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Girl Friday
by
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I

One of the unexpected bonuses of divorce, Kit Hargrove realizes, as she settles onto the porch swing, curling her feet up under her and placing a glass of chilled wine on the wicker table, is having weekends without the children, weekends when she gets to enjoy this extraordinary peace and quiet, remembers who she was before she became defined by motherhood, by the constant noise and motion that come with having a thirteen-year-old and an eight-year-old.

In the beginning, those first few months before they worked out a custody arrangement, when Adam, her ex, stayed in the city Monday to Friday and collected the children every weekend, Kit had been utterly lost.

The house suddenly seemed so quiet, the huge new colonial they had moved into when Adam got his big job in the city, the house they thought they had to have, given the entertaining he now wanted them to be doing, the investors he wanted to invite over to dinner.

She still blames the house for the ending of the marriage. A huge white clapboard house, with black shutters, and a marble-tiled double-height entrance, it was impressive, and empty. Much the way Kit felt about her life while she was living there. The ceilings were high and coffered, the walls panelled. Everything about the house shouted expense, and it never felt like home.

There was nothing cosy about the enormous Great Room, the expansive master bedroom suite complete with his 'n' hers bathrooms and a sitting room attached that no one ever sat in.

There was nothing comfortable about the formal living room, with its Persian rugs and hard French furniture, a room that they used perhaps three times a year, although no one lasted longer than twenty minutes in there before moving into the kitchen and crowding round the island in the one room in the house that felt welcoming and warm.

The kitchen was the room that Kit lived in, for the rest of the house felt like a mausoleum, and the day they moved in was the day it all started to go wrong.

Adam started commuting into the city during the week, leaving on the 'death train' at 5.30 a.m. to avoid the crowds, getting home at 9 p.m.

From Monday to Friday he didn't see the children, didn't see her. She rattled around in that huge house, growing more and more used to being on her own, resenting his presence more and more when he was back for the weekends, feeling like he was invading her space, attempting to mark a territory that, without her knowing, or wanting it to, had undoubtedly become hers.

They became like strangers, ships that pass in the night, not able to agree on anything, not having any common ground, other than their children, and they'd make dinner plans on the weekend and beg people to join them, so they wouldn't have to sit in restaurants

in silence, looking around the room, wondering how it was they had nothing to talk about any more.

When they separated, then talked divorce, Kit knew the house had to be sold. And she was glad. There was nothing in the house that felt like hers, no good memories, nothing but loneliness and isolation within its walls.

During the early days she felt, mostly, lost. For so many years Adam had been her best friend, her lover and, even towards the end, when they barely saw one another, she still knew he was her partner, she still always had someone to phone when she needed an answer to a question.

After the separation, during those first few days, when Adam and the kids pulled away from the house in his Range Rover, Kit would stand in the driveway watching them go, not knowing who she was supposed to *be* without her children, what she was supposed to *do*, how she was supposed to fill two whole days without mouths to feed and small people to entertain.

She lost her partner, her lover and her identity in one fell swoop.

She didn't have the energy to go out, although her social life shrank to almost nothing anyway. A single woman, it seems, doesn't have quite the same appeal in suburban Connecticut. Their couple friends initially invited her out, feeling sorry for her, or wanting to hear what had happened, but the invitations petered out, and she quickly realized that the friends she and Adam shared, *their* friends, would not necessarily remain her

friends, because the chemistry just wasn't the same.

And she couldn't even think about dating (although it was extraordinary how many people offered to set her up on blind dates, within what felt like minutes of her separation), so she went to bed.

Days would pass when she barely emerged from the comfort of her cocoon in the grand master suite on the second floor, aided by Ambien at night and pointless reality shows on the television during the day. She once watched almost eight hours straight of *Project Runway*, even though she wasn't the least bit interested to begin with – but by hour three she was desperate to know who was next going to be *auf wiedersehned* off the show by the glamazonian Heidi Klum.

And then, when they finally agreed a custody arrangement, she had the kids every other weekend, but by that time Adam had agreed to sell the house and split the proceeds, and the resulting house-hunt was like a well-needed injection of energy.

They were lucky. Their house sold quickly, and Kit found a small cape on a pretty street behind Main Street, that was easily big enough for her and the children, and Adam rented a small farmhouse on the other side of town.

It took the best part of a year for Kit to start feeling like herself again after the divorce. And at the end of that time she was not the self she was during her marriage – the wife she had tried so hard to be – but the self she was before her marriage: her true self, the identity she lost in her quest to be the perfect wife.

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It is extraordinary, she thinks, picking up the phone and scrolling back through the numbers to see who has called, how much her life has changed. She was a wealthy Wall Street Widow in a large house, with immaculate children dressed in French designer kiddie wear, complete with Land Rover, a wardrobe stuffed with Tory Burch and a social life that involved going to the gym with the other Wall Street widows, then coming home to shower and change before attending a trunk show in someone's home.

