of a plastic apron as a nurse follows hushed instructions from the surgeon. My husband, Simon, has tried to prepare me for this moment, but how can I be? Nobody could.

Not for this.

My heart is racing and a weight of despair crushes my chest. I can't give up yet though. Mustn't. Simon has told me that I can't think the worst, must be positive. I cannot voice my fears or they could become real. I hold tight to my husband's hand and he whispers encouraging words.

The wail of an infant snaps my eyes open once more and I let out a moan. It's a mixture of both hope and despair, because there should be two, you see.

Two babies.

Moments later, the surgeon tells us we have a little girl. I want to ask about my son, but I can't say the words. There are too many people in the room, nurses, assistants, an anaesthetist, and God knows who else, and it sounds as if they are all talking at once. I can hear someone saying something about weight and then a nurse is rushing around; I can't tell what she's doing; there's a green operating sheet hanging in front of me. Suddenly my daughter is in my arms and an overwhelming rush of love takes my breath. Before I can speak again, I realise that the surgeon has left the room and a nurse too, I think. It's so hard to see everything that's happening and I begin to panic again. Simon calms me, explains they are just doing my stitches.

My husband takes my daughter's tiny hand and says she looks just like me. He is flushed with pride and tells us both how much he loves us. I ask

where our boy is and he tells me not to worry, that a nurse has just taken him to have some checks, that it will all be fine. I think he sounds less than convincing. Then a male nurse comes in, whispers in Simon's ear. He passes my daughter back to me, asks if I will be okay for a few minutes without him. I ask why, but he doesn't answer.

He is gone for some time and when he returns his grey eyes are moist and he whispers in my ear that he's so sorry but there was nothing that could be done and that our worst fears have come true; that he's so, so sorry, but at least we have our healthy baby girl. He kisses my cheek tenderly and I want to scream, because my baby boy is gone.

Gone for ever.

Chapter One

Five weeks earlier...

The kiss of an ocean breeze wakes me from sleep. I watch the white gauze curtain's gentle rise and fall at the open bedroom window, listen to the shush of the waves hurrying in their ceaseless journey back and forth along the sand, and take a deep breath of morning air – ozone and lilies. Wonderful.

Waking to nature's alarm clock in my beloved Cornwall on a sunny spring morning is infinitely preferable to the shriek of a digital one in our twelfth-floor London apartment. I reach out and caress the stems of white lilies by my bed and remind myself that I am very lucky to have both homes. In fact, I think that my life is just about perfect right now. Okay, so there are one or two shadows, I suppose that's what you'd call them, darkening my positive thoughts some days, but nothing I can't handle.

A lazy smile on my lips, I stretch my limbs and run my fingers over the distended mound of my belly. My hands pause. Was that a response?

Yes.

One kick and... another.

It hardly seems possible that just two years ago my belly was as flat as an African veldt and my whole career depended on my face and body. My five-feet-nine fashion-model body. I'd have been horrified to find myself pregnant back then, but now I am overjoyed. Overjoyed times two, because I am carrying twins. My laughter escapes as I stroke my tummy again.

In the kitchen now and halfway through a bowl of cornflakes, my mobile rings from somewhere in the hall. I pull my dressing gown across my bump and hurry over – probably left it in my coat pocket again. Yes, I did...

‘Hi, Holly! Didn’t wake you, did I?’

The sound of my oldest and best friend’s voice on the line warms my heart. ‘Demi! No, of course you didn’t wake me. It is,’ I glance at the kitchen clock, ‘nearly nine o’clock. Been up for hours!’

‘Really?’

‘Of course not. More like ten minutes.’ We laugh. I never was good at getting up early. Demi used to call for me on the way to school and always had to wait while I rushed around like a maniac.

‘Typical. Look, I know we said we’d meet up tomorrow, but can I pop over this morning instead? I’ve doubled booked myself.’

‘Yeah, of course. The sooner the better. I have bacon, but bring eggs and I’ll make us breakfast.’

‘Bacon and eggs? I remember a time that you’d rather die than eat that. How you survived on just coffee and... um... fags I will never know.’ Her chuckle sounds like it’s embarrassed, not amused.

The little pause before she said fags wasn’t lost on either of us and a bit of sunshine went out of the day. We both know that her runaway tongue had been going to say drugs. All that is over now. A hundred years ago. At least that’s how it feels – my life has changed irrevocably.

‘Ah, yes. Dark days, Demelza. Dark days indeed. But now everything is different, thank goodness. Oh, and can you bring some fresh white bread?’

‘Are you sure you are Holly, the “to die for” former fashion model, or am I speaking to a charlatan?’

‘I am the former fashion model, but I think you’ll find my figure is no longer to die for... well, it could be. Depends how you look at it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Let’s just say that I’ve changed in the two years since we last met. You’re going to be in for a big surprise.’

From behind the slats at the window, I watch a battered blue VW Camper trundle along the unmade beach road and pull up outside. Bloody hell, Demi must have had that for nearly ten years. It was old when her dad gave it to her for her sixteenth birthday, but that was Demi all over. Why change

it if it still worked? Besides, it fitted with her laid-back, adventurous nature and surf-dude style. I watch her get out of the van and the breeze tug at her tangle of copper curls as she turns her expectant green eyes to my beach house. Oh, it is so good to see her again. A little piece of my past right there and ready to reunite with my present. A little piece of the past that I missed more than I realised until this moment.

Demi runs up the sandy incline, a carrier bag of groceries in her hand, and I dodge away before she sees me at the window. I don't want to give away my secret until I open the door. I want to see the expression on her face. With a giggle in my throat I fling open the door, just as she's raising her finger to press the bell. The wide-as-the-sky smile on her face falters, her mouth drops open, becoming just as round as her eyes.

'Oh my WORD!' Demi points at my bump in disbelief. 'You're... you're... oh, my word!'

'Pregnant? Is that the word your brain is scrambling for?' I laugh and throw my arms around her. Not easy with a mountain between us.

She hugs me as best she can and then says, 'But why the hell didn't you tell me?'

'Because I wanted to see your face! I couldn't tell you before, could I, because you've been travelling around the world for the last hundred years, finding yourself, or whatever you young folk do.'

Demi narrows her eyes. 'I went to work with Save the Children in India, for six months, and that was ages ago – before your wedding. And then to Greece working in a bar. Listen to you with the young folk? There's three months between us.'

I do love winding her up, it's so easy. I hold the door open and usher her in. 'Well, I am soon to be a mother, so therefore much more mature than you, don't you know?'

She takes a few steps inside and shakes her head, her eyes fixed on my belly. 'I just can't bloody believe it. You're the last person I thought would get pregnant. And you are SO... massive!'

I ignore the first bit and say, 'That's because I'm having twins, a boy and a girl.'

‘Shut up! You’re not!’

‘Am.’

‘Wow! Are you happy about it all, then?’

I grin at the little furrow in her brow. ‘Do I look happy?’

‘Why yes... yes, you do,’ she says with a laugh.

‘Then that’s your answer. Now come through and I’ll get that bacon on.’

Soon the kitchen is full of breakfast smells and laughter. Demi is still as crazy as she ever was, and it’s a wonder I can cook at all, I’m giggling so much. Suddenly serious, she pulls herself up onto the countertop, looks round the room and spreads her arms wide.

‘My God, Holly, you have done incredibly well for a Cornish maid. This house is like, humongous; in fact, this kitchen is bigger than my entire flat! And the view from the living room over the ocean...’ She gives a wistful little sigh. ‘What I wouldn’t give.’

I nod. ‘It is very lovely and I am so lucky to have such a generous husband. Simon bought this place for me when I started to get homesick last year.’

Demi’s eyes grow round. ‘He must be a bloody millionaire then. Most guys buy their wives a bunch of flowers from the local garage.’

I laugh and crack an egg into the pan. ‘Perhaps not quite a millionaire,’ I say, though he probably is. I don’t know for definite as he keeps his finances close to his chest. ‘But, as you know, a London private consultant’s salary isn’t peanuts.’

She takes a sip of her tea and rolls her eyes. I think I catch a look of disdain in that eye-roll and crack another egg more forcefully. Demi and Simon have met just the once, at our wedding two years ago, and though my best friend had been polite and pleasant, I knew she didn’t like him. When I’d asked her what she thought of my new husband, she had been non-committal, just said she was glad I was happy and then gone off to get a drink. Afterwards, despite numerous invites to spend time with us in London, Demi had always come up with an excuse as to why she couldn’t make it. Then she’d gone off to Greece.

‘Why don’t you like Simon, Demi?’ I say as I tip the eggs onto a plate with the bacon.

She pulls her neck in and gives me a frown. ‘Eh? Who says I don’t like him? I’ve only met the guy the once.’

‘Exactly.’ I put the plates on the table and Demi jumps down from the countertop. ‘You never visited us and I know you inside out – I should, shouldn’t I? We have been friends since we were nine.’

Demi cuts the fresh white loaf and slathers thick butter across it. ‘Oh, this is still warm, Holly.’ She gives a groan of pleasure and stuffs more bread in her mouth. ‘I swear to God that Kendra’s bake the best bread in Cornwall. I bet if Terry Kendra went on *Bake Off* he’d win hands...’ Demi looks at my set face, swallows the bread and sighs. ‘Look, do we have to do this now, just as we’re about to enjoy this wonderful breakfast?’

My heart sinks. How bad can it be? ‘No... not if you...’

‘It’s just that he’s a bit, you know, controlling...?’ Demi’s words burst out around forkfuls of breakfast shoved rapidly into her mouth and I have to concentrate really hard to hear them. ‘It’s as if you were some kind of trophy for him. He saw you, decided he wanted you, but then what man wouldn’t? A stunning, tall, blonde, blue-eyed model?’ She pauses and points an egg fork at me. ‘And, I might add, one of the nicest people in the known universe. So he got you clean of drugs and then took you.’ Demi shakes her head in bewilderment. ‘All within three bloody months. I knew within ten minutes of talking to him that it was a case of whatever Simon wants, Simon gets.’

I watch her push her plate away and pour more tea. A mouthful of my breakfast refuses to be swallowed, just sits in my cheek like a lump of cardboard. I hadn’t expected that... even though I might have thought along those lines myself. More than I’d like to admit.

‘Hey, I’m sorry, but you did ask.’ Demi touches my hand briefly but her eyes dance away from the hurt in mine. ‘And we promised early on that we would be honest with each other, didn’t we? If you’re happy with him, that’s all that matters.’

I nod briefly, swallow my food with a swig of tea, and push my barely touched plate away. ‘You don’t really know him, so I suppose he could have

come across as a bit controlling. But I was out of my depth when I met him... had been for nearly a year. The modelling scene in London is mad... a never-ending round of parties, drugs, photo shoots... it all went to my head. I wasn't eating properly, sleeping...' I hear my voice catch and Demi takes my hand across the table.

'Let's stop now. I'm sorry I upset you. Let's talk about the babies...'

'No. I want you to understand.' I take my hand back and tuck my hair behind my ears. I was on antidepressants, booze, as well as the cocaine... I wanted to come home, leave it all, but I couldn't come home a junky, could I? Imagine what it would have done to Mum only the year after Dad died? I wanted her to be proud of me, make something of myself, but the way things were going I'd have been dead before I was twenty-five.'

Demi puts her hand to her mouth. 'I didn't realise it had got that bad. Why didn't you tell me? I would have helped you.'

I look at her shocked little face, soft green eyes as big as saucers, and want to laugh. How the hell could she have helped me? What did she know about my life at the time? Me, a girl from a Cornish village, drunk on the glamour and bright lights of London. Swayed by promises of making the big time, becoming a supermodel even... And I *had* done very well, *very* quickly. Perhaps could have gone higher in my career, but the scene began to beat me back as if I were driftwood against the returning tide. Swept me away, down and under...

'You wouldn't have been able to help me, Dem. I needed specialist help and Simon got that for me. He rescued me from drowning, saved my life...'

'Well, that's good then.' Demi shoots me an unconvincing smile, stands and turns to the kettle. 'Shall I make more tea?'

What the hell is wrong with her? Doesn't she believe me? 'No tea for me. And Simon honestly *did* save me, you know?' I stand and take the plates over to the sink.

Demi gives me a searching look. 'Simon might have saved you, but don't you think he did it for himself, not for you? I had it from the horse's mouth at the wedding. He told me he came to that fashion show with his then girlfriend, saw you on the catwalk and decided he must have you. So he gets your agent to set up a meeting, tells you he's in love with you,

sweeps you off your feet, and arranges for you to see a top drug therapist. Then you're in rehab for a few weeks and, meanwhile, he arranges the wedding of the year. Job done.'

I'm puzzled. 'This isn't news, Demi; I told you the same story myself. He *was* in love with me; *that's* why he had to have me, help me. It was love at first sight on his part and I fell for him pretty quickly afterwards.'

'It might have been the same story, but you didn't see his face when he told me his version. It was as if you were some acquisition, something he'd bought, just like he buys his houses, cars...' Demi stops and holds her hands up. 'Right, that's it. No more now. I want to hear all about these precious babies, and as long as you're happy, that's all that matters.'

I return her smile and we link arms and walk across the living room and out onto the balcony. The tide is on its way in, the sun is playing chase with the clouds, and the wide expanse of Crantock beach is occupied by dog walkers, kite surfers and a few brave paddlers in the cold spring breakers. A thought pushes itself to the front of my mind. Perhaps there's a little bit of Demi that's jealous? Hasn't she just said she would love a place like mine – what she wouldn't give? Maybe she'd like to settle down, have the life I have, a husband that's successful?

'This is just an amazing view; I bet you never want to go back to London,' Demi says quietly.

I push those thoughts to the back of my mind again. If she's a bit jealous, then that's only natural, isn't it? I'd probably be the same if our roles were reversed. I smile. 'To be honest, no I don't. Especially since I've been pregnant. I want my babies to breathe in fresh sea air instead of pollution and listen to seagulls, not car horns.'

I look at Demi and the smile dies on my face. She has tears standing and she swallows hard. 'You know you always say that everything is all okay as long as you're happy?'

I nod.

'I've asked you if you're happy three times since I've been here and you haven't said anything back. You are happy, aren't you? I'd hate to think that you...'

I slip my arm around her shoulder and give her a squeeze. 'Hey, of course I am, silly,' I say to the beach. I don't want to look into her searching eyes; she always could read me far too well. 'Why wouldn't I be? I have everything I've ever wanted.'

Chapter Two

Simon ended the call to his wife and poured a whisky. After the day he'd had, he needed one, and he needed Holly too, but she'd just told him she wasn't coming home until the end of the week and he missed her. She'd originally said she'd be back tomorrow and now it would be three more days. Yes, the beach house was his gift to her to make sure she still felt connected to Cornwall and all that romantic stuff about the wild ocean she talked about. But she needed to realise that London was her home now. He'd make her realise it. He had to. The babies were due in five weeks and if she postponed again he'd be worried she might go into labour out in the sticks instead of at his clinic where she'd be safe. If anything happened to her or the babies, he'd never forgive himself.

The light of the reading lamp behind him in the otherwise dark apartment made a mirror of the floor-to-ceiling windows. In them, a tall, dark-haired man wearing a black pinstriped suit glowered at himself and then lifted a heavy crystal tumbler to his lips. Except that it was empty. Simon strode over to the drinks cabinet and refilled the glass. The apartment always felt so empty when Holly was away. He wished he didn't miss her so much... love her so much. Simon put the glass to his lips and took a big mouthful, his breath taken by the whisky burning a path to his stomach.

In the bedroom he threw off his clothes and ran the shower in the en suite. He'd planned to stay in tonight, but it wouldn't hurt to go out for a bit, would it? Simon needed a distraction, a bit of fun. He thought about the determined tone that had crept into his wife's voice on the telephone earlier when he'd said he'd like her to come home tomorrow like she'd agreed. Simon was sure that little witch Demelza had changed Holly's mind. He knew she'd be trouble when he first laid eyes on her. All thick as thieves

and hugs with Holly, yet as cold as ice with him. That was unusual. He had the opposite effect on women mostly.

Half an hour later, Simon shrugged into his jacket and, with some trepidation, examined his appearance in the dressing-table mirror. These long days and late nights were taking their toll. He leaned closer and ruffled the hair around his temples. No, he wasn't mistaken when he'd looked at himself in the window earlier; there were a few grey hairs amongst the dark. And yes, the fine lines around his eyes were becoming more pronounced. Fuck, he was only thirty-four. Perhaps he should stay in after all, have a warm drink, go to bed... the gaming tables hadn't been kind to him lately either. Then he thought about the empty flat and the bed that was too big.

Grey hairs or no, the cocktail waitress couldn't take her eyes off him. She'd welcomed him into the casino bar as if they were old friends and called him by his name. Yes, he was a regular, but still a nice touch given that he couldn't recall seeing her before. He watched her now as she mixed his drink: dark sparkly eyes, generous mouth, curvy figure poured into a slinky red dress, and bouncy chocolate curls tumbling over her shoulders. The complete opposite of Holly, admittedly, but then he didn't really have a type. A gorgeous woman was a gorgeous woman. He liked them and they liked him.

Simon had been very good since he'd been married where the ladies were concerned, however. Not so much with the gambling... but that was another story. It was blatantly obvious that many of the nurses and some of the female doctors at the practice were his for the taking, should he ask. He hadn't asked though. Holly was enough for him; she was everything he'd ever wanted. Why she was, he didn't know. Apart from her stunning looks, she was kind of average in other areas: intelligence, ambition, creativity... Simon had always thought that any wife of his would be outstanding in everything she did. But he'd seen her on that catwalk three years ago and he'd just known she was the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

'Penny for them, Mr West?' Chocolate Curls set the glass down and leaned her elbows on the bar to give him a good view of her cleavage. 'My name's Lauren by the way.'

Simon took a drink and looked at her cheeky smile. 'I'm thinking about my wife, Lauren, as it goes.'

Lauren's eyes lost a bit of sparkle, but she said in a bright voice, 'Oh, that's nice. She's a very lucky woman to be married to you.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Well, good-looking, successful, polite, charming. Did I say good-looking?'

Her throaty giggle and a wink made Simon laugh too. 'Thanks. My wife doesn't agree though. Seems she prefers the company of her old school friend and the wiles of Cornwall to her husband and Thameside apartment.'

'Really? No accounting for taste is there?' Lauren smiled again and twirled a strand of hair round her finger.

Simon smiled back and let his gaze slowly travel from her eyes to her cleavage, deliberately lingering there before flicking his eyes back to hers again. She looked back at him without a trace of embarrassment, and though she didn't say anything, her message was loud and clear. Simon took another drink and watched her over the rim of his glass as she mixed a drink for another customer at the other side of the bar. She really had the most amazing arse. Would it hurt if he slipped just this once? Because she was heavily pregnant, Holly hadn't felt like sex much lately; understandable, but very tedious...

'Simon! Not joining us tonight, matey?'

He felt the heavy hand of Giles, an old school acquaintance, on his shoulder and the alcohol fumes from his breath nearly singed his eyebrows. 'Evening, Giles. I'm not sure that I am... might give it a miss,' he said into his glass while still eyeing Lauren.

'Nonsense! You have to let me win back what I lost a few weeks back, eh? 'Slonley right.'

Simon looked at Giles's red, gin-soaked face and listened to his slurred gabble for a few moments. He could do with a win. The bank was on his back ever so politely and he'd had a card refused at The Ritz the other day. Very embarrassing, as he'd been with the senior partner of the practice at the time. Giles had more money than sense and at the moment looked to be

pissed as a fart. Easy money. Perhaps Lauren might still be on shift later... Then he thought better of it. He was being ridiculous, self-indulgent. Holly was everything to him; she was carrying his children and soon they would be a happy little family. Something he'd never really been a part of. Next to his wife, the Laurens of the world were ten a penny. Simon glanced over at her and she gave him a slow, sexy smile. He smiled back, but that was all she was getting from him. Simon followed Giles to the poker table.

A few hours later, he'd stopped smiling.

Chapter Three

Paddling in the Atlantic in late March is not something I would go in for normally, but Demi's enthusiasm won't let me sit on the dunes huddled in my duffle coat. A duffle coat and a blanket, to be exact, because my coat will no longer fasten over my bump. So here I am, ankle deep in the surf and actually loving it. The biting cold has subsided and it feels almost warm.

'So refreshing, isn't it?' Demi asks, rolling up the hem of her jeans, which are already damp.

'Actually, yes it is. Makes you feel alive and connected to nature,' I say, looking at a fishing boat, a red splash on the horizon.

'It does; told you it would do you good. Wash all that city pollution out of your skin.'

Talk of the city brings an image of my husband's disgruntled face to mind, soft grey eyes steely with contempt. He wasn't best pleased the other night when I told him I wanted to stay until tomorrow. I don't normally go against his wishes, but I'm just not ready to go back yet. I think it might be that I am at the nesting stage, and nests are built at home. I never think of London as my home, but I'd never tell Simon that of course. Also, I wanted to spend another day with my bestie. It's been far too long... and I am happier being here with her than I have been in a long time, if I'm honest with myself. I don't usually allow that – honesty. It's no good for me.

'You okay?' Demi asks and splashes a few droplets of seawater at me. I raise a quizzical eyebrow. 'Well, you look kind of far away.'

'I was back in London, so yes, I was.'

Demi frowns. 'Hmm. We can't have that, can we? Right, first one back to the beach chairs eats all the Scotch eggs and sandwiches!' She takes off like a hare towards the dunes, sending her laughter back to taunt me.

‘Hey, that’s not fair! I have a lot to carry, you know!’

The sea air gives me an appetite and before I know it there’s just a few crumbs left at the bottom of the sandwich container. With a sigh I lean back in my beach chair, stretch out my long legs, rest my feet on a rock and sip my tea. This is the life. Contentment builds a home in my chest and seeps through the rest of me until I am truly relaxed. Any thought of a return to London is absolutely banished to the darkest recesses of my mind, and all I can see is sunshine, sea and sky. Oh, and Demi’s daft grin as she brings her face close to mine.

‘You look so much better for being out in the elements.’

I laugh. ‘You make it sound as if we’re on the top of Mount Everest or something.’

‘Well, you *do* have a mountain for a tummy these days.’

We laugh and I pretend to strangle her. Then we do synchronised tea sipping for a while in a comfortable silence.

‘Do you ever think about Jowan?’ Demi asks in a quiet voice and the silence turns uncomfortable as I struggle for an answer. Why the hell did she have to spoil the day with that?

I sigh. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Just wondering... childhood sweethearts do tend to have a special place in a girl’s heart, I hear.’ She digs her toes into the sand and looks away from me up the beach.

‘Sometimes, I guess. But he smashed up that special place when he bugged off and left me for the army.’

‘That’s why you went to London, isn’t it – to heal your heart and forget him?’

‘You know it is.’ Why the hell she’s bringing this up, I have no idea.

‘Hmm.’

‘Hmm, what?’

‘So if he hadn’t gone in the army, do you reckon you’d be together now?’

Oh, for God's sake. 'How do I know? Yes. No.' I lift my arms and let my hands fall to my thighs with a slap. 'Who bloody knows!'

'You seem to be getting a bit pissed off... a sure sign you still have feelings for him,' Demi says, scrutinising my face.

'That's rubbish. I just can't see the point in bringing all that up now. It's ancient history.' I bite the inside of my cheek to dislodge an image of Jowan's smiley face, mop of blond curls and sky-blue eyes.

'Four years ago is hardly ancient.' Demi gives a wistful smile and puts her hand on my arm. 'I guess he's on my mind because he's back. Saw him in the bank yesterday actually.'

Jowan's back? To my surprise my stomach does the little roll of excitement it used to do when I thought of him. My heart rate steps up a pace too, but I take a breath and make my voice behave itself. 'He was visiting his family then? Home on leave?'

'No, he's bought himself out of the army. He said it was the worst mistake of his life; just did it to prove himself to his dad and wished to God that he could turn back time.'

I can feel Demi's eyes on me, so I send my gaze to the thin navy line that divides sea from sky. A flurry of unbidden thoughts are coming from different directions, smashing into each other, past and present, a tumult of emotions mirroring the pattern of waves bashing against the rocks in front of me. Eventually I say, 'Well, don't we all wish we could go back sometimes? Do things a different way? A better way?'

Demi nods. 'He said that he misses you every day and wishes you were still together. Said he was a fucking idiot to leave you.'

I look at her to see if she is messing about but she's deadly serious. 'Really?'

'Yeah. He knew you'd moved away, of course. Your mum told his mum that you were married. He didn't know about the babies though – I told him. He said that I should tell you he's glad for you and wishes you all the happiness in the world.'

The breeze picks up and I look into it and away from Demi to let the moisture dry my eyes. The trouble is, more tears are waiting. I don't need

this. Not now. I can't think about Jowan. My heart can't take it.

'Holly? Are you crying?'

'No, of course not,' I say briskly and begin to gather the picnic things. 'The wind is making my eyes water. Let's go back to the house now. I'm getting chilly.'

'Hot chocolate is just the thing for shock,' Demi says and places a steaming mug in front of me on the balcony table. The clouds have rolled themselves across every inch of blue sky and we are wrapped in blankets, eating biscuits and watching the brave souls still on the beach.

'I think you'll find that's hot, sweet tea. And I'm not in shock.'

Demi looks into her mug. Hot, sweet tea? No, it's definitely hot chocolate.'

'I meant that...' The mischief in her eyes stop my words. It's usually me that does the winding up.

She points a digestive at me and then dunks it into the mug. 'Got you there. Makes a change.'

'Yep. So how's the jewellery business going? You haven't said much about it.'

'Really unsubtle way of changing the subject, Hols.'

I sigh. Demi is really beginning to get on my nerves now. 'Unsubtle or not, I'd really rather talk about your life for a bit. You said the other day that your new guy might be moving here. Any more developments?' I take a drink of the hot chocolate and push another image of Jowan's face from my mind.

Demi brightens and a huge smile tells me that this new guy might be 'the guy'. 'Well, funny you should mention that, but yes, Alex texted me last night to say he's coming down in a few weeks to have another look round. Then he'll make his decision. It's a big jump to make from Edinburgh, after all.'

'Oh, that's great! Why didn't you tell me earlier?'

The smile falters and she shrugs. 'Oh, I don't know. I suppose I didn't want to jinx it. It was all lovely when we were working in Greece together,

but I do worry it won't last now we're back here. I don't have a great track record at keeping men, do I?'

'But you never really wanted a serious relationship before, did you? You were always content doing your own thing.'

Demi twists her mouth to the side and nods. 'Yeah, I guess so. It's just that I don't want to get hurt. I saw what happened to you and...'

'Really unsubtle way of bringing the subject back to me, Dem.' My voice is flat, weary.

She has the grace to look sheepish. 'Righty-ho, you win. Let's talk about me. The jewellery-making business isn't half bad. I think tourists like the fact that I sell out of my van – they buy into the surfer-girl image and I lay it on thick too.' Demi grins at me and I send one back.

'Good. And Alex will be good for you; I can feel it in my water.'

Demi gestures at my bump. 'I hope they don't break while I'm here!'

'Me either. You'd probably make me a mug of hot, sweet tea and run around here like a scalded cat.' We laugh. 'I haven't quite decided but I think I might opt for a C-section. Simon's colleague would do it, of course.'

'Why not Simon?'

'Well, it's frowned upon really. It's not illegal, but the medical profession thinks operating on family members is unethical. Besides, he'd be far too nervous, him being the expectant dad and all. The plan is for him to sit and hold my hand like any other dad would and leave the hard work to the others.'

'Good idea. Five weeks to go then?'

'Yeah, though twins normally come earlier. When I get back I'll have a scan at Simon's practice, just to see that everything is okay.'

'Handy, having a private consultant for a husband.'

The disapproval in her voice rankles. Okay, growing up, Simon's world and mine and Demi's were oceans apart. But I live in his world now and he's done everything he can to make me happy in it. I can't see the point in picking a fight with her though, and stand to clear the plates. She stands too

and puts her hands on my shoulders. I don't like the serious look in her eye or the way she takes a deep breath as if she's building up to something.

She lets out the breath and says, 'You know, it isn't too late to go back. I can see that living in London is killing you and Jowan said...'

'For God's sake!' I brush off her hands. 'There is no going back for me and Jowan. Look at me!' I jab a finger at my belly. 'I'm about to become a mother, I have a husband who loves me, and if you don't stop all this nonsense, you and me are going to fall out big time.'

Demi's face crumbles and she draws me to her. 'Oh, I'm so sorry, love. I don't want to upset you, I just thought...'

I hold her at arm's length. 'Then please don't. Too much thinking does no good. I'm going back to London tomorrow and everything will be okay, all right?' I give her a little smile and hope she'll stop now.

'Of course. I'll shut my big gob.' Demi pretends to zip her lips and gives me another hug. 'I'd hate to make you unhappy.'

We clear away and I follow her into the kitchen, wishing it wasn't already too late for that.

Chapter Four

This was ridiculous. He shouldn't have to creep around in his own house; he was doing it for her in the end, wasn't he? Simon held his breath and inched his way past the end of the bed, his eyes watching for any sign that his wife was waking. No. He needn't have worried. Holly's breathing was a slow and steady in-out-in-out. And with any luck he'd be out, too, in a few minutes, if only he could find his car keys.

Ten minutes later, a cold sweat beading his brow, he slipped behind the wheel of his Mercedes, a mixture of guilt and relief slipping in with him. In the ten days since his wife had been back from Cornwall, it had been difficult for him to get out of the apartment in the evenings. Holly had been clingy and anxious, asking him why he was going out, where he was going, what time he'd be home. Each time, he'd made excuses about work, or that he was out to dinner with old university friends, but the last five nights he'd just sneaked out while she was sleeping.

Simon couldn't tell her the truth, of course. Last year, when things hadn't been too desperate, he'd told her about his occasional casino jaunts and she'd looked at him as if he'd told her he was a child molester. Then he'd had the lecture about how the only people who really win are the casino owners and didn't he know that it would all end in disaster. What did she know about gambling? Holly was a country girl with a very naive way of looking at the world. When he'd won big, she hadn't turned her nose up at the extra gifts he'd showered on her though, had she? No. Particularly that beach house she adored so much. Did she think the money for that came out of thin air?

Then a little voice whispered in his ear that he was being far too hard on her. Wasn't she just trying to look out for him? She loved him, that was obvious. In the end he was only getting angry because he knew she was

right, deep down. It was a mug's game. Nevertheless, things were about to change and everything would turn out just fine.

At a red light, Simon took a deep breath and expelled it along with any trace of guilt. Yes, he'd had a longish run of bad luck at the tables lately. The worst loss had been to that nasty little toad Giles, the night Holly had told him she was staying on in Cornwall. She'd upset him and that had clouded his judgement. Turned out Giles hadn't been quite as drunk as he'd made out. Simon had been greedy and by God he'd paid for it. But he'd be lucky tonight; he could feel it in his gut. And it wasn't just his gut; probability came into it too. He'd lost every night for ten nights. How long could a run of bad luck last, for goodness' sake?

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Everybody loves a winner, don't they say? What a difference a few weeks made. Lauren looked at him quickly and then away as if he was something distasteful, something... Simon's befuddled mind struggled for an adequate description... something unwholesome. Who the hell did she think she was? Jumped up little gold-digger.

'Hey, Lauren, my glass needs a refill! What's up, don't you fancy me any more now Lady Luck has deserted me?'

Lauren looked at him and had the grace to blush. Then she raised a quizzical eyebrow across the room at a thick-set man in an expensive suit, one of the managers, Simon thought. He shook his head at Lauren and she shrugged. 'I'm sorry, Mr West. Casino policy is to refuse to serve customers who might have had a little too much to drink.'

'Eh?' Simon leaned his elbows on the bar to steady his legs. 'I've only had a couple! A double whisky in this glass now, if you please, miss.' Simon thumped the glass down hard on the bar.

The thick-set man came over and whispered in his ear. 'We don't want to upset everyone, do we, Mr West? Allow me to escort you outside.'

Simon took a step back, his hands bunched into fists. How dare this ape of a man talk to him like this? 'Upset everyone?' Simon flung his arms up. 'Who am I upsetting!' Then, to his surprise, the ape grabbed his elbow and

made as if to pull him towards the door. ‘Get your hands off me right now, or...’

‘Hey, hey, my man. No need for that,’ a deep and cultured voice said behind them.

The ape immediately released him and nodded in deference before walking away. Simon turned round and could have cried with relief. ‘Mark! Mark, am I glad to see you! Did you see what happened?’ Simon hung on to his oldest friend’s shoulder and swept his arm in the direction of Lauren and the ape. ‘They tried to humiliate me. Said I’d had too much to drink and...’ Simon’s words got blocked by a lump in his throat as he looked up into Mark’s sympathetic dark eyes.

‘Yes, old chap, I saw and heard.’ Mark linked arms with Simon and guided him to a table in a corner. ‘Look, just you sit there and gather your thoughts. I’ll get us a coffee and you can tell me all about it.’

An hour and two coffees later, Simon was seeing things more clearly and he wasn’t sure if that was a good idea. Yes, he *was* sure, actually. It wasn’t a good idea at all. He remembered that he’d purposely downed those whiskies to obliterate reality – the vile, almost unbelievable, nightmare his life was turning into. Simon hugged himself and tried not to give in to the desire to rock back and forth. Wasn’t that what crazy people in movies did? He wasn’t crazy. Just sad, ashamed and... desperate. Yes, desperate was the main thing he was.

‘You’re looking a bit more like your old self now, my friend,’ Mark said, crossing his long legs and leaning his six-foot-five frame back in his chair. Not for the first time he reminded Simon of a hawk. In fact, Hawky had been his nickname back in the day. Dark eyes that missed nothing, aristocratic features, long, hooked nose, slicked-back tawny hair and a keen intelligence that was almost palpable. It was this that had led to his great success as a stockbroker. Mark was seriously loaded.

‘I wish I was my old self, Mark. I don’t care for this new one.’

‘You said you’d lost everything when we first sat down. Can you explain what you meant?’

‘I meant what I said. I have nothing... or won’t have once the bank has taken the house – keep defaulting on the mortgage, see? I lost the rest... everything.’

Mark narrowed his eyes and leaned forward. ‘Surely it can’t be that bad?’

‘It is.’ Simon swallowed hard. There was no way he’d add tears of disgrace to desperation. ‘Tonight was going to be the big win, but it didn’t happen. Should’ve listened to my lovely Holly. The only winners are the casino owners.’

‘We all lose sometimes, old friend. That’s the challenge, isn’t it? I think you might be seeing things a little gloomier than they actually are...’

‘You can afford to lose big, Mark. I can’t.’ Simon ran his tongue over dry lips and shoved his hand through his hair. ‘You know that little prick Giles Harwood we went to school with?’ Mark nodded. ‘He started it all off really. Yes, I was already on a losing streak but he tricked me. I thought he was pissed and risked a pile on that poker game. Lost it all.’

‘How much?’

‘Two hundred and fifty.’

Mark pulled back his neck and frowned. ‘Two hundred and fifty pounds is nothing, Simon. I...’

Simon shot Mark an incredulous look. ‘Of course not, Mark! Do you think I’d be worried about that? No, it was two hundred and fifty thousand!’

Mark stroked his chin. ‘Hmm. That was a tidy sum... I might be able to come up with some of it...’

Simon held his hand up. ‘But did I stop there? No. I carried on. And tonight I bet all of what I had left. My savings, my boat, my car... and the Cornish beach house.’ The enormity of what he was saying whipped up a wave of nausea in his gut. How could he do this to Holly? She’d be devastated.

‘So what are we talking here?’

Simon totted the amount up in his head, hoping he’d done it incorrectly earlier. He hadn’t. ‘Give or take, close on two million.’

‘Fucking hell, Simon... what were you thinking?’ Mark said in a low voice, though its gravity wasn’t diminished.

‘I wasn’t, was I? All I knew was that I needed a win.’ Simon’s gaze slid away from the mixture of pity and contempt in his friend’s eyes. To the table he said, ‘How am I going to survive now? I’m going to be a father soon. My work is suffering – had a warning from the main partner the other day. Holly will leave me, take the children with her. I would if I was her. But I can’t let her do that... oh, sweet Jesus, what am I going to do?’ Simon’s bottom lip began to tremble so he bit down on it.

Simon stuck his knuckles in his eyes and rubbed hard. Then there was a silence that lasted for too long – it made him want to scream.

‘Oh dear, you have made rather a mess of things, haven’t you?’ Mark said eventually, as he looked at his fingers, turning a plain wedding band round and round his finger.

Simon really didn’t need this; his stomach wanted to come up into his throat when he considered the impact of what had happened. He said through gritted teeth, ‘You could say that, Mark. My life is over.’

‘No. No, of course it isn’t. You’re not thinking straight, that’s all – and that’s perfectly understandable.’ Mark looked into the middle distance and did the chin-rubbing thing again. Then he stood and shrugged into his jacket. ‘Right, come on. I’ll get you into a taxi and we’ll talk about this tomorrow. It will all be okay.’

Simon shook his head. ‘How can it be?’ Then a glimmer of hope fought its way to the front of his mind. ‘Wait... do you mean you’re going to help me out?’

Mark helped Simon into his coat. ‘I might have an opportunity for you. We’ll talk tomorrow. I’ll ring you late morning, give you time to clear the hangover.’

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Simon watched the rise and fall of his wife’s chest as she slept, a finger of moonlight caressing her beautiful face, and he prayed that Mark would

come up with something before he lost everything. If he couldn't fix it, then nobody could.

Chapter Five

Even though I'm lying on the bed in my husband's private practice, it still feels like a hospital. It doesn't look like a hospital, with the plush home furnishings and soft music in the background; nor does it have that faint whiff of disinfectant in the air. Nevertheless, the screen of the ultrasound machine, the cold gel a nurse has just put on my bump, and the professional way Simon is moving around the room drags my unwilling memory to the last few days of my dad's life as I sat by his hospital bed. He'd have been so excited to see his grandchildren. At only fifty-four he *should* have seen them, all things being equal. But they're not, are they? Not always.

'Okay, you ready?' Simon asks, the transducer already in his hand and poised over my tummy. Is he in a rush? I'd expected him, now the nurse has left the room, to be more like my husband than a doctor. More intimate...

I look into his serious grey eyes and he looks away. He's been acting very oddly the last few days and seems to have aged about ten years. Perhaps I'm imagining it.

'Yes. You okay?'

'Fine.'

No. I'm not imagining it. His tone is clipped, agitated even. A few nights last week, I'd woken in the early hours and he'd not been in bed beside me. When I questioned him in the morning, he said he'd gone out for a walk. Said he couldn't relax. Why? Is he telling the truth? Is he having an affair? Then the lub-dub of a tiny heartbeat fills the room and I forget about all that as my heartbeat quickens too. I turn to the monitor. There they are, my beautiful babies!

Simon moves the transducer expertly over my abdomen and, after a few moments of silence, says, 'All with our little girl is as it should be. Now for

our boy.’ Well, at least he sounds a bit more human now. I give him a warm smile and try to relax.

A few moments later my heart lurches when the silence goes on a bit too long and I catch his expression. His jaw is tight and his forehead knitted in concentration. Simon’s hand moves more quickly over my stomach, almost frantically now.

‘What is it? What’s wrong?’ I say. I hear the mounting panic in my voice and try to calm my breathing.

Simon won’t look at me, just draws a hand down his face and moves the transducer again. At one point he pushes the thing so hard against my tummy that I cry out. ‘Simon! For God’s sake, tell me what’s wrong?’

Then he releases a huge breath and gives me a shaky smile. ‘Listen to that,’ he says as another heartbeat fills the room.

I frown. ‘Is that what you were doing, trying to find our son’s heartbeat?’ He nods and wipes the back of his hand across his brow. ‘Why couldn’t you find it? Is... is there something wrong?’

With a shaking hand he turns off the monitor, puts down the transducer and sinks down on the bed next to me. ‘He’s...’ He swallows hard and takes my hand. ‘I’m not worried unduly, but he is a little smaller than his sister.’

I can see he’s worried, even though his words say otherwise. *No! This is insane.* ‘But... I saw both babies, they were strong, looked the same size... and...’

‘No, it’s hard to tell really. You might have thought they were, but... anyway, as I said, he’s not that tiny! Don’t worry, love; it’s all going to be fine.’

‘Don’t lie to me. I can tell when you’re keeping things back!’ I yell and yank my hand from his. ‘Is it because of me – something I did? My past, the fact that I abused my body and...’ A sob stops my words and he shakes his head and scrubs at his eyes.

‘No, Holly. Please calm down; it will all be fine. It’s common for one twin to be smaller than the other – you know that.’

I want to yell. Slap him. Stop any more lies from leaving his mouth. When Simon lies he can’t look at me. Not that he lies to me often, but I can

always tell when he does. Right now his voice is unnaturally calm too... as if I'm a patient who has to be handled with kid gloves. A person who can't cope with the bad things in the world. 'Why are you just sitting there calmly, talking about it? Go and get a senior partner, a second opinion.'

He sighs and rubs his eyes again. 'Believe me, there's no point asking anyone else. There is nothing to get hysterical about, I promise. Now come on, Holly, my love. Let's go and have a cuppa...'

'But I don't want a cuppa! I want the truth from you.' I hate that he's using the word 'hysterical'. The trouble is, even to my own ears I do sound it. I sit up and grip his shoulders. Make him face me.

Simon shifts away, looks at the floor. 'Okay. There might be a problem when he's born... it's hard to tell. As far as I can see he's developing normally, has everything he should have and all in the right places. Just a bit...'

'Small.' My sarcasm slices through the tense atmosphere, thick between us. 'Yes, so you keep saying. When you say a problem when he's born, do you mean he's going to be in ICU, or, or what?'

'That's possible. But there's no point in getting ahead of ourselves, to be honest.'

'It would be nice if you were, Simon.' He gives me a quizzical look. 'Honest.' My voice sounds far away... faint. Could... could he d... die?'

A deep sigh. 'I wish you wouldn't jump to the worst-case scenario like this, Holly.'

It's me who looks at the floor now. I feel too hot, the room is moving. I take a few deep breaths to stop myself from screaming. If I start, I won't be able to stop. I'll never forgive myself if there's something seriously wrong... my past life can't have helped, can it? Even though Simon says that wasn't the reason. Was it because I went swimming in the sea when it was too cold? My mum said I shouldn't have... 'So... so what are you saying? There is a worst-case scenario?'

'There's always a worst-case scenario in these situations.' Simon stands up and puts his hands on his hips. 'But for goodness' sake, Holly, stop all this. Everything will be fine, I'm sure of it.'

‘You aren’t sure of it. I saw your face when you couldn’t find the heartbeat. Watched your hands trembling!’

Simon sits back down, gathers me to him and at first I push him off. Then, as he whispers soothing words into my ear, I slump against him, the fight draining away like my dreams of pushing the twins around the park in the new double buggy that waits in the hall. I should never have bought that before they were born. Mum said it would be bad luck.

‘My darling, I can’t give you a one hundred per cent cast-iron guarantee that both our babies will be born perfect, without any problems or issues, but that’s the case in any birth – twins or not. You *really* do have to calm down and trust me. You always imagine the worst, it’s one of your faults.’ He lifts my chin, looks into my eyes. ‘Not that you have many.’

I want to pull away but I force myself to stay focused on him. He’s right. I do always think the worst. But I can’t shake the feeling that it’s something I have done and it’s my fault that our boy is smaller than he should be. It did cross my mind when I fell pregnant that my drug addiction and wild lifestyle might have damaged my body, my organs, in some way. Perhaps I’m not fit enough to sustain two lives...?

Simon kisses my lips and I lay my head on his shoulder. A huge sob bursts out and then I clamp my hand over my mouth to smother any more. I need to get a grip, be strong and think positive. I owe that to my babies and my husband. Simon has told me that everything will be okay as far as he can tell, and he knows what he’s talking about. So I have to believe him, don’t I?

Chapter Six

Three weeks later...

‘If you could just get some rest you’d feel better, love.’

My mum is hovering again. She’s been doing that for days and it’s beginning to drive me insane. From the corner of my eye I see her hands twisting themselves together. Then they stop and retidy the already tidy pile of nappies, creams and wipes next to the Moses basket in which my daughter is sleeping.

‘I’ve told you I can’t rest. My son is dead and everyone is behaving as if he never existed.’ My voice is flat, monotone, empty. I didn’t plan to say that to her, but I can’t bear all the pussyfooting around on the one hand and the think-positive speeches on the other. Everyone does it, not just Mum. Simon, nurses, everyone I come into contact with. What do they know about how I feel? What does anyone know?

‘Oh, love.’ Mum’s voice catches. ‘Holly... we know the poor little mite existed. It’s only been three weeks, you’re bound to feel like this... but it’s true what they say, that time is...’

‘A great healer – yes, so you and everyone else keep saying. And the “poor little mite” had a name. My son was called Ruan.’

Anger has filled the emptiness in my voice and my hands are beginning to tremble. Simon tells me I’m probably depressed – no shit, Sherlock – and that I might need to go back on the happy pills if I’m not careful. He says he’d hate that to happen because it reminds him of what a mess I was in when he first met me. I’m not like I was then. I’m worse. My son’s death has made me into another person. Someone I don’t recognise, someone that scares me. The thoughts in my head scare me. The anger that builds in my

chest scares me. It rages. It screams from my core as I sit silently looking at the ocean.

