

Desperate Decisions a novel by Christina Rowe

Chapter One

Neil saw the green light come on as he passed through the gate on platform 10 and quickened his step. He didn't want to miss the last train. His thoughts were in such a turmoil, he didn't hear the footsteps behind him and almost slammed the door shut in the woman's face as he boarded the last compartment. He wasn't sure she heard his apology as the guard was blowing his whistle for the train to depart. He turned to help her on board and staggered when the train pulled away, causing him to fall on top of her.

The train jarred on its journey with the door banging open. Somehow, he managed to slide off her and retrieve the banging door, all the while jabbering apologies at her. Finding himself staring into her wide violet eyes, only added another dimension to his troubled thoughts. He couldn't remember ever noticing anything attractive in any other women, apart from Clair, until he met Sheena that is. The lady was smiling at him now and her whole face lit up. It seemed she was also relieved to have caught the train and that made all the upset somehow less significant to her.

She didn't remember telling him her name but he called her Joanna as he introduced himself, so she must have. Then she noticed the only other occupants of the compartment, a young couple sitting in the other corner. She could see the woman had tears in her eyes and a puffy face and the young man was looking very grim, staring straight ahead. One of his hands gripped tightly on the curve of the seat and his other was held in the same fashion by, she presumed his wife. Joanna thought so

and they both had wedding rings on. They reminded her of a younger version of herself and Sam but then so did all young couples who appeared to be in love. Sam, dear sweet Sam. He was her partner in business as well as her husband, lover and friend.

The father of her children, twins of 12, Jade and James. She was eager to get home to see him, as always, but at the same time dreading telling him about her meeting in London, still not knowing what to do for the best. Also the best for her was not necessarily the best for Sam and the twins. That was her real dilemma.

The young couple whispered to each other occasionally, but mostly they sat quietly, each deep in their own thoughts. Not knowing what to say to each other. They were both hurting, desperate not to say anything to make the other more miserable. They had been to see a specialist at the hospital with regard to the baby that Emily was carrying. They had been trying since they married three years ago for a family and now their efforts had been rewarded and at the same time thwarted by the heartbreaking news they received that afternoon from the specialist. Steve, the husband, was fighting himself to keep from crying. Not the thing for a man to do. He had to stay strong for Emily but he was finding it hard and hurting so bad. They had spent nearly the whole time since the appointment walking round London talking yet not really saying anything. Both of them trying not to think of the decision they had to make. They had the weekend to make up their minds. Think it over, talk to each other and return on Monday with their decision for the specialist.

The train came to a halt. All of the occupants were so engrossed in their own thoughts and it was a full five minutes before firstly Neil noticed and asked Joanna if she knew what the hold up might be. She just shrugged her shoulders and went back to her thoughts. He opened the window and looked towards the front of the train but

couldn't see any lights or signals that would have made them stop. He sat down again, deep in thought and it was another ten minutes before he rose again to look out the window. The view had changed but Neil didn't understand how that could be.

They were now in what appeared to be in a siding, totally off the main track.

Joanna looked up and seeing the puzzled look on his face, joined him at the window.

'Where are we? This isn't right!' she exclaimed.

'I know' Neil replied. 'It's totally different to where we were five minutes ago and the train hasn't moved to my knowledge.'

Joanna turned to the young couple. 'I don't want to alarm you, but it seems like we have gone right off the main track...' She was interrupted mid-sentence by a man who appeared at the other end of the carriage as if from nowhere, saying in a deep resonant voice.

'You have to leave the train and accompany me to the waiting room.'

Neil, who had been looking out in the direction the man indicated only a few seconds earlier, was astonished to look back and see a small building seemed to have miraculously appeared at the side of the tracks.

'Just what the hell is this, what's going on?' He fumed. He looked at the man, who he assumed to be a guard and felt a sudden incomprehensible fear. The man, seeing the fear in Neil's eyes, responded to it with chilling insight.

'Don't be afraid.'

He was overbearingly tall and black, so much so it was hard to make out his features within the dim lighting of the carriage. He was dressed from head to toe in black too, which added more than a hint of menace to his presence. The silver epaulettes and buttons, the only chink in his blackness, somewhat confirmed Neil's assumption

that he was indeed a guard. He continued to speak. 'You each have a choice to make and while you wait for the train to be made ready to continue, you can give some thought to finding your own way forward. The decisions you all face may even be resolved while you wait.'

Steve got to his feet and addressed the guard. 'If there is a problem with the train, why can't we just wait here on board while it is sorted out?'

'Your wife is pregnant I believe' replied the guard 'and it will be much more comfortable in the waiting room. Please, follow me.'

Steve couldn't understand how he could know his wife was pregnant, she didn't really show yet but he saw something kindly in the guard's eyes and found himself instinctively trusting the guard and gently bent to help his wife up from the seat. He sensed 'It was the right thing to do' and, if somewhat unrealistically, his thoughts had already clarified with regard to the baby. Emily must have felt the same and went willingly with him down the steps after the guard.

Joanna also saw something different in his eyes. She didn't know what it was but followed him and the young couple out of the train. Her thoughts were, not so much on what was happening but, on her choice of future employment or continued self-employed partnership with Sam.

Neil was scared and continued his verbal attempts to stop them following, to no avail. He shouted questions about the strangeness of the situation, why they had to go to a waiting room in the middle of nowhere and where had the guard come from. He couldn't see a connecting door to the next carriage, but there was no way he was staying on this train alone.

He hurried after them, still protesting, but his thoughts were not solely fearful. They drifted momentarily from what was happening, to his need to resolve his choice of Claire or Sheena.

Chapter Two

Emily and Steve stepped into the waiting room behind the guard and Steve led her gently to a double seat in the corner near a blazing log fire. Emily was surprised to realise that she was indeed shivering a little and the warmth of the room was very welcoming. She laid her blonde head on her husband's shoulder and felt so warm and comfortable it was only a matter of seconds before she drifted into a deep sleep. Steve too was yawning and as he sat there and listened to his wife's gentle snores, he found himself looking round the room and was amazed at the dreamlike surroundings he was in.

The door they had passed through was more like an expensive lawyers' office door, deep mahogany leather with buttons. The ceilings and walls were clean, bright and white. On one of the walls was a projection screen and he could see blurred images which, as he stared, gradually became clearer until he could see a child's image form in the centre of the screen.

The child was about seven years old, very angelic looking with his wife's curly blonde hair and green eyes. She was curled over slightly and sitting in a wheelchair. The wheelchair was in a classroom with about seven similar other children and they were all painting. Subconsciously, he noted a calendar on the wall showing March, 1989, 8 years from now! Two of the children were on mats and one little boy was painting with his toes. He had stumps where his arms should be.

As he watched them, he saw a door opening into the room and Emily entered. She had sad eyes but smiled a welcome at the teacher and walked across the room to the little girl who had her hair and eyes and gently, cupping her face with her hands, she kissed her. The little girl smiled up at her and showed her the picture she was painting. It was a picture of her family. Steve recognised the little girl and Emily in the picture but the other person was not him. It was another child, a little boy who was holding Emily's hand as she pushed the wheelchair with their daughter in it.

He knew it was their daughter and he found his thoughts drifting again from the screen to another image in his head a memory of the second visit with Emily to the specialist's office on the Monday to give him the answer to their decision about the baby. Steve didn't know at that time that it was a little girl but he remembered sitting down and the specialist asking them if they had made their decision. Emily looked at Steve and answered the specialist by saying:

'We need to know how severely handicapped our child will be.'

They listened to every word the specialist said about how they could never be sure with spina bifida. The findings of the scan and the amniocentesis showed it was unlikely that the child would be able to walk, but they could not determine how severe the handicap would be or indeed what lifespan the child could expect to achieve. If Steve and Emily decided to go ahead with the birth, he would ensure they received all the relevant help available and an organisation called ASBAH (Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus) would be of great assistance to them. The final decision was of course theirs and he really could not influence them further. If they decided on a termination they must do it soon or it would ethically and medically be too late.

Steve was aware of the pleading in Emily's eyes to give the specialist the right decision. He remembered discussing the options, at great length, over the weekend and the heartache the moral and ethical implications had given to them but he couldn't remember actually making a decision.

The next vision he had was of the birth of their daughter. He witnessed the pain on Emily's face as she gave birth to Lauren, the joy when she held her in her arms and the pride of taking her home from the hospital. He remembered the looks of pity on all their friends and family's faces when they heard of the handicap and Emily's face smiling through the pain and the hurt of the first few months of Laurens' life. How he had held her crying in her sleep at night and how he had tried to help her - at first. He remembered coping somehow with the jealousy of the unending attention Emily had to give to the baby and dealing with the guilt that followed on from that before he began going out more and more after work.

He also recalled the pain he caused her simply by not being there enough, the despair he felt because he didn't think he would ever hold her in his arms and make love to her again the way he used too and how he had cried himself after forcing his need on her when he knew he shouldn't have. It had made things so bad between them, resulting in Emily rejecting him more and devoting all her time and energy into caring for Lauren.

Chapter Three

The weekend their son had been conceived, Steve had been feeling particularly sorry for himself. He had left work at the printers at his normal time 4.30 on a Friday and couldn't bear the thought of going home and, in his opinion, being virtually ignored.

He didn't want to go to the social club they had joined where they had made so many friends, because they all knew and he didn't want their sympathy. He also didn't want to see the looks of disapproval he knew would be forthcoming, especially from the women, due to him not going home to help his wife with Lauren. So he went to the local pub. He parked his car in the car park, knowing it was only fifteen minutes walk from home, so he could leave the car there and have a good drink. He could be alone in his misery and have a drink in peace and quiet.

He went to the end of the bar and ordered a pint of lager. The barmaid knew him as he had been in there once or twice before, but not as well as the one in the social club, so she just smiled a welcome and a few words of greeting, fetched his pint and left him to his thoughts.

He desperately wanted to go home and be greeted with a hug and a kiss from his wife, chat about their days' events, cuddle and play with his daughter, while Emily set about getting their supper but he knew it wouldn't be like that. If he went home, his wife would be agitated, busy with Lauren and he would have to get his own dinner and try and force her to have some too. She was getting painfully thin from neglecting herself. There were dark shadows under her once beautiful eyes and Steve would be lucky if she could manage even half a smile. He knew he was being selfish and, how hard it was for her, but he couldn't help himself. He was just so totally miserable and lonely for her attention. It seemed much more than year ago that they had been so happy, carefree and deeply in love and he blamed Lauren for bringing that to an end and yes, he resented her being in this world.

He must have had about six or seven pints just sitting there in the corner and didn't even realise that he must have been crying when he ordered the last of them.

However the barmaid did! She brought his pint with a tissue and asked if he was okay. He knew he didn't deserve her concern, or her kind words, but told her a load of rubbish about how unfair life was. How his wife didn't understand him. Huh! That old chestnut! The barmaid was being very nice to him and it felt good to have someone's attention and sympathy.

'She wouldn't be so nice if she knew what a selfish bastard I really was though, would she?' he thought. 'It's getting late so perhaps I better go home. Lauren should be in bed now and maybe Emily will be glad to see me, maybe I will get that cuddle and kiss and we can curl up on the sofa and pretend things are back to how they were before...'

Steve turned his key in the lock. It was very quiet. He looked at his watch; it was 9.30. He walked into the living room and saw her sitting on the sofa with a glass of wine in her hand. There was a half empty bottle on the coffee table in front of her. She looked beautiful! Her hair lately was usually straggly and pulled back into a ponytail and her clothes were crumpled and stained with baby food. Now her curly blonde hair shone and cascaded over her shoulders. She was wearing his favourite emerald green dress he had bought for her because it matched her eyes. The living room too was clean and tidy, the absence of the normal clutter, matching the difference of her appearance.

She looked up at him. Her big, sad eyes melted the ice in his heart.

'I am sorry I am late honey, you know how it is.' Steve felt terrible. 'I just popped into the pub for a drink, got talking and didn't realise the time.'

‘It’s okay Steve.’ She said. He knew it wasn’t though. ‘I wanted to surprise you. The dinners’ in the oven, hopefully, it’s not spoiled.’

Steve heard an edge creep back into her voice and could tell she was trying hard not to be cross with him. ‘I thought it was about time we had a meal together. Mum has taken Lauren for a couple of hours so we could at least have a little time on our own.’ There was a whine coming through quite clearly now. So Steve’s guilty tone turned into an attacking one, like all men’s seem to do when they know they are in the wrong.

‘I am sorry but why didn’t you ring me and let me know?’

‘I wanted it to be a surprise’ she said.

‘Now I have spoiled it, haven’t I? Big bad Steve, couldn’t do it right if I tried’

‘They will be back soon. If you had come straight home...’ Her voice trailed away and she was looking at the clock on the mantle when the telephone rang. Steve crossed to the small table that was next to the door to the hall and heard the sound of Lauren crying in the background, before he heard Emily’s mum Janice.

‘Hi Steve, hope you had a nice meal but I am really struggling here with Lauren. Is it okay for us to bring her back now?’ Steve made a grimace at Emily as he replied.

‘Of course Jan, I would come and get her but I have had a couple of drinks.’

‘No worries, Frank will run us round. It’s nice to know we’ve been some help. You enjoyed the meal and wine then?’ Steve could hear the joviality in her voice and realised he was really going to be in the shit now. His heart missed a beat as he muttered agreement, thanked Janice and said he would see them in a little while.

He put the receiver down, sighing deeply and made his way back to sit beside his wife on the sofa. He knew he was in the wrong and tried to tell her.

‘Emily honey, I am sorry, I’m such an asshole treating you like this when you’ve gone to all this trouble sorting out a meal, a bottle of wine and more importantly time for us and what did I do? Go to the pub as usual. Please, can you forgive me?’ He tried to take her in his arms but she pushed him away.

‘What’s the point Steve? You constantly complain that I don’t make any effort and when I do, this is the thanks I get.’ The tears in her eyes threatened to fall and Steve felt so guilty, he found himself back on attack.

‘If you had telephoned me, I would have been straight home from work. How was I supposed to know what you were planning and you haven’t made any effort to look this good for me since Emily came along. Someone has to earn the money to pay the mortgage and household bills, put food on the table and that’s without all the additional expenses that come with our darling daughter!’

Steve knew he had gone too far but the harsh words had been said and any chance of rescuing the evening had gone. Instead he went out to the kitchen and poured himself a large scotch. He was downing a large mouthful, leaning forward over the sink, when he heard Emily scream at him from the doorway.

‘Don’t you think you’ve had enough you bastard.’ She grabbed at him, trying to turn him round to face her.

‘Yes I’ve had enough of you, you stupid fucking bitch.’ He swung round crazily virtually spitting in her face. ‘You know I didn’t want you to have her in the first place. I work all day and come home to this shit so if I want to have a few drinks, I damn well will.’ He pushed past Emily and headed back towards the whisky bottle.

‘You nasty, selfish bastard!’ Emily said through her tears, which were now streaming down her face. ‘We discussed it, you agreed it would be hard, but we

would be okay. You would be okay, more like.’ She stumbled over the words and Steve tried to justify himself by continuing to blame her.

‘I agreed because it was what you wanted. It’s too late to change your mind now.’

‘How can you say that? Emily cried ‘We both agreed. Don’t you love her even a little?’ she whimpered. ‘I know it’s hard, but she is so beautiful and helpless, and I love her so much.’

‘It’s just too much.’ Steve was whining now. ‘You give her too much love, there’s nothing left for me.’

‘I try Steve. I tried tonight.’ She was becoming more distraught. ‘I need you to try too, please don’t do this.’

