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THE MODEL WIFE

Julia
Lewellyn



LOVE NEST

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by
Julia Llewellyn

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Prelude

‘Ashes to ashes,’ intoned the vicar. ‘Dust to dust.’ It was a glacial February morning and in the south-west corner of the churchyard of St Michael’s of All Angels, Little Dittonsbury, Devon, the coffin of Nadia Porter-Healey was being lowered slowly into the frosty ground beside her long-dead husband’s.

Their orphaned daughter Grace stifled her sobs with a tissue. She leaned on the shoulder of her brother Sebastian, who was staring straight ahead with a neutral expression on his face, as if he’d broken wind in a crowded lift.

On his other side, Verity, Sebastian’s wife, sighed heavily, pulled her cashmere coat more tightly around her and glanced at her slim gold watch. Basil, who was three, clung to her leg shouting: ‘What’s going on, Mummy?’ Alfie, the five-year-old, stood rigid, like a soldier about to be despatched to the Western Front. The gravedigger stepped forward and began shovelling earth on to the coffin. Alfie stuck a finger up his nostril. Verity didn’t bother to stifle a yawn. Basil said: ‘Mummy, will there be cake soon? You said there’d be cake.’

Grace’s sobs grew louder. A dam of grief and exhaustion that had been building up for the past five years was suddenly blasted away. The tears poured out. Her mother was dead. Her beautiful mother whom she’d loved so much. Grace had done everything she could to save her,

but it had still been inadequate. As ever, she had failed.

‘There, there,’ mumbled Sebastian, giving her an ineffectual squeeze on the arm. Sympathetic heads were turning. Grace felt a warm arm around her shoulder.

‘Hey, love. Hey. It’s all right.’

It was Lou, cleaner, occasional cook and general handy-woman at Chadlicote Manor for the past sixteen years. Grace inhaled the familiar smells of bleach and baking – the result of being up since six preparing Chadlicote for the wake. Grace had devoured a whole tray of Lou’s sandwiches earlier that morning to fortify herself. She’d blamed their disappearance on Silvester, the spaniel. But she *was* in mourning.

‘It’s not all right, Lou. Mummy’s dead.’

‘I know. It’s very sad. But *you’ll* be all right.’

‘I couldn’t save her.’

‘No one could.’ Lou stroked her hair. ‘Life is just very cruel sometimes.’

Grace wiped the tears away from her cheeks, aware of her brother hovering awkwardly beside them.

‘Ahem, Grace. I think it’s time we got going. Showed people the way.’

‘Of course.’ Grace blew her nose, wrapped her scarf tighter around her neck, readjusted her hat slightly. ‘I’ll see you back at the house, then.’

‘Actually,’ Verity chirped up, ‘Sebby was wondering if he could drive back with you. As there’s so much to discuss.’

‘Oh!’ Grace was pleased. Since her beloved brother had met Verity ten years ago, she’d rarely had a moment alone with him. He’d been staying for the past couple of days, but he’d locked himself up in the study going over paperwork.

Over the suppers Grace had prepared for him he had been monosyllabic. 'I'm exhausted,' was the most she got from him, although after eating he didn't go to bed but returned to the study, while Grace polished off the leftovers.

As children they had been so close, growing up in the paradise that was Chadlicote, bicycling around the grounds, building bridges over the stream, swimming in the lake, camping overnight in the barn, pretending to be Daleks from their favourite television programme, *Doctor Who*. Her home had always been her favourite place on earth, like something from a fairytale, rambling, beautiful and full of history.

But after they'd been sent to boarding school they'd seen much less of each other. Sebby left school at seventeen, after a mysterious incident involving the groundsman's lawnmower, and went into 'business', although Grace never really knew exactly what that meant. She went to university. Every now and then he'd popped down for an evening, taken her out to dinner and made her feel glamorous and popular, things that – being three (all right, maybe four. Sometimes five) stone overweight – she felt very rarely.

Not knowing what to do with her first in classical studies, she'd stayed on to do a PhD. But after two years she threw in the towel. She enjoyed her research but she'd had enough of teaching bored students, just a few years younger than her but seemingly from a different planet. Students who wore crop tops and cut-offs, miniskirts and flimsy dresses, rather than the Evans smocks Grace had resigned herself to.

They seemed so busy surreptitiously checking their texts, and submitting essays that had been downloaded word for

word from the internet, and Twittering and Facebooking, that they didn't have headspace for doughnuts and jelly and Coronation chicken and all the things that haunted Grace's dreams. They looked at her round body with barely concealed pity.

She realized she was getting fatter because she was sad, missing the country she'd grown up in. It was time for a change of career, although Grace didn't know what. The summer holidays were coming and she decided to return to Chadlicote, to think things through. Two weeks before she was due to return, Daddy crashed his car coming home drunk from greyhound racing near Totnes. He died instantly.

Grace resigned from her job. Although Daddy had made a will, the rest of his affairs were in a mess. With Mum in shock, it was left entirely up to Grace to sort it out.

She hoped for some support from Sebastian, who, after all, was tied down to no particular job. By now he'd had various careers. A tapas bar that didn't attract enough trade – bad location, they realized with hindsight. He'd launched a couple of websites, produced one or two films that never got released. Mummy would have loved to have seen more of him; she'd never concealed that Sebby was her favourite – and rightly so, he was better-looking, cleverer and more entertaining than Grace. But around that time Sebby had met Verity and was too busy wooing her (as romantic Grace thought of it) to give Grace a hand.