I'm looking at the ocean now, trapped in my own head, even though Mum is talking, talking, talking, talking. That's all she ever does. Words don't mean anything. Words can't help. Advice leaflets from support groups say I should talk about what happened, how I feel; but unlike everyone else's, my words remain stuck, unformed, hidden.

The doorbell rings and I remember that Demi is visiting. It will be the first time she's seen me and Iona, my daughter. First time I have actually spoken to her. Mum broke the news. How will she be? Will she cry, avoid the subject of Ruan, be overly cheerful or something else? Anything has to be better than the three days I've spent here at the beach house with Mum. She loves me, of course, wants the best for me, grieves for her lost grandson, but she has this knack of making me want to yell. She doesn't know how to be around me and I'm not sure I do either.

'Holly, it's Demi!' Mum says as she comes back to do a bit of hovering on the balcony. I want to say, yes, of course it is. Who else would it be, Father bloody Christmas? But I bite back those words. Funny how nasty, peevish little retorts have no problem finding their way out into the world, while the ones that would let me articulate my feelings have no such luck.

I turn and look up at Demi. She's doing a bit of hovering of her own, a handful of forget-me-nots and freesia, a shift from one foot to the other, a nose that's pink from trying to hold back emotion and eyes that have failed. So she's crying. I think I prefer that to the overly cheerful scenario. The coldness of my thoughts is melted by the biggest – albeit wobbly – smile she can muster, and all of a sudden I'm on my feet and we're hugging.

'I'm so, so sorry,' she whispers and tightens her hold.

'Me too.' I nod over her shoulder at Mum who's making a 'T' sign with her fingers at me. She goes to the kitchen to put the kettle on and her absence gives my eyes permission to fill with tears. Odd. Maybe I don't cry too much in front of her because I don't want her to do the same?

I pull back from Demi and force a smile. We sit down at the table and let the sea breeze dry our tears a bit and she clears her throat and points at the flowers. 'I thought forget-me-nots were appropriate given the

circumstances... and freesia because they have such a wonderful perfume.’ She looked over at the Moses basket. ‘Little girls always smell like freesias, don’t they?’

Thank God for Demi. How perfect is she? No beating about the bush and a touch of humour to temper the heartbreak. ‘Oh yes. Iona always smells of freesias, even when she’s thrown up over me and filled her nappy.’

We laugh and I feel more normal than I have since...

‘Would you like to see her?’ I don’t wait for a reply, just jump up and lead the way over. We look at my sleeping baby, daft sappy grins on our faces. Iona always makes me smile, even when I’m crying at the same time. Her head is a perfect round, topped with a cap of light hair, and her skin is peachy. Some babies take a while to become peachy, but she was peachy from the word go.

‘I had a tiny glimpse of her when I came to the hospital... I didn’t stay more than a few minutes though, of course. I can’t decide who she looks like... I think you though,’ Demi says, carefully taking Iona’s tiny hand. ‘She has your nose.’

‘I’m sorry nobody told me at the hospital that you had come to see us, Dem... You weren’t to know what had happened...’ She shakes her head and says it doesn’t matter, but it does. ‘No. You’re one of the few people I would have seen at the time.’ I stroke my daughter’s hair. ‘Yes, I think she does look more like me. She has blue eyes, but then they all do at first, I think.’

‘And light hair...’ Demi looks at me and I can tell she’s struggling to fight tears, so I lead the way back onto the balcony.

I pick up the flowers and inhale their heady fragrance. ‘Ah yes, essence of Iona.’ We smile at each other. ‘And I’ll press some of these forget-me-nots and put them in a box of remembrance for Ruan. Not that I will ever forget...’ I put the flowers down, aware I’m gripping them too tightly. ‘I just wish I had more to put in the box apart from these, a teddy... and my favourite outfit I bought for him.’

Demi blows her nose and takes a deep breath. ‘Were there no photos you took of him... you know, when he was born?’

‘A few. But I never held him. I have his ashes in an urn we’re going to give to the ocean, when I feel the time is right... and that’s all. Simon organised a funeral... well, not exactly... more of a little ceremony for him, but I didn’t go.’ My voice sounds distant, second-hand – as though it has been borrowed by someone else. That aside, I realise I am relieved that at last I am actually talking about that day, the details of afterwards. If I’m relieved, it must mean that I think talking helps, mustn’t it?

‘But... but I thought...’ Demi stops and shakes her head.

‘What? Say what you think – I’d rather that than pussyfooting around the issue, believe me.’

‘Well, I thought that when babies... you know... the family always spend time with the child, take photos, prints of their feet... say goodbye – that kind of thing.’ Demi wrests her hair from the wind and secures it behind her ears.

‘Yes. I wanted to hold him, kiss his face...’ A lump forms in my throat and I swallow it down with anger. I am so *sick* of being on the edge of tears. ‘But I couldn’t face it because Simon said I wouldn’t want to see him; he was so small, you see... he’d been starved of nutrients. He asked if I’d like to see a photo though... I could hardly bear to look at him, imagine that? Such a pathetic excuse for a mother. He was very underweight; his face was...’ I can’t bring myself to tell Demi about his sunken eyes and the paper-thin skin drawn tight across his cheeks. ‘He was in a Moses basket wrapped in a little blue blanket and wearing a yellow hat with teddies on. He looked like he was sleeping but of course he was... he was... And I can’t help thinking it was all my fault.’ I am sobbing again and hate myself for being so weak, but Demi’s face had crumbled and that was me finished.

Demi puts her arms round me, pats me on the back. ‘How was it your fault, love?’

‘Because of my past. The drugs, pills... like I said, I’m a pathetic excuse...’

‘Hey, hey, you’re not and you can’t think like that,’ Demi says and hands me a tissue. ‘It was just one of those things. Simon said so, didn’t he?’

I nod but I'm not convinced and then Mum breezes in. 'Here, let's all have a cuppa and talk about something else, eh?' she says in a ridiculously cheerful voice as she sets the tray of tea and cake on the table in front of us. 'No use in going over it all because you're obviously upset and...'

'I WANT to talk about it! Don't you get it?' I thump my fist on the arm of my chair. Mum blinks in shock and her bottom lip trembles. Oh good. I've managed to upset her too, but I can't stop. 'I haven't talked about it yet, not sure you've noticed? Because I couldn't. Couldn't physically shape the words, release them... Now I find I can and I want to, is that okay?'

Mum makes a thin line of her lips and nods. 'Of course, love. I'm sorry.'

'Don't be... come on, let's have that tea and I'll try and talk about it without getting in too much of a state.'

'I'm not helping, am I?' Demi blows her nose again and takes a drink of her tea.

'You are, actually. I think it's your straightforward manner – just what I needed.' I notice Mum look down at her twisty hands and I pass her some cake to occupy them.

'So do you think that not having seen Ruan was the right thing?' Demi asks.

I can tell by her tone that she thinks it wasn't. 'I really don't know, Dem. Simon is the doctor, he knows best, but I do wonder if seeing him might have helped me to accept it more. But it's done now. We can't go back. I just wish it wasn't so fucking painful!' I notice Mum's lips purse briefly. She's not a fan of the F word.

Demi puts her hand on my arm. 'It must be. I wish I could do something to make it better but I can't,' she says simply with a shrug. 'It will take time and...' She stops and shakes her head.

'Yes, Mum said that earlier and I bit her head off.' I give Mum an apologetic smile. 'But you are both right. Time does ease the pain. It did with Dad, even though I never thought it would.' Mum nods and dabs at her eyes. 'The thing is...' I pause, wondering if this is going to sound crazy. 'The thing is, in a way, because I hurt so much... physically hurt in my

heart sometimes... it means he was real – existed... and I know that wherever Ruan is, he knows that I love him. Because if I didn't, I wouldn't hurt so much, would I?'

I look from one to the other but neither can speak. Strangely, I don't feel like I want to cry now. Instead there's just peace and calm somehow.

'It makes perfect sense to me,' Mum says thickly.

'Me too,' Demi manages.

'Good. Right, I think I've done enough talking about that for now. Let's eat all this cake before Freesia Child wakes for her next feed.' On cue, a wail goes up from the Moses basket and it sounds so comical that we all have to laugh, despite everything.

Next day I'm power walking on the beach. The sun is sticking my shirt to my back and sweat beads my brow, but I keep going, even though I'm supposed to take it easy because of the C-section scar. It niggles a bit, but not enough to be a problem. Nothing seems a problem today. A light mood has settled over me and for the first time in weeks I'm thinking about the future. Demi really helped me to get my thoughts in order, though she didn't actually do much – she was just Demi. She stayed over last night but went off to work this morning.

As soon as I get back I'm packing Mum off home. Much as I love her, four days has been enough. Besides, I need to get used to coping with being a new mum without always having someone there to help. Simon took the first two and a half weeks off, and the only reason I'm allowed to be in Cornwall is because Mum agreed to stay with me.

At the water's edge I roll up my crop trousers and splash through the waves. I slow my power walk down a few gears though; otherwise I'll soon be drenched. The chill of the ocean climbs up my calves and cools my heated skin. I turn in a circle, tip my face to the sky and spread my arms. It's a Tuesday out of season, so there aren't many people on the beach today to see me; but, to be honest, I couldn't care less if they do. This place, the ocean, makes me feel so free, so peaceful and calm. A deep breath fills my lungs with fresh ozone and seaweed and I close my eyes and let a little bit more pain slip away on the tide.

In my mind's eye I place an image of a happy little boy playing on the dunes behind me with his sister. He's wearing a white sunhat and dungarees, his sister dressed the same, apart from a yellow hat, and they are laughing and digging in the sand. Of course I realise this can never happen, but it helps a little to picture it. Ruan was a part of me, albeit for such a brief time, and he always will be.

I look down and realise that the water is up to my knees and my trousers are soaked. Never mind, I don't care; in fact I love it. It won't be long before I'm back in London and far away from the ocean, the call of the gulls and the whispering sea breeze through my bedroom window. Simon's coming in two days to pick me up and I wish I could look forward to seeing him. I can't though, because he represents going back to the city. Of course he's been wonderful throughout this whole thing, bringing me down here, being attentive – overly so at times – buying loads of new stuff we don't need for Iona, the apartment, me. It's as if he thinks having all these things, packing them into our lives, will fill in the gaping hole Ruan has left behind. I shouldn't be too harsh on him though; it's his way of coping, I suppose. He's suffered just as much as I have.

I think of the little silver urn in my suitcase. Simon and I said we'd sprinkle the ashes on the last day before we went back, but I want to do it alone... I think. Something tells me that Simon agreed to it just to placate me. I don't think he sees the point. But then he wouldn't feel the same about this place as I do, would he? He originally talked about planting a tree for Ruan in some London remembrance park, feeding the roots with his ashes... but... oh, I don't know... it just didn't feel right. My boy belongs here in Cornwall where I'm happiest. Then a little sliver of worry slips under my ribs. Perhaps I'm not looking forward to seeing Simon because I don't feel we have that much in common – in fact we probably never did. But that needs to change. I *must* make it change.

An idea that is becoming a regular visitor pops up again. What if I could persuade Simon to up sticks, move to Truro perhaps, open his own consultancy? Yes, there'd be fewer people here who could afford private care, but do we have to be so rich? He could even work for the NHS. I'd prefer it, I must say. I give a wry smile when I picture his reaction to all

that. No, Simon likes the finest things in life and Cornwall, for him, is not one of them.

Then I remind myself that I am supposed to be looking to the future and being more positive. We have a beautiful little girl that we love, the option of coming down to visit my beloved beach house whenever we like, and friends and family to support us. Well, mine do. Simon's parents are always globetrotting and not particularly warm or approachable people. Nevertheless, when they heard about our loss, they sent a huge bouquet of flowers and a lovely card with a heartfelt message. I have a lot to be thankful for.

I wiggle my toes in the wet sand and look along the dunes towards the beach house. The new future says that I have to point up the positive and play down the negative. And when Simon comes, I must try my best to show him some affection too. I can't continue to push him away. He is my husband and I have to make it work... for Iona, if nothing else. And I do love him really, don't I? My feelings are all over the place at the moment. It's to be expected.

Having made a decision to order his favourite wine and make a lovely meal for when he arrives, I set off back along the beach, the wind at my back. Iona might be awake now and she'll need her feed. Mum is all fingers and thumbs with the formula. I had planned to breastfeed, but after Ruan... I just didn't have the heart. I should have been breastfeeding two babies, not one. It makes no sense really, the more I think about it, but it's how I feel and that's that.

As I turn from the beach onto the unmade road I think I hear someone calling my name. I stop and listen, look round at the dunes... nope. Must have been the moan of the wind. I take a couple more steps and then stop. There it is again, closer now. So close that I recognise the voice and my heart starts thumping in my chest. Turning, I see a man with a mop of blond hair and a tanned face appear from behind the curve of the dunes and raise a hand. Mine copies his, though I haven't asked it to, and the man powers up the beach towards me, his long legs making short work of the distance between us.

‘Holly, I thought it was you,’ Jowan says, pushing his windswept curls out of his eyes. Eyes that I once told him were as blue as summer skies. His tan deepens and he can’t hold my gaze. ‘I wasn’t sure whether to say anything to you. I saw you paddling earlier and chickened out... but in the end I couldn’t help myself. How are you, Trev?’

Hearing his old name for me, based on my maiden name, Trevillick, puts me right back at the school gates where I’d wait every day for him to walk me home. That’s nearly ten years ago, but, my God, it feels like I’m standing there again right now. In my stomach there are the fluttering wings of a hundred butterflies as I anticipate seeing him walk across the playground. I know it won’t be long before I feel his arms around me. I can’t speak.

‘Oh, Holly. Please don’t get upset.’ I curse the moisture in my eyes as Jowan places a hand on my shoulder, a sympathetic look sweeping my face. He is older, broader, more of a man than a boy now, and the nearness of him is taking my breath away.

I take a step back. How dare he? How dare he think he can be so familiar – call me by my old name, put his hand on me? ‘Is there any wonder, Jowan?’ I fling my arms up. ‘You leave without a word – fuck off to the army – and now you expect me to be all calm and collected. It might have been a long time ago, but I can remember it all as if it were yesterday!’

He pushes his hands through his hair and shakes his head. ‘Oh God. Believe me, this was the last thing I wanted. I am so, so sorry for everything I put you through. I was an idiot back then and I wish I’d never gone.’ A heavy sigh. ‘This is the last thing you need with what you’ve had to put up with recently...’

‘What? Who told you?’ I try to calm the rage pulsing through my head but I fail – this is too much. He’s not allowed to know the private details of my life, not any more – he doesn’t have the right!

‘Demi... I saw her the other day in the shop and...’

Damn her! How could she? ‘Go away, Jowan. I don’t want to see you or talk to you ever again.’ My voice is surprisingly calm, but cold. Ice cold. For a moment I think he’s going to cry. His wide mouth that used to kiss me all over, lips I can almost taste he’s so near, opens and then closes again –

becomes a thin line. He nods as if in acceptance, turns and runs off back to the beach.

I don't know how I am managing to walk up the drive to my house; my legs are trembling so much and my heart is threatening to tear apart. Once inside, I lean against the kitchen sink for a few minutes to get my breath, splash water on my face. How can he have such an effect on me after three years? Oh yes, I knew I resented him, despised him, hated him for ripping my heart out. He made me run away, become someone I wasn't; he turned me into a desperate junkie. But what I hadn't known, and can't get over the shock of... is the strength of my feelings for him.

Chapter Seven

Late spring is pretending to be autumn. Perhaps it gets bored of being all full of promise, burgeoning new life, and needs a break from all that cheerfulness. I feel a bit like that at the moment as I watch a huge barge make its way along the gravy-brown Thames in the sheeting rain. Iona is sleeping and the radio is on in the kitchen, playing a song about summer holidays. I think I would like one of those; after all, I have been back in this place for nearly four weeks and the grey weight of London is crushing me, killing me little by little.

I take a breath and remember that I did try to be upbeat and positive with Simon. But that lasted about a week and then I started crying unexpectedly for no reason, or at least not one I could articulate. Of course, it was all to do with Ruan, but in a way I didn't expect. I think again about the night I woke suddenly, covered in sweat, shaking with the certainty that Ruan wasn't dead after all. I'd woken Simon, told him he wasn't dead – couldn't be, because he was so real to me. Simon comforted me, told me it was natural to have these ideas. Grief did strange things to a person's state of mind... but I could tell he was worried about me. Then, in the morning, I reasoned that I must be on the edge of losing it, because my baby was dead. Of course he was. I'd seen his photo – we'd sprinkled his ashes into the Atlantic the day we left Cornwall. I had sobbed my heart out.

Iona cries and I hurry into the bedroom. There she is, my beautiful girl, pink from sleep, bright-eyed, a smile already forming when she sees mine. I pick her up and breathe in that indefinable baby scent on her hair, her skin, and the darkness in my head shrinks a little. If it wasn't for this baby, God knows where I'd be. Simon's still on about the happy pills, at least just for a while, but I have refused so far. That's not the answer – but I'll be buggered if I know what is. I'm afraid my telling him I'd been convinced that Ruan was alive helped him make more of a case for antidepressants. I told him

that if I went on those I'd feel numb. I don't want to feel numb, even though reality is so painful sometimes. So hard to accept. On the whole, he has been so lovely, but I can't respond... Jowan has much to answer for. I wish I'd never set eyes on him again and whenever my thoughts open up to him, I slam the door shut on them.

Iona loves her play mat and all the brightly coloured dangly things just out of her reach. I kneel and extend the cord on a soft, squeaky toucan and touch it to her hand. Her little fingers immediately wrap around it, and she makes a contented coo as the bells above the toucan's head jangle. I wonder if Ruan would have liked the play mat. I imagine him lying next to Iona, kicking his feet at the blue-legged, green-bodied spider hanging at the other corner. Is all this thinking about Ruan really a good idea? Why can't I just let it go...

The doorbell rings and I tell Iona I'll only be a second. Silly really, she's not going anywhere and doesn't have a clue what I've said. I think I say it to reassure myself that I'm being a good mum – whatever that is. There's a man outside who looks vaguely familiar, but I can't place him really. He is tall, balding, mid-forties. My mind puts him in the supermarket behind a till, but no... that's not it. He smiles, though his eyes won't engage with mine.

'Mrs West?'

'Yes?'

'I have a letter here for you. I was under strict instructions to give it to nobody but you. Mrs Holly West?'

I sigh. 'Yes.' Is he some kind of a charlatan who's about to say I've won loads of money, if I just give him all my personal details? God knows how he got past security.

'Okay then.' He hands me a brown envelope. 'Bye, now.'

I watch him hurry towards the lifts and look at the envelope. No stamp? Across the middle in capital letters and red ink is:

HOLLY WEST – IMPORTANT AND CONFIDENTIAL.

I go back inside, lock the door and kneel back down beside Iona. I stroke the down on her cheek. She's still yanking the toucan's legs and

seems fine. I look at the envelope and don't want to open it. It's all a bit mysterious and if it's bad news I'm not sure I could take it right now. The whole thing is unsettling me. Why was it hand-delivered? *No point in wondering, just open it.* After a few more minutes dithering, I quickly slide my finger under the flap and pull out the letter:

Mrs West, I don't know how to tell you this, so I'll just say it. Your baby boy didn't die.

The letter slips from my fingers and I put my hand over my mouth. There's a scream in my throat and I can't let it out because it will scare my baby. Perhaps I have imagined it – perhaps my brain is playing tricks on me due to the trauma I have suffered, just like it did the other night when it woke me and convinced me Ruan was...

I watch my fingers pick up the letter and turn it over but I don't read the rest yet. I direct my eyes at the wall and inhale through my nose and out through my mouth a few times, as Simon has taught me to do when I'm feeling anxious. Then I look back at the letter and the scream builds again.

I was paid for my silence, and I kept it until now. But I couldn't live with myself, or look at my face in the mirror any longer. So there it is. I'm sorry I can't tell you more, because I don't know anything. Though I do know that your boy is safe with new parents.

I had a reason. A very important reason for doing what I did. Please know that I am very, very sorry.

Two hours later and I'm watching Iona sleeping. I keep coming back into her room every five minutes to check on her. It is all I can do to function normally, because the letter in my pocket keeps making me take it out to read it again. I have to keep doing that, because that's the only way I can believe I haven't imagined the whole thing. I have to see that it's still there, that the writing hasn't disappeared, and it's actually just an old shopping list or something. I need to keep checking on Iona too, to make sure she's still there. I am beginning to worry that I have imagined her.

Worry and anxiety are growing with every thought. In fact, inside my head there's an ocean of worry and confusion, a storm of darkness. I want to calm it down, make the sun come out, have a smooth crossing to some

logical answers. There are no logical answers to these questions though, are there?

My boy is gone, so why would someone write a letter like that?

What would they get out of it if it wasn't true?

Is it a cruel joke from someone who has a grudge against me? Against Simon? I shudder, rub my arms briskly. Unthinkable.

My mind goes to the time when we'd said goodbye to Ruan. He and I stood hand in hand, me in hysterics, him shedding a tear at the water's edge as we watched the waves take the ashes out to sea.

But if the letter is true, they weren't ashes. If he isn't dead, how could they be? So the letter can't be true, can it?

In the end I'm convinced that the person who wrote the letter is some sick bastard who just wants to hurt me – us. Is she someone Simon was having an affair with who wants revenge because he ended things?

Was he sneaking out to see her those nights when I'd woken to find him gone, around the time I had the scan and he told me Ruan was on the small side.? Had Simon blamed me for it all because of the way I'd abused my body in the past? Had he taken his revenge on me by sleeping with someone else behind my back?

The blue bear on Iona's coverlet looks too cheerful. Bears don't grin inanely, do they? This one does and I can't be around grinning things. I need to act. I need advice. I need to talk this through, because the storm inside my head is raging so hard that my thoughts can't hang on for more than a few seconds before they're tossed to the four winds. I can't make sense of any of it. Who do I talk to? My mum? No. That would be a disaster. She would say I was overwrought, imagining things, like she said last week when I stupidly let slip that I thought my boy was still alive. She might even phone Simon and that is the *last* thing I want.

*

'Demi, I know how it sounds... It's mad, I know, but...'

'And you say this man who gave you the letter looked familiar?'

‘Kind of. I can’t place him though and he’s my only link to the truth. I’ve racked my brains for the last few hours. Well, what brain I have left, it’s been such a huge fucking shock!’

‘Well, yes! It must have been... It just beggars belief, the whole thing. Why on earth would anyone do that? It makes no sense!’

‘God only knows.’ I flop onto the sofa and try to stop picking the skin at the edge of my thumbnail because I’m making it bleed. I suck the blood away and look at the letter again on the coffee table.

‘I think your theory about a spurned lover might be the most feasible,’ Demi says with a sigh. ‘I know it’s not something you want to hear, but it’s better than the alternative.’

‘What, that Ruan’s alive? My God, what I wouldn’t give...’

‘No. That somehow someone has your baby. It’s such an unspeakably evil thing. To let you think he was dead... nobody would be so cruel, surely?’

My nail worries at the broken skin and I suck blood again. I’m very close to saying something I might regret, given my mother’s reaction last week, but I need to talk it out. ‘Demi, you might think I’m nuts but I woke up the other night convinced Ruan was still alive. You know when you get this unshakable gut feeling? I could smell his skin, touch him almost. Yes, I was just coming out of sleep, but... oh, I don’t know. It was just so real.’

Nothing from Demi apart from a sigh.

Then I remember something odd from the day I had the C-section. I heard the wail of one infant and the surgeon, Jonathan, Simon’s friend and colleague, told me we had our baby girl. You remember him from the wedding? She does. ‘But then a little while later I heard another cry but very weak, just before the nurse put my daughter in my arms. I assumed at the time it had been Iona again, but what if it wasn’t? What if it was Ruan?’

I quickly blurt it all to Demi but she still says nothing. Is she doubting me? I take a breath and say, ‘Now I get this letter and... well...’ *Well, what? My words sound desperate, unreal.*

‘Look. I know you’ve been struggling, who wouldn’t be? And of course you want to believe that Ruan is still alive. But, Holly, can you imagine that

anyone would ever do such a thing? And to what end? And what about the photo of him you saw, love?’

I don’t like the way Demi’s tone has become soothing, as if she’s trying to talk someone down from a high building. That’s how I feel. I feel like I’m on a high building looking down at the tiny, insect-sized cars crawling past, and instead of wanting to jump, feel I’m being pushed. Pushed over the edge into madness. But I’m not mad. I know I’m not. It is suddenly important to tell her that.

‘Demi, as I said, I know how this sounds, but I am totally sane, you know? The letter exists. And you said to what end and about the photo?’ My ravaged thoughts gather themselves. ‘Perhaps Ruan’s heart hadn’t stopped like Simon told me and he actually survived, was sleeping in the photo, not dead... But maybe the poor sweetheart was disabled, sick, because of what happened to him in the womb... and Simon thought I wouldn’t be able to cope with him? As I said before to you, the photo was pretty hard to look at. And Simon wraps me up in cotton wool, always has. I mean, for goodness’ sake, he’s constantly hovering over me asking about my state mind, suggesting I go on antidepressants. He often says he doesn’t want me to go back to how I was when he met me. Says I’ve come so far. Perhaps he thinks I’ll go back on the coke...’ I wrap a tissue around my thumb and just for a second wish I was back on it. I could do with getting out of my head, because it isn’t much fun being inside.

‘But you can’t possibly think Simon would have anything to do with it. And who would want a disabled and sick baby?’ she asks.

‘What? Me, of course; I’m his mother!’ *She’s the one that’s gone fucking mad.*

‘No, of course *you* would. I don’t mean that.’ The calming tone is getting a bit strung-out. ‘I mean the letter said that he’d gone to new parents.’

‘Ah right. Sorry, yes it did.’ There’s no answer to that. I walk to the picture window, rest my head on the cool glass. ‘Maybe they think they can give him a life? Maybe they’re medics, friends of Simon? Shit, Dem, I don’t know.’ There’s silence and I picture Demi in the camper van looking out over a blue ocean, wind in her hair, her elfin face screwed up in

contemplation. Outside the window the barge has gone and smaller boats have taken its place, battling the gravy waves. I'm battling too. I close my eyes.

'Look,' Demi says, authoritatively, 'I think the best thing to do is show Simon the letter and see what he says. You'll soon find out if he's been having an affair or not...'

'No!' The force of my voice shocks me. Even though I don't know what to do about it all, I do know that would be a major mistake. 'There is NO way Simon is getting to know any of this, do you hear me?'

'Hey, don't get upset, Hols. I just thought it would be best to know the truth, even if finding out that he's having an affair...'

'I don't give a shit if he's having an affair; just promise me you won't tell Simon about any of it, Demi.' My voice trembles with a mixture of fear and anger.

'Of course not. That's your call – but can you explain why not? Surely you'd quickly get to the bottom of it, one way or another.'

'The less he knows about it the better. If it's true Ruan is alive, Simon would be in some pretty big trouble, wouldn't he, having lied to me? Telling me our baby had struggled to take his first breath, that he died? But, instead, allowing someone else to have him because he was ill and he thought I'd be unable to cope, that I'd crumble? Then going to the trouble of organising a ceremony, sprinkling fake ashes; God only knows what else he would've had to do to cover it all up...'

'Yes. But, like I said, that scenario is SO far-fetched. Simon isn't my favourite person but I can't believe this of him. Of anyone. Even if he did it to protect you, it's still "out there". I think the spurned lover is much more likely.'

I can't believe it of him either. Not really. I've seen him drink himself into oblivion to blot out the grief. Got up in the early hours to find him curled up in a ball on the sofa, sobbing his heart out when he thought he I was sleeping.

And if he had taken a lover, could I blame him? Not really... I haven't been as attentive as I should have been to him. He's always had to be the

strong one – rescuing me from my life, the mess I’d allowed myself to get in, putting a hundred per cent into our marriage while I...

‘Holly? You okay?’

‘Yes... just thinking. Of course I know Simon’s not involved. It’s just all so hard to get my head around. It could be someone else at the clinic... Someone might have taken him, and instead showed Simon someone else’s dead baby?’ Demi mutters an expletive under her breath, and I must admit that sounds ridiculous, even to me. ‘Oh God, I don’t know... And the spurned lover... it might be. But I need to think, sort out a plan.’ As I say the words I feel stronger. Ideas of a way forward are already forming. ‘Promise me you’ll say nothing of this to Mum, to anyone, and especially not my husband. I don’t want to worry him, or raise his hopes if it was someone else who took Ruan... or most likely make him think I have totally lost my mind. I daren’t have him think I’ve lost my mind.’

‘Okay, Holly.’

‘I need you to say it.’

Demi sighs again. ‘Okay. I promise that I will tell no one. I just wish I was there with you, love.’

‘I wish you were too. But I’ll be in touch and don’t worry about me, okay?’

‘I can’t promise that. Though I must admit, you do sound a bit more like yourself at the moment.’

‘Yes. Told you I wasn’t mad.’ We do fake laughs and end the call.

Iona is stirring and I hurry into her room. Her little arms are thrown back above her head and her lips suckle the air – dreaming of a feed. I can’t remember the last time I had a restful sleep. I smile. The storm in my head, though not quite over, is abating and I think I can see weak sunshine pushing at its edges. The feeling I had that he was alive before is back and growing in strength, even though it might mean the unthinkable. Perhaps it’s all in my head, wishful thinking that he’s alive, and this letter is just the product of a terrible, cruel, twisted person intent on hurting me and Simon. But what I can’t do is dismiss it, ignore it. I owe it to my boy to follow it up, even if it all comes to nothing in the end.

‘I promise I’ll find out what happened to your brother, little one. No matter how hard it is and no matter how long it takes.’ My whisper sounds strong, full of conviction in the peaceful quiet. I like the idea of strength. I need to prove I can stand on my own two feet. For too long I’ve relied on others, been a victim. The poor damaged butterfly, as Simon once called me, the damsel in need of rescuing. I’m damned if I’ll allow it to continue.

The rocking chair takes my weight and, as I wait for my daughter to wake fully, I close my eyes and relax into the forward and back. Inside my head, the sky is blue now and storm-washed thoughts begin to order themselves into logical rows.

I think I’ve found a place to start my quest.

Chapter Eight

If I ever work again in the future, I think I'll become an actress. My 'good wife' act over the past two days has been perfect, so much so that Simon commented that he thought I had turned a corner. Little does he know that's exactly what I have been doing all the time he's been at work all day. Iona and I have been walking the streets, turning corners, revisiting places I have been recently to try and track down the man who delivered the letter. So far, the supermarket, post office, baker's, park, swimming pool and baby clinic have all come to nothing. But I do know I saw the man fairly recently, and more than once.

It had to be more than once, didn't it? I mean, unless you're someone with a photographic memory, faces don't stick so readily. At least I don't think they do. It had to have been more than just seeing him pass me in the street, surely? Cornwall is out too. He is a city man. Not that he dressed in a sharp suit or anything; no, he wore jeans and a light jacket. But his shoes were dusty. Brown, dusty brogues with a layer of London dust living in the pores of the leather and covering the round of the laces. Cornwall has dust, of course, but not city dust. I just *know* he lives here.

So today's visit is the last resort and one I'm not looking forward to making. Because if I'm spotted there, I'll have to dredge up an Academy Award-winning performance from somewhere and there's not much energy left in the tank for that. I'm tired from tossing and turning all night worrying about Ruan. If he's alive, where is he? Are the people who have him looking after him properly? How did they take him from the clinic without anyone knowing? Will I ever be able to track him down? If he is dead – my gut tells me that's increasingly unlikely – who wrote that letter and why? These thoughts exhaust me, and alongside all that, there's the early morning feeds with Iona too. But needs must, and the need is great.

Iona looks at me from under her ‘bunny ears’ hat with an expression that says she’d rather be on her play mat than waiting for me to fiddle with the car seat. Tiredness has turned my fingers to lumps of wood. An idea kicks me in the head – perhaps it’s not a good idea to be driving if you’re that tired? It will be an hour’s walk, but so what? The pram is in the boot and I lift the car seat out and fix it on to the frame.

Ten minutes later and the warm sunshine and slight breeze reward me for my sensible decision. The overwhelming tiredness has been confined to a slight tension behind my eyes and the exercise is doing wonders for my positive outlook. Must be the endorphins. When I think of the word ‘endorphins’, I always picture dolphins. I say it out loud to Iona. She yawns.

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‘No, my husband isn’t expecting me. I just want to get a feel for where he works, you know? He’s here so much; I’d love to just be here on my own for an hour – have a wander. In that way I can try to understand, albeit it in a small way, the huge part of his life that is separate from mine.’ I give her a broad smile and hope it isn’t erring on the manic.

The receptionist tries a smile back, but her eyes tell a different story. ‘I see. I could get someone to show you around?’

I remember vaguely chatting to her at the Christmas party here, but her name escapes me. I peer at her name badge. ‘No thanks, Brittany. I want to just be a fly on the wall... if that makes sense?’

Brittany makes a noise in her throat that sounds like she’s trying to stifle a giggle and shuffles some files to disguise it. She makes her face straight and says to the small garden through the picture window. ‘So you don’t want me to page Mr West?’

Is this woman dense? I just said I wanted to be alone. ‘No thanks. If I bump into him then that’ll be a nice surprise.’ *It’ll be a surprise, all right.*

Brittany twirls a long blonde curl around her fingers and stares at a computer screen. ‘Let’s see... Ah, he’s in surgery, so I doubt that.’

Hallelujah! ‘Righty ho. I’ll just get my daughter into her sling and then I’ll go for a wander. Can I park the pram behind reception?’

The wide blue eyes grow rounder as if the request was for her to strip naked and do a tap dance on the countertop. ‘Well, we’re not supposed to store anything behind here really...’ Brittany begins. And then she looks at my face, respect in her eyes. ‘But as you’re married to Mr West and I know you from the party last year...’ She slips from her stool, takes the pram and hands me a visitor’s badge to clip on my clothes. ‘And may I say... I am so sorry for the loss of your little one.’

I want to say he’s not dead, so no need, but of course I can’t. ‘Thanks, that’s very kind.’ I give a brief smile and then hurry off down the corridor.

Half an hour later we have covered everything the small clinic has to offer and the little garden, twice. Of course we’re not permitted into the operating theatre or the private patients’ rooms, so I am considering going into the plush little coffee area for some much-needed caffeine and then heading off home. Iona needs a feed, so two birds and all that.

I drink my coffee and talk to Iona as she’s the only person here. I realise I spend hours of my life alone now, apart from her, of course. It feels good to talk, even though Iona can’t reply, and I tell her all about her grandfather and how much he would have loved her, and about how happy Demi is with her new boyfriend, Alex. He came to Cornwall to stay for good last week and she’s told me she’s as happy as she can ever remember. Well, apart from when I spoke to her about the man and the letter the other day. She wasn’t happy then.

Iona is on my lap and reaches out a hand for my hair. I lean forward, and she gives it a yank. Strong grip for a tiny baby. I untangle it and kiss her little fingers.

‘Your Auntie Demi thinks I’ve lost my marbles, made the whole thing up. Or at least that I’m imagining it. Oh, she’d say that wasn’t true, but I think it is. She thinks I’m depressed, falling apart because your brother is missing...’ I take a mouthful of coffee. Yes, missing sounds much better than dead. Not only does it sound better, I know it’s true.

My daughter shapes her mouth into a grimace and gives a wail. It's her hungry cry and I take a bottle from my bag. 'But I'm not making it up or imagining it, even though, so far, we haven't found the letter man. You know Mummy's not crackers, don't you, sweet pea?' Iona doesn't comment, of course; she's too busy feeding.

The lady behind the counter in the coffee area keeps smiling at me. Now she's rearranging the cookie shelf. A few minutes later she smiles again and wipes the countertop. Perhaps she knows something? Perhaps she can't pluck up the courage to come forward and spill the beans on where Ruan is. Or then again, perhaps she's just smiling at me because I have a cute baby, I'm the only one here and she's bored stupid. Just as I'm thinking this, a young couple come in. The woman is hugely pregnant and frowny and he looks anxious. I'm guessing she's in early labour.

I make a story up about their lives and whisper it to Iona as she takes the last of her milk. The pregnant woman lowers herself into a seat at a table and the man puts their drinks down and tells her he's off to get his phone from the car. As he leaves, reflected in the glass door as he pushes it open is a man with a mop and bucket, busy cleaning the main corridor. I only see him for a few seconds as the door swings back, but it's enough to make my heart lurch. He is tall, middle-aged and balding.

Calm. Be calm. I can't turn round for a proper look, because I don't want the man to see me through the glass door. If he sees me he might take off and I'll never catch him, not with Iona in tow. My heart is far from calm, so I take a few deep breaths as I watch my fingers take the bottle from Iona's lips and dab at her mouth with a muslin square. I'll have to wait until he's moved past, further along the corridor, then I'll casually walk past and take a good look at him. I was here for three days after the C-section, so I must have seen him fairly often... it makes sense.

In the sling again, Iona rests her cheek on my chest and closes her eyes. Good. A crying baby will cause the man to look up and notice me before I have time to see his face. I sidle out into the corridor and am dismayed by how far away he is. Damn it. I have a long way to walk looking casual and his attention might be drawn to my movement. At the moment his head is down and he's swishing the mop back and forth, side to side – always the same rhythm and speed, as if he's an automaton.

A doctor comes out of a side room and I slip in behind him, mirroring his exact footsteps. I run into his back as he stops to check something – his pager, I think. Luckily, Iona is sound asleep and hasn't been affected by the collision. I mumble an apology, step to the side and look up the corridor... The cleaner has gone. He's gone! Shit, did he see me somehow, recognise me, and has legged it?

As quickly as I am able with a baby strapped to my front, I hurry to the end of the corridor, just in time to see the man open a door and clank his mop bucket through it. He doesn't seem to be in a rush, so chances are he hasn't spotted me. I reach the door marked 'Staff Only' as it closes in my face and gently pull it open again. In front of me is a short concrete landing and beyond that some steep-ish steps. I know the man isn't far away as the metal mop bucket can be heard clanking down to the next level.

My hand grips the metal banister and I peer over it. Looks to be some kind of laundry-come-kitchen room. This place is isolated from the rest of the clinic. What if he's dangerous – if he feels cornered or trapped, he might lash out, mightn't he? A logical voice slips in, calms the thundering in my chest. He has a job here. Can he afford to lose it? If he attacks me, then it would be easy to find his name and address; the police would find him and he'd have to tell them all about the letter and who gave it to him. But what if he denies it all? Simon might back him – he'd say I was depressed, prone to imagining things. Who would they believe, Simon or me? A little voice in my head argues that Simon might not be far off the mark, so I squash the voice with a hefty dose of determination.

Thoughts of being attacked give me little comfort, but I have almost convinced myself that he won't do such a thing. Why would he need to? I'm not about to launch myself at him, baby first and tackle him to the ground, make him tell me everything on pain of death, am I? No. I stop when I realise I'm already halfway down the stone steps. In the air is a mixture of bleach and lemons and, as I walk through an archway, I see the man at a large sink. His back is to me and he's swilling out the mop and humming. It might not even be the guy that delivered the letter... but I am almost sure it is.

'Excuse me,' I say and the man gives a start, turns around. There is no doubt. It's the letter man.

Iona stirs as the mop clatters to the floor. The man wipes the back of his hand across his forehead, dark eyes shifty in his reddening face as if they are looking for a way out. 'Can I help you? This area is for members of staff only.'

So he's pretending he doesn't know me. I shush Iona back to sleep while I consider the next move and notice that his name is on his overall pocket. Excellent. 'I'm not just any member of the public, Neville, as you well know.'

His name on my lips drops his open. 'How did you know my...?' Realisation flits across his eyes and he belatedly puts a hand over his breast pocket. Neville sighs and picks up the mop. 'Why are you here?'

'Why do you think?'

'I have no idea.'

'What do you know about the letter you delivered?'

'What letter? I delivered no letter.'

'Oh please. Look, if you don't tell what you know about it, I'm going to the police.' My voice sounds steady, strong.

He shakes his head. 'I can't tell you anything.' Neville's eyes are still flitting around the kitchen and the mop bucket is overflowing in the sink.

I walk over to the sink and he quickly sidesteps. I almost laugh out loud when I remember that I thought he might attack me. He's scared witless. I turn the tap off and fix him with the kind of stare Simon uses when he wants to intimidate people. 'I think you *can* tell me, Neville. Because if you don't, while we're waiting for the police, I'll phone my husband and get him down here to ask you himself.'

Misplaced confidence disables my 'upper hand' and I swallow hard as I see a calculating brain at work behind his now contemptuous gaze. 'No, you won't,' Neville says quietly. 'Because you'd have done that already instead of coming down here on your own, wouldn't you?'

I try to keep the tremor out of my voice. 'Sounds like you're hiding something to me. I thought you said you don't know anything?'

'I don't know much.' Neville turns one side of his mouth up, folds his arms and leans back against the sink. 'Someone gave me the letter. I don't

know why. That's it.'

'So you were given a letter and told to deliver it. But you can't tell me who gave you the letter.' I state the obvious to give myself thinking time.

'Yeah.'

Now what? I decide to appeal to that contemptuous look in his eye. He thinks because I'm married to Simon, I'm loaded... a rich woman with no idea of what the real world looks like. Well, he's wrong there. 'Okay, Neville,' I say, hitching Iona to one side and rooting in my bag for my purse. 'Here's two hundred pounds – now can you remember who gave you the letter?' I hold out the notes and Neville's tongue quickly runs over his bottom lip. It's obvious he's tempted.

'Look, I don't want to get on the wrong side of your husband. He's a partner here. If he finds out that I did what I did I'll be out on my ear, and I can't afford to lose this job.'

'He won't find out from me.' I flap the notes in my hand impatiently.

'Like I said, I don't know really anything, 'cept it was to do with some secret or other that you should know and it was all written in that letter. I don't even know the person's name that gave me the letter.'

I keep my arm extended and say, 'Look – just tell me everything you know and you can have the money.' I divide the notes and shove half at his chest. He pockets it so fast his hand is a blur.

'Right. It was an agency nurse who used to work here. She was only here a few weeks. I used to say good morning to her but that was it.' He holds out his hand for the rest of the money.

I don't give it to him. 'You think I'm stupid? How can you not have known her name? You all wear badges, don't you?'

Neville's voice has lost its softness and the dark eyes narrow. 'I used to see her in the morning when we both got here. She had a coat on and, funnily enough, she never had a badge on her coat – now give me the rest of the money.'

'So why did you deliver a letter for her? Did she pay you?'

'The money, please.'

I consider refusing because I'm almost sure he's lying, but what can I do? I promised him the money for information and at least I have more than I did when I left the house this morning. At least I have a person in front of me. A real, living person, not a figment of my imagination. This means it's true, the letter is true and Ruan is alive! My heart is thumping. I'm euphoric... and then I hear Demi's voice reminding me that it could all be a nasty, cruel joke. Damn it, I have to know the truth! I hand over the notes and he gives me a smug smile. Perhaps I could tell him about Ruan? Appeal to his better nature. Would he come clean then? But then, what if he knows all about him anyway? Might as well try it... 'Neville...'

'Neville! Are you down there?' a woman's voice calls down the stairs.

'Yeah! Coming!' he shouts, and then grabs my arm and ushers me towards a door. 'It's my supervisor. Get out and don't bother me again. I've told you all I know,' he hisses in my ear, opens the door and shoves me through it.

The door slams behind me and I hear bolts ramming home. I'm in a yard facing a row of bins and it's starting to rain. So that's it then. I pull the material of the sling up around Iona's head and hurry along a passageway into the main street, my thoughts swirling like the raindrops. On the surface it seems like I haven't got much further in finding my boy, but, compared to this morning, I have taken a giant leap. Neville knows more, I can feel it in my gut. I just need to find a way of getting him to tell me what it is.

Chapter Nine

Naked on the rumpled sheets in the middle of the bed, Lauren dipped her forefinger into her glass of champagne and then sucked on it, her eyes dark with lust. Simon shook his head and pulled on his trousers. She gave him a lazy smile and shifted her position, leaving nothing at all to the imagination. There was a tingle in his groin and he almost gave in to it, but he had to get back before Holly woke.

‘Oh, come on. What’s wrong? Can’t you get it up for the third time?’ Lauren giggled and traced her wet finger around her nipple.

Simon turned away and buttoned his shirt. If he didn’t go now, he’d succumb. ‘Oh, I can get it up, believe me. But I must get back before my wife notices I’m missing. It’s almost four-thirty.’

‘But we’re having such fun.’ Lauren was behind him now; her arms encircled his chest, the heat of her body pressing against his back.

He broke her grip and moved to the door. ‘Look, you know I’m only here for sex. I love my wife and the excuse that I’m not sleeping well and have been for a walk to clear my head, or that I’ve had a late night with old friends, is wearing thin.’

Lauren sighed and went back to bed. ‘She’ll believe anything you tell her if she knows what’s good for her. I would if I was her... living in that apartment, wanting for nothing...’

‘Well you’re not her, are you?’ Simon snapped. How dare she talk about his wife. He dug in his jacket for his wallet. A pity Lauren didn’t know about the trauma Holly had suffered over the loss of their son. She might be a bit more sensitive then. But if she did know, she might not be so accommodating either. ‘Here, this should cover the room and champagne.’ He tossed a wad of notes on the bed. Simon made his voice gentle; he

couldn't do without his weekly Lauren fix. 'There's a bit extra for you, babe. Treat yourself to something nice.'