‘Don’t do what? The evening is already spoilt. Your mum’s on her way with Lauren, the dinner is ruined and I am having another drink, so fuck off!’ Steve’s words were hanging in the air when the front door opened and Frank walked in.

He had used the spare key and stood open mouthed staring at Steve with pure hatred in his eyes as Steve shot past him up the stairs to the bedroom. Steve could hear Lauren crying and whispering coming from the kitchen as Emily spoke to her parents. He could imagine they were being given the full story of what a bastard he was.

The last thing he remembered hearing was Emily saying not to worry they would be fine before falling into a drunken sleep. He woke up as Emily got into bed as far away from him as she could, which wasn’t far, as he was sprawled across the middle. He sat up, crawled out of the bed and went into the bathroom.

When he returned he noticed it was 11.30 and Lauren was fast asleep in her cot and Emily was curled up in a foetal position on the corner of the bed next to the cot.

Undressing quickly he got into bed and tried to cuddle up to her but she held her body rigid, whilst shrugging him off.

‘I’m sorry honey, please.’ He tried to smooth talk his way back into her favour. ‘Just give me a little cuddle.’

‘Go to sleep Steve’ she said. ‘I am tired, let’s just forget it.’

How long are we going to forget it for? Please honey lets have a little cuddle. I want to try now.’ He tried to cajole her. Trying to be humorous he said ‘I suppose a shag is out of the question then?’ He felt his penis start to rise and hated himself for it but he needed to feel close to her again. He needed her so badly.

‘Come on baby, please.’ He kept trying. ‘It’s been so long.’

‘Leave me alone.’ She shrugged him off. ‘I hate you.’

‘No you don’t, not really.’ He tenderly stroked her back. ‘Come on, it’s been nearly five months, I can’t wait much longer.’ He pulled her over onto her back and, ignoring her struggles, he forced himself into her. He raped her!

‘God forgive me but I can’t stop’ was the thought uppermost in his mind. All the time she had tears streaming down her face. At some point she did stop struggling and just lay there but that seemed to Steve to be a sign of compliance, almost an invitation to continue. Deep down, he knew it was rape whether she stopped struggling or not.

Afterwards he rolled off and she just turned over and went back into the foetal position, sobbing quietly.

‘I am so sorry baby, I wanted you so bad’ he tried to cuddle up to her. She didn’t push him away, but didn’t respond either. ‘How could I have done such a thing?’

His guilt and disgust with himself were overpowering. He couldn’t sleep for the rest of the night. Emily did, but he had ruined anything good that may have been left in

their relationship. She would never be able to forgive him and he would never be able to forgive himself!

Chapter Four

The next morning, when he heard Lauren stir, he went down to get her bottle. By the time he came back upstairs, Emily was sitting on the bed with Lauren in her arms. He just handed her the bottle. Lauren gurgled happily at him but he couldn't even look Emily in the eye. He left them there and went to have a shower and get dressed. He spent the rest of the weekend pottering around the house doing all the odd jobs that he had put off for weeks. Trying to atone for what he had done, as if he could. He cooked Sunday lunch and supper, even fed Lauren two or three times, but Emily hardly said a word to him, she just looked desperately sad and hurt.

Steve left work early on the Monday and came home to find them in the garden. Lauren was happily bouncing in her little chair. Emily was knitting and chatting away to her. The perfect little family and he had blown away his membership, big time.

He made some tea, took it out to her and sat on the bench next to her.

'Will I put the dinner on love' he said determined to keep trying to show how much he loved her and how sorry he was. 'What would you like?'

'There's a lasagne in the oven. If you put it on now it should be ready in about 45 minutes.' she actually smiled at him. She too was wishing she could turn the clock back. She wanted to save what was left of their marriage, thinking it was probably too late but hoping it might not be.

‘Okay, I will go and make some salad and get some garlic bread out of the freezer.’

He felt a surge of hope rush through him. ‘I won’t be long.’ The hope gave a spring to his step and he went into the house whistling cheerily as he prepared the dinner.

Maybe, just maybe she can forgive me’ he thought. His determination to really try to make it up to her spurred him on. Some people say it takes a tragedy to bring back the love between a couple who have drifted apart, and he hoped that’s what would happen with them. He knew he needed to change and prayed it wasn’t too late.

He would remember in the not too distant future that that was the night he hoped Jake was conceived. It didn’t bear thinking about that it could have been as the result of the rape. They had a rare night of peace from Lauren. She had gone to sleep about seven and slept right through. They had a lovely meal and Steve had gone out to get a couple of bottles of wine from the off-licence while Emily fed and changed Lauren and put her to bed. They both tried to put Friday night to the back of their minds and made a conscious effort to talk about the future. How they would make more time for themselves and how Steve would help more with Lauren.

They watched a film snuggled upon the sofa and went to bed at about 10 o’clock.

Lying in bed together Steve put his arm around Emily and she snuggled up to him. They made bittersweet love. Steve kissed her gently all over, truly made love to her in the ways he knew she liked. He took as much time as was humanly possible to ensure that she came to orgasm before entering her and basked in every squeal of incredible delight before exploding with more force than he can ever remember doing before or since. The joy of hearing her pleasure and feeling her multiple orgasms was almost more than he could bear. Almost!

Afterwards as they lay in each other’s arms, they had such high hopes for the future.

How could they know it was all to go so horribly wrong.

Chapter Five

It is said what you sow so shall you reap and Jake was completely normal, Emily had to go through all the same tests as for Lauren, but all had been well. He was born when Lauren was 14 months old. However that night proved to be the last time Steve made love to Emily. Of course he was full of good intentions and really tried over the next few weeks. Coming straight home from work he either played with Lauren while Emily prepared dinner or, more often than not, he cooked the dinner if Emily was busy seeing to Lauren. The atmosphere was decidedly better but Emily was so tired at nights she invariably fell asleep on the sofa or, as soon as her head hit the pillow, she was gone.

A fortnight after that weekend Steve called in at the same pub on the Friday intending to have a couple of pints before going home. The same barmaid was on and she seemed really pleased to see him. She brought his pint over to him and as it was pretty quiet in there, they got talking. Her name was Jill and she had only been working there a few months. Seeing he was in good spirits she had asked him what had happened to cheer him up so much. She had remembered how upset he had been the last time he was there.

He found himself telling her everything that had happened between Emily and himself – leaving out the rape – and how they were now back on course. As they chatted he found himself thinking how he was already starting to feel neglected again. The more he drank the more he felt that he was the only one making any effort in his marriage. She told him she had taken the job at the pub as she was on

her own following a bitter divorce and needed the extra income to buy out her ex-husbands' share of the house.

She wasn't as lovely as Emily but still fairly attractive and during the course of the evening he found himself warming to her more and more. It was almost 10 o'clock when she said hadn't he better be getting home?

'You will be ending up like me, divorced and lonely, reduced to staying out every night and chatting up barmaids!'

Realising how late it had become he got up and thanking her for her company, he left the remains of his pint and hurried out the door. She called after him.

'See you tomorrow maybe Steve?'

When he got home it was to find Emily asleep on the sofa. Scanning the room he took in the state of it. It was like a pig sty. He wished he had stayed at the pub and went into the kitchen to see if there was anything to eat. There wasn't, not much anyway and the kitchen was in much the same state.

Dirty dishes piled high in the sink and the baby's bottles, although obviously sterilised, were strewn over the side. He remembered that he had arranged with Emily to go to the supermarket after he finished work. That explained the lack of food. He made up the bottles and put them in the fridge, washed up the dishes and after making himself a cheese sandwich and a cup of coffee, went back into the front room.

Emily was stirring. She looked a mess. Her hair was straggly and her clothes were grubby. Obviously another bad day! While he sat looking at her, she woke up and, seeing the disgust in his eyes, she immediately went on the defensive. Her hurt green eyes reflecting her misery she said: 'What time is it? Are you just home now? What happened to us going shopping?'

‘Time you had a shower and put on some clean clothes.’ he replied before he could stop himself.

‘Perhaps if you had come straight home instead of going to the pub I would have had the time.’ She spat at him. ‘All you think of is you. I might have known it wouldn’t last long you selfish bastard, so much for you going to change.’

‘Oh shut up and stop feeling so sorry for yourself’ Steve retorted. ‘Perhaps if there was something worth coming home to, I would. All I’ve got is a screaming brat and a slut of a wife.’ he yelled at her.

She jumped off the sofa and went for him, fists flying. ‘I hate you. I would kill you if I had the energy but I haven’t got any left. I used it up taking care of Lauren and our home. Why don’t you just piss off and die in some corner.’

He held her wrists to stop the punches and pushed her back onto the sofa. ‘I’m sorry Emily, but I just can’t go on like this. I know it’s not your fault but I really can’t help any more than I do already. There must be some other way to cope with Lauren. It’s just too much. Please, won’t you even consider the care home they told us about?’

Emily’s body visibly crumbled, shuddering as she sobbed. ‘I can’t. You know I can’t, she’s ours, we can’t put her into an institution, don’t ask me to do that, ever.’

The last word was barely audible, her voice trembling with emotion. Neither of them spoke for what seemed like an eternity. Each lost in their own thoughts. Steve wanted things how they were before Lauren. He hated himself for the way he felt and knew Emily hated him too, but felt he was being punished and he didn’t know what for. Who in God’s name was responsible? He had heard all the answers from the so called experts. It was just bad luck. It is no-one’s fault. No one was responsible. It was just something that happened. He felt useless. No good for Emily or Lauren and no damn good to anyone. He was really feeling sorry for himself.

Emily meanwhile was having similar thoughts, but blamed herself too. She was scared for the future and wondered what was going to happen to them and where could they go from here?

Chapter Six

The next day was Saturday and Steve woke early. Emily was already up and giving Lauren her bottle. He sat down beside her and almost in a whisper said

‘What are we going to do love? It can’t go on like this.’

‘I don’t know Steve’ she replied. ‘What can we do? She is our child, our responsibility and we really have no choice, as far as I am concerned anyway.’

She kissed Lauren tenderly and stroked her head gently. Steve felt he had been dismissed. From then on he would take one day at a time.

Some days were okay and some were downright miserable. The majority of the time Steve went straight home but on Fridays he went to the pub. He became really good friends with Jill and Fridays became the highlight of his week. It probably would have stayed like that if Emily hadn’t been pregnant. It was about a month after their last row when she told him. They had settled into a routine of just existing. She looked after Lauren, he went to work and at the weekends, he did the shopping and any odd jobs that needed doing around the house and garden. Most of their evenings were spent watching television. Not often together. When Lauren didn’t settle, Emily would see to her and frequently went up to bed with her around nine o’clock. Janice, Emily’s mum, did offer to have Lauren and give them a night out but Emily said no. She didn’t think to ask Steve whether he wanted to take her out. So he was

surprised when he came home one Thursday and Janice and Frank were there. They were on their way out with Lauren in Frank's arms.

'Hi Steve' Janice said cheerily. 'We are just taking Lauren with us for a couple of hours. Give you both a break.'

'Oh right.' Steve looked at Frank but he didn't meet his eyes. He just nodded as he carried Lauren past him. 'See you later then'.

Steve made his way indoors. Emily was sitting on the edge of the armchair twisting her hands together. She looked up apprehensively when he sat down.

'Steve we need to talk. I have some news for you.' She was trying to find the words and it seemed to take forever before she just blurted it out. 'I'm pregnant.'

'I'm pregnant.' She repeated herself. 'And I need to know how you feel before I can decide what to do about it.'

'What do you mean, decide what to do?' Steve was shocked and confused. His first thought being, how could she be? Then he remembered, that weekend.

Steve's thoughts were in turmoil. (Was it the rape on the Friday night or, please God the following Monday, when we made love?).

Emily continued; 'We haven't really got a marriage any more have we?' she said adding; 'I can't manage another baby too, not by myself anyway. I can't imagine being able to have an abortion. Anyway, I will have to be tested again to see if the baby is okay.' Her voice trailed away.

'What do you mean how do I feel. I don't understand?' Steve was mystified.

'If you don't want to be around, to help and support me, I would rather know now. I have spoken to Mum and she and Dad will stand by me and help me.'

'What? You've told them before me' he shouted. 'Of course I want to be around. Why wouldn't I? I can't believe you've told them first.' he said accusingly.

‘I’m sorry Steve but I needed to talk to someone. We haven’t really talked since God knows when. I need total commitment from you if we are to have any chance of making it.’ She frowned at him in despair. He didn’t know what hurt more. Her asking her parents for help or knowing they knew the state of their marriage.

‘Just tell me what you need me to do to convince you that I am and, always will be, there for you.’ He begged her. ‘I love you, you know that.’

‘Just loving me isn’t enough Steve. You have to totally be there for me and both of the kids. Do you understand?’

‘I will be, I promise.’ He knew the fear showed clearly on his face though.

Chapter Seven

Steve was the perfect husband and father for the next two months but even although they snuggled up in bed together most nights and were affectionate in almost every way, they never made love. Emily eventually suggested to Steve that he should start going out again on a Friday night. She didn’t want to go out but her Mum would come over and keep her company. There was no reason for him to stay in every night. She would be able to relax and rest while her Mum saw to Emily and she wanted him to be able to relax too.

Steve did. He relaxed straight into Jill’s arms and, before long, her bed. He didn’t mean it to happen of course, husbands never do but he was also aware they all say that. He was ashamed for breaking his vows, and ashamed for using Jill, but that didn’t stop him, until Emily found out.

On that next Friday he visited the Pub. Jill wasn’t working and he asked the new barmaid where she was. She said she had swapped nights with her and instead of

Fridays and Saturdays, Jill now worked Saturdays and Sundays. So Steve had a couple of pints and went home. Emily was surprised. She had thought he would be out all night. They sat in the kitchen drinking coffee and chatting while her Mum put Lauren to bed. It made a pleasant change and, after Janice went home, they continued to just chill out together, totally relaxed and found they actually enjoyed each others company.

The following week when her Mum came round Emily asked her if she minded if she joined Steve for a couple of drinks as she had enjoyed herself so much the previous week. Janice didn't mind and Emily gave her the number of the social club so she could ring if there were any problems. She obviously assumed that's where Steve went and he was happy to let her. Needless to say it all went wrong.

From the moment they got to the club it seemed Emily was on the edge of her seat.

They said hello to the regulars, who made a big fuss of Emily and went into the hall to sit down. She only had one drink before saying she was sorry but she wanted to go home. She felt out of place and worried about Lauren. Steve tried, in vain, to persuade her to stay until she announced angrily that if he didn't want to take her, she would call a cab. So they left.

'What's the point in me trying to make the effort to be a model husband if you can't even pretend to enjoy my company?' Steve asked on the way home.

'I tried tonight' she replied adding sarcastically 'I can't help it if I prefer Mum and Laurens company to yours. You can piss off out on your own in future.'

When the taxi pulled up at the house she stormed off indoors. Steve went to the pub. He walked in the door and there was Jill, only she was on the customers' side of the bar. The look on her face let him know how pleased she was to see him.

‘Hi Steve, long time no see. Mandy told me you were asking after me last week so I thought I would pop in and see if you were here tonight.’

She was just what his bruised ego needed. He smiled warmly joining her at the bar.

‘Hello Jill, nice to see you too. Can I get you a drink?’

They spent the rest of the evening chatting in the corner.

