

The Way We Were

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To all aspiring writers. Believe in yourself.

Sometimes even to live is an act of courage.

Seneca

London, Holland Park, November 2014

Dan reached over and took two glasses of champagne from the waiter. Handing one to Alice, he smiled reassuringly at her, then tapped his to get everyone's attention. He cleared his throat and made a toast: 'I'm so happy that you, my closest friends, could be here tonight to meet Alice properly. You all know my story, and you also know from me that Alice has had a very difficult time. I feel very lucky to have met her. Second chances are hard to come by in life, and I'm grabbing this one with both hands. Here's to new beginnings with the most wonderful woman in the world.'

He pulled her close and kissed her as his friends clapped and cheered.

Alice glanced over at Jools and Holly, who were standing in the corner with Dan's daughter, Stella. Jools smiled crookedly at her mother, while Holly gave her a double thumbs-up. Alice smiled back and allowed herself to breathe. Everything was going to be fine. She had made the right decision.

Alice leaned into Dan and said, 'Thank you for . . . well, for everything. For saving me and for making me see that I could be happy again . . .' She stopped as her voice quivered.

Dan kissed her hand. 'You're the one who's made *me* happy. I want to tell them about the engagement.' Alice tried to protest but before she could stop him, he bellowed, 'One final thing. I've asked Alice to marry me.'

The room went silent. Clearly Dan's friends had not been expecting this. But then someone began to clap and everyone joined in.

Alice frowned. 'Dan, I told you I needed time for me and the girls to get used to the idea before announcing it.'

'Relax, darling, I told the girls when they arrived that I was going to announce it tonight. They told me to go ahead.' Dan beamed.

Before Alice could say anything else, there was a quiet cough at Dan's elbow and the event organizer shot him an apologetic smile. 'Excuse me, so sorry to interrupt, but I'd just like to check when you wish the food to be served, Mr Penfold.'

Dan kissed Alice once more, then headed towards the kitchen. Alice's brother, Kevin, came over to her. Squeezing her hand, he said, 'Calm down, it was going to come out soon anyway.'

'I know, but I don't like surprises. I'm worried about the girls.'

'They're fine. They really like Dan. Alice, smile, you're going to scare the guests.'

Alice laughed, letting go of the tension in her stomach. 'You're right. I guess I'm still getting used to the idea of marrying someone else.'

'You deserve to be happy. He's a good man. You have to look forward now.'

Alice's eyes filled with tears. 'Thanks, Kevin, you've been brilliant. I really do love Dan and, like he said, I'm going to take this second chance and embrace it.'

'Good for you,' he said. 'If only his brother was gay – I could get seriously used to this.' He waved his hand around at the plush furnishings and enormous chandeliers.

'Your prince will come,' Alice teased him.

‘When? I’m not getting any younger. Older gay men are not in demand, especially the ones with no money!’

‘If it can happen to me, it can happen to you.’ Alice kissed her brother’s cheek.

‘By the way, you should probably say something, Alice. I overheard one of Dan’s friends mutter that he hoped Dan was doing the right thing. They all seem nice enough, but I’d say the idea of him taking on a widow and two kids has raised a few eyebrows.’

Alice sighed. She and Dan had kept to themselves during their whirlwind romance so she didn’t know his friends, but she did want them to like her. There were about twenty people gathered in the room, and she was doing her best to talk to each one. They seemed very nice, but it was all a bit intimidating. She decided her brother was right, that she needed to take the bull by the horns and say a few words.

Dan was walking towards her. As he came close she caught his hand and whispered, ‘I’d like to say something too, if that’s all right.’

He looked pleased. ‘Of course, darling.’

Alice tapped the side of her glass for silence. The chatter died down. ‘I’m sorry to string out the speeches, but I’d like to add something quickly. I never expected to be lucky enough to meet someone again, but then Dan came into my life and he’s made me see that there is such a thing as a second chance. I –’

Alice was interrupted by Mrs Jenkins, Dan’s housekeeper, who pressed her arm gently. She was holding a phone. ‘I’m sorry, Alice,’ she whispered, ‘but there’s a man on the phone who says he must talk to you urgently. An emergency. A Mr Jonathan Londis from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.’

Alice excused herself, took the phone and walked out into the vast reception area.

‘Hello?’ Alice said, her voice sounding odd in the emptiness of the large hallway.

‘Hello, Mrs Gregory, I’m calling you with some rather incredible news.’ He sounded breathless. ‘I have someone here who wants to say hello.’

Alice’s heart began to beat very fast. Her mouth went dry. What was going on? Her hands were trembling uncontrollably. ‘Hello – who is it?’

PART I

London, October 2012

Alice

Kevin locked up the surgery and handed Alice the keys.

‘God, I’m tired today.’ Alice yawned. ‘It’s been non-stop.’

‘It’s such a bitch being so popular,’ Kevin said, grinning.

Alice smiled. ‘I’m glad to be busy, but I’d just love a soak in the bath instead of a long evening wrestling with Jools about homework. And now Ben’s invited David and Pippa for dinner tomorrow night, so I’ll have to go to the shops on my way home.’

‘Maybe Ben will come home early tomorrow and help cook for his friends.’

‘Fat chance.’ Alice sighed. ‘I love David and Pippa, but dinner at nine on a Tuesday night just doesn’t suit me. I’m always so tired after dealing with Jools.’

‘You should have said no, then.’

Alice smiled at the idea. Kevin had never really grasped the concept of compromise in relationships. Which was probably why his never lasted very long. ‘Ben was really keen to have them over and we do owe them. They’re always inviting us to dinner parties in their house.’

‘Get take-out and pretend you cooked. Problem solved.’

Alice shook her head. ‘It’ll be fine. I’ll pop into M&S now on the way back. Don’t mind me, I’m just being a grump.’

‘Well, I’ll think of you slaving over a hot stove as I’m flying into NYC.’

Alice punched his arm playfully. ‘I hope you have a great

time, but don't go home with strange men. New York is dangerous.'

Kevin snorted. 'I'm planning on going home with as many strange men as will have me.'

Alice rolled her eyes. 'Like I said, have fun but be careful and safe too.'

'You'll miss me.'

'I always do when you go away, even for just a week.'

'I'm the best medical secretary around.'

'Yes, you are.' Alice kissed her brother. 'See you when you get back. Have fun.'

'I fully intend to!' Kevin winked at her. 'Now go home to your girls.'

Alice liked the fifteen-minute walk home, which allowed her to decompress. Some days being a GP was very hard – today, she'd been vomited on by a three-year-old with tonsillitis, shouted at by a patient with acute back pain and propositioned by a randy eighty-year-old man.

On days like this she envied Ben and his exciting job. He considered a general surgeon to be at a different echelon from a general practitioner. He never said it, he wouldn't dare, but she knew he thought it. He'd say things like 'I've had a hell of a day. I performed an inguinal hernia repair, a cholecystectomy, a cervical gland excision and two breast biopsies. How was your day?'

Sometimes she wanted to scream at him that (a) she had studied for almost as many years as he had and (b) she had chosen a job that allowed her to get home early for their children because someone had to be there. As a result, she not only ran a busy surgery but she also did the vast majority of the work involved in raising their two daughters. As she went into M&S, she felt a stab of envy for her husband's life:

hot-shot surgical job, no housework, setting up dinners without doing any of the organizing whatsoever. It must be nice to be Ben, she thought crossly.

Once she had decided on and bought the ingredients for dinner the next night, she walked quickly towards home. She wanted to get back in time to cook for the girls. Nora, her nanny, housekeeper and, at times, surrogate mother, was wonderful, but her cooking was very basic. When they were young it had been fine, but now the girls were a bit older, Alice was keen for them to try new things.

As she stepped into the hall of their Kensington mews home, she could hear Jools complaining: 'I'm not eating rice any more, Nora, only quinoa now.'

'Keenwa?' Nora snapped. 'Never heard of it.'

'It's kind of new. Gwyneth Paltrow eats it all the time and she's super-healthy. So can you please cook it for me?'

'Sure that one is like a toothpick. She needs a good feed. I bet you that keenwa is one of those new makey-up things. One of those scientist things that'll give you cancer in the end. Meat and two veg is what you need.'

Alice rounded the corner into the kitchen where fifteen-year-old Jools was looking very put out. She was pouting in the way Alice knew well – it generally preceded an outburst of one kind or another, which Nora wouldn't tolerate.

'I think quinoa is perfectly safe, Nora. Don't worry, I'll cook it for her. Why don't you head home?'

'I will so,' Nora said. 'Himself will be wanting his pork chops and potatoes. No keenwa for him!'

Alice laughed at the idea of Nora's husband, a retired plumber from Yorkshire, eating quinoa. They were a no-nonsense couple. Nora was from the deepest west of Ireland,

with a sturdy farming background. When Alice had gone back to work after Jools was born, she had been delighted to find an Irish minder for her baby. Nora's kids had flown the nest and she wanted a nice job where she could earn some money. She had been there when Alice's parents had been killed in a car crash and had become a surrogate mother to Alice in many ways.