The trunk shows varied. Designer stationery featuring cute colourful cartoons of women who were supposed to look like Kit and her friends, or jewellery made by a local once-high-powered-but-now-looking-to-find-her-creativity mother, charging exorbitant prices for semi-precious gemstones strung together with pretty clasps. Some held children's wear sales and displayed tie-dyed funky yoga pants for three-year-olds, sparkly navel-baring tops for toddlers. Others filled their homes with children's clothes from the catalogues, trying to induce mothers to order copious amounts of clothes. Whatever the trunk show, what they all had in common was the aim to satisfy the instant gratification gene that all Wall Street widows seemed to have.

As soon as she and Adam separated, Kit knew she needed to work, but she didn't want to go back into teaching. She had loved it while she did it – teaching at a Montessori school until she became pregnant with Tory – but she didn't want to be an employee, as such, of *anyone*. She wanted to make some money, and retain her freedom. Adam paid child support, and the alimony

was just about enough to live, but not enough to live the life she had grown used to in Highfield, heart of Connecticut's Gold Coast.

It wasn't even as if it was a big life, not compared to some of her friends. Certainly, her life was bigger when she was married, but one of the lovelier changes that occurred post-divorce was that she suddenly saw no reason to feel insecure around the women who used to cause her nervous breakdowns while waiting in the corridors outside the classrooms in pre-school.

She doesn't see the need to dress to impress these women any more, because who else had she been carefully applying make-up for, popping diamond studs in her ears, carefully coordinating her ballet pumps with her bag?

She had felt those women looking her up and down, judging her, deciding whether or not she was good enough based on the cost of her handbag or the number of carats in her ears, and she had shrunk with inadequacy every time she walked in.

Since the divorce, she has found she doesn't want to wear make-up any more. Her daily uniform has become jeans and boots in winter, and shorts and flip-flops in summer. Sure, she still dresses up on the rare occasions she has to, but now if she bumps into one of the scary gala-obsessed women in Stop and Shop and she is in shorts with her hair shoved back in a ponytail, she doesn't mind, doesn't fight the urge to hide behind the grapefruit stand.

She has taken up yoga, joining the new yoga centre that has opened on the outskirts of town, and is finding

not only is she calmer, more centred, but she has found new friends, women like her – grounded, down-to-earth women – not to mention Tracy, the charismatic owner of the yoga centre, who has swiftly become one of Kit's favourite newer friends in town.

Kit has been avoiding the charity circuit, choosing instead to focus on the handful of friends she trusts and adores. Getting divorced in a small town, she discovered, was no walk in the park. For a while there, she and Adam were the subject of various gossipy lunches. The rumours shocked and upset her. In the course of one week she heard the following different reasons for their divorce:

- 1) That Adam had been unfaithful
- 2) That she had been unfaithful
- 3) They had run out of money so now she was leaving him.

None of it was true. The truth, that they had simply grown apart, was far more prosaic, and didn't seem to make sense to people, hence the need to embellish. The rumours had hurt Kit far more than she let on, and it was only when she met Tracy at the yoga centre that she became willing to expand her social circle again, beyond Charlie, her oldest friend in Highfield.

For a long time after the divorce, she had stopped being invited to things. She doubted Adam was being invited either, but that was largely because he was rarely in Highfield these days. She realized that however much people liked her while she was married, even though she

was effectively single in those days because Adam was hardly ever around, it was different now that she was actually *divorced*. People seemed to become frightened of being around her too much, as if, she sometimes thought, some of her bad karma might rub off on them.

Not that she felt as if she had bad karma. Not any more. She felt as if she had had bad karma during her marriage, when she would go to bed at night and feel that she was drowning in loneliness. Since the dust settled, and once the children were fine again, she has woken up every morning looking forward to the day, trusting that it will be good, knowing that she has finally discovered who she is, and with a sense of peace.

When Kit first saw the house she bought for herself and the kids after the divorce, she fell in love. Instantly. White clapboard with sea-green shutters that had little starfish cut-outs, the window boxes bursting with impatiens that tumbled over the sides, it was the prettiest house she had ever seen.

She recognized that she was falling in love with a lifestyle rather than with a house, but she didn't care. She wanted that lifestyle. She saw herself swinging on the porch swing, hosting dinners around that kitchen table, kneading dough on those marble countertops.

The kids would curl up on the huge, squishy, mushroom-coloured sofas as a fire blazed in the grate and she merrily made dinner while sipping a glass of ice-cold Pinot Noir, and the three of them would all live happily ever after.