He shut his mind to the nagging voices telling him where it was heading and imagined he was eighteen again with no responsibilities or baggage. They talked about schooldays, holidays, anything and everything, apart from his marriage. Before they knew, it was closing time and Steve offered to walk her home. He tried to say no when she invited him in for coffee, knowing coffee was not what was on the menu, but said yes and as soon as the door was shut, she was in his arms. He kissed her with all the passion that had built up over the last four months and she returned it, with interest. He wished it could have been Emily in his arms but the thought disappeared into the oblivion of raw sex. Jill seemed to ooze sexuality. Steve was surprised by her experience. She took control and made him feel like the best lover she had ever had.

They didn’t even make it upstairs the first time. Lost in their mutual passion, they had sex against the wall in the hall. Then, after they went into the kitchen and actually had a cup of coffee, she took his hand and led him through the hall and upstairs to her bedroom. He felt like he was flying. She undressed him, slowly on her bed, kissing him all over and every inch of his body responded. She left him lying there exposed while she went over to the small c.d. player on her dressing table.

The room was decorated like, he imagined, a boudoir would be. Steve momentarily wondered about that but when he heard the music, and particularly the song, he was lost again. The song was ‘Sexual Healing’ and boy was it! Jill danced for him

swaying in time with the music. She began to do a striptease, revealing the full works, suspenders, stockings and a peep hole red lace bra with matching panties.

Steve couldn't contain himself. He tried to keep it slow but it was impossible.

He pulled her onto the bed before she could take off the stockings and suspenders.

Later walking home, it occurred to him that she had obviously planned the whole thing. Surely that kind of underwear wasn't her normal attire, and she did say she had been in the pub, hoping he would be there. He still had his family to fuel his guilt but in the circumstances felt a little less guilty about using her.

When he left, Jill asked if they could see each other again and trying to keep it casual he said he would probably be in the pub next Friday. He had a lot of thinking to do. He still loved Emily and wanted to be a good husband and father, but if it was not happening, where was the harm in 'a little bit on the side?'

Chapter Eight

Emily was waiting up. It must have been after two but there were no recriminations.

She just smiled and said. 'I'm sorry Steve. I don't know what's wrong with me.'

'I'm sorry too honey and I'm sorry I'm so late, they had a lock in at the Club.'

It was amazing how easily the lie slipped off his tongue.

'Mum was even surprised to see me back so soon.' She continued. 'She told me off for not staying out with you.'

'Well maybe I should have tried harder to persuade you to stay' he replied. He was starting to get a little hot under the collar, and panicking about getting close enough to her in case she could smell Jill's perfume, or worse, the smell of sex on him. He

added: 'I'm beat honey. I think I'll have a quick shower and get the smell of smoke off me before I go to bed.'

'Oh right' her disappointment hung in the air.

She wanted something more? Steve knew he couldn't give her what he thought that would be. Not now. What a mess. Perhaps he could, after his shower? Steve really wasn't sure whether he was relieved or disappointed, when he heard her snoring softly by the time he finished in the shower. He crept into bed and felt her arm go round his waist but she didn't wake. It took him quite a while to fall asleep, his mind buzzing.

('What can I do now? Could I cope with a full blown affair? Would I be able to live a double life? I struggled to cope with life before I slept with Jill. Could I cope now?')

The following Friday took the matter out of his hands.

He went home straight from work as usual and Lauren was having one of her bad days. Emily was stressed and it transpired that she had been intending to go out with him again. However, with Lauren like this, she really didn't think her Mum could cope, so unfortunately she couldn't take the chance and hoped he didn't mind too much. To be fair it was not just a bad day for Lauren. It had been a bad week and although Emily and Steve were getting on well, they had not had the opportunity, or time, to be close. Steve was upset that she wouldn't be going out with him but secretly relieved because it left the way clear for him to see Jill.

As he expected, Jill was waiting in the pub for him. The electricity between them was so powerful, it was a wonder that they managed to contain themselves long enough to have a couple of drinks. It was about an hour after Steve arrived when Jill suggested they went back to her place. He didn't need much persuading.

She had a bottle of wine on ice in the bedroom.

Steve poured and sipped the wine whilst Jill put on a c.d. Before she could take control he pulled her down on the bed and undressed her, kissing her all over but didn't have the talent or the inclination to do a strip for her. Without him realising, Jill was back in control. She undressed him and knelt straddled over him on the bed. Reaching to grasp one of her full breasts that were swaying as she rode him, he caught a movement out of the corner of his eye.

To his horror, Emily was standing at the door.

'You bastard' she shrieked. 'You dirty stinking bastard'

'Emily. Oh my God!' Pushing Jill off, he made a dive for his trousers on the floor.

Emily heard the crash as she ran down the stairs and through the door. She had found the door ajar when she followed them from the pub. She felt such a fool and couldn't imagine how he could hurt her so badly. The tears streamed down her face as she ran down the street.

Lauren had worn herself out and fallen asleep shortly after Steve had left. Emily thought she would surprise him by turning up at the club. Only he wasn't there. Old Jim had told her he had taken to drinking at The Crown, on the corner of Bridge Street and she had called a cab to go there. She was getting out of the cab across the street from the pub when she saw him leave with the woman and decided to follow them.

Well she was the one who had got the surprise and now she was determined to make him pay.

Steve couldn't get his legs into his trousers and, in his panic, had fallen over. If it hadn't been so serious, it would have been pretty comical to watch. He managed to get one leg in and, losing his balance, crashed into the wall.

He knocked himself out cold. He came to after a few minutes to find Jill bending over him asking if he was okay. On realising he was just stunned, she said she was so sorry, she couldn't have closed the door properly in the rush to get upstairs and that must have been how Emily got in.

'How did she know where I lived Steve?' Jill said.

'I really don't know, but I must get home and try to explain.' Steve hurriedly dressed. 'I'm sorry Jill, this should never have happened and it won't be happening again.'

'I just can't do this.' He knew he could never see her again, whether or not he managed to make up with Emily, it just wasn't what he wanted. He knew it wasn't her fault, but she would get over him, and his final thought on leaving was she was the one who had done all the running, even if he had made an easy catch.

Chapter Nine

He ran all the way home. What was he going to say to her?

He turned the corner of his road to see Emily leaning out the bedroom window, throwing all his clothes into the street.

'Honey please. Don't do this.' he said, trying to catch the clothes. 'I'm really sorry, please, let me explain'

'No you can't.' She spat out the words. 'I really thought you had changed but you never did, you just got worse. You can do what the hell you like now. To think I came down to the pub to surprise you.' She shouted. 'Well I certainly did that. Didn't I? Saw you leave with that tart and followed you.'

‘Stop, please. I know this is probably what I deserve but I’m really so sorry. Let me make it up to you. Try to explain.’ He pleaded.

‘It’s far too late for that now. It’s too late for us and I never ever want to see you again.’ She was so calm, considering what she was doing and Steve knew then. This was really it.

‘You can stay at her place for all I care. You can collect the rest of your stuff tomorrow. After 10, I will be out’ she added slamming the window shut.

Steve tried his key in the lock, but she had that covered too. It was bolted. He thought about banging on the door but realised that if he woke Lauren up that would be the final nail in his coffin. For a brief moment, he thought of going back to Jill’s but knew it wasn’t really an option. Maybe, if he sat in the car, she might come round later, feel sorry for him. Then he realised that the car keys were indoors. There was nowhere for him to go. He couldn’t face any family or friends. He started walking down the path when he heard the door open. Janice, Emily’s mum called to him.

‘Here take the car keys.’ she threw them, quickly closing the door before he could reply. He resigned himself to sleeping in the car, hoping to speak to Emily in the morning.

He had been sitting in the car about an hour when he heard Frank’s car pull up. He saw the look of fury on his face and tried to slide down and hide. No chance.

Frank stormed over and started banging his fist on the window, swearing loudly.

Steve had never heard that sort of language from him before. He was so angry and Steve had no argument. With great relief, he saw the front door open and Janice come out and drag Frank away.

‘Leave it Frank’ she said. ‘He isn’t worth it and Emily doesn’t need this.’ Then turning to Steve she said. ‘You had better get out of here, now!’ Realising she was right, Steve started the engine and drove away.

He had no idea where to go and ended up driving around half the night. He eventually stopped at a late night coffee shop on the outskirts of town. Drinking cold coffee and feeling really sorry for himself, he tried desperately to come up with an acceptable excuse for his behaviour. There wasn’t one and he knew he had no-one to blame but himself. No reason to stop the feelings of contempt for his actions either.

Chapter Ten

It was not until Jake was born that Steve saw Emily again. He had spoken to her on the phone several times and was amazed at how strong she had become. They had only spoken to make arrangements for him to see Lauren. Emily made sure she was out when he came to visit. Janice was there and although she was perfectly civil to him, she wouldn’t answer any of his questions about Emily and how she was coping. Emily told her just to say she was okay and the pregnancy was going well. Emily felt she’d given him more than enough chances and simply didn’t love him anymore.

She accepted his financial help, which was only fair, and Steve enjoyed his time with Lauren and she was glad of it. It was funny how she always seemed to have a good day when he visited. Eventually, Steve stopped wishing Emily would be there too.

Even on Lauren’s first birthday when he thought there would be a good chance of seeing her, she was at an ante-natal appointment during his morning visit.

Steve had no choice but to accept their marriage was over. When they did speak, she made it clear there was no chance of any reconciliation. Emily hoped Steve didn’t

think she was being spiteful when she said how much easier it was for her, not to have me to worry about him anymore. She could concentrate more on Lauren and the pregnancy. Also, on Lauren's bad days, Janice was a much better crutch than he had ever been. She did still care for him, but before he could get his hopes up, she made it crystal clear that it was not enough to want to get back together. She wanted a divorce.

Janice called him when Emily went into labour.

She was going to the hospital with Emily and needed him to look after Lauren. Frank was not confident enough to be with her on his own for too long. Steve rushed round as soon as he put down the telephone but they had already left for the hospital. Frank left shortly after Steve arrived and he contented himself with caring for Lauren. He played with her, fed and changed her and waited for the phone to ring.

Some six hours later, he heard a key in the lock and rushed into the hall. It was Frank. He smiled warmly at Steve, all previous animosity gone.

'It's a boy. Mother and baby are both well. Emily said would you like to take Lauren in to see them. I'll drive you if you'd like, I've all the kit for Lauren in my car.'

'Yes please Frank. Thanks. Give me a minute.' Steve hurried to get Lauren ready, all the while talking to her and letting her know they were going to see her little brother.

It took Steve's breath away when he walked into the ward and saw Emily cradling their son in her arms. She looked beautiful. Jake did too.

'Hello Steve' she smiled. 'He's just like you isn't he?' He had Steve's colouring certainly, much darker than the girl's. He felt the tears welling up in his eyes.

Emily asked him if he would like to hold the baby but he couldn't, he was shaking too much. He was an emotional and physical wreck. It could all have been so perfect. It looked so perfect, to an outsider.

'A Picture of a mother nestling her newly born baby on the hospital bed. Standing alongside, the nervous, happy father was holding the hand of a pretty little girl in a buggy, not much more than a baby herself with the adoring grandparents looking on.'

Perfect, to the onlooker. Painful for Steve, and that was his cross to bear. What a stupid fool he was and what a selfish pig he had been. How could anyone have thrown all that away?

Chapter Eleven

Steve thought about little else over the next six years while he watched his children grow. He became the doting weekend father. There are so many of them these days. You find them in the parks in the summer and in the museums and Mc Donalds in the winter. It doesn't matter whether it's London or Leeds. They are everywhere up and down the country.

The weeks following Jake's birth were hard for Steve, being so closely involved with Emily and helping out with the kids. He wished there was some chance of rekindling her love for him. When they had a particularly good weekend and he had helped put the kids to bed on the Sunday, Emily asked him if he would like a glass of wine with her before he left. He jumped at the opportunity to spend some time with her, and as they drank their wine, he plucked up the courage to ask her outright.

‘Emily, is there any chance we could try again?’ He reached for her hand. She surprised him with the speed at which she jumped up.

‘No Steve, I’m sorry, but I just don’t love you anymore. Please don’t spoil it. There’s no going back. Let’s enjoy having a good friendship for the kids’ sake.’ She pleaded.

Her words tore into Steve’s heart. She didn’t love him. He could tell by her eyes, she meant it. There was nothing more he could do or say that would make any difference.

Emily felt for him as he swallowed hard and stood up. She could see he was struggling to hold back the tears and she wished, for a moment, she could forgive him, but it was too late, the love was gone. She had to be strong, just like all the other times. She knew now that she had always been the strong one in their relationship but it didn’t mean she couldn’t feel his pain.

Steve had to leave before the tears fell. He stuttered a goodbye and left, not with his pride intact and not with any dignity. Emily found her eyes watering too as she went into the kitchen to put the glasses in the sink. He would continue to be a good father, she knew that and in time he would accept what he had done. She would always care for him. Always keep a place in her heart but she had already moved on. .

Chapter Twelve

She had met Paul at the day centre. She had gone along, not only because she felt Lauren needed more stimulus, but because she wanted time to spend with her son.

He was a good baby, he had to be. So much of her time was taken up with Lauren, even with her parents help. The centre was a bright cheery place and Lauren loved

going there, thriving on the specialist help that she received.

Paul was a care assistant and made Emily feel at ease, both with her doubts about 'offloading' Lauren at the centre and taking time for herself and Jake. She only took her one day a week at first. Six months later, when she progressed to two days a week, Emily had struck up a friendship with Paul, who had also developed a mutual bond with Lauren. The first time Paul asked her out, she quickly declined. Only after telling her Mum, who urged her to 'go for it, it will do you good', did she agree. Paul had asked a few more times by then.

It was Lauren who first mentioned Paul to Steve, only to say that he was her special carer. So he got to know him in that capacity, long before he learned of the growing friendship between him and Emily. Over the next two years, he had come to like him too and, when Jake inadvertently said Mummy was out with Paul, he was pleased for her. That was a great shock to him, realising that he was really happy for her. He still loved her deeply and knew that was why he was happy for her. He also reluctantly realised that he had finally grown up.

He had accepted the inevitable by the time, when Jack was a boisterous five years old, Emily married Paul. He knew Paul was a good man, not only with Lauren who adored him, but with Jake too.

Jake had grown into a bright young lad and could sense his father's sadness when he told him about some of the things they got up to as a family. So, as time went by, Jake didn't tell him so much. Steve couldn't even hate Paul, however much he wanted too.

He knew how important it was for him not to spoil the time he had with the kids by constantly harbouring bad feelings. So he learnt to just enjoy the time he had with

them. He had a few relationships but they didn't last very long. He still loved Emily, probably always would. So instead he concentrated on his relationship with his children, forging a strong bond with them and learning to live with the new man in Emily's life.

Chapter Thirteen

Steve woke with a start. He had been dreaming but it was more like a nightmare. Emily was still asleep. It looked like she was dreaming too. He hoped it was a better dream than his while somehow knowing it was not. He kissed her lovingly on the head as he looked round the room. The projection screen wasn't there either it had obviously been part of his dream too. Everything else appeared the same and the other man and Joanna, the woman who had come into the waiting room with them, seemed to be dreaming too. Joanna was on the bench opposite them and the young man was to the right, near the door they had come through. Steve wanted to get up and look outside for the guard but didn't want to disturb Emily. Her head was still resting on his shoulder. Instead, he called out as softly as he could to the young man.

'Excuse me. Hello!'

He tried a couple of times. He watched him stir and he heard him mumble something, but didn't catch what. Then Steve realised the man was talking in his sleep and he strained to try and catch what he was saying.

'Hello' the greeting surprised him.