As Alice walked Nora to the door, her phone beeped. It was Ben: *Going for a cycle after work. C u about 9.*

Alice cursed. The selfish git. He had promised to help Jools with her homework tonight and now he was going for a bloody cycle. She could kill him!

'What is it?' Nora asked.

'Ben's going cycling after work. Again.'

'Sure aren't all men in their forties these days cycling around in tight shorts looking like right eejits. Don't worry, it's just a little mid-life crisis. Better his balls are tucked into the Lycra than into some young nurse.'

'Nora!'

'I'm just saying . . .'

Alice sighed. 'Let's hope it's not both!'

Nora slapped her arm gently. 'Stop that now. Ben is devoted to you and the girls. He's a good man, Alice. Let him off on his bike. This phase he's going through will wear off. He'll tire himself out eventually, or the Lycra will cut off his blood circulation. Either way, he'll get fed up.'

Alice laughed and waved Nora off. It had started to rain and she half hoped it might put Ben off cycling so he'd turn up before nine and do the homework shift.

When she went back into the kitchen, Jools was flicking through the Gwyneth Paltrow cookbook. Alice had bought it a few weeks previously in an effort to try different recipes and be more healthy generally. So far she'd only made one

dish from it and she'd ended up eating a whole box of Maltesers afterwards, which had cancelled out her effort at healthy eating. Mind you, she liked looking at the pictures of Gwyneth and her beautiful children, sunlight kissing the tops of their heads.

Jools closed the book with a slap. 'So, we need to talk about my party.'

Alice smiled. Jools seemed to think turning sixteen deserved some kind of jubilee celebration.

'I know I said I wanted to be healthier,' Jools went on, 'but when it comes to my party, I want a chocolate bonanza. I want —'

'I would like,' Alice interrupted.

'Fine. I would like a chocolate cake, with Harry from One Direction on it, and a sleepover with my seven best friends — I've decided to invite Harriet, too, even though she's kind of a nerd but she's funny — and we're not watching some lame film. We're going to watch *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and I don't care what you say.'

Leaning over the table Alice said, 'Let me stop you right there. You will not be watching *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* because it's really violent and frightening and is not suitable for you or your friends.'

Jools slammed her hand onto the marble countertop. 'I knew you'd say that. I knew you'd ruin my party. I'm going to ask Daddy — he'll let me.'

Of course he will, Alice thought. His giving in to Jools was the main issue that Ben and she argued about. Ben completely indulged Jools and it drove Alice nuts.

Alice reckoned it was because Jools was their firstborn, a girl and looked just like him. The moment Jools had been born, Ben had fallen head over heels in love with her. When he'd held her for the first time, he'd cried. The love in his

eyes was overwhelming. Alice had known he'd be a great dad, but she'd also had the foresight to anticipate trouble ahead. A man so besotted with his daughter was going to be a walk-over when it came to discipline. Ben found it very hard to say no to Jools, so Alice had ended up with the role of 'bad cop'. Alice loved her daughter more than anything, but she didn't want her turning into a spoilt brat. She wanted her to know the value of things, to appreciate what she had and not to take everything for granted.

Holly had come along four years later and had been a dream child. Where Jools hadn't slept through the night until she was three, Holly had from ten weeks. Even as a baby Jools had demanded everyone's attention but Holly had always found something to occupy herself. Half the time Alice and Ben would forget Holly was even in the room. She was always so quiet.

Alice knew it was wrong to compare children, and that she shouldn't, but if she was being really honest, she found Jools very trying and Holly was just . . . well, easy.

Alice took a deep breath to calm herself. She didn't want to get into an argument with Jools. 'What do you want for birthday breakfast? You know you're allowed anything you like.'

Jools didn't hesitate. 'Pancakes filled with whipped cream and Nutella.'

'I really don't think you need cream on top of Nutella – you'll be sick.'

Jools eyeballed her mother. 'You said I could have anything I wanted.'

'Yes, but I thought you were trying to be more healthy.'

Jools snorted. 'I'm hardly going to have quinoa in my birthday pancakes.'

Alice decided to let this one go. ‘Fine, but don’t come crying to me if you throw up in school from sugar overload.’

‘Don’t worry, I’d never come crying to you. Daddy’s the one I go to when I’m upset about anything.’

Alice tried not to show that she was hurt. She knew she was strict but she wasn’t unsympathetic. Ben, on the other hand, was hardly ever home, these days, and when he was, he always sided with Jools. Alice was sick of being the bad cop. She needed Ben to help more. Lately, she had felt increasingly like a single parent.

‘That was mean, Jools,’ Holly said, as she came into the room, with a book. ‘Mummy’s just offered to make you a super-yummy breakfast. You should be grateful. There are nearly eight hundred and seventy million people in the world who don’t have enough to eat. That’s one in eight people.’

‘Will you please shut up with your stupid facts? You’re like a walking calculator.’

‘Leave your sister alone,’ Alice warned. ‘You could do with a bit more fact-finding yourself – and a little less cheek,’ she added.

‘Yeah, like I want to be a nerd like Holly,’ Jools snarled.

‘Holly is not a nerd. She’s a very clever girl.’

‘Miss Robinson says I’m a joy to teach,’ Holly defended herself.

‘Good for her. I bet you are.’ Alice kissed her.

‘Nobody likes the teacher’s pet, Holly. You’ll end up with no friends.’ Jools was unimpressed.

‘She has lots of friends!’ Alice said.

‘Like who?’ Jools asked.

‘Jackie,’ Holly said.

‘Is she the geek with the big glasses?’

‘Yes.’

‘Seriously, Holly, you need to stop banging on about boring stuff and start making some cool friends before you totally blow it and end up being cast as a total nerd. I don’t need my sister being the biggest loser in school.’

‘I feel sorry for you, Jools.’ Holly placed her book on the table. ‘You care far too much about what other people think. Miss Robinson says you should be true to yourself and not worry about other people’s opinions.’

‘Miss Robinson is officially insane. Mum, you need to talk to her and stop her ruining kids’ lives.’

Alice decided to step in. ‘Okay, girls, let’s try not to argue any more. I want us to have a nice time and not fight over dinner. Jools, I’ll make you pancakes with Nutella and whipped cream for your birthday breakfast, but I’m only allowing you to eat two. I’ll make big ones.’

‘Three.’

‘Two.’

‘Three.’

‘How about two and a half?’ Holly suggested.

‘Good idea,’ Alice said.

‘Fine,’ Jools said.

‘Yummy!’ Holly enthused. ‘I can’t wait. Can I have two, Mummy?’

‘Yes, pet.’

‘Can I at least have a hot chocolate as well?’ Jools asked.

Alice knew it was a case of picking your battles, and gave in. ‘Okay.’

Jools almost smiled. ‘Thanks.’

Alice went to the fridge to get a start on dinner while Jools and Holly did their homework at the kitchen table.

Alice spotted *Little Women* in front of Jools. 'Have you finished it yet?'

Jools flushed. 'No, not yet.'

'Aren't you supposed to be doing a summary of it for next week?'

'Yes, it's fine. I'll get it done.'

Alice frowned. Jools was a slow reader. She struggled with spelling. When she was seven, Alice and Ben had thought she was dyslexic but the tests said she wasn't. She was just a very bad speller. Alice had done everything in her power to get Jools to read more as she knew it would improve her spelling, but Jools didn't enjoy it and it was a constant battle to get her to read anything.

'No television tonight. I want you to read for an hour instead. You need to finish it, Jools. It's a brilliant book. You'll love it once you get into it.'

'That's what you said about those stupid *St Clare's* books with all those dorks at boarding-school having midnight feasts and playing lame stink-bomb tricks on their ridiculous French teacher. They were beyond boring.'

'If you'd read more than the first twenty pages, you would probably have enjoyed them.'

'I love those books, and the *Naughtiest Girl* ones,' Holly said. 'I'd like to go to boarding-school.'

Jools snorted. 'You should go to a boarding-school for geeks. You'd fit right in.'

'Stop it!' Alice snapped. 'Holly isn't a geek, she's clever and studious.'

'Yeah, and I'm thick,' Jools muttered.

'No, you aren't. You just need to concentrate your mind a bit more.'

'Yeah, right! It's okay, Mum, I know I'm rubbish at school

but I'm popular and good-looking so I'll be fine. You won't have to look after me. I'll marry some millionaire and live in LA.'

'I like looking after you and I hope you marry someone you love, regardless of the size of his wallet. Besides, I'd hate you to live in LA – it's too far away and it's full of vacuous people who've had too much plastic surgery.'

'Is "vacuous" a kind of Botox?'

Alice tried not to laugh. 'No.'

'Is it a type of filler?'

'How do you even know about these things?'

Jools shrugged. 'The Kardashians. They get it done and they look amazing.'

Alice frowned. 'I told you that I didn't want you watching that rubbish any more.'

'Then how come I caught you watching it last week?'

Alice had been caught red-handed, glued to *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* – it was her secret guilty pleasure. After dealing with patients' problems all day, she liked nothing better than to kick back and watch cheesy reality TV.

