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The Love of Her Life



Harriet Evans

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HARRIET EVANS

 HarperCollins e-books

Darling Kate,

I'm sorry.

Perhaps one day, when you're grown-up, you'll understand why I've done it. Relationships are complicated, that's the truth. Darling, I love you, and your father loves you. You mustn't blame yourself. You are our little girl, and we're both very proud of you.

You must come and see me soon,

Lots and lots of love,

Mummy

xxx

PS Happy belated fourteenth birthday, darling. I do hope you like the telescope, is it the one you wanted? Zoe helped me choose it, so I do hope so. Lots of love xxxxx

It's not love. It's just where I live.
Nora Ephron, *Moving On*

*Set me a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine
arm; for love is stronger than death.*

Song of Solomon, ch VIII, v6

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

New York, 2007

Her father wasn't well. They kept saying she shouldn't worry too much, but she should still come back to London. He had had an operation – emergency kidney transplant, he'd been bumped right up the list. He was lucky to get one, considering his lifestyle, his age, everything. They kept saying that, too. Earlier, before it was an emergency, Kate had even been tested, to see if she could be a donor. She couldn't, which made her feel like a bad daughter.

It all happened so suddenly. It was Monday afternoon when she got the call telling her it had happened, the previous day, after a kidney miraculously became available. He'd been unwell for a few years now, the diabetes and the drinking; and the stress of his new life, he was busier than ever – but how had it got to this, got so far? Apparently he had collapsed; the next day he'd been put at the top of the transplant list; and that afternoon, Daniel was given a new kidney. Kate's stepmother Lisa had rung the following day to let her know.

'I think he'd very much like to see you.' Lisa's rather nasal voice was not improved by the tinny phone line.

'Of – of course,' Kate said. She cast around for something to say. 'Oh god. How ... how is he now?'

'He's alive, Kate. It was very sudden. But he's got much much worse these last few months. So he's not that well. And he'd like to see you. Like I say. He misses you.'

'Yes,' said Kate. Her throat was dry, her heart was pounding. 'Yes. Yes, of course.'

'He's going to be in intensive care for a few days, you know. Can you come next week? You can get the time off at the office, I presume.' Lisa made no other comment, but a variety of the comments she could make hung in the air, and rushing in next to them came millions of other guilty thoughts, all jostling for attention in front of Kate till she couldn't see anything. She rubbed her eyes with one hand as she cradled the phone on her shoulder. Her darling dad, and she hadn't seen him for eighteen months, hadn't been back to London in nearly three years. How the hell ... was this emergency, his rapid decline, was it her fault? No, of course it wasn't, but still, Kate couldn't escape the thought that she had made him ill herself, as certainly as if she had stuck a knife into him.

Out of the window, Manhattan looked calm and still, the grey monolithic buildings giving no clue to the arctic weather, the noise, the hustle, the sweet crazy smell of toasted sugar and tar that hit you every time you went outside, the city she had grown used to, fallen in love with, the city that had long ago replaced London in her affections. Kate looked round the office of the literary agency where she worked. It was a small place, only four full-time members of staff. Bruce Perry, the boss, was in his office, talking on the phone. Kate could see his head bobbing up and down as he violently agreed with someone and what they were saying. Doris, the malevolent old bookkeeper from Queens, who openly hated Kate, was pretending to type but in reality listening to Kate's conversation, trying to work out what was going on. Megan, the junior agent, was in the far corner,

tapping a pencil against her keyboard.

‘Kate?’ said Lisa, breaking into Kate’s thoughts. ‘Look, I can’t force you to come back, but ...’ She cleared her throat, and Kate could hear the sound echo in the cavernous basement kitchen of her father and Lisa’s flashy new home in Notting Hill.

‘Of course I’ll come,’ Kate heard herself say, and she crouched into herself, flushed with shame, hoping Doris hadn’t heard her.

‘You will?’ Lisa said, and Kate could hear incredulity and something else, yes – pleading in her voice, and she was horrified at herself, at how cold she was capable of being to Lisa. Her father was ill, for god’s sake. Dad.

It was time to get a grip and go back home. And so Kate put the phone down, booked a flight for Saturday evening, getting into London on Sunday morning. Then she went into Bruce Perry’s office to ask for two weeks off. No more. She wasn’t staying there any longer than she had to.

Bruce had grimaced a bit, but he’d been fine about giving her the time off. Perry and Co was not exactly the fast-paced business unit it might have been, which is why Kate had got her job as assistant there in the first place. In fact, to the outside eye, but for one author it would seem to be a mystery that they managed to stay in business, employing as they did five people, and with no books sold to any major publisher, no scripts sold to any studio, for years and years, so it would seem.

But one day, seventeen years ago, a middle-aged lady called Anne Graves had arrived in Bruce’s office with the idea for a crime series set in her hometown in Ohio. And that day Bruce had got lucky, very lucky. It was Anne Graves who kept them afloat, Anne Graves who paid their salaries, for the lunches, for the midtown offices a block or two from the Rockefeller Plaza. Anne Graves, and her creation Jimmy Potomac and his dog, Thomas. Jimmy and Thomas lived in Ravenna, Ohio, and solved crimes together. A flagpole goes missing. The local sheriff loses his golden wedding anniversary present. Some kids make a little disturbance. That kind of thing. The books had sold one hundred million copies, and the NBC series, *Jimmy Potomac*, now in its third season, pulled in sixteen million viewers a week. When the dog playing Thomas had died, the studio had received five thousand letters of sympathy.

Kate had been the office assistant at Perry and Co now for over two years. She had yet to meet a single person who’d read a Jimmy Potomac book.

‘Where will you stay?’ Bruce asked. ‘Will you go to your dad?’

‘No,’ said Kate firmly. ‘I’ve – I’ve actually got a place there.’ Bruce raised his eyebrows, and Kate could see Doris put down her ledger and look up, intrigued.