It was Joanna who had woken from her own dream who called out.

'Hi' Steve replied. 'I was trying to catch his attention to have a look outside and see if he could see what was taking so long with the train. I didn't want to disturb my wife in case it is going to be a while longer.'

'I'll have a look'. She said and walked over to the window.

'I can't see anything.' She cupped her hand to the glass and her forehead, trying to see beyond the reflected light of the room. 'It is very dark outside. I hope it won't be much longer. My husband will be worrying.' She walked over to the door, continuing to speak. 'I have been having a really weird dream too.'

'So have I and surprisingly we have only been here for about 10 minutes' Steve said, looking at his watch and noticing the small distance the minute hand had moved. 'I feel as if I have been asleep for hours, but it must have been just a catnap.'

The woman also looked at her watch.

'Yes, isn't that strange' she said, turning back. 'I thought it was hours too.'

'Could you see anything out there?' Steve repeated his question.

Joanna had sat down again. She had forgotten she had been on her way to the door.

She really was very tired and the room was too warm. She heard the young man say.

'Are you all right? This isn't right, something weird is happening here' but she had already drifted back to sleep.

Chapter Fourteen

Joanna was in her office, it was a caravan actually, on location in Galveston, Texas when her telephone rang. It was six o'clock in the evening so she was surprised to hear her husbands' voice as it was midnight back home in Streatham.

Obviously there was a problem.

‘Hello Sam’ she said fearfully. ‘What’s up?’

She was right to be fearful.

‘There’s no easy way to tell you this Jo’ Sam said.’ James has been arrested. The Charge is ‘Possession, with intent to supply’. I am on my way to the Police Station now. I will call you when I get the full story.’ He heard the cry from her, which seemed to explode across the miles.

‘What, I don’t understand. How could that happen? How could you let it happen Sam? The words hung in the air between them. ‘I’ll get the next flight over.’

‘Don’t be silly Joanna, I only rung so you wouldn’t be alarmed by me ringing in the early hours of the morning, once I had been down the station. Anyway, he will probably be out by the time you get here. Even if he is charged, it is only cannabis.’ The words echoed in her ears. ‘Only cannabis.’ I should be there she was thinking. He wouldn’t have been into drugs if I hadn’t taken this job and left him at home. First Jade got in trouble and now James. She reluctantly allowed Sam to hang up as he needed to get down to the station and had to content herself with waiting for his next call. Well, she wouldn’t be able to concentrate on work now. She got up from her desk and poured herself a large bourbon from the bottle in the cabinet above the sink.

Leaning against the side, she stared out the window at the lights on the set.

She recalled the last seven years with the tears already forming in the corners of her eyes and then looked back to before she had made the decision that changed their lives forever.

Sam and Joanna had a successful business. They had met as students in a small accountancy practice in Cheam. Sam had already been there for a few years and was about to take his final exams when she joined the firm, straight from college. They

had fallen in love over her text books. Sam had helped her study. For him, it all came easily. She had to work much harder. He was already qualified and Mr. Hopkins had made him a junior partner in the firm by the time she passed her finals, at the second attempt. Sam was to all intents and purposes running the firm. Mr. Hopkins was fast approaching retirement and, as soon as she qualified, Sam asked her to marry him. She was so happy, of course she said yes. Five years on, when the twins James and Jade were in nursery school and Joanna went back to work part-time, Mr. Hopkins offered them the practice at a very good price. Because Sam had been running the practice for quite a while, the bank saw no problem with giving them the loan they required, and they became partners in their own business. In addition to the clients they inherited from the old practice, they acquired quite a number of new clients of their own. One of them was a struggling young actor from Croydon, called Johnny Samms.

It was Johnny, when he became successful, that asked for their help. The production company making his next movie, the subsequent one to the one that had made him a star, had been having problems with their accountancy firm. This was what had resulted in Joanna having such a crucial decision to make seven years ago.

She had been the partner dealing with Johnny's accounts, so she became the partner responsible for the production company. They were so pleased with her work they approached her with a job offer.

They wanted her to become 'Head of Finance' and, due to the volume of work and travel involved, she would have to give up her partnership with her husband. That had been a very major decision in her life. The twins at that time were 12. They had started secondary school in the summer and it would be too much of an upheaval for them and for Sam, if she took the job. However, ever since she was at primary

school, acting had been her secret dream. Probably most youngsters craved to be involved in any of the performing arts or of becoming a famous sports star. Fame, she supposed, being the operative word. This would not of course be acting, but doing what she did well in the environment of her dreams, would be a close second.

Who knows what being in the right place at the right time could bring?

Sam had been against the idea from the beginning. He not only didn't want her to take the job, he also insisted that the partnership needed her. How would he cope while she was on location? A partnership wasn't a partnership with an absent partner and, more importantly, what about the children? Had she thought about how they would feel? She must have chopped and changed her mind a thousand times. Thought about getting an au pair or perhaps sending the twins to boarding school?

Then, when she realised most of the options she was considering were leaning towards taking the job, it resulted in triggering off the biggest row she and Sam had ever had.

Chapter Fifteen

It started quite calmly. They were in the lounge a week before Joanna had to give them her decision. Sam was sitting at his desk, in the corner of the room, going through some papers. Joanna was perched on the edge of her favourite chair, dark blue, worn leather. She had set down the coffee she had brought through from the kitchen on one of the three glass and chrome occasional tables. Staring into the fake log fire (it was gas but the flickering flames burned brightly and made it look real) she looked for inspiration, as she spoke.

‘Do you realise that, if I let this opportunity pass, it may mean in years to come I will blame you for not letting me at least try?’ she asked Sam.

‘Maybe, but if I willingly let you go, you could say I didn’t care what you did, when I do and I really think you will find it too much of an upheaval.’

He walked across the room, to collect his coffee and sat on the armchair on the other side of the fire.

‘It won’t be the same as in our practise. You won’t be the boss, just an employee and the work is very different to what you’re used too.’

‘Precisely darling, that’s why I want to do it. Can’t you see, I need a new challenge.’

‘You do what the hell you like then.’ He was rattled. ‘You usually do anyway.’

‘That’s not fair Sam. I always discuss everything with you first.’ Joanna reasoned.

‘Yes, then you do what you want. James and Jade are only twelve years old for Christ’s sake. They need both of us.’ He shouted.

‘I’ll still be around, most of the time. I’m not asking for a divorce, just a new career. You’re just thinking of you, not them.’ She argued.

‘Think about it Jo.’ He tried to calm down. ‘I mean really think about it. I have tried to sit back, let you make this decision on your own but I feel like you are leaving us.’

I can’t help it.’ Sam continued ‘Yes, maybe I am being selfish but you will be away too much if you take this job. Don’t you think you are being selfish too?’

‘No. Not really. What if it was you they wanted? Would that make any difference? I bet it would. I bet you are really just jealous that I have been asked and not you.’

She wished straight away she hadn’t said what she was thinking. She knew the best way to get round him was to sweet talk him, but she had blown it now.

‘How can you even think that’ he said. ‘We’ve always had an equal marriage, shared everything in the office and at home. How can you even suggest I think I’m better than you?’

‘I’m sorry Sam. You’re right of course, but I really want to take this job. Perhaps I could ask them to give it a six month trial to see how we cope? That might work.’

‘No it wouldn’t’ How could I keep the practice running without you for that amount of time? I would have to get someone in to share the client list. Then, I couldn’t just get rid of them if you decide your new job isn’t working. Just forget about the whole thing, please Jo.’ He got up and went back to his paperwork, willing her to listen.

Joanna wasn’t able to forget it. She wanted it too much.

‘I can’t do that Sam. She followed him over to his desk. ‘I want to take this opportunity. I’m sorry if it’s not what you want to hear, but I am going to say yes.’

‘Right, well you can tell the twins you’re leaving then.’ He spun round angrily and brushing past her, left the room. She hurried after him all the way, protesting that of course she wasn’t leaving and trying to make him understand how much there was to sort out before she could even think about starting the job. Then she realised from what he said next that he was telling her to leave altogether.....

‘Go on pack your case’ he said. ‘You won’t need a house on location.’

Joanna couldn’t believe he was serious. He couldn’t be. What was wrong with him?

‘You are being plain stupid now. I’m not leaving. This is my home, our home’

They were in the kitchen now and Sam’s normally placid face was contorted with anger as he said:

‘You are the stupid one. If you think I’m sitting around waiting for you to come back and play happy families when you feel like it, you are wrong. You take the job. You leave this family totally. We don’t want bits and pieces of your time.’

‘Don’t, please Sam, don’t be like this.’ she pleaded with him in vain. He just got even angrier and his cruel comments cut through her like a knife. He called her all sorts of hurtful names. It had quickly turned into a furious row.

Finally, Joanna screamed that she hated him for what he was saying and before Sam could stop himself, he’d slapped her! He was as horrified as she was.

‘I’m so sorry Jo.’ He had never raised a hand to her before, never even threatened it. Even now the memory of it still haunted Joanna. So many hurtful things were said and that slap was the culmination of it all.

Sam held out his arms and Joanna went into them. They stopped rowing and Joanna almost reversed her decision on the strength of the damage done but they managed to work it all out.

She took the job and loved it from the start. There were lots of problems, mostly the extra time they had to put in with regard to working arrangements at their practise but the biggest problems were what it did to the twins.

Chapter Sixteen

Joanna still couldn’t be sure whether or not Jade would have got pregnant at 15 if both her and Sam had been there every day. She felt that she would definitely have had more time for her and thought Jade might have spoken to her when she was thinking of sleeping with her boyfriend.

As it happened Sam didn’t even know Jade had a boyfriend and she refused to say who he was when Joanna and Sam found out. She was almost 6 months gone and Joanna was home for a couple of weeks between films when she guessed. Otherwise she might have given birth without them finding out. Jade had definitely changed

from the happy-go-lucky kid that she had been when Joanna had started her new job. Joanna put it down to normal teenage sullenness, combined with the worry of her GCSE's. She wanted to go to drama school, possibly due to Joanna's involvement in the Film Industry, and was hopeful of high grades in English, English Literature and Drama, which she would need. Joanna had only been home a couple of days when she commented on the fact that Jade was putting on quite a bit of weight. It was certainly hard to tell that it was due to her being pregnant. She had always worn the baggy clothes that were fashionable at the time. Joanna made a joke about it and, when she didn't laugh, realised that she was hiding more than her eyes.

Joanna could always tell when Jade was lying just by looking in her eyes.

'Jade, look at me' she said tentatively. 'Tell me you are not pregnant, please tell me sweetheart?' She turned and Joanna could see the tears glistening in her beautiful blue eyes.

'I'm sorry Mum. Please don't hate me.' She cried. Joanna could never hate her daughter, no matter what she had done. She held out her arms and Jade fell into them.

'Don't cry honey. We can sort this out. Of course I don't hate you.' Joanna did her best to reassure Jade and, with all the mental strength she could muster, held her, consoled her and got all the details she could from her. She wouldn't tell her who the father was.

'It isn't important Mum, I'm not with him anymore. He just used me, I know that now. He dumped me as soon as he had got what he wanted. It's my body, my baby and I will decide the fate of both.'

Joanna couldn't believe how determined she was. She didn't appear to have made any decision about telling her mother or father. Joanna probably shouldn't have

been surprised. Jade may have been only fifteen, but she had already slept with someone, got pregnant, and decided to cope with the consequences on her own; albeit expecting her parents to help when she felt she needed it. Joanna wondered if it was all her fault. If she'd been home more often would Jade have had the freedom to enable her to get into this situation? Well whatever Joanna thought, there was only one thing she could do now and that was to make herself available. She hugged Jade to her tightly.

'Okay darling, I'm sorry I wasn't here for you before but I am now. We will sort this out together. Whatever you decide.'

The next project fortunately didn't necessitate a large input from Joanna. She needed to set up the initial budgeting for a one-off production. It was a 'playhouse' series and the company were producing one of six separate episodes.

Their story was set in London and the vast majority of it would be filmed in the studio. Once the filming started, the finances would be set up sufficiently to allow the backroom staff to, more or less, run it. Her input, for most of the time, could be dealt with by telephone with an occasional day trip to the studio.

Joanna's immediate concern was to sit down with Sam and Jade and talk through what needed to be done to ensure the remainder of her pregnancy and the eventual birth of her grandchild went smoothly. No chance of that was there?

Chapter Seventeen

'Are you trying to tell me you want me to give up my career and look after the baby so you can finish your exams and go to college?' Joanna asked Jade.

‘Why not, other Mum’s do’ she replied. They were sitting in the lounge that evening and had been through various discussions regarding ante-natal care, hospital and doctor’s appointments. In fact everything had gone comparatively smoothly. Sam had been brilliant. Calm and collected as ever. He took the news completely in his stride, much better than Joanna had. He now had an amused twinkle in his eye as he sat on the sofa with Jade, stroking her hand, held in his. He raised his left eyebrow inquisitively as he waited with his daughter for her reply.

‘What?’ Joanna returned his gaze. ‘You want me to do that too? Well I should have expected that I suppose. You never wanted me to take this job in the first place and now Jade has become your ally. She’s given you a perfect foil to pressurise me with.’

Joanna sat down slowly on the armchair opposite and just looked at them. Her eyes took in the soft glow of the wall lamps and reflected on how stark a contrast they were to the bizarre reality of the situation.

‘You are out of your minds, the pair of you. I’ll get back to you later Sam... You Jade can think again. If you want to go ahead and keep this baby, you are the one who has to make sacrifices, not me. I will give you all the love and support I can, but you can’t expect me to give up my career for your mistake. I won’t do that and you shouldn’t ask me too.’

Sam’s eyes were twinkling with mirth throughout Joanna’s statement. He found it amusing and Joanna couldn’t understand how he could remain so calm. Jade however was becoming tearful.

‘How can I cope with a baby and school?’ She tried, unsuccessfully, to make Joanna think it was her duty. ‘Don’t you want me to have a good career like you Mum?’

You're established, and as soon as I finish my studies, I'll take over looking after the baby, and then you can go back to work.' she implored.

Joanna pondered on the irony of how kids believe their parents should take responsibility for their mistakes.

'You are the one who got yourself into this situation Jade, she said trying hard to be practical and give her all the options whilst remembering that it would be her first grandchild she was referring to. Taking a deep breath, she swallowed hard before saying unconvincingly; 'You could give the baby up for adoption and carry on with your studies. There are hundreds of couples out there who are begging for a child to adopt.' Jade heard the fear in her voice and used it brilliantly.

'Mum, you can't want me to give your first grandchild up for adoption. You know you don't want that, anymore than I do. Please, don't ask me to do that.' She cried.

'Oh I see, but it's all right for you to ask me to give up my career to look after your baby though?'

'That's enough, both of you' Sam interrupted. 'We won't find a solution by turning this into a row. Let's have a break and think about it. Make a list of pros and cons and an informed decision at the end of it' he said. 'I'll make some tea' and he got up and walked through to the kitchen to put on the kettle.

Joanna cursed his practicality and felt he was trying to trivialise the situation.

'It's too emotional a dilemma for that Sam.' she said following him. Automatically reaching for the cups from the cupboard she added; 'I suppose writing down the options might help. Let Jade go through them and give it some serious thought.'

'Perhaps she could discuss it with the Doctor tomorrow.' He called through to Jade;

'What do you think honey? He might even be able to recommend someone

professional you could talk to about it. Mum and I are much too emotionally involved to give you any practical advice.'