Lauren's pout became a wide grin as she counted the money. 'Oh, thanks, sweetheart. See you on Thursday?'

He blew her a kiss and opened the door, his eyes lingering over her full breasts. 'Oh, you can bet on it.'

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Behind the wheel of his car, Simon wondered how much longer he could keep doing this and getting away with it. Since he'd accepted Mark's offer, the weight of debt had disappeared, but the guilt hadn't. The only thing that kept him going was his work, the occasional flutter – his lesson had been learned – and the time he spent with Lauren. He'd been most surprised three weeks ago when she'd thrown herself at him, given that night when he'd crashed big time, but she had and he'd not turned her away. Why should he? Holly wouldn't let him anywhere near her still. Of course she'd had a terrible loss; he had too, though she'd scared him at times when she'd retreated into herself. But he'd persevered, looked after her, encouraged her, and just lately she'd become much more rational. He'd even go so far as to say that he thought she seemed to be coming to terms with the loss of Ruan. These past few weeks she had been pleasant and cheerful with him, but still any attempt at intimacy was rebuffed. Of course he'd asked her about it and she'd said she wasn't yet ready. How long did she think he could wait?

So far, Simon had sneaked out between the hours of one, after Iona's feed, and three-ish, as he knew Iona was scheduled for another feed at around four-thirty. She had fallen into a predictable pattern lately, but he knew that might change at any time. Tonight he'd ignored the curfew – he just couldn't resist one more session with Lauren. He pulled into the underground car park beneath the apartments and checked his watch. Five o'clock. Damn it. Holly would surely have missed him by now.

In the lift, he checked his appearance in the mirror – no tell-tale signs of lipstick or a stray chocolate hair on his collar. Perfume? Possibly. Simon watched his forehead knit into a furrow. Well, it couldn't be helped. He had needs, was only human. Then guilt punched him hard in the chest. What

was he thinking? After everything that had happened he should wait for as long as it took – should be content with anything she had to give him; he actually didn't deserve anything at all... apart from her contempt. How could he cheat on her like this? His lovely wife. He should be patient, true and loving, shouldn't he? He loved her so much – she'd be in pieces if she found out. Why did he keep doing such a fucking awful thing? His reflection raised an eyebrow and an unwelcome thought entered his head. *Because you are a narcissist, Simon. Perhaps with a few added sociopathic tendencies?* That's what his dad had said once. His dad who couldn't give a fuck about him.

Outside the bedroom door Simon ruffled his hair and belted his dressing gown loosely. Perhaps he could say he'd been asleep on the sofa because Iona was crying? Holly had all the necessary stuff for feeds and changing in the offshoot nursery, so wouldn't have gone through to the kitchen. But what if she'd looked for him, having woken to find him gone? She'd know he'd not been on the sofa, wouldn't she?

Simon couldn't believe his luck when he slipped into the quiet bedroom. Iona was in a deep sleep and so was Holly. Perhaps Iona hadn't woken yet? Under the duvet he snuggled up to Holly's back and then wrinkled his nose. Ugh, her hair smelled of baby sick. Simon rolled over and caught a much more pleasant note of Lauren on his forearm, accompanied by an image of her writhing on top of him as he rocked her to climax. He wasn't sure he could wait until Thursday. A way to be with her every night for a few nights dawned and he hated himself for thinking of it. Still, it wouldn't be a hardship for Holly, would it? She'd enjoy herself and so would he. Simon cursed himself for being so weak and resolved to end it with Lauren soon. That thought made him feel better. He gently caressed his wife's shoulder and immediately fell asleep.

Chapter Ten

I secure Iona into the taxi's car seat and climb in beside her. As we speed away from Newquay Airport along the country roads I realise that my heart isn't lifted in the way it normally is when I'm back in Cornwall. In fact my heart has refused to be lifted since I came to a dead end a few days ago with Neville. I just can't figure out a way to make him tell me anything more, and I certainly can't ask Simon for help.

There is no doubt whatever in my mind that he's seeing someone now. The other night, just before dawn, he sneaked into our room like a thief, stinking of sex and perfume. I pretended to be fast asleep, because I really couldn't care less. At least it took the pressure off me. That kind of brought me up with a start, but then what did I expect? How can I love him after what he's done? Playing around with someone else when we've just lost our baby? I remember that a friend of a friend's husband was having an affair while she was pregnant, but I never expected it of Simon. Just shows how much you really know a person, doesn't it? And if I'm honest, I don't think I ever *really* loved him. Well, not in the way I loved... He threw me a lifeline and I grabbed it. If I hadn't, I think I'd be dead now. Should I be grateful for that at least?

Through the taxi window I see a line of horses and riders wending their way along the side of the river Gannel. Brown, black and white flanks rising and falling – undulating, flowing, just like the water as if they're attached to a carousel. My heart tries to lift itself a little. Soon be home. This visit had been Simon's idea. I knew it was for his benefit so he could see his woman, even as he presented me with the flight boarding printout – a big 'look how kind I am' grin on his guilty face.

Mum is coming over in an hour and then Demi will pop by this evening. I hope she'll have some idea of what to do next when I tell her about my meeting with Neville. At the moment I have no clue, and I can see a bank of

depression sitting just offshore, waiting to roll in. I can't let it though. If I do, I'll never find my boy and perhaps even lose Iona. At all costs, Simon must remain clueless about what I have found out, such as it is, and taking a nosedive regarding my mental health wouldn't really help. They take babies away from women who can't cope, don't they?

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Mum actually cheered me up this afternoon. I wasn't expecting it and I'm grateful. I think it was because she has no knowledge of the missing grandson situation and so was able to just be my mum. We talked about how much Iona had grown, that we missed each other, the local crab we had for lunch, her voluntary work at the library, the wider family. It was so... normal. I have missed normal.

At first I had to put on an act, but after a while I realised that I wasn't acting, I was being me. Then I felt guilty because I was behaving as if Ruan wasn't somewhere in the world, just waiting for me to find him. So when Mum went to change Iona's nappy, I walked out onto the balcony and told the ocean that I'd not forgotten him and that I was coming soon. I felt better then, even though a nasty little voice in my head tried to spoil it by muttering that 'soon' might be a tad optimistic.

Demi is wearing a frowny face and a smart dress. I can't quite get my head around it, having only seen her in casual surfer-type stuff – apart from at my wedding, of course. The dress is red, short and she's plaited her hair to the side in a sophisticated way. Then I realise I am looking into her eyes on a level, which is odd as I'm five-nine and she's five-three. I glance down. Oh my word – stilettos?

'Are you asking me in or what?' she says, rubbing her bare arms. There's a fresh evening breeze offshore and her tanned skin is wearing goose pimples.

'Sorry, yes, come in.' I step to the side and she gives me a quick hug and hurries into the kitchen. Well, hobbles, as she's clearly not used to heels. I follow her in, trying to keep a straight face. 'Cuppa, or something stronger?'

‘Er, a glass of white if you have it. And...’ Her face turns as red as the dress. ‘Sorry, I can’t stay long as me and Alex are off to a wedding reception. I forgot when I said I’d come over. Hope you don’t mind... he’s picking me up in an hour.’

I make my face say I don’t mind, while my heart plummets. All hopes of two heads are better than one and finding a way forward has just flown out the window. And Demi wouldn’t have forgotten. Or, if she had, she’d have phoned me and rearranged. No. She obviously just wants a quick visit and off. ‘Oh, right. No, of course not. I did wonder what the dress was about.’

Demi’s face falls. ‘I look like a tart, don’t I?’

‘Of course not. You look stunning!’

After Demi has cooed over Iona sleeping in her Moses basket for a while, we make ourselves comfy on the big leather sofa, curled up like bookends. She tells me all about how well she and Alex are getting on and I tell her about Mum’s visit, and then into the awkward silence lumbers the biggest elephant in the room I have ever seen. I’m not going to be the one to mention it though. No, she can have that pleasure.

Demi makes a little sound in her throat that’s halfway between a cough and a hiccup, and then out of a tight mouth spills, ‘So, how’s Simon and... everything?’

The mild irritation that has been building immediately blooms into anger and I know that my cheeks have flushed. I refuse to give it free rein though and take a deep breath to calm my galloping heart rate. ‘If by “everything”, you mean that someone wrote a letter to tell me my son is alive, but that I have no idea where he is or how to get him back?’

‘Look, Holly...’ Demi pauses, avoids my eyes and takes a sip of wine. ‘Don’t take this the wrong way...’ As soon as she says this, I immediately know it’s something I will take the wrong way. Why do people even begin sentences like that? She looks straight at me. ‘Of course you want to believe that Ruan is still alive, but you really can’t be certain of that. You have no proof and...’

‘Ah, but I do,’ I say, gratified to see her eyes grow round.

‘You do? Did you speak to Simon?’

‘God, no. I tracked down the man that delivered the letter to me. His name’s Neville and he’s a cleaner at the clinic.’

‘Simon’s clinic?’

‘No, the man in the moon’s.’

‘No need to be sarky. How did you manage that?’

I can see incredulity in her face and realise that sarcasm and flippancy have no place here if she is to believe me. She already thinks I’m on the edge; perhaps she might think I wrote the letter myself. I explain everything that happened and then take a big swallow of wine, because Demi’s expression hasn’t changed. ‘So, there’s the proof,’ I say and hold my breath.

‘So, this nurse... Was she the one who assisted when Jonathan delivered your babies?’

This is promising. I exhale. ‘There were lots of staff there – nurses, male and female, besides other members of the team. Though yes, I’ve considered that, but of course I don’t know. All Neville said was that she was an agency nurse who only worked there for a few weeks.’

‘Hmm. Well, there has to be a good chance she was one of those who assisted, if she wrote the letter. She’d know everything that happened if she was actually there at the time.’

‘I thought you said it was most likely that a spurned lover wrote the letter, made it all up to get revenge on him? To hurt us, me? And that Ruan did in fact die. The lover imagined that I would run to him with the letter, he’d guess it was from her, and he’d have to confess to the fact that he’d had an affair. Something like that, eh?’ I can’t help having a dig.

Demi nods and smoothes her dress. ‘Yes, and I haven’t changed my opinion.’

I stare at her. What the hell is she talking about? ‘I’m not sure I get you. Neville told me all...’

‘This Neville would say anything to get money, it seems. But what I mean is, one of the nurses who assisted could be the spurned lover, have you thought of that?’ There’s an edge of triumph in her voice which I don’t like.

‘Yes, fleetingly. But I just know that Ruan is alive, Demi. You might think that’s irrational, but a mother knows.’ As I say those last four words I see a look of disbelief flit across her eyes and wish I hadn’t said them. I must admit, it does sound like a line from a bad soap opera.

She chooses not to comment on that and instead says, ‘Can you remember what any of them looked like?’

‘When Jonathan delivered my babies, you mean?’

‘No, when the man in the moon did.’ Demi smiled then and some of the tension thick between us thins out a bit.

‘Touché.’ I allow a little smile back. ‘No, not really. I was in such a distressed state, as you can imagine, having been told that one of my babies might struggle, was smaller than his sister... worst-case scenario, might not make it. I didn’t take an awful lot of notice. There was one nurse who seemed to be rushing around quite a bit. At one point Simon went over and said something to her, I think... but she wore a surgical mask and her hair was covered with one of those paper hat things too.’

‘But did she seem old, young, what? Was she of an age that would fit with having an affair with Simon?’

I have already thought about this scenario but dismissed it, as I know the letter is the truth. My boy is alive and living with new parents. I decide not to say that to Demi again, however. I close my eyes and pretend to consider the nurse in my mind’s eye.

‘I only have her eyes to go on, but if I had to guess, I’d say mid to late thirties. Forties at a push. I heard her voice briefly. Nothing there to really help – no accent to speak of.’

‘Well, Simon’s thirty-four, and even if she is in her early forties, you can’t rule it out,’ Demi says and folds her arms as if she’s presented me with a *fait accompli*. ‘You need to come right out and ask Simon if he was seeing her.’

I put my glass down and lean forward, pinch the bridge of my nose between my fingers. Here goes. ‘I know beyond doubt that Simon is having an affair right now. If it is this nurse, why would she want revenge if she’s still seeing him? Unless, of course, he’s dumped her and moved on to

pastures new. Doubt it though. That would be a bit quick. He's had to contend with my grief, borderline depression, the loss of his son, and to come to terms with being a new dad in the interim, don't forget. So my guess is he's not been seeing this woman he sneaks out to see, whoever she is, for very long.'

I daren't tell her that I was suspicious that Simon was seeing someone a few weeks before he told me my boy was smaller than his sister. Those times he kept disappearing for 'walks' in the early hours. That would fit with Demi's theory, wouldn't it? Could he possibly have been seeing the nurse, dumped her, and now have a new woman on the go, like I'd just said to Demi? Maybe, but more likely that he'd rekindled the affair with the nurse. Demi's hand on mine startles me out of my thoughts.

'An affair... what, right now?' Demi says. Her face is incredulous and sympathetic all at the same time and I can't look at her.

I jump up, go to the kitchen for a refill and tell myself to put the nurse idea *right* out of my mind, because if I go down that route it means Demi is right and Ruan is actually...

She follows me. I can't bear to look at her bewildered expression. She holds out her glass, and shakes her head as if she can't take my words in. 'But that's terrible. Are you sure he's seeing someone right at the moment?'

'Yes.' I slosh a good measure into her glass. 'And don't worry; I don't really care about him having an affair. All I care about is finding the nurse who wrote that bloody letter and getting her to tell me why she did it. What she knows about my missing boy.' My voice is shaky and I realise I'm on the edge of tears. I take two big swallows of wine to calm myself.

Demi gives me a brief hug then steps back and takes a drink too. 'Tell me what went on the day you lost Ruan. How did it all happen?'

I close my eyes and try to remember again exactly what Simon told me. That day has been going round and round in my head since I got the letter. I try to remember anything that might give me a clue, but so far I can't. I release a deep breath.

'Okay, he said that when Jonathan had delivered Ruan, he was taken out for checks straight away. Jonathan was called away on an emergency, so his assistant had to do my stitches. Simon told me not to worry, that it would all

be fine – though he hadn't seen Ruan either, as he'd been holding my hand the whole time. We cuddled our daughter a while but then a male nurse came in and whispered in his ear. Simon asked if I'd be okay without him for a few minutes and left. When he came back he broke the news that we'd lost Ruan... Later he told me our boy had died a few minutes after the nurse had taken him out. There was nothing they could have done.'

'Oh God, Holly, I don't know what to say... poor Simon must have been devastated, him being a doctor and not having the chance to try and save him.'

I swallow and try to remember exactly what Simon said about that. 'Yes, he was. But he told me that, in a way, he was glad he wasn't there when they were trying to save Ruan, because if he'd been involved and he'd died anyway, he would have blamed himself. He'd gone to the room where our baby son was, and he'd taken the photos. He was in bits, didn't know how he was going to tell me, of course, but he had to...'

Demi is silent for a while, keeps shaking her head; then she says, 'Oh, my poor Hols. I'm so sorry. I can hardly imagine what that must have done to you both. And I'm so sorry Simon's playing away too. But now you've told me all this, I think the likelihood of someone at the practice... because it had to be someone there, didn't it, someone high up... going to the trouble of ...' She raises her hands to the ceiling. 'Of what? Showing your husband someone else's dead child, saying it was his, and then in fact secretly giving Ruan away to other parents... is virtually nil. It makes no sense! It's one of the most ludicrous ideas I have *ever* heard.' She bites her lower lip and then draws a deep breath. 'I think you need to accept the fact that your baby boy...'

It's the most ludicrous thing that I have ever heard too, even more so since I listened to myself recounting that day out loud, but I have to stop her words. 'Don't say it, Demi. I don't want to hear...'

She holds up her palm to me and plows on. 'That he's dead and that your husband's ex-mistress wrote that let...'

'No!' I can't bear it, won't hear it. 'No, he isn't dead and I will bloody prove it. I thought I could at least count on *you* to believe me, Demi, if nobody else.' I stop when she puts her hand to her mouth, her eyes awash.

‘I wish I could, love. But I’m worried about you, don’t you see? You’ve been through hell and it’s only natural you want to think that...’ She takes a step forward but I turn away, walk quickly back to the living room. She follows me and says in an infuriatingly sympathetic tone, ‘Look, I think you might be on the edge of a breakdown. Not surprising, really – I would be if I were you and...’

‘Oh, you sound just like Simon! You’ll be suggesting happy pills next.’

‘They might help for a while. There’s no shame in it. God knows you need something after all this, and now you find out he’s having another affair too. Though you say you don’t care about that, I think you do. You need to let me help you, love. Believe me, I know what I’m talking about.’

As I watch her face and listen to her waffling on in a soothing tone as if she’s talking me down from a high building again, just like she did on the phone that day, I suddenly realise that she thinks I’ve lost it. She doesn’t trust anything I’ve said. She might not even believe Neville exists; and like I thought earlier, she might even believe I wrote the letter myself. I have brought the letter to show her, but what’s the point? She’d just say it was the spurned lover again. I won’t believe that. I can’t. My boy is alive, I can feel it. Then the worst-case scenario smacks me in the head. What if she rings Simon, tells him she thinks I’m ready for the big house? That I need medical help? When you think about it logically, like Demi says, the lengths someone would have had to go to get my boy and cover it all up is insane. Shit... SHIT! He’ll believe her. They’ll take Iona away. My heart thuds in my ears, there’s lightness in my head. I need to take a few deep breaths, calm myself before sense deserts me... *Okay, that’s better.* Now to make a big U-turn and I have to make it bloody convincing.

I put my arms around Demi and cry on her shoulder. Not all of it is an act.

‘Oh, Demi, I don’t know what to think any more. I know it sounds like a crazy idea that Ruan is still alive, because that would mean someone at Simon’s practice is some kind of deranged monster who stole our baby... and of course it makes no sense. But I so want to believe my boy isn’t gone for ever.’

Demi smooths my hair and rocks me to and fro. ‘Of course you do, sweetheart, of course you do.’ There’s a break in her voice and I feel a bit guilty, but only a bit. She has to believe this act now. Everything depends on it.

‘Perhaps your theory is right. If I’m honest, it’s the only one that’s feasible really.’ I sob louder and her embrace tightens.

‘I’m afraid it is, love. And I wish Simon were here now because I’d slap that smug, self-satisfied smile he always wears right off his face! How could he cheat on you? How?’

She rocks me a bit more and then I say, ‘Maybe the best thing is for me to confront him, challenge him about the affair like you say.’

‘Yes, and I’ll come with you for back-up. You’re in no fit state with everything you’ve been through. In fact, I’ll bloody speak to him for you right now...’

‘No, Dem. Thank you, but it has to come from me...’ I pull away and give her a beseeching look.

She dabs at my tears with a tissue, concentration furrowing her brow. ‘Okay, but you’re in a vulnerable position right now. If you don’t speak to him soon, I will.’

‘Yes, but I need time to think. Promise me you won’t say anything to Simon. You’re my oldest and dearest friend; you have to trust me.’

It’s because you are *my* dearest and oldest friend that I’ll go along with you, but not for ever. I wouldn’t be acting responsibly, or a true friend, if I kept quiet indefinitely. Not with... well, not with the state you’re in.’

I was right, she does thing I’m bonkers. ‘I understand, Demi, but give me a few weeks at least?’

‘Of course, okay. You must promise to keep in touch though, keep me posted on any developments?’

‘I will, I promise.’

Demi opens her mouth and then closes it again. I can see she’s struggling with her thoughts. A moment later she says. ‘Look, as I said – I know what I’m talking about. I was on antidepressants for a while too... after I had an abortion.’

My mouth opens too, drops open actually. ‘What? When?’ She wipes away tears and then it all comes out in a rush. She tells me it happened when she was in India. A stupid, drunken, one-night stand with a student she never saw again. She’d not realised she was pregnant for some time as she’d still kept having her periods, but when she got back to the UK she’d recognised other symptoms and did a pregnancy test.

‘Believe me, Hols, it was the hardest decision of my life,’ she says and takes another drink. ‘I wanted to confide in you at the time but I couldn’t bring myself to. I had a termination... but then I picked up an infection somehow. I was quite ill for a while and, once I’d recovered, they told me I’d most likely be unable to conceive. That’s why I went off to Greece after that. I couldn’t cope with my life. I wanted escapism.’

I have no words so I just hold her while she cries. My God. No wonder she’s so keen on monitoring my mental health. She’s been there too. And to think she might never know the joy of holding a child in her arms. Maybe that’s why she was so emotional the day she came to the beach house and saw I was pregnant, poor love.

After a while, she goes to the bathroom to retouch her make-up and I have to keep focused. Yes, my dearest friend has had an awful time and knows just as much about being depressed as I do, knows what she’s talking about... but, I have to keep focused. Somehow I know Ruan is alive, that the letter is the truth, but I have to convince her I’m letting that idea go. There is no way she can suspect I will keep on looking for him, because she’ll confront Simon about the affair, the shit will hit the fan, I will lose the chance of finding Ruan, which will send me properly nuts... he’ll section me and that will be the end of everything.

We agree to change the subject while she waits for Alex to collect her, but the atmosphere is strained, false. For the first time in my life, I want rid of her. I am watching the clock, counting the minutes until she leaves. When she’s gone, I pour another drink and stand out on the balcony to watch the waves. This is when the real tears come and keep coming. I can no longer rely on my best friend, and I can’t tell Mum because she would freak out, go to pieces and probably ring Simon. So I’m stuck with no way forward. I

button up my woolly cardigan against the fresh wind, but it doesn't help.
The cold comes from within.

I'm desperate, frightened and, right at this moment, have never felt
so completely alone.

Chapter Eleven

Three days of being back in London and acting as if nothing is wrong is almost more than I can bear. Apparently it is more than Simon can bear too, as he informed me yesterday he's off to Germany for a conference and is now in the bedroom packing a case. It might be true, but I think it's an excuse to see his woman. Last night he came to bed early and snuggled up behind me. The feel of his hands on my skin made me feel physically ill, imagining them touching his woman in the same way. Once again I rejected his advances. He was lucky he didn't receive a vicious kick to the balls.

'Have you seen my toiletry bag?' Simon is in the doorway, wearing only boxer shorts. I think there's a faded love bite on his chest.

I turn back to the changing mat and look into my daughter's beautiful eyes. Thank God she looks nothing like her daddy. 'Not if it isn't in the third drawer down, next to the shower.'

'You moved it... used to be in the first one. Trying to trick me, eh?' He laughs.

I don't reply. It's always been in the third one. This normal everyday banter is killing me inside. I just want him gone. And whatever the outcome of this whole bloody mess, he soon will be. I want as far away from him as I can get. Then the weak part of me argues that it's my fault. The cocaine, drink, antidepressants day in, day out, not eating properly... It's my fault. My fault my baby was small, struggled to grow, my fault he's gone, my fault that Simon is turning to someone else for comfort after losing his son. Then I shake my head. Stop it, Holly, stop it right now. Your baby is not dead, not dead, NOT DEAD!

Twenty minutes later he's ready to go. I'm playing with Iona and she's showing signs of a real smile. Not the kind that comes with wind; a genuine, proper smile. But then she would be at nearly two months old.

That thought brings with it an image of another smiling baby somewhere in the world and the pain of that reaches in, grabs my heart and squeezes it. Hard. Two months old. Ruan is two months old and I have never seen him smile. Never even seen his face, held him...

‘Hey, baby, baby. Don’t cry,’ Simon coos, kneeling by me on floor and pulling me to him.

I recoil. ‘What are you on about? I’m not crying!’ Then I see the shock and hurt in his face at my furious response and at the same time feel the wetness on my cheeks. He’s right. I am crying after all... Be normal. Stay normal.

‘I’m sorry for shouting, love. It’s just that I haven’t been back from Cornwall long and now you’re going away.’ Then I grit my teeth as he holds me close again.

‘Sweetheart, if you want me to stay I’ll ring and cancel. You’re my priority, you know that.’

‘No. It’s just me being daft. You must go, but when you come back I’ll work harder to make this work.’ I give him a look from under my lashes. ‘I know we haven’t been as close as you would like. It’s just taking some time...’

‘My darling, you take all the time you need.’

Yeah, because you’re getting all the sex you need from your whore. I sniff and try to move away, but he hugs me tighter. ‘I’m fine now, love,’ I say. ‘Off you go; you’ll be late for your plane.’

‘If you’re sure, my darling.’ Simon kisses my hair. I make a note to wash it as soon as he leaves.

‘I’m sure.’

He kisses both Iona and me, then he’s gone. I gently but firmly wipe his kiss from her cheek with a wet wipe and then scrub it over my mouth. The thought of where his lips have been recently makes me want to heave.

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It's late afternoon and Simon's just phoned to say he arrived safely. I bet he has. Whether he's actually in Germany with this woman or London, it matters little. Actually, it would be better if he's in Germany because over the last few hours I have come to the conclusion that the only way I can go forward is to go to the clinic and try to speak to Neville again. That could be very dangerous though, because if Simon isn't in Germany for the next three days he could spot me, and then where would we be? He'd be caught out and what would my excuse be for being there?

I make a cup of tea, check on Iona, who's sleeping peacefully, and look out over the Thames. It's always full of busy boats, sailing past shops, pavement cafes – people going here and there, having a life. Mine has stopped. Paused. Will stay paused until my boy is home. Neville is the key to that, and if he won't talk I'll make him. I'll blackmail him if need be. How, I don't know, but I need to do something. Get control and make something happen!

The doorbell is ringing and my heart leaps. What if Neville has had second thoughts? I set down my mug, run to the door, press my eye to the spy-hole and almost cry out in shock. No. No, I can't do this now. I can't do this. Ever.

I lean my forehead against the wood. How the hell has he found me?

'Holly? Holly, can you hear me?'

Of course I can, but I wish you far away. Maybe the mad woman that Demi thinks I have become is a reality. A mind searching for comfort amongst all the chaos? Does that make sense? Just my imagination creating a safety valve? If I check the spy-hole again he'll be gone. Please let him be gone. No. He is still there. This is unbearable on top of everything else. He rings the bell again. My heart is racing. I need to make him go away. Now.

With an effort, I make my voice as calm as I can and say through the door, 'What the hell are you doing here, Jowan?'

'Holly, thank God. Let me in.'

'No. I don't think that's a good idea.'

'Please, Holly. I need to talk to you.'

'No. Go away, there's nothing I have to say to you.'

‘I’m staying here until you open the door. I’ll keep ringing on the bell too.’

Damn it. ‘My husband will be back soon... I don’t think he’ll be too happy to find you here.’

‘No, he won’t, because he’s in Germany.’

How the hell...?

‘Holly, I’m going to ring the bell again now and keep ringing it until...’

‘Five minutes. That’s all.’ My fingers are shaking so much they can hardly manage the Yale lock. I open the door a crack and feel an unexpected rush of relief as I look into Jowan’s concerned face. I need to control myself. I must. ‘Why are you here?’

‘I know all about what that bastard you married did, is doing, and I’m here to help you.’ Jowan’s eyes flash and he clenches his jaw. Then he takes a step forward and before I have gathered my wits he’s inside the apartment.

‘Jowan! How dare you just barge in here and...’

He reaches round me and gently closes the door behind us. The familiar closeness of him and the fresh smell of his hair, his skin, is almost too much to bear. I want to feel his arms around me, rest my head on his shoulder, hold him tight and thank him for being here. At last I’m not all alone in this horrific nightmare. I don’t though. I fold my arms and walk through to the living room. Over my shoulder I say, ‘You’d better come in, but I’m bloody furious that you think you can just turn up out of the blue like this.’

‘I had to come after I found out about what happened.’

I gesture to the sofa and sit down across the room in an armchair. I only just make it because my legs feel peculiarly unsteady. The whole situation feels like it’s happening to somebody else. He puts his head on one side and his blond curly fringe falls into his eyes. He pushes his hair back and tries a smile. My mouth wants to copy his but I can’t allow that. Then a mixture of curiosity and anger drives my questions.

‘Right. How the hell did you find my address and who told you what you think you know about what Simon did?’

‘A cuppa wouldn’t go amiss first. It’s a big trek from Cornwall.’ Jowan grins, sinks back on the sofa and stretches out his long legs.

‘Jowan, I’m in no mood for this. Just tell me.’

He finds a serious face from somewhere and sits forward again, resting his elbows on his knees. ‘Okay. Yesterday I bumped into Demi’s new bloke, Alex, in town and we went for a bite to eat and a pint. We got talking about how I first came to know Demi and you and I told him all about the old days and how much I regret leaving you.’

‘This isn’t going to wash with me. I have no time for reminiscing and apologies or sweet words; I told you that the last time I saw you.’ There’s a catch in my voice, but from anger rather than tears.

He holds his hands up. ‘Hey, I’m just telling you what happened. So then he tells me how worried Demi is about you and makes me promise to keep what he’s about to tell me to myself.’ Jowan twists his mouth to the side and his eyes fix on mine then flit away as if he’s unwilling to say more. He blows heavily down his nose. ‘I could hardly believe what Alex told me.’

I watch him twiddling a braided leather strap round and round his wrist and shaking his head for a few moments until I can’t stand it any longer. I’m the one in bloody torment, not him. ‘For God’s sake, just tell me!’

His head jerks up and he stops twiddling. ‘Sorry, it’s just so hard to swallow... That a man, a father, could do that to his wife when she has recently suffered such a terrible tragedy.’

Jowan’s expression is questioning, anxious. Well, he can sod off. I’m not helping him out here. I want to find out the detail of what he knows. I swallow hard. ‘Do what, exactly?’

‘Have an affair with someone. Some fucking nut job by the sound of it, if indeed they wrote the letter. How could they tell you that your baby is in fact alive and that he’s been given away to new parents?’ But Hols, I also know you think that somehow it isn’t the jealous ex-lover. You think your boy is really alive... Well, if you believe it then so do I.’ Jowan puts his hand over his mouth as if he’s trying to check his emotions, stop more words.

I get up and walk to the window. I can't look at him because I'm on the edge of tears. He really seems like he believes I haven't just made the whole thing up. But I can't let myself hope that he does. Not yet. We need to talk about this calmly. I turn and look at him. 'I'll make that tea now if you like.'

Jowan smiles and follows me into the kitchen. Into the awkward atmosphere he offers conversation about the decor and the great views while I make the tea, and then we sit at the table across from each other. I decide to cut to the chase.

'So, I suppose you know Demi isn't altogether sure about what happened... about my sanity, you might say?'

I could warm my hands on the colour in his cheeks. He turns his mug slowly round and round on the table. I remember that this twiddling, turning, fiddling with things when he was upset or unsure used to drive me mad back when we were together. It did just a while ago when he fiddled with the leather strap. But somehow, now, I feel oddly comforted by it.

He says to the mug, 'I wouldn't go that far, but... I don't think she can see a reason as to why anyone would do such a despicable thing.'

'Well, I'm right with her there.' I lean back and fold my arms across my chest.

'Would you mind if I asked you to tell me all about it? In case Alex missed anything?'

'So you can decide if I'm off my head or not?'

I see a flash of irritation behind his eyes. 'Not at all. Just that first-hand is always better than second.'

I sigh and tell him everything that's happened, including that it's imperative Simon has no clue about any of it. Jowan listens without interruption, but I can tell he's getting more and more wound up. He's shifting position, shoving his hair back repeatedly as if it's offended him, and sighing in exasperation. As soon as I've finished, he jumps up, scraping the chair along the tiles.

'Okay. So we have three days before your husband is back...'

‘How do you know that?’ I look up at him and try not to notice how blue his eyes are.

‘Same way as I know everything else. Alex. You rang Demi and told her yesterday about his trip and he told me. It took a bit of persuading for him to get me your address though.’ Jowan drains his mug and gives me a triumphant smile.

He looks so much like the boy I knew in school that I have to smile back. ‘How did he get it?’

‘Looked in Demi’s address book when she was out and then texted it to me. Although he doesn’t know you, he knows how much his girlfriend loves you and wants to do the right thing by you.’

She might love me but she doesn’t believe me, I think, but don’t say. What would be the point? ‘Okay, so we have three days to do what?’

‘To get this Neville bloke to tell us the rest of what he knows – enough so we can find the nurse. Once we find her, we’re on the way to finding Ruan.’

There’s a lump in my throat so I swallow it down with tea. He *does* believe me. He must if he’s talking like this, mustn’t he? ‘You say we...’

‘Yes, you and me; oh, and Iona, of course. We can hardly leave her here while we go investigating, can we?’ Jowan’s eyes are alight with excitement and he gives me a wide smile.

I give him a little nod but hope he’s not doing this for the thrill, the adventure. He always was an adrenalin junky. I remember how he’d stay in the water long after the other surfers had come ashore when the weather turned. Well, this is my life, not some impossible wave. I also remember how he dumped me without a backward glance, broke me into pieces, as a submerged rock breaks a surfboard. The trust we shared isn’t there any more. How could it be?

‘Look, Jowan. I appreciate the offer of help, but I think this is something I have to do by myself. It’s touching that you seem to believe my story...’

‘Seem to? I only had to look at your face when you told me it all just now.’ He tilts his head and stares at me. ‘Okay, when I came down here I

wasn't totally convinced because of Demi's concerns, and the fact that none of it makes sense, particularly now you've told me that Simon saw the baby afterwards... but I'm totally with you. Whatever happens, I want to help you get to the bottom of it. Trust me.'

'Like I did before, you mean? Look where that got me.' The words are out before I can stop them and heat rushes up my neck and into my cheeks.

'I asked for that.' Jowan blinks and draws a hand down his chin. 'But please know that I have never been sorrier about anything in my life, and I will do anything to make things right. I know it won't be easy to win your forgiveness and I'll have to work hard. But helping you track down your missing boy is a good place to start, I think. Let me help?'

I think for a few moments. Try to look at the whole situation objectively, because if I let my heart come into it we'll be sunk. It was a shock to discover how I still felt about him that day he found me on the beach, but I can't go there. Ever again.

'Okay, thanks. I can't tell you how much it means to me to have someone who believes this insane story. There have been times lately when I questioned my own sanity too. Like you say, it makes no sense.'

I stand and take the cups to the sink and go through the next bit in my head before I say, 'You must understand that there can be nothing between us. Not now, not ever. My main priority is Ruan and it would be fantastic if you were to help, but everything must be on my terms, okay? No rushing off playing the hero?' I look at Jowan and he nods, his expression solemn.

'Of course. I'll do whatever you say.'

'Do we understand each other about, you know, *everything* I said?'

He hesitates, looks out of the kitchen window and says, 'Of course. I realise the last thing on your mind is a relationship, and because of what I did, and the present circumstances, it isn't surprising.' He runs both hands through his hair, twists his curls into the nape of his neck, then looks back at me. 'I just need you to know that I am here whenever you need me, for as long as you need me.'

There is no hidden agenda in his words or pretence in his open and honest face. I have always been able to tell when he was lying; he was

always terrible at it. A warm feeling rises in my chest as the realisation dawns that I'm no longer alone in this. Jowan believes me that Ruan is alive and is willing to stick his neck out on my say-so. He has no proof that any of it happened. For all he knows I could have written the letter myself and concocted a whole fairy tale about Neville, the nurse and the fact that Ruan was cruelly snatched away by someone at the practice.

The fact is that Jowan has chosen to believe me and is here to help in whatever way he can. And, my God, that has given me a much-needed boost. It's as though a bit of the old me is back. The bit of me before I went to London and got into that unholy mess that Simon pulled me out of. The bit of me that was confident, full of hope and determination – strong.

A few minutes later I watch Jowan pick Iona up from her crib and my heart tips a barrowload of feelings out for my consideration. Tangled snippets of love, hurt, anger, happiness, regret and relief, heaped one on top of the other, twisting, threading, until I can't see where one starts and the next ends.

Later I make a simple supper while Jowan plays with Iona and realise the main thing I feel is relief at no longer being alone. I also feel something I haven't dared contemplate for very long recently – hope. Hope that, with Jowan on my side, Ruan will be easier to find. Two heads are always better than one, and though he has a very long way to go on the road to my forgiveness, at least he's taken the first step.

Chapter Twelve

Jowan is a natural when it comes to babies. He knows instinctively what Iona wants and isn't afraid to just muck in and get stuff done. Apart from nappy changing that is. So far, he has drawn the line there. He's feeding her now while I make breakfast and I can't help drawing comparisons between him and her father. Simon has never really 'got' her moods. He can't distinguish between her hungry, tired or bored cry. In fact, he found it hard to believe a tiny baby could *be* bored until I took her, pink faced and yelling, from his arms and placed her on the play mat. Instantaneous quiet and gurgling followed, but he said that was just 'coincidence' and had gone off to do something else.

Having Jowan here is just so easy. Yesterday, when he suggested staying here on the sofa for the next few days so we could flesh out a plan, I did wonder if there might be some sort of awkwardness or strain between us. Thankfully, I couldn't have been more wrong. Apart from being fantastic with my daughter, he's been friendly to me, but not overfriendly, and I haven't felt so supported for a long time. In a weird kind of way, I am almost relaxed. Given what we are planning for today, there should be at least a few pangs of anxiety in my chest or butterflies in my belly, but so far I am fine.

From the kitchen counter I sneak a few surreptitious glances at him on the sofa with Iona. If last night was anything to go by, poor Jowan's had far from a relaxing time overseas. To look at him now, all smiley and making baby noises, no one would suspect he'd been tossing and turning and calling out in the early hours.

When I'd come to make Iona's feed at four-ish, he'd scared the hell out of me. First he'd yelled out, then moaned 'No, no... Take cover!' over and over. I had taken a tentative few steps towards the sofa, but stopped when he'd sat bolt upright, eyes open, arms flailing. With my heart in my throat

I'd just stood there, Iona's bottle clutched to my chest. It was the oddest thing, looking at someone who was still asleep with their eyes wide open. Then he'd calmly lain back down and his breathing assumed a regular rhythm. I watched him sleep for a few minutes and then carried on with preparing the feed.

What had happened to him those years he was in the army? To my poor gentle boy from a Cornish village? As I put rashers of bacon on bread, I remind myself he isn't a boy now, and certainly not *mine*; nor will he ever be again. Would it help him to talk about it? Would he tell me? Perhaps, but now isn't the time.

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Part one of the plan has gone smoothly and that's a good sign. Lisa, a young woman I have been getting friendly with at the baby and toddler sessions we have attended, has agreed to have Iona for a few hours. We'd already talked about helping each other out if we needed to get something done, and she only lives a few streets away. There had to be a lie, I'm afraid, and that didn't sit well. An emergency dental appointment because I have been awake half the night with pain in my back molar seemed as good as any, and now I'm back here at the apartment, ready to put part two into action.

The nerves I'd been expecting, but which didn't arrive, now turn up in my gut, and I have to pay one last visit to the bathroom. In my mind, the action plan we'd had last night and earlier is breaking up, fragmenting, jumbling out of order, so that what seemed feasible an hour ago now seems ludicrous.

I return from the bathroom, my heart hammering, my palms clammy and say to Jowan, who's sitting on a kitchen chair lacing up his trainers, 'So, we drive to the clinic and then you go in and ask if Neville's on duty, right? Say you have a really important message for him but can't say what it is, yeah?'

Jowan frowns but nods. 'Yeah, that's right. You okay, because you look...'

'What if the receptionist doesn't buy your story? What if she alerts security and the senior partner is called? What if my husband isn't really in

Germany and comes to ask what you're playing at?'

Jowan stands up and puts his hand on my arm. 'Hey, calm down, Hols. Why on earth would she call security?'

'No idea, but she might. What then?' I can hear the mild hysteria in my voice and touch my hand to my mouth.

'She won't. The most she would do is ask me to leave a message because he's working or something. And even if that whole totally weird scenario came true – your husband wouldn't recognise me, or connect me to you, would he?'

'So, I'm totally weird, am I?'

'Of course not. You have the jitters, that's all.'

He's right. I decide to let that crazy scenario go and allow myself to feel a bit calmer. There is other stuff waiting though. 'The bit about if he's not on duty, you'll ask when he will be?' He nods and I think there's humour behind his eyes. This doesn't help. 'Why would she tell you that? It's against confidentiality, I expect.'

'But we went through that. If she won't tell me, we'll just have to wait outside in the car and watch the gates.'

'But what if...'

'No more "what ifs". Come on, Hols. Let's go before you work yourself up into a state.'

'Might be a bit late for that,' I say and try to give a nonchalant laugh. It sounds like a yelp.

The humour is gone and he sighs. 'Look, I know why you're like this – it's such a huge thing. This Neville is our only lead to your boy, so it's only natural.' Jowan gives me a brief hug and I wish he hadn't, because it causes tears to well. Before he can see, I rush off to the bedroom to get a jacket, and by the time I'm back my eyes are dry.

'Right. Let's do this,' I say, with more conviction than I really feel, and lead the way out of the apartment.

Jowan is running towards my car through the clinic car park and across the road. His face says it went well and, as he slides into the passenger seat

beside me, he lets out a sigh of relief. It's obviously a sigh of relief because he follows it with a triumphant slap of the dashboard and does a daft little dance in his seat. For a moment I get the full force of his charm as he grins all twinkly-eyed at me. And when there's nothing more, I thump him on the arm and say, 'Well? For God's sake, tell me what bloody happened!'

From the corner of his mouth Jowan blows a strand of hair out of his eyes and says, 'It went so well I can hardly believe our luck. The receptionist paged him and he only had five minutes left of his shift so he came to meet me. I said I had a confidential matter to discuss with him, but for the moment I could only say it involved a letter and Simon West.'

Jowan pulls a bottle of water from his pocket and I watch the muscles work in his throat as he takes a big glug. Then he looks at me while he takes his time screwing the top back on, deliberately teasing me as he always used to. I give him what he's hoping for.

'Get on with it!'

Jowan laughs. 'Okay, so Neville plays dumb about it all. Says he knows nothing about a letter and asks what I meant about Mr West. I say I'm acting on Mr West's behalf and, depending on the quality of information Neville has to impart, there could be a lot of money coming his way.'

In my chest my heart is doing a drum roll and my mouth feels dry so I take the bottle from him. 'Go on.'

'Neville lowers his voice and guides me into a corner of reception and says he might have something. I tell him I'll meet him in half an hour at the park down the road and we'll go from there.'

Hang on, this wasn't part of the plan. 'But we said at the coffee shop... and what park?'

'The one we passed on the way. It's only ten minutes back and I noticed it has a great cover of trees behind the bandstand.'

'Why do you need cover?' I don't like the sound of this, or the cold look turning his pale-blue eyes into chips of ice.

'In case he smells a rat and decides talking to me isn't such a good idea after all.'

'Still not with you.' I am getting there but wish I wasn't.

‘Look, there might need to be a bit of strong arm and threats... no need for you to know everything.’ He looks out of the window at the clinic.

‘What did I say, Jowan? I said this is to be done my way and no playing the sodding hero, remember?’

‘Of course. But trust me. I’ve seen his type before – cocky, unscrupulous and slippery as an eel. I don’t expect him to swallow everything I say and just tell me all we need to know.’

‘But if you hurt him he’ll get the police involved.’

Jowan gives me an incredulous look. ‘Really? After what he’s been involved in, I don’t think so.’ I pull a disapproving face and shake my head. ‘Look, I won’t hurt him badly, and not at all if I don’t have to. I’ll just shake him up a bit.’

We sit in silence for a few moments while I try to rationalise what Jowan might have to do. Of course I will do anything to get a lead on Ruan, but condoning violence wasn’t something I’d imagined when we set this plan up. Jowan is right, of course. If he’d met Neville in a coffee shop there was no way he’d just spill everything without a fight, especially if he suspected Jowan was making everything up.

‘There is an alternative, of course,’ Jowan says quietly.

‘What?’

‘Go to the police, tell them everything – let them investigate.’

Was he fucking crazy? ‘No!’ I throw my arms up. ‘Neville would just deny everything. I told you, Simon mustn’t get to know what we’re doing. He could try to have me sectioned if this comes out. He’s already worried about my mental state, so is Demi, so is my mum. You don’t know Simon; he’s clever, has friends in high places, even the police. He goes out to gentlemen’s clubs and God knows where else with old university and school friends. He mentioned he dined with Commissioner Someone or Other just last week. A friend of a friend, apparently. They would all dismiss me as psychotic, delusional... and I’d lose Iona.’

I close my eyes and rest my head on the dashboard. Why did I allow Jowan to help? This is all going horribly tits up. My stomach’s churning and the urge to get out of the car and run far away is getting the upper hand.

‘But you don’t know that for sure and...’

‘Yes, I do! And even if they did believe me, do you think I’d get Ruan back? Of course not. The people who have him might take him somewhere else, abroad even, if the police start sniffing around. Then I’ll never find him!’ I don’t voice my fear that he might already be out of the country. That idea’s too much to bear. I push down the door handle and kick the door open.

Jowan grabs my arm. ‘Hey, hey, where are you going?’

‘I don’t know! Just away. I can’t stand any more of it!’ I shake his hand off but don’t stand up. My trembling legs won’t allow it, so I hug myself tight and give in to silent tears.