So Grace single-handedly and not altogether successfully tried to sort out her father's numerous debts. She was too tired and busy and grief-struck even to think about a social life, and nearly a year passed before she

could turn her attentions to the neglected house and grounds. It wasn't as if Chadlicote had been in the family for generations – her grandfather had bought it cheaply as a crumbling ruin and set about restoring it. When Daddy had inherited it, the work was only part done and since he was far more interested in who was racing in the two-thirty at Doncaster than in replacing worm-gnawed floorboards, the place had remained ramshackle. To Grace that was part of its charm.

However, it couldn't stay like that. She began to list ways of reviving Chadlicote – converting the outhouses into holiday cottages, opening a restaurant, hiring it out for weddings. She was fired with excitement. Her mother, however, was more dubious. Nadia Briggs, as she was originally known, was the only child of a railway worker and a housewife. They had great ambitions for their beautiful daughter and sent her to finishing school. After that she did a bit of modelling, before marrying Blewitt Porter-Healey, who was seen as a catch because he was the heir to a big house.

Nearly thirty years of living in that same big house, which also turned out to be draughty and unmanageable and four miles from the nearest shop (and thirteen miles from anything even vaguely resembling a boutique or beauty parlour), had only slightly dimmed Nadia's stylishness. In her early fifties, she was still far more striking than her daughter.

Grace adored her mother. She was also a bit scared of her. The awareness that she had failed to fulfil any of her hopes was one of the main reasons she turned so often to the biscuit tin.

‘You’ve lost a few pounds,’ Nadia said with a frown as the two of them sat one evening about a year after Daddy’s death on the back terrace with its views out towards the lake. ‘Have you been doing Scarsdale like I told you?’

‘Sort of, Mummy. And just spending lots of time outdoors has helped, I think.’

‘Thank heavens.’ She slapped her daughter’s hand, as it reached for the bowl of rice crackers. ‘No! I said you’ve lost a few pounds. Not that you can go crazy.’

‘Sorry, Mummy.’

‘Keep up the good work. It might help you find a husband. Lord knows, you’re handicapped enough as it is. Young girls shouldn’t be living in the middle of nowhere with their parents. They should be sharing flats with other young girls in London. Going dancing and having fun. That’s what I did after I left school.’

‘But I don’t really like London. I prefer the country. And I’m really happy being here with you, Mummy.’

Nadia shrugged. ‘And I’m happy to have you here, my dear. After decades of being alone when Daddy was at the greyhounds, it’s nice to have some company. It’s you I’m worried about. These are your best years. You don’t want to spend them locked up with me in the middle of nowhere, your lovely looks lost in a casing of blubber.’

‘It won’t be like that,’ Grace said. And she didn’t think it would. She wasn’t a weirdo. She was twenty-five; she’d work out a plan to revive the house, she’d lose weight and somehow on the way she’d meet a man.

But her hopes were put on ice again. Because Nadia, who had always been so active, walking at least five miles

a day with the dogs, began complaining of joint pains and stiffness.

The symptoms got worse and eventually she went to see a specialist. He ordered some tests and then some more before eventually breaking the news that Nadia had motor neurone disease.

‘What, like Stephen Hawking?’

The consultant cleared his throat. ‘Well, that’s a very advanced form of the disease.’

‘So I’ll end up in a wheelchair. Talking. Like. A. Robot.’ Nadia said the last bit in a synthesized American voice.

‘And being a world-class physicist,’ Grace added. The consultant didn’t laugh.

‘There are many, many treatments available to maximize quality of life,’ he said.

These treatments began immediately. Nadia popped dozens of pills a day. Saw endless therapists. Grace’s days were crammed with ferrying her to various appointments – her mother’s hands had suddenly and dramatically got too shaky for her to drive. There was no time for anything else. What choice did she have? This was her adored mother. They couldn’t afford nursing care anyway, plus Nadia found that idea intolerable.

‘I don’t want some man who couldn’t get a job anywhere else giving me a bath and helping me into my underwear,’ she cried. ‘Not when my darling daughter can help.’

Sebastian and Verity had got engaged, so he was tied up with wedding plans. He did call twice a week, and Mummy was always thrilled to hear from him and would spend the rest of the day reporting to Grace: how Sebby was looking into starting a hedge fund, how Verity’s bonus from the

bank where she worked was going to be more than a million, how they were planning a bash at the Grosvenor House Hotel and a honeymoon in the Maldives. Grace was glad Nadia could live vicariously through them. For her own part, she was so busy just keeping Mummy well that she had no time to look after the house and grounds. Whole sections of the once glorious gardens disappeared under weeds. Wallpaper peeled. Algae stifled the lake.

And slowly Nadia's legs became weaker and weaker until she was confined to a wheelchair. Her arms and hands started to go too, so everyday tasks like turning taps, brushing hair, dressing, doing up buttons became more and more difficult. Her head began to loll as her neck muscles weakened.

Over the final couple of years she found it harder and harder to speak and then swallow as her throat muscles atrophied. In the final days Grace was spoon-feeding her, bathing her, even changing her nappies. Lou helped out as much as she could, and tried to persuade Grace to come out occasionally for the odd supper at her cottage in the village. But so often Mummy would call, frustrated because she couldn't get undressed, or frightened – as her mind began to slip as well – at being alone in the house. Even if she didn't, Grace felt so guilty leaving her that she couldn't really enjoy herself. It was easier to stay at home. And eat. Cakes that Lou baked. Biscuits. Family bars of chocolate wolfed down in a couple of mouthfuls. Jacket potatoes covered in comforting mountains of melted Cheddar. Whole tubs of ice cream, straight from the freezer, that burned her lips and gave her heartburn, but tasted so smooth on her tongue.