'I suppose' she said, joining her parents in the kitchen. 'I really would like to be able to keep it though.' She gave him a hug and Joanna felt a jealous twinge. 'Don't make tea for me. I think I'll go up to bed now. Night Mum, night Dad.' She kissed them both. It seemed to Joanna her kiss was more of a peck than the one she gave her Dad. It made her wonder if it was because she refused to give up work or because she had been the more absent parent over the last three years. Sam saw the look of hurt she tried to hide. He gave her the tea and kissed her lightly on the forehead saying.

'Don't worry Jo, it will be okay. It will really. Come on lets go and start watching that film we got from the video shop before James gets home and we have to break the news to him.'

'What time did you tell him to be home?' Joanna replied. 'It's gone ten o'clock now.'

'Oh don't worry. He is only over at Nick's house studying. He said his Dad would drop him off about 10.30. He's usually as good as his word.' Sam reassured her. He was bending to put the film in the machine. Joanna didn't even know who Nick was but didn't want to admit this to Sam. That would be admitting they were both right. She had sacrificed too much of family life to further her own career and had it all been worth it? Her mind was in turmoil and she had no idea what the film was about. She watched it without taking any of it in and racked her brains, trying desperately to find a solution, not just for Jade's dilemma, but for her own.

Chapter Eighteen

Luke was born on 28th of July. Four weeks to the day after Jade and James turned 16. It was the most beautiful summer's day but he was not the most beautiful baby Joanna had ever seen, contrary to what she expected to think. He had a shock of jet black hair, that reminded her of the punk rockers of her youth, and his head was misshapen due to them having to use suction to help the delivery. Jade had become too tired to push due to her long labour and the midwife decided on the weird looking implement to finish off the delivery. It had done the trick but had left the baby's head with an equally weird shape. It did subside after a few days as they had been assured it would.

Joanne held Jade's hand throughout the long labour and it was, and remained, the most incredible time of her life, bringing home to her how wonderful it must be for fathers to be able to watch their children being born. Women have the glory of giving birth but they also have to endure the pain. Nothing could have prepared Joanna for the overwhelming joy and delight of seeing her grandson come into the world.

'Go on darling one last push.' Her words echoed that of the midwife. Tears of happiness streamed down her face. 'Well done darling, well done.' The tremor in her voice blurred with her tears, while the relief of giving birth took away the pain that was etched on her daughter's face.

'Oh Mummy isn't he perfect. He is perfect isn't he?'

'Yes he is, Isn't he nurse?' Joanna noted and gained great pleasure in her daughter's use of Mummy. What an unbelievable moment it was.

Also they had managed to come up with a solution to enable Jade to keep Luke.

The film company had a crèche and, although it wasn't ideal, it meant Joanna could share the burden of caring for Luke with Jade. It was one of the continuity staff that suggested it.

'There's no reason why it should only be mother's that use it.' Joanna's colleague Pam said when they were discussing how Jade could continue with her exams whilst coping with the baby.

'I suppose not' Joanna replied 'And I could delegate most of the location work to the rest of the team and only come on set once or twice a week.'

They were sitting outside the canteen truck near the shopping mall, where the day's filming was taking place. Suddenly the sun re-appeared from behind a previously persistent cloud and matched her new found optimistic mood.

'Perhaps it really could work if I shared the load with her. I wouldn't be doing it for her but sharing in the care might be the best thing to do. Thanks Pam you're an angel, let's hope they'll go for it!

The crèche was only available in the day so, for the first year or so, Joanna couldn't stay overnight on location, but with the help of the team and her employers, who were thankfully desperate not to lose her totally, she acquired an assistant who became her saviour. Kelly thoroughly deserved the promotion. She had proven to be a valuable support member of the team and Joanna knew with her becoming a co-financial director she could take a less active role. She also enjoyed bringing her up to scratch during the months before and after Luke was born. At the same time Jade, with Sam's help, took care of him, and when it was time for her to go back to her studies, after the summer break, Joanna was able to cope.

She successfully divided her time between going to 'the office' with Luke in the crèche and working from home with Kelly in situ at work for her.

It wasn't ideal, but they managed. Sam, incredibly, was superb. He still had a successful, thriving business and must have been tired when he got home in the evenings but, as soon as he walked through the door, he took control. Whoever was at home caring for Luke that day, it didn't matter. He was home and it was his time with Luke. He loved it. You could hear the disappointment in his voice if he came home and Luke was sleeping peacefully. The minute he walked in he would say 'Where's my boy?' and, if he was awake, he would whisk him up in his arms.

If he was asleep, he would get on and make dinner or whatever else needed doing, allowing Jade to get back to her studying or Joanna to get on with her work.

'How do you do it, honey?' Joanna said to him one day when he came home to find her struggling with an expenditure analysis spreadsheet on the computer.

'How do I do what?' he said bending over the playpen to tickle Luke's chin. He was now 6 months old and busy stuffing the red band of his teething ring in his mouth.

'How to you find so much energy and enthusiasm after a day's work?' Joanna looked up at him and Luke over the top of her reading glasses. She loved watching Luke's face light up with a big gurgling grin at the sight of his Grand-dad. He would try to pull himself up to get to him. 'I find it so hard to concentrate on two things at once.'

'I guess you've answered your own question.' He said scooping Luke up and carrying him over to her, planting a kiss on her forehead. 'When I come home, I am finished work for the day and I am free to enjoy every second with this little angel.' He tickled Luke under his chin again. 'You get on now and, when you've finished that spreadsheet, come and play with us, you'll enjoy it too.' He left to take Luke through to the kitchen for his supper.

Jade struggled like Joanna, finding it hard to keep up with her studies. She was at the age where she should have been out enjoying herself, but any free time she had was spent with Luke. For all the help her parents gave her and all the joy she got from Luke, she still had to grow up much too quickly and it showed. From the dark rings under her eyes, to the absence of any spark of youth in her demeanour, you could see what keeping Luke had cost her. Meanwhile all of the time, they collectively spent with Luke, must have had more than a little effect on James. He was hardly ever home. He remarked on more than one occasion that no-one needed or wanted him. They were all too busy playing happy families with Luke. Most of his remarks were quite normal for a teenager. Like; 'Can't you shut him up, he's screaming all the time.' Or; 'He stinks something chronic.' But the worst ones were directed at his sister, to whom he had previously always been so close. These usually ended with her being, 'a stupid slut' or 'a selfish whore'. Perhaps Joanna and Sam should have seen the warning signs when he stopped even being interested enough to bother making any comments at all. With hindsight it would become obvious that, while all their spare time was spent on Luke, James albeit not intentionally, had been pushed to the back of their thoughts. So he had found another world outside of the home, and that world was full of drugs and violence.

Chapter Nineteen

It was June of the following year when Joanna saw the first signs of trouble.

It was the Saturday before James and Jade's 17th birthday. She was on a two week break between filming and was sitting in the garden with Sam and Jade watching Luke, who had just started to toddle around, playing in his sandpit. They were

discussing with Jade how well she thought she had done with her exams which she had just finished and where they might go for a meal to celebrate their birthday's and hopefully, their results, when a shadow fell over them. Joanna turned to see James who had crept up behind the picnic table where they were sitting. He had startled her and she got even more of a surprise when she saw the state of his face. He had a bruised eye rapidly turning black, his lip was split and his face was covered in cuts and grazes.

Joanna looked at him with her mouth open, unable to speak. He in turn was unable to hide his anger.

'I hope you are not including me in those plans. I am not interested in your little world. I've got better things to do.'

'Like what? And what happened to your face?' Joanna found her voice.

'Have you been fighting again son?' Sam asked almost simultaneously.

'Again? What do you mean, again? What does he mean James?'

Joanna's mind was working overtime, trying to remember seeing any previous bruises on James.

'Nothing, anyway as if you care.' He turned to go into the house. 'Go back to your prissy little dreams for the slut and the bastard. Leave me to get on with my own life.'

'James, get back here.' Joanna shouted after him. He ignored her and continued his stroll up the garden to the patio. 'How dare you speak like that about Jade and Luke.' Joanna got to her feet to follow him. Jade meanwhile, had gone over to the sandpit to play with Luke and was purposely trying to ignore her brother. Sam came after Joanna, squeezing her shoulder gently, trying to pacify her.

'Stay here with Jade and Luke. I'll go and find out what's happening with James.'

He followed James through the patio doors and Joanna stood rooted to the spot. Jade took her mother's hand and slid it into Luke's, who was complaining at being removed from the sandpit.

'Come on Mum. Let Dad talk to him. You know what he's been like lately. He'll calm him down and find out what happened.'

Joanna could not be comforted and felt the tears sliding down her cheeks. They swung Luke up in the air between them and Joanna tried to get her emotions under control. 'That's the problem. I don't know what he is like anymore. I'm not even sure I know who he is now. What's turned him into such a loner and made him so bitter and cruel, especially to you? He never has his friends round anymore and who did that to him, made such a mess out of his face?' She desperately wanted to go in to the house but allowed Jade to drag her back to the picnic bench. 'I need to know what is being said indoors.'

Sam and James's voices were definitely raised, but she couldn't make out what they were shouting at each other.

James argued with his father for almost an hour before slamming the front door with a final retort of 'It's my life and I will live it my way.'

Sam told Joanna later that James had said that he had gotten into a fight at the pub with his friends. He wouldn't say what it was all about but Sam got the impression from what James said that it was a case of too much drink, dope or a combination of both. He wasn't very 'worldly-wise' and in Joanna's experience dope calmed you down more than set you off, and she did wonder if maybe it was something a bit stronger! She couldn't share these fears with Sam though, he wasn't aware that she had tried dope in her college days. She could only hope that if it was coke, or maybe ecstasy, it was a one off.

Chapter Twenty

She tried for the rest of the week to talk to James. She couldn't believe he had become so moody and sullen without her noticing. He did his best to avoid her but eventually, on the Friday, she succeeded in pinning him down. He had come to her.

'Mum, any chance of borrowing a few quid to go and celebrate my birthday with the lads?' He asked, bringing the dinner plates through to load into the dishwasher.

Joanna was busy scraping the remains of the meal from her plate and replied.

'Sure. Any chance you'll let me know what you are going to spend it on?' she turned to face him. 'Drink, drugs or both? Just what is it you are into these days?'

He laughed nervously. 'It's not what you think Mum. I just want to have a few beers for my birthday. You usually give me and Jade money anyway. A day early wouldn't be a problem, would it?'

Joanna gave him a look that dispensed with an answer. Luke then tried to bribe her.

'You do want me to come out with the family tomorrow night, don't you?'

He knew she did. He had been avoiding having to discuss his temper tantrum all week and now he thought he could use it as an excuse to get his own way. Well he had another trick coming!

'Sorry James, No way are you going to get round me like that. You made it perfectly clear that you had no intention of coming out with us tomorrow. I have been trying to talk to you all week, and now, because you want something, suddenly we have to forget all the hurtful things you said.' His face dropped further with every word.

'Don't be like that Mum. You know I don't really mean it.' The pleading in his voice only irritated her more.

‘Why say it then and when are you going to stop using this house as a hotel? You come and go as you please, you get drunk or high every weekend. That’s not what Dad and I give you an allowance for. You’re not even old enough to go to the pub and drink yet. You are seventeen tomorrow and most of the time you act younger than Luke!’

He must have wanted the money badly or he wouldn’t have stood there taking this from her. Joanna knew that and used it to her advantage. James had sat down at the breakfast bar in the middle of the kitchen while his mother ranted, his head in his hands, but he wouldn’t give up that easily.

‘Look Mum.’ he said getting up and going over to where she stood against the dishwasher. He put his hands on her shoulders and stared straight into her eyes, bending his head and putting a puppy dog expression on his face, he pleaded.

‘Lend me £20 and I promise I won’t do any drugs. I’ll come out with the family for dinner tomorrow and, I also promise to be nicer to Jade and her sprog! I’ve arranged to meet the lads and we’ll only have a few. Please?’

He knew how to get round her all right! She started to relent, cupping his face in her hands she tried desperately to keep the strength in her words and the steel in her voice. She looked long and hard at him.

‘Okay, £20, no more. And I will hold you to your promise. You also need to make one more. We must talk, really talk. I want to know everything you’re up to from now on. No more avoiding me. Let’s try to be a proper family.’

James had won this time. As his mother gave him the £20, he kissed her on the end of her nose, promised they would talk on Sunday properly, thanked her, and was gone.

‘Don’t be late and behave’ she called to him as he fled through the hall, grabbing his jacket from the banister.

Sam had been listening from the dining room. He was obviously amused.

‘Well you handled that well’ he said, as James slammed the front door. ‘Not sure if he’ll keep his promise. We’ll hope for the best, shall we?’ He came up and put his arms round her. He knew she had been fretting about James all week. Wondering how much of his behaviour was down to her frequent absences. She returned his embrace and wondered again if everything would have been so bad if she had still been in partnership with him. She also realised how lucky she was to still have him and debated whether she made the right decision five years earlier.

Sam had other things on his mind. He began kissing her neck and nibbling her ear and banished her worries completely by asking if she fancied an early night!

Chapter Twenty One

James did change, although more to do with him getting a girlfriend than taking any notice of his parents. The amount of time he spent with Emma limited the time he had to spend with the lads. That’s not to say he became an angel overnight, he still caused quite a few sleepless nights over the next two years. He sometimes stayed out all night and not knowing whether he was with Katie, like he said or with his mates, they could only believe what he told them. He also got a job, not one they would have wished for him but he stuck at it and was earning reasonable money. This in turn afforded him more freedom, not having to rely on an allowance, with the added expenses a girlfriend can bring.

Joanna found she was working less, giving more responsibility to Kelly than was necessary and was beginning to wonder whether it might be time to relinquish the job altogether. It had been a fascinating experience and she loved the glamorous side of the industry but more and more she craved time with the family. She had met and become friendly with some very famous actors and directors, some of whom had in turn appointed Sam as their Accountant. Yet now, here she was, miles away, needing and wanting to be home. Realising there really wasn't anything to stop her, she began making plans.

She would tell them tomorrow that this location would be her last. The company knew Kelly was more than capable of carrying on the work. Sam's company could take over the audit which Kelly wasn't qualified to do and she could work part-time for the partnership, taking responsibility for all the new film industry clients and a few more audits. Sam's new partner had fitted in well and he could continue to do so. It wasn't necessary for Joanna to take up where she left off seven years ago. While she was making all these plans, she realised she was happier than she had been in quite a while, even allowing for James's predicament.

Chapter Twenty Two

The plane touched down at Gatwick and Joanna automatically went through the process of disembarkation. She felt her heart had been torn from her body. Somehow she had to find the strength for James, Jade and Luke but her soul-mate was gone. Ripped out of her life by some late night drunk, who had no thought for the vehicle he had careered into, no thought for the driver of that vehicle and no thought for the havoc and pain he caused her and her family. He had killed her Sam.

Sam was dead. He had died before they could cut him from the wreckage of his car. The ambulance driver, who had spent the last moments of his life with him, told her Sam's last words were to make him promise to tell Joanna he loved her.

'Tell her I have always loved her and I always will.'

He'd known he wasn't going to make it. The paramedic said he tried to convince him to stay with him. He told him he had to 'hang in there' for his family. Sam had told him about the twins and his beloved grandson, said how much he loved them, how much joy they had given him over the years but saved his last words for Joanne. The twins were waiting at the barrier, tears streaming down their faces. They had left Luke at home, being cared for by Emma. She hugged them both tightly.