'I wanted to see if it was as bad as I thought.' Alice fudged the question.

'"Vacuous" means "not expressing intelligent thought"?' Holly looked up from her dictionary.

'The Kardashians would be an excellent example of that,' Alice noted.

'I think they rock. Their life is so cool.'

'I want to be like Malala Yousafzai,' Holly said.

Alice paused. 'Well, yes, she is incredibly brave, but I'd rather you didn't get shot for your beliefs.'

Jools's mouth dropped open. 'OMG, is she the kid who got shot because she *wanted* to go to school? I thought it was a joke when Miss Kent told us about her. Then I presumed

there was something wrong with her, like she was mentally ill or something. Why would anyone get on some stupid bus to go to school if they could stay at home? I actually said to Miss Kent that I wanted to go and live in Pakistan. It sounded awesome – no school for girls. How cool is that?’

Alice covered her eyes with her hand. ‘What did Miss Kent say?’

‘She was all red in the face and went on this crazy rant about women’s rights and suffragettes and equality and blah-blah-blah.’

Alice didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

It was Holly’s turn to be incredulous. ‘I’m actually embarrassed to be your sister right now. Malala Yousafzai is the bravest, most courageous girl in the world. She risked her life to get an education. You’re just . . . just –’

‘What? Dumb? Stupid?’ Jools challenged her.

‘Ignorant.’

‘At least I knew Flo Rida was a rapper and not an actual place in America!’

‘Florida *is* a place in America. It’s one of the fifty states in America. He just took the name and cut it up,’ Holly countered.

‘Oh, my God, you’re like an old woman who lives in the Dark Ages,’ Jools shouted. ‘You should read less and actually watch some TV so you know what’s going on in the world.’

‘Sure, because knowing Flo Rida is some loser who can’t even sing is going to make my life so much better.’

‘You might make some actual friends if you can talk to them about normal things.’

‘You –’

Alice put a hand on each daughter’s shoulder. ‘Enough! Stop being so mean to each other. I always wanted a sister

and you're lucky to have each other. I hate seeing you guys fighting.'

'Kevin is kind of like a sister,' Jools said.

Holly giggled.

Alice grinned and went back to her cooking.

Ben

Ben put his head down and hunched his shoulders against the driving rain. His legs were aching and his heart was pumping. He rode on. It felt good to push himself. He glanced at his watch: he was two minutes faster than last week. If he could keep it up for the final five miles, he'd beat his best time.

He pounded along the wet London streets, ignoring his ringing phone. It would be Alice, moaning at him for being late. She didn't get it. He needed to let off steam after a long day operating. She was lucky, really. Some of his colleagues went straight to the wine bar opposite the hospital and drank themselves into oblivion. Others shagged young nurses or interns.

But Ben preferred to cycle. Not that the idea of getting drunk or having hot sex with a young nurse wasn't appealing, but he was a married man and he took that seriously. Sure he'd been tempted over the years, but so far he had resisted.

He really wished Alice would back off and stop nagging him about cycling. She said it took up too much time and that it was dangerous. She said he spent enough time away from home at the hospital and didn't need to waste an extra six or seven hours a week cycling.

The problem was, her job was easy. Ben didn't want to belittle her, but it really was. She doled out antibiotics and listened to old people complain about aches and pains. It

wasn't exactly cutting-edge. Alice was a very good GP and Ben was proud of how she had built up her practice, but she didn't understand the pressures of being a surgeon. Ben dealt with life and death. Granted, he did a lot of run-of-the-mill procedures too, but the complex operations always gave him a high. Occasionally they gave him a terrible low: a patient's death was never easy. Every patient he lost weighed heavily on his mind. People complained that surgeons got paid too much, but they had no idea of the toll a bad day could take on a person.

Thankfully the good days, of which there were many, made up for the bad ones. Ben loved the cut and thrust of the operating theatre. He loved the feeling of entering the 'zone', the place where you went when all noise was blocked out and it was just you and the body lying in front of you.

There was nothing like the rush of adrenalin when you were in the middle of a difficult surgery. Surgeons had a bad reputation. People accused them of having God complexes. Ben never felt like God, but saving someone's life was pretty fantastic. It was a high he'd never get tired of. That moment of elation, when he knew the patient was going to live because of his handiwork, was like a drug.

Alice couldn't understand. No one could. You had to be there. You had to witness it first-hand. Ben knew that he was at the top of his game right now and he wanted to do more. He wanted to challenge himself.

He looked up and saw David, wearing a bright green jacket, waiting for him, sheltering under a tree.

'I was hoping you'd cancel,' David said.

'No way. This is my release before going home to bedlam. Honestly, I think you and Pippa have it right – one child, who goes to boarding-school. Your home life must be bliss.'

David pushed his pedals and fell into rhythm with Ben. 'It

suits us, but come on, Ben, you adore your girls. You'd hate them to be away at boarding-school.'

Ben smiled. His friend was right. He would hate it if the girls were away. He loved seeing them, although lately it had become less fun. It was all homework and hormones, these days. Things had changed.

'Any more thoughts on applying for a job at Addenbrooke's?' David asked.

'I'm still thinking about it but haven't approached them yet. I'm very tempted. I want to push myself. I'm in a bit of a rut – I'm sick of doing appendectomies and hernia repairs.'

'Well, a major trauma centre like Addenbrooke's would certainly shake things up for you. But Cambridge isn't an easy commute,' David pointed out.

Ben wiped rain from his eyes. 'I know. Alice will go completely mad if I do get a job there, but I need more stimulation. I feel as if life is passing me by.'

'Well, be careful. Remember what happened to me when I had my mid-life blip two years ago? I almost lost Pippa.'

David had had a fling with one of the nurses at the private hospital where he worked and Pippa had found out. They had almost split up, but David had begged and pleaded and offered to go to marriage counselling, and things had settled down. Ben was glad they'd worked things out. They were good together. Pippa was a lovely woman and he would have hated to see them separate.

'You've got a good marriage,' David said. 'Don't rush into taking a job that might damage it. Pippa always says that you and Alice are the best couple we know because you still have fun together. All our other friends just bicker all the time.'

'We've been bickering a lot more recently, but I know what you mean. Alice is wonderful and I don't want to cause problems. Maybe I need to look for stimulation elsewhere.'

‘As long as you don’t look for it where I did,’ David warned. ‘Stay away from the nurses is my advice.’

Ben knew Alice would go nuts if he took a job in Cambridge. It would mean longer hours and many overnights at the trauma centre. Alice would never move. She had her thriving practice and the girls were settled at school. They’d only bought the house three years ago, Alice’s dream home. It was just off Kensington High Street in a little courtyard of eight.

‘I think turning forty-five has thrown me,’ Ben admitted. David was the only person in the world he could say this to and not feel self-conscious. He knew his friend understood. ‘I suddenly realized that more than half my life was over. Let’s be honest here, I’ve only got ten more years at the top of my game, fifteen if I’m lucky.’

‘But look at what you’ve achieved already,’ David reminded him.

‘There’s so much more I want to learn and do. I suddenly feel as if a time-bomb’s ticking loudly in my ear.’

‘I do understand, but sometimes it’s important to look at what you have instead of what you don’t. Believe me, Ben, I made that mistake and almost lost my family.’

Ben arrived home soaking wet and exhausted. As he squelched through the hall in his wet socks towards the kitchen, he could hear Alice and Jools arguing.

‘Come on, Jools, concentrate. It’s ten past nine, you’re tired and so am I. We need to get this finished.’

‘I’m trying,’ Jools snapped. ‘I don’t understand the stupid question!’

‘It’s not that difficult, darling. You just need to explain why Henry the Eighth split with Rome.’

‘I don’t care about boring old Henry the Eighth and his millions of wives. He was just a big, fat, greedy loser who married women to have babies with, and when they had girls, he killed them off. If you’d been married to him, you would have had your head chopped off.’

‘If you could find a way to express that more eloquently, we’d be halfway there. Now, come on, why did Henry turn his back on Rome?’

‘Because he wanted to marry Anne of Cleves.’

‘No, not Anne of Cleves.’

‘Fine. Catherine Something.’

‘No, Jools, it was Anne Boleyn. We’ve been over this a million times.’

‘Well, if he wasn’t such a sleazebag and didn’t marry so many women, I wouldn’t be getting mixed up.’

Ben knew that this would end in yet another argument between his wife and daughter. They clashed constantly. Since Jools’s hormones had kicked in, she had become more difficult to deal with, but Alice was too impatient with her. Ben found Jools trying too, but he was better at handling her. He came up with games to help her remember things. When it came to exams, Alice always begged him to help her study. He felt sorry for his elder daughter. It wasn’t easy for her. Both he and Alice had sailed through school and Holly was always top of her class. Poor old Jools simply wasn’t that academic. Ben just wanted her to be happy, get through school and do something she liked.