‘Your own place?’

‘It’s ... kind of,’ Kate told him. She cleared her throat. ‘I part own it. I was renting it out, but they’ve just left. Last month.’

‘Good timing,’ said Bruce, pleased. ‘That’s great!’

‘Yes,’ said Kate. She wasn’t sure it was that good timing, the ending of Gemma’s rental lease coinciding with her father’s emergency kidney transplant, but still, look for the silver lining, as her mother was always telling her. She shook her head, still trying to come to terms with it. ‘Wow,’ she said out loud. ‘I’m going back to London. Wow.’ She bit her thumb. ‘I’d better see if I can get hold of Dad, Lisa said he’d be awake in a little while ...’

‘Well, what will we do without you,’ Bruce said, more for effect than sounding like he meant it.

He stood up languidly. 'Hurry back now!'

'I will,' said Kate, although she was kind of sure she could simply not ever appear again and all they'd need to do after a few weeks would be to hire a temp to filter through the fan letters to Anne Graves. 'I'm sorry to leave you in the lurch like this –'

'Oh honey,' Doris said, standing up and coming over. She patted Kate's arm. Kate reared back in horror, since usually Doris wore an expression of murderous hate every time she came near Kate. 'Don't you worry about that. My niece, Lorraine, she can cover for you. She'll do a real good job too, you know it, Bruce.'

'Great idea!' Bruce said happily.

Kate nodded. It made sense. Lorraine had temped for her before, when Kate and her friend Betty had driven across the States the previous summer. She had put all the files back in extraordinary places, none of Kate's messages had been checked, nor her emails, but she had, during the handover session they'd had, managed to walk behind Bruce, murmuring, 'Oh, excuse me, Mr Perry,' brushing her enormous breasts against his back and that, not her shorthand skills, was the reason she'd be welcomed back at Perry and Co anytime. That, plus she was the kind of girl who made herself genial, asking questions about folks, smiling brightly at people, even when on the phone.

'That OK with you?' said Bruce, as if it were up to Kate, and he'd ring up a temping agency right away if she vetoed Lorraine. He rubbed his hands together.

'Oh sure, sure,' said Kate. 'That's cool, and you know, I'll be –'

'I'll call her now,' said Doris, waddling back to her desk, and smiling gleefully down at her own monstrous nails. 'Say, Bruce! Lorraine did say to tell you hi last week anyway. She'll be thrilled, you know!'

'I'm thrilled too, Doris,' Bruce said, solemnly. 'Real thrilled.' He went back into his office, whistling, as Kate swung back around to face her computer. She bit her lip, not sure whether she wanted to laugh or cry.

Kate walked home that night, the twenty-odd blocks that took her back to her mother and Oscar's apartment, a feeling of slight unease hanging over her about the task that lay ahead, and the conversation she would have to have with her mother and stepfather. It was a milder March night than it had been thus far that year, and though it was dark, and the clocks wouldn't go forward till Sunday, there was still a sense that spring was in the air. She walked up Broadway, following its slicing path through her beloved Manhattan. She didn't try to think about anything, just walked her usual walk, drinking it all in. This was her home. Here she could walk the streets and be part of the glorious, jostling mass of humanity, anonymous even if she wore a pink wig and rode a giraffe. No one here cared, no one here recognized her, knew her. Here she bumped into no old school friends, ex-work colleagues, here she saw no ghosts getting in her way. Just the wide stretch of the road, leaving mid-town behind, heading up past the Lincoln Center, the lights getting dimmer, a little cosier, people out running, walking their dogs, living their lives in the thick of the metropolis – that was what she loved best about New York.

She knew she was nearly home when she got to Zabar's. The huge, cheery, famous deli was as busy as ever. Families doing late-night shopping, solitary coffee drinkers hunched over a paper in the café. Warmth, light, colour, bursting out of every window and door. Kate stared in. They were advertising gefilte fish for Passover, only a few weeks away in mid-April. I'll be back by then, she thought. Only a couple of weeks. Really, that's all it is.

He's going to be fine, she told herself, as the traffic purred beside her and she looked around

wildly, wondering where she was for a moment. She thought about him for the moment, wondering with terrified fascination what it would be like to see him again. Her father, so tall, so commanding, so handsome and charismatic, always the centre of the room – what would he be like now, what would his life be like after this operation? What if the kidney didn't work? How had it come to this, that she could push down the love she had for him, push it down so far inside her she had been able to pretend, for a while, that it was all OK?

But she knew the answer. She'd become an expert at the answer since she'd left London.

Deep inside her came a stabbing pain at the top of her breast bone. Kate gently rubbed her collarbone; her eyes filled with painful tears. But she could not cry, not here, not now. If she started, she might never stop. Come on, she told herself. She carried on walking, turned the corner.

I'll go back, see Dad, make sure he's OK, check on the flat, try and find a new tenant.

And I'll see Zoe.

At the thought of seeing her best friend after all this time, the hairs on Kate's neck stood up, and though the memory of what had happened still sliced at her she smiled, a small smile, until she realized she was grinning through the window at a rather bewildered old man with thick white hair, who was trying to read his paper in peace. Kate blushed, and hurried on.

It was Oscar's sixtieth birthday in a few weeks' time, and Venetia had given him his present – a brand-new baby grand piano – early, back in January. As Kate arrived at the apartment building, on the corner of Riverside Drive, the window of Venetia and Oscar's apartment was open, and the sound of the piano came floating down to her on the sidewalk.

'Hello there, Kate!' Maurice the doorman called happily, opening the door for her into the small marbled foyer. He pushed the button for the elevator. Kate smiled at him, a little wearily.

'How are you, Maurice?' she said.

'I'm just fine,' said Maurice. 'I'm pretty good. That spray you told me to get, for my back – well, I bought it yesterday, I meant to say. And it's done a lot of good.'

'Really?' said Kate, pleased. 'That's great, Maurice. I'm so glad.'

