

From the author of *Getting Rid of Matthew*
A RICHARD & JUDY SUMMER READ SELECTION 2007

jane fallon

got
you
back

A husband. A wife.
A mistress. And the
ultimate plan for revenge



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Got You Back
by
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Stephanie closed her eyes and held out her hands, her son's almost uncontrollable excitement rubbing off on her and making her feel like a child again herself. It was hard to believe it had been nine years. Nine years ago today she had been shivering because of the cold, and crying because it was raining and her hair was going to get ruined, and James had burst into the hotel room where she had been getting ready, ignoring all the voices telling him it was bad luck for him to see his bride before the ceremony, because he had known she would be nervous and that she would care about seeing him more than she would worry about breaking with tradition.

'You're going to have to wear a mac,' he'd said, 'and galoshes. Oh, and maybe a rain bonnet. That'll look nice,' and despite her nerves Stephanie had laughed.

'I mean, I can't marry you if you look like a drowned rat – it'd be bad for my reputation.'

Stephanie's mother, who had been helping her squeeze into her untraditional grey satin dress and who had never quite got James's sense of humour, had tutted and tried to usher him out of the room, but James had flung himself into an armchair in the corner and refused to budge. By the time they had had to leave for the register office Stephanie had felt relaxed and in control, secure that this

was going to be the happiest day of her life, just as it was meant to be.

In the end her hair had lain plastered to her head like wet string, and James had told her that she'd never looked so beautiful and he'd said it with such conviction that she'd actually believed him.

Every year since he had made a big fuss on their anniversary, surprising her with cleverly chosen gifts: a pair of heavily decorated designer wellingtons the first year, a reference to the weather on their wedding day but also, as it turned out, something she now treasured for a different reason – a reminder of their last weekend spent stomping around in the mud at Glastonbury before she'd found out she was pregnant with Finn; a night away at a B-and-B, complete with his parents' offer of babysitting when Finn was two, and Stephanie was at the furthest edge of her rationality; last year a flowery tin watering-can he had known she had her eye on.

Fired up by his enthusiasm, she had planned surprises for him too, something her family had never really gone in for, Christmas being more a time for 'What do you want? A new blender? Fine, that's what I'll get you.' Over the years she had bought him books and gadgets and once, when she was feeling particularly sentimental, a photograph of the three of them in a silver frame. The rule was that the gifts had to remain secret until the big day, something which Finn, confidant of both parents in the planning stages, always struggled with.

This year Stephanie had bought James a fish-shaped corkscrew, which Finn had insisted his father had been admiring in a shop window, although she'd had her

doubts. He had opened it eagerly, tearing off the paper, and had certainly seemed delighted, although Stephanie knew he would never have given away that he wasn't. Now it was her turn and the suspense was killing her.

'Come on.' She laughed. She could hear Finn giggling with excitement.

'Don't open your eyes,' James said, and she felt a small light square box drop into her outstretched hands. She had suspected that he was going to buy her the new Jamie Oliver – in fact, she had been hinting heavily to Finn that that was what she wanted. This didn't feel like the new Jamie Oliver. 'OK, you can open them now.'

She did as she was told. In her hand was a small but distinctive red box. This wasn't right. They weren't meant to spend a lot: the presents were a token, a bit of fun. It was most definitely the thought that counted. OK, she thought, I'll open it and inside there'll be a plastic necklace from Camden Market. That'll be the joke.

Finn was jumping up and down. 'Open it.'

She arranged her face into what she thought was a look of genuine expectation – James had done this before: once he had wrapped a huge box in beautiful flock paper, and when she had unwrapped it there was another and then another until finally all that was left was an empty matchbox. Then he had produced her real gift from behind the sofa. Finn had thought it was the funniest thing he had ever witnessed.

She opened the box. Inside was something that seemed to be doing a very passable imitation of a silver bracelet inlaid with pink diamonds. Stephanie looked at James

quizzically. He raised his eyebrows as if to say, 'Well, what did you expect?' She picked the bracelet out of its white satin bed. It was most definitely not plastic. 'James?'