It was something of a shock to do the walk through

on the day of closing, to realize that without the smells of cinnamon buns rising gently in the oven, the sounds of soft jazz filling the air, without the mushroom-coloured sofas, softly lit table lamps and fresh blue and white curtains, the house was just . . . a house. A nice house, admittedly, but Kit couldn't help but feel a swell of disappointment.

She knew the sellers were taking the furniture, of course, but she didn't think it would make the house feel so . . . different.

By the next morning, she had forgotten that. She had forgotten it because she woke up after their first night in the house, the sun streaming through the curtainless windows, and realized that it was hers. All hers. And more than that, her *life* was hers.

There was something so different about living in a small, manageable house, living a life that felt *real*, rather than a pretence. Never again would she have to squeeze into high heels and dresses because that's what her husband liked. Never again would she have to sit through boring dinners with people she didn't understand, people with whom she had nothing in common, because Adam was doing a deal with them, or needed to befriend them, or impress them.

She didn't have to take the kids on vacation to only the smartest and best hotels, hotels that always intimidated her, where she never felt she belonged. For the first time in a long time – fifteen years to be exact – Kit didn't have to please anyone other than herself.

Of course there were the children too – dramatic, strong-willed Tory, and easy, easy-going Buckley, and

she always had to consider them, but she didn't have to change her way of living, change her life for them.

And while she knew there would be times when she would feel vulnerable and lonely and scared, she also knew that the more time that passed, the less she would feel those things, and when she did, she would breathe through the feeling and remind herself it always passed.

So she woke up, made coffee and climbed back into bed, sipping slowly and looking out of the window at the tree tops, refusing to be daunted by the boxes all over the house, relishing the feeling of being free.

They spent the day unpacking, Tory miserably until Kit promised her a cool sofa bed from PB Teen, and then, towards dusk, there was a banging on the door and it was flung open before anyone had a chance to even get up. A small, wiry, very tanned old woman with long white hair in a ponytail came striding into the living room holding a stack of plates with a pie balanced precariously on the top.

'I'm Edie,' she said. 'I live next door in the purple house.' Tory caught Buckley's eye and suppressed a grin – they had been wondering who lived in the bright purple eyesore next door. 'And before you ask, no, I won't paint it. I love the colour purple and you'll get used to it.'

'I . . . I hadn't noticed,' Kit lied.

'I've brought you a home-made rhubarb and cherry pie –' Edie put the plates down on the counter – 'and some plates for us to eat it off as I figured you wouldn't have unpacked yet.'

*

‘You need a job,’ she said, half an hour later, after the group had swapped small talk and licked their plates clean. She peered at Kit as Kit pretended not to be disconcerted by this tiny, white-haired bundle of energy who had made herself instantly at home.

‘I do?’ Kit said, wondering how Edie had known; for it was true, it was just that Kit hadn’t got around to telling anyone.

‘Why yes,’ Edie got up, opened the fridge, found a carton of orange juice and helped herself. ‘It’s not good for all you young girls to give up your jobs once you’ve had children. You get bored and have far too much time to worry about things you don’t have to worry about. Everyone should work, in my opinion. We need to exercise our brains just as much as our bodies.’

‘Do *you* exercise?’ Tory asked, somewhat mesmerized by Edie.

‘I most certainly do,’ Edie said, flexing her muscles. ‘I do Pilates twice a week and play tennis every weekend.’

‘How old are you?’ Tory said.

‘Tory!’ Kit instantly admonished. ‘You can’t ask that! It’s rude.’

‘Not at all,’ Edie dismissed Kit. ‘I like people who speak their minds. I’m eighty-three years young.’

‘Wow!’ Tory said. ‘You look amazing.’

‘You see?’ Edie beamed with delight. ‘That’s because I take care of my body and my mind.’

‘So what do you do?’ Kit couldn’t help but ask.

‘I’m a realtor.’ Edie’s chest puffed up with pride. ‘The

star of the Burton Holloway group for the last thirty years.'

'Thirty years!' Tory, at thirteen, couldn't fathom doing anything for that long. 'That's a lifetime.'

'Almost!' Edie chuckled. 'I'm going to speak to my friend Robert McClore about you. He's been looking for an assistant for ages, and he keeps trying out these silly young things who haven't a clue how to use their initiative and don't have a bone of common sense in their bodies. He needs someone like you. Know how to type?' She examined Kit with a beady eye.

'I ... of course.' Kit grinned, thinking, Robert McClore! The famous writer! This was the most exciting thing to have happened to her since she once sat in the same restaurant as Ray Liotta.

Kit had realized that knowing she would have to get a job was very different to actually finding one. In the early days, she didn't have the strength to actively look, being too busy packing up the house, making lists of what was hers and what was Adam's. Too busy sorting out the books into his and hers piles, wondering what on earth to do with the Duxiana bed, and all the extra furniture that Adam didn't want, the furniture that wouldn't fit into a new, smaller house.