'I owe you Kate, that's for sure. It just went away after I used that spray.'

Kate got into the lift. 'Good-o. That's brilliant.'

'Hold the elevator!' came a querulous voice, and Mrs Cohen, still elegant, tall, refined in a powder-blue suit, shuffled into the lobby. 'Kate, dear, hold the elevator! Hello Maurice. Would you be a dear, and –'

'I'll get the bags from the cab,' said Maurice, nodding. 'You wait here.'

There were times when the geriatric street theatre of the apartment block made Kate's day; there were other times when she would have given fifty dollars to see someone her own age in the lift. Just once. When they were installed in the lift, bags and all, and when Kate had helped Mrs Cohen to her door, and put her bags in her hallway, she climbed the last flight up to her mother's apartment, hearing the sound of the piano again, as she reached the sixth floor.

Venetia was born to be a New Yorker; it was hard to believe she'd ever lived anywhere else. Of course, Kate could remember her in London, but it seemed rather unreal, now. The mother she'd had until the age of fourteen when, the day after Kate's birthday, Venetia had left, was like a character Kate remembered watching in a film, not her actual, own mother. She had to remind herself that it was Venetia who'd picked her up from school every day, Venetia who'd smoothed her hair back when she'd been sick after some scrambled eggs when she was eight, Venetia who'd

collected her from the Brownie camp in the New Forest a day early after Kate had cried all night for her. The idea that she and Kate's father had lived together no longer had any substance. That Venetia had taken Kate to the Proms to watch Daniel play, had entertained myriad friends of Daniel's in their cluttered basement in the tall house in Kentish Town, had wiped down tables, collected up wine bottles, fielded calls from agents and journalists and critics and young, lithe music students: that Venetia had long disappeared. She was a New Yorker now, and more importantly, Kate thought, she was the star of her *own* show.

Venetia and Oscar's apartment was straight out of Annie Hall, from the framed Saul Steinberg prints and posters of the *Guys and Dolls* revival that Oscar had done a couple of years ago, to the copies of *The New Yorker* on the coffee table, and the view over Riverside Drive from the long, low room that served as sitting room, dining room, den and Oscar's office (he worked at home mostly; he was an arranger, a composer, and a conductor).

There were also pictures of Kate in silver frames that she always found hugely embarrassing: her as a baby, sucking her toes, sitting on a lawn somewhere (Kate never knew where; there was no lawn in the Kentish Town house); smiling rather rigidly outside her college after getting her degree; with her mother, the first time she came to New York to visit, when Kate was fifteen, just after Venetia had married Oscar. And there was one she always wanted to take down, just because: Kate, beaming, holding the first issue of *Venus*, the magazine she'd worked on in London. There had been other photos, other remnants of Kate's life. They had been taken down – no one wanted to see them, now.

As Kate opened the door to the apartment, a smell of onions, something warming, hit her. Her mother was in the tiny galley kitchen singing; 'Some Enchanted Evening' was being played in the long room.

'Hi!' she called, injecting a note of jollity into her voice. 'Something smells nice.'

'Hello darling!' Venetia appeared in the corridor, wiping her hands on her apron. 'I'm making risotto, it's going to be lovely.' She kissed her daughter. 'Thanks for calling. It'll be ready in about fifteen minutes. How was your day? Did you get hold of Betty? She rang earlier. She was wondering if you wanted to meet for a drink on Friday.'

Kate disentangled herself from her scarf, and from her mother, backing away towards the door to hang her things up. She pulled her long dark blonde hair out from her coat, and turned to her mother, chewing a lock of hair as she did.

'I'm starving,' she said indistinctly. 'I'll give her a call in a minute. Mum –'

Oscar called from the long room. 'Hello, Katy! Come and say hi!'

Kate poked her head around the door. 'Hi, Oscar,' she said. 'How was your day?'

'Honey, I'm home!' Oscar said joyously, launching into a ragtime version of 'Luck Be A Lady'. 'I've been home all day!'

Oscar made this joke roughly three times a week. Kate smiled affectionately at him.

'What a lovely evening,' she said, staring out over the Hudson, at the purple, grey sunset. 'I had such a nice walk back.'

Oscar was only half listening. 'That's good, dear,' he said. 'Would you like a drink? Venetia, can I get you another drink, darling?'

Venetia appeared, carrying her gin and tonic. 'I'm fine with this one, thanks, darling,' she said, carelessly caressing the back of her husband's neck as she passed by. 'I'd better lay the table – darling, did I mention that I saw Kathy today? And she and Don can't make it to your party?'

'Dad's ill,' Kate said, suddenly. Her voice was louder than she'd meant. The room was suddenly

deadly silent.

‘What?’ Venetia turned to look at her daughter. ‘What did you say?’

Kate gripped the side of the sofa. ‘Dad’s really ill. He’s had a kidney transplant. He’s in intensive care.’

‘Oh, my god,’ Oscar said, looking towards his wife. ‘That’s – well, that’s awful.’

‘I’m going home,’ said Kate. ‘On Saturday. To see him.’

‘Back to London?’ her mother said. Her face was white.

‘Yes,’ said Kate, shaking her head very slightly, willing her mother to do the right thing.

‘My god,’ said Oscar. He chewed at a cuticle, nervously. ‘Will he be – OK?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Kate, wanting to reassure them. ‘I mean – it’s dangerous, but he’s very lucky. I hope so –’ She swallowed, as black dots danced in front of her eyes, and a wave of panic swept over her at the thought of it, her poor darling dad. ‘Yes, Lisa thinks he will be ...’

Lisa’s name dropped like a stone between them. It was Venetia who broke the silence. ‘You’re going back Saturday? What time’s your flight?’

‘Nine. In the evening.’

‘Right.’ Venetia put her drink down; she patted her collar bone, her slim white fingers stroking her skin. ‘We’ll drive you. Oh, darling. How long are you going for?’