*

It was five years between the diagnosis and Nadia's death at the end of a long, cold winter when the house's various boilers kept breaking down and the roof started resembling a colander. Grace could do nothing about her beloved home. She was either helping Mummy, or she was too exhausted to do more than cook a whole packet of pasta, smother it in butter, devour it and collapse.

Now Nadia was gone. Grace was exhausted. She was thirty-four, but she looked far older. She felt some relief that Mummy was, at least, at peace, but all her anxieties were now channelled into the collapsing house that she now owned jointly with Sebastian – Sebastian who had also aged, thanks to the quick arrival of Alfie and Basil, not to mention the folding of more business ventures. Grace told herself something would work out. With Lou's support, she put in place a vague plan to have some kind of holiday – her first since all this had started. Then she would lose four stone and set to work to raise the funds to restore Chadlicote to its former glory.

'So . . .?' Sebastian said, climbing into the beaten-up old Land Rover which stank of Silvester, the spaniel, and Shackleton, the pug.

'Are you sure you won't change your minds? Stay the night?' Grace turned on the ignition and backed out of the car park. Verity and the boys had arrived late last night and made a lot of fuss about how cold the house was and how frightened Basil was by creaking pipes in the night. She wasn't surprised when Sebastian now shook his head.

'We've got to get back. Alfie's got a birthday party tomorrow.' He cleared his throat as the car bumped along a winding country lane. 'Now, listen, there's something we

need to talk about,' he said hastily. 'What are we going to do with Chadlicote?'

Grace glanced at him as she negotiated the tight bend next to the entrance to Cudd's Farm. 'I know it needs a lot of work. But we'll get there. I can devote myself to it now.'

'Er . . . I'm sorry but I don't think that's an option.'

'What do you mean?' Grace glanced at him sharply as she revved into fourth gear.

It came out in a rush. 'I've been looking at the accounts, as you know. And we have no choice but to sell.'

'Sell Chadlicote?' Grace couldn't take her eyes off the road but her jaw dropped like a cartoon character's.

'I've looked at the figures. It's unsustainable. We have a huge amount of inheritance tax to pay, and even without that we simply can't afford the work needed. And besides . . . even if we did it what would be the point? I mean, what would become of Chadlicote in the long run?'

'Well . . . I don't know. I would live there, I thought. And then maybe . . . well, it would be up to our children to decide.'

'*Our* children?' Her brother looked puzzled. 'Oh, you mean if *you* have any?' His tone made it clear that was highly unlikely. 'Well, yes, I suppose so. But what would they do? They couldn't all live in it together, in some kind of commune. And besides . . . Vee and I need the money. We're feeling the pinch like everyone else. Business hasn't been good for me recently and she's not going to get anything like her usual bonus. Everything has got so much more expensive, and Alfie's really not thriving at the local school, so we've got to start thinking about going private.'

He sighed. 'I'm really sorry, Grace, but it's going to have to go.'

'And where will I live?' she asked, as the car turned the last curving bend and entered the tall metal gates, flanked by the derelict lodge, that marked the drive.

'Vee and I discussed that. Of course you can't be left homeless. I mean, you would be left with a decent sum of money from the sale of the house, plenty to allow you to buy a decent place of your own. But you did nurse Mummy for a long time *and* you're not married *and* you don't have anything even vaguely resembling a career. So we've agreed it would be only fair to let you have the village cottage when the tenant moves out.'

'Oh!' Grace's head was swimming. They were pulling up in front of Chadlicote now: Chadlicote with its beautiful, red-brick Elizabethan façade choked with ivy. Mullioned windows glinting in the sun. Wide stone steps. Perfect proportions. All right, the stonework was crumbling, there were boards over a couple of the windows, but still . . . it was her home. Half hers, anyway. But Sebastian had a splendid home of his own in Wimbledon, near the Common.

It had never occurred to her he wouldn't let her stay.

But there was no time for further discussion. The drive was full of cars, and people in black were standing around the dried-up fountain, wanting to let her know how sorry they were. Grace couldn't face them. She needed time alone. She was still taking in this news, that her brother and sister-in-law were sending her to live in a run-down workman's cottage on the edge of the village, which – as far as she recalled – had a patch of scrubby garden and no central heating.

‘Look, do we really have to . . . ?’ she began, but Mrs Legan, the village’s chief nosy parker, was peering at her through the window. Reluctantly, Grace wound it down.

‘Grace. I’m so sorry I didn’t get the chance to say it before. But I am truly sorry for your loss.’

‘Thank you,’ said Grace. She glanced urgently at her brother.

‘Do we really have to?’ she said softly, winding up the window again.

‘I’m sorry. I should have told you earlier. I called the estate agents last night. They’re coming tomorrow for a valuation. They think we should have no problem with a quick sale.’

‘I . . .’ But guests were approaching. Grace gave up and got out of the car. She’d fight this battle later, she told herself, although if Sebby said they had no choice . . .

Grace needed a sausage roll. That would help her think straight.

I

It was the final viewing of the day and the client was late. As usual. Lucinda stood outside the heavy front door of the converted bottle factory, tapping her heel on the concrete and looking at photos on her mobile. How did people pass the time before they had phones? She smiled at the picture of herself last summer by the pool of the villa in Tobago, wearing a very flattering orange bikini. Mummy and Daddy at the lunch table, sheltered by an umbrella from the Caribbean sun. Ginevra and Wolfie, arms wrapped round each other. Benjie about to do a silly backwards dive into the pool.

Happy memories. Looking up, Lucinda caught sight of herself grinning in the plate-glass doors leading into the lobby. It was the kind of thing you could never admit to anyone, but she knew she was looking beautiful that day. Her auburn hair shone, her green eyes sparkled, her skin glowed. Just lucky, she reminded herself, knowing she was in danger of tipping over from self-confident into smug. She came from a good gene pool. She was young. And going places. She couldn't help it; she smiled again at her huge fortune in being her.