Jowan reaches round and closes the door and pulls me backwards, places my head onto his shoulder. The soft black hoodie top he’s wearing smells of Cornwall and spicy cologne, his chest is hard and toned under it and his heart beats steady and sure against my ear. Unbidden come memories of us on lazy afternoons after a morning’s surfing, naked in his bed, entwined in his sheets, my head on his chest like it is now. This is so wrong, but I need him right now. Then, unexpectedly, my tears give way to laughter. Laughter that’s a bit hysterical if I’m honest.

‘Hang on, are you...?’ He lifts my chin and looks into my face. ‘You’re not crying, you’re laughing?’

‘Apparently.’ I pull away and dab at my eyes. ‘I don’t seem to be in control of my faculties at the moment.’ That makes me sound like a Victorian schoolmarm and sets me off again. Jowan’s looking bemused but he has a smile waiting. ‘It’s just that this whole thing feels so surreal. Something out of a TV drama. Like I’m dreaming it all... And it’s not funny, not funny at all, but I suppose laughing is better than crying.’

‘That’s a common coping mechanism.’ He traces a finger down my cheek and I don’t stop him. ‘When a situation gets too much to bear, or too desperately sad, people often laugh, even though they don’t feel like it – it’s a safety valve. I’ve seen people laugh at funerals.’

His eyes are too beautiful, too full of caring. I look away but let the words come.

‘For weeks after I thought Ruan was dead – cremated, gone for ever – the pain of his loss felt like an internal gouging. It was as if a tiger was inside my heart, ripping it to shreds with powerful claws. When I realised Simon was having an affair, I wanted to be that tiger, to rip *him* to shreds, but I couldn’t of course. No. I had to be normal. Play the good wife. I guess getting a bit hysterical is a reaction to the act I’ve had to put on – hysteria is normal.’

‘Yes. Absolutely. And if you need any help ripping that bastard to shreds at some point, I’m your man.’ Jowan’s voice catches and I daren’t look at him.

Something tells me I must get control of my ‘faculties’ before I let my emotions run away with me. ‘Right, let’s get to this park before Neville comes out and sees me. Because that would be the bloody end of it.’

*

To the untrained eye, the meeting seems to be going well. I am watching Jowan and Neville from my car outside the park railings. They are sitting on a bench in front of the bandstand and Neville keeps nodding and now he’s just smiled. Jowan’s body is twisted towards Neville, his left foot resting on his right knee. He looks relaxed. I know he isn’t though, because he keeps twisting his hair into a little ponytail and letting it fall. He doesn’t realise he’s doing it; it’s a habit. He does it when he’s nervous – unsure.

Neville’s stance tells me he’s in fight or flight mode. Though he might be nodding and smiling, he’s perched on the edge of the bench as if he’s a captive bird of prey waiting for his chance to break free of his jesses and take to the sky like a bullet. Either that, or sink his talons into Jowan and peck his eyes out.

I check my phone again to make sure it’s not on silent and the volume is up high. If Jowan calls me I can’t afford to miss it. Then I look back to the bench. Oh God, no! Neville’s up and running but Jowan’s too quick. He’s grabbed him, bent Neville’s arm up his back, and then I hear a yell. Luckily the park is pretty empty apart from a few toddlers and their mums on the baby swings a good way off. They don’t appear to have seen or heard

anything. When I look back, I'm just in time to see Jowan dragging Neville behind a tree.

Nausea rolls in my belly and I tuck my hands under my armpits to stop my hands from shaking. Then my phone rings. I can hardly keep it still while I slide my finger across the surface.

'Come to the trees now. Bring my rucksack.' Jowan's voice is cold, menacing, and I hear a grunt and a thump. The line goes dead. Shit. This is not what I wanted. Not what I wanted at all. Before he left the car, Jowan said that if he phoned me I must do exactly as he said. But why does he need the rucksack? Perhaps I should look inside? No. I'll do as Jowan says; I have to trust him. I grab the rucksack, jump out of the car, and hurry through the gates and across the park.

As I approach the trees I can see that Neville is face down on the ground and Jowan is sitting on his back; Neville's arm is still bent up behind him at an angle that must be excruciatingly painful for him. He's panting and swearing and Jowan twists his arm each time he struggles. Jowan turns to me. 'Okay, open the bag and hand me the cord. The army knife too.'

My horrified expression makes Jowan give a quick shake of his head and mouth 'don't worry' at me. I take a breath, think of Ruan and nod my assent. Neville can't see me from his position and he tries to turn his head. Jowan orders him to keep still and he does. His breath is shallow, quiet. There's a length of cord wound around a bit of driftwood at the bottom of the rucksack, which answers my question as to why it's there. It's a leash cord used to secure a surfboard. The army knife is in the side pocket. I hand both to Jowan.

'Right, I'm going to tie your hands and sit you up with your back against this tree. You are going to tell us everything you know about who wrote that letter and how we can talk to her.'

'I told you I don't know anything.'

Jowan ties his hands and drags him to the tree. Neville looks at me and realisation dawns. 'Ah, it all makes sense now.' He glances at Jowan. 'There was no way your story about working for Mr West rang true. Why would he pay me for information he already has?'

‘He doesn’t know about the letter,’ I say and receive a black look from Jowan.’

‘Holly, let me handle this...’

‘Just tell us the name of the nurse and where she lives,’ I say, angling my head away from Jowan so I don’t have to see his face. My gut is telling me to take over this interrogation and I’m listening to it.

‘I told you the other week, Mrs West. I don’t know the name of the nurse or where she lives. I have no idea what was in the letter – just that it was about a secret and it was pretty bad to say the least.’

Neville sounds as if he’s telling the whole truth but I know otherwise. The nausea and trembling have left me and from somewhere strength and confidence are taking over. ‘I don’t believe you, Neville. Oh yes, most of it is true, but I know there’s more.’

Jowan leans against the tree and flicks open a nasty-looking blade on the army knife. Neville looks up at it and the colour leaves his face. ‘I don’t want to use this, Neville, as I’m not a violent man. But I will, trust me.’

I want to tell Jowan to be quiet but the terror behind Neville’s eyes indicates that we might get somewhere soon. Ruan is my priority here. ‘Tell us,’ I say, and the ice in my voice surprises me.

Neville closes his eyes and runs his tongue over dry lips. Then he opens them and shakes his head. ‘Do your worst. I don’t know any...’ A punch to the side of the head from Jowan silences him, and as I watch a trickle of blood run down the side of his face from his split eyebrow, I know I can’t be a party to this.

‘That’s enough!’ I hold my hand up to Jowan. I don’t like the look in his eyes; it’s as if he’s somebody else. Somebody the army created. They made a fighting machine of the gentle boy who left me four years ago; they also made him into someone who cries out at night in anguish from a troubled sleep.

Jowan sighs but steps away. Neville’s expression visibly relaxes and he knows he’s won. But there is one last hope that he’ll tell me what he knows. If he has a better nature, I’ll appeal to it. Reason must be better than

brutality, surely? I kneel beside him on the ground and gently wipe blood from his face with a tissue. He eyes me with suspicion but says nothing.

‘Neville. I don’t know why you delivered that letter to me from the nurse; perhaps she paid you, perhaps she’s your friend, or more than that to you? But I’m begging you; please tell me how I can find her, because she’s the only lead I have to the whereabouts of my baby son.’

His mouth drops open. ‘What the hell? Now I know you’re lying, because everyone knows your son died,’ Neville says, a look of contempt darkening his features.

‘No, he didn’t...’ I hesitate and look to Jowan for assent.

He raises his eyebrows and raises his palms to the sky. ‘It’s your call.’

‘Look, you obviously don’t know what was in the letter so I’ll tell you. Yes, it’s true, we were told that one of our twins, my boy, was dead. Only he wasn’t. For some reason, somebody unknown gave him away to other parents. The person that wrote the letter – the nurse you know presumably – said she was paid for her silence, but had her own very important reason for doing it. She promised to keep it all a secret, but couldn’t live with herself, so she told me.’

Neville frowns, and under his breath mutters, ‘She wouldn’t do that...’ To me he says, ‘But that makes no sense? It’s mad. Why would anyone do such a thing? And why the hell haven’t you told your husband, gone to the police?’

‘As you say, it’s mad! And because I worry my husband would think I was crazy!’ I slap my hand against the tree. ‘Look, the thing is, Neville, I’ve had a few problems with depression and other stuff in the past. There’s no way people would believe my story and, in the meantime, whoever has my boy would make sure he was never traced.’ My face is hot and I realise I’m crying. I dash the tears away and make my voice strong. ‘Whoever it is must have influence, have money. I’m guessing your nurse friend definitely wouldn’t be safe either if he knew she’d gone back on her word and told me all about it.’

Before my eyes, Neville seems to deflate – all the anger and cocksureness drain away until there’s just a broken man slumped against the tree. There’s a tear running down his cheek and he looks at me,

bewilderment in his eyes. ‘How could she *do* such a thing? She told me your husband was having an affair and she found out. She blackmailed him because she needed the money for... for...’

His dark eyes slide away from mine and to the tops of the trees. After a few moments he says to the sky, ‘But then she felt sorry for you and had to let you know in the letter. I felt sorry your husband had cheated on you too, especially since you’d lost a child, but then I changed my mind when I met you. I thought you were the same kind of person as him, up yourself, marching into my workplace all high and mighty, demanding... That’s why I took your money.’ He looks at me and then at Jowan. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Inside my head there’s a little figure of triumph doing a crazy dance. Looks like Neville has a better nature after all, thank God! I won’t give room to the idea that she is the spurned lover, the one who wants revenge. My boy is alive. No question. We aren’t home and dry yet though. I put my hand on his arm and say, ‘Don’t worry about that now. Just tell us who...’

‘Her name is Yvonne Marshall. She was a nurse at the clinic, worked there two years and left just after you had your twins. The only one who talked to me as if I was an equal instead of a minion in that snooty place. Yvonne was a friend, and I miss her. I wanted more, but she has no place in her life for me, for anyone but... You’ll find out why when you talk to her. It’s so hard to believe she could have done such a terrible thing and not told me, despite her circumstances. Anyway, I’m saying no more on it. Though you can have her address. Untie me and I’ll write it down.’

Jowan unties him while I rummage in my bag for a pen and paper, but I can’t focus. My pulse is racing and I’m giddy with relief. I can hardly believe we have a name at last! Once Jowan has helped Neville to his feet, he apologises and asks if his arm is okay.

‘A bit sore, but it will be all right. My head feels worse.’ Neville touches his fingertips to the cut on his eyebrow and winces. Jowan goes to apologise again but Neville waves it away. ‘In the circumstances I would have done the same.’ While he writes the address down, Jowan and I share a little smile, but there’s a touch of shame in his. I know he regrets hurting Neville, perhaps realises I saw his unnecessary zeal, but it’s done now. We must focus on Yvonne Marshall.

At the park gates Neville touches my arm. 'Wishing you luck in finding your little boy, Mrs West.'

Tears prickle behind my eyes and I say, 'Thanks, Neville. I'm sure your friend Yvonne will be able to tell us something to help, even though she doesn't know who has him.'

His face darkens in anger. 'She's no friend of mine. Not after this. And that evil bastard who took your son s needs locking up!'

'Oh, they need more than that,' Jowan says evenly. 'But you aren't going to breathe a word of this to the police because, if you do, Yvonne will pay, Holly might never see her son again, and you will also be implicated. Are we clear?'

Neville nodded. 'Don't you worry, mate. I want nothing else to do with this whole bloody mess, I can tell you.'

We watch him walk down the street and Jowan slips his arm around me. 'You okay?'

'I will be when we've talked to Yvonne Marshall. I wonder what the circumstances are that Neville mentioned?' Jowan shrugs and walks me to my car. 'It's all beyond belief, but my God, I never thought we'd have come this far so quickly.'

'Yeah. It's bloody fantastic. I'll get to her house as quickly as possible while you pick up Iona. Meet you there.'

'Why can't we go together after I get Iona?'

Jowan looks at me as if I'm a bit dense. 'Because as much as Neville says he's washed his hands of his friend, he might be on the phone in a few minutes, tipping her off that we're on our way, and she'll make a run for it.'

'Blimey, I would never have thought of that. I'm so glad you're here, Jowan,' I say and, without knowing I am about to, place a kiss on his cheek.

His face turns pink and he hails a cab. 'I wouldn't want to be anywhere else, Hols.'

Chapter Thirteen

The tree-lined street with its modest row of Victorian terraced houses in Walthamstow seems too ordinary a setting. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but the evil witch of a woman who helps deprive a mother of her newborn baby for money ought to live in a dark castle on top of a mountain, complete with lightning bolts at the very least. Jowan looks completely out of place here, his back against the street sign, hood up, hands in pockets. I'm reminded of one of those sticker books for kids, the ones with the various background scenes and a choice of stickers to make a picture. Jowan is a sticker that belongs on one that has sand, sunshine and ocean. Someone's stuck him on the wrong page.

I park just up the road from Jowan and he hurries over to help me with Iona. 'Have you seen any movement?' I ask, as I scan the doors for number 82.

'Nope. All quiet – she might be out of course.'

That had occurred to me, but if that turns out to be the case, we'll just have to wait as long as it takes. Iona is content and we have everything she needs in the car. Number 82 has a red door and an uninspiring withered pot plant in the bay window. With Iona in a sling in front of me I follow Jowan up the steps to the front door. He suggests I wait to the side, out of sight, to avoid recognition; if she was indeed the attending nurse at my C-section, she might just slam the door in our faces.

Jowan pushes on the bell and I hear the door open just as a phone starts ringing in the hallway. A woman's voice asks Jowan to hold on a minute while she answers it and I sneak a look, just in time to see the door closing again. Jowan takes me by the elbow, leans on the door and pulls me through, much to the astonishment of the woman.

'What the hell...'

‘Yvonne Marshall?’

‘Yes...’ She looks at me, falters, then says tremulously into the phone, ‘Neville, there are people in my house and...’ She listens for a while, shakes her head and leans her back against the wall, her face drained of colour. ‘Neville, please, I...’

It’s obvious Neville has hung up and she puts the phone on the side table and a trembling hand to her mouth. She doesn’t look like a wicked witch or a monster, just ordinary, like the street. Late thirties, brown hair scraped back into a ponytail, without a trace of make-up to enhance the red-rimmed but intelligent hazel eyes – the only attractive bit of her plain features. I remember her eyes. She is the nurse who was there rushing around on that terrible day. She’s not Simon’s type... couldn’t be. Besides, my son is alive. He is alive.

‘He took his time ringing you,’ Jowan says to her. ‘If he’d have done it straight away you could have legged it by now.’

At first I think she’s about to cry. Her eyes are moist, her mouth turns down and she makes a gravelly noise in her throat. But then I realise she’s laughing. Laughing hysterically. She sounds a lot like I did earlier. Iona shifts her position and gives a little wail. Yvonne stops laughing and notices my daughter perhaps for the first time. She looks up into my eyes and suddenly she’s deadly serious. ‘I’m so very, very sorry, Mrs West. I wasn’t laughing in humour... nothing about this is remotely funny.’

‘No, it certainly isn’t, Ms Marshall,’ I reply, eyeing her with contempt.

‘It’s just if you knew why I couldn’t have just “legged it”... why I did that vile, despicable thing...’ Heaving a sigh, she pushes herself away from the wall, she looks resigned. Beaten. ‘Follow me. Then you’ll perhaps begin to understand.’

Jowan and I exchange a look and follow her down the hall and into a kitchen. Yvonne opens a door a little way and looks round it into a dimly lit room. She turns back to us. ‘Please don’t make a noise; my daughter, Verity, is sleeping,’ she whispers and beckons us over.

Jowan enters the room first and I hear his intake of breath and a faint beep, beep. Puzzled, I peer round him and press the back of my hand to my mouth. On a bed, flanked by a monitor and with an oxygen mask over her

mouth, I see a little girl, her head swathed in a bandage, her skin as white as snow.

I'm rooted to the spot until Jowan takes my arm and leads me back into the kitchen. Yvonne pulls out a chair at the kitchen table and indicates we do the same. She rubs her eyes and says, 'Verity is eight. Seven months ago she started to get headaches and eventually was diagnosed with a brain tumour. It was in an inaccessible place, however, and I was told it was inoperable. Being a mother, I couldn't accept it... wouldn't accept it.' She allows her eyes to meet mine for a second. 'Being a nurse, I know what a state the NHS is in and that there's a shortage of surgeons with this particular expertise... so we got a second opinion and there was light at the end of the tunnel. A surgeon in the US.'

'That's why you needed the money,' Jowan says quietly. There are plenty of words waiting on my tongue too but I can't find the appropriate ones.

'Yes. I managed to raise some against the house, some in the local community, and my ex-husband chipped in. We still fell far short of the £100,000 needed though, and time was running out. I was working in maternity at the time, Mrs West, and confided in someone one day when I couldn't do my job properly because I was too upset. A few days later that person told me they'd give us the £100,000 if I agreed to...' Her voice cracks and she takes a few breaths. 'To do what I did.'

'The bastard!' Jowan says. 'Who was it?'

Yvonne shakes her head. 'I dare not tell you.' She looks away and then back.

I say nothing, but kiss the top of Iona's head, rock her to and fro. The anguish in Yvonne's eyes is almost too much to bear. So is confirmation that someone working with Simon is actually a monster. A creature... a vile, despicable creature.

'Was your daughter's operation successful?' I hear myself ask in a remarkably calm voice. It's as if I'm outside myself, looking in on the scene through a window.

'Yes, it's early days, but there is every sign it has been. I only hook up the monitor and oxygen when she sleeps; it gives me piece of mind. If

you'd have come round last week we'd have still been in the States. Verity was in hospital a good while. Luckily my profession means I can help with the aftercare – there's another specialist nurse and a colleague who comes in too, to give me a break.'

'It must be very stressful,' Jowan says, and I don't know how to react. There's a part of me that sympathises, can see exactly why she did it, but that can't excuse what she's done to me... to Ruan.

Yvonne looks at both of us. 'I just wish I could do something to make things right and...'

'Well, you should have thought of that before. Have you any idea how stressful my life is!' The words are out before I can consider their impact. 'You have your daughter; yes, she's ill, but hopefully she'll recover and you'll both live happily ever after. But my son... my baby was ripped from my body, literally... helped by you, I might add...' I jab my finger at her. 'Then given to somebody else. My husband had to come and tell me he was dead. Can you even BEGIN to imagine what that was like for me? For both of us?'

Iona starts to cry; my yelling has startled her, and Yvonne starts too, covering her face with her hands, huge, racking sobs shaking her entire body. Jowan puts his hand on her shoulder and she brushes it away as if it is an affront. 'Please don't be nice. I don't deserve it,' she says through her sobs.

'No, you bloody well don't,' I say, ice in my voice.

Jowan looks at me but says nothing. Good, because, if he did, he'd be bloody sorry. I bounce Iona on my knee try to shush her but she's not having it. I think she's hungry. 'You said in your letter that you knew nothing more about Ruan's whereabouts. Is that the truth?' Yvonne blows her nose and nods yes. 'Well, I need to feed my daughter. While I do that I'd like you to at least trouble your brain enough to see if there's anything that might help me.'

Yvonne shakes her head. 'You have every right to hate me and I'm not surprised Neville said all those horrible things to me just now. But, unlike Neville, I know you understand why I did it. He has no children, but you are a mother. Oh, don't get me wrong – I'm not excusing myself, or asking

for forgiveness. But if you were me, Mrs West, wouldn't you have done the same?'

Iona fixes her big blue eyes on mine as she feeds and I can't trust myself to answer that question. Would I? If Iona had only a few months or weeks left and then I suddenly had an opportunity to save her, despite the fact that I had to do something unspeakable... yes, probably. Yes, definitely. 'So, can you think of anything that might help us, Yvonne?' I say, allowing my tone to defrost somewhat.

She asks if we want tea and I decide to accept; perhaps we might get somewhere if I go for the civil approach. Yvonne fills the kettle and says, 'As I said in my letter, your son was to be well cared for with new parents. I asked the person involved why they would do such a thing, cause such pain to you, but they told me I didn't need to know the details.'

'None of it makes any sense,' Jowan says.

'No. In fact I'm a little surprised you didn't ask your husband about it after Neville delivered the letter. I'd hoped you might have been on the way to finding your baby by now. I thought a lot about it while I was sitting by Verity's bedside in the hospital.'

Jowan explains why I haven't mentioned it to him or involved the police and she nods. 'Yes. I didn't think of that. And you are right, I agree; this person is an influential and powerful individual. I knew I was putting myself in jeopardy contacting you, but I couldn't live with myself. And if this person did find out about the letter and came round here to confront me, I would just deny it, of course. I would say that, in a weak moment, I let it all slip to a dear friend, and they must have written it. This person would be fuming, but what could they do? The main thing for me was that you knew your boy was still alive.'

'Okay, what happened that day? If we go through it step by step, something might pop up,' Jowan says, taking a mug of tea from Yvonne.

She sighs and looks into her tea. 'Well, as you know, I was one of those who assisted. Once I had placed your daughter in your arms, I took your son out of the room, down the corridor and into another, as instructed. In there I did all the routine checks to see that all was well and it was.'

My heart lurches and I grab the table. The teacup clatters against the saucer and I feel like I'm floating. This information is unbelievable... it cannot... will not go in. Jowan stands up, comes close to me. His face is in mine. I'm struggling to breathe.

'Holly, you okay? You look like death.' My mouth opens and closes, but nothing comes out. I rest my head on his shoulder, take deep breaths, tell him I'm okay, that I need to think. Then instinct kicks in and I whisper in his ear.

'Don't say a word to her about what I told you happened that day... about the photo... Just go with me, okay?' He nods and sits back down, concern furrowing his brow.

What we were told about our son being sickly was obviously all a lie. But the shock of it is already being replaced with joy. Deep joy. I have to hear it again though. Just to be sure. I look at Yvonne. 'So he was normal, nothing wrong with him at all?'

'Well, we were expecting him to be a bit small, which he was. But he certainly wasn't the smallest baby I've seen, particularly not for a twin. He was healthy enough.' She gives me a watery smile.

My heart floods with love for him, but I don't smile back. In my head a rage is building at how cruelly I have been deceived, but I can't let it loose. 'And then what?'

'The person who paid for my silence came in about twenty minutes later and picked him up. Then another doctor came in. I was told to go then, so I gathered my stuff and left.'

Jowan's eyes light up. 'If there was another doctor there, he or she might be able to help – what's the name?'

Yvonne shrugs. 'I don't know. Never seen him before.' She looks at my incredulous expression. 'Oh, that's not unusual, believe me. There are lots of doctors who come and go – locums and...'

'But he might also have been the guy this nameless person was giving my son to! Think, did he speak? Go over to see Ruan?'

Yvonne twists her mouth to the side. 'No, he smiled at the one who paid me and then looked at his notes... I think. He didn't seem at all interested in

your little one.'

'But he wouldn't, would he, not while you were there? They wouldn't have wanted you to know anything more about it all than was necessary,' I say, trying to calm my excitement. Then I blurt an idea that's been circling for some time. 'Tell me, was the one who paid you Jonathan, the senior partner? It makes sense. He was the one who operated... he was called away on an "emergency", but that might have been just a cover for him to be absent from the operating room. Then he sent the male nurse to tell us what had happened later.' I tell her about how Simon was taken to see our supposedly dead son. 'Oh, my God... how completely despicable,' she whispers and starts crying again.

I believe she didn't know that part, but she's avoided answering my question about Jonathan. It's hard to believe that he was involved; he's a lovely man, or so I'd always thought. He's been a good friend to Simon over the years, had come to our wedding. I take a moment to choose my words then say, 'Look, Yvonne, I know you're scared, but I promise I'll keep you out of it all. I need to know if it was Jonathan... A shake of her head stops me. She can't meet my eyes though and stares out of the window.

'No, I can't tell you who it was, but I can tell you who it wasn't. Jonathan went off to an emergency like he said... he isn't the one.' She turns to look at me. 'He knows nothing of what happened after he left the room.' There's honesty in her face – but do I believe her?

'What did he look like?' Jowan asks. 'This locum doctor or whoever he was.'

Yvonne wipes her eyes and looks at Jowan. 'Now that's one I don't have to think about. He was really tall; I mean, well over six feet, maybe six-five, and aristocratic looking. Quite attractive.'

My hand shakes on the bottle so much I almost dislodge the teat from Iona's mouth. Hope comes out from a dark corner and pushes into my chest. I can hardly control myself. But that's ridiculous. There's no way, is there? 'Did he have slicked-back hair and kind of...' I swallow hard and try to calm myself. 'Kind of a long, hooked nose?'

She frowns and nods. 'Yeah, yeah, he did.'

‘Oh, my God!’ I say to Jowan. He reaches for my hand across the table. My heart’s pounding; I feel light-headed, dizzy with excitement. I look from Yvonne to Jowan and back again. ‘It sounds like it could be someone we know... If it is, we have him; we have the man that has my baby!’ I cry and burst into tears.

Chapter Fourteen

Simon looked out of the plane window at a cloud in the shape of a walnut whip and decided he might possibly be falling in love with Lauren. No matter how much he told himself it was ludicrous, that it was lust, not love, he couldn't kid himself any longer. These past few days in Germany had felt like the beginning of a new adventure, a breath of fresh air blowing away the stale smell of the mundane. Holly was becoming the mundane. Holly was becoming boring, predictable, uninspiring. Other women had babies and managed to look nice for their husbands, didn't they? Made sure they didn't stink of baby, did their hair and put a bit of make-up on now and then? Was it too much to ask? Granted they had lost their son, but he'd tried to make sure she had everything she could ever want to compensate, put up with her moods, her reluctance to even come near him.

Lauren took a sip of her G&T and gave him a lovely smile. Then she squeezed his thigh and rested her head on his shoulder. Her hair smelled divine, no baby sick there. And he'd had no idea she was such a clever woman, talented too. No. This jaunt to Germany was supposed to have been for a short conference and then he'd planned to spend the rest of the time in bed with Lauren. But it had all turned out so differently.

Yes, of course they'd had lots of sex, but Simon had discovered Lauren knew so much about art, history, politics, you name it. They'd visited galleries, the theatre, walked around the streets of Frankfurt seeing the sights, and never once had he looked at his watch, or been stuck for something to say. The time spent with Lauren was so easy, natural... right. These days he had to struggle to find a topic of conversation when he was with his wife. Yes, he'd promised himself he'd finish with Lauren for the sake of his marriage, but right now he didn't know what the hell to do.

It was such a tragedy that Lauren had ended up in the casino. A bright star fallen to earth when it was obvious the heavens were empty without

her. Born into a single-parent family in Bradford, her university career had been cut short because her mother had fallen ill. Lauren, of course, felt duty bound, so the history of art course went, along with her dreams. When her mother died, she felt it was too late to go back. Something had died within her too, she'd told him.

Lauren had shown Simon photos of her own artwork on her phone. Quite stunning and he had a good eye, or so he was told. He'd picked Lauren so it must be true. It was when she'd been telling him about her past that he'd experienced a kick in the gut. Simon, to his surprise, felt exactly the way he'd felt when he'd seen Holly for the first time on the catwalk. That had been love at first sight, so he'd told himself he couldn't possibly be in love with Lauren. After all, he'd seen her many times before. Nevertheless, the feeling wouldn't leave him alone, even though he'd tried countless times to talk himself out of it... and right now, looking at the clouds, with Lauren's head on his shoulder, he knew he had to have her, make her his own.

Guilt laid a heavy hand on his shoulder just as the steward came round to take their orders for lunch. Here he was in first class, having a whale of a time with his mistress, while his poor wife and daughter were at home looking forward to his return. Of course it would be hard to leave Holly and Iona, and could he in fact really do it? Should he even be thinking about it? Simon slid his hand into Lauren's and tried to picture his future with each woman in turn.

In the one he shared with Holly, he saw gloom, a yelling baby, misery, a grudging sex life and boredom. He was in a box with no way out, trapped. Suffocated. In the one he shared with Lauren he saw freedom, excitement and adventure. He could set her up in her own gallery – she would love to spend her days painting – and the evenings would be spent in bed, out at the theatre, at the finest restaurants. He liked helping people up. Out of the hole they were in. He'd done that with Holly, saved her. Wasn't it Lauren's turn now?

Lauren made him feel like a teenager again – no responsibilities, free of children and a nagging wife. If he was honest, babies had never been on the agenda for him really – the twins had been unplanned. Yes, he'd been happy about the pregnancy, but was that because that's how he was supposed to

feel? Social pressures and the like? Lauren had already said she never wanted children, which suited him. Besides, he doubted he'd make a very good father. Of course he had a fondness for Iona, but... shouldn't he feel more? Though, given his own upbringing, he shouldn't be surprised. His parents had never really had much time for him; they were always more interested in each other. Simon had tried so hard to impress them, particularly his father, but his efforts had never been enough. But then there was what happened with Ruan; his loss had crushed him.

Plans would need to be made shortly. There would have to be some money put aside for Holly and his daughter; a home too. Perhaps the beach house? The further away the better. He'd see Iona now and then, of course. It would be easier when she was older, had a personality. Lots of people he knew had broken marriages, so she'd be fine. Besides, he'd given her life, so wasn't that the greatest gift?

Simon sighed and swallowed the remainder of his whisky, and then thoughts of how happy he'd been with Holly in the past, along with yet more guilt, brought a lump to his throat, so he pressed the buzzer and ordered more whisky. Should he at least give her one more chance to make amends? He was bugged if he knew... *Damn it, man. Make up your mind!* One thing was for certain; whatever happened, he couldn't see a future without Lauren.

Simon drew Lauren to him and gave her a lingering kiss. For now he decided to not decide, to let things take their course for a bit. What was the point in spoiling such a lovely trip away with thoughts of life-changing plans that didn't have to be made quite yet? Besides, he had one more night with Lauren before he was due back. A night at the Waldorf had been booked as a last-minute surprise for her; he'd phoned while she'd been in the shower that morning. How she'd love that. It was time she had more of the finer things in life; God knew she'd had precious little of those up until now, poor baby. Yes, Holly had better up her game, or it would soon be game over. He had given her his all and she never gave anything back. It wasn't fair. He was only human after all, wasn't he?

Out of the window the walnut-whip cloud had disappeared and there was nothing but blue sky as far as the eye could see. That was just how Simon liked things.

Chapter Fifteen

Jowan is left holding the baby while I search through boxes in the walk-in-wardrobe. Search is not quite the right description for what I'm doing. I'm pulling and emptying contents, pulling and emptying. How can two people accumulate so much stuff in such short time? I pull out another box from under the bed, empty it, rifle through it, slap my hand against my head in frustration. For God's sake, stop it. I need to calm down, be more methodical, but my hands are moving too fast, seem to have a mind of their own.

It's a wonder I didn't get stopped by the police the speed I was going at after we left Yvonne's. Jowan made me pull over and took the wheel, thank goodness, because my hands were shaking and all I had screaming in my head over and over was the same sentence – Mark Jenson has my boy! Then a stomach-churning question followed that one, equally repetitive – Why? Why? Why did he have him? How did he get him? Jonathan must be involved after all, mustn't he? He and Mark went back even further than Mark and Simon...Why did Yvonne say he wasn't? Jowan could hardly believe it when I told him who Mark was. Neither could I. I just needed to say the words out loud.

Okay think! Take a moment, be logical. I sit back on my haunches and scan the bedroom again. Of course, the wardrobe, I remember now... The dressing-table stool might be just tall enough. I shove it next to the wardrobe and climb on top, stretch my hands up, feel the rough wicker basket under my fingers. It's heavy, but yes, I've got it! Please let it be inside.

Inside the basket under a fine layer of dust, is a box labelled – Our Wedding Day. The woman who lovingly placed the box in this basket a few years ago was so different from the one sitting on the bed now, her stomach churning with a mixture of worry and anticipation. I run my finger over the

label, wipe the dust on the bed sheet, then snatch off the lid, rip off the tissue paper surrounding it and yank out the wedding album. I try not to look at the happy faces of my friends and family on that day, because I'm not taking a trip down memory lane; I'm making a beeline for the group photos. I'm looking for the tallest man on the back row, and there he is, his hands on Demi's shoulders. Mark Jenson. Jonathan is standing next to him, a dwarf in comparison.

'Found it, Jowan! Can you bring my phone?' I yell over my shoulder.

Jowan comes in with Iona, gives me my mobile, and puts her on the bed with her cuddly purple dinosaur toy. I squeeze his hand then take all the photos of Mark Jenson there are and send them to Yvonne. Okay, there are lots of tall men in the world – but six-feet-six with a long, hooked nose? In my heart of hearts I know it's him, it has to be, but we have to be absolutely sure... and what if it isn't? What then? I push that thought away and lock it down somewhere deep and dark. It has no place in the light hopefulness of my heart.

We wait for a response. Jowan talks to me about Iona and how content she seems. I can't answer, because my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth and I can't focus on anything but my phone screen. Then he tries asking if I'd like him to make an omelette or something, as we haven't eaten since breakfast. Again no words will come. When the phone screen lights up and chirrup an incoming message, I let out a slow breath I didn't know I'd been holding and sweep a finger across it. It's from Yvonne and it says, *Yes, it's him. That's the 'doctor' I saw. No question!*

As if from a long way off I hear Jowan say, 'Well? Is it from Yvonne?'

I nod and hand over the phone. Relief both raises my spirits to the ceiling and immobilises me too, and there are a thousand questions waiting in my throat, but only 'Thank God' whispers from my mouth. Jowan whoops and punches the air, then takes over the questioning bit for me.

'You say this Mark is Jonathan's oldest friend so he must be involved in it all? But why on earth would he do such a thing? Why did this Mark want Ruan? And who's the person who paid off Yvonne? She said it wasn't Jonathan. You say this Mark is rich and powerful, so how do we persuade him to give your boy back? He'll most likely deny he's yours when we

track him down, won't he?' He bites the edge of his thumbnail and frowns. 'DNA test then?'

Jowan jumps off the bed and starts to do annoying pacing up and down my bedroom, running his hands through his mop of curls as he asks more questions and has a conversation with himself mostly, because I'm only capable of just grunting now and then. Although we have come further than I dared hope, these questions tell me we're only at the foothills of the mountain.

'Holly, did you hear me?'

'Um, which particular thing? You have said quiet a lot.' Iona has managed to pull the dinosaur over her face and can't quite push it off, so I scoop her up and shower her with kisses.

'I said do you know where he lives?'

'No. Except Hampstead rings a faint bell somewhere. All I have to do is look in the address book and then we'll have it.'

Jowan puts his head on one side and gives me the sweetest smile. 'Are you okay, love? It's just that I thought you'd be more excited. We have the man who has your boy.'

Unexpectedly I feel a rush of... of warm affection for him. I won't allow the word love. No. Even though I admitted to myself that I still did have strong feelings, that day at the beach house when he called my name from the sand dunes, I refuse to be that woman again. The woman who, each night, asked the stars in the dark sky what she'd done to drive him away. The woman who sobbed into her pillow until she was exhausted enough to sleep. He abandoned me once, so he could do it again.

'Hols, what are you thinking?' He lifts a hand, strokes my cheek. Of course I don't tell him my most recent thoughts, but at last out tumble the words that have hitherto evaded me.

'Oh, Jowan. Of course I'm thrilled we have a positive ID and lead to Ruan, but finding where he lives is the least of our problems. What if Mark is just a middle man or something? What if he took him to someone else?' Then an uncomfortable and ludicrous thought surfaces. What if he and Demi are in it together? I remember how they flirted at the wedding.

Remember that, in the photo, he had his hands on her shoulders. She had said he was hot, in a *Downton Abbey* kind of way... and now I know she might not be able to have children... Perhaps they have been having an affair all this time. Perhaps she never went to Greece and Alex is just a cover? Another memory rocks me on my feet. Demi had come to the hospital to see us...I didn't know she'd been there at the time, but she told me at the beach house when she'd come to see Iona and I, about three weeks after Ruan had supposedly died. Could she have taken him...her and Mark?

I think about telling Jowan but decide against it. That might be one step too far. I shake this notion out of my head and continue, 'Like you said, he's yet another powerful man, well connected, more so even than my husband. What chance do we have? Like you also said, he'll never admit anything. And the DNA test?' A humourless bark of laughter escapes my throat. 'He would never agree to that, and to even go there would mean involving the police.'

'Hey. This is defeatist talk before we've even tried. Stop all the "what ifs" and let's just make a plan. We'll take each bit as it comes along.'

That rankles. 'Of course I'm not defeated, just bloody practical! We have to plan for every eventuality, not just blindly stumble through with Pollyanna optimism.'

'I'm not the Pollyanna here.' Jowan's cheeks colour and he shoves his hands under his armpits. 'If you think we can somehow go through this without involving the police then you must be nuts.'

'Nuts? Yes, exactly that! If the police become involved, we'd have to tell Simon that two of his oldest friends are involved in some crazy bloody conspiracy to steal his child; that they told him he had in fact died and produced a dead baby from somewhere to prove it. He would say I was psychotic, drag up my whole sorry drugs history, say I'd become depressed again, was an unfit mother. He would never believe me over them. He has friends in high places, well connected. We've been through all this before, only this morning. Why aren't you *listening* to me?!'

My shouting has startled Iona; she makes a square of her mouth and howls. The crestfallen look on Jowan's face forces me out of the bedroom

and to the play mat in the sitting room, on which I place Iona. My daughter immediately stops crying and stretches her hand up to a sparkly pink giraffe, a smile forming on her lips. Oh, if only life could be so simple for me.

Perhaps it's time Jowan went. That would uncomplicate things a bit, wouldn't it? And after all, I need to be able to cope on my own sooner or later.

'I'm sorry I upset, you, Holly,' Jowan says quietly from the doorway. 'Just want to help and I really can't see how to do that without the police. They would have to listen to you and you never know, they could take you seriously. Iona and Ruan are twins after all. There must be some sort of resemblance. Look, I'm here to back you and they might see through Mark and Jonathan...' The icy glare I toss over my shoulder at him has his hands in the air in a second and there is surrender in his tone when he says, 'But I will do whatever you think best. I promise.'

Moments pass while I consider his words, consider the whole situation, then I say, 'Firstly, my children are not identical, being different sexes. There might not necessarily be any resemblance at all. And the problem is, Jowan, you can't back me in the way the authorities would need. You're my friend... my ex-lover... and, for all the police know, might be lying your head off to protect me. And, believe it or not, I don't want to land Yvonne in it, because we'd have to, you know, if we were to stand a chance of getting them to take us seriously. I think she lied about Jonathan, given his connection to Mark, and I abhor what she's done, but you know when she asked me if I'd do the same...?' Jowan nods, sits on the sofa, a serious look on his face. 'Well, I would. Of course I would. So she'd be right up shit creek, and where would that leave her little girl?'

'Yes, I get that but...'

'And what would our lives become? There would be a pack of media wolves at the door day and night, my family and friends would be questioned, photographed, misquoted... My mother, perhaps even Demi, might say they think I'm imagining it all, delusional because of my grief after losing my baby. They'd say Mark and Jonathan wouldn't do such a vile thing, especially Mark. Demi was all over him at our wedding... it

would be a bloody nightmare. They wouldn't believe me, Jowan. Don't you see? And worse, much worse than that, Ruan would be lost to me for ever.' My voice falters and I scoop Iona up again. I need to have her close, feel her little heart beating under my hand. I look into Jowan's sympathetic eyes. 'If they took her from me, I...'

'Okay, okay. I understand. I do. So what do you think we should do?'

The shadow of a plan that's been hovering in the wings plucks up the courage to stride on to the stage. 'Maybe Jonathan is being blackmailed by Mark somehow. Jonathan arranged for Ruan to be given to Mark. Mark wants a child, and for some unknown reason chose my boy. Or perhaps Mark's acting as a middle man for someone... for people that wanted a child? God, I don't know. I think it's more reasonable to think Mark wanted Ruan for himself though. I don't say that Demi might be in on it with him, even though the words are waiting there on my tongue. 'We'll go to Mark's house. The letter Yvonne wrote said that Ruan had new parents. I know he has a wife, though she wasn't at our wedding. We watch their movements, find out as much as we can about them, and then snatch my boy back when the time is right. When she's on her own with him if possible. That's if he isn't some kind of middle man, of course, as I said, and has passed my son on to God knows who... Then... well, I don't know what we do then. I'm not even going there for now.'

Jowan's eyebrows jump up and his mouth looks like it's shaping some words, but then he just says with a sigh, 'Whatever you think. But where does the one who paid for Yvonne's silence fit in, if it isn't Jonathan?'

'I have absolutely no idea.' I sigh and suddenly deflate. I think my ideas are just pie in the sky. Going round to Mark's? Not a great idea but what other option do I have? 'I know what you're thinking. You're thinking it's mad. That we'll be caught and he'll have us arrested.'

Jowan shrugs. 'More or less.'

'Well, if that happens it will all have to come out anyway. The scenarios I've been terrified of will come true and it will be horrendous. But we have to try and do this my way first, because we might have a chance, Jowan. A slim chance, granted, but we could get away with Iona and Ruan, go somewhere Mark will never find us.'

I watch Jowan twist his hair into the nape of his neck and let it fall, an unreadable look on his face, and I realise he thinks I've included him in the 'we'. Perhaps I have. That's the subconscious for you. My face is on fire, so I concentrate on Iona for a while. 'Oh, I don't mean you. I was actually thinking you might want to go back to Cornwall now anyway. You've gone above and beyond, and you were saying yesterday that you'll need to find a job before long...'

'Eh?' Jowan's pale-blue eyes are shadowed by a deep frown. 'You think I'd go and leave you now? How on earth would you organise a heist to get back your most precious treasure without my help?'

I look at his earnest expression, and an irrational urge to giggle at his dramatic choice of words is with an effort turned into a cough. I look away, place Iona back on her mat. 'Well, that's kind of you to offer, but I honestly wouldn't blame you. Without you I couldn't have come this far, so thank you from the bottom of my heart. You've certainly done your bit to earn my forgiveness.'

'Is that what you think this is about? Me earning your forgiveness?'

'Well, yes, I...'

Then he's right next to me on the mat, his arms around me, his lips on my hair. 'Don't you realise how I feel about you, Hols? I...'

I pull away. 'Stop. Don't say it, Jowan. I can't hear this; I can't even think about what we have, or don't have, while my boy is with that man. Surely you get that?' Though my tone is calm, my insides are in turmoil.

Jowan hangs his head, shoves his golden curls back a few times and sighs. 'Of course, I'm sorry. Just sometimes I want to...' He catches the warning look in my eye and smiles. 'Okay. Let's find that address book and get on with the next step. I'm with you, like it or not.'

As I walk to Simon's study, I realise I'm ridiculously pleased that my next step won't be taken alone.

Chapter Sixteen

The tie around his neck felt like a noose. Why, in order to look smart, men were expected to have bits of material around their necks that endeavour to cut off their air supply, had always been beyond him. Jowan studied his appearance in the cheval mirror and fiddled with the top button of his shirt until Holly slapped his hand away.

‘You can’t undo it, Jowan, you’ll look messy.’

‘But I feel like the damn thing is choking me.’

‘It’s only for a few hours and then you can go back to your jeans.’ Holly took a step back and dusted an invisible speck of something off the charcoal-grey suit he’d been forced to wear. ‘And to be honest, you look really good in it. Much better than Simon ever did.’

Jowan looked into her big blue eyes and wondered if she was just saying that to make him feel better, more confident. The idea of pretending to be an estate agent and rocking up to Mark’s house wasn’t thrilling him, if he was honest, but they’d talked it all through for hours and, of the three or four scenarios, it was the best of a bad lot.

‘You say the nicest things,’ he said and rolled his eyes. She laughed, picked up Iona and left the bedroom. He loved to hear her laugh, but just lately she’d not done much of that, unsurprisingly. In fact he was worried about the way her face had grown thinner, the haunted look in her eyes, the dark circles underneath them, the way she jumped at every noise but pretended she hadn’t. She said he looked better in the tie than her useless husband. God, how he’d love to get a tie around Simon’s cheating throat and throttle him. He’d be back this evening and the thought of leaving Holly alone with him was almost too much to bear.

‘So, I think we’re almost ready... when I’ve seen to your hair,’ Holly said, coming back in with some gel and a comb.

‘My hair? What’s wrong with it?’

‘Nothing, I love it. But in order to look the part, I think we need to tame it a little.’ She put Iona in his arms and instructed him to sit on the bed.

‘My own mother won’t recognise me when you’ve finished.’

‘That’s the idea.’

‘And do you really love my hair?’

‘Yes. What’s not to like?’

Jowan looked up at her and gave her a slow smile. ‘I love the feel of your fingers running through it.’

‘Jowan...’ she said in a warning tone.

‘Sorry.’

‘Right, that will do.’ She wiped gel from her hands, whisked Iona away and nodded to the mirror. ‘See what you think while I get her coat on.’

In front of the mirror again, Jowan pulled a face. With his slicked-back hair and sharp suit, he looked the epitome of a successful businessman type, which was, of course, the look they’d been hoping to achieve. He pretended to hang himself with his tie and then went in search of Holly.

*

When the ‘estate agent plan’ had been just that – a loose network of ‘it might just work’ notions inside their heads as they’d plotted in Holly’s flat, far away from reality – it hadn’t really inspired him. Now, as they sat in her car, parked on the sweeping, tree-lined avenue next to Hampstead Heath, he realised the plan was pants. Really, really pants.