Too busy running, so she wouldn't have to stop and deal with the anxiety, the fear. Could she do this by herself? Was she really that strong?

But once she bought this house, she knew she would have to find something, and Edie's suggestion was a blessing in disguise.

*

Robert McClore is probably the most famous person to live in Highfield. Neighbouring towns have their share of movie stars and rock gods, but Highfield has one of the biggest names in literature today.

He is talked of in the same breath as Clancy, Patterson or Grisham. He is one of the giants in men's commercial fiction, and the airports stack his small, meaty paperbacks high every summer.

He is read by all the men who profess not to enjoy fiction. The men who read the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, who, if they read books at all, read biographies, history books, business tomes, and who only ever pick up a blockbuster when they're flying to sandy destinations with their wives and families.

His books have been turned into movies, each one more successful than the last, and the script for *The Last Landing* is still studied by film students all over the country, lauded as an example, as *the* example, in fact, of the perfect thriller.

He moved to Highfield thirty-five years previously with his wife, Penelope, a model. They were part of the beautiful crowd, the artists and writers who summered in Highfield, who drove down on Friday nights with the back seats of their sporty little convertibles stuffed with cases of champagne.

They were the golden couple, until Penelope disappeared from their yacht while they were sailing, with friends, in the Greek islands during the summer of 1978. It was the biggest story of the year, and to this day there are people who believe Penelope was murdered, that there was far more to the story than met the eye.

Their friends, it was true, were there. Plum Apostoles, who had made a fortune in shipping, was rumoured to have been having an affair with Penelope. Plum's wife, Ileana, was thought to have been having an affair with Robert. Plum had, it later came out, served time in prison for assault. There was talk of huge rows, drunken parties, but Robert never spoke about it again.

Nor did he remarry. The parties and the high life stopped as soon as Penelope disappeared, and he became something of a recluse.

Hillpoint, the grand old house perched at the top of Dune Road, overlooks the calm waters of Long Island Sound. The house itself is approached by a long, gravel driveway. As the electric gates swing noiselessly open, and you round the corner, you catch a glimpse of the large white columns of the house before it comes into view in its entirety.

Gracious, regal, impressive, it is a house that is often whispered about, for few have actually seen it, few have ventured beyond those intimidating electric gates. Some of the mothers that Kit knows, women who have grown up in Highfield, say they went trick or treating there as children, that Robert and Penelope left the gates open every Halloween, when they threw huge parties for all their New York friends, and they let anyone come, lavishing delicious gourmet candy on all the local neighbourhood children.

The house was designed by Cameron Clark in 1929, but it is a house that hasn't been seen for years. Aside from the people who take care of Robert McClore, few are allowed beyond the gates.

Robert McClore spends his time writing a book a year, consulting on the movies, and occasionally, very occasionally, appearing at an event in town to benefit one of the local charities. His name appears far more often than he does, as a generous donor to everything charitable, including being one of the giant supporters behind the rebuilding of Highfield Library.

Kit sat in her kitchen and looked at her new neighbour.

‘Of *course* I know how to type,’ she said, despite not having typed for many, many years. Still, nothing that a spot of practice wouldn’t cure.

‘Know how to read?’ Edie peered at Kit with a twinkle in her eye, while Tory burst out laughing.

‘Is Robert McClore really looking for an assistant?’ Kit asked.

‘Yes, and he’d like you.’

‘How do you know? You don’t know me.’

‘No, but I like you already, and that’s always a good sign.’

‘How do you know him?’

Edie smiled. ‘I was his . . . well, not assistant, exactly . . . more like his Girl Friday. Oh it was hundreds of years ago, when he and his wife, gorgeous thing, first moved to Highfield. I used to cook for them, do a spot of cleaning, and even go on movie sets with him. It was quite the life.’

‘It sounds amazing. Did you do it for long?’

A look of sadness came into Edie’s eyes. ‘A while. Until Penelope died. You know the story?’

Kit nodded. Everyone in town knew the story.

‘Robert was a changed man when he came back. He went into hiding for a while, hence that ridiculous reputation he has as a recluse.’

‘You mean he’s not?’

‘Robert!’ Edie barked with laughter. ‘He loves people! He’s just private. There’s a big difference. He couldn’t stand the attention after Penelope’s death, and refused to let anyone help him. Including me. That’s when I decided to get my realtor’s licence instead.’

‘But you’re still in touch?’

‘Of course! I shall ring him tonight when I get home.’

Kit chose her clothes carefully, but it all went horribly wrong at the last minute. You’re going for an interview to be an assistant to a novelist, she told herself, as she glared at her black skirt suit in the mirror, not an accountant.

She whipped off her suit and put on black pants and a blue shirt, then tore the pants off and pulled her chinos on. Too casual. Oh *God*. What on earth was she supposed to wear? She wanted to be professional, but not too professional. Casual, but not too casual.