'Lucinda?'

At the sound of her name, she jumped. She swung round. A man – presumably the client – was grinning at her unnervingly, as if he'd read her thoughts. He was about

her age. Lanky. Blond, slightly spiky hair. Very blue eyes. Skinny jeans, a Sex Pistols T-shirt and a slightly tattered navy blazer. Very different from the City boys she normally took on viewings. Intrigued, she held out her hand.

‘Mr Crex? I’m Lucinda Gresham. How do you do?’

‘Lucinda.’ He had a northern accent. Rather cute. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

She didn’t show it, but inwardly she winced. She couldn’t help it. Her upbringing might have been too sheltered but she had been taught manners. Mummy had trained her that the right response to ‘How do you do?’ was ‘How do you do?’ Ridiculous, but when anyone replied in any other way it made her think less of them and it was all she could do not to correct them. Not that she would have implied that Nick Crex was in the wrong, even if he’d pulled down his skinny jeans and mooned at her. One of the first rules of estate agency was that the customers were always right – at least when you were with them. Back at the office you could bitch about them to your heart’s content.

But for now Lucinda would nod and smile if Nick Crex told her Princess Diana had been murdered by aliens. She had to prove Niall wrong. Though he’d never said it in as many words, he’d been understandably wary about taking her on at the Clerkenwell branch of Dunraven Mackie, not least at a time when so many agents were being made redundant.

And quite right, Lucinda acknowledged – even though his behaviour pissed her off – because she had zero experience and owed her job to blatant nepotism. But Lucinda was determined to show her worth, and six months down

the line Niall was having to admit that she was pretty good at this selling houses lark, even with the market in its direst straits in years.

‘Shall we take a look?’ she asked.

‘I’m all yours.’

She punched in the code that opened the front door. They crossed the lobby and called the lift. Ping. Up to the first floor. Down a long red-linoed corridor. Lucinda knocked on the green front door of Flat 15. Gemma Meehan had told her she’d be out, but you never knew. She’d had a hideous, though hilarious, experience last weekend when she’d ushered an uptight American couple into 12 Dorchester Place, a cute little Georgian house in a quiet terrace near the Barbican.

Knowing that the owners, the Kitsons, were on holiday in Mallorca, Lucinda had opened the door and marched straight through the hallway to the living room to find Carlotta Kitson wearing nothing but a fuchsia G-string, while a man who was most definitely not Linus Kitson was thwacking her on the bottom with a tennis racquet.

‘Oh, whoopsie,’ Lucinda cried merrily. ‘So sorry!’ And she virtually dragged the Americans out of the front door and down the stairs flanked by fake bay trees in a pot. She thought it highly unlikely she’d come across Gemma Meehan in the same situation – she was far too prim. But they did always say the quiet ones were the worst.

No one replied to the knock, so Lucinda unlocked the door and they stepped inside.

‘Wow,’ he said, before he could stop himself.

‘It’s a fantastic space, isn’t it?’ Mimicking his body language, Lucinda looked around the large room. To the

left, a kitchen with Italian marble surfaces and a state-of-the-art range. In front of them the dining area. A sitting area furnished with vast zebra-striped sofas occupied the rest of the space. Huge floor-to-ceiling windows on two sides, with views over the slanty roofs of Clerkenwell. It was glorious. Clients always got a great first impression. It reminded Lucinda of Fabio, her sister Ginevra's ex: great on the surface, but a quick viewing immediately highlighted flaws. Still, Ginevra hadn't minded – for a while at least – and maybe Nick Crex was the man who for whatever reason might be blind to the obvious problems of Flat 15 and instead focus on its plus points.

So far, so good. He was turning round slowly. Taking it all in. Lucinda inhaled the scent of freshly baked bread. *Everyone* had latched on to that trick. Fresh flowers on the table. Yawn. Those property programmes had so much to answer for.

'A fencer,' he said, nodding at the left-hand wall where the exposed brick had been decorated with a collection of long, slim blades.

'I guess so,' Lucinda said, surprised. Again, she wasn't being snobbish exactly, but fencing was a posh sort of sport and Nick Crex was certainly not posh.

'I used to fence at school,' he said. 'A "Help Deprived Youth" programme.' His tone was mocking, acknowledging that he'd sussed her and her prejudices. Lucinda blushed.

'Oh, right. What fun.' She twisted the Cartier pearl and diamond bracelet Daddy had given her for her eighteenth birthday round her wrist. She always fiddled with it when she was a bit nervous.

‘It was.’ Nick Crex turned to a table covered in silver-framed photos. ‘And she’s a dancer,’ he said, picking up a photo of Gemma Meehan in a tutu.

‘She used to be. She had to give up. Some injury.’ Gemma was attractive in a skinny, dark kind of way. Driving everyone at the agency crazy with all her nagging about why the place hadn’t sold, but fortunately the pictures didn’t reveal that.

‘They’ve travelled a lot,’ he said, picking up a photo of the Meehans grinning on what looked like a Thai beach.

‘It’s a real party flat,’ Lucinda said, eager to steer him back on track.

‘Yeah. Especially with that balcony thing.’ He nodded upwards.

‘The mezzanine,’ Lucinda corrected, unable to stop herself. ‘It’s great, isn’t it? Shall we go up?’