'Don't you like it?' Finn was saying.

'Of course I do, I love it, but it's too much. Since when did we do this? Spend fortunes on each other, I mean. This *must* have cost a fortune.'

'I wanted to get you something nice, something proper for a change. To show you how much I appreciate you. Well, how much I love you, really.'

'Yuk,' Finn said, and made a face as if he was going to be sick.

'It's beautiful. I don't know what to say.' She looked at him, her head on one side.

'Well, "Thank you, James, for your amazing kindness and generosity," would be a start,' he said, trying to look serious.

She smiled. 'Thank you, James, for your amazing . . . What was it?'

'Kindness and generosity.'

'Yes, that, exactly, whatever you just said.'

'And for being such a wonderful, not to mention handsome and intelligent, some would say genius, husband.'

Stephanie laughed. 'Oh, no, you'll have to buy me more than a Cartier bracelet to get me to say all that.'

'Just remember this next year,' James said, laughing too, 'when you're out shopping.'

Stephanie slipped the bracelet on to her wrist. It was perfect, exactly the one she would have chosen for herself, except that she probably would have decided it was too

expensive and ended up settling for something far less special. James, when he wanted to, could still surprise her. She slipped her arms round his neck and hugged him. ‘Thank you.’

I

Five days later

It wasn't the words that upset her particularly: it was the kisses that followed them. That and the fact that the message was signed with an initial, not even a name. As if there was no question in the writer's mind that he would know who it was from. As if he received texts like this every day. Perhaps he did, Stephanie thought sadly.

Stephanie had been married to James for nine years, most of them blissfully happy, at least as far as she knew, although suddenly nothing felt that certain. They had one child, seven-year-old Finn, who was bright and funny and, above all, healthy, a black and white cat called Sebastian, who seemed to share all those qualities, and a goldfish named Goldie, who was, well, a fish. They had forty-two and a half thousand pounds left to pay on their mortgage, eleven thousand three hundred in their joint savings account, two thousand two hundred and thirty-eight pounds and seventy-two pence worth of credit-card debt, and a joint inheritance of about thirty-five thousand on its way once both sets of elderly parents died – although it wasn't looking like that would be any time soon: longevity ran in both their families.

In the years that they had been together James had lost his appendix while Stephanie had gained and, thankfully,

lost a handful of kidney stones. James had put on about two stone in weight, mostly around the middle, while Stephanie's valiant efforts in the gym meant that she was only a few pounds heavier than when they had met. She had, of course, acquired a few stretchmarks, but along with them had come Finn, so on balance she thought they were a price worth paying. They were both, still, without a doubt, on the plus side of attractive for their combined age of seventy-seven.

I'm really missing you. K xxx

She thought back over the previous night. James had arrived home at about six thirty as usual. He had seemed completely himself, tired but happy to be back. He had gone through his usual after-work routine; getting changed, spending half an hour or so playing with Finn in the garden, reading the paper, dinner, TV then bed. It hadn't exactly been a scintillating evening, the conversation had hardly rivalled the round table at the Algonquin, but it had been . . . normal. An evening exactly like a thousand other evenings they had spent together.

James had told her and Finn a story at dinner, she remembered. A funny story about how he had managed to successfully remove a splinter from the paw of an Afghan hound despite the fact that the family's python was working its way up the inside of his trouser leg. He had acted out the whole scene, putting on a gruff voice to portray the bemused thoughts of the dog, which had had Finn creasing up. He had a tendency to make himself

the hero of his stories – there was usually an underlying message of ‘Look how great I am’ – however entertaining and hilarious he made them. But that was just James. He had grown a little pompous over the years, a little too pleased with himself, but she had always put that down to insecurity, had even found it quite endearing. He was so transparent, she’d thought fondly. Apparently that was not the case.