In the end she settled on brown pants and a blue cashmere sweater with a pretty scarf, and all the way over to Robert McClore’s house she fought the urge to run home and change.

‘You will be fine.’ Edie was driving, and kept chuckling to herself about how nervous Kit was. ‘He’s terribly nice, and you’ll charm him. You’ll see.’

But as soon as they pulled through the gates and Kit

saw, for the first time, the grandeur of the house, she almost went to pieces.

Eddie bypassed the front door and marched straight in the back – ‘He never keeps it locked,’ she whispered to Kit, ‘but don’t tell anyone’ – striding through the kitchen and calling out a loud, ‘Hellooo?’

‘Eddie!’ It was slightly surreal, this man who was so famous suddenly standing before her. He gave Eddie a huge hug, then turned to Kit with a warm smile on his face.

‘I’m Robert,’ he said. ‘You must be Kit.’

She was instantly disarmed by his warmth, although now, eight months later, she knows that it is only because of Eddie that he was relaxed; more often, with strangers, he is polite and always gracious, but distant – the price of fame meaning he has to truly trust before he can let anyone get close.

And so, for the past eight months, Kit has been his assistant. Initially, she went in three days a week, just for three hours, to tidy up, answer fan mail, sort out his bills. Robert McClore wasn’t around much while she was there. She’d be in the large office downstairs, while he was in his writing office, a former sunroom attached to the side of the house.

She would knock tentatively when she needed him, intimidated by his greatness, but slowly they began to chat, slowly they began to relax with one another, and now he brings her coffee when he makes his, and sits in the 1920s art deco armchair in her office, chatting to her about life.

Three hours a day became five hours a day, four days a week, and Robert told her, just the other day, he didn't know what he did before she came along. Her chest swelled with pride.

Finally, for the first time since the divorce, it feels like everything in life is in place. Her kids are settled, her home is calm, she loves her job. She wakes up every morning and cannot believe how lucky she is.

Robert McClore wanders in and places a mug of coffee on the desk to one side of Kit's computer. She looks up and smiles gratefully, reaching over for the mug and sliding her chair slightly away from the desk so she can sit more comfortably.

'How's the research coming along?' he asks.

Kit has spent the last two weeks trawling the Internet for information on Navy SEAL training. Every day she collates the most relevant facts, cuts and pastes them, and gives them to Robert. She doesn't read the books as he writes them, but reads the outlines, the synopses and the research. She never thought this kind of book would interest her – she is much more likely to pick up a book with a pink cover featuring a pair of glossy high-heeled shoes – but since working here she has read most of Robert's work, and is surprised by how much she likes it.

This latest features a martial arts expert brought in to train the Navy SEALs. Only he's not quite what he appears, and mayhem ensues when his terrorist links are discovered.

'It's fascinating,' Kit says, for it is, and that is the true beauty of the job. Not that she is gainfully employed and earning her own money for the first time in years, but that she is learning something new every day.

Frequently, she leaves feeling that her brain has physically expanded in the few short hours she has spent there. ‘I love learning about all these new things,’ she says with a smile. ‘I never expected I’d be finding out so much when I took the job.’

‘That doesn’t mean you regret it, then?’ Robert says, sipping his coffee.

‘God! No!’ She is forceful, and slightly embarrassed. She looks away, then turns to him again, wondering how it is that such a kind, successful and – yes, okay, she has to admit this, even though he is in his sixties – very *handsome* man, is on his own so much of the time.

There are times, particularly like now, when there feels such intimacy between them that she wants to blurt out the question: why are you on your own? But she would never cross that line, would never dare be so presumptuous.

But she doesn’t understand it. She knows about the terrible tragedy with his wife, yet it seems there has been no one serious since then. Rumours abound about covert affairs with wives of wealthy men, but in eight months here she has never seen evidence of anything.

There is talk in the town that he might be gay, but she thinks that unlikely. Just as there have been no women, there have been no men either, and she just doesn’t believe it, realizing that he is a target for gossip, false rumours, simply because of his fame.

She studies him as he leafs through the papers she has collated for him. He has a craggy, handsome face, tanned from the hours he spends in the garden. She watches him through the windows sometimes, knows

he is taking a break from writing, but that this is part of the process, that gardening is a meditation for him, and he would not relish being disturbed.

His hair is more salt than pepper these days, but the silver-framed photos scattered around the house show Robert and Penelope decades ago, Robert squeezed next to George Clooney and Meryl Streep at the Academy Awards, and when he was younger his looks weren't just handsome, they were breathtaking.

'I wonder whether you would come to the reading tonight.' Robert suddenly lays the papers on his lap and studies Kit over the top of his glasses. 'You haven't been to one of my readings and I think you would enjoy it.'