‘Had you any idea this area was quite so grand?’ Jowan said, moving to run his hand through his hair but stopping when his fingers met a sticky mat.

Holly twisted her mouth to the side. ‘Well... not exactly.’

‘That’ll be a no then.’ Jowan tried to keep the irritation out of his voice but couldn’t quite manage it. ‘I mean, these houses must be worth millions of pounds each. Can you imagine the reaction of whoever opens the door to me when I say I’m just checking to see if they might be in the market for

selling their property? Me, with no ID or business card, a made-up estate agent's name, and hair that feels like it's been glued on?'

Holly stifled a giggle. 'Your hair looks fine. And I told you, that's what really happened to me one day. A guy turned up at the door asking the exact same thing...'

'Yes, but he was a real, bona fide estate agent with an office you'd heard of, and...'

'You have their name, a briefcase, and a big, official-looking notepad to pretend to jot stuff down in if they're interested.'

Jowan sighed and started to bite the edge of his nail until Holly placed her hand on his. 'I can only do my best, and the main thing is to see if I can find any evidence of a baby in there, try to get any information I can about their lives. I'm not really hoping to get them to sell their house after all, am I?'

'No. Well, at least I don't think so.'

Jowan looked at Holly's mischievous expression. 'I'm glad you think this is funny, my dear.'

'No, far from it. But if we get wound up into a state, then we're on a hiding to nothing before we start.' Jowan nodded and fiddled with his tie for the umpteenth time. 'And it's not lost on me that I'm over here safe in the car, while you do it all. If I could do it, I would.'

'Of course you can't. He knows you. And I'm not complaining really – just want everything to go well.'

'I know.' Holly gently removed Jowan's hand from his tie and gave it a squeeze. 'Remember, any sign of them being suspicious or uncomfortable, just make your excuses and leave. We don't want them spooked. Or you in trouble, more importantly.'

Jowan couldn't decide if Holly was warning him to remain calm. They had talked briefly earlier about the way he'd handled Neville that day in the park and she'd let on that she'd been worried by his apparent zeal. At first he'd been affronted, but in the end admitted it had been because of his experience in the army, and he'd not been proud of his actions. He'd only gone in to prove himself to his dad. What he'd really wanted was to develop

his talent for painting, but his dad had said the farm or nothing, and that he wasn't forking out for art college. One of the reasons he'd left the army was that he'd hated the man he was becoming. Holly had pushed for more, but he wasn't ready to share that.

'Look, I'm not going to do anything rash, okay? Trust me,' he said with a little smile.

'I do trust you. Just go careful, hey?'

Jowan nodded, took a breath, and left the car.

One more go and then he'd have to leave. Damn it. If they didn't answer this time he'd have to go through all this again later, or tomorrow. He'd psyched himself up for it and now it looked like there was nobody in. Jowan pressed the doorbell at the side of the imposing black door with its ostentatious brass furniture and glanced to his left and right while doing so. There was nobody on the street, or any sign of life in the immediate vicinity. It was as if he'd arrived on a deserted movie set. A deserted, Dickensian movie set, full of grand Victorian houses, sweeping marble steps and Corinthian columns. Perhaps a singing rose seller would appear shortly and Oliver would stick his head out of the top window.

Down the street he could just make out the pale face of Holly through the windscreen, though he couldn't see her expression. He could guess though. Much the same as his own. Jowan cocked his head and held his breath for any sign of movement within the house. No. Nothing. That was it then. He turned and began to run down the steps and then stopped in his tracks when a voice said, 'Hello? Hello there, young man.'

Jowan turned to see an elderly lady on the steps of next door's property. She had on a wide-brimmed yellow hat, blue twinset and pearls, gardening gloves and carried secateurs in a wicker basket, or trug he thought they were called. In her brown, weather-lined face were two keen green eyes. Eyes that Jowan guessed didn't miss much.

'Er, hello,' he said and tried a smile. Now what?

'My goodness, aren't you handsome?' she said and then flapped her hand at him. 'Sorry, don't mind me. Can I help you at all?'

Jowan ran back up the steps. ‘I don’t know. I was looking for Mr and Mrs Jenson.’

‘Yes, I guessed as much, you being at their door and all.’ A mischievous twinkle in her eyes made him relax a little. ‘You won’t find them here though. Well, you might find *him* here later, but not Angela. No, Angela has been at their house in Devon for...’ The woman rolled her eyes up to the right. ‘Must be nearly three months.’

Jowan nodded and put on a concerned face. ‘Oh really? Everything okay, I hope?’

‘Oh yes, I think so. I think she’s still in shock about the baby. Mark says she feels more relaxed in Devon; a slower pace of life, you know? Such a lovely couple. He’s here for work, of course, but goes down there every weekend to be with his wife and son.’

Though his heart had leapt when she’d mentioned the baby he’d managed to keep a straight face. Now he just nodded and smiled again, but said nothing. It appeared he didn’t have to. It appeared that, living next door to the Jensons, was the archetypal dotty English character from a *Miss Marple* episode, who had a runaway tongue. This might be his lucky day after all.

The woman snipped the head off a drooping rose in her side garden. ‘But here’s me going on – I never introduced myself, or asked what your business is with the Jensons.’ She stuck out a gloved hand. ‘Isadora Whittle.’

Jowan held on to her hand for longer than necessary and fixed her with what he hoped was a winning smile. ‘What a lovely name. Most unusual.’

Isadora took the glove off, put her hand to her neck, fiddled with her pearls and did a girlish laugh. ‘Oh, do you think so? Thank you. My grandparents were great friends of the dancer Isadora Duncan, you know? When I was born, a few years after her untimely death, they begged my father to name me after her, and he always did as they asked.’

‘I see. Lovely. Well, my name is Ben Malton and I’m from Malton and Forbes Estate Agents. We’ve just moved into the area and...’

‘Now I knew a Ben once.’ Isadora pointed the secateurs at Jowan. ‘Well, a Benjamin actually; he was such a nice man, handsome like you too, but married unfortunately. Are you married?’

‘No, I...’

‘Funnily enough, Ben introduced me to my future husband. Phillip and I were married for nearly sixty-three years. Can you imagine that? No, of course you can’t; you must only be in your twenties.’ Isadora pushed back the hat from her forehead and wafted a glove in front of her face. ‘My, isn’t it a warm one?’

‘It is. I would love to loosen my tie, but that isn’t the done thing, is it?’ Jowan pulled a face.

‘Oh no. My Phillip always wore a tie even in the heatwave of 1976.’ Then Isadora leaned in to him conspiratorially. ‘But you know, sometimes my husband could be such a stuffed shirt!’ She did the girlish laugh again and Jowan laughed as if it was the funniest thing he’d heard in ages.

When she’d recovered, she said, ‘So, you say you’re an estate agent. I do hope the Jensions aren’t selling up. They’ve been so kind to me since Phillip died two years ago. Well, Mark has, as Phillip got him a job once; he and Mark’s father were at school together, old boys and so forth. Lived next door too – the Jensions’ house used to belong to Mark’s father.’ Anyway, that first job really kick started his career.’ Isadora stopped talking suddenly and pounced on a flurry of aphids on another rose bush.

Jowan wondered what to do next. Let her carry on, or offer an explanation about why he was there? He needn’t have worried though because Isadora turned to him, a thoughtful look on her face.

‘Angela’s a different kettle of mackerel. Though polite, charming sometimes, she’s a bit more reserved really. She’s always in a rush if we meet by chance on our doorsteps; runs away when I come out, or so it seems. I had no idea she was pregnant I see her so seldom. Mind you, she was always on the plump side.’

Jowan could understand why Angela might run away from Isadora. He did find her charming, but he imagined she’d be hard to get away from as a neighbour. Could a person be talked to death? Probably. ‘Tell me, Isadora, why was it such a shock that she had a baby?’

‘A shock?’ Isadora absently scratched her forearm with the point of the secateurs.

‘Yes. You said it was a shock for her, so she went to Devon...’

‘Oh, yes, I did. You’ll have to excuse me, Phillip; I’m getting a little forgetful nowadays. I’m nearly eighty-seven after all.’

Jowan considered pointing out that she’d just called him Phillip and decided against it. ‘Oh, don’t worry. I have a brain like a sieve some days...’

Isadora lifted a finger to silence him, a light in her eyes as if she’d just remembered something. ‘Yes, that was it, she had one of those unexpected pregnancies. They’d been wanting a child for years, but nothing worked. They’d had that UFO thingy-me-bob in hospital, you know, test tubes and whatnot? But it didn’t work, and then, miraculously, she finds she’s eight months gone.’

‘My goodness! That would be a shock, wouldn’t it?’ Jowan said, folding his arms, concentrating on Isadora’s face to assure her he was hanging on her every word.

‘Oh, it would. So then they go off to Harefields and she has the baby there. Well, not there exactly; in the hospital, of course. And as I said, she’s not been back since.’

‘Harefields?’

‘The name of the house they have there...’ Isadora pushed the hat back and poked a finger under the brim to give her head a good scratch. ‘Or is it Harebrook?’ She lifted her hands and dropped them again. ‘No matter, it’s Hare something anyway, in Kingsbridge; well, South Milton. Seen the stunning photos, a gorgeous house on the hill overlooking the village. Yes, South Milton; I know I have that right, because we had a house near there years ago too.’ She gave him a wistful little smile. ‘Happy days.’

Jowan’s heart thumped in his chest. He could barely contain his excitement. Isadora had told him everything he needed to know, and with the minimum effort from him. ‘Well, I hope they come back and see you soon. I bet you’d like to see the baby?’

‘I would, yes, and they’ll be back. Unless they are selling?’ Isadora wrinkled her nose and put a hand on his arm. ‘Please tell me they aren’t.’

Jowan patted her hand and explained why he’d come in the first place. ‘So you see, there’s nothing to worry about. I was just trying to gauge how many people would be thinking of moving in the area and...’

‘Well, the only way I’ll be moving is in a box! But I don’t intend to turn my toes up quite yet!’ Isadora gave a bark of laughter.

Jowan joined in and then shook hands with her. ‘It has been a pleasure to meet you, Isadora. It’s nice to meet such a cheerful and lively person.’

‘And it’s been nice to have some handsome male company for a change; I do get lonely now Phillip has gone...’ Isadora gave him that wistful smile again. Jowan patted her arm, and as he turned to go she said, ‘And I won’t mention to Mark that you called. I don’t want him getting any bright ideas about putting this old place on the market.’

Bloody hell, he couldn’t have asked for more than that. He grinned. ‘I don’t blame you, Isadora. Goodbye for now!’

Jowan hurried along the street towards Holly’s car and wanted to punch the air. This plan hadn’t been pants at all; it had turned out to be brilliant. Perfectly brilliant!

Chapter Seventeen

I can remember the time I watched the clock, counting the minutes until Simon came home, butterflies in my chest, anticipation in my heart. I am watching the same clock now for the same reason. My feelings aren't remotely the same though. Dread is in my heart and anger courses hot through my veins. He's been with his woman while I have been going through hell. It was traumatic enough before today, but after Isadora's revelations, how can I get through this evening and night without letting him see through the 'good wife' act?

I load the dishwasher and let my mind wander; think through reasons other than blackmail for Jonathan doing what he did. So Jonathan gave away our son to Mark Jenson and his wife because... what? Because they were childless?

Really?

There has to be something more. Blackmail is the only answer, isn't it? But whatever it is, it isn't enough. How could it be? And who is the person who paid Yvonne if not Jonathan? If there is a God, they all will be punished for this. Hopefully in this life rather than the hereafter. I am furious enough to take matters into my own hands, but Iona needs her mother.

I check on her now and there she is, sleeping peacefully in her cot. The illuminated mobile is casting moonbeams and stars on the ceiling and walls and I wish she'd wake up. At least then Simon can't have me to himself; expect more than a hug and a peck on the cheek. If his mistress is any good, he won't want more. That's if he's actually been with her these past few days and not just at a conference like he said. I allow myself a wry smile when I realise I am hoping my husband has been sleeping with another

woman. How quickly a life can change; one false act and the whole curtain comes down.

Still, it will only be for one night. Whether he likes it or not, I'm telling him I'm off to Cornwall again tomorrow. I won't tell him I'm going there with my ex-boyfriend to leave Iona with Demi though. I cringe when I remember I'd considered Demi might be in it with Mark. But then, given the situation, it's not surprising, is it? Neither will I tell Simon that, afterwards, Jowan and I will go on to Devon to try and snatch my son back. I would dearly love to be able to, just to see the look on his face. Iona murmurs in her sleep and I stroke her forehead and hope everything will be okay. Then I hear a key in the door and the heat in my blood chills.

'Darling! Darling, it's me.'

I step quietly out of Iona's room and hurry into the hallway. Simon is hanging up his coat and humming to himself. How dare he hum? How dear he even breathe!

'Simon, at last. I was beginning to wonder if you were okay.' I can hardly believe my voice. It's calm. Has just the right amount of good wife-ish-ness about it and totally foreign to me.

He glances at his watch; a slight frown puckers his brow. 'Only twenty minutes late, sweetie. The traffic was awful as usual.' Simon kicks off his shoes and loosens his tie. 'So have you missed me? Come and give your man a hug.' He opens his arms and gives me a huge smile.

My insides churn and there's a wave of nausea building, but I tell myself I have to go along with this charade. Ruan is depending on it. I walk into his embrace and try not to remain stiff as a board. Even give him a squeeze for good measure, 'You had a nice conference?' I step back and walk into the sitting room. He follows me in and pours himself a large whisky.

'It was excellent. You wouldn't believe the new bits of kit they're developing in Germany now. I think I'll try and convince our senior partners to invest in some.' He takes a sip of his drink and makes himself comfortable on the sofa.

'Really? What bits of kit would that be then?' I stay where I am near the door. I feel awkward and uneasy. He has a look in his eye that I have seen

before. A hungry look.

‘Medical kit. You wouldn’t understand.’ He stretches his hand out to me. ‘No more shop talk; come and sit next to me, my beautiful wife. It’s been a while since we’ve had some time alone.’

Oh no, please no. ‘We aren’t alone. Iona’s here, you silly thing.’

‘Iona’s sleeping, I presume?’ His smile has gone. His grey eyes are cold.

‘Yes, but she’s probably going to wake any moment.’ I have to change his mood, get his mind away from sex. I perch on the edge of the armchair, sigh and run my fingers through my hair as if I’m fed up. ‘Oh, and don’t be angry. I know it’s bad timing, love, but I’m going to spend a few days with my mum. Said I’d be there tomorrow. She’s not well, you see; it’s her back. She fell over and...’

‘You’re going to Cornwall *again*?’ Simon knocks back the whisky, stands up, immediately pours another.

‘Well, yes. I wouldn’t go normally but, as I said, my mum...’

‘You’re never bloody here!’

‘Shh, you’ll wake Iona.’ I offer a placating smile. ‘And it’s you who’s just been away for three days, not me, sweetheart.’ Once again my voice could win an award, while the rest of me is beside myself.

‘That was work. What shall I do next time, say I’m not going? Is there nobody else who can look after your mum?’

He’s not shouting now but I can tell he’s angry. ‘No, not really. She has my Aunty Lu and friends, but Lu is away on holiday. And relying on friends – it’s not the same as family, is it?’

‘I don’t know, Holly. I don’t have an awful lot to do with mine. I find they get on my nerves after a few days, as you know. I’d much prefer to spend time with my own little family.’ He softens his voice. ‘With you.’

My throat feels dry and I swallow a few times. What do I say now? Go for the reasoned approach. ‘I know you do, love. And believe me, there’s nothing I want more than to spend time with you too. But I’ve told her I’m coming and... well, I don’t see how I can get out of it.’

Simon huffs and leans forward, elbows on knees, runs his hand through his hair. Then his head comes up and his eyes lock on mine. I'm reminded of a rattlesnake ready to strike. 'Well, my dear Holly, I suggest we make the most of this evening then. I'll go and run a bath, get the wine from the fridge and light a few candles.' He moves to the kitchen door and turns, flicks those snake eyes up and down my body. 'And this time I will not take no for an answer.'

The nausea that has been building reaches my throat and I cover my mouth until it subsides. I have to get out of this, but how? He's humming again and then I hear the bath water running, smell the expensive bath oil he bought me last Christmas. No. No. NO! Simon and me in the bath having sex? I can't do it. Won't. I would rather drown him than have his hands on my body.

'Darling, can you get the wine and glasses?' His voice floats out to me.

No, darling. No, I can't, because I hate you.

Iona. I need to wake her up and then nothing can happen. 'Yes, okay!' I answer and then tiptoe past the bathroom to Iona's room. At the door I depress the handle but something makes me stop just as I'm about to step inside. I can sense that he's behind me, watching from along the corridor.

'That's where we keep the wine now?'

A sigh escapes me and I turn round. He's leaning against the bathroom door, naked, arms folded, grim-faced. 'It's Iona – thought I heard her whimper.'

'You were mistaken. Get the wine.'

'Let me just check...'

'I'll check. Get the wine.'

His eyes never leave mine; his jaw is set, his chest rising and falling, his penis semi-erect. This is a side to Simon I've not seen and it scares me. He moves towards me and I sidestep, go to the kitchen and grab the wine and glasses. When I return, he's walking back to the bathroom. 'She's sound asleep, though we knew she would be, didn't we?'

In the bathroom he takes the wine and glasses, puts them on the side. Candlelight flickers, though can't soften his determined glare. He's pours

the wine and then unzips my top. *No. God, no.* I move away from him. ‘Look, I’m not sure if I’m ready yet. You know I haven’t felt like sex and...’

‘Oh, how could I not?’ His eyes flash and then he smiles, makes his voice soft. ‘This evening is where it stops. You’re clearly having problems getting your mind around having a baby, becoming a mother, and then returning to a sexual being afterwards. It isn’t unusual and I promise I will be very gentle...’

‘Having *a* baby? I had two babies, Simon. Two.’ This isn’t the best response given I want to keep him on side, but it’s the only one I have.

The wine disappears down his throat in a few gulps and he slams the glass down on the side of the bath so hard I think it will break. ‘I haven’t forgotten; I suffered too! But, for God’s sake, it’s about time you tried to move on a little, Holly.’ His tone is calm, yet all the more chilling for it.

A rage flares in my gut but I daren’t give vent to it. Walk away. Just walk away. As I turn to leave, I feel his fingers encircle my wrist and yank me round so hard that I cry out.

‘Shh, you’ll wake the baby,’ he says with a humourless chuckle. ‘I had hoped to have you bathed, get the baby stink off you, but never mind.’

Then I’m against his chest, his arms pinning me to him, his mouth on my neck, my breasts spilling over my bra, exposed as they are now he’s unzipped my top.

‘Get off me!’ I scream in his ear but he takes no notice. Shoves me against the bathroom wall so hard my teeth snap together, lifts my skirt, fumbles with my knickers as he presses his erection into my thigh.

‘You’re going to do your bloody duty and enjoy it,’ he pants in my face.

Instinct takes over. I stop struggling. He gives me a lascivious grin, and then I bring my knee up into his balls so fast I lose my balance, and as he doubles up in pain, I fall to the floor. On my hands and knees I crawl past him, but almost immediately feel a sharp pain on the back of my leg. Twisting round I see a length of leather in his hand; he’s still bent over a little and his face is contorted with a mixture of pain and fury. He roars and I see the belt buckle coming down for a second time. I’m too quick and

scoot out into the corridor and into Iona's room, wedging a chair under the handle, just in time. Thank God.

He's hammering on the door and rattling the handle. 'Let me in, damn you! How DARE you knee me in the bollocks? HOW DARE YOU!'

'It's a wonder I didn't put a knife in you after what you've done! You are EVIL!' Iona starts to scream the place down so I scoop her up. My heart is racing and sinking all at the same time. Damn my runaway tongue. He's gone quiet. Please don't let him realise what I meant. He can't know I know he's having an affair... or he'll insist I stay here, talk it through, or God knows what else. I shush my daughter and pace up and down, then he thumps on the door just once.

'What do you mean by that? After what I've done?' His voice is calm yet menacing.

'You tried to rape me, for God's sake!'

'I was being forceful, not trying to rape you. And that's not what you meant anyway, is it? You said what I *have* done, not what I *tried* to do.'

Shit! Now what? I shush Iona some more and say, 'I mean, what you *were* doing in the bloody bathroom. Why are you playing semantics?' A pause. 'Unless you have done something else?'

'Don't be stupid.' Those words sound cagey, unsure.

'How could you, Simon?' My voice cracks. 'I can't believe you... would be so... horrible.' There are tears rolling down my face. Not because I'm surprised at anything he could ever do any more, but because I'm terrified of being alone with him for the rest of the night. Iona is already falling back to sleep on my shoulder.

'Oh, Holly, I'm sorry, I really am. But I wanted you so much... it's been months now, four if you count the pregnancy.'

Four for me. A matter of hours, I'd warrant, for him. 'But that's not the way to make me feel ready is it? I was terrified of you.' I wait a full ten seconds. 'In fact I'm staying in here until the morning.' Pressing my ear to the door I hear him curse softly and sigh.

'I'll save you the bother.' He sounds resigned. 'I'll go to a hotel and we'll start afresh when you come back from Cornwall. How long will you

be gone?’

Relief runs through my tense muscles and I lean my forehead against the wood. ‘A week, ten days?’ I have no clue how long it will take to get my boy back.

‘Okay. Take as long as you need. I just want us back to normal, Holly. Please believe me, I am so, so sorry for what I did – tried to do.’

His voice sounds genuine, but I can tell it isn’t. I know he’s furious and I won’t have heard the last of it. Simon doesn’t do losing. But for now it doesn’t matter. For now he’s leaving me alone and I can bolt the door once he’s gone. The door to this apartment that was never my home. I won’t be back here again, apart from to collect my belongings. This thought gives me some comfort as I lay my daughter back to sleep. Ten minutes later he says goodbye and I hear the front door close.

It’s a full twenty minutes before I remove the chair from the handle and check he’s really gone. He has. I bolt and chain the door and then head for the wine bottle. I down one glass in a few minutes but then take my time with the second. I need a clear head tomorrow when I see Demi again. Jowan spoke to her on the phone and gave her a very brief outline of what had happened. She begged to speak to me, to tell me she was sorry, but I couldn’t do that on the phone. Besides, do I really blame her for doubting my story? This whole nightmare seems too terrible to be the truth. I doubted her too. So we’re even. Perhaps I will wake up in the morning and find it has all been a dream. If only...

Chapter Eighteen

A recent summer shower has awakened the verdant green of the landscape – a patchwork of hills and valleys dotted with brown farms and white sheep. Crystal-blue skies growing in confidence soon banish the remnants of rainclouds and, once again, beyond the car windscreen, the world looks idyllic. Inside my head things are very different. Inside my head are a tangle of thoughts and feelings, clashing, writhing and tying themselves in knots.

It started this morning when I met up with Jowan. I was so relieved Simon hadn't returned at the last minute to block our escape, and so happy to see Jowan's beautiful smiling face pop round the corner of the underground car park, that I almost wept. With a huge effort I'd managed to be upbeat, excited about heading to Cornwall and then to Devon, and told him a whopper of a lie that Simon had been fine last night. I said that he'd come home a bit late and was so tired from the flight and the conference that he'd gone to bed within the hour. What else could I do? If he knew the truth he would have tracked Simon down and torn him limb from limb. The vengeful part of me would pay good money to see that. The sensible part painted a smile on my face and made me act 'normal'. I sometimes wonder if I will be normal ever again.

For the past four hours, Jowan has interspersed our conversation with things like, 'This is the last leg now. We'll soon be home with your boy.' And, 'Just think, this time next week, you might have Ruan in your arms.' This is to make me feel better, I know, but it's beginning to get on my nerves. It might take far longer than a week. In fact, this time next week I might be under arrest for trying to steal the Jensons' baby. My face might be plastered all over the tabloids with headlines such as 'Grieving Mother of Dead Twin Steals Baby Boy from Cradle'. Or, less charitably, 'Ex-Model and Junky Commits Evil Act'.

The idyllic world whizzes past the window at seventy miles per hour and in the distance I can see the Broadwoodwidge trees, a circle of mighty oaks crowning the hill that slopes down to the A30. When Cornwall dwellers see those, they know they're only eight miles or so from the Cornish border and so nearly home. I call them the 'nearly home trees'. But what does that mean now? If we do get Ruan back, where do we live? It certainly can't be Cornwall as that's the first place Mark would look. No question.

And what would we do for money? I did quite a bit of waitressing before the modelling, but the babies would have to go to nursery while I was at work. How would I afford that on a waitress's wage and somewhere to rent too? Fuck! It all seems so hopeless. I pretend to look at my phone while I try and compose myself and curse under my breath for getting so emotional. Then I think that it isn't surprising, given the fact that I narrowly escaped being raped last night, plus the whole nightmare I'm living through.

I look up just in time to see the nearly home trees flashing past, and my heart sets itself on a path for the beach house. Closing my eyes I can almost feel the wind in my hair and the pull of the ocean. In the interests of survival, I need to block any thought of the immediate future from my mind, apart from Ruan of course. One step at a time. Slowly my thoughts stop their writhing and a peace of sorts settles across my mind. If I could sleep I'd feel better; there was precious little of it for me last night.

'Holly. Holly, we're here, love.'

Jowan's voice startles me out of sleep. I'd been dangerously close to a cliff edge, looking down at the ocean smashing over rocks below. My heart is thumping and I grab his hand – a lifeline. 'Oh... thank goodness you're here. I nearly fell.'

'Eh?' Jowan says, a half-smile on his lips.

'Don't mind me.' I fake a yawn, stretch, so I can release his hand. 'Just dreaming.'

Iona has slept for most of the journey, thank goodness, and is just stirring as Jowan lifts the bags out of the boot and takes them up the path.

‘You taking the tiny one in, or am I?’ he asks as he jogs back down from the door of the beach house.

‘You can if you like. I’m still half asleep.’ I’m not really. I just like to see her in his arms. He is so good with her and, tiny as she is, it’s as if she knows he’s a good person. She relaxes so much more with him than with her father. That’s partly because he rarely picks her up, and partly because he’s an arsehole. Babies know these things.

An hour later I realise I haven’t thought about reality since we walked back into the house. Jowan had the grand tour and I could see he adored the place almost as much as I do. Then we sat on the balcony and watched the wind play with the ocean, beers in our hands and a bottle of milk for Iona. Against my wishes, my imagination pretended we were a little family. Here we were, just relaxing in the late-afternoon sun. Our son was visiting his gran and she’d be back soon with him. Then we’d all have a walk on the beach before popping into Newquay for a fish supper.

Though all these imaginings are silly, naive and possibly destructive in the end, I can’t help it. Jowan’s leaning on the balcony looking along the beach at the surfers. He looks so gorgeous with the sunlight turning his hair into a tumble of golden curls, his eyes reflecting the blue of the ocean, a ready smile for me each time our eyes meet. Of course I’m not going to get totally carried away with it. It’s never going to happen... once bitten and all. But it’s nice to have these little fantasies, because unless we are very lucky, the next few days aren’t going to be very much fun at all.

I’m in the kitchen cooking spag bol when Demi and Alex arrive. Jowan answers the door and I can hear them all chattering in the hallway, and then there’s an awkward silence as they troop into the kitchen. Demi gives me a tentative smile and I send a welcome one back. Jowan introduces Alex. Instantly I like him. He’s a mountain of a man: dark curly hair, a smiley face, bearded, kind hazel eyes. Alex is what I call a twinkly person and he greets me with a deep Scottish brogue and a hug that could crush your spine.

Still with one arm round my shoulder he turns to Jowan and Demi. ‘You weren’t joking when you said your best friend was a stunner, Dem,’ he

says, giving his girlfriend a wink.

Demi fakes a grumpy face. ‘Okay, put her down now. That’s quite enough.’ Then she takes a step towards me, her head on one side, her arms open. ‘I don’t know what to say, love.’

I pull her to me and we don’t speak for a few moments. The boys shuffle about a bit and then go in search of wine and beer, talking too loudly about the journey down here. I hold her at arm’s length and say, ‘There’s nothing to be sorry for.’ And even though she hurt me last time I was down here, I realise I mean it. ‘I’d probably have reacted in exactly the same way if you’d come to me with such an unbelievable tale.’

Demi’s green eyes grow wide, serious. ‘Please believe I thought I was acting in your best interests.’

‘Of course you were. And with my history, it’s no wonder that you...’

‘But Jowan had no trouble accepting it all, did he?’ Demi’s bottom lip trembles and her eyes fill. ‘So why did your oldest and closest friend?’ To that there’s no answer, so I just hold her while she cries. Then she says, ‘Perhaps I have more of a protective or motherly instinct? Whereas Jowan just reacts in a knee-jerk way because he’s in love with you?’

‘Shh, he’s only in the living room, for goodness’ sake.’ I step away and busy myself with the Bolognese sauce to hide my flushed cheeks.

‘He SO is though.’

‘I have no idea and I cannot think about that, given my situation...’

Demi perches on a kitchen stool next to the breakfast bar and says in a low voice, ‘He is, because he told Alex; told me too, actually.’

My heart leaps and I’m annoyed with it. I point a wooden spoon at her. ‘Please stop. Jowan has been bloody marvellous these last few days and I know without a doubt that I wouldn’t have traced Ruan so quickly without him, if at all. Of that I’m certain. But this is neither the time nor the place for...’ I stop when I see Demi warning me with her eyes.

From the doorway behind me Jowan says, ‘Shall I open the wine for you two? I’ve just checked on Iona and I think she might possibly have another sleep after she’s been changed. Want me to do it for you?’

Turning to face him I hope my cheeks have calmed down a bit. ‘That would be perfect thanks, Jo.’ Damn it. Why am I calling him Jo now? It’s all this domesticity and talk of love. He is not Iona’s father, nor my husband, and I need to snap out of it.

Demi gives me a knowing look that says ‘told you he was in love with you’ and then says, ‘Actually Jowan, can you show me how to change her nappy, seeing as we’ll be looking after her? I haven’t ever done one!’ He laughs and they leave me alone.

I turn off the sauce and boil the water for spaghetti, but I feel sick. Everything is false, fake. Cooking, being with old friends, having a laugh – none of it is real. I think perhaps we are all acting like this, or I am at least, because my brain needs a safety valve. Pretending things are normal is what’s getting me through the nightmare of the letter, the affair, Neville, Yvonne, Jonathan and, in the last few days, finding out that Mark and his wife definitely have Ruan. Inside a rage is building, has been building since I realised the enormity of the betrayal. If I allow that rage free rein, we’ll be sunk.

So I ignore the incessant raw pain that claws at my insides day and night, the voice that repeats over and over that my boy has been stolen, and tell myself he’s waiting for me right now, not too far away. Tonight we’ll go through the motions, but tomorrow we’ll set out to bring him home. *Not much longer now, little one. Mummy will get you, no matter what it takes.*

Chapter Nineteen

According to the map, we should be in South Milton in just under two hours. Thank God the Jensons' second home wasn't abroad. That would have been so much more difficult. I pack the last of my things and once more check the instructions on how to look after Iona for Demi and Alex. It will break my heart to leave her, but taking her along is just too dangerous. God knows what might happen.

Already I am worried about my mum being suspicious. She asked if she could come over yesterday when I said I was coming down here for a few days, but I said I needed a few days alone – some 'me time' walking on the beach. She seemed a bit miffed and not altogether convinced, but said she'd be over to see me and Iona as soon as I gave her the go ahead. I hadn't wanted to tell her we were coming at all, but had to, just in case she phoned the flat and Simon answered. Mum had phoned Demi to ask if I was all right and check I'd not fallen out with Simon. She said she was getting a bit concerned because I came down here without him so often. Demi assuaged her fears, I hope. I couldn't possibly tell her what was really happening. The shock of it all might make her do something daft like contact Simon, or call the police – both. A mother's instinct is to protect, fight for her children, but in this case, fighting for me would make everything irreparably worse.

Last night went okay. For a while, the four of us talked about everything that had happened, but I put a stop to further discussion when Demi and Alex went down the old road of calling the police. Why is it that everyone thinks they know best? In the end, they said they understood my reasons and promised to just be my support. But Alex inadvertently scraped a raw nerve that's been giving me a twinge now and then. He asked if Ruan would miss Angela. He has no idea about babies, and what they know or don't know at just under three months old. Demi pounced on him and said that,

know her or not, miss her or not, I was his mother and Ruan would soon adjust.

Often since I discovered he was still alive, I have woken with Alex's question running through my head. Providing they have looked after him properly, loved him, he might miss them. Mightn't he? He'll be taken from everything he's ever known. Smells, sights, sounds. But in the long run he'll thank me. If he'd been a toddler it would be much harder, I think. How can anything ever replace his true mother's love? I believe he'll bond with me quickly... or at least I hope so. Whatever the case, he'll soon be back where he belongs.

*

South Milton is a small but beautiful Devon village about three miles from its larger Kingsbridge neighbour. It really does look like a backdrop to *Midsomer Murders*, yet if possible even more picturesque with its thatched cottages and beautiful old church. I so wish we were here under different circumstances, because it is just stunning. But we aren't, and that's that.

Because it is so tiny, there are only a few choices for a bed for the night and we booked into a lovely old farmhouse B&B online before setting off this morning. In my wildest imaginings, we won't have to actually stay there at all, because we'll just waltz up to the Jensons' house and take my boy. But life isn't that simple, is it?

We have had an almost silent journey here because I have been very uncommunicative. Since we left the house I have been worried about Iona, Ruan, the future, everything. I was very emotional this morning when I kissed my daughter goodbye. I know I'm just at the end of phone and Demi is a capable person, even though she's not had many dealings with babies, but I have never left her for more than a few hours. What if something happens to her? Jowan has tried to calm me and assure me nothing will, but I don't want to talk to him. In the end he gives up and concentrates on driving.

Fear of losing your children or something happening to them isn't unusual for a parent, is it? But because I actually *did* lose my boy, those fears are all the more real. Jowan tries to understand, but how can he? He's

not a parent and so whatever he has to say is all a little twee. Too many clichés and placations. And the other reason I haven't spoken much on the journey is because there is this 'love' information doing lazy laps around my mind. Demi should have kept her big trap shut last night. It's made travelling in such close proximity to Jowan hard, because now I know for certain he loves me, every little look or smile he gives me seems to suggest so much more. I don't want it to and the whole situation is irritating me. All I care about is finding my boy and getting out of here.

At the B&B we check in and tell lots of lies about what we are doing here. I hate it. Deception. Debs and Michael, the people who run the place, are so lovely, as was Isadora according to Jowan, but we have no choice, do we? This time we are travel journalists doing research about Devon and Cornwall. We are writing a book together and hopefully it should be out next year. Just friends, hence separate rooms.

'A friend of mine mentioned that there's a lovely old house here called Harebrook or Harefields? Do you know it?' Jowan drops casually into the conversation. I try not to look surprised, because we were still wondering on the way up here how we would find out the exact location of the Jensons'.

'Harefields,' Debs says. 'Yes, it is gorgeous. Used to be the old manor house back in the day.'

'So it would be worth taking a photo or two for the book?' I say.

'It would. All red brick, gravel drive and sweeping grounds,' Michael says. 'You'd have to get permission from the owners, I expect. The Jensons are pleasant, but they don't really mix in the village much. Their main home is in London and they keep themselves to themselves pretty much. I did hear they have a baby now though, and the wife has been spending more time here.'

'Lovely,' Jowan says. 'Is it hard to find?'

'Not at all. Just follow the road round out of the village and it's in the clearing on the hill surrounded by trees. Can't miss it. It has a grand view out to the sea.'

In my room with the door shut I slap Jowan on the back. 'That was brilliant; you're a natural liar, Jowan.' The sarcastic tone of my voices surprises me.

It wasn't intended, well not really, but the stress of everything is getting to me.

Jowan raises an eyebrow and folds his arms. 'Well, at least I got the information we needed.'

'Yes, you did. I'm sorry... it's just...'

'I know exactly what you mean. It's rubbish having to pretend. Let's go and have a bite to eat at the cafe by the beach and then drive up to the Jensons'.'

'How can you think about eating at a time like this?'

'We need to eat. We left early without breakfast and an army marches on its stomach, don't forget. I can't think with an empty belly.'

'A two-man army...'

I look out of the bedroom window and see green fields leading to the hills not too far away. My boy is waiting over there. The last thing I want to do is eat, but Jowan does and we need energy, I guess. Talk of armies has me wondering about Jowan's experience again, and before I have time to think properly, out comes, 'Jowan, I suspect you had a really traumatic time in the army. You said the way you behaved with Neville was to do with it, but you wouldn't say more.'

He's just getting ready to leave the room but then turns quickly. 'Eh? Why do you say that?' A shutter has started to wind down across his face and his eyes turn ice-blue.

Why the hell did I open my mouth about that right at this particular time? Don't we have enough stress? 'Sorry, let's leave it for now and go to the cafe. You're right. We can't think straight on an empty...'

'No. I want to know what you mean,' Jowan says quietly. He sits on the bed, fixes me with his no-nonsense stare.

Buggeration. I turn back to the view, say to a field of sheep, 'It was when you were staying at my apartment the first night. I'd got up to get Iona a bottle and you yelled out in your sleep – no, take cover, over and over. Then you sat up with your eyes open, flailing your arms, and I thought you were awake, but you weren't.'

Jowan sighs. I turn round and he closes his eyes, flops back on my bed, one arm across his face. He says nothing and I watch his chest rise and fall,

listen to his rapid breathing, and curse my big mouth again. Just as I'm about to say we should go, he says, 'I witnessed a roadside bomb going off. There were two patrol trucks. I was in the second one. One minute there was a truckload of my mates pulling up to the curb in the marketplace, the next it was raining body parts.'

My hand flies to my mouth and I sit on the end of the bed. 'Oh, Jowan, I'm so sorry, I...'

'I haven't finished. I jump out yelling for people to take cover because the truck's ablaze; lumps of metal were flying through the air. But the market was busy and I saw people stumbling towards us.' There's a sob in his throat. 'They were on fire, Holly. Men, women and children... on fire. I can't describe the sounds they were making, the smell of their flesh...'

'Oh Jesus, no! Stop. Please stop.' He looks at me, but doesn't see. I know he's far away, lost in the horror of that memory. My poor Jowan. I realise I'm shaking and I wrap my arms around myself. I daren't wrap them around him.

Jowan's eyes refocus and he shakes his head. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go into detail like that. It's not something I talk about – well, apart from the counsellor the army provided. That helped some, but it's never far away from my mind. How could it be? Once you've witnessed something like that, it stays with you.'

'Of course. No wonder you have nightmares. Please believe me that I'm so sorry for bringing it up. I hadn't planned to, it just came out. My head is all over the place.'

'Bound to be. I'm glad you told me anyway, as I had no idea I shout out in my sleep. Maybe I need more counselling.'

'Perhaps you do...' I was going to add that he might because of the overzealous 'handling' of Neville too, but this definitely wasn't the time.

'I'm just so glad I got out when I did. I hated everything about it. What it was turning me into. One of the worst things was that nobody really knew why we were there or whether we were doing any good or not. It's just one horrendous shambles.'

'Afghanistan, wasn't it?'

‘Yeah, but I mean, Syria, Iraq, the Middle East in general. When you look at the history of that area and our involvement – when I say ours, I mean Europe’s – it makes me so angry. It’s complicated, granted, but half the problems were caused by us in the first place.’

My instinct is to put my arms around him, kiss his cheek, make him feel safe. But that would be a disaster the way I’m feeling. It could lead to more... no, it *would* lead to more. I smile and touch his shoulder. ‘I’m glad you got out too, while you’re still my... still the Jowan I knew.’

Jowan smiles and the horrors of the past are gone from his eyes. ‘What were you going to say?’ I frown and shrug, though know exactly what he means. ‘You said “my”.’

‘Did I? No idea.’ I stand and walk to the door. ‘Right, let’s go.’

The cafe on the beach is grounded, cool and real. This is what Jowan says at intervals as he demolishes a huge burger with all the trimmings. I pick at a sandwich, my thoughts far away on the blue horizon. I wish I was on a boat with my children, heading to a desert island. Nobody could find us, or steal my Ruan away ever again. I’m dimly aware of Jowan talking through a mouthful of burger about surfing and the music in the cafe. Then a spark of irritation snaps my head from the window and my eyes onto his. Is he crazy? How can we have a normal conversation, with our imminent visit to the Jensons’ hanging over us like a thunder cloud?

‘Can we go soon?’ I say. My voice is flat, ironed out.

Jowan swallows and rinses the food down with a swig of Coke. ‘Yeah, just thought we’d try and relax a bit. We can’t show up pretending to be journalists if you’re screwed up with nerves.’

Relax a bit. I almost laugh out loud so bite the inside of my cheek. He has no idea how I feel.

No.

Bloody.

Idea.

The journalist act feels wrong all of a sudden. Wrong and stupid. ‘We’re dropping the journalist thing. We’re going as us. I am going as me, the

mother of my child.'

His eyes nearly pop out of his head and he chokes on the drink. 'But that's not going to help, is it?' he asks after getting his breath back. 'At least with the journalist thing she might allow us to wander round the place, pretending to get the best camera angles and stuff. Then we might get her, Angela, to relax enough to bring Ruan outside.'

'Where's our ID and camera?'

A sigh and a shrug. 'No ID. I have a camera in my rucksack; it's not grand but it...'

'We're going as us.' I stand and walk to the door. 'And we're going now.'

Inside my gut there are little churny cogs, pistons and pulleys too, all driven by a steam of fear and anxiety. Jowan hasn't said a word so far, just climbed in the car beside me and taken the wheel. Good. There's nothing more to be said. My plan, such as it is? To win Angela over, appeal to her as a woman. Surely she can see what she's doing is wrong. Beyond that I will let my instinct lead me.

A sidelong glance at Jowan's set profile tells me he's pissed off. It can't be helped. He promised to do as I asked the day at the flat when I said no heroics and that he must follow my lead and decisions. His help has been priceless and I'm so grateful he's by my side now, but I know I'm doing the right thing. Amongst the churny cogs, pistons and pulleys, there's a certainty and calm, and it's growing. Angela is the key to my boy's release.

*

Harefields is an imposing but beautiful building nestled between sweeping oaks on the crest of a hill. The car engine idles as we look up the drive and then, getting the nod from me, Jowan turns off the road and up to the gabled front door. We park next to a black four-by-four Mercedes and then Jowan cuts the engine. In the silence, my heartbeat thunders in my ears and I have to employ all the calming techniques I know. Jowan asks if I'm okay and I nod. Of course I'm not, but there's little point in saying so.

Once out of the car we walk a few steps, the gravel crunching underfoot, and then Jowan stops. ‘What’s that?’ he puts his head on one side, listens.

A melancholy cry splits the still air and I realise it’s a fox a little way off behind us. I turn and look back to the road and in the direction of the cry, and my breath is taken by the rolling fields, village and ocean beyond. My breath is taken again by another melancholy cry. The cry of a baby from somewhere in the house.

‘My boy. It’s my boy,’ I whisper, linking arms with Jowan before my knees give out.

He squeezes my hand. ‘Yes, at last.’

On hearing my boy’s cry, renewed strength and confidence surge through my core and I’m about to lift the brass knocker on the door, when an upstairs window opens and a woman sticks her head out. I don’t know what I was expecting – perhaps a ravishing beauty with immaculate hair and make-up – but this woman looks like a normal person. A person who has sole care of a young baby. Short, dark, messy hair, shadows under her green eyes indicating sleep deprivation, and a look on her face indicating that she’d like to murder us.

‘What do you want? I’m not buying anything.’

‘We’re not selling anything,’ Jowan says, because my tongue appears to be stuck to the roof of my mouth.

‘That’s what they all say. Look, my son has just this second gone to sleep and...’

‘But he’s not, is he?’ My tongue has become unstuck.

Angela frowns, looks surprised, but there is fear behind her eyes. ‘He’s not what?’

‘Your son.’ I glare at her. ‘He’s mine.’

Her face, already pale, turns ashen and her hand comes up, grabs the window frame. ‘What the hell are you talking about? Just leave before I call the police.’ Her voice betrays her apparent bravado.

‘You know that’s not true, Angela,’ I say, trying to be as calm as possible. I don’t want her to slam the window on us. ‘Please. Please, if you

love my boy, you know it's wrong to keep him from me. Can you even *begin* to imagine how I feel?'

Angela opens and closes her mouth, shakes her head in bewilderment. 'How... how do you know my name? I...'

Jowan snorts and there's fire in his eyes. 'Is that the issue here? How we know your...'

A quick elbow to his ribs shuts him up. 'Look, I know you couldn't have children and I'm sorry.' My eyes find hers again and hold them. 'A new baby must have been a dream come true for you, but...'

'He said you were sectioned... might not ever get out of hospital because you had tried to...' Angela's voice trails off and she stares beyond me, out over the sea. She looks totally destroyed.

'Who said?' Jowan snaps. Angela ignores him. Just stares ahead. 'Angela, who said, and tried to do what?'

Her head snaps back down to us. To me. 'My husband, Mark... he said you had tried to kill yourself when you were carrying my Harry. Said you *would* kill him once he was born... you'd been an addict in the past. You were psychotic, a danger to yourself and others.'