The way it usually went was like this: James would say something self-aggrandizing, Stephanie would make fun of him, he would laugh and admit to exaggerating his part in whatever story he was telling. It was like role-play: they each knew what was expected of them and what their boundaries were. They enjoyed it, or so she had thought. They would argue about anything, however trivial or taboo – politics, religion, who had had the better voice, Nathan from *Brother Beyond* or Limahl from *Kajagoogoo*. It was what they did. Last night had been no exception. James had been trying to insist that *ER* gave a more realistic portrayal of life in an American hospital than *Grey’s Anatomy*.

‘You might be right,’ Stephanie had said. ‘I’m just saying you don’t know.’

James had puffed up in that half-serious, half-ironic way he had. ‘I do work in the medical profession.’

Stephanie had snorted indignantly. ‘James, you’re a vet. You know nothing about hospitals, apart from the eighteen hours you spent sitting in the waiting room being sick into a bag when I was in labour. I can’t even get you to go to the doctor when you’re ill.’

‘Did you know,’ James had said, ignoring her last

comment, 'that in some countries it's legal for a vet to practise on a human but not the other way round?'

'Your point being?'

'I'm just saying that what I do and what a doctor does are very closely related.'

'And that makes you an expert on life in an inner-city American hospital?'

'Well, more so than you, anyway. You know that I'd defer to you if we were having an argument about . . . ooh, I don't know . . . *What Not to Wear* or *The Clothes Show*.' He'd smiled at her smugly as if to say, 'Got you.'

Stephanie had picked up a cushion, aiming it at his head. 'Patronizing git,' she'd said, laughing, and his self-important front had dissolved.

'Hit a nerve, did I?' he'd said, laughing along with her. 'Upset because you know I'm right?'

Stephanie stared at the four words – actually, four words and a letter – and the three kisses. She hadn't meant to look. She wasn't the sort of woman who trawled through the messages on her husband's mobile phone while he was in the bath but today, when she had realized that he'd left his phone at home and had been scroll through trying to find a number for the surgery's receptionist, Jackie, she'd found herself idly flicking through his texts looking for, well, nothing really, just looking. She had felt all the blood rush from her head as she'd looked to see who the message was from. 'K', it said. Just 'K'. No Karen or Kirsty or Kylie to give her a clue. No Kimberley, Katrina or Kristen. Just 'I'm really missing you. K. xxx', like there was only one person in the world whose name began with a K and James would know

exactly who that was. She was fumbling about for the phone's address book, trying to see if the person listed as 'K' had a number she recognized, when she heard the bang of the front door closing. Stephanie dropped the phone hurriedly, jumping away from it as if she'd been stung. She plunged her hands into the too-hot washing-up water in the sink and tried to look casual as James strode into the room.

'Have you seen my phone?' he asked, not even stopping to say hello.

'No,' Stephanie said and then she'd wondered why she hadn't just said, 'Yes, it's over there.' Because he might have noticed she'd been looking through his address book, that was why.

He cast a cursory glance round the room, rushed out again, and then she heard him running up the stairs. She grabbed the phone from under the chair where she'd dropped it, stabbed at the buttons till the main screen returned, then ran out into the hall.

'James, I've found it. It's here,' she shouted.

'Thanks.' He pecked her on the cheek as he took it from her. 'I'd got as far as Primrose Hill,' he said, rolling his eyes and heading out of the front door again.

'Bye,' she said sadly to his back. She closed the door behind him and sat down heavily on the stairs.

OK, she thought, I have to think about this rationally. I mustn't jump to conclusions. But it was the language, the over-familiarity, the three kisses rather than the routine one that everybody seemed to deem suitable on even the most official piece of office communication, these days. And why would he have a number in his phone

identifiable only as 'K'? Because he didn't want her to know who it was, she thought.

She was tempted to look on James's computer, to go through his emails to see if she could find any clues, any hints of who K might be, but she knew she mustn't turn into one of those people. You'd start by glancing through his emails, next thing you knew you'd be steaming open his post or sniffing his shirt collars every time he came home, like a lovestruck dog. She had to give James the benefit of the doubt. The truth was that even though her marriage wasn't perfect, even though they didn't see enough of each other these days and when they did the routine of running a family seemed to get in the way of everything else, she would still never have thought he would turn to another woman. Not in a thousand years.