'I thought you didn't like turning up with "people",' Kit says and grins, thinking of the stories Robert has told her, how he turns up for book signings, lectures, television shows, with no one, and is usually ignored because people don't believe it's him, don't believe a writer of his calibre could possibly have no ego, ergo no entourage.

Her favourite story, one that he told her just recently, laughing all the while, was when he turned up to a talk show that featured another author, this one female, young, who had enjoyed great success with her very commercial first novel and was suffering from an advanced case, Robert said, of 'first novel syndrome', which meant all the attention had quite clearly gone to her head.

Young, beautiful and charming on the surface, she had arrived with her assistant, her publicist, her editor,

her manager, her hair and make-up artist, her sister and her sister's friend. The production team, panicking, put her in the best dressing room, the one that had home-made pastries and fresh coffee, baskets of fresh fruit on every surface. The one that had two plush sofas and a fridge filled with chilled white wine.

Robert arrived alone. He was shoved into someone's office, which they had decided to turn into a makeshift dressing room for the day.

'See?' Kit had been horrified but had laughed. 'You need *people!*'

'Oh pshaw,' Robert had brushed her off. 'I can't stand all that *look at me, I'm a star* business. I don't need people, but I wouldn't have minded some of those home-made pastries.'

Robert grins at Kit now.

'I don't want you to come and assist me. I want you to come and be a member of the audience. Come and enjoy.'

'I . . . I'd love to,' Kit says. 'I just have to see if I can get a babysitter.'

'Isn't Tory thirteen? Couldn't she babysit?'

'Yes, but she's already got plans tonight. Let me ask around this afternoon at yoga and see if I can find someone.'

Later that day, at her yoga class, Kit inhales, sits back on her ankles as she stretches forward in Child's Pose, then swoops slowly through Chataranga and into Downward Dog.

She catches the eye of Charlie, who grimaces at her

and makes her smile, then she forces herself to stay focused on her breathing.

The room is absolutely quiet, save for the soft, tinkling music in the background, and Tracy's melodious voice, taking them through the yoga movements.

Kit never would have thought she would become addicted to yoga. She remembers first trying it when she was pregnant with Tory. She went to a pre-natal yoga class, armed with all the right gear because she was convinced it was going to change her life. She had cute maternity yoga pants, the matching vest with a painted Buddha on it, and a brand-new hot-pink yoga mat.

She had entered at the back of the class, a little surprised that when she smiled at the other mothers they didn't smile back, but perhaps, she thought, they were already in a meditative state and didn't quite see her.

Kit was looking forward to lying flat on her back and breathing deeply, anticipating an hour of rest and relaxation, of going through the movements in a slow and measured way. After the thirtieth consecutive Downward Dog, she knew she'd made a terrible mistake. It didn't help that she was using her pregnancy with Tory as an excuse to eat whatever the hell she wanted and was subsequently the size of a small whale (she liked to think it was normal that six out of ten people asked her if she was having twins, but she very much doubted it).

She huffed and puffed her way through the class, threw the yoga mat in the back of the closet in the mud room when she got home, and forgot all about it until

the yard sale when they moved, when someone paid \$2 for the mat.

Since the time of that first class, yoga seemed to sweep the country. Everyone Kit knew was raving about either Pilates or yoga, but it wasn't until she and Adam separated that she actually decided to give it another go.

And even then she didn't really want to, she just did it because Charlie was going, and this, more than anything, was an opportunity to see Charlie more often and grab tea or coffee or lunch, depending on the time of the class, afterwards.

Charlie had been her lifesaver when she first moved to Highfield. Their girls, Tory and Paige, were in pre-school together, and the minute Kit walked into the pre-school and saw Charlie's mass of curly red hair, her large open smile, she knew they'd be friends, made it her mission, in fact, to be friends.

She got Charlie's number from the school, phoned her the next day and invited her over so the girls could get to know one another before they started school. Given that Tory and Paige were turning two, it was unlikely they'd find much in common, but that's what mothers of pre-schoolers did, particularly ones who were new to the area – they looked for mothers they liked the look of and invited them over.

Months later, when she and Charlie were firm friends, Charlie confessed she had no idea who Kit was when she phoned with that initial invitation. 'And you still came?' Kit was aghast but Charlie shrugged and said, 'I needed friends as much as anyone else.'

The girls had been best frenemies until Charlie sent her daughter to private school, and this had, unwittingly, split them up. Until then, if they weren't obsessed with one another, unable to breathe or live without the other in her sights at all times, they were having huge and dramatic arguments, which Kit and Charlie tried to laugh about, but in truth they found all rather exhausting.

Charlie's husband, Keith, worked, as did most of the husbands in Highfield these days, in finance, and he and Adam instantly bonded, so for a while the four of them were inseparable.