He and Alice were already putting money aside for both daughters to help them buy an apartment when they were older. Jools was very pretty and street-smart, and Ben reckoned she’d be fine. Holly was incredibly bright, but clueless about life. He worried more about her. He could see her

spending her whole life with her head stuck in a book and waking up at forty, single, with no children and nothing but her work to keep her warm at night.

Alice told him he was being ridiculous: Holly would meet some like-minded brainbox and live happily ever after doing research or finding the cure for cancer. She worried all the time about Jools not having a career, taking a dead-end job, meeting the wrong type of boy and getting pregnant at eighteen.

‘Hello, everyone. Having fun with the Tudors, I hear.’ Ben kissed Jools’s head.

‘Ooh, you’re all wet and gross.’ She pulled away from him. Ben kissed his wife.

‘You’re soaking, Ben.’ Alice wiped the rain from her cheek. ‘Can you dry off and help Jools with her homework?’

‘Give me five minutes for a very quick shower and I’ll be straight back down.’

When Ben came out of the bathroom, Alice was sitting on the edge of the bed. ‘Thank God you walked in when you did. I was about to shove the history book down her throat. She has the concentration span of a gnat!’

Ben pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. ‘I know, but you really must try to be more patient, darling.’

Alice tensed. ‘That’s easy for you to say, swanning in at nine o’clock. I’ve already spent almost two hours trying to help her with her homework, so please don’t tell me I’m not being patient.’

Ben leant down and kissed her cheek. ‘Don’t blow a fuse. I know it’s not easy. I’ll take over and you can relax.’

‘Sounds good to me.’ Alice smiled.

He left Alice reading and went back down to Jools. When he walked into the kitchen, Jools had her back to him and

was FaceTiming her friend Chloë. ‘I know, right? He’s totally hot,’ she said.

‘And he totally fancies you, Jools,’ Chloë replied.

‘No way!’ Jools protested weakly.

Ben smiled. Jools was well aware that she was a good-looking girl.

‘He so does. I bet you get together at Amelia’s party.’

‘Is he definitely going, then?’ Jools was trying to sound nonchalant.

‘Yes. He told Jeremy who told Alex who told Jude who told me.’

‘Okay, well, that’s cool.’

‘What are you going to wear?’

Jools shrugged. ‘I haven’t really thought about it. Maybe my pink Topshop dress.’

‘OMG, you should so wear that! It’s amazing on you! Ollie will die when he sees you in it.’

Let’s hope not, thought Ben. He didn’t want his daughter causing anyone’s demise.

‘My mum thinks it’s too short. My dad hasn’t seen it. He’d go mental if he did. He’s such a nerd – he thinks I should be wearing long skirts like those freaks who live in cults in America. You know, the ones where one man has, like, twenty wives and they all call each other “Sister”. So weird.’

Ben coughed loudly. ‘Exactly how short is this dress, Jools?’

Jools squealed and hung up. ‘For God’s sake, Daddy, you almost gave me a heart attack. How long have you been standing there?’

‘Long enough to know some guy called Ollie likes you, you’re getting together at Amelia’s party and you’re planning on wearing an obscenely short dress.’

Jools blushed. ‘You shouldn’t eavesdrop. It’s rude.’

‘You will not be going anywhere in a dress that’s too short. You’re a beautiful girl, Jools, and you don’t need to show off all your flesh.’

‘Please stop talking. You’re so embarrassing.’

‘I’m serious. I know you look at me and think, Old Man, but I was once a teenager and I didn’t find the girl in the shortest dress the most attractive. It was the girl with the dress that actually covered her bottom and had the best smile that I went for.’

‘Mum has a nice smile, when she uses it,’ Jools said, doodling on her copybook.

‘Mum has a fantastic smile. It lights up a room.’

Jools yawned, clearly bored with the conversation. Ben clapped his hands. ‘Right, what have you got left to do?’

‘I’m supposed to learn the first verse of this boring poem.’ Jools handed Ben her book and pointed.

‘Ah, “The Lady of Shalott” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. I remember this one. Right, off you go.’

Jools’s brow knitted in concentration. ““On each side of the river lies a field of long . . . grass?””

‘No, it’s “On either side the river lie Long fields of barley and of rye, That clothe the wold and meet the sky.”’

‘Oh, yeah. Okay. “On each side” –’

‘No, Jools, it’s “On either side”.’

‘Okay. “On either side of the river lies fields of . . . of . . .”’

““Long fields of barley and of rye”.”

““Long fields of barely any rye”.”

‘No, Jools, it’s not “barely”, it’s “barley”.’

She shrugged. ‘It’s the same.’

‘No, it isn’t. Barley is a grain and “barely” means “scarcely”.’

‘Fine, whatever.’

‘Start from the beginning.’ Ben glanced down at the

poem. There were nine lines to learn. This was going to take a while.

““On each side of the river lies a field of barley and rye.””

‘You’re nearly there.’ Ben was determined to be positive. ‘You just need to add in a few words – “On either side the river lie Long fields of barley and of rye . . .”’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘Not exactly. Okay, let’s move on to the next line. We can get a rhythm going. ““That clothe the wold and meet the sky”.’

‘That closes the world and met the sky.’

““Clothe”.’

‘Oh, “close”.’

‘No, the word is “clothe”.’

‘What?’

““Clothe”.’

‘What does that even mean? Hello, it’s just a made-up word.’

‘No, Jools, it isn’t. It means “to dress”.’

‘Dress the world? Is he a designer? Was he like Victoria Beckham back in the old days?’

‘No. He was a poet. It’s an expression.’

‘Oh.’ Jools looked disappointed. ‘For a nano-second I thought he might actually be interesting.’

‘He’s one of the most famous poets in the history of the world.’

‘Yeah, right. Well, he doesn’t do it for me. This poem sucks.’

Ben took a deep breath. ‘Come on, Jools, concentrate. You need to focus so you can learn the poem and not be here all night.’

‘You sound just like Mum.’

‘Well, she’s right, you do need to concentrate a bit harder.’

Okay, now don't get frustrated, we'll take it nice and slowly. Let's do the first three lines again.'

Thirty minutes later, they had got to line four. As Jools made yet another mistake, Ben lost it.

'For God's sake, Jools, will you please focus! It's not that hard. We're not even halfway through and you've got it wrong every single time.'

'It's not easy for me. I'm not bloody Holly with the freaky brain.'

'It's one verse of a poem, Jools! It's not a lot to remember and if you stopped looking around and getting up to fetch drinks and snacks, you might actually memorize it properly. This has nothing to do with your ability to learn and everything to do with your lack of focus. Now we are going to sit here until you memorize it, so I strongly recommend that you concentrate.'

'You're a tryant.'

'I think you mean "tyrant".'

'Whatever.'

Ben ended up bribing Jools. He told her that if she memorized the poem, he'd give her ten pounds. That made her concentrate and, after a further torturous twenty minutes, she kind of knew it. She tripped up here and there, but Ben had reached his limit. They called it a night, and when Jools was in her bedroom, ten pounds richer, Ben went up to Alice.

He handed his wife a glass of wine and took a large gulp from his own. Alice smirked at him. 'Did you have fun?'

Ben sat beside her on the bed and groaned. 'Christ, she's hard work. I'd forgotten how bad she is.'

Alice raised an eyebrow. Ben held up his hands. 'I know,

I'm sorry. I haven't helped her with her homework in a while and I'd genuinely forgotten what torture it is.'

'And exactly how "patient" were you?'

'I started off well, and then I lost my temper. You're a saint for doing that every night. Is it just me or is she getting worse?'

'The homework is getting more difficult and she's struggling to keep up.'

'Is she just . . . stupid?' Ben asked.

'No. She isn't interested. If you ask Jools to recite passages from the *Twilight* movies, she can do it, no problem. She just doesn't apply herself to schoolwork.'

'What are we going to do?'

'Keep helping her and encouraging her and —'

'Bribing her.'

'What?'

'I'm ashamed to say I bribed her.'

'Ben!'

'Alice, she was torturing me and poor Tennyson, who is definitely turning in his grave by the way. So I told her I'd give her a tenner if she'd just learn the bloody verse.'

'Did it work?'

'Not exactly. She's still reciting it with missing bits, but I couldn't listen to another word of it. She's ruined Tennyson for me for life.'

Alice began to laugh, such a happy, infectious sound. Ben loved it. He joined in, enjoying the release from his week's worries and having fun with his wife.

Holly

Mummy and Jools are having a big fight because Jools lied about reading *Little Women*. Mummy gave it to her nineteen days ago and she never got past the first chapter. But she pretended she'd read it when she'd just watched the movie on her iPad. When Mummy asked her about the book, Jools said she thought it boring with a stupid end – Jo would never have gone off with Gabriel Byrne because he was way too old.

Mummy said that Jools was a liar for pretending she'd read the book. She said there was no one in the book called Gabriel Byrne. She said that Gabriel Byrne is a famous Irish actor.

Jools shouted that Mummy was mean and always trying to force her to be clever. She said she was sick of it and that Mummy should just leave her alone. Then she said something really mean and I saw Mummy's face go all red. Jools said that Gabriel Byrne wasn't famous at all, he was just a stupid old Irishman with a stupid accent like Mummy's. She said she wished Mummy had a normal voice and didn't pronounce words all wrong because it was embarrassing.