‘Two weeks, probably,’ said Kate, coming towards her. She wanted her reassurance, for her mother to tell her it was going to be OK, not just Dad, but everything to do with it. ‘I’ll be back for Oscar’s party, of course I will – I’m just going to make sure he’s OK.’

‘Course you do!’ said Venetia. She put her arm around her daughter, squeezed her shoulders. ‘Darling, it’s just – well. It’ll be hard for you. That’s all.’

There was silence again in the room, as Oscar looked from his wife to his stepdaughter. Kate gazed out of the window. The sunset was almost over; it was nearly dark.

‘Yep,’ Kate said. ‘It will be hard.’ It felt strange; it felt alien here, suddenly. She hated that feeling. ‘I had to go back sometime,’ she added, and Oscar nodded and sat back down at the piano. ‘Just wish it wasn’t for this, that’s all.’

CHAPTER TWO

Kate had lived with Oscar and Venetia since she came to New York. She was always just about to start looking for an apartment of her own – or a studio, more likely, since renting in New York was still staggeringly expensive, even with the rental money she had from her flat in London. Still, it was ridiculous, being thirty, living with your mother and stepfather and when she'd moved to New York she'd thought it would only be a temporary measure, that she'd be moving out soon. But the right time never seemed to happen.

She and Betty often talked about getting a place together, but Betty's love life was erratic to say the least, and whenever Kate was at her most desperate to move out, move on, move away from her domestic situation, coincided exactly with Betty and her latest five-star full-on love affair being at its height, whereupon Betty would say '... I think we're getting married ... or at least, moving in together ... in a couple of months I'd say, so no Kate, sorry ... I can't!' Then they would break up, awfully, and Betty would be too heartbroken to contemplate anything, and Kate would have to soothe her back to sanity with a variety of cocktails all over the SoHo area, and Betty would gradually perk up and say, 'We should really look for a place soon!' and Kate would say, 'Yes!' and then, without fail, the next day, Betty would go to a gallery opening, and there she would meet Charles (public schoolboy with nappy fetish) or Johan (Norwegian bike courier) or Elrond (poet with long hair), and the whole apartment thing would go quiet for a while ... and Kate would tell herself to wait a little longer.

So the weeks turned into months, and the months turned into years. To her surprise. And still she didn't move, still she stayed in Riverside Drive.

On Friday evening, Venetia and Oscar gave Kate a farewell supper. It was early, because Kate was going out to meet Betty, and Venetia and Oscar were off to a drinks party at Alvin and Carol DaCosta's on the third floor. Venetia made quiche, Oscar made a beautiful mesclun and pomegranate seed salad. They drank a toast to Daniel, said bon voyage to Kate.

The last few days seemed to have flown by; how could it be Friday already, Kate wondered? Escaping their ministrations – 'Remember to take an *adaptor*.' 'Did you collect your drycleaning?' she excused herself, and shut the door of her bedroom slowly and sank down on the bed, wondering when she should pack.

Now she was alone, she wished, as she had done these past few days, she was going tonight, that she was already there, even though Lisa had told her there was no point in coming over till Daniel was out of intensive care; but still, Kate wished she was there, even if he didn't realize it. 'It'll give you time to sort your stuff out, before you come,' Lisa had said. Kate supposed she meant it kindly.

The truth was, really, that she didn't have that much stuff anyway. Clothes, yes, but all her books, her old things from her old life – they were all in storage in the basement of her flat in London, like her old self, trapped in aspic, while the new self gazed longingly into the window of Pottery Barn or Bed Bath and Beyond, picking out covers for imaginary cushions, towels to hang on

illusory rails. She'd bought a new duvet and pillow set for her room in the sales this year and she was *still* excited about it.

Kate shook her head, smiling. She realized now, with a start, that she'd lived for nearly three years with her mother and Oscar – because she enjoyed it. Not just because they were fun – Oscar *wanted* people to be happy in his presence, and he wanted Venetia to be happy more than anyone else and, therefore, her daughter by extension. The truth was, it was fun, living with them, especially for a girl like Kate who was, as Zoe had once pointed out, old before her time anyway, and more likely to enjoy an evening around the piano singing showtunes than queuing for ages to get into a loud, sweaty, pricey club (as she saw it).

But it was also nice because Kate had got to know her mother again, after years of never really seeing her, years of her name being *persona non grata* with almost all her father's friends and family in London. Even Venetia's sister, Jane, who was much more stiff-lipped than she, and lived a life of rigid, middle-England organization in Marlow, could barely tolerate any mention of her. It was fun, living with her mother again. Especially this happy version of her mother. She didn't put any pressure on Kate to do anything she didn't want to – she was just happy to have her living there.

Still, perhaps that's why it's a good thing I'm going back, Kate told herself as she climbed up on a stool to take down her big suitcase from on top of the wardrobe. It was dusty – when was the last time she'd used it? She couldn't remember. Cars honked faintly outside: Kate looked at her watch. It was time to go. She pulled some slouchy boots on over her skinny jeans and ran out into the hall.

'You look lovely, dear,' Oscar called, spying her through the open doorway.

'Thanks, dear,' said Kate. 'I won't be too late.'

'Stay out! Enjoy yourself!' called her mother. 'Where are you going?'

'Downtown, near the West Village,' said Kate, without great enthusiasm. She sighed. She wanted to see Betty, of course, but Betty was on a matchmaking drive and tonight, Kate feared, was to be the culmination of this. Since the last person Betty had set her up with turned out to be gay, and was only going along with Betty because he wanted her gallery to show his work, Kate didn't hold out much hope.

'So, will you stay in London?' Betty wiped her fingers on the napkin and stared at Kate, who paused with a bowl of miso soup halfway to her lips. 'I bet you will.'