He followed her up the spiral staircase, to the upper level. A TV area with a giant HDTV screen and squashy beanbags. A study area with a desk built into the wall, lit by a genuine Bestlite. Two bathrooms leading off it – this was the point when most people started realizing that there was a catch and asking questions like isn’t that a bit of an odd layout and wouldn’t it be better if the bathrooms were en suite? Lucinda was all ready with the spiel, that this was a converted warehouse, that the floorplan reflected the layout of the original, historic building, blah blah.

But Nick Crex said nothing. Good man.

While he was looking round, Lucinda stood back. For something to do, she scanned the wedding photos on the wall. Alex in black tie, skinnier than he was now. She didn’t like Gemma’s dress, far too meringuey. But the look of love in her eyes was very sweet, even someone like Lucinda

who categorically did not get the whole bride thing had to admit it.

‘So is this a bedroom?’ Nick asked, nodding towards the three steps that led down to the master one.

‘Yes. It’s very . . . original!’ Code for blinking ridiculous. She followed him into the room. An empty space. To the right, a ladder leading to a bed perched on top of the – slightly ambitiously named – walk-in wardrobe. A clichéd scent of vanilla candles in the air. Poor Gemma, she wanted this sale so much there was nothing she wasn’t prepared to do.

‘Isn’t it great?’ Lucinda enthused. She couldn’t think of anything worse than sleeping on a sort of perch, she’d be up and down it all night, wanting to pee, and would inevitably fall off. But maybe Nick Crex had a stronger bladder than her. Or a catheter and bag. ‘Look, and here below it you’ve got your very own walk-in wardrobe. Isn’t it fabulous?’

‘Mmm.’ He definitely liked it. She could tell from the body language. What did he do that he could be in with even the vaguest chance of affording such a place? Even though prices had crashed, it should still have been beyond his league. All she knew about him was from the brief phone call they’d had that morning when she had randomly picked up the phone. He’d said he’d seen the flat on the internet and given a Belsize Park address. Which was smart enough to mark him out as a serious client, rather than a time-waster.

‘Would you like to see the other bedroom?’

‘Rock ’n’ roll swin-dle, rock ’n’ roll *swin* . . .’

The sudden noise made Lucinda shriek. Then she realized that it was his ring tone. Impatiently, he pulled his phone from his jeans pocket.

‘Hello? Yeah. Hiya.’ He looked annoyed. She could just hear a woman’s voice.

‘Yeah. I’m a bit busy right now . . . Can I call you back? . . . Yeah, I won’t be that long . . . I’ll call you back . . . I’ll call you back, all right? . . . I love you too,’ he mumbled like a teenager asked to kiss his mum in front of the school football team. ‘Yeah. See ya.’ Hanging up, he shoved the phone back in his pocket.

‘So, the other bedroom?’ Lucinda smiled. It was up a small flight of stairs. Again, a funny shape with another raised bed stuck on a shelf in the corner. But different. Definitely different.

‘It’s such a great location,’ Lucinda said. ‘The area just gets cooler by the day. So many bars and restaurants and shops and great for transport links. St Pancras just up the road for the Eurostar . . .’

‘Why do they want to sell?’

‘They’re a couple. I think they want a baby. And . . .’ Lucinda gestured towards the mezzanine with its wide-spaced railings and the fifteen-foot drop on to the stone tiles below. No point lying. Anyway, she was pretty sure Nick Crex wasn’t into the whole baby thing yet. ‘Well, it’s no place for a baby, is it?’

‘Guess not.’ A smile broke over his face, but then suddenly he seemed awkward. ‘Well, thanks for that. I’ll be in touch.’

‘You’ve got the details, haven’t you? No? I’ll give them to you.’ She rummaged in the lime green Smythson’s briefcase which her mother had bought her to congratulate her on her first job. ‘Here you are.’

‘Thanks,’ he said, not glancing at the laminated A4.

‘Thanks so much,’ she said when they were back out on the pavement. Held out her hand again. He shook it limply. Such gestures obviously weren’t the done thing where he came from, Lucinda thought. Snobbish. But true.

‘I’ll be in touch,’ he said, and turned abruptly up the narrow cobbled street. Lucinda watched him for a second and then turned in the opposite direction. It was late enough for her to call the office and say she was clocking off, but she decided to go back and put in at least another hour’s work. No one was going to call Lucinda Gresham a slacker.

Even though her reflexology appointment had run over, making her slightly late, Gemma Meehan was first to arrive at the café where she was meeting her younger sister Bridget. No surprise there, Gemma thought as she took a corner seat and ordered a cup of peppermint tea.

She'd have loved a cappuccino, but caffeine was banned until her future baby, Chudney, as Alex, her husband, insisted on calling it (he'd laughed for about an hour when he'd heard that Diana Ross had cruelly named her daughter that), was safely in her arms. Although then Gemma would be breastfeeding, so caffeine would be off limits too. And then – who knew – but with luck there'd be another Chudney. In other words, no coffee for another – what? – three, four years? Never mind. For her unborn children she would do anything.

'Stop it,' Gemma said, almost out loud. She was getting ahead of herself again. There were no children. And whether there ever would be or not was all down to what happened in the next hour or so. At the thought of the conversation she was about to have, her heart began to pitter like rain on a tin roof. Calm down, she told herself. And by the same token, no negative vibes at Bridget's lateness. Though she could have texted to let her know.

Gemma sighed. She'd spent twenty-one long years making allowances for Bridget. From the moment their

mother had returned from the hospital jiggling a screaming bundle, all Gemma could remember was Bridget being a nuisance, albeit a cute one. As soon as she could crawl she snatched Gemma's toys away. Ripped up her drawings. She blew out the candles on Gemma's eighth birthday cake. Every time Gemma cried or complained, her parents told her not to be so silly, that she had to make allowances. That babies couldn't be expected to understand the rules.