She just couldn't imagine he would have it in him, that, even if he was bored with her and tired of their marriage – and she had no real reason to believe that either of these things was true – he would do this to their child. Neither, if she was honest, could she imagine that another woman would throw herself at him, with his self-importance and his habit of poking about in his ears with a cotton bud while he was watching the TV. But maybe she'd got things completely wrong. She had to get out of the house before the lure of his computer became too much for her to resist. She had to get to the office and speak to Natasha. Natasha would know what she should do.

'Don't do anything,' Natasha said, when Stephanie had told her the whole story. 'It'll turn out to be nothing and

then he'll just resent you for going through his texts. Why were you going through his texts anyway?'

'I wasn't . . . I have no idea.'

'Maybe it's from a bloke. Kevin or Kelvin or Keith?'

'With three kisses?'

'A metrosexual,' Natasha persisted. 'They're very free with their emotions. Or a gay admirer? Kieron? Kiefer?'

'I don't think it's from a bloke.'

'Or an aunt?'

'No.'

'Someone from work?'

'Three kisses.'

'I agree it doesn't look good. Just don't do anything in a hurry, OK? Sleep on it.'

'OK,' Stephanie said reluctantly. She always took Natasha's advice.

'Shit,' she said, five minutes later. 'I've just realized. That bracelet he gave me for our anniversary – he's feeling guilty. That's why he spent so much. It wasn't an expression of love, it was an apology.'

Stephanie couldn't get James out of her head all day. Since they'd moved to London three years ago it had felt like they had hardly seen each other. The deal was that he would only put up with living in the city if he could split his week between his old rural practice near Lincoln and his new job, declawing Bengal cats and devising diets for overweight dogs in rarefied St John's Wood. He didn't want to give up his work with farm animals, he'd said. That was what he'd trained for. To work with real livestock, working animals, not the pampered pets of the upper-middle classes. Dairy cows and abattoir-bound lambs, not Fluffy and Precious and Mr Paws. So now he left for the country every Sunday morning and returned to London on Wednesday evenings, tired and irritable from all the upheaval. He had a whole other life up there, she thought miserably. Why had she always thought it so unlikely that there could be another woman up there too? He had means, opportunity, motive. It was the perfect crime.

In the early days she had thought she might travel up and down with him sometimes, but as soon as Finn had settled into his primary school it had seemed ridiculous to uproot him every few weeks. And, besides, it had actually felt like a relief to have one less person to worry about for a few days at a time. It was inevitable, though,

that with so much time spent apart their close ties would start to unravel. That their two worlds would overlap less and less. He had never been very interested in her job anyway, not fully understanding how life-threateningly crucial it was that the new face of *Holby City* didn't turn up to an awards do wearing the same dress as one of *Girls Aloud*.

When she'd first met James she had moved back home to her parents' house in Bath to save money. She had accidentally run over a neighbour's cat in her Citroën and, traumatized, had taken it straight to the local vet where James was, at the time, doing some on-the-job training. The cat, sadly, had failed to pull through, despite James's best efforts, but somewhere in the middle of the blood, guts and tears he had asked Stephanie out for a drink and she had agreed. Tiddles's loss had been her gain.

James, it seemed, had been as wowed by her ambition and skill as she had been by his. It was love at first sight. Well, lust and a bit of a rapport, which was all you could realistically hope for. But, somewhere along the line – somewhere, that was, around the time she had found she was pregnant with Finn – James had persuaded her to give up her lofty dream to be the new Vivienne Westwood and move into something less all-consuming, something which would allow her to spend time with the baby.

At first he had been supportive – it had been his idea, after all – encouraging her move into freelance dress-making and enjoying all the extra home comforts her working part-time – and in the spare room – afforded him. But then, three years ago when she had decided she wanted more, that she wanted to get back on the path to

having a career rather than just a job, and had persuaded him to buy the house in London so that she could be near the young women with too much money and little enough style of their own that they were happy to employ someone to find their clothes for them, she had soon realized that he was actually a little embarrassed by her work.