'Stay there?' she said, in astonished tones. 'Good god no, Bets. Are you mad? I'm going back to see Dad now he's had the op, then I'll wait till he's on the mend ok, I'll see Zoe and the kids and I'll be back on the first plane that'll take me. It's Oscar's sixtieth in three weeks, anyway. I can't miss that. Can you imagine?' Betty said nothing. 'Come on.'

'Hm,' said Betty. 'Well, I'm just saying, that's all. It's going to be weird. Three years!' She turned to Andrew, who was next to her, and gestured at him. 'What do you reckon?'

Kate and Betty had been friends since university, so Kate should have been used to her ways. Now she reminded herself, as she stole a glance at Andrew from under her lashes, that Betty – and Francesca, for that matter, so thank god she wasn't here too – always said what they thought, always had done. It was funny, really. Most of the time. She blushed as Andrew suddenly met her gaze.

'I hope she comes back,' Andrew said. He coughed, awkwardly, and was silent again. Betty rolled her eyes significantly at Kate and made nudging motions at her. Kate ignored her. She was too astonished, and pleased, at what Andrew had said, for usually he said nothing, let alone anything conclusive.

Kate had known Andrew now for a couple of months purely because, since he'd moved into

Betty's building in January, Betty had wasted no time in throwing him into Kate's path. This was made easier by Andrew's eagerness to meet Kate when he heard she worked for a literary agency. For Andrew was that not-so-rare creature: the boy with a book inside him. Kate had met enough of them both in London, when she worked on various magazines, and in New York, working at Perry and Co, to recognize Andrew as conforming fairly typically to type: he was angry about a lot of things, not least the parlous state of the Great American Novel, and his novel was extremely difficult, both thematically and practically. He had thick hair he brushed back from his face a lot, mostly in anger. He hadn't written more than a word since he had first started talking to Kate about it. He was 'circling round the themes', he had told her, when she'd asked.

'Right,' Kate had said, politely, when she first heard this. She had glanced at Betty, who was nodding hopefully as if, a mere few minutes after their first introduction, she expected Kate and Andrew to dive underneath the table and copulate.

'Honestly, that's not exactly true,' Andrew had added with a rueful smile. He scratched his cheek. 'Could also be that I'd rather be out having a few beers after work than writing.' He smiled at her, and Kate had instantly liked him again.

She found that, over the following weeks, she alternated in the same way, not being sure whether she liked him or not. Sometimes he was really very funny, coruscatingly rude or charming about something. Other times – too many – he was moody, virtually silent, as if oppressed by the weight of matters on his mind. Betty was running out of excuses, of social events to ask him to. Sooner or later Kate was just going to have to make a move, she told her. Ask him out for coffee.

As Andrew got up to use the bathroom, Betty said this to Kate, in no uncertain terms.

Kate was horrified.

'Ask him out? No, no way, Bets. I couldn't. Get him to.'

'He's not going to,' said Betty decisively. She looked around her, to make sure Andrew wasn't on his way back and hissed across the table, 'It has to be you. Come on. You've got to seize the moment. Otherwise it'll be over, and – and then what? You could have missed the chance to get married. For ever. How would you feel then?'

'Oh,' said Kate. 'Relieved?'

Betty shook her head. 'You are weird, did you know that?'

'No I'm not,' said Kate.

'You're like a metaphor for ... argh. Intransigence.'

Betty worked in an art gallery in SoHo and was prone to remarks like this. Kate suppressed a smile.

'Oh dear,' she said. 'Damn.'

'Don't you want to get married?' said Betty. She stabbed at a dumpling with a chopstick. 'Is that what you want? Would you do that to me? To your mother?'

Kate stared at her in astonishment. 'You're from West Norwood, Betty. Stop talking like that. Anyway, I don't want to get married.'

'Why? Why don't you?' Betty said, but as she was saying it recognition flooded her face. 'Oh my god. Kate, I'm sorry –'

Kate held up her hand and smiled, but underneath the table her foot beat a steady tattoo against the aluminium table leg. 'It's ok! It's fine. Now –' as Andrew came back to the table, 'I kind of need to get an early night, I'm afraid, and I have to pack. Can I get out before you sit back down again?' She shot up and scooted along the plastic bench.

'Kate –' Betty said.

Kate looked up at her.

‘Sure,’ Betty nodded. ‘Sure.’

‘Bye, Andrew,’ Kate said, turning to him as he stood next to her. They stood to one side against the table as a tiny Japanese waitress bustled past them, bearing a huge tray of sushi, and Kate felt the pressure of his arm against hers.

‘Sorry,’ he said.

‘It’s fine,’ Kate put her bag on her shoulder. ‘So I’ll see you when I get back ...’

‘Let me walk you outside,’ Andrew said, in a loud, rather unnatural voice. He cleared his throat.

Outside on the crowded sidewalk, the heart of the tiny Japanese district on East 12th Street, Kate cast around to see if there was a cab.

‘I’ve got something to ask you,’ Andrew said, staring intently at her in the evening gloom.

‘So, thanks,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you when I’m back –’

‘Kate, Kate,’ Andrew said, rapidly. ‘I gotta say this now.’

‘Oh,’ said Kate, with a dreadful sense of foreboding. ‘No, I should walk to the –’

He gripped her arms. ‘Kate, let me finish.’

‘No, really,’ said Kate desperately, stupidly hoping that if she warded him off then what was about to happen might not happen.

Andrew stepped back. ‘Look,’ he said, crestfallen at her apparent horror. ‘I just wanted to ask you out when you get back. Maybe see if you wanted to go for a coffee, see a movie some time. But I guess – I guess that’s not such a great idea at the moment. With your dad, and all. I’m sorry.’

‘Ah,’ said Kate, feeling rotten that she was hiding behind her dad’s kidney transplant to get out of a date she didn’t want to go on. ‘You’re right. It’s – not a good time for me right now.’

God I sound American she thought. I really must go home.

‘Of course it’s not,’ Andrew nodded. ‘Hey. When you get back, if it is a good time – call me. OK?’