After what seemed like an eternity, breaking free to breathe, she found her clothes wet with their tears. They didn't need to speak, their hurt was reflected in their eyes and the emotion stinging their throats, they just needed to be.

Joanna and James each had reasons to feel guilt. Joanna felt she should have been there and James felt guilty for being at the police station. It was while Sam was on his way to the police station that a drunken driver lost control and ploughed into his car. Joanna, too late, had been making her plans to come home for good when the telephone had rung for the second time. She had caught the first plane the next day and now, instead of the elation she should have felt, coming home for good, she had her husband's funeral to arrange.

Now she began the long walk to the car park. Jade and James on either side of the trolley all pushing so they could hold onto each other. Reluctant to lose, however frail, the physical contact.

Chapter Twenty Three

Steve realised the woman had fallen back to sleep. He was left with the same problem. Not being able to get up and look to see whether the situation had changed with the train. He looked tenderly at his wife's beautiful face. It was half obscured by her blonde curls. He loved her so much. What were they going to do? Had he just seen into the future? He couldn't bear the thought of losing her. He couldn't imagine ever being unfaithful to her. No matter what the circumstances, she would always be the most important thing in his life.

He was puzzled – the dream – the train – the baby. Everything about this day seemed so unreal! His thoughts returned to the specialist who had said to them that it was only this year that routine scanning had begun. If Emily had been pregnant just a year ago, if the pregnancy had gone smoothly, they might never have known until the birth that there was a problem.

Steve truly wished it could have been that way. At least they wouldn't have had to make this awful decision.

Meanwhile, Neil had heard the voice calling out to him and fought to ignore it. He wanted to continue with his dream. It was more of a nightmare but it was fascinating just the same. In it he had married Claire and believed he had succeeded in banishing all thoughts of Sheena from his mind. It had been quite easy at first. Sheena hadn't told him she was going back to Ireland for a while. He found out she had gone from Keith in the accounts office on the following Monday. He had gone looking for her determined to tell her he had made his choice. He would not see her again and he would be marrying Claire. Simple! Much simpler, not having to tell her at all, it

transpired. Apparently, her Mum had been taken ill and she had gone back to help. Being the boss's daughter was a distinct advantage in the circumstances. Now, Neil could convince himself that Sheena had been his final fling before marriage and he could forget how great the sex was, couldn't he?

The wedding had gone very smoothly. Claire had looked every inch his dream girl, resplendent in a tight fitting, strapless satin gown. The gown was ivory white, with small silver pearls and pale blue piping sewn into the bodice. It accentuated her perfect size eight figure. It had a neat train, also trimmed with pearls and had pale blue piping round the edge. It was attached to the waist with Velcro, allowing it to appear a complete part of the dress. This was worn for the ceremony and the photographs in the Churchyard. The train cascaded around the dress, forming a semi-circle six feet behind her. She later removed it at the reception allowing her the freedom of movement to dance the night away. She had a half veil and tiara, pinned precariously in the top knot of the chignon in her black hair. Long white gloves completed the picture of virginal beauty. As he watched her walk down the aisle he felt an overwhelming rush of love for her and knew he would have no problems keeping to the vows he was about to make. Especially, being true unto her and forsaking all others.....

Then, two months after the wedding, Sheena arrived back in town.

Chapter Twenty Four

'Hi Neil' she called as she poked her head round the office door. 'How did the wedding go and are you enjoying married life?'

Neil had been going through some paperwork, head bent and deep in thought. He looked up, startled to feel his heart skip a beat. Her unruly red hair fell over her face and he saw the twinkle in her green eyes as she came up and perched herself on the free corner of his desk. She looked amazing and Neil wondered just how easy it would be to forget those vows he had made such a short time ago. He cleared his throat noisily.

‘Hello Sheena’ he tried to keep his voice even. ‘Is your Mum better now? How long have you been back?’

‘Mum’s sound. I got back at the weekend. Couldn’t wait to get back here, it’s much more exciting.’ Her words conveyed she was itching to find out if he was up for an affair.

‘You haven’t answered my question. How are you enjoying married life? Are you happy?’ She leant over, smoothing imaginary creases out of her tight black skirt, deliberately allowing him the view of her ample cleavage. She had undone an extra button on her lilac shirt to put the goods more on show. He felt the stirrings he knew she was counting on, and felt the sweat appearing on his brow. He stood up, turning his back on her, feigning an interest in the traffic outside his office window, three floors below, hoping it would help, and knowing he was weakening, replied.

‘I am very happy, Claire is a wonderful wife.’ That much was true, at least it had been until today. He must be strong. ‘Sorry, was there anything else only I must get on’ he turned back, desperately trying to sound calm. ‘Must keep to the deadlines,’ pointedly adding, ‘not all of us have the luxury of insider dealings with the boss.’

Sheena laughed loudly at this. ‘But you could have. Or at least insider dealings with the boss’s daughter! It’s up to you Sugar.’ She leaned over the desk and straightened Neil’s tie. ‘Just don’t keep me waiting too long, will you’ she added, cupping his

face in her hands and pouting her lips in a kiss before turning and leaving the office, swinging her hips provocatively.

Neil was in turmoil. How could she do this? Didn't she have any morals? He sat down slowly and told himself he could resist the temptation. He would keep his distance, avoid her at all costs and maybe even start looking around for another job. It wasn't as if he didn't love his wife. She was all he could ever need. He just needed to convince himself she was all he wanted. That was the hard part!

Chapter Twenty Five

Neil did try. He scoured the local papers and employment agencies in Sutton, looking for a job. Telling Claire he wanted to be closer to home, to spend less time commuting to London and more time with her. The only openings he found were more junior and, not surprisingly, less well paid than he was already enjoying.

He avoided Sheena quite successfully for the next few months and probably would have continued to do so if it hadn't been for the office Christmas party. He decided he would leave as soon as he reasonably could, without arousing too many questions. He had always enjoyed McCluskey's Christmas parties so much in the past it would have looked decidedly odd if he didn't attend. Claire had seen him off at the station in the morning, telling him to enjoy himself and not to worry about her. She knew it was likely to be a 'late one' and arranged to go out for Christmas drinks with her two sisters and some friends from her work. They were 'going clubbing' too and Claire joked that she might even be later than Neil getting home.

The party was in full swing and Neil was drinking quietly in the corner of the boardroom with Keith and Beth from Accounts. They were nibbling tidbits from the well stocked buffet table and discussing the awful dress sense of Carole from the typing pool, when Sheena made her entrance. The fact that she was McCluskeys' daughter wasn't the only reason all heads turned in her direction.

She looked stunning!

Her normally unruly hair had somehow been straightened and shimmered in the strong lighting at the entrance to the boardroom. All the other lights, apart from over the buffet table, had been dimmed to add to the party atmosphere.

She had on a purple silk dress, falling just above the knee. It had a mandarin collar and clung tightly, showing off every curve of her body and gave her the look of a geisha girl. Neil's gaze seemed to remove the twenty four feet that fell between them and zoomed in on her sparkling green eyes. She smiled warmly and kissed everyone she passed, making her way slowly across the room. Keith broke into his thoughts.

'Wow' he enthused. 'Doesn't she look amazing? No wonder every red blooded guy in this firm wants to bed her. Neil – you lucky bastard! It's obvious you're one of the ones she has the 'hots' for.'

'Yeah but I'm happily married, don't forget' Neil knew he was trying to convince himself as much as Keith. 'Claire is more than enough for me.'

Beth smiled knowingly at him. 'You must have heard the rumours. She specialises in married men. She's just dumped Paul Fletcher when he told her he would leave his wife for her. The poor mans' in pieces over it. Be very careful Neil. She is a born heartbreaker, everyone says so.'

'If she made a play for me, I would lie back and enjoy it.' Keith wished out loud.

'Fat chance of that though, unfortunately, Oh well I can but dream.' He turned again

to Neil after scoffing some more pastries. 'She'll be over for you soon buddy boy. And you're a better man than me if you manage to resist.'

Neil watched his friend stuffing his face and, momentarily, wished he was overweight and on the wrong side of forty too.

He quickly refilled his glass and threw the contents down his throat and filled it again, getting edgier by the minute.

'No worries mate' he said. 'I'm not interested.' He saw Beth through the bottom of his glass nudging Keith and following her gaze, he almost choked on his drink. Sheena had joined them.

'Neil darling, how are you. Beth, Keith,' she kissed them in turn and Neil definitely got the 'Royal' portion of her lips and the strong smell of Chanel No. 5 floated around in his head. Was it the perfume or just the nearness of her that was making him dizzy? He barely managed to reply and, before he could protest, she took the drink from his hand and led him to the dancing area. He was lost. He tried to say he couldn't dance but he knew he really wanted to. He really wanted her. He knew then that he would break his vows. His state of mind was greatly influenced by the memories that came flooding back. He had been surprised at the raw passion he felt when Sheena had cornered him in this very room, just a short time before his marriage to Clair. It had been her pulling the strings then and she was doing it again now.

Chapter Twenty Six

Neil had been finishing up a Presentation for some new clients and thought he was the last one in the office that evening, when Sheena walked in at 9.30.

‘There you are’ she said. ‘I wondered where you had got to. I thought you all went for a drink at Jack’s Bar on a Friday night?’ She came and sat at the end of the boardroom table. Neil started gathering up the papers and putting them with the posters, ready for Monday’s Presentation.

‘I usually go for a couple, but I needed to get this ready.’ He tried to avoid looking directly at her. She had been playing on his mind since the first time he laid eyes on her. She was very attractive and he wondered if the attraction had been emphasised by his fast approaching wedding. He thought of Clair now, waiting patiently at home. He had phoned her to let her know he would be late, and guiltily, knowing before the event, made the eye contact he had been avoiding and asked: ‘We could go for one now if you like? Just give me a few minutes to finish up here.’ Sheena had other ideas!

‘No, not really.’ she said coming round to stand behind him. She stroked his arm playfully. ‘I have the keys to Daddy’s office. I’ll go grab a bottle from his cabinet while you finish up and we can have a cosy chat here. They are all well on the way down Jack’s and we have this place all to ourselves.’ Sheena caressed the nape of Neil’s neck as she spoke and, momentarily struck dumb, Neil could only look, admire her voluptuous rear and wonder about what was to come.

He didn’t know how he managed to tidy away all the papers without scattering them over the floor and was fumbling with the lock on his briefcase when she returned. He watched as she laid a champagne bottle and two glasses on the end of the table before turning and locking the door. Smiling seductively at him, she winked saying: ‘Just in case old Fred decides to investigate, we wouldn’t want to embarrass him would we?’ Neil’s hopes of her not noticing the beads of sweat forming rapidly on his face were swiftly dashed as she cupped his face in her hands. ‘You’re not

nervous of little ole me are you? You must have known how attracted to you I am and I can feel how much you are attracted to me.’ Her hand moved down and Neil’s pulse raced. Staring into her sparkling green eyes, his fingers locking in the curls of her vibrant, red hair, he kissed her passionately. She was already undoing his trousers, returning his kisses and all thoughts of Claire were relegated to the back of his mind, where they remained for the next hour.

Now here he was again, same room, same girl, only this time Neil was married. Sheena was still pulling his strings. As they danced she whispered in his ear, reminding him of their discussion.

‘So glad you went for the first option. This way you get the marriage and the fun. If you hadn’t married Claire, you wouldn’t have been happy. I love adventure and couldn’t possibly stick to one man. You would have been miserable. I could never be the faithful, dutiful wife you need.’

Neil made an effort to argue. ‘No Sheena. I love Claire. I won’t be unfaithful to her. You’re making a big mistake.’ Neil continued but was quickly succumbing to her very obvious charms. ‘I love her and I am sticking to the vows I made. You’ll have to find someone else to manipulate.’ The record finished and Neil politely kissed her cheek as they left the floor. He made a brave effort to convince himself he would not be unfaithful to Claire, but it was not going to be as easy as he thought.

Sheena could tell it was just bravado and decided to play along with him. She spent the rest of the evening dancing with all the men, flirting outrageously. All the time she watched Neil, glowering in the corner, pretending not to care. He was fighting a losing battle. When she came over to ask Keith to dance – about the only man in the room she hadn’t danced with - he stopped fighting. Poor Keith was roughly pushed aside. Neil grabbed Sheena’s arm and said;

‘We need to have a chat, in private.’ Sheena allowed him to escort her from the room.

Keith, Beth and everyone else stared, open mouthed, at their hasty departure. When they were a sufficient distance from the party, Neil stopped and turned to face her, pleading with her to stop tormenting him. Sheena just laughed.

‘Grow up Neil.’ She added; ‘I only want the same as you and unless you do something about it now, I am going back to the party.’

Neil’s answer was to take her in his arms and, silently asking Claire for forgiveness, showed her exactly what he was going to do and how much he wanted her.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Many times, over the next six years, Neil tried to stop the affair but he was too weak. To all intents and purposes, his marriage was happy. In fact, Clair was the one who comforted him when, unbeknown to her, Sheena dropped him for a few weeks or months and saw other men. Thinking he was going through a bad patch because of work, she got him through with her sheer enthusiasm for life. Then, out of the blue, Sheena told him that the time had come to choose between them.

They were in her apartment, in town. Daddy had bought it for her of course. It was in a very exclusive block, close to the Thames. They were in her bedroom and had just made love. It was a Friday night – most Fridays they spent together there. Claire knew and accepted ‘he always went for a few drinks on a Friday.’

He was sitting on Sheena’s bed, putting on his socks. Sheena was sitting up in bed, watching him, with a far away glaze over her eyes. The red silk sheets, pulled up over her knees and breasts, should have clashed with her hair but somehow didn’t.

It really was a beautiful bedroom. The large circular bed was on a pedestal in the centre, against the backdrop of rich brocade drapes. The drapes served both as headboard and curtains to the panoramic windows, overlooking a spectacular view of the Thames. An ornately decorated dressing table and matching chair on the left side of the room and a state of the art entertainment centre on the right, being the only furniture. The thick pile carpet was cream and Neil loved the feel and warmth of it. Many a time they made love on it, not making it to the slinky sheets of the bed. Sheena waited until Neil returned to the bed to kiss her goodbye before she spoke.

‘I want this affair to end Neil. I can’t do it anymore.’ There were tears in her eyes and at first Neil thought she didn’t want him anymore but before he could protest she added. ‘I want you to leave Claire. I can’t share you anymore. I’m done playing the field. I want us to marry and have a family, the whole works.’

Neil couldn’t take it in. This was what he had always wanted, wasn’t it? Now that it was happening he wasn’t sure anymore. He loved Claire, he wasn’t sure now if he had ever loved Sheena. Yes, it had been hard when she went with other guys but was that a pride thing? He really didn’t know now. He needed time to think.

‘Baby, what brought this on?’ He needed to stall her. ‘Are you sure? I can’t just dump Claire for you to change your mind again.’

‘I won’t, I promise.’ She said. ‘I love you. I think I always have. It’s just taken me this long to realise. I have given this a lot of thought. I know now that all those other guys, they meant nothing. I guess I was trying to prove that I could be like most men.’

‘What do you mean, most men?’

‘Most men think it is okay to be unfaithful, don’t they? Sex is a physical thing for men. They don’t need to be emotionally involved.’

Sheena continued to try to explain the emotional needs of women and how she had now realised she had been looking for something special when, all the time, she already had it with Neil.

Neil started to panic. He was surprised to realise that he too knew what he wanted, and it wasn't Sheena. It was Claire. How was he going to tell Sheena that? He couldn't say it, not now anyway. He took her in his arms, knowing it would be the last time and tried to comfort her.