They went out for dinner every Saturday night, sometimes with others joining in, did classes with their kids at the library and YMCA, and had brunch every Sunday, usually at Kit's house because, as Charlie said, she was a horrible cook.

'It's brunch,' Kit said in disbelief. 'Bagels, scrambled eggs and bacon. What's to cook?'

'Have you tasted my scrambled eggs?' Charlie said, and Kit shook her head. 'Exactly.'

'I'll make them!' Kit offered, but the tradition, for a long time, remained brunch at Kit and Adam's.

On the night that Kit and Adam decided to divorce – both of them had been waiting for their unhappiness to pass, waiting for things to get better, until they realized that they had been living this way for two years and it wasn't going to get any better, that they had in fact drifted so far apart they couldn't see how to find their way back, even if they had wanted to – Charlie and Keith were the first people Kit turned to.

Kit moves gracefully out of Plank as her mind flits back to walking into Charlie and Keith's kitchen, sitting their table as Keith brought over a bottle of vodka. Not for her, but for himself. He was so shocked he was almost numb, just kept shaking his head in disbelief.

'But we've been unhappy for years,' Kit kept saying. 'Couldn't you tell?'

'No!' Keith insisted. 'I thought all that bickering was just, well, just part of your relationship. I didn't think it meant there was something wrong with the marriage. I didn't think you would split up.'

Kit remembers Charlie saying, afterwards, that Keith had been heartbroken. She said that for both of them, but particularly for Keith, having their best friends break up was like losing a friend, and Keith had to grieve.

Charlie understood, though. She had liked Adam, but after they split up she confessed she could see that they weren't perhaps a great match. Adam was very caught up in working on Wall Street, and all the trappings that came with that. And Kit? Well, Charlie realized that the labels and the jewels weren't her, and Charlie knew how unhappy Kit was, living in the huge house.

Things had been a little awkward for a while with Keith because Kit knew he still saw Adam – had lunch with him regularly in the city. And although she and Adam had approached their separation and subsequent divorce determined to be friends, ironing out the finances and custody agreement was so horrible that for a time Kit actually hated him.

Her first priority was to protect the children and she

had hoped that she and Adam would be able to come to an amicable arrangement, but Adam's lawyer, the Rottweiler, as she came to call him, was so aggressive that she is convinced to this day he deliberately made things as contentious and awkward as possible, dragging the proceedings out far longer than was necessary, in order to get more money.

They are friendlier now. Adam is dating up a storm in New York City, which Kit thinks should bother her more, but in fact she is grateful she does not have to spend time going to the smartest, trendiest restaurants any more, and grateful for her quiet life in Highfield.

Perhaps it was simply that they married too young, she realizes now. They met at twenty-three, married at twenty-five, long before they knew who they were going to grow into, long before they knew whether they were going to share their journey or find that when they came to a fork, they would both choose a different direction.

There had been many forks in their marriage, and many different directions chosen, but Kit had never thought seriously about the possibility of leaving because the idea of being on her own again, of handling this life all by herself, was not just overwhelming, but terrifying.

True, Adam had never been around very much during the marriage, and for most of the time, particularly during the week, she felt like a single mother, but that wasn't the same as actually *being* a single mother, having to deal with everything herself, not having any support when the going got tough – and there were times when the going certainly got tough.

The class finishes and Tracy bows her head in Prayer Pose, then looks at each of the women in the room intently. ‘Namaste,’ she says to all of them in turn.

‘Namaste,’ they say and bow their heads in reply.

‘So?’ Tracy gives first Kit then Charlie a hug. ‘Anyone for a smoothie?’

‘Love one,’ they both say in unison, turning to one another and laughing.

‘I saw in the paper that Robert McClore’s giving a talk tonight,’ Tracy says, as they walk out of the yoga studio and up the stairs towards the smoothie bar. ‘I thought I might go. You’ll be there, right?’

‘Thanks for reminding me!’ Kit turns to Charlie. ‘I meant to ask you. Is Keith around tonight? Can I borrow Amanda?’ Amanda is the wonderful Brazilian babysitter who moved into Charlie and Keith’s house six months previously, and has changed their lives.

‘Where’s Edie?’

‘Pilates tonight.’

‘Oh damn. The kids have sleepovers and Amanda’s going out. I’m so sorry. What about Adam? Do you think he could take the kids?’

‘I don’t know.’ Kit sighs. ‘Adam’s so busy sowing his wild oats he doesn’t tend to be around any more than he needs to be, and certainly not at the last minute. But you’re right, I should try.’ And she reaches down into her bag and brings out her mobile phone to send him a text.

‘I can’t believe we’re finally going to meet your reclusive boss,’ Tracy says with a smile as they sit down at a table in the corner.

‘Uh oh!’ Charlie casts her a sideways glance. ‘I know that look.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that predatory, cougar look. You’ve got your eye on Robert McClore, haven’t you?’