‘Sure,’ said Kate. ‘Sure.’

‘I promise not to talk about the novel,’ said Andrew. ‘Much.’

She looked at him, into his big brown eyes, as he smiled at her in the street, the lanterns from the bar next door swaying in the breeze behind him.

‘I just kind of like you, Kate,’ he said. ‘There’s – there’s something about you. You’re cool. I – I guess.’

He scuffed the pavement with his toe and she watched him, her heart pounding. It had been so long since someone had said anything like that to her and, to be honest, she had thought they never would again.

‘Oh,’ she said, and a lock of her dark blonde hair fell into her face. He looked at her, and pushed it off her cheek, his fingers stroking her skin. Kate met his gaze, shaking her head. Something was wrong.

‘Andrew,’ she said. ‘I –’

He bent his head and kissed her. His touch, his warm lips on hers, his hands on her ribs. Perhaps –

But she couldn’t. And the force of her response surprised her, for Kate pushed him away and said, breathlessly,

‘No. I’m sorry, no.’

She gave a huge, shuddering sigh.

Andrew stepped back, blinking uncertainly. He looked bewildered.

‘I’m – my god, I’m sorry.’

‘No,’ Kate said. She was almost backing away from him, she realized, trying to escape, like a cornered animal. ‘It’s not you. It’s me.’

He wiped his mouth with his hand, almost in disgust. She smiled. ‘No, really. I mean that. It’s the oldest cliché in the book – but in my case it’s totally true ... it really is me.’

‘Right,’ said Andrew formally. He brushed something off his shirt. ‘I’m just – I’m sorry if I offended you. I thought –’

Kate held out both her hands, still keeping him at a distance. A couple walking down the sidewalk, who didn’t want to break their joint stride, bumped into her and she stumbled.

‘Look,’ she said, still breathing heavily, ‘I’m sorry, again. It really is me, Andrew, and I wish it wasn’t.’ She looked around, wildly, and he watched her.

‘Yeah,’ he said, after a while. ‘Betty said something.’

‘What?’ said Kate.

Andrew nodded, and looked at his feet. ‘Hey, it’s no big deal. She said some guy screwed you over. Something bad happened to you in London.’

She loved the way certain Americans always said the word ‘London’, investing it with a certain amount of reverence. ‘You could say that,’ she said. She winced, and looked up at him, not sure how he was taking all of this. ‘Hey –’ she began.

‘It’s no big deal,’ he said. ‘Really, it isn’t.’ He ran his hands through his hair. ‘You wanna cab?’

‘Sure,’ said Kate. ‘That’d be –’

Andrew whistled, and almost immediately, as if he were calling up the Batmobile, a cab zoomed around the corner. ‘So,’ he said. He held the door open. ‘See you around, I guess.’

‘Sure,’ said Kate. ‘Yeah. Upper West Side, Eightieth and Broadway. Thanks.’

The cab pulled off; through its greasy window she watched Andrew as he turned and walked off. Kate touched her fingers to her lips as the car sped through mid-town. She was shaking, and she didn’t know why.

The traffic was light, miraculously. Please go through Times Square, she willed the cab driver. Please, go on. Out of the window the lights of Broadway grew closer and they headed past Macy’s, and a sense of disgust came over her. Why had she let that happen with Andrew? Why couldn’t she just have kissed him and jumped into a cab? Maybe arranged to see him when she got back? Why did she have to behave like that? What was she going to say to him, to Betty?

I’m too good at running away, she said softly under her breath. She put her head against the glass, watching the reflection of her skin as the streets rushed by and they came to Times Square. Kate loved Times Square, much to Oscar and her mother’s horror. She couldn’t tell them why she loved it, quite, it never seemed to make sense. She loved the anonymity of it, the adrenaline that came with it. You could be wholly yourself, a unit of one, walking on its concrete, neon-lit stage. You could stand in the centre of the traffic all day and twirl around – and no one would look at you. She loved the contradiction of it – when she first came to see her mother, and went looking for Times Square, she had spent ages trying to find an actual square. She didn’t know now what she’d been picturing in her head: a stately square of London houses, with a garden in the centre, railings around the edge, perhaps? And when she’d realized this was it, this grey meeting of roads, stretched out over three or so blocks, she had laughed. It was unlike anything she’d ever seen before, it was utterly unlike London.

Twenty-four hours’ time, and she’d be on the plane. Twenty-four hours’ time, and her dad’s stay

in hospital would nearly be over. Less than forty-eight hours till she saw him again. Till she was back there again ... The lights of Manhattan flickered and flashed into Kate's cab, the theatre signs, the road signs, the bars and restaurants and clubs, flickering on her face, keeping her alert, but then, suddenly, she was very tired.

CHAPTER THREE

There was a backlog at Heathrow, and Kate's plane circled over London, coming in from the east, flying straight across the centre of the city. It was the perfect bird's-eye view. Kate shifted in her window seat, her hands resting lightly on the stack of magazines she'd been reading, and stared down at the view, craning her neck in excitement. The huge jet followed the path of the Thames, its tiny black shadow flickering through the streets and places below. The river was bluer than she remembered. She'd forgotten how green it all was, how many open spaces there were. They flew over the Houses of Parliament, glowing gold in the early morning light, as the centre of the city stretched away in front of them. Kate twisted in her seat, following the path of Regent Street all the way up to Regent's Park, the Telecom Tower, King's Cross away to the side, as they headed west.

It looked like a toytown, Legoland, and she couldn't reconcile it with what had gone on before. In those tiny streets below her, in that park there, in that tall building just beyond the river – yes, it was all still there.

The wheel on Kate's trolley didn't work. Of course it didn't, they never did. It got stuck, and whirled around on its own, and consequently the trolley made a loud, juddering noise, like a goods train thundering through the night, which caused the other passengers and those waiting to greet them to look at Kate with a stare of disapproval, as if she personally was making the noise herself, had taken a large mallet to it and bashed it repeatedly, to cause maximum annoyance to others.