I stopped breathing for eight seconds because I was worried Mummy was going to be angry, but she actually just looked really sad. She said she was sorry that Jools found her so embarrassing and then she went upstairs.

Jools pretended she didn't care, but I knew she felt bad because she set the table for dinner, which she never does.

I went up to Mummy's bedroom. She was sitting on her bed doing deep breathing. I went up and gave her a hug. I told her I liked the way she talks. I said that I think her accent is lovely. It's very sing-songy.

Mummy hugged me very tight – a bit too tight. I counted to twenty and then I pulled away because I was having trouble breathing.

Alice

Holly came into the kitchen and sat up at the counter. ‘Mummy, I loved it.’

‘What?’ Alice put her phone down.

‘*Little Women*. I read it and I adored it.’

Alice leant over and kissed her. ‘You really are a wonder. I can’t believe you’ve read it so quickly.’

Alice often wondered where Holly had come from. She and Ben were smart, but Holly was unique. Her mind never stopped working. She had been born a month premature and was still small for her age, but she was streets ahead of the other eleven-year-olds in her year. She was like a sponge that soaked up everything around her.

Alice worried that Holly didn’t have enough fun. She was always reading or working things out in her mind. She wasn’t very sporty, although she always tried her best, and she didn’t seem interested in making jewellery, experimenting with make-up or listening to music, like Jools and her friends had when they were eleven.

Holly’s pale blue eyes looked up at Alice. While Jools was sallow-skinned, like Ben, and had his thick dark hair and beautiful big brown eyes, Holly had Alice’s strawberry blonde hair and light eyes, although Holly’s eyes were so pale they were almost translucent. People often said she reminded them of the little girl in the movie *Atonement*.

Holly tapped Alice's arm. 'Mummy, did you know there are four hundred and forty-nine pages in the book. In chapter one there are . . .'

Alice knew that Holly was about to break the book down into chapter-by-chapter page counts, and while she was constantly astounded by her daughter's mind, sometimes Holly needed to be nudged in a different direction. The chapter page count would turn into a page word count and it could go on for hours. When she was five Holly had counted to a thousand – slowly – on the six-hour drive from London to Holyhead. Ben had described it as the ultimate form of torture. Thankfully, Jools had had her headphones on during the drive, which was the only reason Holly had survived in one piece.

'So, who was your favourite character?' Alice asked.

Holly stopped focusing on the word count. Pushing her long hair out of her eyes, she said, 'I think Jo is just wonderful. And Beth is so kind and sweet, but I was very sad when Amy stole Laurie away.'

'I totally agree. I always thought Jo and Laurie should have ended up together.'

'Professor Bhaer was nice and kind, but Laurie was fun and he was her best friend,' Holly said.

'And he was rich, young and fit.' Jools shuffled in. Then, raising her hands, she said, 'I know I didn't read it, but I do know the story.'

Alice took some mushrooms out of the fridge and began to chop them. 'Relationships are not about money or looks. They're about love, loyalty and respect.'

'And friendship, Mummy – you always say that Daddy's your best friend,' Holly reminded her.

'You're right, darling, he is.'

‘Okay, fine, but being rich and handsome are not bad things either,’ Jools said.

‘No, but kindness and decency are much more important,’ Alice replied. Jools was obsessed with fame and celebrity to an extent that sometimes worried Alice. She clearly wasn’t going to thrive in academia, but Alice was concerned that she thought celebrity was some kind of a viable career.

‘I love Marmee, too. She’s so wise and gentle,’ Holly gushed.

‘And she never shouts,’ Jools said, with a smirk, as she popped a grape into her mouth.

‘That’s because she has four daughters who do what they’re told and don’t give her cheek. Besides, I don’t shout a lot.’

‘Holly? Back me up! Does Mummy shout a lot?’

Holly’s eyes grew wide. ‘It depends on the situation.’

‘Don’t put Holly on the spot. I know I shout sometimes, but usually with good reason. Now, can you help me tidy up? David and Pippa are coming for dinner. They’ll be here in half an hour and the place is a mess.’

‘Where’s Daddy?’ Jools asked.

Alice gritted her teeth. ‘Stuck in work yet again. Let’s just hope he actually makes it in time to have dinner with the friends *he* invited over.’

‘Mum, you need to take a deep breath,’ Jools said. ‘Daddy can’t help being stuck at work. He’s probably saving a life or something.’

Or just not bothering to come home and help, Alice thought darkly.

‘We’ll help you, Mummy,’ Holly said, tidying up the books that were strewn all over the table.

‘Thanks, girls – what would I do without you?’

Within half an hour the kitchen was tidy, candles were lit and dinner was cooking in the oven.

Ben strolled in at nine.

‘Nice of you to turn up,’ Alice snapped.

‘Oh, God, don’t start nagging again.’

‘Don’t invite your friends for dinner if you’re not even going to be here!’ Alice hissed.

‘I’m here now and they haven’t arrived,’ Ben said, as the doorbell rang.

Alice glared at him and went to check on the food.

David and Pippa arrived full of good cheer, laden with wine and chocolates.

While Ben and David had a drink in the lounge and chatted to the girls, Pippa and Alice had a glass of wine in the kitchen.

‘So, how are things? I haven’t seen you for about six months,’ Pippa said.

‘Life is just so bloody busy all the time – I never seem to catch up with anyone,’ Alice replied. It was true: she never saw her friends from medical school. The surgery, the girls and Ben took up all of her time.

‘Oh, darling, I don’t know how you do it.’ Pippa sipped her wine. ‘I barely have time to fit everything in and I don’t work and William is away at school.’

Alice loved Pippa. Her life was so privileged and different from Alice’s yet they got on really well. Pippa was kind, sweet and generous to a fault. Both she and David were from landed gentry. David’s parents owned half of Berkshire and Pippa’s half of Kent. They were a perfect match.

They lived in a huge house in Holland Park. When Alice was with them, she felt as if she was in an episode of

Downton Abbey. They actually had a housekeeper and a driver, and always had cocktails at seven, before dinner. Alice loved going there – it was always so civilized and calm, not to mention luxurious and elegant.

‘Hold on a minute!’ Alice gasped. ‘Your bracelet nearly took my eye out. Is it new?’

Pippa wrinkled her nose. ‘It’s the guilt bracelet. David bought it for me last year, after his liaison with that nurse. I don’t like wearing it – it’s terribly showy – but David gets offended if I don’t. Honestly, men are such children.’

Alice squeezed Pippa’s hand. ‘I think it’s wonderful that you guys managed to work it out. I was relieved as well as glad because we get to keep you both as friends.’

Pippa smiled. ‘It hasn’t been easy, but I’m glad too. I do love him, you know, and he truly is sorry. He’s much nicer to me now than before. I think it was a mid-life crisis, to be honest. He felt his youth slipping away and wanted one last fling. Mind you, if it happens again I’ve told David that Daddy has the best lawyer lined up for me, a total Rottweiler. That frightened him a bit, I can tell you.’

‘Serves him right!’ Alice said. ‘To be honest,’ she said, lowering her voice, ‘I think Ben’s having some kind of mid-life thing as well.’

‘With a nurse?’ Pippa was visibly shocked.

‘No – at least, I don’t think so.’

‘Thank goodness, although I can’t imagine Ben being unfaithful to you.’

‘Never say never.’

‘That’s true – I never thought David would do it to me.’ Pippa looked down at her bracelet. Glancing up, she asked, ‘Are you having sex?’

‘Yes.’

‘Regular sex?’

‘Yes.’ Alice felt a bit awkward discussing it with Pippa. It wasn’t a usual topic of conversation for them.

‘Oh, good. Sorry, but I had to ask. My counsellor said part of our problem was that we weren’t having sex. I just went off it a bit, darling, but I’m making more of an effort now and it’s much better.’

‘I honestly don’t think Ben’s having an affair. It’s more of a restlessness with life. He seems to be unfulfilled in work. It’s scaring me a bit, where it might lead.’

‘Don’t worry. All men have a wobble at this age. Ben adores you. I always say to David that you have such a good marriage. It’s balanced because you both have jobs, you both earn money and you make each other laugh. I’m sure this is just a little distraction that he’ll get over soon.’

‘I hope so,’ Alice said, as she lifted the beef bourguignon out of the oven.

Dinner was lovely. They drank too much wine and told funny stories of medical-school days and holidays, children and work. Alice felt the red wine relaxing her. She watched Ben as he told an amusing anecdote about their honeymoon. His eyes twinkled in the candlelight and she thought how handsome he was.

He caught her eye and winked at her. Alice’s stomach fluttered. He still had it. He could still make her want to rip his clothes off – especially after a few glasses of wine.

As they waved David and Pippa off, Ben pinched her bum. He closed the door and spun her towards him. ‘You look very hot tonight, Dr Gregory.’

Alice giggled. ‘You look pretty sexy yourself, Doctor. Can I be examined, please?’