‘Stephanie dresses people who can’t dress themselves,’ he would say to their friends, finding himself hilarious. ‘No, she’s not a carer, nothing so worthy.’

Remembering this, Stephanie flung a pile of dresses, which had just been sent over from La Petite Salope, on to the sofa just as Natasha came in from the tiny room next door holding up a red shift. ‘Is Shannon Fearon a size sixteen?’ she asked, mentioning a young ex-soap opera actress who had recently shot back into the public eye by winning a celebrity singing competition, and who Stephanie was dressing for a photo shoot that afternoon.

‘Really or officially?’

‘Really.’

‘She is.’

‘OK, well, this might do.’ Natasha started to unpick the size sixteen label in the neck of the dress, then rooted through a small metal box and found a label marked ‘size ten’ to replace it. It was always good to make the client feel skinny and confident. That way, if a journalist asked how big they were, they could reply that they were well under the average size for a British woman, without giving away that they were clearly talking rubbish with a sub-conscious downward flick of the eyes.

‘Fine,’ Stephanie said, without looking.

Natasha sat down, moving the crumpled pile of dresses out of the way. ‘Stop dwelling on it,’ she said, ‘because you’ll turn it into something even if it’s nothing. Don’t worry about things before you have to. That’s my motto.’

‘One of them,’ Stephanie said.

Natasha had worked alongside Stephanie as a pattern cutter when Stephanie was still in her dress-maker phase and then had readily agreed to come along in the role of assistant when Stephanie had set herself up as a stylist five years later. She didn’t want any responsibility, she’d said. Work, to Natasha, was something you did during the day. Then you went home and forgot about it. Natasha had a lovely home with a husband who worshipped her and three well-behaved, neat children. She had never had to worry about random text messages or what Martin was up to for half the week. Consequently her face was almost free of lines and she looked at least five years younger than the forty-one it said on her birth certificate. Over the years she had become much more friend than colleague. ‘Mock if you want but you know I’m always right,’ she said now.

‘Of course you are,’ Stephanie said fondly. ‘I’ll try. It just makes me so angry that some silly cow might have turned his head, tried to steal my husband from under my nose without even thinking about me and my life. And my son.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘No,’ Stephanie said. ‘I don’t know that.’

But the thought wouldn’t leave her head. What else could it mean, after all? I’m really missing you. Kiss. Kiss. Kiss.

She couldn't concentrate at the photo shoot and found herself snapping at Shannon when she'd complained that a particular dress made her look fat. 'That's because you are fat,' Stephanie had wanted to scream, although that would have been unfair. Shannon was most definitely not fat but she was short and disastrously proportioned so she had a tendency to look dumpy. In the end Natasha had suggested that Stephanie go home early before a fight broke out.

Luckily Finn was already there, playing ball in the tiny garden with Cassie, the nanny, so Stephanie could occupy herself with making him snacks.

Finn, at seven, could still be cajoled into keeping her company, and even though usually she would be cross with him for playing his favourite new game of rolling cherry tomatoes off the kitchen table and trying to make them land in the cat's bowl (one point if they went in the water, two if they landed in the Whiskas), she was so grateful to have a distraction that she just let him get on with it. Just after six she heard the front door open and slam shut again.

'Hello,' she heard James call.

'Hi', she managed to shout back, weakly

He headed straight upstairs without stopping by the kitchen to see her. Not that this surprised her: he usually went up to the bedroom and changed out of his work clothes then settled down with the newspaper till dinner-time. He rarely asked her what she had done at work, and if he did, she normally didn't answer truthfully because he would only roll his eyes or make some sarcastic remark that he thought passed as a joke. If she was being honest

with herself she would have realized hardly ever asked him what had happened at the surgery either. She loved animals but couldn't rustle up much interest in stories about their ingrowing claws or dodgy hips. But Stephanie had always believed that all marriages went through this stage when there were young children around. There were simply more things to worry about, other considerations that were more important than 'Did you have a good day at work?' She had thought they would come out the other side of it once Finn was a bit older, and live out a blissful old age together, with all the time in the world to indulge in idle chat. She'd obviously been delusional, she thought now, pounding a chicken breast until it was nearly see-through. She stopped when she saw Finn, white-faced, at her elbow.