Kate never understood people who said airports were full of romance or love. Not only had no one ever met her at an airport (except her mother, and that hardly counted), she wouldn't want them to meet her. Reunited with the love of your life under polystyrene ceiling tiles, strip lighting and grey upholstery? No thanks. She struggled with the trolley, flaring her elbows out to manoeuvre it around corners, trying not to let hopelessness and the strangeness of the situation overwhelm her. Taxi. She needed a taxi. A good old black London cab and she pushed on through to the arrivals hall, vaguely registering the expectant faces of people waiting as she went. Kate had learnt, now. She didn't even bother to look around. She had long given up playing that game in her head.

It was a sunny day. Warm and fresh, with a cool little breeze whipping about. It smelled of spring, of something in the air, even there at the airport. Spring had come to London, and she felt it as she crossed the tarmac to the cab rank, as a man in a blue sou'wester waved her into a cab, and nodded politely as she said 'thank you'. He helped her in with her bags, the cab driver tutted proprietorially over her and said, 'Mind your head, love,' as they both heaved the heavier of her suitcases into the back with her. She thought of JFK, of how fast it all was, how the director of the cab rank barked questions at you, of how fast the cab drivers went, manically swerving from lane to lane, talking wildly to their friends on an earpiece.

But although she kept expecting something dramatic to happen, for someone to leap at her and stop her, or yell at her, nothing did, and so the taxi moved off, gliding along smoothly. They reached the Heathrow roundabout, where the daffodils bobbed in the sunny breeze and the

motorway opened up in front of her and they headed into London.

~~On a grey motorway, how prosaic, but there she was, and as the redbrick streets flew past she looked for the old familiar signs, like the old Lucozade sign, but that was gone; the blue and gold dome of the Russian Orthodox Cathedral, Fuller's Brewery at the roundabout. She stopped trying to think and simply sat there, drinking it all in, wondering how she'd got there, and most of all, how her father was, and what would happen now.~~

And then suddenly they were there, turning off Maida Vale, into the long tree-lined boulevard, where the buds on the elms were just visible, and they were grinding to a halt outside the red-brick building, and the bin with the face painted onto the lid was still outside. Kate didn't get out of the car. She looked around only as the cab driver pulled her bags out onto the pavement, puffing, and said,

'Alright, love?'

He opened the door, regarding her curiously. She knew he was probably thinking, Uh-oh. Is she actually a bit ... mad. Kate blinked at him, suddenly, as if he were speaking Martian.

'Oh,' she said. 'Yes.'

'Is this where you want?'

'Yes,' said Kate, stepping out onto the pavement, though actually what she really wanted to say was, I've changed my mind, can we go back to the airport? 'Yes, it is.'

She gave him money and thanked him; he drove away, with a hand-wave out of the window. She felt like an alien, she couldn't remember how to behave. She looked down at the paving slabs on the pavement. Rectangular, scratchy dark grey, slightly cracked. It was silly. She'd forgotten what they were like here.

Shoulders squared, Kate picked up the bags, and stood at the foot of the stairs up to the hallway of the flats. A bird called in a nearby tree, a large black car hummed next to her, its engine running, but otherwise it was silent.

It's strange, the things that are stored in your brain, but that you haven't thought about for years. The black front door of her old building was really heavy, on a spring. You had to wedge your body really firmly against the door to stop it clapping shut in your face; she forgot. It banged shut behind Kate, practically trapping her with its force, as she dragged her bags into the hallway and looked rather blankly around her, at the large, beige, sunny hall, quiet and dusty in the cool sunshine.

How she was going to get her huge suitcase upstairs? The thought of lugging it to the first floor, her body already bone-tired, made her feel rather blue. Impossible not to think about the first time she'd come here, with him, impossible not to think about how it had been, the day they'd moved in, over three years ago, in deepest winter. Then the pigeonholes had been over there; they'd moved around now. Kate peered inside the box marked Flat 4; two catalogues, five pizza delivery leaflets, four minicab cards, three Chinese takeaway menus, and a plethora of random letters addressed to assorted names she didn't know, and some bills, addressed to her, greeted her. Flat 4's pigeon-hole had obviously become the storage depot for everyone's unwanted post; and Gemma the tenant had only moved out last week. Lovely.

Kate looked down at her bags, and decided she'd deal with the post later. She stuffed the letters back in their box and pulled her suitcases across the hall. She was not usually given to moments of girlish weakness, but she was suddenly overcome with fatigue. Up till now coming back to London had been anonymous, impersonal. The taxi driver, the man at customs, the lady on the passport desk; they didn't know her. Now she was here and she was in the flat where people knew who she

was. This was when it started to get ... messy. Somewhere above her a door opened; she heard voices. ~~Kate shrank back against the wall, like a prisoner on the run. Perhaps this was a mistake, a big mistake, perhaps she should just turn around and ...~~

Suddenly there was a loud noise, a thudding sound, and boots on feet thumping across the landing, coming downstairs, several pairs of feet, she thought. Kate pushed her bag up into the nook by the bannisters and peered up. There was muffled cursing; they were obviously carrying something heavy, and she heard an old, familiar voice say,

‘Thank you. Thank you very much. I’ll see you later then.’

Kate peered up through the bannisters. There was a coffin coming down the stairs. A coffin. She blinked, and to her alarm an hysterical, horrifying urge to laugh bubbled up inside her, before she swallowed it down, frantically scrabbling to push her suitcase out of the way.

‘Can you open the door, Fred?’

‘No mate,’ Fred answered. ‘You’ve got the front, you take it.’

‘It’s heavy, remember?’

They were turning the last corner, outside her own flat, just appearing at the top of the stairs, and Kate called up,

‘I’m down here. I’ll hold the door open.’