Tracy laughs. ‘Don’t call me a cougar!’

‘Why not?’ Charlie is all innocence. ‘It’s a compliment!’

‘No it’s not. Anyway, isn’t a cougar a woman who goes out with younger men?’

‘No. A cougar is a sexually active and confident woman who’s a predator. Tell me you’re not flattered.’

‘I’m not flattered.’

‘But you wouldn’t mind getting your hands on Robert McClore?’

‘Well, he is attractive and single and seriously successful. Why exactly would I not be interested?’

‘You’re talking about my boss!’ Kit says. ‘I don’t even think of him that way. Anyway, he’s not interested, and why would you be? He’s in his sixties, Tracy! That’s much too old for you.’

‘I’m forty-one,’ Tracy says. ‘And I’ve always liked older men. Just say you’ll introduce me, that’s all. Oh go on . . . please?’ She leans her head on Kit’s shoulder and Kit laughs.

‘Tracy, like you need anyone to introduce you. Men go crazy for you.’

‘In my dreams!’ Tracy snorts. ‘Since that freaky ex-husband of mine left, I only seem to attract the losers.’

‘Cute losers,’ Charlie says and grins, remembering a guy who was with Tracy one time when she and Keith

had bumped into them. That one had turned out to be a drug addict who ended his many clean years soon after he and Tracy started dating.

‘Yes, well. I’ve never been able to resist that lethal combination of black hair and green eyes.’ Tracy remembers the ex with a shrug.

‘Doesn’t sound like Robert McClore would be your type,’ Charlie teases.

‘Maybe he’s not.’ Tracy grins. ‘But I wouldn’t mind finding out.’

‘You’re both incorrigible!’ Kit laughs, but she is thrilled to have found Tracy, thrilled that she now feels part of a ‘gang’, feels like she belongs; and how lovely it is to have someone to share things with, to call up out of the blue or have them drop in unexpectedly for coffee.

She hadn’t realized, for many years during her marriage, quite how much she had missed her female friends. Not that they fell out deliberately, but she no longer lived in Concord, and nor did any of her school friends, and distance, more than anything else, had forced them to drift apart.

She was in Connecticut, others were in New York, still others scattered across the United States, and even some in Paris and London. From time to time they exchanged emails, and Facebook had done wonders in reintroducing her to faces from her past, but it wasn’t the same as having that close-knit group of friends, people who knew you back before you grew into your self, people who had known, and loved you, for years.

Charlie she has known for eleven years. They have

shared history, laughter, tears. When Charlie suffered three miscarriages in a row after Paige was born, Kit was the one on whose shoulder she cried.

And when Emma was born, it was Kit who threw the baby shower, Kit who gathered her friends together and made beautiful favours of miniature bassinets stuffed with embroidered goodies, Kit who took care of Emma when Charlie had to be somewhere for Paige.

They met Tracy at an event called Cocktails, Creators and Chat, just over a year ago. In aid of one of the local breast cancer charities, it was a monthly event that had guest speakers, and women all over Highfield insisted their husbands get the earlier train home, or found a babysitter, and they filled the hall of the local theatre, sipping Cosmos and chattering excitedly, so thrilled to be away from their families for the night.

Tracy stepped up to the stage, gorgeous with her long, blonde hair, her fresh-faced Californian beauty, and she talked about her love of yoga, her journey from being a girl who leaped from one drama to another, to a woman who had finally found peace.

Her speech affected Kit, particularly. She was coming out of the haze of her divorce, and was starting to enjoy her life, to feel serenity during the weekends she was all alone, rather than a crippling fear.

Kit had approached Tracy afterwards, a little intimidated by both Tracy's confidence and her beauty. 'I loved your talk.'

'Thank you.' Tracy smiled. 'I love being able to share some of my journey with women, especially those of us who are on a similar path.'

‘Well, I just got divorced, so it was more than a little relevant.’

‘How are you doing?’ Tracy asked, placing a hand on Kit’s arm, and Kit found herself talking to Tracy as if she were an old friend, an instant bond between them.

Part of the gift bag that night had been a free yoga session at Tracy’s new studio, Namaste.

‘Will you come?’ Tracy said, as she was being pulled away to talk to other women.

‘Sure,’ Kit said, thinking, suddenly, and sadly, that Tracy was only being a good businesswoman.

‘No, seriously. I want you to come. I don’t often meet other single women and I think it’s really important to have girlfriends. Honestly, I could do with some single girlfriends. Will you come? Make sure it’s one of my classes and we can have some tea afterwards. Can we do that?’

Kit’s face lit up. ‘I’d love to,’ she said.

The following week she and Charlie did exactly that, and by the time they had all finished their tea and had sat chatting and laughing for over an hour, they were firm friends.