'Are you OK?' he asked, in his best grown-up voice, a mimic of the way she said it to him several times a day.

She bent down and kissed the top of his head. 'I'm fine, darling.'

'You don't look OK,' he said stubbornly.

His face was creased with worry, and Stephanie felt guilty for having allowed her mood to affect him. She picked up a tomato and rolled it along the table from which it dropped on to the head of a startled Sebastian and, bounced off his ear, into his organic chicken in gravy.

Try as he might, Finn couldn't hold back a smile. 'Excellent,' he said.

If you had asked James Mortimer how his life was – and if he had been in the mood to tell you the truth, because, actually, he had confided in no one over the last year, knowing that to tell one person would be to tell the world – he would have told you it was complicated. That he loved his wife Stephanie, deep down, but that somewhere along the line it had all got a bit safe and maybe even a little dull; that he adored his son and would never want to hurt him; that he had feelings for Katie that bordered on love, and that when he was with her he felt alive and invigorated in a way that routine family life no longer had the power to make him feel.

He wouldn't have admitted that what he was doing was wrong because he was trying to convince himself that there was no harm in it. He believed he was happy, Stephanie, he believed, was happy, and Katie certainly was. OK, so it was a bit of a ticking time-bomb waiting to explode. One of these days he knew he'd have to make a decision, plump for one life or the other. One day either Stephanie was going to insist that he gave up his life in Lincolnshire and moved to London full-time or Katie would grow tired of waiting for him to settle in the country. But until that happened his life suited him. As long as he didn't think about what he was doing too much.

James, if he had been being honest, would probably have said that the easiest, most carefree times of his double existence were the long journeys each week between London and Lincoln, Lincoln and London. He took his time in the car, listening to music, singing along. He would stop several times, not just at service stations but occasionally veering off into Bedfordshire or Hertfordshire to visit a quiet pub or a Michelin-starred restaurant, an anonymous man taking time out between his two lives.

He had never deliberately set out to create a double life for himself. When he had first met Katie he had been feeling particularly low, particularly hard-done-by by Stephanie. He had felt sorry for himself – poor James, working so hard and slogging up and down the country because his wife had insisted that was what he had to do. He was tired from the travelling and lonely on his nights away from home, holed up in the flat above the surgery eating microwave meals and drinking beer out of the can. He missed the day-to-day dramas of family life, the way his routine had been so entwined with his wife and son's that he had always felt part of a team. He was miserable. Katie was sweet and pretty and vulnerable and crying, and it had seemed like the most natural thing in the world to put his arm round her. And then, of course, one thing had led to another. It wasn't the first time his head had been turned by an attractive woman since he'd got married, it was just the first time he'd acted on it. He had thought it was the textbook 'bit of fun', the classic 'What she doesn't know won't hurt her', the clichéd 'It's different for men, sex is just sex – it doesn't mean we love our wives any less.'

He had invited Katie out to dinner and she had said yes, and he had found himself trotting out the story he had prepared in advance, that his marriage was over and that the only reason he travelled to London every weekend was to see his son. Because Lower Shppingham was such a small place, the news had got round and he was now having to keep up the lie with colleagues and friends too. Lucky for him that there was no one Stephanie had kept in touch with. As she never tired of telling him, she hated Lower Shppingham and everybody in it, so there was little chance of her ever coming for a visit.

Katie had eaten mussels and oysters and prawns with her fingers, and he had laughed at her and said she reminded him of Daryl Hannah in *Splash*, which she had taken as a compliment. He had been charmed by her sweetness, her hopeful – some would have said naïve – view of the world. He had always found Stephanie's dry cynicism funny, they had always shared a rather cruel sense of humour, but Katie's optimism was so . . . unchallenging. It was relaxing to spend an evening with someone who wasn't looking for ways to contest everything you said for comic effect.