A wave of anger and indignation threatens to drown me and I hold on to Jowan again. Take deep breaths. How could Mark have said such vile things, told such lies? But then why am I surprised? *And she said – my Harry... he is not yours and his name isn't fucking Harry!*

'Well, your husband is a bloody liar then, isn't he?' Jowan growls, throws his hands up.

Gathering my strength and resolve to be calm I look up at her. She has tears rolling down her cheeks and is shaking her head as if she's trying to banish unwelcome thoughts. Then hope enters her eyes and she says, 'You might have been released, might have hired an unscrupulous doctor to say you were fit to leave and...' Angela ends on a sigh. She knows she's talking rubbish.

'Look, come down and we'll discuss it. I'll tell you exactly what happened to me and...'

Angela sends a humourless laugh down. ‘No. If I come down you’ll barge in and steal my son. You have no proof he’s yours and...’

I expected this and a flash of inspiration has me holding my phone up to her as I scroll down the photos. ‘From what you’ve said, you obviously don’t know my son has a sister. Iona is missing her twin too. If it’s true I’m a danger, which I’m clearly not, because the whole thing is a huge lie, would they allow me to keep my daughter?’ Her mouth drops open and she clutches at the window frame again.

‘He’s a twin?’

‘Yes.’ I hold up more photos. ‘Please come down and...’

She holds up her finger and shakes her head. ‘No. I can’t see those photos properly; they could be of any baby. The whole story is preposterous. Go away before I call the police.’ There’s a cold light in her eyes and a new edge to her voice, a determined no-nonsense edge I haven’t heard before, and it scares me.

‘You don’t want the police involved, believe me,’ Jowan says quietly. ‘Come down to the French windows over there.’ He cranes his neck around the side of the house. ‘They look very secure and probably triple-glazed. Holly can show you the photos close up, and if I tell you my number, she can talk to you on my phone. Please, Mrs Jenson, just listen to what Holly has to say?’ Jowan gives me a quick sidelong glance and squeezes my hand.

Angela looks ready to just shut the window and perhaps even call the police, but then she stops, heaves a sigh. She’s obviously struggling with her conscience. Then the cold chips leave her eyes. ‘Okay, I’ll come down. But I warn you, my husband will be here in a few minutes and he won’t be happy to find you here.’

Chapter Twenty

While we wait, I grab Jowan and hiss in his ear, ‘You told me Isadora said Mark only comes down at weekends!’

He hisses back, ‘Yes, that’s right. But it is Thursday; perhaps he’s decided to have a long weekend.’

‘Shit. Shit! Just when we’re making a breakthrough.’ I fold my arms, look down the drive, then walk round to the French windows.

Jowan follows me. ‘Calm down. She might be lying about that, just to warn us not to try and break in or something. Anyway, she’s agreed to talk on the phone. It could still work.’

That’s true. I can tell Angela is almost convinced, and thank God for Jowan’s phone idea. ‘Good thinking about the phone, Jo.’ I offer him a quick smile and then Angela appears at the windows.

I hold my phone centimetres from the pane and go through all the pics I have of Iona from her being born until now. There’s some from before I knew about Ruan being alive as well. Me and Simon, proud parents – me smiling up at him, he cradling our daughter. When Angela sees those she puts a trembling hand to her mouth, sways a little. Then Jowan’s phone rings. Wordlessly he hands it to me.

‘Tell me what happened.’

I tell her, and when I’m done, she sinks into a chair and sobs her heart out. ‘Please, Angela, let us in. You know it’s the right thing to do. I know you must love him but you have to believe my story now, don’t you?’ I say into the phone. A sob is in my throat but I swallow it down.

She cries for a while longer then rubs her eyes, says in a resigned tone, ‘Yes, I suppose I must believe you... but why would Jonathan *do* such a thing? He’s a doctor, for God’s sake! How could he and Mark do that to

you, your husband, be involved in something so awful? It's too despicable to contemplate.'

My cheeks are wet now too and I shake my head. 'That's something I have yet to find out. I'm guessing Jonathan must have been blackmailed, threatened in some way. Your husband must be the blackmailer... seems the most likely answer to me. I have no solid proof it was Jonathan of course, but everything points to him.'

Angela asks why I haven't asked, haven't told Simon, and I go through the whole scenario again – the fact that he wouldn't believe me, that he's a powerful man, friends in high places, fears of having Iona taken from me. Angela gives a wry smile. 'If you think *your* husband is powerful and controlling, then you haven't met mine.' She stands up and comes over to the window. 'What he says goes... I have lived to regret challenging him.' She shrugs one arm out of her light cardigan and all along her arm there's an ugly twisted scar from shoulder to wrist.

My breath is taken but Jowan says, 'He did that? He burned you?'

Angela nods. 'Yes. Last year he was drunk. He was calling me a useless barren bitch because I couldn't give him children. I said he was more to blame as his sperm count was so low and he flipped. Held me down on the hob plates.'

'The bastard!' I say and Jowan calls him something worse.

'Yes, he really is. Since that incident, I have no money of my own; he stopped my account. I must do exactly as he says. He threatened to hurt my family if I had any further contact with them, and warned me not to talk to the neighbours. I was like his creature, a slave...' Angela takes a moment and blows her nose on a tissue.

'When he arrived home that day with Harry and told me that tale about you – that Simon couldn't cope with him, didn't want him actually, was almost on the edge of a breakdown himself after what you'd put him through, was grateful we could take him off his hands, that he knew he'd have a good home – I asked no questions. I was totally shocked, of course, but too scared to do anything about it. Just went along with him and came down to Devon.' Her eyes leave ours and she flushes. 'And of course... I did so want a baby.'

‘Dear God, I’m so sorry,’ I say and mean it.

She carries on as if I haven’t spoken. ‘It was the perfect answer for us, you see – well, for him. He was reluctant to go through an adoption agency. Mark is such a snob. He was worried a baby coming to us might have come from bad stock. From the wrong side of the tracks. Mark said your bloodline was problematic – Cornish yokels, he called you – but at least we could be sure that half of Harry’s DNA was Simon’s. Simon at least came from a good family, respectable, no rubbish there.’

‘How dare he!’ I spit, fury flooding through my core.

‘Is he really on his way here?’ Jowan asks, his face a mask of anger.

Angela’s head jerks up. ‘Shit, yes! He’s coming down early as he’s got a meeting tomorrow in Exeter and functions there all weekend. Oh my God, you have to go. He’ll be here any moment!’

‘No. I think I might like a word or two with Mr Jenson,’ Jowan says, looking at me for assent.

I don’t know what to say. There’s a whirl of arguments in my head. If we stay we’ll get into an argument or, in Jowan’s case, a fight with Jenson. He might call the police and then my fears will become a reality. I might never get my boy back. But if we leave and Angela, through fear and worry at the thought of losing ‘her’ son, confesses we’ve been here, he might force her to go with him – take Ruan out of the country or something. But then the decision is taken out of my hands as we hear a crunch of car tyres racing up the gravel drive behind us. Angela ends the call and hurries from the window.

A flashy red Alfa Romeo screeches to a halt inches from the door and out leaps Mark Jenson. He’s even taller than I remember and marches up to us, his eyes ablaze, two spots of high colour on his cheeks. ‘What the hell are you doing here?’ He directs this at me and flicks his gaze over Jowan as if he’s scum.

‘What do you think?’ I say. ‘You have my boy in there and I want him back!’ My voice sounds stronger than I feel.

A flicker of panic shows behind his eyes, then it’s gone. ‘Don’t be bloody ridiculous! Your son is dead.’ He looks up at his house. ‘Have you

being hassling my wife?’ He doesn’t wait for a reply but shapes up to Jowan. ‘And who the fuck are you?’

I get in before Jowan can. ‘He’s a friend who offered to give me a bit of support.’ With a flash of my eyes I warn Jowan to keep quiet.

‘Oh, I bet he’s helping you.’ Mark gives me a lecherous grin. ‘In and out of bed if Simon’s tales are true. Seems you won’t go near your husband these days. No wonder he’s screwing someone else.’ Though I knew about his affair, hearing it confirmed out loud takes my breath. Then Jowan gives Mark a shove in the chest. Not enough to knock him off balance, but enough to enrage him. ‘Oh, fancy your chances, eh, you little shit? Come on then!’ Mark shrugs his jacket off, lets it fall to the ground and takes a swing.

Jowan ducks it easily and lands one square on Mark’s jaw. He goes down on the gravel, cursing. He’s up again in seconds, shouting, swearing, spittle spraying my cheek. Jowan’s ready in a boxer’s stance, calm, unafraid, but I step between them.

‘No! This won’t help. We are here to get my son and we won’t go until we do. We don’t want to fight with you. Surely you can see what you’ve done is wrong?’

Mark laughs. ‘You have to be fucking kidding me. Out of my way, you mad bitch.’ He goes to push me, but Jowan dances behind him, gets him in a headlock, and forces him to his knees. He struggles but he’s no match for Jowan, who gives him a few sharp body punches. He can’t hold him for ever though.

Before I have time to change my mind, I pull Jowan’s army knife from my bag. I put it there ‘just in case’ the night before. Just in case of what, I had no idea, but now I do. Jowan shoots me a shocked expression but goes along with me. I put the knife to Mark’s throat.

‘Where are your house keys?’

Mark stops struggling, grows infuriatingly calm, drops all pretence. ‘There’s no way in hell I’m giving you my keys. You’ll have to kill me first. If you take *our* son, my wife will call the police and they’ll be here in minutes.’ He nods towards the house. ‘That’s if she hasn’t done so already.’

‘Really?’ Jowan says into Mark’s ear. ‘You really want the police here? I think they’ll be most interested in our story.’

‘They’ll see you for what you are – a couple of crazy people. You arrive here, scare my wife and child, attack me – I have your DNA all over me, a lump the size of Everest on my jaw, and you are on MY property. I’m very close friends with the Chief Commissioner of...’

‘Oh, spare me the “I have friends in high places” act. Angela will...’

‘Will what? You’ve spoken to her?’

No. Don’t drop her in it, Jowan! I try to warn him with my eyes but he’s not looking at me and says, ‘Yes, we have as a matter of...’

‘We spoke to her through the upstairs window just before you arrived,’ I say in a rush, my hands shaking on the knife. ‘You did a good job on her – she refused to believe me, but she was a little curious as to how I had managed to ‘escape’ from an institution. I’m sure Jowan was about to say she wouldn’t take much more convincing?’

Jowan nods his understanding. ‘Yes, I mean, how could she trust a nasty, conniving, evil bastard like you?’ he hisses.

Mark turns his mouth down at the corners. ‘You both ought to be in a fucking institution, coming here, talking all kinds of nonsense! Now get that knife from my throat unless you intend to use it, and get the fuck off my property before I call the police.’

Jowan looks at me, a question in his eyes. I nod. We both know Jenson has the upper hand theoretically, if not physically. He releases him and Mark leaps up, brushes himself down.

‘We have friends who know the truth,’ I say. ‘People who will back us. It won’t be all plain sailing for you, no matter who you know.’ My voice sounds weak, beaten.

‘The truth? You wouldn’t know truth if it bit you on your arse... and let me tell you, I don’t take kindly to threats. You have absolutely no idea who you’re up against, my dear. And how the hell did you find out about my address here?’

I just glare at him, shake my head.

He shrugs. ‘Hmm, well, Simon will not be at all pleased when I phone him in a moment. When I tell him you’ve come to my home, all guns blazing, accusing me of taking your child. He was so pleased we’d been blessed with a son at last, when we least expected it. Your life will be in tatters...’ His hawk eyes give me the once-over and flick to Jowan. ‘Both of your lives. And I’ll help him out there if he needs me.’

Jowan looks like he’s about to attack Mark again so I hold my hand up and stand between them. ‘Look, give Jowan and me a moment to discuss this, okay?’

Mark picks up his briefcase and jacket. ‘I can’t see what there is to discuss, but go ahead. Don’t take all day though, I’m a busy man.’ He walks towards his front door and leans against one of the marble columns, looking at us as if we’re some unpleasant virus under a microscope.

Out of earshot Jowan says, ‘That man needs a good hiding and then some.’

‘I agree, but you won’t be the one to give it to him.’ I lean in to make sure none of my words find their way to Mark on the still air. ‘We’re here to get my boy and grievous bodily harm and breaking and entering isn’t a good idea. You heard what he said, heard what Angela said; saw what he did to her. Simon and Mark are cut from the same cloth, but Mark’s cloth is more expensive, and the money behind him means he can and will do anything. I can tell by the look in his eye, he’s a demon. He forced Jonathan into this somehow.’

‘So, what are you proposing we do to get Ruan back?’ Jowan’s frustration is palpable.

‘We wait and hope. Instinct tells me that Angela is the key to it all. We have her number and we’ll try and get her to see reason. We were getting somewhere just before...’

‘She’s terrified of him. There’s no way she’d go behind his back...’ Jowan sets his jaw and looks away over the sea.

‘You could be right, but we can try. Also, Mark’s reaction just now gives me a bit of hope. If he wanted to call the police, was confident we’d be chucked in a cell somewhere, he’d have called them. There would be sirens wailing up the valley right now.’

Jowan frowns at me. 'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying that he no more wants the police involved than we do. Look, I'm going over to talk to him now. You stay here because you're like a red rag to his bull. I'll beg him not to talk to Simon, say I'm terrified he'll take Iona from me, that he'll believe Mark over me. In return, we'll leave and not come back.'

'Yeah, right.'

'Trust me, I will be very convincing. Might even manage a few tears the way I'm feeling at the moment.' I try a watery smile, but the corners of my mouth turn down instead.

Jowan does the telltale shoving of his hands through his hair again and chucks in a few twiddles of his leather wrist strap for good measure. 'Well, I can't see that it will work. Why don't we call the police if you think he's as worried as we are about them?'

'Do we *really* have to do this again? And I didn't say he's *as* worried...' A sigh of frustration leaves my mouth. 'Right, that's it, and that's all. Just stay here by the car, Jowan,' I snap and I hurry over to Mark. Then a thought occurs and I go back to Jowan. 'Text Angela and tell her Mark knows nothing of what passed between us, apart from what we told him, okay? Tell her where we're staying too.' He nods and I leave him to his task.

'You and the tousle-haired lover having a few words, hmm?' Mark grins and fixes his haughty gaze on me as I reach him.

Keeping my expression neutral, I say, 'He isn't my lover, but yes, a few. The thing is, I need to talk to you in private about Simon. I'm already scared of him, but I've kept that to myself. He's so unpredictable now and if he knew I'd been here, saying that you had Ruan...'

Mark raises a brow. 'Ruan?'

'That's the name of *my* boy.' I stick my chin out, fold my arms.

'How quaint.'

Letting that pass, I say, 'As I was saying, Simon is capable of anything. He tried to rape me the other night when...'

Mark clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth. ‘Most distasteful. He really should know better than that...’

I look up into his dark eyes and see humour and insincerity behind them. I want to slap the smirk off his face, but that would get me nowhere. Instead I look at the floor, put my hand over my mouth, and think of Ruan somewhere behind the door a few steps away. Aching close, yet so far. Then the tears come. ‘Please, Mark.’ I look up at him, tears rolling down my face. ‘If you phone Simon like you said you would, I agree our life will be in tatters. But he might go further than that – do something stupid. He has the cheek to say he’s worried about my state of mind. But I think it’s him who’s the mad one.’

‘Do you really?’ Mark sighs as if he’s bored now.

‘Yes. He’d feel like I’d betrayed him, coming here with my friend, accusing you of all sorts. After what happened the other night I can’t stay with him, but if I try to run before I’ve organised a safe house he’ll come and find me.’ I nod my head over to Jowan. ‘Find us, and...’ I raise my arms, then let them fall. ‘Could you really live with our murders on your conscience?’

‘What! I know you’re nuts, but I can’t believe you’re saying Simon would commit murder?’ Mark turns one side of his mouth down in derision, pulls his neck back, though I think there’s uncertainty in his stare. I must be a better actress than I think.

‘I don’t know for sure, and neither do you.’

He’s concentrating on my face, my every movement. Mark reminds me of a hawk waiting for its prey to make a stupid mistake, to come out into the open on a moonlit night. ‘So, you’re telling me you’re going to walk away, and that’s it? Forget this unthinkable notion that I have your son, if I don’t phone your husband?’

My heart is thumping and I’m afraid but not beaten. I don’t know where all my strength or ideas are coming from; instinct’s leading me. But I know, in order for him to even half believe me, that I have to be half honest. I nod. ‘Yes, for now at least. I have little choice. My hope was to speak to your wife and hopefully get my son back without your knowing, but unfortunately you arrived unexpectedly. Now you do know, there isn’t

much I can do. I'm desperate to hold on to my daughter at all costs and, if you tell Simon, taking her from me is the very least he might do... well, you don't need me to explain further.'

We stare into each other's eyes. I can almost see his quick mind at work and then he breaks the connection, walks towards the door. 'Okay, until we meet again.' He turns back, his hand on the door knob, puts his head on one side. 'Because I know you won't keep away for ever; you've said as much. But I'll be ready for you. Now fuck off and leave me and *mine* alone.'

The door slams behind him and my heart plummets; it's all I can do to keep standing. My boy is just inside, within touching distance. Still so near – yet so very far away.

Chapter Twenty-One

We have been back in my bedroom at the B&B for half an hour and Jowan is pacing. Just for a change. He's been pacing and talking at me for the last five minutes. I have been sitting on the bed staring out towards the Jensons' house, occasionally saying yes, no, I don't know. He has various strategies for getting Ruan out. All of them are flawed and bound to fail.

The firm belief that Angela will do the right thing is growing in my heart. There was something in her eyes when she saw the photos of Iona. I've been trying to decide if it was grief, resignation or sorrow. Perhaps all three. And so, if she's a decent person, and I think she is, she'll find a way to do the right thing. Just like Yvonne did.

'Holly?'

'Yeah?'

'So we stay here until the early hours and then...'

'We stay here until tomorrow and if Angela hasn't called by then, we'll call her. She knows where we are...'

Jowan throws his arms up and flops down on the bed next to me. 'For goodness' sake, Hols, we can't just wait for her to come to her senses. For all we know they might decide to make a run for it. They could be packing their stuff right now as we speak...' His voice tails off when he sees the look on my face.

'Thanks, Jowan. That's *exactly* what I need right now to keep my bloody sanity!'

'Well, I'm just saying...'

'Well, please don't. I have enough scary scenarios racing around my brain, including that one.' He purses his lips and shrugs. 'So, if you really

think the Jensons might be doing a runner right now, what's the point in sneaking up there in the dead of night? Hardly a feasible plan, is it?'

He looks at the ceiling. 'Hey, I'm not the enemy here.'

'No. I know you're not.' My hand finds his. 'Without you we wouldn't be sitting here right now. I could never have come this far, and if I'd gone up there on my own today... well, it doesn't bear thinking about.'

'What I wouldn't give to have an hour on my own with that fucking coward. Poor Angela.'

I'm glad I haven't told him what Simon attempted the other night. I sigh. 'Yes. My heart goes out to her and I believe hers is coming out to me right now.'

Jowan tightens his grip on my hand and slips his arm around my shoulder. 'I hope to God you're right. I think she's a good person, but her conscience is fighting on two fronts. One, she's terrified of Mark, and two, she obviously loves Ruan. So...'

He doesn't need to finish. 'If we abandon hope of her doing the right thing we might as well just drive away now,' I say. Suddenly weary, I rest my head on his shoulder. 'Let's sit tight and hope for the best. We'll wait until it's dark and then drive up to see if they're still there. If they are, and we don't hear from Angela, we'll text in the morning.'

'And if they aren't there?' Jowan strokes my hair.

'Then we go up to their house in London. If they aren't there either, we go to the police. We won't have any choice. I'll do anything to get Ruan back, even if it means...'

'Okay. Sounds like a plan, Holly,' he says quietly.

I look up into Jowan's eyes. There's an intensity in them that draws me in; my heart thumps and, as I open my mouth to say thank you, he kisses me. My arms go round him and I kiss him back, passionately. I feel his surprise, momentarily, but then he's holding me tight, pushing me back on the bed. No. This is so wrong on so many levels. His hands find their way under my top and caress my breasts and I draw back. 'No. We can't do this, Jowan,' I say, though every fibre of my being aches for his touch.

He shakes his head and kisses me again, tenderly. 'Why not, my love?'

‘Because...’ But, just at this moment, I can’t think of a reason and twist my hand into his curls, pull his mouth to mine.

*

The last pink fingers of sunset reach in through the window and I stroke Jowan’s face. I’m in an armchair by the door, watching him sleep. There have been no yells of terror in the night. He looks so peaceful. The duvet is barely covering his groin and his arms are flung out to the sides as if he’s worried someone might take up space in the bed. He’s no concerns on that score. My eyes travel the length of his body, linger on his tanned, muscular torso and the slow rise and fall of his chest, and then I cover my face with my hands. What the bloody hell was I thinking? I obviously wasn’t. Well, not with my head, that’s for damned sure. What kind of mother jumps into bed with her ex-lover when her child is still missing from her arms? Is up the road with strangers?

Once was bad enough, but we have been in bed for hours. Jowan told me it was a normal reaction after my first few guilty worries and reasoned that we needed each other. I must admit I didn’t put up much of a counterargument. Especially after he told me how much he loved me. There was no way I was reciprocating though. Thank goodness for small mercies. My mouth is dry and my heart is heavy. God knows what happens now.

In my bag there’s a bottle of water and I chug almost all of it down, even though it’s warm and tastes of plastic. And now my belly rumbles. How can I think of food at a time like this? What’s happening to me? As I’m wiping the back of my hand across my mouth, I catch Jowan’s eyes on me, a slow smile spreading across his face. I put the bottle down and my head back in my hands.

‘Hey, Hols, you okay?’

My tongue has a few choice replies ready, none of them suitable before the watershed. I sigh and look at him sitting up in bed, plumping pillows as if we’re on a jaunt away or something. ‘No, I’m not, Jowan. My boy is half a mile away with people who have stolen him from me, but am I rushing to try and get him back, phoning the police, calling the media, anything that might help? No. No. I’m here with you; have been in bed with you all

afternoon and evening.’ I hold a finger up at his protest. ‘Oh, and now I’m starving too.’

Jowan looks like he’s trying not to laugh. He’d better not or I won’t be responsible for my actions. ‘Calm down, Hols. You’re human. You have needs and hungry is normal.’ He folds his arms across his chest. ‘You need fuel to keep your strength up for Ruan. And as I said before, about us making love, it’s the most natural thing in the world to comfort each other when things are...’

‘People can comfort each other without jumping into bed. It’s true; I read it somewhere.’

He sighs. ‘If you want to call the police, go ahead. It might be for the best.’

‘Not yet. We stick to the plan.’ I gesture to the fast-disappearing sunset. ‘It’ll be dark in an hour or so. We’ll go back to the cafe, eat, and then go up to the Jensons’ – see if they’re still there.’

‘Good. You’re being practical now.’ He slips out of bed, walks naked towards me.

Keeping my eyes level with his I hold up my hand and say, ‘All this stops now.’

A mischievous twinkle and a grin. ‘What does?’

‘Stop it, Jowan. I can’t even think about what we’ve done, or what it means at the moment. It happened because I’m anxious beyond belief; needed comfort, as you say. You caught me at a weak moment, that’s all. I need a clear head, uncluttered with any romantic notions.’

He puts his head on one side, folds his arms. ‘So, you have romantic notions about me? That’s promising...’

‘Enough!’ I say, a bit too harshly, but this isn’t some fucking game. This is my life, my son’s life.

He says sorry and gets dressed. I want to say sorry too but I don’t, because I’m not. Well, not entirely. In my chest there’s a big ball, stuffed full of confusion, guilt and anger, bouncing around. Happiness is struggling to get out of the shadows too, because Jowan says he loves me. Dear God, I really don’t need this on top of everything else.

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The energy rush from dinner gives my brain a boost and my thoughts untangle a little. The guilt and anger abate a little, but the confusion is still as robust as ever. It has linked arms with happiness and the two seem content to bounce around together for now, so I shelve both in a distant part of my mind and concentrate on the here and now.

‘Okay. Ready to drive up to the...?’ I begin, but on the table between us Jowan’s mobile vibrates and dings twice.

‘A message,’ he says to my raised eyebrows. I watch him push buttons and then my heart thumps when he says, ‘It’s Angela.’

With a shaking hand I take the phone from him and read:

Holly, after you’d gone, Mark and I talked. I told him that even if you were telling the truth – that you weren’t ever in an institution and that Jonathan and he went behind Simon’s back and took your son – I wouldn’t care. I said there would be no way on earth that I’d let you have him back. I hugged him, told him I loved him, thanked him for bringing me our child, and said we should move away – emigrate as soon as possible.

My hand is shaking so much and tears fill my eyes. Jowan’s fingers reach for the phone and he starts to read it out loud from the start. ‘No. The next bit after emigrate...’ I want to cover my ears and run away, but I have to know.

“‘Mark was thrilled, said he wished he’d told me before, and it was a weight off his shoulders to know I was behind him. He said there’d be no need to emigrate as you would be no problem for us. I asked him to tell me exactly what happened – everything – and he did. Do you know he seemed quite proud of himself? God, Holly, you don’t know the half of it... I told him I’d take our son back to London in case you came back while I was here alone. As you may remember, I told you that, tomorrow, Mark leaves for Exeter and will be away the rest of the weekend. He didn’t see a need to change his plans, so confident was he that you were beaten.’”

Jowan looks up from the screen, touches my cheek, but I brush his hand away. ‘Is that it?’

‘No. Just checking on you. You’re white as a sheet and...’

A scream of frustration is waiting but I make myself say, 'Read it.'

He scans the message and then a huge smile of relief lights up his face. 'Oh Holly, it's okay, listen to the next bit! "...But it's him that's beaten. He's an evil bastard who deserves his comeuppance. I'll ring you tomorrow when he's gone. I'll have your son ready and waiting, because it's the right thing to do, even though the pain of losing him is already tearing the heart out of me. Angela.'"

No. No, that can't be right, surely? Dashing my tears away on the back of my forearm, I grab the phone from him, scan the message from top to bottom, then read it again more slowly. 'Oh, my God, Jowan. OH MY God!' A huge sob bursts out and everyone turns to look. I couldn't care less though. Nothing matters any more.

Jowan's eyes are moist too, but he's laughing. Thumping the table and laughing. The expressions on the other diners' faces are a mixture of disgruntled and amused, and that makes me laugh too. I'm laughing so hard that I'm crying, and then I'm laughing; I can't stop either. Hysteria claims me totally, and I am helpless to speak, move or think. 'Come on, let's get out of here before they do send you to an institution,' Jowan says and propels me outside.

It's nearly midnight and I'm alone in my room. I'm pacing the same bit of carpet that Jowan paced earlier. Every limb is weary with emotional exhaustion, but I can't rest until Jowan comes back. I've sent him up to the Jenson's to see if they really are still there and that Angela's text wasn't some kind of ruse. Jowan texted Angela back a short message dictated by me. *Thank God, Angela. Thank you so, so much. We'll await your call.*

Since dinner, we have talked and puzzled, but are none the wiser as to how she will explain herself to Mark. When he finds out she's given Ruan back, she will surely be in terrible danger. We also discuss how long it will be before Simon finds out... Mark will obviously be on the phone to him the minute he finds out Angela has betrayed him.

Jowan also brings up the subject of where we will go with the twins. He has an aunt in Sheffield who lives on the moors in an old farmhouse. He says we will be safe there for a while, until we can figure out what to do

next. I tell him he's under no obligation to do anything, but he just smiles and hugs me. I have no words and none are necessary.

I force myself to lie down on the bed, try to rest my eyes. Part of me is euphoric, bordering on hysteria; the other part is terrified it's all some cruel charade. I called Demi to check on Iona and tell her everything that's happened, and she said I should be cautiously optimistic, because why the hell would Angela text and say those things if she didn't mean them? I had to concede I couldn't think of a logical reason, unless it's because Angela is just as evil as her husband, intent on crushing me. This thought, however unlikely, churns my stomach, and then I hear footsteps hurrying along the landing outside.

Jowan comes in. He's smiling. 'There are two cars outside the Jensions' still, and light in an upstairs window.'

My heart leaps and then I allow it to soar. This looks promising. Very promising. 'Nothing could sound sweeter to my ears,' I say, and a hundred knots start to loosen in my shoulders.

'Sounds good to me too.' Jowan sits in the armchair and takes off his trainers.

Plumping the pillows I settle back on the bed and give him a grateful smile. 'Thanks so much, Jowan... for everything. Now we'd better get some sleep. If we can, of course. I can hardly wait for the morning.'

He raises an eyebrow. 'Do you want me with you... or?'

This is a question that has no straightforward answer. Yes, I want him, but I don't want to make love. I need to keep all my focus on Ruan. Anything else would feel wrong. 'No, as I said, it was a weak moment...'

His face falls but he says, 'I could just hold you? Or I could go next door. Whatever you want to do, Holly.'

A smile spreads through me. He understands totally. I reach out my hand to him.

'Hold me until the sun comes up, Jowan. It's a long time since you did that.'

Chapter Twenty-Two

The sun and I rise together. There's a mist draped over the curves of the land and a crescent moon still hanging in the pale, clear sky. It promises to be another beautiful day. June is already here. Over the last few days she's been determined to create a good first impression by weaving a riot of wildflowers through the hedgerows, dappling through the meadows, and adding deep blue to the skies and ocean. I see her efforts, with my baby stolen from me, they only serve as a reminder of just how much time has passed without him. This day will change all that. Then I correct myself. No point in getting too confident. I add 'all being well' to my thoughts.

Jowan wakes and we shower and go down to breakfast. I check us out beforehand and settle the bill, because once the phone call comes from Angela, we are out of here. We are almost finished breakfast when it comes. Jowan hands his phone to me.

'Angela?'

'Yes. Mark's just left.'

'I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am to...'

'Then don't.' There's a sigh. 'Sorry, but this is so hard. Just come up here now and take him. There will be no conversation when you arrive. I have written down everything about what food he's been having, his sleep patterns – everything. His clothes and toys are... all...' Angela's voice cracks and she takes a few breaths. '...All packed and so there's nothing else to say. I could apologise, but given that I knew nothing of Mark's crime and your situation, I can't blame myself. Won't.'

I swallow a lump of emotion. 'No. Of course not. But don't go yet' I need to know how you'll protect yourself after Mark finds out and...'

'Thanks for your concern, but I'll be far away by the time Mark finds out. He won't look for you or make any trouble, because I've left him a

letter explaining that, if he does, he will certainly be arrested and charged with abduction and God knows what else... He won't ever try to look for me either, or recover the sizeable amount of money I will take from his personal safe when I get back to London later.'

Jowan's mouthing 'what's she saying?' at me, so I flap my hand at him and turn my back. 'But why... I don't understand, Angela.'

'Because I taped everything he said to me last night on my mobile phone.'

My hand flies to my mouth and I can hardly breathe. 'Oh, my God...'

'All his disgusting confession, the pride in his voice at the way he got what he wanted. I made sure he named names too... Then I said, "Oh, what a clever husband I have, Mark Jenson!" There's no ambiguity at all about the people involved. The "confession" will be kept with a solicitor, in case I should ever need it.'

Could this really be happening? In my wildest dreams I never expected such a wonderful outcome. 'That is unbelievable, Angela! My goodness and you're so brave, given what we know about him.' Jowan has come round the table now, doing the mouthing thing again, so I put my forefinger to my lips and glare at him.

'Oh, I'm not stupid. I think he'll try and find me, eventually. Hurt me somehow – perhaps make it look like an accident. But I know Harry should be with you... you're his mother, so I'll take my chances.'

Then I remember something that's been nagging me since yesterday. 'Angela, in your text you said I didn't know the half of it... what did you mean?'

'I don't want to talk about it. The more people that know the whole story, the more dangerous it is for me. You're better off not knowing, trust me.'

The ice in her voice makes me shiver and I hug myself. 'Angela, I don't know what to...'

'Just get up here now, before I change my mind.'

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‘So she’s going to take money from his safe? How does she know the combination?’ Jowan says as we fly along the country lanes. He’s doing his thousand questions in thirty seconds thing, and I’m doing my ‘I don’t know so shut up’ face. There’s a herd of galloping horses in my chest and I blot everything else out apart from holding my boy in my arms. My boy, my boy.

We swing on to the gravel drive and the door opens at the Jensons’. Angela comes out with a huge stripy bag and places it next to the three already on the doorstep. Jowan pulls up and cuts the engine. Through the windscreen my eyes meet Angela’s and she tries a brief smile. Her face is pale, eyes red-rimmed and so puffy I wonder how she can see out of them. Then I get out and she goes inside. For one moment I think she’s changed her mind and I hurry to the door. Then she’s out again with a car seat. And in the car seat... is... my boy. My Ruan.

A cry leaves my throat and I close the remaining steps between us as Angela runs inside, closes the door. I can hear her anguished sobs as I pick up my son and wrap my arms around him, hold him tight to my chest, smell the scent of his hair. I turn to the car, to Jowan, but after a few steps, my legs decide this is all too much and I sink to my knees, rocking him, kissing his soft, downy cheeks. Then I hold my boy at arm’s length and it’s like looking at Iona. Ruan has a little more hair, but it’s the same blond and his eyes are hers; are mine.

Jowan kneels beside us and strokes his hair. ‘He’s so much like Iona,’ he says, and there’s a catch in his voice.

My voice is lost for the moment so I just nod. I’m surprised I’m not crying because I feel like I want to, but there’s this huge swell of happiness inside me, a tidal wave of joy that’s sweeping away all capacity for tears, even of relief. Ruan isn’t crying either; he’s smiling and trying to touch my cheek. Angela is crying enough for all of us. Though I feel sorry for her, the sound of her hysterical sobbing gives strength to my legs and I tell Jowan to gather up all the bags because we need to leave, and quickly.

Ruan is asleep ten minutes into our journey and I look at his little hand holding my finger, look at every centimetre of his face, his body, and try to push away the feelings of anger that his first few months of life were spent

with another mother. Anger has no place in my heart today. Only love. Huge, all-encompassing feelings of love. I bring his hand to my lips and kiss it and that's when the tears come.

Instead of taking the road to the beach house, I ask Jowan to drive down the left fork to the beach. Before we take Ruan in to meet his sister, Demi and Alex, I want to introduce him to the ocean. Not too long ago I thought I'd sent his last earthly remains into it, to be carried away on the tide. I want to show the ocean that he's not dead, not ashes; that he's alive. Ruan is the boy who lived.

Perhaps I knew he was alive deep down all the time. That's why I pictured him on the sands playing with his sister, why I didn't breastfeed because it wouldn't have been right, why I imagined him lying next to Iona, kicking his feet at the blue-legged, green-bodied spider on the play mat, and why I couldn't shake the feelings of utter despair. Because, from the darkness of utter despair, burned a faint little light of hope.

The little light wasn't always acknowledged. In fact it was often snuffed out by me, because to let it burn would be evidence I might be edging towards the happy pills. That couldn't be allowed because I needed to be there for Iona. But there were times that the light shone so bright it couldn't be ignored, like the night I woke covered in sweat and shaking, convinced he was still alive.

At the water's edge now, he lifts his head from my chest and his smile makes a mockery of the sunlight. Jowan smiles too and slips his arm around me. 'Good to be back, eh?' he says.

'Can't quite take it in,' I say and bob down next to the gentle waves, dangle Ruan from my knee. As the water rushes in, I scoop a handful and let it trickle through my fingers across his little feet. At first he makes a square of his mouth and I think he's going to cry, but he doesn't. He just gurgles and kicks the air.

'Next year he'll be paddling. A proper local lad,' Jowan says, swishing the water with his hand.

The thought of next year presents an image of two toddlers. The boy is wearing a white sunhat and dungarees, his sister dressed the same, apart

from a yellow hat, and they are laughing and digging in the sand. Angela was right about my not wanting to know the whole story of what Mark did. It sounds unspeakable... and right now I only have room for positive thoughts. My chest swells with so much love and hope I can hardly breathe. 'Oh, Jowan. I'm so happy... please tell me it isn't a dream.' I stand and hold my boy tight against my thumping heart.

'It isn't a dream, love.' He holds my gaze and his hand out for mine, and together we walk towards the dunes and the beach house.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Simon ended the call and knew immediately that there was something wrong with Holly. Something more than the fact that they had parted on bad terms after he had been a little forceful with her. Something that sent prickles of apprehension down his spine. He could sense a fake cheerfulness in her voice, her silly comments, her loving words. It was as if she were delivering lines from a badly written play. It wasn't like her to be so nice to him. Not nowadays anyway, especially after the way they had parted.

Since she'd left for Cornwall he'd been mulling the situation over. Simon had decided he wouldn't call her; she needed time to be with her mum and to calm down, but in his heart he'd expected her to call him. She would have done normally. It wasn't as if he'd had any notion they could carry on together, not after the way she'd behaved, but it rankled that she'd not called. Lauren wouldn't have done that to him. Lauren was grateful for every moment he gave her, and soon he would give her all of his time. She was his future and Holly was his past. But his wife wasn't herself, wasn't herself at all.

She'd said she'd be up to London in the next few days to pick up some stuff as she was staying longer with her mum. Her back was on the mend but she still couldn't do much for herself. Holly had said she was looking forward to seeing him and hoped they could get back to normal once she was home for good. Very odd. Home was not a word she'd ever used when referring to their apartment. He'd told her he'd check his operating schedule and let her know when he'd be home. He needed to hold her, tell her he was sorry. Simon had calculated she'd backtrack on this, that there was no way she'd want to be intimate, but no. No, she'd told him she couldn't wait. She was lying through her teeth, but why? She must have found out about Lauren somehow? But how?

The only person he'd told about the affair was Mark. There was no way he'd have told Holly. Why would he? There had to be another explanation... Mark would know what to do. He had to speak to him. It was just past seven at night, and though Mark was very protective of his private space, he couldn't complain about him ringing at that time that, could he? He eyed the vodka bottle but shook his head at his reflection in the glass doors. That would be a mistake. Coffee instead.

Simon watched his hands calmly making coffee while his thoughts were anything but. Okay, think. He needed to be casual with Mark, just ask after him, and suggest they meet for a drink, something like that. It would be best face-to-face anyway. He was hopeless on the phone when he was worried about anything. Yes, he was going to leave Holly, but it had to be planned – on his terms. Simon couldn't be doing with Holly going off her rocker, cooking up some revenge plot or something. She must be cooking something up, mustn't she, if she was being all nicey-nicey with him?

An unpleasant thought thumped him in the gut. What if she'd found out where his girlfriend lived? What if she planned to hurt Lauren? No. No, she wouldn't do that, would she? It was possible. Holly was hardly what you'd call the calmest of people, especially if she'd found out he'd been with Lauren while she had been grieving over Ruan...Shit... he needed to ask Mark. His old friend could always make molehills from his mountains with a few well-chosen words. He was very good at reasoned, logical conclusions. Simon needed some of those, because the jitters were making a tumble dryer of his stomach.

An automated voice told him that Mark's number had not been recognised. Simon frowned at the phone and punched the redial button again. The voice started again, so he cut the call and physically entered the number again from his old notebook. The voice again. Simon roared and chucked the phone at the sofa cushion. What the hell? He paced and scrubbed his fists at the sides of his head. Why would his old friend change his number and not inform him? His skin itched, his eyes ached. He needed to see MARK!

In the car heading across London, Simon's rage reduced to a simmer and he wondered if he was making a mistake. Perhaps he was overreacting; perhaps Mark would be furious at his showing up unannounced. There had

to be a pretext of some sort. He could say he'd tried ringing, but there was something wrong with Mark's phone (yeah, he'd ditched the number without telling him) and he just had to see him about... about what? Business might be an answer. At a red light, he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and wracked his brains... and then smiled. Of course. He had money that needed to be invested wisely. Mark knew all about money and making it. An excellent idea. Simon would praise his expertise, chat about investments, and then casually mention Holly, talk to him about his concerns.

Simon pulled up just short of the grand house in Hampstead and cut the engine. The sunset had set the sky on fire and Mark's house sat dark and quiet against it. No lights on. Shit! He'd expected that Angela would be home even if Mark wasn't. In this instance he'd still planned to go in, chat to Angela and try to find out Mark's new phone number. Now he'd come all this way for nothing. Simon drew his hand across the stubble on his chin and forced some optimism. Perhaps they were in their huge conservatory at the back having a few drinks on such a lovely evening. Yes, that would be it. Another flash of anxiety. The thought again that Mark might be angry with him, showing up at his home out of the blue like this... But never mind. Needs must.

The flash of anxiety became a flare as he walked up the steps to the front door. Mark might be furious if he was in the bath or something, or possibly being intimate with his wife. A sigh. No going back now. He pressed the bell and waited. Nothing. He pressed the bell again and looked up at the windows.

No lights. Silence. Fuck.

As he was preparing to go down the side entrance to the back garden he saw a head pop round the door in the next house. Oh great. Not bloody Isadora sodding Duncan. She was all he needed – he'd never get away from her. Simon pretended not to see her and set off down the path.

'Hello! Simon, isn't it?'

The reedy voice snaked round, hooked him back. He couldn't ignore her – she'd only follow him anyway, knowing her. He retraced his steps and

dredged up a smile. ‘Hello. Isadora; yes, it’s Simon. Thought I’d pop over and visit my chums. It’s been a while.’

Isadora popped back inside momentarily, then shrugged on a cardigan as she closed the short gap between them, her face full of news. ‘You’ll be lucky,’ she said, folding her arms and scanning his face with her intelligent eyes. ‘I think they’ve “done one”, as the youngsters say.’

‘Done one?’ Simon said, though he knew full well what that meant. He refused to believe it. Couldn’t.

‘Yes. Mark came today and seemed to be in an awful hurry. He kept going in and out with bags, suitcases.’

‘Bags and suitcases?’

Isadora put her head on one side and looked at him. ‘Yes, dear. Are you quite all right? You seem to be repeating the last few words of my sentences.’

Simon wanted to slap the twinkle from her eyes and put his hands around her scrawny neck. This wasn’t funny. Wasn’t fucking funny at all. He gathered his senses. ‘I’m just a bit shocked. I had no idea they were going anywhere.’

She pulled her chin to her neck and snorted. ‘You and me both. You’d think that after nearly ten years of being neighbours he’d have come to tell me, wouldn’t you?’

‘But how do you know they’ve gone? They might have just gone on holiday... they have a new baby and might just need a break.’

‘I know because Mark said he was. After I’d watched him hurrying in and out a few times I decided to stick my beak in – I don’t normally, but curiosity got the better of me.’ Isadora stopped and gave him a cheeky smile. Simon’s hands itched to throttle her. Why didn’t she just get on with it?

‘Really?’ he said through clenched teeth.

‘Yes, really. I stood almost where I’m standing now and he was near his car.’ she waved her arm towards the pavement. ‘I asked where he was going and he said “away”, just like that.’ Isadora pursed her lips. ‘Curt, clipped, dismissive.’

Simon's thoughts stopped their downward spiral and grabbed at her words. 'Away could mean just that. Away on holiday.'

'No, I checked. I said, "Oh, away on holiday with Angela and the baby?"'

Again she did that infuriating pause and Simon folded his arms. 'So what did he say?'

'He slammed the boot down and said, "No." Just, no. Nothing else. It sounded very final. Then he got in his car and left without so much as a backward glance. Very rude and not like him at all. I think he is an extremely troubled man.'

Simon felt a bit better. The old trout had probably just irritated Mark once too often. He knew he couldn't have lived next door to her for ten minutes, let alone ten years. He said, 'Well, he might just have been having a bad day. Who knows?'

Isadora turned up one side of her mouth and fixed him with a keen stare. 'I do actually; you see, I didn't tell Mark, but I know full well he wasn't going away with Angela and the baby. Naughty of me, I know, but I was trying to do a bit of digging.'

The pause again. 'How did you know?' Simon heard a tremor in his voice.

'Because Angela had come the day before and done the same thing as him. I'd come out and asked her if I could meet the baby. I knew she didn't have a baby with her though, as I'd watched her from my window going in and out with suitcases and bags even quicker than Mark. No baby to be seen.'

Simon found that he was leaning against the wall of Mark's house. He felt queasy and it took all his strength to be polite. 'Oh, that is odd.'

'Very. Particularly when you hear the next bit.' Isadora sighed and shook her head. 'I asked Angela if she was going away on holiday and someone was looking after the baby. You'll never guess what she said.'

Isadora's face was full of expectation. at the thought of delivering There had to be a punchline that Simon didn't think he wanted to hear. He swallowed hard. 'What did she say?'

‘She said she wasn’t going on holiday, she was going for good, and that the baby was back where he belonged.’ Simon’s world shifted. ‘Now what do you make of that?’

Queasy turned to nauseous and Simon could hear the thump of his heartbeat in his ears. This couldn’t be happening. *No. No. God, no!* He pushed himself from the wall and stumbled down the path to the street. Isadora called after him but he ignored her, ran to his car.

*

At times of crisis he always reached for the bottle, but this was a crisis to end all others. This time he needed a clear mind. Simon closed the apartment door behind him, strode to the sofa and pulled his phone from his jacket.

‘Simon? How nice to hear from you, love. I was only saying to Demi the other day how it’s been ages since I saw you.’

‘It is, Wendy. We must make time to see each other soon. Can I speak to Holly?’ Simon was relieved his voice sounded normal, even though the phone was shaking in his hand.