But the day never came when Bridget did start understanding the rules. Gemma loved Bridget – the maternal feelings that had always been at her core ensured that – but she couldn't help feeling frustrated at times. While Gemma worked hard at school and even harder at her ballet, Bridget was always bottom of the class. What was worse was she never seemed to care. Gemma was mortified if she came home with an even vaguely bad report for anything, but Bridget didn't give a damn. Mum and Dad would shake their heads and sigh and say, 'Darling, you really must try harder,' but she'd just giggle and the subject would get dropped.

Gemma had gone to ballet school, where she had literally worked her arse off – living for a while on two apples and a glass of milk a day in order to get herself down to the seven stone achieved by the top pupils. Bridget meanwhile had dropped out of school after her GCSEs (two Ds and an E) and gone off to Spain, where she'd worked in a bar for a couple of years.

By the time Bridget had returned with a fiancé, Pablo, Gemma had a job in the corps de ballet of a small company based in Manchester. It wasn't the fairytale life she'd envisaged – the work was physically gruelling, the money was

rubbish, and with every day that passed her dream of making prima ballerina became less likely.

But she'd never know if that dream might have come true, because shortly after she'd met Alex, who was up in Manchester working on a case, she'd badly sprained her foot, and that was the end of Gemma's professional career. But it didn't really matter because she was so deeply in love. Five months after they met Alex had proposed to her with a vast diamond and sapphire ring, which his grandmother had been given by her Rajah boss while working as a governess in India just before the war.

Gemma resigned from the ballet company, moved to London to be with Alex and found part-time work teaching dance to toddlers, which left her plenty of time and energy to plan their wedding.

Meanwhile, Bridget had discovered that Pablo had another fiancée back in Malaga, and was working in a shoe shop, although she got fired after a few months for unpunctuality. She went off to India for a while and came back with a gastric disorder that made her farts smell of rotten eggs and a dolphin tattoo on her left shoulderblade. She quickly found a job as dogsbody at a small business selling bras online, which Gemma thought sounded fascinating, but again she was sacked after a few months for spending too much time in chatrooms. Mum and Dad were very sympathetic and let her move into their house in Norwood until she sorted herself out.

It didn't bother Gemma. She was used to it. But it infuriated Alex.

'Here we are declining all offers of financial help for the wedding and there's your sister still getting your poor mum

to do all her washing and make her vegan meals,' he fulminated.

'But I don't want Mum to do my washing,' Gemma pointed out. Mum was a terrible cook, after all, and never properly sorted the lights and darks. Anyway, she was blissfully happy with Alex. They could look after themselves, why begrudge her sister?

She and Alex had got married in a beautiful ceremony at the Orangery in Holland Park. Alex and Bridget had a bit of a spat on the day because Bridget insisted on wearing black. Gemma let it ride. She was too busy having the happiest day of her life; or the happiest day until Chudney was born.

On honeymoon in South Africa, Gemma threw her pills away. Six months passed. Then another six. Gemma was only twenty-seven, so she was sure there was nothing to worry about. Nonetheless, she decided after another six months that they'd see a doctor. In the meantime, they put the flat on the market. Around that time she lost her job, when the ballet school she worked for went under. Although she was upset, she decided not to look for another one. She hoped not working would minimize stress levels and boost her chances of conception. It also gave her plenty of time to find the perfect family house.

'Don't you think you might be jumping the gun?' asked her friend Lila, having sat through another lengthy summary of the properties on the short list.

'Absolutely not. John and Alison only started looking for a new place when she was six months pregnant and they had a nightmare. Builders in with the baby, all that drilling and dust. I'd hate that.'

In the end it took five months of surfing the net, tramping round estate agents introducing herself, poring late into the night over school league tables. But then just three weeks ago – the day before their first appointment with fertility doctor to the stars Dr Malpadhi – she found 16 Coverley Drive.

Gemma couldn't resist. She reached into her bag and pulled out the glossy details that by now were etched on her heart. The four bedrooms so beautifully decorated, one for her and Alex, one for each baby and one for guests – even Bridget, if she cooperated today. The lovely light kitchen/diner with its granite work surfaces and Mexican tiles and flagstone floor backing on to the seventy-foot mature, west-facing garden. Gemma wasn't quite sure why west-facing was so good, but everyone's voices dropped in a hushed kind of way at the mention of it and, as for mature, well, that had to be better than immature, which made her think of a garden making fart jokes and crying when it didn't get its own way.

Then there were the things you didn't see, though they were reflected in the price – the Ofsted-rated outstanding primary school just down the road. The town with its cutesy shops, where people still greeted each other in the street. The station, ten minutes' walk away, with its commuter trains for Alex.

OK, the decor was too flamboyant for her – all primary colours, dhurrie rugs and strange metal figurines. Gemma was a more restful, neutrals kind of girl. But such details were cosmetic. She wanted this house so much. And amazingly, picky Alex wanted it too. Terrified that the market was bottoming out and soon prices would start to soar

again, they put in an offer for a hundred grand less than the asking price and, after a week of haggling, managed to settle on a discount of fifty grand.

It was theirs. Except it wasn't. Because they still had to sell Flat 15. Flat 15, Alex's bachelor pad, which had seemed so quirky and cool when she'd moved in, but which was now a millstone that no one wanted to buy, that was holding them back. Flat 15, which was all wrong for a family – because families didn't live in city centres and open-plan lateral spaces, they lived in two-storey houses in the suburbs where there was fresh air and good schools and no tramps slumped asleep in doorways. That was how Gemma had grown up and it was what she was determined to provide for her own babies.