‘I’ll give you the full once-over.’

Laughing, Ben pulled Alice into the lounge and they fell

onto the couch, kissing and tugging each other's clothes off. Their bodies, so used to each other, came together in a familiar dance. As they lay side by side, half dressed in the moonlight, fingers loosely entwined, Alice knew that everything would be all right.

Alice

Alice was lost in a book when the doorbell rang. Jools ran to open it and Alice heard her squeal, then a louder male squeal. She knew her brother's voice immediately.

'Happy birthday, Jools. I know it's a little early, but I just got in from New York and I was dying for you to see your present.' Kevin came into the kitchen carrying a large box tied with a huge red bow.

'Uncle Kevin!' Holly jumped off her stool and ran to hug him.

Kevin swung her into the air. 'How's my little Einstein? Are you still dazzling everyone with your brains?'

Holly blushed. 'Kind of.'

'Well, you inherited them from me,' he said, and Alice almost snapped the book closed on her finger.

'*I don't believe it!*' Jools screeched. 'You're the best ever! I love you.' She pushed Alice and Holly aside to reach Kevin.

'I am pretty awesome,' Kevin agreed, with a grin.

'What did you get?' Alice asked.

'Only the silver jeans from the new Kardashian collection and a pink Hollister hoodie!' Jools hugged the clothes to her chest.

'The hoodie is also new season,' Kevin added. 'Neither pieces will be in the shops here until January.'

Jools ripped off her school uniform and put on her new clothes.

‘Wow, the jeans are very . . . shiny,’ Alice said, trying to be diplomatic. Jools looked like she was applying for a job as an astronaut.

Kevin raised an eyebrow. ‘They’re of the moment and she looks fabulous.’

‘OMG, I can’t wait for my friends to see them! I’m going to wear them at the party on Saturday. I have to send Chloë a selfie – she’s going to die of jealousy!’ Jools rushed off to get her phone.

Kevin turned to Holly. ‘And this is a little something for you.’ He handed her a small blue box. She opened it to find a silver Tiffany bracelet with a silver heart that said *smart girls rock*. ‘I got it engraved especially for you.’

Holly hugged Kevin. ‘Wow! It’s not even my birthday. Thank you! I love it.’

Holly went off to show Jools her present and Kevin sat up at the counter. ‘Any chance of a glass of wine?’

‘Absolutely.’ Alice grabbed a bottle from the fridge, then handed it to her brother with the corkscrew. Kevin poured them both a large glass.

Alice clinked hers with her brother’s. ‘It’s good to have you back. I missed you at work.’

Kevin smirked. ‘I take it Karolina wasn’t as good with the patients as I am?’

‘She’s a little too dour.’

‘It’s good to go away sometimes so your boss appreciates you more,’ he teased, waving his glass at her.

‘I do appreciate you. You’re the best-paid medical secretary in London.’

‘Not quite, but you’re a good employer, although you can be a little bossy at times.’

‘That’s the older sister in me.’

‘You can’t help yourself.’

‘So New York was good?’

Kevin sighed happily. ‘Wild and wonderful and far too short. I need a holiday after it. God, the clubs there are just incredible, and the men are *so* hot.’

‘Did you meet anyone?’

‘I sure did.’ Kevin chuckled into his wine. ‘Lots of people.’

Alice raised her hand. ‘Let’s stop there, I don’t need any more details. Thanks for bringing the presents for the girls – you spoil them.’

‘I could see by your face that the jeans were a big hit.’

‘Well, they’re very in-your-face. Ben’s going to have a seizure when he sees them.’

Kevin rolled his eyes. ‘Ben’s a fashion bore. He thinks wearing a red jumper is cutting-edge.’

Alice laughed. Ben was a very conservative dresser but he always looked smart. Mind you, with his lovely tanned skin, he looked good in anything. Alice thought he looked even more handsome with his hair going grey. He had aged very well, better than she had. His wrinkles marked him out as distinguished. Hers made her look tired.

Alice was careful about what she ate, and she ran when she could – usually early mornings before the girls woke up or at weekends when Ben was home. She had kept her figure and her hair was thick and long, but her face had aged faster than she’d have liked. She hadn’t ruled out Botox, but she knew Ben would go mad if she did it. He was dead set against it and he constantly told her she was gorgeous. He was good like that – he complimented her a lot.

Kevin leant back in the kitchen chair. ‘So, how’s Ben? Is he still having his Lycra-wearing, holy-shit-I’m-forty-five crisis?’

‘Ssh.’ Alice walked over and closed the kitchen door. ‘Yes, he is. But in the last week he’s been in better form, less restless.’

‘He should be thanking his lucky stars for what he has – a gorgeous wife who earns lots of money, two beautiful daughters and a mews house in Kensington. It doesn’t get much better than that. Take it from a single man living in a shoebox in Soho.’

‘Don’t you think you’re a bit old for Soho?’

‘Hello? I’m thirty-seven, not ninety. Besides, I like Soho – it’s where all the hot young men are.’

‘Maybe I should move there!’

‘Don’t tell me you’re having a mid-life wobble too?’

Alice shook her head. ‘Not yet. Women usually have them in their fifties, around the menopause.’

‘Well, that’s something to look forward to. When you turn fifty Ben should get a job in Glasgow and I can move in with you, a sad, lonely gay man who gardens all day.’

‘Have you met anyone nice recently?’ Alice asked, as she took dinner ingredients out of the fridge. She really hoped Kevin would meet a lovely guy and settle down. Although he had a very active social life, she knew he wanted to find someone special. He’d been partying hard since he moved to London fifteen years ago.

Alice had always worried about her little brother. She had always known he was gay, but her parents hadn’t had a clue. When Kevin had finally come out, aged twenty, their parents had decided it was only a phase and kept praying that Kevin would meet a nice girl who might change his mind. Alice’s mother had lit hundreds of candles and said novenas for her son, but instead of meeting a nice girl, Kevin had moved to London and met lots of men.

They’d grown up in a small town twenty miles outside Dublin and Kevin was, literally, the only gay in the village. Well, the only one who admitted it. According to Kevin’s

gaydar, Mr O'Reilly, the butcher, was gay but didn't know it, as was Johnny Kane, who owned the hardware store.

It had been difficult for him, and Alice had always felt protective of him. When she'd moved to London to study medicine, Kevin was only twelve. Alice knew secondary school was going to be hard for him and it had been. Confused about his sexuality and wanting to conform to the 'norms' of small-town Ireland, Kevin had tried to go out with girls but always ended up as their best friend.

Alice was the only person he had opened up to and she had supported him as much as she could, in between studying and doing insane hours during her internship.

When Kevin moved to London and was free to be the man he wanted to be, they had seen lots of each other – Kevin had lived with Alice and Ben for the first three months while he got settled. When their parents had been killed in a car crash fourteen years ago, they had become even closer. They clung to each other – the only family they had left.

Jools and Holly loved Kevin because he was the indulgent uncle who gave them all the things that Alice would never buy. Jools also seemed to think it was cool to have a gay uncle. He was wonderful with the girls and they adored him.

Ben liked Kevin, but hated him camping it up. Kevin knew this and always went over the top just to wind him up. Alice wished he wouldn't. She wanted her husband and brother to be closer.

She threw some vegetables and chicken into the pan.

'Smells good,' Kevin said.

'Would you like to stay for dinner? The girls would love it and, to be honest, I could do with Jools being diluted. We're clashing all the time.'

'Just like you and Mum.'

‘I didn’t fight with her all the time.’

Kevin whooped. ‘You were always at each other’s throats. You only got on when you moved out.’

Alice tried to think back. Had she fought as much with her mother as Jools did with her? If she was honest, she had to admit that they’d clashed a lot. When Alice had moved to London at nineteen to study medicine, her relationship with her mother had got a whole lot better. With a bit of distance between them, they had become more like friends than mother and daughter.

Alice had been devastated when her parents died. It was such a shock. To become an orphan overnight at the age of thirty seemed as ridiculous as it was sad. Ben had been a rock, and Alice knew she wouldn’t have got through those dark days without him.

Sometimes Alice wondered if her grief had affected Jools. Her little girl had been nearly two when the car crash had happened and Alice had been grief-stricken and very low for months afterwards. She worried that Jools had picked up on her sorrow. Days would go by when Alice hadn’t got dressed or even washed. She hadn’t left the house for weeks and cried all the time.

Kevin had reacted to the tragedy by going wild. He had partied hard, drunk too much and taken lots of drugs to try to obliterate the pain. Thankfully, they’d both come out the other side – Alice because of Ben, and Kevin because he did masses of therapy.

‘What do you think I should do to help me stop fighting with Jools? What did Mum do that worked?’ Alice asked her brother now.

He shrugged. ‘I dunno. All I remember is a lot of slamming doors and you being grounded all the time. Mum was

very strict with you, and you are equally, if not more so, tough on Jools.'

Alice sighed. 'It's because she struggles in school. I worry about her future. I was hoping she was dyslexic because then she could have got help and some exemptions from her exams. But she's just a bad speller and reader. I really need to help her keep up. I try so hard to get her to read, but she just won't do it.'