‘Holly?’

At the question in her voice Simon’s heart began free fall. His fears were starting to come horribly true. ‘Yes, you know, your daughter, my wife.’

‘Well, she’s at the beach house, love...’

Simon hurled a cushion at the door but tried to make his voice calm. ‘Right... not there looking after you then?’

‘Oh. Um... well, she was but... er...’

Damn it, she was lying. She’d twigged something was wrong. He cursed under his breath. Why hadn’t he just started the conversation by asking how her back was? Fuck. She was on her guard now.

‘So is your back improving?’

‘My back... is, er... getting better, thank you.’

He wanted to say, well, that's not what your lying cow of a daughter said. In fact she said you still couldn't do much for yourself, and that's why she was extending her stay. But instead he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. 'Well, that's a relief. Speak to you soon, Wendy. Bye now.'

He ended the call and put his head in his hands. What the bloody hell was going on? If Holly suspected anything, why the hell hadn't she blown it all apart, gone crazy at him down the phone, anything but say she was coming home, was dying to see him? It didn't make sense at all. And how the FUCK did she know in the first place?

Simon raised his head and the first thing he saw was the vodka bottle. One wouldn't hurt. He needed to stop this bloody shaking. Then he couldn't find a glass quick enough, so the top came off and he raised the bottle to his lips. As the fiery liquid burned a path down his throat he felt immediately calmer. He turned off the lights and, through the windows, watched the activity on the moonlit Thames below. Two pleasure boats passed close by, broadsiding each other with flashing lights, music and a gabble of revellers intent on boozing and cruising.

People strolled along the walkways enjoying the warm spring evening, perhaps talking about the show they were going to, or the restaurant they'd booked. And as he watched them, watched the whole scene, he allowed his mind to pick a clear path, to step out of all the blind alleys it had been running down.

Simon sipped from the bottle and closed his eyes. It was obvious that dear little Holly was playing a game. He didn't know what game, or any of the rules, but he was a fast learner. There was the option of flying down to her little rathole in Cornwall, all guns blazing, catching her out, but that wasn't his style. The gun could backfire too – land him in all sorts of shit. No. Holly would come to him. If she thought she was his match, she'd be sadly mistaken, because whatever game she was playing, he'd win. And when he did, by God she would pay a heavy price for crossing him. Simon felt a tickle of excitement in his belly. He put the top on the bottle and reached for his phone. Oh yes, he was so going to enjoy this game.

Chapter Twenty-Four

My twins are lying on the play mat together, gurgling and kicking their legs. Already inseparable, it's as if each has always known the other existed. When Iona first saw Ruan, her whole face lit up, her chubby little hands reaching for his, and his for hers. Womb buddies reunited.

My twins.

I will never tire of saying those words, hearing them in my mind or out loud. Last night they slept in bed with me. Well, they slept and I stared at them adoringly for hours, until exhaustion eventually closed my eyes. There was just about room still in the Moses basket for one of them, the other in the cot, but I couldn't bear to have them out of my grasp.

Demi and Alex stayed over and I'm cooking us all a wonderful breakfast. I hope full bellies will pave the way for the huge favour I have to ask them. Jowan too, though I don't think he will be too hard to persuade. While we haven't talked about what the future holds for us, my heart will never forgive me if I don't forgive him. Any future without him in it looks less than rounded, rough around the edges... incomplete. Though I can't allow any serious discussion of all that at the moment. There are loose ends to be tied and the sooner the better.

I put croissants into the oven and turn to find everyone pulling out chairs at the kitchen table. I smile and listen to the cheery conversation, the oohs and ahs directed at the twins, and lean into a warm hug as Jowan asks if he can help. He sets the table, Alex makes the tea and Demi plays with the twins.

This scene of simple domesticity is one I'd like to photograph and keep for ever. By most people's standards it's not unusually beautiful, not grand, not a world landmark, but it is perfect to me. Perfect. And for the first time in a long while I can feel happiness pushing at the edges of despair. The sort

of happiness I can believe is more than fleeting, that is real, that won't be snatched away at a moment's notice. Though Ruan is back, I must admit I worried last night that I had been imagining it, or that Angela would change her mind and have henchmen wrest him from my arms, or that something would happen, anything, that would mean I'd lose him again. Now I can at last start to plan a proper future, and this is where my friends come in.

'Anyone like any more bacon?' I look round at the rolling eyes and shaking heads.

'If I eat any more of anything I'll pop. It was lovely though; thanks, Hols,' Demi says and pours everyone more tea.

The others agree and I wonder how to broach the next bit. I am expecting opposition. My face feels stretched by the biggest smile I can find and I say, 'So, I've decided to go back to London tomorrow and get a few sentimental bits and the rest of mine and Iona's things. I would be so grateful if you would look after Iona again, Demi; Ruan too. I know it's asking a lot but...'

'Are you mad?' Demi says, banging her mug down on the table.

That was expected. 'No. I'm perfectly sane.' I try to curb a smile. She looks like an indignant child, wide green eyes blazing, copper curls bouncing, as she whips her head round to see the expressions of the others.

Jowan frowns and pushes his mug to one side. 'But I thought you'd just leave, not make contact with him again? I also thought that for the first few months we'd lie low – go up to my auntie's in Sheffield, liked we talked about...'

'This is my home. I'm staying put. If I run from Simon now I'll be running for ever. I'm going to keep Ruan's presence a secret from him, so he might just leave me alone – he must know we're over. He's got his mistress after all. If he knows our boy is alive he'll need to know the whole story, and God knows what he'd do then. Probably go to the police, track down Mark and throttle him, Jonathan too. Our nice quiet life would be over.' I frown but then give him a gentle smile.

'Oh, I've heard it all now. And then what?' Demi says, folding her arms tight across her chest. 'You go to London and then what? What do you say to him?'

‘I’ll go when he’s not there. Leave him a note saying we are finished and...’

‘But what’s so important there that you have to go back at all?’ Demi nudges Alex. ‘Tell her, Alex.’

Alex turns red and mumbles something that sounds like ‘not my place’.

‘And what if he knows what’s happened, or finds out before you arrive. Then what?’ Demi says.

‘Demi, will you stop saying “and then what?”,’ I say, looking at Jowan for support. He twists his mouth to the side and starts fiddling with the leather strap on his wrist. No help there then. ‘Look, will you all let me explain without jumping on me for a moment?’

‘But...’

I cut Demi off with a raised hand and calm myself. ‘This is what I’m thinking. I’m going to London tomorrow to get photos of my dad, some jewellery left to me by my gran, and the rest of my stuff.’ Demi opens her mouth so I hold up a finger. ‘Yes, I can do without mine and Iona’s clothes, but the photos of Dad are the only ones I have of him and me together and Gran’s jewellery will be passed on down the line.’

There is contemplative quiet for a bit and then Demi says, ‘But what if Simon suspects you’re going to leave him, that news has got out about Ruan somehow? What if he comes back while you’re there and goes crazy?’

‘I know for certain he suspects nothing. Don’t you think he’d be here beating the door down if he did? I spoke to him yesterday morning and told him I was looking forward to coming home. He said he missed me and couldn’t wait for me to be back. Then he phoned me again last night after he’d checked his operating schedule and said I should come the day after tomorrow. I’ll go tomorrow instead while he’s at the clinic, get my things and leave a letter saying we’re over and that I know everything about his woman. Say I don’t want him to come after me, and that’s the end of it.’

Three shocked faces look at me and then everyone starts babbling at once. Holding my hand up makes no difference, so I thump it on the table instead. That works. Just as I open my mouth, Jowan says, ‘Well, I’m not

sure it's a good idea. In fact I think it stinks. But if you're determined, there's one sure thing – I'm coming too. I'll stay in the car, just in case. No arguments.'

Relief floods through me. That saved me having to ask. 'No argument from me there. And thanks, Jo.'

'And then what? He just accepts it all? As if. You know what he's like. He won't lose.' Demi stands up and gathers Iona up as she's starting to grizzle. Ruan copies his sister so I pick him up too.

Ruan snuggles his head under my chin and a little sigh leaves him. For a moment I'm lost in the feel of his soft hair against my skin and the lovely baby smell of him. Then I realise that Demi is still waiting for an answer. Alex and Jowan too. 'He'll have to accept it, Demi, because I will say in the letter that if he tries to come after us he'll be in the middle of a shit storm, in court for an expensive divorce, and exposed as a callous adulterer while his wife was pregnant, and even after she'd lost her baby. His career might be damaged too because some of the wives of friends in his "circle" will certainly not approve. And regarding the affair, I'll say I have concrete proof that will stick. I won't say more than that.'

Alex speaks for the first time, an apologetic look on his face. 'Well, I think that might not work, because you don't have proof, do you? And more importantly, I think Mark and Jonathan ought to get their punishment, so get the police involved. Mark might come after Ruan, or send someone to snatch him. Get Angela to agree to share her tape. That's the only way you'll be sure this is over.' Demi gives him an approving smile and turns questioning eyes on me.

'Angela would have done that already if she'd wanted to,' I say. 'She just wants to put it behind her and start a new life, as do I. How many times have I been through this with you all? Can you imagine what that would be like – the media here talking to friends, neighbours, to poor Mum? If they couldn't get a story they'd make stuff up. My past addiction would be dragged up and spewed across the newspapers and TV even – Mark is pretty high-profile, don't forget. Yvonne would be dragged into it with her daughter; she might even be charged. No. I'll leave it as a threat, thank you very much. Of course I'd like to see those two bastards punished, but as

long as Simon leaves us alone, never finds out about Ruan, then I'll settle for that.'

'He'll still want to see Iona after the divorce, when things have settled down, though, won't he? Iona is obviously going to talk about Ruan when she's with him, it's only natural,' Demi says.

'Well, hopefully he won't want to see her. He's never shown much interest in her so far... but if he does ask to see her later, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.' I know that sounds lame but I have no other answers at the moment.

I'm thankful there are no more 'and then whats', just thoughtful expressions and a smile from Jowan. Then Demi shakes a fluffy rattle at Iona and asks, 'Yeah, but how can you be sure he won't come back while you're at the flat?'

This is getting silly now. I sigh and reply, 'I've told you. He's working tomorrow and expecting me the day after. *That's* why I'm going tomorrow.'

'But he might be ill or something and not go to work. I just worry you might be putting yourself in danger, love,' Demi says, looking at me over the top of Iona's head.

A fleeting image of the look in Simon's eyes when he pinned me up against the bathroom wall crosses my mind but I make my voice calm. 'He's all bloody mouth and no trousers, that guy. He wouldn't be a danger... and besides, he's never ill.'

'I'll be with her anyway,' Jowan says. 'I'd like to see him try anything with me there.'

Demi still looks unconvinced so I say, 'Look, if it makes you feel better, I promise I'll ring the surgery to check he's there before I go into the apartment. I'll get Jowan to stand guard in the underground car park in case he drives in too, okay?'

She relaxes her jaw a bit but says, 'I guess so. But I still don't like it.'

'Neither do I. But that's what's happening. Afterwards we can drive back down here and everyone will live happily ever after. All the bad stuff will be left in London where it belongs,' I say with a determined smile, fixing my gaze on all three.

‘Sounds good to me,’ Alex says and slips his arm round Demi.

‘And to me,’ Jowan says, holding his arms out for Ruan, who’s wriggling under my chin and trying to turn round. Probably looking for his sister. ‘Particularly the living happily ever after bit.’

‘So, you’ll drive back up tomorrow evening?’ Demi asks. I nod. ‘Won’t that be a bit of a marathon trip?’

‘We can share the driving and I don’t want to spend another night away from my babies,’ I answer, looking at Jowan for confirmation. I find it in a slight incline of his head and a wink.

‘Well, if you’re determined to go, I wish you a speedy round trip. Then we can get on with all this living happily ever after lark,’ Demi says, giving Iona to me as she begins to clear the table. Then she stops and looks at me, a frown furrowing her brow. ‘Hey, what about your mum? She doesn’t even know Ruan is back yet, does she?’

‘No. And there’s no use telling her until I’m back here from London for good. Then she can come round and meet her grandson and we’ll have a proper celebration party. If I tell her now, she’ll be round in a right old state, asking all sorts of questions and threatening to tell the police about Mark and Jonathan.’

Demi nods and thankfully that’s the end of the inquisition. We have coffee and talk about normal things, which is such a relief from the madness of the last few weeks. Then Demi and Alex leave, and the four of us are alone. The four of us has a nice ring to it. Jowan suggests going to the beach later and starts gathering the twins’ stuff together. He is a natural with babies; goodness knows why, given he’s had no experience. There will be a huge hole in my life if and when he leaves, and it will be very hard to let him go. Thankfully, he shows little sign of wanting to right now.

Down the sink with the dregs from the coffee cups, I pour a bucketload of confused feelings. Is it fair to expect him to stay with us? What about his freedom? He’s only just left the army. Does he want to be saddled with a ‘ready-made’ family and all the baggage associated with it? It’s safe to say that my family have more baggage than most, given the circumstances. Have I just become reliant on having a man to help me out of my messes? First Simon, now Jowan. Isn’t it about time I learned to be independent?

Jowan catches me looking at him when he glances up from packing a beach bag and says, 'You look thoughtful. Everything okay?'

Words line up on my tongue, yet some haven't linked arms enough to form a complete sentence. I shrug and then think I have an answer. 'I hope it will be when we come back from London. But we need to talk seriously about what happens with us when we do, yes?'

Jowan frowns but then a smile lights the shadows in his eyes. 'Okay by me, Hols. But believe me, our future looks sunny as far as the eye can see.' He puts Iona on the play mat and Ruan on the changing mat and busies himself getting my boy ready for the beach.

Out on the balcony I notice the clouds are gathering and Simon's image flits through my mind. He could well be the dark clouds on Jowan's idea of a sunny future. Tomorrow's journey has to be made, however, and I send a wish to the ocean for a safe and swift one.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Even though I know I'll return tonight, my stomach lurches and every instinct pulls me back to the front door where Alex and Demi stand with the twins, waving and smiling their goodbyes. Every instinct except one. The one that insists that, in order to move forward, I have to shut the door on the past. Shut it and bolt it securely. As Jowan drives us away, I fight back tears and make my mind list the reasons for going to London again. In my head I repeat them, mantra-like, to avoid my heart getting in the way and making Jowan turn the car round.

The only way to keep that door securely bolted is to make sure Simon stays away. He will only stay away once he's read the letter. If I don't write that letter he will fly straight down here like a demon when he realises I've gone. Why a letter? When I could do it over the phone? It's because a letter will be reread, will hit harder than spoken words. Words that might get muddled, lost, diluted. He can't answer back to a letter, can he? I need to go to the apartment, physically remove my life from his, get my photos, my gran's jewellery. He would burn them, bin them, and that would be too hard to bear.

Through the window the Atlantic Ocean whizzes past, grey, green, galloping white horses racing the wind to the shore. Deep, deep. My heartbeat quickens and I feel my cheeks colour as I allow an admission hitherto squashed: that I want to win. I want to beat Simon, for him to know, even though he's cheated on me and attempted to rape me, that his little wife – his trinket, the trophy he rescued from drowning in drugs and despair – is now stronger than him.

Right is on my side, and Jowan. And strong women too. Yvonne, Angela, Demi and even, albeit unwittingly, Isadora formed a chain of defence, lit a path forward. Against the odds I have found my boy, tracked him down, and taken him back. Holly Trevillick, the naive Cornish maid,

has beaten two supposedly powerful men with friends in high places. And very soon I'll be starting a whole new life back in Cornwall where I belong. Simon will have to live with that and the fact that there is not a damned thing he can do about it.

*

It's all very well to have determination, grit and confidence when you're speeding along next to the sunny Atlantic and the world you know. It's a bit different when you're crawling through the outskirts of London after a five-hour drive and the heavens have just opened. The forward-and-back thump of the wipers competes with my heartbeat and I look across at Jowan's profile. More than anything right now I want to stop the world and get off it with him. Take him to bed and stay there for the rest of the day. I can't, of course, and I look away.

Lost in thought, I find my eyes on him again a few moments later. He's concentrating on the lunchtime traffic stretching endlessly before us and drumming his fingers on the wheel. His drumming is out of sync with the wipers and that irritates me. I realise that it only irritates me because I'm tired, nervous and worried, and realise he must be too. It's not fair to make an issue out of the drumming, so I get my phone out and check texts and emails, to take my mind off everything more than anything else.

Simon's name is the first text I see and a distraction I could do without. It was sent ten minutes ago. Shall I open it or not? One little touch of my fingertip could open up a sea of problems, or a huge chasm that I'll tumble into, free falling to jagged rocks beneath. What if he's at the apartment? What if he's home ill like Demi suggested he might be. Okay, he's never ill, but that means, by sod's law, it's about time he should be. Nobody can remain healthy all the time, can they? If he is, the trip will be for nothing and we'll have to turn round and go home.

Jowan gives me a quick smile and stops the drumming. The quiet instantly calms me and I jab my finger at the screen and open the text:

Darling Holly, I can hardly concentrate on my work today as I am so looking forward to seeing you tomorrow. Grabbing a bite to eat now, but will be operating at 3pm. I love you sweetheart – see you soon xxx

Through a small mouth I release a breath I didn't know I'd been holding. Thank God he's at work. The clock on the dial says one-fifteen. The satnav calculates we'll be at the apartment in an hour. Unless the traffic starts moving faster, we can double that. Still, at least I know he won't be at the apartment. I tell Jowan.

'Well, that's good, isn't it? And this traffic looks like it's going from a crawl to a walk now – that's something. How the hell did you live in such a hellhole? I couldn't cope with this every day.'

'Didn't have much choice, did I? After today I won't ever be back.' That thought makes me a bit sad. London is a wonderful city, with so much history, diversity and extraordinary places to visit. But Simon has forever tarnished it, because whenever I think of it, I think of him.

We come to a red light and Jowan gives a snort of frustration. 'It'd be quicker to walk.'

My hand covers his on the steering wheel and I feel a shock of desire run through my fingertips. I must have passed it on to him, because he leans across and gives me a long, sensuous kiss. We jump apart at the sound of a taxi horn behind us and laugh when we notice the light has gone green. 'Did you know that when we spent the night together in Devon, you didn't cry out in your sleep?' I say, even though I hadn't planned to.

Jowan raises an eyebrow then turns back to the traffic. 'Well, that's good to know. It must be your calming influence on me.'

This had crossed my mind but my mind wasn't entirely convinced, so it's nice to have it confirmed. 'Must be...'

'You know, yesterday, when you said let's talk about the future when we get home? As far as I'm concerned, my future is...'

'When we get back, Jo. I don't want to do it here. Not in a London traffic jam in the rain.'

He says nothing but a quick squeeze of my knee reassures me he understands.

*

We make good time and are about two miles from the apartment forty minutes later. I remember I promised Demi I'd ring the clinic to make sure Simon was at work. Now he's sent me a text though, there seems little point. However, something makes me reconsider – what's it going to hurt anyway? If I want to win, then every 't' should be crossed and 'i' dotted.

'Yes, I'll hold.' I sigh and mutter an expletive under my breath. The receptionist's voice on the other end of the phone sounds jaded, and frankly put out that I am asking to speak to my husband. If it's Brittany, the same woman who was there the time I visited, she's probably too busy checking the sweep of her eyebrows to be bothered with me.

'I'm sorry – your husband is in surgery very soon. Can I take a message?'

My heart lifts and I smile into the phone. 'No thanks, that's fine. I'll speak to him later.'

'Shall I get him to call you, Mrs West?'

Dear God, the few brain cells she has must have rearranged themselves into some form of order and a polite button must have been pressed somewhere. 'No. Please don't do that. I'll speak to him this evening. Goodbye.'

'Bye, now. Bye, bye.'

'Why do people do that? Say bye three or four times? It seems to be a trend these days,' I say to Jowan before telling him Simon is indeed at work.

'It's better than just putting the phone down I suppose.'

'Yes, but... oh, never mind.' There's no point in having a totally irrelevant conversation with Jowan right now. It's just that I can feel the jitters start up a tap dance in my belly and have no idea why. Perhaps it's the thought of going back into the apartment again after what happened last time.

'You okay?' Jowan says as he turns the corner into my street.

'Yes, just a bit nervous.'

'But why? There's no way that Simon is home and you'll be in and out within half an hour, won't you?'

‘Let’s say forty-five minutes. I’ll text you if I’m going to be longer.’

‘I’ll come with you; we’ll get it done quicker.’

As I hand Jowan the pass card to our underground car park, I say, ‘No. We stick to the plan. You sit in the car in a visitor’s space and watch to see Simon doesn’t come back.’ I look at our designated parking space and see it’s empty. ‘His car’s gone, so that’s good.’

Jowan cuts the engine and gives me an incredulous look. ‘Of course it’s gone, because he’s not here. And surely you can’t think he’ll come back. Not now, after you’ve had a text from him *and* the receptionist just told you he’s at work?’

I’m not surprised he’s incredulous, but for some reason I want to stick to the plan. I think about the terrible things Simon has done and say, ‘Something might go wrong. The receptionist might call him anyway and tell him I phoned and he might wonder why...’

‘But why would he come home? He thinks you’re in Cornwall.’

‘He just might. Simon is capable of anything.’ My words sound unconvincing and I realise I’m sounding like a crazy person now. Nevertheless, the jitters have moved up and are stomping around in my chest now, so I grab Jowan’s hand. ‘Look, just humour me, okay? Stay in the car and I’ll text you if I’m going to be longer than forty-five minutes.’

Jowan looks at his watch. ‘Right. So text me if you’re going to be later than three-thirty.’

‘I will.’ I give him a peck on the cheek. ‘Thanks for everything, Jo. It’ll soon be over now, yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And you remember the make and colour of the car?’ A weary nod. ‘And the registration number is written on a bit of paper in the...’

‘Glove compartment, yes. Now go!’

I laugh and say, ‘Okay, bye now. Bye, bye...’ Then I jump out of the car, and speed to the lift.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It's cold in the apartment, or is it just me? A shiver ran the length of me as soon as I put the key in the lock, so perhaps it is. Not surprising really; this place holds little warmth in my heart. I stand at the floor-to-ceiling windows and watch the sheeting rain hurl itself at them as if it is furious it can't reach me. Beyond that, the river scene is distorted, as if I'm looking through a heat haze instead of water, and I think about what's happened and how everything could have been so different.

The cool of the glass soothes my forehead and I just stand there, eyes closed, my palms splayed against the window, trying to comprehend the whole unbelievable unfolding of recent events. What hold did Mark have over Jonathan? Because it had to be Jonathan, didn't it? What had driven an eminent surgeon to give our son away, to get some poor little corpse to put in his place, to let his friend and colleague believe it was his own dead child – to take photos of it, grieve over it. Perhaps I will never know...

And then there's my darling husband. Having an affair behind my back when we had just lost our son. How could he? Going to Germany with her, pretending to me that he was just as upset as me about everything, when all the time he was with her. Then coming home and trying to rape me... He's evil. Him, Mark and Jonathan... they're not only from a different world, but a different planet. The old boys' network, public school, the best of everything. Whatever they want, they get, and if they can't, they just steal, take it by force. There's no guilt either... just a sense of entitlement. Simon's shown no guilt at what he's done. Not to me anyway. Perhaps he's shared it all with his mistress; unlikely though. How could any woman think what he's done is okay?

I loved him once, or if it wasn't love, I was at least very fond of him, wasn't I? We were looking forward to being the parents of twins, or at least I was. We had everything, wanted for nothing. It didn't make sense. But

then, could I have been happy with him even if hadn't done what he did? Truly happy, when Jowan had always been waiting in a secret locked box in my heart? The lock was already loosening well before I became pregnant, even though I had always tried to ignore it.

A thud snaps me out of contemplation and fear quickens my heartbeat. I turn from the window and hold my breath. It sounded like it might have come from the bathroom. Wrapping my arms around myself I tiptoe across the living room and down the corridor. I tell myself I'm being ridiculous, but snap the light on near the door to the apartment because the dark afternoon has allowed too many shadows. Then I take the door off the latch. Leave it open a crack in case there is someone in the bathroom... My heart is hammering now and I tell myself to get a grip and open the damned bathroom door.

I stretch out a trembling hand to the door knob and then withdraw it, listening hard. Nothing. I let out a breath and quickly open the door – nobody here. Relief walks me into the empty bathroom and forces unwelcome memories of candles, wine and Simon's evil expression from my mind. But what caused the thump? Pulling back the shower curtain I see a bottle of shower gel has slid on its own yellow, slimy contents, like some plastic snail, from the corner of the shower base to the plughole. Simon must have left the top off and knocked it over... but why has it taken so long to fall? He would have left at around ten if he was operating later... and that was over four hours ago.

I run a finger across the base of the shower and it's dry. That would fit with him leaving when I thought, so how did the damned thing fall over just now? Could a drop of shower gel have been underneath the bottle, and it's taken all this time to slide and fall over? Possibly. But I don't like it at all, and decide to get my stuff and get out of here, instead of looking out of the windows and rehashing the past.

My dad looks at me from a backdrop of azure sky and windswept coastal path, a grin on his tanned face, eyes like mine, alive, joyful. I look at myself too, on his shoulders, a blonde ponytail streaming in the wind, my face full of giggles and ice cream. I prop the photo up on the dressing table and look at it a while. I must have been about six, but it doesn't seem so long ago.

Not quite yesterday, but not nearly twenty years ago either. What would he make of all this? Not much. But oh my goodness, he would have adored Iona and Ruan. I trace a finger across his smile and fight back tears. Why is life so unfair sometimes?

I look at my face, pale and anxious in the mirror on the wardrobe door, and behind me see the bags packed ready on the bed. What am I waiting for? There's nothing left to do. *But there is, isn't there, Holly?*

The letter.

The letter sits heavy in my pocket like some guilty secret. Once it's out and left here, there will be no going back. Simon will read it and know everything. He will rage and tear the place apart, but my God, I hope that will be it. I hope he won't be stupid enough to risk everything and follow me to Cornwall. Is he bloody-minded enough for that? Would he do me real harm?

The answer I arrive at is chilling, yet not unexpected. All of a sudden this place is giving me the creeps, so I swipe the photo from the dressing table and shove it in one of the bags with the others and my gran's jewellery. Then I prop the letter up where the photo was and hope that will be the end of it. Just as I'm about to leave the bedroom, my mobile rings. It's Demi. Shit, I hope nothing is wrong with my babies. I sink back down on the bed and answer it.

'Demi?'

'Holly, are you okay?'

My heart plummets – she sounds frantic. 'Yes, why? Are the twins okay?'

'Yes, they're absolutely fine. But your mum came here about fifteen minutes ago and when she found you'd gone to London, poor Wendy was in a bit of a state. The day before yesterday, Simon phoned her and asked to speak to you. And she said you were at the beach house...'

My heart jumps and into Demi's pause I say, 'Shit. What did he say?'

'She said Simon seemed surprised and asked, weren't you there looking after her? Wendy twigged something was up and said you were there at first

or something. She can't quite remember. Then he asked about her back and was it better? So she said it was getting better.'

Inside my head the word NO is repeating itself over and over and I grip the phone tighter. In the mirror my face, already pale, has drained of colour and nausea pricks my stomach. 'Oh fuck, Demi. What then?'

'Well, apparently, at first he sounded a bit odd and then he was fine about it and said that was good that she was feeling better, and that they would speak soon.'

That sounds very unlikely. Simon wouldn't have been fine about it – would have suspected something. I start to pick at the skin at the side of my thumbnail. 'But he thinks she's still too ill to manage on her own, and that's why I'm extending my stay... he never said a word about this to me when we spoke that evening. Never even mentioned Mum.'

'That's not all. He then rings her back that evening and says not to breathe a word of their previous conversation about her bad back to you. He told her he was coming down to Cornwall for a visit to surprise his wonderful wife. That he'd bought you an eternity ring. He told her not to speak to you at any time actually, because he knew Wendy wasn't great at keeping secrets and he didn't want her giving the game away. He told her not to ring me either, because I might give the game away too, to spite him, as I've never liked him. He got that right. She's in a hell of a state because, of course, she saw Ruan here and I had to tell her the truth.'

'Oh, for fuck's sake!' I shout at my reflection. My poor mum. Why did she have to find out about her grandson like this? This is making no sense at all. None. I realise I'm digging my nails into my wrist and rocking to and fro. I force myself to stop. Demi is saying my name and asking if I'm okay. 'Yes, yes. I'm still here. But this is all bloody mad. I phoned his clinic and the receptionist said he was going to operate shortly. How could he be on his way to Cornwall?'

'Perhaps he told the receptionist to say that to put you off the scent?'

'No. She offered to ring him for me. If he was driving down to Cornwall, he could hardly answer, could he?'

'Hmm,' Demi says and lets out a long sigh. 'God knows. To be honest, Hols, I think he might be on his way here, to surprise you, but not with a

ring. What if he's suspicious after his first call to Wendy?'

'Suspicious about what?'

About you lying to him about having to stay here looking after your mum. He might be coming to have a row... or something.'

My heart is thumping in my ears and I swallow hard. 'If he comes there he'll see Ruan... oh my God, what am I going to do?'

'Get out of there and home as fast as...'

The idea that Simon might find Ruan when I'm not there to protect him kicks me into action. He might take both my babies! 'Right, listen. Take the twins, Demi. Take them to a hotel, not to Mum's because that's where he'd go after he'd searched the beach house. I'll see you right moneywise – just take them and take them now!'

'Oh, for goodness' sake, forget the money. I was going to suggest that anyway, love. But try not to get too upset. Just come home immediately, okay?'

'I can't get out of here fast enough, believe me,' I say and end the call. I feel sick to my core. My head in my hands, I take a few deep breaths to stop the tremors coursing through my body. This is awful. I never expected it – it wasn't part of my grand plan of winning, beating my bastard shit of a husband, and living happily ever after. Stupid cow. I should have just fucking stayed away. Stayed home safe in Cornwall.

I lift my head, grab my bags, and catch a movement not of my making in the mirror. No... no... I turn my head, every fibre of my being hoping that what I think I've just seen is only my overactive imagination, but no.

No.

NO!

Simon is there in the bedroom doorway looking at me, cold hatred afire in his eyes. I open my mouth to scream but nothing comes out.

Then he walks into the room, smiles and says, 'Darling Holly. Thank God you're home.'

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It's as if my brain is frozen. I can see and hear Simon, but my whole body is immobile, my voice isn't working, I can't think properly. One coherent thought breaks free. Fear. It's paralysing fear.

Simon closes the door behind him. He's dressed in sweatpants and a T-shirt. He can't have been at work, but he can't have been on the way to Cornwall either, can he, not if he's standing here in front of me. I didn't hear him come in, the key in the door, nothing... Then I kick myself. I unlocked the front door when I heard the noise in the bathroom, didn't I? Shit. I forgot to relock it.

There's something in the pocket of his sweatpants. Something bulky. The air between us feels charged with electricity. Dangerous. I close my eyes, hoping it's all some hallucination brought on by the stress of past events, but when I open them he's still there.

He puts his head on one side, the false smile still fixed. 'Holly, are you okay, love?'

My husband's voice sounds normal, as if he's concerned. Is it possible he doesn't suspect anything? That I am here to leave him? I don't know – but I need to find some strength from somewhere, break out of this stupor. My instinct is to try to act normally.

'Yes, I'm fine. You just gave me a start; didn't hear you come in.' Thank God my voice sounds relatively calm.

'I bet I did. And you wouldn't have heard me come in. You thought I was at work, didn't you?' He grins and folds his arms. Leans his shoulder against the wall.

What does he mean by, I wouldn't have heard him come in? He has said it in an odd, almost proud way. *Think. Think what to say!* 'Yeah... I thought I'd come down early, get my stuff together and then cook you a nice

surprise meal for when you got home. I'll stay tomorrow too; Demi says she'll look in on Mum.' My smile feels unsure, but in the circumstances that sounded pretty convincing to me.

'Well, isn't that lovely? Thanks, sweetheart.' Simon's false smile stretches even wider and then he walks past me... and oh my God, he's seen the letter with his name on the front propped up on the dressing table. I need to get out right now!

As he picks it up, I get up from the bed very slowly and start to walk towards the door. 'Stay right there, Holly. It will go badly for you if you don't.'

Any pretence at normality is dropped and the ice in his voice makes my legs weak. I stop and turn. 'Hmm? What do you mean?' My voice sounds like I'm about to cry and I swallow hard. This man bears no resemblance to my husband. Last time, when he tried to force himself on me in the bathroom, was bloody scary, but this... this is beyond terrifying.

He turns and closes the gap between himself and the door with three swift strides, then leans his back against it and shakes open the folded page. He doesn't make eye contact. 'Just sit the fuck down or I will hurt you, badly.'

My legs give way and I watch him from the bed. His face gives nothing away as he reads the letter. *Oh fuck... oh fuck, I need to get out!* The clock on the bedside table says three-twenty-five. Five minutes and Jowan will expect me to text. When I don't, he'll come up... but how will he get in? Has Simon locked the door again? Probably! My stomach rolls and my heart's hammering in my ears. I want to scream, run at him, but I know I will have no chance. *Come on, Holly, don't give up. Bide your time – save your strength for when Jowan starts hammering on the door.*

It doesn't take long for him to read the one side of A4 and then he does something I couldn't have predicted. He drops the letter and starts a slow handclap, his gaze fixed on my face. 'Bravo, Holly. Bravo!'

I shake my head and wipe away tears. 'I don't get you.'

'No? You do surprise me. As you know, I do like a gamble, a game. And I was so enjoying this one I'm playing with you. I didn't have you down as such a good opponent but you really, really are.' Simon raises his

eyebrows and gives me an incredulous shake of his head. 'I honestly didn't think you had it in you.' He raises a hand to his forehead in mock salute.

Rage fuels my words. 'You see what you did as a fucking game, having an affair behind my back with some cheap tart?' I stand up and he takes one step forward, puts the flat of his hand on my chest and pushes me down hard onto the bed again.

'Stand up once more and I'll make sure it's the last time you do.' Simon's voice is quiet, yet the menace in it brings bile to my throat. I put a shaking hand to my mouth and he leans back against the door again. 'Yes, a great player – poker should have been your choice of game. But it's over now. You were never a match for me really. Not in the end.'

Those words grab my heart and squeeze. Surely he doesn't mean to...? It's three-thirty. Come on, Jowan! I must keep calm...' How do you mean?'

'Well, I guessed you'd come the day before, or even *after*, the one we'd agreed on, so I took the week off to be sure. Told the receptionist to say I was at work if you called. Messaged her this morning to say when I was supposed to be operating, just in case you were cleverer than I thought and called the clinic. And you were cleverer, weren't you, my love? Brittany texted me after you'd called. Oh, I told her it was all to do with surprising you, just like I told your stupid mother.'

His depth of planning terrifies me. I glance at the clock. Where is Jowan? I know the answer to my next question, but I have to keep him talking. That's what they do on the movies, right? 'But... but why?'

'Because I needed your mother not to contact you. I knew you'd realise something was up if she asked you why you pretended to me that she'd had a bad back. I couldn't be sure she'd do as I asked though; that's why I made the shit up about coming to Cornwall. If she did tell you, then at least you might have fallen for it... Believed you'd pulled the wool over my eyes so much that I was bringing you a ring to show the extent of my adoration. Seems she stuck to her word until today though, judging by the phone call I listened to just now.'

My heart plummets. 'You heard that?'

'Yes, I stood and listened at the door.'

But then he must have heard me talk about the children... heard me mention Ruan! But he *can't* have or... I swallow, take deep breaths... just keep him talking. 'I... I thought you'd just arrived...'

'Good God, no. I've been here all the time. I had to make sure I didn't miss you.' Simon laughs and this time it is genuine. He seems so very pleased with himself. His eyes look blank...cold like a shark's.

He's mad. Stark raving mad...

'So was that you I heard in the bathroom?'

'Yep.' He rolls his eyes. 'That was so clumsy of me with that sodding shower gel. But I was just finishing having a pee when I heard your key in the lock, so I jumped in the shower. Then, once you'd come into the apartment, I realised it was a daft place to hide as you might come in to collect some of your many products, so I nipped into the spare-room wardrobe for a bit.'

'H... how could you be so sure I'd come at all?'

'I couldn't be.' He shrugs and picks up the letter from the floor. But I had to be ready if you did. Even parked my car round the corner in old Kevin Lancaster's space, so you wouldn't see it. Paid him shedloads too, for the privilege. You see, I think of everything, don't I?'

Yes... it seems he does, unfortunately for me. He doesn't know about Jowan though... I see that it is now three-thirty-five. *Where the fuck is he?* Realisation dawns that he might not come for a while for whatever reason, God knows what that could be; perhaps he's gone for a pee, anything... he might ring in a minute to tell me why he's late. My phone is inches away from my hand on the bed. I try to think of something to say while I try to slide the phone under my hand.

Simon comes to sit next to me on the bed. I move along it and he laughs. 'Don't worry, I'm not going to try anything on. Tell me, how did you find out that our boy was alive? I'm intrigued.'

My mouth drops open and my heart leaps into my throat. I can't get my breath! A tremor runs through me. NO! NO! No... no, my ears must be deceiving me. I'm so scared of what he might do I must be imaging it. 'W... what?'

‘You heard fine. That’s what I meant when I said you were good player.’ Simon smiles and folds his arms. ‘I originally thought you’d found out about my affair the day I phoned your mother, so imagine my shock when a neighbour of Mark was kind enough to drop a few hints about the boy. It seemed inconceivable that you had found out, and until I heard you on the phone just now, I wasn’t absolutely sure... I would have got it out of you anyway, but it was nice to just get the information I needed without any fuss.’

‘I don’t understand.’ My brain won’t work... my reactions feel slowed down, as if I’m waking from a deep sleep. This does not make sense. ‘You knew he was alive before I did, that Mark had him? But how, and why didn’t you tell me!?’

Simon turns his mouth down at the corners and shakes his head. ‘Oh dear. You really aren’t as clever as I thought after all. You don’t get it, do you? Now I asked you a question. How did you find the boy was alive and trace him to Mark?’

He is right. I don’t get it, but I think I’m beginning to... and what I am imagining is too terrible to contemplate... I need help and fast. ‘The “boy” is called Ruan. Don’t you remember?’ I say and twist my body to him slightly while I inch my hand in the direction of the phone.

‘Yes. I remember. Now tell me.’ His grey eyes ice over – they’ve lost any trace of humour. He’s clenching his jaw. A sure sign that he’s ready to lose it.

I tell him about Isadora, turning up at Angela’s and how she came to believe me, but that’s all. I don’t want to give Yvonne away.

‘I see. It was Isadora that helped me too. My goodness, you are a bit of a sleuth and to do it all alone.’ Suddenly his hand flies out and he grabs my chin between his thumb and forefinger, turns my face towards him. It hurts but I won’t let him see that it does. ‘You *are* all alone in this, aren’t you?’

I slap his hand away. ‘Of course I am. Who would believe such a wild story, that my baby was still alive? Not even Demi believed me and I daren’t tell Mum.’

‘Hmm. But you’re not telling me the half of it. You told me how you traced him to Mark, but how did you know he wasn’t dead and that Mark

was involved in the first place? Just tell me what you know.'

I look down at the space between us on the bed. I need to think fast to avoid dropping Yvonne in it. My chin is throbbing, which helps my plan. He could never cope with me losing it emotionally.

My lip trembles as I open the flood gates. Raw emotion breaks from its chains and I sob, 'Please tell me you weren't involved... please, Simon.'

He heaves a deep sigh. 'I can't do that, I'm afraid... I've been involved from the beginning. I gave our boy to Mark.'

His words seem to hang in the air between us. They won't go in. This is impossible. When he said I didn't get it, I had an inkling, but my God, I hadn't really believed it... It was unthinkable. He. Actually. Gave. Our. Son. Away? But it made no sense. 'Why, Simon? Why did you give our boy to Mark? Was he blackmailing you?' Tears pour down my face and I realise I am on the edge of really losing it. Whatever the answer, I need to hang on to control. If he is capable of that there really is no telling what he might do... and I need that phone.

Simon screws his face up and the letter into a ball and places it in his pocket. At first he looks like he's going to cry too but then he sighs and shoves his hands through his dark curls. 'Blackmail? Um... well, yes, kind of. He did leave me no choice... so in that way he made me do it. I was vulnerable and he knew it. It was a very unfortunate incident.' He turns his mouth down at the corners again like some vile clown and looks at me.

'An unfortunate fucking incident?' I give him an incredulous look, shake my head.

'Believe me, love, I only did it because I was desperate.' I feel his hand on my shoulder and cringe inwardly but don't move. 'I hated myself for what I did... but it worked out for the best in the end. You see, I'd lost everything at the casino.' He spreads his hands. 'I mean *everything*. Losing is something I won't... no, cannot allow. Mark was there, calmed me down. The next day he phoned me. He asked if I'd do anything to put things right, even give him my firstborn. I thought he was joking at first. Turns out he wasn't. Mark wanted a child; we had two... so we did a deal. A two-million-pound deal...' His voice tails off and he can't meet my eyes.

My mouth falls open and shock stops my words. No fucking wonder he can't look at me! My mind is finding it so hard to process this. *He sold our son... he sold our son... HE SOLD OUR SON!* When I speak my voice is a flat monotone. 'I... I can't believe it... you sold our son... to the Jensons...'

'Hey. That's not fair!' Simon punched the bed, his voice barely concealing his rage. 'I was helping you really – you were on the edge of depression again and I was worried that having two babies to care for would tip you...'

'I was perfectly fine until you told me our son was too small, might not be strong enough and then that he struggled to take his first breath! And what about the photo of him you showed me? That had to be someone else's poor baby, I suppose?

'Yes, it was,' Simon says with a little shrug. 'It was quite fortuitous actually. A baby died at the clinic a few weeks before, and so I took a photo. I knew what the plan was by then and that photo was a nice touch – made it seem so real that Ruan had...'

'You evil fucking bastard!' I yell and raise my fist, but his hand's a blur. A fire shoots through my cheek and my head spins under the force of his slap. I fall on my side on the bed sobbing. Then I realise the phone is under my ribs and I shove my arm underneath me and slip my fingers around it. I hope it's not upside down as I try to figure out where the number nine is. Three little pushes, that's all it takes. Then his arm goes under my belly and he yanks me into a sitting position.

He puts his lips to my ear and I shudder. 'I thought we'd established that you are no match for me. Give me the phone, Holly, or I'll break your arm.'

The ice in his voice chills my blood and I know there is no point holding on to it. I hand it over and he tosses it into a corner of the room. I try to hold back my sobs but they are an unstoppable torrent. There's a look in his eye that I haven't seen before. Worse than a shark's now. It's as if he's detached, devoid of emotion. I have to keep him talking. Must.

Through my tears I say, 'How... how did you do it? Jonathan had to be involved, didn't he?'

‘Jonathan?’ he laughs. ‘Good God, no! I got rid of him just after he’d delivered the twins, with an emergency call. That’s why his second in command had to do your stitches. I arranged for a porter to bleep Jonathan to say he was needed downstairs – a senior partner was needed urgently. Same guy sent a medic to call me outside the room. Slipped this porter a fifty-pound note, told him to keep his mouth shut. I couldn’t have Jonathan popping down the corridor to see how little Ruan was doing, could I? He was surprised and very upset when I told him that our boy had died. Jonathan said, although he was definitely on the small side, he thought he’d looked healthy enough from the short glance he’d had at him before he’d been called away. I told him that his lungs were the problem; he struggled to breathe and died before we could get him in a ventilator and that these things happen... and they do, of course. Jonathan accepted that, had to. Why would he doubt me?’

The fact that he’s proud of himself makes me choke on a sob. There must be someone else involved – the guy that paid off Yvonne?

‘You need to stop that noise now.’ He grabs a handful of tissues from the side table and shoves them at me. ‘Dry your eyes. We need to talk calmly.’

‘But the nurse that took him for checks... surely she would have suspected some...’

‘I paid the nurse off too; she helped me. Whisked him out of there fast before any of the operating team had a good enough look at him, and crucially before he cried... though he did give out a bit of a whimper... I think?’ He stops, looks up to the left as if he’s recalling something normal, everyday, a story about what the weather was like last week.

So I was right. I knew I’d heard another cry. Bless my boy. It was as if he’d been trying to tell me what was happening. I close my eyes on more tears, try to concentrate on what he’s saying...

‘Anyway, the team were told to expect that he’d be taken out, him being small and all. And it was much more than fifty pounds I paid the nurse, I can tell you.’ Simon twists his mouth to the side. Then he shrugs. ‘Had to be done though. It’s nice that you thought I was innocent in it all. I really wish I could have been.’

There's a silent scream inside my head. He paid Yvonne. Simon did. He was the person she daren't name! But if it was just Simon behind the whole thing all the time... why didn't Yvonne tell me? The answer comes back immediately. How did she know that I wouldn't crack and tell my husband everything? Drop her and her daughter right in it? My God, what a nightmare... the facts that he wasn't being blackmailed, did it all by himself, sold our son, showed me a photo of a dead baby, sprinkled fake ashes, said he'd organised a funeral, are all there in front of me, but so hard to swallow. How could the man who loved me, who I thought the world of in the early days, turn into such a monster? There's ice in my blood, my whole body is trembling.

'Anyway, that's all done now. I said we need to talk calmly, my love,' he says and traces a finger down my cheek, scrapes a teardrop and licks it off.