'Don't cry baby. I must go, before I miss the last train. We can talk about it next week, if you are sure this is what you want?'

'I'm sure Neil. I have never been sure of anything in my life before but I am sure about this. Please don't go yet. Stay tonight. I don't want to be on my own.'

'I can't, you know that. Don't worry, we'll sort this out.' He looked over to the dressing table and added. 'Have a little snort, calm yourself down.' He normally wouldn't have encouraged her to take cocaine. He knew she did sometimes and although he didn't approve, used it to his advantage. He hoped, over the weekend, to sort out a way of letting her down gently and if the coke helped her, it would also help him to get away, for now anyway.

'I'll call you tomorrow baby. We'll work this out, I promise.' Adding, more out of guilt than truth - 'Love you' – and hurried out before she could answer.

Claire was sitting up in bed reading, when Neil arrived home that night. He looked around the nice, comfortable bedroom and was struck by the warmth of the welcome he felt. It couldn't have been more different from the luxury of Sheena's boudoir. The matching dark green quilt and curtains, with abstract yellow swirls, the pale green walls and burgundy carpet would all fit into a room the size of Sheena's bed. There was just enough room, because of the fitted wardrobes, for a small dressing

table that matched the pine bedside cabinets. Claire looked at him over the rim of her reading glasses and smiled.

She looked gorgeous.

Her big brown eyes filled with love, only for him. He found himself wondering how he could have treated her so badly and deciding he would certainly make it up to her now. He quickly undressed, wanting to cuddle her to him. Hold her and never let her go. Claire was bubbling with excitement. She had held onto the news all day and couldn't contain herself a moment longer. As Neil returned her smile and started to say how sorry he was for being late, she just blurted it out.

'Neil darling, it's finally happened at last. You're going to be a Daddy! I'm pregnant.'

Neil was ecstatic. They had been trying for so long. Now, any reservations he may have had were quashed. This was incredible news.

'Darling that's wonderful news. You've had it confirmed?'

'Yes. I made myself wait until I saw the doctor this morning and then I had to make myself wait to tell you face to face. I am almost 12 weeks.' Claire had irregular periods all her life, which explained why she found out when she was so far gone and why it had proved so hard to conceive. Finally now they would be a complete family.

Neil got into bed, putting his arms round her and held her tightly to his chest. Wiping the tears of happiness from his eyes he thanked his lucky stars that he still had her unwavering love. He made a silent promise to stay true to her for the rest of his life and knew in his heart that this time he would keep that promise.

He fell asleep with his wife in his arms, blissfully happy and unaware of the tragedy to come.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Neil forgot all about contacting Sheena the next day as he promised. He was pottering about in the garden that afternoon when Claire called him into the kitchen. It didn't register at first when she said to listen to the news bulletin being broadcast on Capital Radio. Then as the words of the newsreader took hold, he found himself falling into the chair, holding his head in his hands and listening intently.

‘...daughter of Patrick McCluskey, the Chairman of the second largest advertising agency in London. It is as yet unconfirmed whether it was a tragic accident or suicide. Early indications show the time of death as being the early hours of this morning. It is also unconfirmed that she was under the influence of drugs, believed to be cocaine...’

Neil couldn't believe this was happening. He imagined she must have overdosed, gone outside and fallen. That must have been what happened because she couldn't have known he was going to choose Claire, at least not until he had failed to telephone her. His thoughts in disarray, he tried hard to remember how she had looked when he left. The harder he tried the worse it became and he couldn't remember. He knew, whichever way it turned out, he would never be able to shake the guilty feelings of being in some way responsible for her death. He should never have left her in such a state of mind and never have suggested, for his benefit, that she take a snort.

‘You knew her well, didn't you darling?’ Claire's words struggled to penetrate Neil's exploding brain. ‘She was a beautiful young woman. What a waste of life. Patrick must be inconsolable. Are you okay darling? Neil?..’

Chapter Twenty Nine

Neil woke with a start. He had fallen back to sleep and was decidedly angry now. He got up and went to the door of the waiting room. The other occupants appeared to be in a deep sleep. He reached for the handle and opened the door to be confronted by the guard. Those eyes! They bore into his brain, somehow quelling the anger, forcing him back into the room and stopping the angry words escaping his throat.

‘Calm down sir,’ said the guard. ‘Everything is under control. You’ve only covered part of your choices. By the time the train is ready, you’ll be twice as wise as you are now. Take your seat and I’ll go fetch you a nice cup of coffee. Two sugars I think?’

‘Yes, that’s right, thanks.’ Neil couldn’t believe this was happening. He meekly sat back down and watched as the guard crossed the room to where the young couple were sitting. He was amazed to see the guard gently shake the young woman’s shoulders.

He couldn’t make out what he was saying to her, struggling as he was to keep his eyes open with no success. He soon drifted back to the dream-filled sleep.

The guard was concerned for Emily. Knowing she, with her husband, had the toughest choice to make, he merely tried to put her at ease. He also knew that she had the same dream as her husband and felt the need to speak a few words of a comforting nature. This he did and Emily had momentarily woken to hear him saying;

‘God is with you he knows you have a hard choice. Try not to despair. Try to remember, for the moment, you are merely dreaming and I will be here when you next wake. Sleep again now, your second option awaits you.’

Emily was comforted by his words. The dream had been very sad and she couldn’t even begin to believe her darling Steve could ever behave that way. It did however have the effect of making her think about the opposite choice. Maybe she should give more thought to having an abortion. Perhaps it would be for the best. It was with that thought in mind she fell back to sleep and the guard crept quietly from the room.

Chapter Thirty

Emily felt Steve was to blame for pressing her into having an abortion. She had really wanted to go ahead and take her chances that the baby would not be too badly handicapped. She had not been strong enough with her arguments. Here she was in hospital, surrounded by other women, most of whom had also had an abortion. It didn’t make her feel a great deal better, being made aware by listening to the nurses’ gossip, that they, the other killers (that’s what she felt she was) had aborted their foetuses for more social reasons. Some of them felt too young to cope without a father around to help. Others felt their families were complete and couldn’t cope financially or practically with any more. One or two just felt inconvenienced and the hard bitch in the bed next to her was having her third termination. She talked about it like she was having a tooth extracted! Emily just wanted to go home. She couldn’t bear this place. The nurses were kind enough, considering what they did all day, but

having the terminator in the next bed was driving her crazy. The only consolation she had was the woman on the other side of her. She, bless her, was only on this ward because the gynaecology ward was full. She was being sterilised. Her name was Maggie and she had given birth to three children but the middle one had a similar condition to the baby Emily had just aborted. It was born two weeks premature and only lived for twenty four hours but she had gone on and had a third, a son, who was now a happy healthy six months old. This was despite odds of twenty to one of having the same abnormality as the child who had died. She gave Emily hope for the future. She was only being sterilised due to having had three caesareans and didn't want to risk the possibility of future heartache. She had a daughter and a son and was not prepared to tempt fate further.

Maggie and Emily had comforted each other. They talked late into the night, after their husbands had gone home. Even managing the odd laugh or two talking about the conveyor belt abortionists, which one of the nurses told them she sometimes felt she was. They made plans to keep in touch and, unlike some previous spur of the moment promises Emily had made, she hoped they would.

They were both in for one night only and by the following morning they were firm friends.

Steve was due to pick her up about midday after the doctor completed his final examination. Maggie's husband had to go to work so she would be staying there until four o'clock. They were both awake by 6.30 and carried on where they left off, while eating breakfast. The terminator looked peeved that she was not included in their conversation but Maggie and Emily paid no mind to her. Short of being downright rude, they kept any exchange of comments with her to a minimum.

Emily found her opinion of Maggie rising in stature due to her civility to the woman. She felt if she was in Maggie's shoes she would have been hard-pressed to hold her tongue!

Emily was so engrossed in conversation that she didn't notice Steve's arrival until she heard the terminator speak to him. She and Maggie were sitting facing each other, on their beds. Emily's back was to the terminator and although she knew the woman's name was Carol from the headboard, she would always be the terminator to her.

'Don't look like your wife's quite ready to leave yet. Proper mother's meeting those two have been having' she said.

Emily turned to see her husband at the foot of her bed and shooting a look of pure hatred at the terminator, she welcomed her husband.

'Hi Steve.' Smiling warmly at Maggie, Emily reached across for her hand adding; 'This is my new friend, Maggie. We've been helping each other through this and intend keeping in touch.'

'Hi Maggie, good to meet you.' Steve greeted Maggie at the same time noticing the change in his wife's facial expressions, depending on which of the two women she looked at. He remembered the brief explanations he had heard yesterday and had a fairly good idea of her feelings. He kissed his wife tenderly on the forehead. Sitting next to her, with his back also to Carol, he exchanged pleasantries with his wife's new friend. He desperately wanted to get Emily home and put this experience firmly to the back of his mind. Emily busied herself getting her bits and pieces together and then left Maggie chatting to Steve while she went to the bathroom to put on her outdoor clothes. She was very glad to be seeing the back of this place.

Chapter Thirty One

Several months later, Steve came home from work to find Maggie and Emily in the back garden. Her two children were with her and Emily was sitting with the little boy on her lap, gently coaxing him to eat his tea. The little girl was happily playing with some toys on the lawn. He felt a lump in his throat seeing how happy Emily looked.

‘Hello there’ he said trying to control the quiver in his voice. ‘Looks like a nice little party you’re having. Isn’t it a lovely day?’ He went over to the picnic table and sat opposite them. ‘Can I have some of that’ he indicated at the spoonful of spaghetti hoops Emily was about to give the boy.

‘No you can’t, can he Lewis? It’s all for you, isn’t it?’ Emily said whilst copying the noise and actions of an aeroplane as she spooned it into his mouth. Turning to Steve she said. ‘Hi darling. Have a good day? Isn’t Lewis adorable and little Katie too?’

Maggie said ‘Hello Steve. They are really little monsters.’ She added humorously. ‘I have been promising to come over for the day for some time and I hope you don’t mind.’

‘Of course I don’t.’ Yet he couldn’t help wondering what effect spending time with Maggie and her children would have on Emily. She was still suffering greatly with a crippling sense of loss. He was glad Maggie had contacted her and had invited herself for the day but really wasn’t sure if it would help. Emily had become very withdrawn and melancholy. Perhaps this would give her the kick-start she needed to get back her old zest for life. Being with Lewis and Katie, enjoying watching them play and chatting to Maggie might even make her think about trying again for a family.

Emily had a good idea what Steve was thinking. He had tried a few times over the last month to bring up the subject of trying for another baby. She really didn't want to talk about it and managed to avoid an in-depth discussion. She desperately hoped for children but couldn't face the agony of waiting for the tests if she became pregnant. She would also then have to endure the same heartbreaking decision again if the tests showed an abnormality. The genetic counsellor had told them there was a one in twenty chance of this happening. It was too soon, the feelings were too raw and she needed more time to grieve for the child she had aborted. She really didn't know if she would ever want to try again.

Chapter Thirty Two

'Hi Honey, I'm home.' Steve called out. The house was silent.

Steve went through to the kitchen and saw the message pinned to the fridge.

'Gone to Maggie's be back about 6, love Emily xx'

He sat down at the breakfast bar with his head in his hands thinking how this was becoming a habit. Emily seemed to spend more time these days with Maggie and her kids than she did with him. He sat there for a while remembering the last time they spoke.

It was late last night. They were getting ready for bed. Emily was sitting in front of the mirror moisturising her face and neck and he was sitting on the bed taking off his clothes. He spoke to her as he stood up to pull back the covers.

'Emily it's been nearly two years now. I need to know if you ever intend to try for a family again.' He watched her face in the mirror, noting the way the muscles tensed.

'Not now Steve, please.' she implored him.

‘That’s all you ever say love. I know it won’t be easy but when? When will you at least discuss it with me?’

‘Aren’t you satisfied with the life we have?’ She turned to face him. ‘We are happy aren’t we? I can’t say if I ever want to go through that again Steve.’ Emily rose from the stool where she was sitting and, climbing into the bed, snuggled up to Steve’s warm body, feeling safe as his arms enfolded her. ‘I just couldn’t bear it if it all went wrong again.’

‘There is a good chance it won’t Emily. Of course I am happy just being with you. You know how much I love you but it’s what we both always wanted.’ Steve was pleased that at last they were discussing it. He stroked her hair and looking into her eyes, gently kissed her lips. ‘Please honey, let’s just give it one more go?’

‘I can’t Steve’ she replied, smoothing his cheek with her hand. ‘Not yet anyway.’

‘When then?’ Steve pulled his head back to see her face more clearly. ‘Another two years?’ He didn’t want to push her too far but had to make the most of this opportunity to discuss it properly. ‘I need to know that you are seriously thinking about this and not just stalling me.’

‘I don’t know Steve’ Emily felt the tears forming in her eyes. ‘I want children with you. You know I do. I just don’t know if I can take the chance of it happening again.’

‘You remember what the specialist said. There really is a much better chance of everything being alright.’ Steve insisted ‘If you really want a child Emily, we have to take that chance.’

‘I’m too scared.’ Emily whimpered. Her tears were falling freely now. ‘Please say I don’t have too.’

‘You know you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to Emily.’ Steve comforted her. ‘But I think you need to want to try again. Otherwise, you will always wonder what if? Wouldn’t you? We have so much love to give. You have so much love to give. You owe it to yourself to at least try.’

‘But, what if I do and it does all go wrong? What will we do then Steve? Have the baby this time? Take the chance of bringing up a handicapped child? How could you do that now when you couldn’t do it two years ago?’

She didn’t want to hurt Steve but she needed to take the pressure off herself. Blaming him for their decision two years ago helped her do that. It also was a thought that had gone through her mind on more than one occasion when she deliberated about maybe trying again. Steve had thought about that too but, like Emily, hoped that decision would not have to be made.

‘I don’t know Emily.’ He tried to reason with her. ‘Why put additional pressure on ourselves by worrying about what might not happen?’

They had argued and discussed it late into the night but did not make any decision.

Steve had left for work before she had woken this morning and now sitting at the breakfast bar, he waited for her to come back from Maggie’s. All the time thinking she was okay, she had Maggie’s kids to play happy families with. Would he ever get the chance to play happy families?

Chapter Thirty Three

Emily instinctively knew when her dream finished that Steve had been having the same dream. She also knew what he had been thinking when she had dreamed about him sitting at that breakfast bar and at all the other times throughout the dream.

Each of their thoughts formed part of their strange vision of their future. This, the second dream, didn't seem as bad as the first. Not so far anyway. Perhaps that had something to do with her not being a victim, which is how she saw herself in the first vision. She was still desperately unhappy but felt this time that Steve was more of a victim.

Falling back to sleep she felt Steve was hurting, probably more than she was. In her dream she forgot Lewis and Katie weren't her children for the two or three days a week she spent with them. Maggie was happy for the break she got when she visited Emily or, as was more frequent, when Emily spent the day with them. She also realised that it was very therapeutic for Emily and was desperately sorry for her friend's predicament.

It was Maggie that Emily confided in, shortly after the evening she had spent discussing trying again for a baby with Steve. She opened her heart to her friend telling her all her deepest thoughts. How she wanted desperately to have a baby and how scared she was of the possibility of the baby being handicapped a second time. Perhaps it was because Maggie wasn't directly involved that Emily listened more when she suggested she should try again. She decided a few months later that she would stop taking contraception, without telling Steve! She was surprised by Maggie's reaction to this decision.

'You can't do that' Maggie was shocked. 'When will you tell him? When you're pregnant?'