'Maybe you should back off a bit.'

'But if I do, she'll fall further behind.'

Kevin picked a piece of red pepper out of the wok and popped it into his mouth. 'It's hard for Jools, with Holly being so bright. She's always going to be the stupid one. I know how that feels. It was the same with us. You were the smart one and I was thick.'

'You weren't thick, just lazy.'

'I wasn't lazy, I just wasn't interested.' He grinned. 'But I turned out okay.'

Alice added some spices to the stir-fry. 'That's debatable! I just worry about Jools.'

'Well, stop worrying and give her a break . . . at least for the next few days. It's her birthday week, after all, and sweet sixteen on top of that. Anyway, she's so stunning she can always be a model. Problem solved.'

Alice added some noodles to the wok. 'She's five foot three, Kevin! Besides, I want her to go to college, have fun and get some kind of degree. But you're right, I do need to manage her better. I think from now on I'll get Ben to do her homework with her. He's so much more patient than I am, although even he has a breaking-point.'

'You're very calm with your patients.'

'I have to be. But after dealing with other people's issues

all day, I come home drained and the last thing I want to do is hours of sodding homework.’

‘God, I do not miss schooldays at all. Whoever said they’re the best days of your life was a delusional lunatic.’

‘I actually liked school.’

Kevin groaned. ‘That’s because you had friends and were “normal”. You didn’t get called “steamer” and “arse bandit” on a regular basis.’

Alice was laughing.

‘It’s not funny!’ Kevin cried. ‘Mum kept asking me why they called me “steamer” and I had to say it was because I was a really fast runner – like a steam train.’

At that, they both burst out laughing.

‘Oh, God,’ Alice said, wiping tears from her eyes. ‘Poor Mum. At least they were nice to you when you did come out.’

Kevin snorted. ‘They weren’t exactly thrilled.’

‘They were just from a different generation, so it was hard for them initially, but they were supportive.’

‘I know,’ Kevin admitted. ‘They were good. When I see how some of my friends were disowned and thrown out of home, I had it easy.’

Alice got five plates out of the cupboard. ‘Our parents’ generation had a very different upbringing. They lived in fear of the Church. It wasn’t easy for them. We were lucky. We grew up questioning everything and having our own opinions from an early age.’

‘Thank God for that.’

‘Thank God for what?’ Jools asked, as she walked in, still wearing her silver jeans and hoodie.

‘I’m just telling your mum how lucky she is to have such a gorgeous and fabulous daughter,’ Kevin said.

Jools’s face lit up. ‘Really?’

She was so beautiful and young and innocent. Alice

realized Kevin was right: she *was* too hard on her. She just didn't want her daughter to leave school with nothing.

'You're fabulous.' Alice smiled at her.

Jools pulled the sleeves of her hoodie over her hands. 'Okay, what are you about to tell me? Is my party cancelled? Am I in trouble for something?'

Alice went over and put her arms around her daughter. 'No. I just think you're wonderful and I don't tell you enough.'

Jools squirmed and wriggled away from her mother. 'Enough of the mushy stuff. What's for dinner?'

Ben

Ben rushed his shower and hurried to get dressed so he wouldn't be late home again. But as he was about to leave the hospital, a nurse called after him to tell him that John Lester had phoned. 'He said it was important and asked you to call him back.'

Ben frowned. John Lester? What did he want? John Lester was a total maverick. He was always taking time out to go to conflict zones with Médecins Sans Frontières and other humanitarian organizations. The last Ben had heard, John was in Eritrea to train surgeons there.

Hang on! Maybe he wanted Ben to go with him on one of his trips. How exciting. Maybe this was his chance to do something stimulating. Ben had never done any humanitarian trips, mainly because of Alice. After her parents had been killed, she was a nervous wreck every time he left the house or if she couldn't locate the girls for more than five seconds. Thankfully, over the years her anxiety and panic had dissipated, but she still would not be happy to hear that Ben was off to some far-flung corner of the world.

Nonetheless, Ben felt a surge of excitement. Sure, it might mean the cold shoulder for a while, but if this call from John Lester turned out to be an opportunity to do something exhilarating, he was bloody well going to do it. Life was too short.

John picked up on the first ring. 'Ben?'

'I'm returning your call.'

'Good man. Right, I'll get straight to the point. I was due to fly to Eritrea on Wednesday to operate on the minister of health, Negasi Kidane. I met him when I was over there setting up a training programme. Anyway, I've broken my leg. Bloody nuisance. Slid on the steps outside the house yesterday morning. I can't go now but the poor man needs surgery. Bloody great tumour in the colon. Needs to come out. Can you fly to Eritrea on Wednesday? You'll need to stay for post-op care. I'd like you to take my intern, Declan, with you. He's Irish, a bit of a livewire, but huge potential. I think he'll go a long way.'

Ben's head was reeling. Eritrea on Wednesday! That gave him two days to clear his schedule and persuade Alice that it wasn't the worst idea in the world. His heart was racing. This was exactly what he'd been looking for – adventure, change, something new, exciting and challenging – and it had dropped out of the sky into his lap. It was meant to be. Nothing and no one would prevent him going.

'I'd love to go, John. Thanks for thinking of me.'

'Good man. I'm afraid I'm stuck at home, so could you pop over? I can talk you through Kidane's history and show you the X-rays. I'll get Declan to come, too, so you can get acquainted. We'll need to change the name on the ticket and I'll let the Eritreans know you're coming in my stead.'

Ben's heart was beating faster. 'No problem, John. I'm just getting onto my bike now. Can I call in on my way home?'

'Excellent! No time like the present. I'll call Declan right now. See you when you get here.'

John Lester hung up and Ben punched the air. Eritrea here I come, he thought. The timing couldn't have been more perfect – except for missing Jools's birthday. He knew the Cambridge post was going to cause too much trouble at

home, with Alice and the girls. In any case, it would put a lot of extra pressure on Alice if he were away so much during the week. But this one-off opportunity would be great, and maybe others would come up once people heard he was prepared to travel for his work.

One or two of these interesting trips a year would keep him going. He made a mental note to get in touch with Médecins Sans Frontières when he got back. This was Fate. Ben strode purposefully towards the hospital entrance. He felt brighter, happier and more alive than he had in a very long time.

As he cycled towards John Lester's house, he was mentally organizing his schedule around the week he was going to need off. John had been clear about Ben staying to make sure that the minister's operation had gone smoothly and that there were no complications afterwards. On the off-chance that something did occur, Ben wanted enough time to deal with any post-op issues, however small. He wanted to prove himself on this mission. A week should be adequate to make sure the minister was recovering well.

Cycling home, Ben prepared himself for Alice's reaction to his Eritrean trip. He knew it wasn't going to be good. They'd been arguing quite a bit lately, partly because he'd been so restless and distracted, but he wished Alice didn't always have to react to everything as if it was the end of the world.

He climbed off his bike, removed his helmet, pulled out his key and took a deep breath.

He could hear voices in the kitchen. Damn! Kevin was here. Ben didn't want to say anything in front of Kevin because his brother-in-law always took Alice's side. It bothered Ben that Alice discussed so much with him. He felt that some things were private, such as their marriage. But since Kevin had gone to work for Alice two years ago it was even

worse because they saw each other every day and talked about everything. Ben knew Alice complained about him to Kevin when she was fed up. He really didn't want to take on the two of them when he made his big announcement. But with only two days to departure, he couldn't be picky about timing – better to get it over and done with.

He squared his shoulders and opened the kitchen door. 'Hello, everyone,' he said, in an over-cheery voice.

He bent down to kiss Jools and Holly's cheeks and Alice's lips. Then he went to shake Kevin's hand. 'Welcome back. I hope New York was good.'

'It was fantastic, thanks. How are you?'

'I'm good. Great, actually.' Turning to Alice, he said, 'Darling, John Lester has asked me to go to Eritrea for a few days.'

Alice frowned. 'Eritrea?'

'Air-it-tray-on? Are you winding us up?' Kevin said, as Jools giggled.

'Eritrea is a country in Africa. It borders with Ethiopia,' Holly said.

'Thank you, Holly.' Ben ruffled her hair as he watched Alice's face.

'Ethiopia?' Alice's voice was shrill. 'Jesus, Ben.'

'It's fine. It's not dangerous.'

'The war with Ethiopia ended in 2000.'

Everyone stared at Holly.

'How in God's name do you know that?' Kevin wondered.

'Because she eats books,' Jools reminded him.

'I don't eat them, I read them. I read about it in the library when I finished my homework.'

'How long are you going for?' Kevin asked Ben.

'Oh, just a few days, a week at the most. I'm operating on the minister of health. It's fairly straightforward.'

Alice stood up abruptly. ‘Ben, can I have a word in private, please? Kevin, can you make sure the girls finish their dinner.’

‘Uh-oh, someone’s in for a bollocking,’ Jools drawled, as Alice nudged Ben out of the kitchen and into the lounge.