I consider running and then know it will do no good. Surely Jowan will be here any minute? I do as he asks; blow my nose for good measure. Look at him expectantly – anything to keep him calm. 'Talk about what?' I say.

'What happens next. I know you have been through hell because of... well, what happened. But we have a choice to make. I can end the affair with my lovely lady. We can go forward together and try to make a life as a family, or we can part. If we part, I'll divorce you of course, and you won't get a penny of my money. The kids will suffer obviously, as you'll have to get some kind of a job.' He shrugs and slips an arm over my shoulder; his hand brushes my breast and I want to scream. Then he kisses my hair. 'Your choice, love.'

Realisation dawns that he actually must be mentally unstable – insane. Has to be if he thinks we can just start again after what he's done. My skin is crawling at his nearness and I look desperately at the clock. Three-forty-five. His other hand strokes my leg, and inside my head a silent scream starts up again. I'm trembling and nausea waves through me. I might vomit. Then a small voice grows louder until it's louder than the screaming, and it yells over and over – *Survival. Survival.* I take a deep breath and say, 'Perhaps we could try again... for the sake of the children at least. It will take me a while to trust you again... but...'

‘Oh, Holly. Thank God! This is beyond my wildest dreams...’ The arm draped over my shoulder comes up under my neck and he pulls my head tight against his. I can smell sour sweat on his skin and a whiff of alcohol on his breath. Then his voice goes from excited to calm. ‘But then I know you’d say anything at the moment. No. I don’t think so. I wouldn’t have you back in a million years. You see, Lauren, the woman that I’m having an affair with, is your replacement. It’s time for you to go, you lying, conniving little bitch!’

His words send shockwaves through me, but I’m too late. I try to fight, but his thumb is at the base of my Adam’s apple, in my windpipe, and there’s a pressure at the side of my neck... it grows dark and I’m falling.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Jowan woke to the sound of a car alarm. He'd been dreaming of Afghanistan again and the alarm had inserted itself into a training session. He'd been running through the desert, a heavy pack on his back, sweat stinging his eyes, thighs burning, and his heart hammering in his chest. He'd felt like a trapped animal, desperate – the alarm had terrified him, what did it mean? Was he about to die in a bomb just like his friends? But he wasn't in the marketplace, was he? He was training in the desert. Everything had become muddled, mixed up together, slowed down, and then his eyes had flown open.

Relief at finding himself in the dark concrete underground car park didn't last long as he looked at his watch. Three-fifty. Fuck! The alert hadn't gone off on his phone for some reason. He couldn't have set it properly. Jowan scabbled in his pocket for his phone and punched in his security code. Nothing from Holly. Perhaps she'd lost track of time. Nevertheless, he felt such a letdown. Through the windscreen he saw a young woman hurry to the screaming car and suddenly there was quiet. He glanced at Holly's designated parking space. Empty. Well, that was something.

Jowan rubbed sleep from his eyes and called Holly. It rang out – went to voicemail. That wasn't like her. He decided not to leave a message, but jumped out of the car and hurried to the lift. Outside the apartment Jowan noticed that the door was open a fraction. Why would Holly have forgotten to lock it, given she was so scared of Simon finding her? About to just stroll in, he thought twice. Maybe it was his army training, but he decided to err on the cautious side.

The fall of his feet made no sound as he crept down the hallway to the living room. Nothing. The kitchen was empty too. Then he heard muted voices. Head on one side he thought one was Holly's, but he couldn't make

out her words. The other was male. Jowan crept back into the hall and, back to the wall, he made his way to the master bedroom. The door was open slightly and he held his breath, listened.

‘Because I can’t trust you to be quiet. Yes, I know you just said that you don’t care about seeing me banged up and all you want is a quiet life, but that’s not good enough for me,’ the male voice said.

‘Why would I do otherwise, Simon? I just want an end to it. I have my babies, friends, family...’ Holly said. Jowan thought she sounded fairly calm, but he could detect a tremor in her voice. What now? Burst in, take Simon on? His instinct told him to wait a moment.

‘No. I don’t want to do this but... You see, I am in love with a wonderful woman. Lauren is a lovely name, don’t you think? She’s perhaps not quite as classically beautiful as you; you were a model after all – though lately, God knows, it’s hard to believe the way you’ve let yourself go.’

Bastard. Jowan clenched his jaw; perhaps now was the time to go in? He eyed a decorative stone jug on a plinth a little way down the hall.

‘This way I can kill two birds with one stone. Make sure you never tell, and leave the way free to marry my Lauren. It won’t be too hard for people to believe that you went back on the drugs – not with losing your boy. Everything just got too much, didn’t it? I won’t be beaten, Holly, don’t you see? If any of this came out I’d lose Lauren, my job, my liberty...I don’t do losing as you know.’

Holly said, ‘But as I said, I won’t tell anyone, I just want a normal life...’

‘No. I can’t trust you on that, I’m afraid.’

‘You won’t get away with this. No! NOOOO!’

Jowan kicked open the door and ran into the bedroom. The horrific scene before him slammed into his skull.

Holly on the floor.

Simon astride her, syringe in hand.

Duct tape binding her arms to her body. Round her ankles too.

With a roar of fury, Jowan took a leap and, with his whole weight behind him, dropped a kick to Simon's kidneys. He yelped in pain and surprise as he flew across the room, thudding into the wardrobe. As he was scrabbling to right himself, Jowan lifted the jug from the hall and crashed it down on the back of Simon's neck. He went down and out.

Holly's screams of fear quietened and tears took over. 'Oh Jowan, he was going to give me a heroin overdose, he was going to k... kill me! When I told Mark he was capable of it, I was making it up... but he was really going to...'

Jowan knelt beside her, cradled her, kissed her tears away. 'Shh, now. It's all going to be okay. I'm here. I'm so sorry that I was late... I...' Jowan stopped his excuses and grabbed a pair of scissors that were lying on top of the tape. Action not words. He cut through the tape and lifted her up. 'Can you walk?'

Holly leaned against him. 'I feel a bit dizzy. He made me pass out... while he put the tape round me and...' He looked into her ashen face and haunted eyes. She took a breath and said, 'I'm okay now, I think. Jowan, get my bags and let's get out of here. I want to go home.'

Jowan nodded then looked at the prone Simon; he was already starting to moan and move his arm. Not dead then. Rage pounded through Jowan's veins and he wanted to feel his hands around his throat. It wouldn't take long and it was more than he deserved. 'I ought to finish the fucker off,' he said to Holly as she retrieved her phone from the floor.

She turned, her eyes blazing. 'No! That's not you. That's him. You are ten times the man he is, but if you kill him, you will be no better.'

Jowan sighed and shrugged. 'Okay, and I guess you need me with you, not behind bars.' He tried a smile, but Holly just grabbed her handbag and led the way out.

In the car, the shock of what had happened reduced Holly to a blubbing mess. Jowan tried to comfort her at the same time as his fingers fumbled to get the key in the ignition. 'We'll soon be far away. He won't try and hurt you again, my love. But if he did, I swear it will be the last thing he ever does.'

Holly just shook her head and sighed. 'Take me home, Jo. I'm not feeling well.' Then she looked at him and he watched all the colour drain from her face. 'Sick...' she murmured, lurched for the door and just got it open in time. Jowan rubbed her back and handed her tissues while she retched and vomited on the floor of the car park.

Afterwards she at last had colour in her cheeks and after a drink was good to go. 'Come on, we must get going. He might come after us,' she said, looking into the shadows at the turn of the car park.

Jowan snorted. 'I doubt that. He'll have a hell of a headache and feel like he's walking on a trampoline for a bit. Besides, where is his car?'

'Round the corner. And don't underestimate him, Jowan. I did and look where that got us.'

Jowan flicked on the wipers as they drove up the ramp into the afternoon deluge. A sickly yellow hue tinged the sky and in the east thunder grumbled from furious black clouds. 'Supposed to be May,' he said to Holly, but noticed she had her eyes shut. No wonder. Under his breath he muttered, 'Spring in England, eh?' He shook his head and then jumped as a fork of lightning speared a bus shelter about a hundred yards away.

Forgetting Holly was trying to rest he turned to her and said, 'Jesus, did you see that?'

But her eyes were wide open and staring in the side mirror, a look of terror on her face as she said, 'Yes, and I can see something far worse behind us, Jowan!! Drive, Drive!'

Jowan looked through the rear-view mirror and saw Simon's demented face looming at him through the windscreen of the car behind. His eyes were aflame and his mouth was wide open, shouting or screaming something while banging the side of his fist on the windscreen. Then he flung open his door and made to get out. Jowan stepped on the accelerator and tore down the street like a bat out of hell. How on earth could Simon be driving in his state? Surely he wouldn't be able to keep up for long?

As he sped the nippy Honda down the narrow side roads, dodging parked cars and cyclists, Simon's big Mercedes four-by-four had to slow, and once they'd joined the main dual carriageway a few moments later

they'd lost him. Good. Jowan prayed there'd be no hold-ups like they'd had that morning. It was rush hour though, so chances were...

'Jowan,' Holly said tremulously and put a hand on his arm, looking again through the side mirror.

He didn't need her to continue. He'd already seen the big car swing into the road, full-beam headlights cutting through the torrential rain. It was catching up to them. Fast.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

How can this be happening? Jowan said he should be woozy, incapable of walking straight, and judging by his breath when he was pawing me, under the influence too. But there he is, gunning our Mercedes through this hellish storm towards us. I twist round in my seat to get a better look and, between the forward-and-back of the rear wiper, I see a Mini change lanes and nip in behind us. Thank God, because I swear Simon was intending to ram us. A blare of Simon's car horn over and over makes no difference and the Mini slows down, an obvious sign of the driver's annoyance. Then all the traffic slows due to the sheer volume of rush hour. The speedometer says twenty miles per hour. This is all we need!

'Christ, is he fucking mad? He's trying to get round that Mini, he's mounting the pavement!' Jowan yells, banging the flat of his hand on the dash.

'Yes he is, totally!' I tell Jowan everything I have learned. Hearing the words out loud makes it seem even more unbelievable. My heart is thundering and I feel sick again. This has to be some terrible nightmare, doesn't it? Please let me wake up in my bed in the beach house... please. No such luck. I watch the tussle going on between the two cars. The driver of the Mini is very obstinate thankfully and is cutting up in front of Simon each time he has nearly overtaken.

I turn back in my seat and face front – take in my surroundings. Then I have a flash of inspiration. 'Jowan, take the next exit. It cuts down a side street then down a few twisty roads and then across a viaduct. It's a shortcut I've used sometimes and we might just shake Simon off. I don't think he knows it.'

Luck decides to be on our side, because the queue frees up again and Jowan does as I ask. I turn in my seat, stare back along the street, but Simon

doesn't follow. I can hardly believe it, but I daren't let myself get too excited. 'Okay, now next left. Then next right.' We drive for a few minutes. 'Nothing yet, Jo.'

Jowan nods. 'Okay. Where now?'

'Over the viaduct; it's a really old narrow one and then, once we're across, it does a sharp right down a hill. We have gone out of our way, the wrong direction completely actually, but we'll soon get to the ring road.'

'And then that will take us to the M4?'

'Kind of. Well, sort the satnav out in a bit ...' My words dry up as I see a big black car following in the distance... Oh, it can't be, surely?

'Fuck. It's him,' Jowan mutters.

'He's inhuman. How can he possibly know this shortcut? He never comes this way...'

'He might just have been lucky, caught a glimpse of us taking the corners.'

Tears are pushing behind my eyes and that makes me angry. I am sick of crying today, being weak – at his mercy. The memory of his thumb in my windpipe, the pressure on my neck, flashes in my mind again and I want to retch. Simon took great delight in telling me exactly how he'd made me pass out, once I'd regained consciousness and found myself trussed like a turkey. Something about pressing his fingers on my vagus nerve. He'd even made a joke about it, called it 'the gambler', as it sounds like Vegas. How appropriate. Simon and his fellow students had called it that in med school, apparently.

I think again about how calmly he'd sat astride me, chatting as if it was most normal thing in the world. He was sorry, but he'd had to do it to make sure I didn't struggle when he wrapped the tape around me. He didn't want me struggling, scratching him, and getting incriminating bits of his DNA under my nails. Ever the bragger, he said that, if you weren't careful, you could make someone have brain damage or worse doing what he did. But he was just so skilled there was no danger. That would have been funny if it wasn't so sick. No danger of course until he plunged an overdose of heroin into my arm. A shock runs the length of me. If Jowan hadn't turned up

when he did, I would now be lying dead and cold on the floor of the bedroom.

The narrow street behind us is full up with Simon's powerful car and soon he'll be feet away from our bumper. Then there's a screech of metal as he drives too close to a parked car; it slows him, but he doesn't stop.

'Un-be-fucking-lievable! This man is hell-bent on chasing us down!' Jowan shouts, his face flushed with fury.

'He is capable of anything; after what he did today, nothing will surprise me.' I place a hand on Jowan's shoulder. 'Okay, we'll be on the viaduct in a moment; be careful of that sharp right bend as we get off like I told you...'

A beep from my phone signals a message and I can hardly believe it when Simon's name lights up. How the hell is he texting and driving the way he is? No wonder he nearly took that car's door off! Against my better judgement I read it.

WHO THE FUCK IS THE BOYFRIEND??!! YOU WON'T GET AWAY WITH THIS, BITCH!!

I tell Jowan what it says and tell him to go faster if he can, but to be careful. Jowan nods and accelerates onto the viaduct. Simon is right behind now. Too close. I look at my phone. Hover my finger over the nine button, Three pushes, that's all it takes. I know what the consequences would be, but after everything Simon has done, there's no telling what he'd do in the future to get revenge. Don't I owe it to my children to make sure he's punished for what he's done? I turn to face the back. I can't bear it. Even through the driving rain I can see his face contorted in rage, determination in his eyes. I have to do it. I have to call the police.

Then there's a CRUMP as he rams our bumper and we are flung forward and back in our seats as we ricochet off the side of the viaduct and then over to the other wall. My phone clatters somewhere on the floor. I scream and close my eyes. Please don't let us crash! The car judders and Jowan somehow manages to pull us back into the middle of the road just in time.

I'm screaming again and, though I try, I can't stop. It's as if I'm outside my body; I have no control of it. Jowan is yelling a string of expletives as he floors the accelerator and pitches the car towards the end of the viaduct.

Then, through the mirror, I see the big car coming again. My mind offers an unwelcome thought – the same car that we had planned to fit car seats into for the twins. All that seems a lifetime ago...

‘Right, hold on tight, Holly!’ Jowan says and wrenches the wheel tight right as we fly down the hill. It feels like we are on just two wheels as we skid on the tarmac, slick with rain. My stomach rolls and a scream catches in my throat as we hurtle towards a brick wall covered in flyers and graffiti. This is it. This is how we die. I close my eyes and think of my babies. Wait for impact.

The impact doesn’t come. My head bangs against the window as Jowan miraculously wrenches the wheel to the left and pulls our car clear. We miss the wall by inches.

‘YES!! THANK GOD!’ As well as triumph there is a tremor in Jowan’s voice and he blows hard through his mouth a few times and guides our car into a street lined with small shops. We are alive. Normal life is going on around us. People are walking into a newsagent’s, laughing with each other in the laundrette...

Overwhelming relief pulls a bark of hysterical laughter from my throat and I say, ‘Oh, Jo... I thought we were dead. I mean, I honestly...’

A deafening squeal of brakes, screech of metal and what sounds like a rumble of thunder behind us stops my words. Then an ear-shattering explosion has me in the brace position and I feel Jowan accelerate but then slow the car to a stop. I think I know what has happened, but I can’t lift my head from my knees... can’t remove my hands, my fingers, from their tight interlinked clasp around the back of my head. I am paralysed by a mix of shock and hope. And something else is there. A pang of shame. Shame because hope is my dominant emotion. I hope that what I think has happened is correct.

Suddenly I am enveloped in Jowan’s arms and he gently sits me up straight. ‘Jesus, Holly. The bastard crashed into that wall, his car has gone up in flames.’

I look at a pulse jumping in his neck as he strains to see behind us. I want to look too but I can’t bring myself to do it. Suddenly there is a cacophony of noise and people run out of shops slack-jawed, pale. Some

have hands over their mouths, wide-eyed. People are running past our car towards the crash, others are yelling about emergency services. I hear a loud male voice saying that all three emergency services are on their way and then I hear a woman's high-pitched scream. It comes again, a hysterical scream. She screams and screams and screams, but I can't turn round.

Can. Not.

Jowan tells me to stay put and gets out of the car. I yell at him to come back. I don't want to be alone. He doesn't listen and jogs off down the street so I gather my courage and undo my seatbelt. Turning, I see the Mercedes engulfed in a raging fire – black putrid smoke belches up into the sky until it's lost in the dark of the rainclouds.

A little knot of people have gathered in a semi-circle, their backs to me. To one side I can see a woman sobbing, her hands over her mouth. Perhaps she was the screaming woman. She's looking at something on the ground but I can't see what it is because of the crowd. The woman is wearing a long white apron; I think she must be from the bakery because a man runs out of there with an umbrella and drags her away.

Jowan fills the space she left, looks at the ground and then I see his hand fly to his mouth. He looks up the street towards me and runs back, just as I hear a faint wail of a siren in the distance. He gets back in the car. There's a damp and acrid smell of smoke and burning clinging to him like a second skin.

The haunted look in his eyes makes my heart jump. 'W... what did you see?' I ask, but I don't really want to know.

He takes my hand, kisses the back of it. 'Let's just say we won't be bothered by Simon ever again...'

Shame and hope tussle in my heart. 'Are you sure... he might just be injured...'

'Oh, I'm sure,' Jowan says and draws his hands down his face.

I'm torn. Though I don't want to know, I have to. Have to be sure. 'Tell me exactly what you saw,' I say and put my hand on his knee. He shakes his head. 'I need to know, Jo.'

Jowan takes a breath. ‘Okay, if you’re sure. It was just like being back at the marketplace in Afghanistan. The smell of burning flesh, the blackened body...’

‘No, stop. Oh God. Oh God. Oh God,’ I hear myself say. I can’t be here. Can’t listen to more. We need to be away from here. Far away.

It’s as if I’ve spoken that thought out loud, because Jowan starts the engine. ‘Right. Let’s get out of here before the fire brigade, police and the rest arrive.’

*

We are an hour out of London before either of us speaks. Jowan suggests we stop for a toilet break and a coffee and I agree. He did try once or twice to ask how I felt earlier, but I just shook my head. I couldn’t answer because I didn’t know. Now, as we pull into a service station, my jumbled thoughts produce just a few halting words. ‘I’m glad Simon is dead,’ I say to the dashboard. ‘I’m not in the least sorry... does that make me a bad person?’

Jowan puts a finger under my chin and raises my gaze to his. I look into his deep blue eyes, full of concern for me, and he says, ‘He was the bad person, Holly. He tried to murder you today, for Christ’s sake! He gave away your son, told you he was dead, who knows what else he’s done? You have nothing to be sorry for.’

Even though I believe this myself, it is comforting to have it confirmed. Maybe now I can stop wondering if Simon will show up to get revenge, stop living in fear and truly look forward to a happy future with my babies... and perhaps even with Jowan too. Once we have got home to Cornwall, rested and celebrated the return of my boy, we’ll have that talk. I smile at Jowan and we get out of the car. My heart is full of hope again, but this time it’s because I’m wishing that he’ll decide to stay.

Chapter Thirty

The kiss of an ocean breeze wakes me from sleep. I watch the white gauze curtain's gentle rise and fall at the open bedroom window, listen to the shush of the waves hurrying in their ceaseless journey back and forth along the sand and take a deep breath of morning air – ozone and lilies. Wonderful. Then panic creeps up me like acid along litmus and I can't breathe. My limbs are dead weights, my heart thuds, and panic turns to terror as Simon's blackened face looms over me – charred flesh peeling from bleached cheekbones. From a ruined mouth comes the stench of death and a red lizard tongue flicks my lips. A grotesque attempt at a smile, and in a voice from hell he says, 'I told you you'd not get away with this, bitch. I ALWAYS win.'

A baby cries and I sit up, a scream in my throat. It takes a few seconds for reality to sink in and when it does I'm overcome with relief. I'm in bed. I was dreaming – a terrifyingly real nightmare. The third since I went to bed last night totally exhausted. The gauze curtains rise and fall, the waves roll in, my heart slows, and from the cot next to my bed, Iona yells for her breakfast. Ruan wakes too and joins in with his sister. Though I am still shattered from lack of sleep and the trauma of yesterday, I can't remember hearing a sweeter sound.

Getting out of bed I stand between the cots and stretch my hands to theirs. Immediately two pairs of eyes lock on mine and yells turn to smiles. I marvel at their little hands clasped around each of my fingers. How can these children have such sunny personalities given what they have been through. I smile and stroke their hair.

Then I try to be objective. In actual fact they haven't been through anything too terrible, have they? Yes, they have been separated, but thankfully Ruan had Angela, and I know beyond doubt that she adored him. He wasn't harmed in any way and for that at least I am grateful. Iona might

have suffered a little given my state of mind after I thought her brother was dead, but I don't think so. And it's not something she will ever remember.

I pick them both up at the same time, something I won't be able to do for much longer given their growth rate, and tell them that there is no place in our lives for gloomy thoughts. Our future will be full of sunshine and roses, and if anyone tries to give us dark clouds and weeds we'll send them packing.

Jowan appears in the doorway half asleep, his hair a mess of curls, a day's growth of stubble on his chin. Wearing just boxers he stretches and yawns and I can't help notice the pull of muscles across his toned stomach. My cheeks flame and I put the twins on my bed.

'Morning,' I say over my shoulder. 'Sorry, did the babies wake you?'

'Yes, but it's a lovely sound. Two crying babies are always better than one, eh?'

The smile I send him comes right back at me, big, bright and beautiful, then he stretches again and I look back at the twins. 'Can you give me a hand to take them downstairs and get them ready? I need to ring Mum then and get the celebration lunch underway.'

Jowan comes over and picks up Ruan. 'I wish you'd rethink that one. You need a few days to recover from your ordeal first, love. And I still think you should get a doctor to check you over. You *were* out cold you know.'

I wave away his frowny face and head downstairs with Iona. 'I told you I'll be fine. If there is any brain damage, nobody would know the difference, me being nuts and all.'

'Oh, ha ha.' He follows me into the kitchen and we put the children onto the play mat. 'Well at least put the lunch off until later. You might laugh it off, but you've had a terrible ordeal and you need to rest.'

'No. Mum needs to meet her grandson properly without all the upset that went with it yesterday, and besides, I want to celebrate! God knows we have had enough misery lately.'

'Okay, if you insist,' Jowan says and walks out onto the balcony.

There was something about the look he just gave me and his stance now as he leans on the rail and gazes out over the early morning ocean. Against

the competing hues of grey and blue he looks like a cardboard cut-out. As though he's been stuck there by a careless hand. He hunches his shoulders and looks down to the beach. He's gone all stiff and rigid, awkward, as if he doesn't fit into the scene. Then it hits me what was behind the look he gave me.

My hands stop making the twins' bottles up and I stare at his back. He doesn't fit into the scene because he wants to be elsewhere. There was a depth of sadness in his eyes... sadness and loss. Maybe he's decided he doesn't want this. Me. A ready-made family. Yes, I know it was him that made the running from the word go, but perhaps now he's having second thoughts and who would blame him? He's too nice to tell me, especially now, after what happened yesterday. No matter what happens today, we must have that talk before another goes by... be the outcome bad or good, no more delays.

*

'Holly, my love! My little girl. Thank God you're safe!' Mum's chin wobbles and she flings her arms around me and sobs into my neck. I'm not sure how to take this uncharacteristic show of emotion. Her little girl? Even when I was a little girl I can't remember her being so affectionate. Because she is beside herself, my emotions rise and swell and I know that if I don't squash them down, I will be blubbering too.

My hands do the back patting thing, and presently I say, 'I'm okay, Mum. I'm okay. Me and the babies are together now and back here for good.'

Mum breaks away gently and blows her nose on a tissue bigger than her head. 'What a bloody nightmare you went through, what a terrible, terrible mess,' she says, pulling out a chair at the kitchen table and slumping down into it as if she had jelly for legs. 'Why didn't you tell me you suspected Ruan was alive?'

I join her opposite and put my hand on hers. 'I did if you remember. Said I had a feeling that he hadn't died, and you were bad enough then. Can you imagine how you would have reacted if I said I had a letter telling me he was still alive? You would have thought that I was becoming depressed

again, imagining things. You might have told Simon and as things turned out that would have been far, far worse than I have ever imagined. As far as you were concerned, Simon was a wonderful man – a bloody good catch, I think you said, when I first told you that I was marrying him.’

‘Well, he did seem to be,’ she sniffs. He was from a posh background, a surgeon for goodness’ sake. I would never have thought one of our family would have married into those circles. I was just so glad that you’d never have to scrimp and save.’

I sit back and fold my arms. ‘There’s more to happiness than money.’

‘Of course, there is. But me and your...’ Her eyes fill again. ‘Your dad wanted the best for you that’s all. And when Jowan left, you were so, so sad. I thought you’d never get over him. But you did.’ Mum blows her nose again and leans forward, curiosity narrowing her eyes. ‘How did you and Jowan get back together? You could have knocked me over with a feather when Demi told me. And then when he opened the door this morning to me I...’

My mother’s voice is not the softest and I don’t want Jowan catching this. I put my index finger to my lips. ‘Let’s talk about that another time, Mum.’

She pulls her chin back into her neck. ‘Oh I see,’ she says in a tone of disapproval.

‘I doubt that you do, but let’s talk about nice things.’

Mum isn’t in the mood for nice things judging by her expression. ‘What I don’t understand is how Simon went from such a loving husband to doing something like... well... it isn’t like anything else, it’s nothing more than despicable. Unthinkable. To give his son to someone else, tell you that he was dead...’

Wait until she finds out the reason he did it. Was telling her all about Simon a good idea? She might go on and on and on. But if I don’t, we’d have to keep returning to it. I want to tell her everything and then we never speak about him again. Then I check myself. Everything but the part where he tried to kill me... What good would that do? She’d just have nightmares about it. Demi was hysterical when she’d heard about it all upon our return

last night, so God knows what it would do to Mum. No. It was over now and talking about it wouldn't help anyone – least of all me.

‘The thing is, Mum. I don't think he ever was the loving husband you think he was. He rescued me at a time I was most vulnerable, not for my sake, but for his. I never told you the whole truth... but I will now. I'll put the kettle on.’

Ten minutes later, Mum's tea is still in front of her, untouched. Tears are streaming down her face and dripping off her chin and I think it might have been all too much. Then she says to the ceiling, ‘You were a drug addict? A drug addict and I never knew. Yes, you told me you had depression, had to when you came up to see your dad – it was obvious I suppose... but drugs...’

Her red-rimmed eyes and bewildered expression are too much for me to take. She's disappointed in me. That's par for the course then. I say I have to check on the twins. They have been asleep a good while now, but she stops me with, ‘My poor love. What kind of a mother must I be that you couldn't come to me. Your dad always said I was too hard on you, but that's because I wanted the best for you... and...’ She throws her hands up. ‘What a bloody mess.’

So... not disappointed in me? Disappointed in herself. My heart reaches out a bit and I say, ‘No use in blaming yourself, Mum. I felt bad that I couldn't protect my boy from Simon – but how could I? You did nothing wrong.’

Mum's face sets into a glower. ‘That bloody man. If he wasn't dead I'd kill him.’

‘Careful, Mum. That's too “bloodys” in one afternoon.’ I try a smile.

‘That man would make a saint swear.’ She takes a sip of cold tea and pulls a face. ‘Did you ever find out why he did it?’

A deep breath fills my lungs and I let it out slowly. It still takes a lot of believing. ‘Yes, it was money. He got up to his neck in gambling debt and so sold Ruan for two million pounds.’

‘No... No, Holly. Tell me that's not true.’ When I don't, she startles me by smashing the heel of her hand on the table with such force that the tea

slops over her mug. ‘The fucking devil! The fucking evil bastard! Evil!’ she yells, her face contorted in rage.

My God, I thought I’d never see the day when my mum used the F word. If the situation wasn’t so tragic I’d laugh. Just then Demi, Alex and Jowan come in weighed down with bags of goodies for the celebration lunch. Mum turns bright red and goes to the bathroom.

‘Was that Wendy swearing?’ Demi asks, incredulous.

‘Yes, but then I did just tell her why Simon gave Ruan away.’

‘Ah. That would make a saint swear,’ she says and begins unpacking the bags.

Late afternoon finds us all on the beach in the shade of a sand dune. The spring weather is perfect for it. A gentle breeze tempers the sun’s heat and we’re all on our knees creating the biggest moat around a spectacular collection of sand castles. Our endeavours have produced three tiers, flags, drawbridges, shell patterns, you name it. Mum is on grandma duty and thoroughly enjoying peeping into the beach tent every few minutes to check the children are still sleeping, while the rest of us act like big kids. And oh my God, does it feel good. I really can’t remember the last time I just let go, let my hair down and had such uninhibited fun.

Since I married Simon I haven’t been myself. Not really. There was always a bit of me that I kept in reserve. Maybe it was because I knew Simon wouldn’t approve. He’d say I was childish or something, ruin whatever I was doing anyway. Why had it taken me so long to realise what we had wasn’t right. Never had been? Still, that was over now – dead and buried just like he soon would be.

The police had come round just after lunch to tell me about the accident. I had done a good job of being shocked, because I was. I hadn’t expected them just to show up so fast... not with the way he died. To be honest, I hadn’t even thought about the police properly for some reason. Stupid really. They said though the car had burned, the registration plate was still legible and led them to Simon. It didn’t necessarily mean that the body they found was Simon’s, but given that he wasn’t at home and his phone was dead, chances were that it was likely. The dental records should give them

the answer, but that hadn't been established yet. I should be prepared for the worst.

Mum had talked for me, thank goodness. Asked lots of questions about where and how it had happened. They said the weather must have played a part – he'd been driving too fast in a storm, they thought, but that was all they knew at the moment. I just thanked them for telling me, and then they went.

Later Demi and I talked about why Simon had told me everything he'd done. If he hadn't, if he'd just kept quiet, he could have let me go. He could have gone to his woman and that would have been it. I would never have suspected his involvement. Yes, I know he said that he couldn't trust me to keep quiet about Mark, and that might have eventually led the authorities to Simon, but to just tell me it all like that seemed incredible.

Demi said that she'd done a bit of criminology and psychology at night school and that she thought he definitely had psychopathic tendencies. Simon wanted to tell me everything because he was proud of how he'd fooled us all. He also then needed to kill me because his main aim was winning, and then moving on to a new game. I was the old game – I had to go. He wouldn't have liked the messy and unsavoury bits of his past clinging to his rosy future.

Demi throws a bit of seaweed at my head and snaps my mind back to the sunny afternoon. I laugh and look round for Jowan. He's been having fun today too, but I can tell he's not been as carefree as the rest of us. Too often there's been a faraway look in his eye and he's been subdued from time to time. Jowan's missing. I shield my eyes and look along the shoreline. He was there a while ago filling plastic buckets with seawater for the moat. I can't see him now though. Alex says he went back to the beach house for the loo a while ago.

Ten minutes later I decide to go and find him and collect some beers while I'm at it. Out of the shade and scrambling up dunes, I realise how unfit I am. Sweat trickles down my back and I'm puffing like an old goat. Once the dust has settled I must get back into some kind of healthy-eating routine and exercise plan. The fact that I'm planning to collect beers at the same time as having these thoughts isn't lost on me.

The cool of the kitchen is heavenly and I run the tap and drink straight from it. ‘Jowan? You want a beer?’ I call behind me as I dab my mouth with a towel. No answer. He might be in the shower washing sand from his feet. I smile to myself. He has a thing about sand getting between his toes and rubbing... I stop in my tracks. The cool of the kitchen feels warm next to the chill that runs the length of me. My gut twists and I have this unshakable fear that he’s gone. He’s not in the shower, the bedroom... anywhere in the house. He’s gone.

On my bed there’s a bit of paper folded in half. I poke it with a fingernail and it falls open a bit; I glimpse Jowan’s handwriting before it closes again. I can’t pick it up, can’t read it because if I do... if I do my fears will become a reality. This morning when he was looking out to sea on the balcony I knew that it would come to this...but until I read the words on the paper, the note, there is still hope. In the spare room his bags have gone. The room looks like he was never there.

I hear Demi come in, yelling that she’s dying for a pee and I go back to look at the note again. I’m still looking when she comes up behind me. ‘What’s up? We’re all dying of thirst on the beach.’ Her grin freezes when she sees my face. Then she follows my gaze. ‘What are you looking at that bit of paper for?’

‘It’s a note from Jowan. Please read it, Demi.’

‘Why don’t you?’ she says, but I can see by her face that she knows why. After a moment’s hesitation she grabs it and shakes her head. I see her swallow hard.

‘Please read it,’ I whisper.

She nods and unfolds it. “*My darling Holly. I have decided that it’s best that we call it a day.*” She stops and makes a thin line of her lips.’

‘Carry on,’ I say, though I don’t want to hear it.

Demi shakes her head in bewilderment. “*I have the wanderlust again. I tried to kid myself that settling down in my hometown with you was what I wanted, but I don’t think it is... I will always wonder if I don’t follow my heart, see the world, won’t I? I don’t want to get to be an old man and wonder what if... That said, I will always love you. Love the twins too. Be happy, my love. From your Jo xxx*”

Demi's eyes mist over, but mine are dry. So there it is in black and white. He's left me again, just like I always feared he might... the selfish, shallow bastard. My head told me to be sensible, protect myself, but I didn't pay attention. How stupid was I to forgive him, let him back into my heart just to have him rip it up, stamp all over it?

'Oh, bloody hell, Holly. I am so sorry. What are you going to do?' Demi says taking a step towards me, the note fluttering in her fingers like a dying bird.

I take the note, screw it into a ball and hurl it across the room. 'I'm going to get some beers and go play on the beach. Coming?'

Chapter Thirty-One

Eight weeks later...

The shade of the garden at the back of the beach house is a little patch of heaven. Flaming June has run into boiling July and in two days time, according to the weather forecast, scorching August is waiting to carry the baton. Iona and Ruan are in the paddling pool and are sitting up, practically unaided. They both mastered this last week in the bath and my heart swelled with parental pride. They are only four months old and this seems early according to my baby books. Okay, so they are propped up by inflatable lobsters, but that's unaided in my world.

My world is so much happier without Simon in it. It took a while, but I no longer feel guilty in the slightest when I think of his death. Many would say he deserved it, and I think I would be amongst them. It wasn't as if I killed him, was it? No. He did that all by himself, so hell-bent was he on getting revenge. Sometimes, when I sit alone on the balcony in the evening, I do worry about what I'll tell the twins about their father when they are old enough to ask.

It goes without saying that Ruan will never know where he spent his first few months or why, but how can I tell them the lie that Simon was a good husband and father who died tragically in a car accident? There's plenty of time to think of the right words, of course. Then there's the problem of the birth certificate that Angela left in the bag of his things. It had obviously been forged somehow; they were the named parents and Ruan's name was Harry Nathaniel Jenson. Another headache for the future... still, if it comes to it, a DNA test would prove I am in fact his mother. I shut my mind to that for now. It's all too much.

Ruan splashes his hand in the water and laughs as he's showered with sparkling droplets. Iona watches him and he does exactly the same. I laugh

too and right now I feel I am the luckiest woman in the world. They quickly had a positive ID on the blackened corpse of my husband, and as a consequence, I have my own home right on the beach where I've always dreamed of living. I have more money than I could ever need due to the sale of the London apartment and what was in our joint bank account. Because of how it arrived there, I gave lots away to charity, some to Demi and Alex to set up their new home, some to Mum and some to Yvonne. It made me feel good that her sick daughter would be helped by my donation. After all, Yvonne was just another victim of Simon, wasn't she? A pawn in his ongoing game. She admitted to me when I called her that she didn't tell me it was Simon that paid for her silence because she thought I might crack and blurt it to him and that would be the end of her. The excuse that a friend wrote the letter wouldn't have washed either then, and she'd be terrified of what he'd do. Just one thing is missing, a person actually. But my heart has closed and locked the door on that one for ever. The keyhole has become rusted and corroded by endless and often unexpected tears. But now the well is dry. Time to move on.

I lift Ruan and Iona onto a picnic rug and towel them dry. Even though the day is a scorcher I think they have had enough time in the pool. Perhaps I'll take them in and give them a warm bath, before lunch, get the sticky sunscreen off their...

'There you are!'

I look up to see Demi and Alex hurrying down the garden path. 'Oh hello, thought you were furniture shopping this weekend?'

'We are, but Alex just told me something and I have to share it. He doesn't want to, but I made him come.'

Alex looks caught between a rock and a hard place. He can't meet my eyes and, for once, a smile is far from his face. 'What's up, Alex?' I ask.

He sits on the grass and sighs. 'It is supposed to be a secret, but Inspector Gadget here always knows when I'm hiding something.'

Demi is busy cooing over the twins but says, 'Get on with it, before I do.'

'Okay... I ran into Jowan in the supermarket last night...'

I raise my hand. ‘Don’t want to hear it, thanks.’ My heart won’t take any more of Jowan. How dare they come round here with his name on their lips? There’s a knot of anger in my chest and it’s tightening.

‘You will when he tells you what he said...’ Demi picks up Ruan and jiggles him on her knee.

‘No, I won’t, and stop jiggling him. He needs a nappy on or he’ll pee all over you.’ It will bloody serve her right if he does.

Alex stands up. ‘Right, I think we should go. I told you she wouldn’t want to know.’

Something about the way Alex says the words ‘she’ gets my hackles up. ‘It amazes me that you would be surprised I wouldn’t want to know, given the way that man – or child rather, he’s no man – just upped and left.’

‘But he didn’t...’ Demi begins.

‘Of course he did!’ I snap, pulling a nappy onto Iona and handing one to Demi for Ruan. ‘When all the excitement over Simon was over, and real life stretched in front of him, he decided he couldn’t take the responsibility. He’s a little boy at heart, always was. Oh yes, he likes to play the hero – but that’s all he can do, play at it. A real hero would be in it for the long-haul. The only long-haul he likes is a flight to somewhere far flung – wants to see the world, bless him.’

At my unexpected outburst there’s a long silence and I turn my burning cheeks away from them as I dress Iona. ‘And why is he still here?’ I say. ‘Unless seeing the world was just another excuse to get away from us.’

Behind me there’s a quick exchange of words in hushed tones and Alex sighs. ‘He had to work on his dad’s farm to get enough money together for the flight. He hated that of course but he had no choice. He’s leaving from Newquay Airport this afternoon, as it happens.’

My fickle heart sinks at this. My head is furious. How can it be disappointed after everything that man put me through over the last five years? ‘Well, that’s nice then.’

Demi puts Ruan’s sunhat on. ‘It’s not a holiday, Holly. He’s off to Syria to help with the humanitarian crisis.’

My laugh is false, bitter. ‘Oh isn’t that just like him? It has hero written all over it.’ My heart frowns at that. A bit cruel, Holly.

‘He left because he thinks he’s not good enough for you, Holly,’ Alex says, kneeling beside me. ‘He couldn’t bear the fact that he let you down when he went in the army – that his leaving led to your drug addiction and also to Simon. Then he did it again when he fell asleep in the car... you could have been killed... he’s thinks you need someone better.’

‘Oh please,’ I say to stop my heart’s mutterings. ‘He will say anything – probably trying to impress you.’

Alex spreads his hands. ‘Then why did he swear me to silence?’

‘Because he knew that you’d tell Demi and Demi would tell me? It isn’t rocket science.’ I pick up Iona and start to walk back to the house. ‘Can you bring Ruan please, Demi?’

Demi follows close behind as we step into the cool of the kitchen. ‘I think you’re being harsh, Hols. It was only by chance that Jowan and Alex met last night. Jowan’s leaving in a few hours, so if he wanted you to know the truth he would have mentioned it to Alex before, wouldn’t he? They have been out for a drink a couple of times since you two split.’

I spin round and glare at Alex who has the good grace to look sheepish. ‘Oh, nice to know who your friends are,’ I snap, while all the time my heart can see the logic of Demi’s words. But so what? What if it is true? I say as much to Demi.

‘Because if it is true, which I have no doubt it is – you can’t let him go off to Syria if you still love him. You do, don’t you?’

Iona puts her arms out to Alex and I hand her over, walk to the sink, run water into a glass. I don’t drink it though; just stare out of the window at the ocean. A white boat is on the far horizon and I wonder where it’s going, about the lives of the passengers. Are they happy, sad, going through the motions of life, or living the dream? Some of us are lucky enough to be somewhere in between. My heart slips a sneaky thought in at the end. *If you had Jowan, you would always be living the dream.*

‘Look, we’ll look after the kids while you go to the airport. Just speak to him, if only to say goodbye.’ Demi gives me a pensive smile. ‘I don’t have

to tell you how dangerous Syria is.'

I say nothing because I can't. Then I grab my car keys and rush out of the house. Once behind the wheel though I look at the keys in my hand but don't insert them into the ignition. I'm running off to the airport to catch Jowan to say what? Don't go, of course you're good enough for me? I know you dumped me and ran off to the army, turned me into a junkie, but never mind, I got over it? Please come back and we can play happy families together? This isn't some daft Hollywood film, this is my life.

Out of the window I watch a seagull glide on the thermals, high above the ocean, the sun on its wings, beautiful, graceful, free. That gull doesn't need anyone to look out for it, watch over it like it was some sickly kitten. It has to live on its wits, look out for itself, survive out in the world all by itself. If I'm honest I hate that Jowan had to rescue me from Simon. It played on my mind for weeks afterwards. I always end up being the victim somehow. He's kicking himself that he fell asleep – I'm kicking myself that he had to be there at all. Of course I am eternally grateful that he was, but nevertheless... I'm sick of having men rescue me. I can rescue myself in future. It's time I stood on my own two feet, made a life for myself and my children. I can do that on my own – should do that on my own.

Before I can change my mind, I get out of the car and walk back to my house.

Epilogue

On the sand dunes are two toddlers, a boy and a girl. The boy is wearing a white sunhat and dungarees, his sister is dressed the same, apart from a yellow hat, and they are laughing and digging in the sand. Sixteen months old and into everything. I have now developed eyes in the back of my head and there's never a minute's rest. Am I complaining? No. A jackdaw swoops near to them overhead, a bit too low for my liking, and Jowan leaps off the picnic rug and waves his arms at it.

'Bloody scavengers!' he says and chases it along the beach for a bit. He does make me laugh. In fact laughter is a big part of our lives nowadays. Me and the twins had fun before, but since he came back from Syria, we do laugh. A lot.

I think back to the day I was off to catch him at the airport a year ago and I'm so pleased I didn't go. In the time we were apart I learned to cope with everything by myself and raising twins as a lone parent is not plain sailing. I am proud of myself and am happy with the person I am becoming. I feel stronger than I ever have and can't see that changing any time soon.

Mum had been round often; she's totally besotted with her grandchildren. And Demi and Alex, of course, so I never felt lonely. I think of the beautiful ivory wedding gown Demi showed me a photo of the other day – can't wait for their wedding in the spring. And who'd have thought that she's four months gone. Miracles do happen, apparently.

Jowan's been home six months now and we have spent our time just 'being'. We bumped into each other on the beach not long after he came back from Syria and it was a bit awkward. He played with the kids and then I made an excuse and left. A week later I called him, suggested we met up. I felt strong enough to do that. It was on my terms, you see, not his.

The relief on Jowan's face when he saw me walk into the cafe is still fresh in my mind and how we sat over a coffee while he confirmed what Alex had told me. He'd said that I was the strongest person he knew and that he'd let me down very badly, once when he'd gone to the army, and then again in London; for that he couldn't live with himself. He said that it was more down to luck than judgement that I was still alive, because he'd not believed the seriousness of the situation and allowed himself to go to sleep. I deserved someone far better than him. I remember that his exact words were: *I'm a major fuck-up and always will be.*

My heart took over completely then, even though I had tried to keep it in check, and I told him that he was wrong, that he wasn't a fuck-up and that if he hadn't been by my side, believed in me from day one about Ruan still being alive, God knows where we'd be now.

But I also told him that I wanted an equal, not a rescuer, and that if he thought I was strong then, he wouldn't recognise me now. We agreed to take things slowly and to see where it led us. Most importantly he would follow my lead.

So far it has led us well. Jowan has followed his dream of taking art lessons and even though I am quite biased, anyone can see that he is a really talented painter. He checks on the twins after he's seen the bird off and flops back down in the sand next to me. 'You know, you were saying that you'd give me the money to set up a small gallery, Holly?'

I nod and offer him a sandwich.

'Well, I'd like to accept on the condition that it's a loan, not a gift.'

I know better than to argue. There is absolutely no need for him to pay me back, but that's just Jowan. We are very similar in that he wants to show himself and me that he can do this alone. It all goes back to his dad I guess. 'Yes, whatever you want, Jo.'

He grins and takes a bite from the sandwich and right then I hope that we are going to have that happy ever after that we talked about. And if we don't, then we only have ourselves to blame. The shadows of the past are gone, and tomorrow looks like it's going to be another lovely day.

The End

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