‘She’s down there,’ said the other man. ‘There’s someone down there.’

‘Thanks love,’ Fred said. ‘We’ve got a coffin here, you know.’

‘Yes, a coffin,’ the other man added.

‘Yes,’ said Kate gravely, wondering if she were being filmed as an extra in a hidden-camera Pinter play. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll stay here.’

She leant against the door, holding it flat open, and frowned at the driver, who had left the engine running, which always annoyed her. Questions ran through her head. Who was it? What did you say in the way of pleasantries to undertakers? And how did you tell someone to turn their engine off without sounding self-righteous? She caught the thought escaping into the dim recesses of her mind that she didn’t think like this in New York.

It was, indeed, a coffin, sleek and brown, borne gently by its bearers to the bottom of the stairs, held only at a slight diagonal angle. She stared at it as they reached the bottom step and gingerly readjusted their load.

‘Been on holiday?’ Fred said politely. He nodded at her suitcase as they walked towards the front door.

‘I’ve been away,’ said Kate vaguely. ‘Just got back, yes. This is – er – sad.’ She gestured pathetically at the coffin. ‘Who – who is it?’

‘Old lady who lived upstairs. Had a husband. Nice fellow.’ Fred jerked his head up, indicating where in the labyrinthine view they might live. Kate followed his gaze.

They passed through the front door and left her standing there on the threshold.

‘Second floor?’ said Kate, her voice faint.

‘Yep,’ said Fred, nodding kindly at her.

‘Mrs – not Mrs Allan?’

‘Yes, love,’ he answered her. ‘Sorry. Not the best welcome back for you, is it now?’

Kate loved him then for apologizing, as if he were personally responsible for Mrs Allan’s death. She smiled at him and shook her head, as if to say please, don’t worry. She followed them onto the pavement as they slid the coffin gently into the hearse – she hadn’t realized it was a hearse.

‘There he is,’ one of them said under his breath to the other. ‘Ah,’ and they looked up. There in

the window, two floors above Kate's, an old face looked out through the glass. She recognized him then, of course she did – it was Mr Allan. Mr Allan pressed a hand to the glass, looking down at the street, his face impassive. He was much older than she remembered.

The car drove off. Kate raised a hand in greeting to Mr Allan, not sure whether to smile or not. Once again, she wasn't sure what to do, how to behave. What did you yell up to a neighbour in circumstances like this? 'Hiya! How are you! Haven't seen you for ages! I know, I moved to New York. So, what's new with you? Apart from your wife dying?'

She hadn't spoken to them since she'd left. They'd written to her in New York. Kind, sweet Mrs Allan had sent her newspaper clippings, articles she thought she might like, but Kate hadn't written back, and the communication had dried up. Mr Allan's face now looked down at her, grey and yellow through the sun on the glass, and she waved again, uncertainty flowering within her, and looked around to realize she was standing on the pavement alone. She pointed in, towards the flats, as if to say I'm back, and looked up – but he had gone.

'I'll –' she started to say out loud. I'll see you later. Climbing up the steps, she shut the front door behind her, picked up her heavy bag and dragged it upstairs.

CHAPTER FOUR

The lock that clicked in the door, the floorboard in the hall with the big hole in it, where you could see the Victorian pipes underneath; the sunny little sitting room down the corridor with the bay windows, the radiator in a fretwork covered box. The bookshelves, still filled with her books, gaps where he had taken his books away – all these things, stored somewhere in her memory, forgotten till now. She didn't remember leaving her flat for the last time. She remembered scenes within it, though. She remembered coming here for the first time with Sean, the first Christmas here ... waking up on a Sunday morning, in bed together, the papers, friends for lunch ... as Kate stood in the living room, keys in her hand, and looked around, she smiled grimly. Every bloody couple cliché under the sun, like an advert for a sofa workshop or a kitchen sale.

The recent tenant, Gemma, was about her age, and while she'd left everything pretty much as it should have been, for a furnished flat, she'd moved the armchairs around. Frowning, Kate pushed them back to where she'd had them before, one next to the sofa, the other in front of the window. She leant against the window sill and breathed in, memory flooding over her with the smell of wood, of lavender, of something indefinable, dusty, earthy, cosy, the smell of her flat.

Funny that it should be so comforting to be back here. Funny. She put the keys quietly down on the table, almost as if she were afraid of disturbing someone, and took off her coat, putting it gingerly on an armchair. She went into the kitchen, noting with pleasure that the pots and pans hanging on the hooks she'd so lovingly put up a couple of months before she'd gone were still there. On the tiny little balcony that led off the kitchen door, no more than doormat-size, really, she could see the thyme and rosemary were still going strong. She opened the door, pulling it slightly, remembering how it always used to stick.

There were people walking on the street outside; families pushing buggies, people chatting outside the little row of shops down the road. Kate craned her neck to watch them, to look down, over the wide boulevard of redbrick apartments lined with trees that were sprinkled with fat, green little buds. Beyond the shops was Lord's cricket ground, a ten-minute walk, then Regent's Park, the Zoo, the canal ... down Maida Vale, which she could just see, was Edgware Road, leading into the park, to Mayfair, into town. All just outside. She could go out now, could be in any of those places, which she'd dreamt of over the past three years with increasing frequency. She could do that, she was back.

A loud noise from the bedroom made her jump. Kate turned and ran, relishing the size of the space that was her own, now, and she saw that her suitcase, which she'd leant against the wall, had fallen over, bringing down with it her telescope. She smiled at the sight of it, memory leading her back down a path. Her telescope! She hurried over to the corner of the room, straightening it out, setting it right again. How she had loved that bloody thing when she was a teenager. While Zoe and most of her other friends had been standing outside Tube stations of an evening with their waistbands rolled up and over, to shorten their skirts, ponytails high on their heads, usually to one side, smoking Silk Cut Menthols and chipping their nail polish, Kate had been – where? Yes, at

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