Alice closed the door and turned on Ben. ‘Is this some kind of a joke? Are you trying to wind me up? Eritrea, Ben? Seriously?’

Ben knew it was vital that he remain calm and firm. ‘Alice, it’s perfectly safe. I’m flying in with John Lester’s registrar – he’s actually Irish. I’m going to operate – it’s a fairly straightforward tumour in the colon – and then I’ll stay for a couple of days to make sure the patient’s on the mend before I fly home.’

‘Eritrea is not safe. Anything could happen.’

‘Alice, you’d hardly heard of Eritrea before now, so how do you know it’s not safe?’

‘Because it’s beside bloody Ethiopia and, according to Holly, they had a war and what’s to say it won’t kick off again? Besides, Africa in general is not safe or stable. Anything could happen.’

Ben put his hands on his wife’s shoulders. ‘Alice, calm down. Don’t make a big deal about nothing. It’s a simple operation and I’ll be back within the week.’

Alice shrugged him off. ‘You’re not going.’

‘What?’

‘You’re not going. You’re not allowed to put yourself at risk. You have a wife and two kids. You have responsibilities, Ben. You can’t just decide to head off to dangerous places whenever you feel like it.’

Ben could feel anger creeping up from his stomach through his chest. ‘Alice, I am going to Eritrea. I am fully

aware of my responsibilities and I take them very seriously, but you won't stop me going on this trip.'

'Yes, I will.'

Ben gritted his teeth. 'No, you are not. I need this. I need to do something different. It's an opportunity to shake things up a bit.'

'Why do you need to shake things up? What's wrong with your life?'

Ben paced up and down. 'I'm a bit restless and this is a good opportunity to do something different. John told me he goes over and trains the surgeons there once a year. I'd like to do that with him in the future.'

Alice frowned. 'So you're planning on going to Africa once a year now?'

'I'm hoping to, yes. Africa or anywhere else where they need local surgeons to be trained.'

'Why?' Alice asked, her eyes filling.

'Because I just feel . . . I need something else.'

'Why aren't we enough for you?' Alice was crying now.

Ben felt bad. He went over and put his arms around her. 'You are, darling. You and the girls mean everything to me. This has nothing to do with you. I just feel the need to push myself a bit, shake things up work-wise.'

Alice wiped the tears from her face with her hands. 'I took a different path in my career so I could put our family first. I didn't plan to end up being a GP. I wanted to specialize in oncology. But it's what you do when you have kids. You give up certain goals to spend time with them. They'll be gone at eighteen.'

Ben sighed. 'I'm not asking a lot, Alice. A week here or there helping others isn't a big deal.'

'I just don't understand why you're so restless. It's freaking me out. We have everything we dreamt of. Why do you need more?'

Ben looked at his lovely wife. She was right: they had a beautiful home, two healthy daughters and good careers, but it just wasn't enough for him. He needed something else. He wanted more. Maybe he was selfish, but he couldn't help how he felt. His life seemed mundane and monotonous. He needed this trip.

'I can't really explain it. Maybe it's turning forty-five – I don't know. But this opportunity has come at the right time. I'm excited about it. I haven't felt that in a while.'

Alice rolled her eyes. 'I suppose a week in Eritrea is better than an affair.'

'It'll be totally safe. We'll be very well cared for. After all, we'll be operating on a senior government official.'

'Make sure you don't kill him.' Alice walked back towards the kitchen.

'I will.'

'Oh, and Ben?' Alice turned around. 'You can leave your mid-life crisis in Eritrea. I want a happy husband after this trip.'

Ben

As Ben packed, Alice sat on the bed and watched him. ‘Call me every day. I’ll be worried.’

‘I will. Listen, why don’t we go on a trip when I get back? Christmas isn’t too far off. We could go somewhere nice. How about Paris? I know it’s your favourite place and we haven’t been for so long.’

‘That would be nice.’

‘Paris, here we come!’ Ben leant down to kiss her.

‘Why are you talking about Paris? OMG, you’re so gross. Stop kissing – it’s embarrassing. Old people should never kiss.’ Jools stood in the doorway, hands on hips, wearing her favourite bright pink tracksuit with ‘Babe’ emblazoned across the front in some kind of sparkly writing. It was appalling, but Kevin had bought it for her so Ben wasn’t allowed to criticize.

No one was allowed to criticize Kevin, except Alice. Even when Kevin had got drunk and tried to shove his tongue down the throat of Clive Hetherington, a friend of Ben who was about as straight as it was possible to be, Ben hadn’t been permitted to say anything. Alice said that ‘poor Kevin’ was having a hard time meeting a nice man and he was upset and confused. He wasn’t confused: he was the horniest gay man Ben had ever met.

Alice said Kevin’s ‘enthusiasm’ was because he’d grown

up suppressing his gayness and only come out when he'd moved to London so he had a lot of years to catch up on. Ben pointed out, reasonably, that he could do all the catching up he wanted, just not with his heterosexual friends. Kevin was, as it were, barking up the wrong tree. Alice said he was unsympathetic and needed to be kinder to him. Ben said no more, but decided to keep his friends away from his brother-in-law in future.

'I thought it would be nice for us to go on a family holiday. So when I get back from Eritrea, we'll fix up a trip to Paris.'

'I still can't believe you're missing my birthday,' Jools said.

Ben went over to his sulky-faced daughter. 'I promise to make it up to you with a huge present.'

'How huge?'

'Hugely huge.' Ben hugged his daughter. He felt brilliant. He couldn't wait to get on the plane. Everything looked brighter this morning. He must have been suffering from mild depression: he felt light and full of energy.

'Well, I'm amazing so I deserve a huge present. Besides, turning sixteen is a big deal. I can't wait for my party next weekend.'

'I'm so sorry, Jools, it looks like I'll miss that too.'

Jools rolled her eyes. 'I'm actually glad you're away for it. I'm having my seven best friends for a sleepover and I don't need you coming in and checking up on us every five minutes and saying really embarrassing things, like "One Direction rock."''

Ben grinned at her. At almost sixteen, Jools had already decided he was an embarrassment. It seemed like only

yesterday when she'd climb onto his lap and ask him to read her stories.

'Don't be rude to your father or there'll be no sleep-over and no Paris.' Alice's arms were crossed and she was pacing.

'Relax, Mum, you don't have to jump down my throat. I know you're worried about Dad going to Erimea or whatever it's called, but it'll be fine. You always make a big deal about everything.'

'Don't speak to me –'

Ben raised his hands. 'Ladies, can you please not argue? I have to go and I'd like to leave a peaceful house behind.'

'Fat chance,' Jools huffed. 'I wish I had a mother who wasn't always on my back. Charlotte's mum lets her have a Twitter account because she's normal, unlike you!'

'I told you, I had a young girl in my surgery who was traumatized because she was receiving such vile threats on Twitter. There are bad men out there who prey on young girls like you,' Alice said.

'What do the bad men look like?' Holly had come into the room, eyes wide.

'Well, that's the whole point – you can't see them. They hide behind the anonymity of the computer so you don't know what they look like,' Alice explained.

'Oh, for goodness' sake, Mum, I know how to deal with dickheads.'

'Mind your language,' Alice barked.

'Fine, but I want a Twitter account. All my friends have them.'

'You're not getting one. And –'

‘Sorry to interrupt,’ Ben shouted, to be heard. ‘I have to go now.’ He bent to kiss Jools.

Then he gave Holly a bear hug – thankfully, she still allowed him to hug her.

‘If you go for five days, you’ll be gone for a hundred and twenty hours, or if it’s six days, it’ll be a hundred and forty-four hours,’ Holly announced.

‘You are a wonder.’ Ben smiled at her.

‘Daddy, I Googled Eritrea.’ Holly pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket. Reading from it, she told them, ‘The official languages are Tigrinya, English and Arabic. It has a population of six point one three million. A UN report estimated that about seventy per cent of Eritreans cannot meet their food needs on their own.’

Ben knew he had to stop her or she’d keep reading and he’d miss his flight. ‘I’ll take that and read it on the plane. Thank you, Holly.’ He stuffed the paper into his suitcase.

‘You’re such a dork, seriously!’ Jools said.

Holly shrugged. ‘I was just helping Daddy to have information.’

‘I really have to go. Be good for your mother.’

‘If she lets me on Twitter, I’ll be incredibly good.’ Jools wasn’t going to let this go. She could be exhaustingly tenacious when she wanted something, a trait she’d inherited from her mother, although Ben wasn’t about to mention that now.

‘Drop it, Jools, it’s not happening,’ Alice warned.

Ben leant over to give Alice a kiss. He murmured in her ear, ‘Maybe we should let her have an account if all of her friends do. We can keep an eye on it.’

Jools’s bionic ears picked it up. ‘Yes! You see? Even Daddy agrees with me.’

Alice’s eyes flashed. ‘Thanks a lot, Ben. Bloody typical!’

You always give in to her. You never back me up. I'm sick of it. Why don't you just stay in bloody Eritrea?'

Alice stormed out of the room. Ben sighed, headed for the front door and on to the airport.

Her final words were to haunt them both.