But luckily the Drakes of Coverley Drive were still looking for a property of their own, so for now they were happy to wait. And Flat 15 had to sell eventually. In fact, a viewing was taking place right now. Gemma shut her eyes, focusing all her energies into making this one a success. She'd done everything the programmes advised, made fresh coffee that morning, left vases of flowers everywhere, put out photos of her and Alex looking fun-loving and carefree. She'd even lit some sodding vanilla candles that made her sinuses ache but that were allegedly irresistible to home buyers. This time it had to work.

Gemma regrouped. Selling the flat was not her only concern. She had work to do with Bridget too. Time to focus on that.

The door opened, letting in a blast of freezing air.
'Hiiii!' called Bridget from the threshold.

She was wearing a rainbow-striped jumper, a blue beret

with sequins on it and no make up. She had two pigtailed tied with rubber bands and she had put on a bit of weight since the last time Gemma had seen her at Christmas, before another long trip to India. Weren't you meant to *lose* weight there with all the curries and dysentery and stuff? 'Stop it,' Gemma told herself. Bridget wasn't a dancer, she could be any weight she wanted.

Most of the time Gemma felt a bit sorry for Bridget, but every now and then she couldn't help being just the tiniest bit admiring of the casual way she flouted the norms. Sometimes she suspected her sister was a much braver creature than her. Alex, of course, disagreed.

'She's not brave. She's lazy, rude and disrespectful.'

'That's harsh.'

'Well, look at her, gadding off to Goa for six months whenever she fancies it, to discover herself. She treats life like a holiday.'

'Why shouldn't she?'

'Because holidays have no meaning unless they're a break from reality.' Sometimes Gemma wondered if her husband was jealous of Bridget's falafel-munching, festival-attending, anti-globalization-marching existence. After all, it couldn't be more different from his own, which was like a hurdle race. Swotting to win a scholarship to Belfast's top private school and then to get into Oxford. To qualify as a barrister, to fight to get a pupillage and then win tenancy of his chambers and now his sixty- to seventy-hour weeks working late almost every night and at weekends, to be on top of his briefs, rarely taking a holiday in case a big case came up.

But if Bridget agreed to Gemma's request, he'd have to

change his tune. She hadn't told him they were meeting. The plan was to surprise him with the most incredible news.

'Oh, sorry!' Bridget cried, as she trod on the foot of an elderly lady, who tutted in annoyance. Bridget steamed on, having not even noticed.

'Hey!' She pulled her sister to her bosom in a clumsy, patchouli-scented hug.

'Great to see you. You look *fantastic*. How are you?' Gemma suspected she was going overboard on the gushiness but she was nervous. Everything hinged on the next twenty minutes or so.

'*Really* good!' Bridget cried, sitting down. 'I'm thinking about doing a degree. I've been looking at all the different courses.'

'Oh, wow!' Gemma said, though more from duty than real enthusiasm. For years announcements like that had fired her up. She'd get all excited on Bridget's behalf, helping her pursue whatever her latest dream was by investigating it on the internet, sending off for brochures, making calls on her behalf. But by the time all the information was placed in front of her Bridget had long moved on to the next fad, so Gemma had stopped bothering.

'I'm thinking of doing a course in popular and world music. There's one at Leeds. Or maybe film and television. Or women's studies. Hi.' Big smile to the waitress. 'A cappuccino, please. Ooh and maybe a slab of that yummy-looking chocolate cake. Anything for you?'

'I'm fine.' Gemma waved the waitress away with a polite smile. To stave off the nagging of '*Why* not? Are you eating enough?' that inevitably accompanied such

exchanges, she quickly added, ‘So no more travelling for now?’

‘Oh no, definitely some more travelling. The plan’s to earn some money – there’s a job in a sandwich shop going. Once I’ve earned enough I thought I’d go to Indonesia for some meditation. But not for a while. Say September, when the weather cools down a bit. So you’re stuck with me for the next few months.’

‘But what about the university course? Doesn’t term start in October?’

Bridget waved airily. ‘I wasn’t planning on starting this year. Maybe next year. There are more important things than courses and qualifications, you know.’

‘Mmm,’ Gemma said, congratulating herself on not inviting Alex to this meeting. Those kinds of comments irritated him like a case of prickly heat. ‘So . . . any news from Mum and Dad?’

‘Only the email they sent both of us.’ Their parents had moved to Spain three months ago. ‘Sounds like the neighbours are being a bit arsey about the extension.’

‘They’ll win them round, I’m sure.’

‘I hope so, because once it’s built, I’ll be out there like a shot. They won’t be able to get rid of me. Dad said he’d send me a ticket.’

Typical. Gemma smiled serenely. ‘And where are you living now?’

‘At my friend Estelle’s in Acton. Remember Estelle? Amazing woman. You should ask her to do your Tarot some time. I’m sleeping on her sofa. Not the comfiest but it’s really near this community centre which does subsidized yoga for jobseekers, so I’ve been going there every morning.’

Gemma took a deep breath. She'd ask her now. But she was thrown off beam by her phone ringing. She looked at the caller ID, planning to ignore it, but it was Dunraven Mackie. 'Excuse me,' she said, grabbing it. 'Hello?'

'Hi, Gemma,' said Lucinda, in her upper-crust tones. 'Lucinda Gresham here. Returning your call.'

'How did it go?'

'Really well! He's definitely interested . . .'

'But he didn't make an offer?'

'Well, no. Not yet. But it's very unusual to put in an offer on the spot. I'd say he'll almost definitely be coming back for a second viewing.'

'Right.'

'So I'll keep you posted. Fingers crossed. Goodbye. Have a lovely day.'

'Bye.' Gemma hung up, bitterly disappointed.