The other thing Katie did, which ensured that James would want to see her again, was say no. He had walked her home to her little cottage, buying condoms from the machine in the restaurant toilet before they left. On the doorstep she had thanked him for a lovely evening and had allowed him to kiss her just enough to let him know she was interested, they pushed him away and said good-night. James was intrigued. It was that easy. He had known he had to see her again.

In the end Katie had kept him waiting for six dates before she had invited him into her bed for comfortable and undemanding sex. He had felt under no pressure to perform, so focused was she on making sure he was having a good time. By then he was hooked, having got used to the home cooking, the back rubs and the cosy, quiet life in Katie's cottage, so much more comfortable than the flat above the surgery.

Suddenly Katie was his girlfriend, not just a woman he had gone on a date with once. And he had found he liked it. It made his life in the country so much more homely. The first few times he had gone back to London for the weekend he had walked around in a cold sweat – a mixture of guilt and the fear of discovery. He had felt wretched, as if the enormity of what he was doing only became a reality when he was with his family. He promised himself he would break it off with Katie, that he would try to pretend it had never happened, make it up to Stephanie and Finn somehow. But then he would go back to Lincolnshire and Katie would be there, just wanting to look after him, and he would convince himself that he wasn't hurting anyone, he was just trying to make life away from home a little more bearable.

This evening he had arrived home from his practice in St John's Wood at the usual time, sweating and irritable after a half-hour journey in the car that anywhere else would have taken ten minutes. He felt out of place in London. He had grown up in the countryside and, although he had spent five years in Bristol studying to become a vet, he had always known he would move back out to the sticks to practise. He could understand why

Stephanie had needed to get back to work, to find a career, but there was no denying he resented the fact that this meant he had to spend half of his week in town.

He looked down at the list of tomorrow's patients, which Jackie had emailed him over, as she always did at the end of every day, all listed in that rather cutesy way that town veterinary practices often had, with the first name of the animal rather than the person who was bringing them in: Fluffy O'Leary, a Siamese cat who was having her teeth brushed, Manolito Pemberton, a Chihuahua with foot problems – caused, James had no doubt, by the fact that his elderly owner never let his paws touch the ground – Snoopy Titchmarsh, Boots Hughes-Robertson, Socks Allardyce. The list went on and on with not a genuine problem between them. He sighed. Three days of indulged baby substitutes. When he was feeling especially hard-done-by he felt that Stephanie ought to be more grateful that he spent half of his life doing a job he hated.

Stephanie didn't know what she had been expecting when she saw James that evening – that he would come in and say, 'I've met a woman called Kathy,' or suddenly start talking about a colleague called Kitty he had never mentioned before. What she hadn't prepared herself for was that he would be the same old James.

'Did you have a good day?' she said, with as much dignity as she could muster, once they had sat down at the table.

'Great,' he said, smiling in a way that made swallowing her food impossible.

‘Anything exotic?’ Usually days that were described as ‘great’ were those on which he had carried out an intricate operation on an unusual pet. A salamander, or once, even, a small monkey. At least, that was what she had always thought. Clearly wrongly. *I’m really missing you. K. Kiss. Kiss, Kiss.*

‘No,’ he said, stuffing a huge piece of chicken into his mouth. She waited to see if he would elaborate. He didn’t.

‘Jonas has got a puppy,’ Finn piped up, getting his father off the hook.

Stephanie had no idea who Jonas was, but she knew where this was going. ‘No, Finn, no puppies.’

‘That’s so unfair. Jonas is a year younger than me and he’s allowed a puppy so why aren’t I?’

‘Who is Jonas anyway?’ Stephanie asked, not really caring what the answer was.

‘Oh, mum, you’re so stupid.’ Finn sighed and turned back to his food.

James was humming to himself between mouthfuls, something he often did and which Stephanie had always found irritating, but today he seemed to have taken on a new significance. It was as if he was saying, ‘look how happy I am. Look what a great week I’ve had, shagging Katherine.’