'Offer on the flat?' Bridget asked.

'Not yet.' She pulled herself together. 'But looking good, apparently.'

'You're not *still* obsessed with getting that family house?' Bridget sounded amiable enough but she had that look in her eyes that drove Alex mad, a look that said, 'Christ, how bourgeois.' As if there was somehow something wrong with wanting to live in a nice house in a nice street. As opposed to a friend's futon in an area where it was easier to buy class A drugs than fresh fruit or vegetables.

'It'll be perfect for children,' Gemma retorted.

'I guess.' There was the tiniest pause and then Bridget asked gently, 'And how's all that going?'

The moment had come. Gemma could hardly speak; she felt as if she'd been punched in the mouth. She sipped

some tea, then, looking her sister in the eye, said: ‘Well . . . we sort of know what we’re up against now.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The specialist . . .’ She couldn’t help it, a big tear plopped down her face and into her tea. ‘The specialist says I’ve got the eggs of a nine-year-old.’

‘Meaning?’ Bridget looked shocked.

‘Meaning they’re never going to mature.’ *It’s so unfair*, her inner voice screamed, as it did all day every day. But she didn’t say it.

‘You’ve never really had periods, have you?’ Bridget said, as if she were an esteemed gynaecologist. ‘I always thought that was the dancing, though.’

‘Well, it wasn’t. It’s just the way I was born.’

‘You never ate much though, did you? And that can have an effect on your menstrual . . .’

‘I always ate plenty!’ Gemma snapped, then immediately regretted it. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound so cross. I’m just allergic to so many things.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like butter.’

‘You’re not allergic to butter. Does it bring you out in a rash? Does it make you vomit? You just don’t like eating it because it’s full of calories.’ Right on cue, the chocolate cake appeared. ‘Oh thank you! Yum. Are you sure you don’t want some?’

‘No thanks. I had a late lunch.’ Gemma wasn’t going to have an argument about her allergies. They needed to get this conversation back on track. ‘So the doctor said the only way forward is egg donation.’

‘Using another woman’s eggs?’

‘Uh huh. Mixing them with Alex’s sperm and planting them in my womb.’

‘So it wouldn’t be your baby?’

‘Not biologically mine. But it would be Alex’s. And I’d carry it, I’d give birth to it. But it’s not so easy. There aren’t any eggs in this country. The government changed the law so donors lost their anonymity. Which means hardly anyone is prepared to donate any more in case a child turns up on their doorstep eighteen years later. And the waiting lists are horrific. So now if you want an egg you basically have to go abroad. But of course you have no idea whose eggs you’re getting. I mean they *say* you do but you can’t be sure and there are these rumours about girls from eastern Europe being forced into it and . . .’

‘Right.’ Bridget reached out and squeezed Gemma’s hand. She’d had a new tattoo done on her knuckles, Gemma noticed as she squeezed back, took a deep breath and blurted it out.

‘So I was wondering if we could use one of your eggs.’

‘Sorry?’

‘One of your eggs.’ She shrugged. ‘If you’d be OK with that.’ She made it sound as if she was asking to borrow a jumper. Not that she’d be seen dead in one of Bridget’s moth-eaten numbers knitted from sustainable llama’s fur, but anyway . . . ‘I mean, I know we could adopt but we want a *baby* and it’s practically impossible to find a newborn and I’d like to have *some* blood tie and if it’s your egg . . .’

She looked expectantly at her sister’s face. She’d anticipated delight, disgust, dubiousness, but Bridget seemed merely amused.

‘I don’t see why not. I don’t want kids. Not yet anyway. So why shouldn’t you have them?’

Hot, salty tears flowed down Gemma’s cheeks. ‘That’s so kind of you. I can’t believe it. I don’t believe it. I . . .’

‘s OK,’ Bridget grinned, pink in the face and obviously chuffed with herself.

‘It’s wonderful!’ Gemma checked herself. ‘Before you definitely commit you need to know exactly what will be involved. It’s quite an ordeal. You’ll have to take all sorts of drugs and . . .’

‘Well, it won’t exactly be the first time,’ Bridget chortled.

That laugh brought Gemma right back to earth.

‘Bridget, you can’t take drugs if you’re going to be an egg donor. It would be *incredibly* irresponsible.’

Bridget laughed again and waved a dismissive hand. ‘Chill, Gems. I was only joking. I mean, you can’t discount what I’ve done in the past but I’m clean now. Well, pretty clean . . . I mean, I do the odd spliff and things but . . .’

‘You couldn’t do that if you were giving me an egg.’

There was a moment’s silence, then Bridget said, ‘Um. Sorry. I thought I was helping you out. But obviously not.’ She stood up, wrapping her scarf around her neck.

‘No, sorry, sorry! I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry, it’s just this means so much to me and I can’t . . . I’ve lost my sense of humour.’

‘You mean you once possessed one?’ Bridget teased, sitting down again.

Gemma tried to get a grip. ‘Listen, you don’t need to make your mind up straight away. Have a think about it. Read up on it. I can send you some links.’

‘Sure,’ Bridget shrugged, good-naturedly. ‘But I’ll do it. Why ever wouldn’t I?’

Gemma’s phone rang again.

‘Oh sorry, I’d better take this, it’s Alex. Hi, darling! Yes, Lucinda says he’s definitely interested . . . No, I won’t get my hopes up but it’s looking good . . . I know, we’ll see, but I might as well be optimistic, for once. And . . . ?’ She looked at Bridget, who gave her a perky thumbs up. Gemma was infused with love for her sister and the world in general. ‘I’ve got some other news . . . I’ll tell you later. Do you think you can get home early tonight?’