Stephanie looked at him across the table. I have to get a grip, she thought. One text does not mean he’s having an affair. He smiled an I-haven’t-a-care-in-the-world smile at her, and she turned away.

‘Eat your peas,’ she said to Finn, trying to sound like her normal self.

‘I already have stupid,’ Finn said, picking up his plate

and turning it upside-down to demonstrate his point. 'See?'

Once Finn had been persuaded to go to sleep, at about eight thirty, Stephanie had claimed a headache and announced she was going to bed. James had stretched out a hand to touch hers as she walked past him, eyes still glued to the TV.

'Night, darling,' he'd said. 'Hope you feel better.' His phone, which was lying on the coffee-table, had beeped to announce a message coming through.

'That'll be Karmen,' Stephanie had wanted to say, but instead she'd huffed out of the room. Or maybe it's Kara or Kayla or Katie, she thought, accidentally hitting on the right name finally, although, of course, she didn't know that yet.

Katie Cartwright was in love, she was sure of it. She didn't know where it had come from, this sudden, overwhelming attraction to James, but come it had and now it was all she could think about. She had been in love before – or, at least, had thought she was. She was thirty-eight years old, after all. It would be strange if this was the first time. In fact, she had never been without a man in tow her whole adult life. As soon as one disappeared over the horizon another had always popped round the corner. But she had never felt like this. She had known James for almost exactly a year, she thought now. Nearly a year to the day since her dog Stanley had had to have corrective surgery on his leg and she had cried because she was so scared something might go wrong, and, next thing she knew, the kindly (not to mention handsome) vet had his arm round her shoulders and the rest was history, as they say.

They took it slowly at first. James was a divorcé and he had told her he wanted to give this new relationship the best possible chance, to do everything right, which included taking their time. They had to make sure they were doing what was best for both of them before they took any big steps. Katie had found this a little difficult, not to mention unnerving, at first but she knew it meant James was taking their affair seriously, that he was

considering her as someone he could spend his life with. So she accepted it when he had to leave to go down to London on Wednesday mornings and didn't return until Sunday nights. She had never questioned why he didn't invite her to go with him: she knew that while he was away he was having to lodge with friends until he found a permanent base, and that their small flat was barely big enough for the two of them, let alone James as well.

After a couple of months he had moved his toothbrush and a few other bits and pieces into her tiny girly bathroom. Gradually his clothes had begun to take up space in her wardrobe and his books and papers crept across the dining-table. She loved the feeling that his possessions were enveloping her, marking out his territory like he was a tom cat spraying the boundaries. She lived for the Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays when his belongings were joined by their owner. She understood why he couldn't be with her all the time – he had his practice in the city to think about – but he had recently begun to hint that one of these days he might give up his London work altogether and she thought there was a promise in there somewhere that the two of them might live out their happy-ever-after in the countryside together.

Katie had had a series of careers and had never found the one that totally suited her. Recently, following a couple of years of night classes, she had set herself up practising acupuncture and aromatherapy massage, seeing clients several times a week in her house. The fact that more often than not the appointments turned into *ad hoc* therapy sessions suited her. She loved to feel she was helping people. She knew she was a good listener and she

had a positive outlook on life that her clients found uplifting. It was taking a while to establish some regulars but she had known it would, alternative therapies not being something which the locals took to easily.

Ironically, if Katie had ever trained in the psychological therapy she now found herself having to practise on others, she would almost certainly have deduced that her behaviour, passively accepting that she was in a relationship with a commitment phobe who seemed happy to keep their liaison a part-time venture, stemmed from her rather low-self esteem. That this made it impossible for her to risk confronting James or even suggesting that she move all her clients to the beginning of the week so that she could spend the latter part in London with him. That, deep down, she knew that the fact that he was a lodger in a friend's flat was just an excuse. Rather, she had convinced herself she was the victim of an irresistible force, hopelessly ensnared by love. Like Juliet with her Romeo or Cathy and her Heathcliff, she was powerless to stop what was happening. She was happy to wait it out. James was a careful man. He needed to make sure that the time was right before he made any big gestures.