'No. I planned to have the test and only tell him when I know everything's okay.'

'And what if everything isn't okay?' Maggie exclaimed. 'What will you do then?'

'I can decide myself.' Emily said calmly. 'He will be none the wiser and it is my body after all.'

‘Emily, think about it. Think seriously about it.’ Maggie said.

‘I have thought about it. If everything’s okay, think how pleased he will be.’ Emily couldn’t understand how her friend was being so negative about this. ‘If there is a problem, it will be my decision and I can’t blame Steve if I make the wrong one.’

‘So what if there is a problem and you decide to keep it? What then?’

‘Then I will tell him what I have decided and he can choose to stand by me and the baby, or not.’ Emily was starting to realise what her friend was concerned about.

‘I’ve made up my mind Maggie. It’s what I want to do. I will just have to pray everything is okay, won’t I?’ Emily was desperate for her friend’s support.

‘I really think you are making a big mistake here and I hope, for everyone’s sake, that I am wrong. You need his support with this and how can he give it if he doesn’t know anything about it? Please, promise me, you’ll think about it some more?’

Emily stopped taking the pill after her next period. After six months, she decided to go to the Doctor to find out if there was a problem as she hadn’t managed to conceive. The doctor, after checking her notes, pointed out that she had tried for three years before conceiving the first time. He suggested she should try a little longer and keep a chart of her ovulation and periods for the next couple of months to establish her most fertile period. She left the surgery feeling more than a little peeved. She had waited nearly a week for an appointment and he couldn’t wait to usher her back out the door. Well, if nothing happened in the next couple of months, she would go back and demand to see a specialist.

Six weeks after she had gone to see the doctor, Emily was surprised when Steve came home early. He had badly gashed his finger on the guillotine at work and had made an emergency appointment at the doctors. The Health and Safety Officer had stopped the bleeding and bandaged the cut, but advised him to get his doctor to

check it out. This would be better than waiting for two or three hours at the Casualty Department of the hospital, when stitches might not be needed. He had popped in to see if she needed a repeat prescription while he was there. Emily said no she was fine, not thinking he had meant contraceptive pills.

‘Where do you keep your pills now then?’ Steve was rummaging in her underwear drawer. ‘Only I haven’t seen them for ages.’

Emily had to think quickly. ‘Oh I was going to see the Doctor myself about that injection you can get now. Can you get me an appointment and I can find out the details. It will have to be in this week though as I am due to start a new packet of pills at the weekend.’ Emily hoped her words didn’t sound too garbled.

‘Okay. See you in a little while’ Steve called out as he went down the stairs and out the door.

He thought maybe he could try to talk her out of the new contraceptive injection and into stopping any form of contraceptive but it would have to wait. He gave it some thought while he was waiting to see the doctor and purposely didn’t ask the receptionist for an appointment. He was going to tell Emily he had forgotten.

However, after the Doctor had checked out his finger, he decided he had better make one. He was flabbergasted when he asked the Doctor for an appointment for his wife for the next few days. The Doctor beamed at him and said.

‘Oh good! I am so pleased for you, let’s hope this pregnancy is happier than the last.’

Steve stuttered. ‘What do you mean? My wife is pregnant? When? How?’

‘Sorry’ the Doctor said. ‘I assumed she wanted an appointment to confirm the pregnancy. When I saw her last month she told me you had been trying for six

months and I said to give it a bit more time. I am so sorry, I guess she just wants to have some tests.....’

Steve didn’t hear any more he had bolted out of the surgery.

What was Emily playing at? What was she thinking off? Steve couldn’t grasp what his wife could have been planning. He made it home in record time.

Emily was in the kitchen and, seeing the alarmed look on Steve’s face assumed the injury to his finger was worse than she had imagined.

‘Whatever’s wrong Steve?’ She asked.

Looking intently at her, Steve found he was lost for words.

‘Why – what were you thinking off? When did you stop? When were you going to tell me?’ He knew he wasn’t making any sense and the puzzled look on his wife’s face let him know that she was totally confused too.

He sat down at the breakfast bar and, after allaying her fears about his finger, told her what he had found out at the surgery. Emily, knowing there was no point lying to him, explained why she had felt the need to keep it secret from him.

‘I knew how much you wanted another baby Steve and I felt this was the only way I could deal with it. I’m sorry if you’re hurt.’

‘Hurt! Hurt doesn’t come into it. I can’t believe you could have gone all this time, worrying yourself, without letting me share it with you. If anything, I am angry.’

‘I thought it was for the best, truly I did....’

‘The best for who? And what happens now? Now I know? Will you go back on the pill and resume your little game in a couple of months?’

‘Of course not. Now you know, we can go to the doctor together and sort out the next step.’ Emily said with more than a hint of resignation.

Chapter Thirty Four

That day proved to be the turning point in their relationship. After then, everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. They waited for another six months before the doctor sent them to a fertility specialist to have the necessary tests. Then another six months later he was told that, not only did he have a low sperm count but, one of Emily's fallopian tubes was blocked.

The combination of these problems, whilst not totally ruling out Emily becoming pregnant, would severely limit their chances. It also didn't help their dilemma that making love had changed to 'making babies'. 'Temperature charts' and 'most fertile periods' became the order of the day. No more spontaneous lovemaking.

They had considered fertility treatment but their genetic abnormalities meant that they would not be considered 'eligible' for this under the National Health. They discussed going private but, not only was the cost a major barrier, what if they were successful and the baby had spina bifida? Would an abortion even be a consideration, if they knew they might never have another child? Steve felt that Emily blamed him for making her abort the first baby and although Emily tried not too, secretly she did.

Emily began spending more and more time with Maggie and her children and eventually Maggie telephoned Steve to let him know it was becoming a problem.

'I love her dearly Steve but I am worried about her state of mind.' Maggie had rang Steve at work after Emily left to go back home. 'She is starting to take over when she is here. I know I have condoned this in the past but it seems to have become an obsession. She is starting to behave strangely towards me. Almost as if they are her

children and I am depriving her of them. I don't want to stop her coming here but I may have to soon. I have tried talking to her but I am not getting through.'

'Surely it's not that bad.' Steve couldn't believe what she was saying.

'I know she is with you a lot but I honestly believe it is just because she loves you and the children.'

'It's worse than you think Steve' Maggie emphasised. 'Last week she was here every single day, Monday to Friday. She behaved as if it was almost her job! Arriving shortly after 9 and leaving at 5. She even had a go at me for sending Lewis to school with a bit of a cold on Thursday. You really have to talk to her and soon. I think she needs professional help.' Maggie's words touched a raw nerve.

Steve had been aware that Emily had seemed distant over the weekend and now talking to Maggie he realised that she had been like a caged animal at home. She had even tried to get him to go over on the Sunday afternoon, saying it would be nice to give Maggie and Pete a break. They could take Lewis and Katie to the park and feed the ducks. Steve had managed to talk her out of it but she wasn't happy about it!

Reassuring Maggie that he would talk to Emily, he hung up the phone. He didn't know what he was going to say to her but he had to try.

That evening they had a tremendous row. Steve had tried to be casual in his approach to Emily. He pointed out that it wasn't a good idea to spend so much time at Maggie's house and maybe she should get a little part-time job, to fill the days, if she was getting bored.

'I don't go there because I'm bored. I'm a great help to Maggie. She enjoys me being there and I enjoy going.' She smiled. 'Anyway, it's good practise for me.'

'I'm not so sure.' Steve replied. 'Have you actually spoken to her about it?' Steve was sitting next to her on the sofa and he took her hand from her lap and held it.

‘I don’t need to speak to her darling. It’s obvious she likes all the help I give her.’

‘But it’s not fair on you either.’ Steve tried desperately to hide the panic from his voice. ‘Your Mum said the other day it’s weeks since you’ve paid her a visit. You are at Maggie’s almost every day.’

‘We’re going to Mums’ for Sunday lunch this weekend.’

‘You only agreed to that because they insisted. Anyone would think you’d fallen out with them the pressure they had to put on you to go there.’ Steve noticed Emily trying to avoid his eyes.

‘Let’s leave it shall we.’ Emily got up from the sofa and headed for the kitchen under the pretence of making coffee. Steve followed her realising that he had to convince her that what she was doing wasn’t good for her.

‘Were you planning on going to Maggie’s tomorrow?’ He reached to get the cups.

‘Yes. She wants to get a bit of shopping and I said I would look after Katie. It will save her dragging her round the supermarket.’

‘I don’t think you should go’ Steve noticed the authority in his own voice and hoped that Emily wouldn’t. She did of course.

‘Don’t start telling me when I can or can’t go and see my friend. I need to see her and the kids love me being there. You know, I think they even prefer me to Maggie.’ She poured the water from the kettle into the cups and Steve felt a shiver go down his spine. He waited until she put the kettle down and tried, unsuccessfully, to take Emily in his arms. She shrugged him off.

‘Honey I am worried about you. If those kids do prefer you to Maggie, that’s no good to them, or to you. Maggie is their mother and she is worried about you too.’

‘How do you know that?’ Emily spat the words out. ‘Have you two been conspiring

behind my back? How dare you discuss me, with my friend. You've no right and she is just jealous because her kids prefer me!

'Emily, calm down.' Steve tried to reassure her. 'Maggie telephoned me because she was worried and, if this reaction is anything to go by, she is right to be.'

Emily turned her back on Steve and went through to the front room.

'I don't want to discuss this with you anymore.' She shouted back at him. 'Leave me alone! Seeing Steve follow her, she turned again and went out to the hall and up the stairs. 'I'm going to bed.'

Steve didn't follow her but while he stood in the kitchen, drinking the coffee Emily had made and left, he hoped she would give some serious thought to what was definitely becoming an obsession. Perhaps if she had things might have turned out very differently.

Chapter Thirty Five

It was a year later, the next time Maggie called Steve at work. Only this time it wasn't just to talk as a concerned friend. During the year Maggie had put her foot down and told Emily, as kindly as she could, not to come round every day. Trying to use the excuse that the children needed more independence and, if she refused to pamper them, then they couldn't use Emily as a scapegoat. They would have to do whatever it was themselves.

When Emily told Steve about this it was clear that she still wasn't happy about it. She let him know, in no uncertain terms, that she thought it was his doing and Maggie was merely carrying out his wishes. Gradually, over the year, the visits went down to one a week. Unfortunately at the same time their lovemaking took even

more of a dive. Emily used the excuse that there was no point in 'doing it' when the odds of her conceiving were so remote. Steve tried to convince her that he wanted to make love to her with no ulterior motive other than because he loved her, wanted her and needed to show her how much. He tried to speak to her about adoption but that also was met with contempt by Emily. She wanted her own baby or no baby. She then wounded him even more by reminding him that they could have had their own if he hadn't pressured her into an abortion.

Emily's feelings were putting her constantly on a knife's edge. She retreated more and more into herself and became withdrawn crying at a moments notice. She felt that Steve was only concerned with himself and, when he suggested she go to see the Doctor because he felt she was suffering from depression, she called him an unfeeling bully. He even went to see her parents, Janice and Frank, and begged them to have a word with her, hoping that they would persuade her to get some help. This only resulted in Emily telling them that, if they wanted to take Steve's side, they were as bad as he was and they could go to hell! This in turn made them more concerned and added to Steve's worries, constantly hounding him to do something about it. He didn't know what more he could do. He went to see the Doctor himself and asked him to refer her to a specialist but when the appointment came through, Emily refused to keep it.

Now Maggie was on the phone, telling him that Emily went to collect Lewis from kindergarten and on to Katie's school over an hour ago and hadn't come back.

'I am getting very worried Steve. I have phoned both school offices and the children were collected on time. I wish I hadn't let Emily collect them. Especially since she seemed in an odd frame of mind.

'Don't worry.' Steve found it difficult to get a word in edgeways.

‘I can’t help it Steve. I don’t think I have any other option but to call the police!’

Please don’t call the police yet. Please Maggie wait till I get there.’ Steve begged.

‘I’ll drive past both schools on my way. She might have broken down. I promise I will be no more than twenty minutes getting there.’

His adrenalin was pumping furiously. If he couldn’t find them, he wanted to be with her when she called the police.

‘Okay but hurry.’

He arrived at Maggie’s fifteen minutes later. She and Pete were watching from the window. Pete had managed to calm his wife a little and had convinced her that Emily loved the children so much, she could never harm them.

‘I will wait here at home, you go with Steve. Try the local parks. She may have taken them to the swings and forgot the time.’

‘If we have not found them by six, I’m calling the police.’ Maggie didn’t even stop to put on her coat. ‘That will give them a couple hours of daylight left to search for them.’

‘We will find them, I promise’ Steve said hopefully.

They were on their way to the last park in the area when they passed through the High Street and Steve spotted them, through the window of McDonalds.

‘Look Maggie, there they are.’

He pulled over a couple of shops down and tried in vain to stop Maggie storming in, to no avail. He caught up with her in time to hear her screaming at his wife.

‘How dare you! How dare you put me through that agony. I can’t believe you could be so stupid!’ Steve could only guess that Maggie had toned down her fury on seeing the smiles on her children’s faces turn to frowns and their Mummy being in such a rage. They, like Emily, were oblivious to the trauma Maggie had suffered.

‘What’s wrong Maggie?’ Emily enquired innocently. ‘We are only having a burger!’

‘What’s wrong?’ Maggie was spitting venom. ‘You went to collect them from school two and a half hours ago, that’s what’s wrong. I have been going out of my mind with worry. I would have called the police by now if it wasn’t for Steve and Pete.’ Maggie took the children’s hands and started heading for the door.

‘Wait, let them finish their burgers.’ Emily said. ‘I am sorry, I didn’t realise the time and I just didn’t think...’

‘Damn right you didn’t think.’ Maggie cut her short. ‘You don’t think, that’s your problem. Well don’t think of coming over again. Our friendship’s finished and I don’t want you near my children again. Do you understand?’

‘Hold on a minute Maggie’ Steve was torn between the hurt and confusion on his wife’s face and the need to calm Maggie’s understandable fury. ‘Let me take you and the kids’ home.’

‘I won’t be long Emily.’ Steve said on seeing his wife getting up from the table.

‘Please wait here for me. Don’t leave.’ He hurried after Maggie and the children.

Maggie took a bit of convincing to let Steve take her and the children home. Only when she realised Steve was right and Pete would be worried if they weren’t back soon, she reluctantly gave in. All the way back she kept up a stony silence and when they got to her house and the children ran in, pleased to see their Daddy home so early, she turned to Steve and said;

‘I meant every word I said Steve. I don’t want anymore to do with Emily. I’m sorry for you. I think you have major problems to sort her out but I can’t go through anything like that again.’

Please Maggie, don’t be hasty. I do understand how you feel but in a week or two you might feel differently.’

‘No I won’t’

Steve tried to reassure her. ‘She does need help, I know, but she would never hurt Lewis and Katie. You know that.’

‘No Steve, I’m sorry I can’t – I don’t want to – take that chance. Goodbye and good luck, you’re going to need it.’

Chapter Thirty Six

Steve watched his wife deteriorate rapidly over the next few months. Despite all his efforts, it became clear that she needed professional help. He tried everything he could think of to bring her round, lighten her mood. But nothing worked. She didn’t even argue with him anymore. He could get no real emotion from her at all. She sunk deeper and deeper into depression. He tried to get Maggie to bring Lewis and Katie round just to say hello, but she wouldn’t. He couldn’t blame her but he was getting desperate and was willing to try anything. Even Emily’s parents couldn’t get through to her and knew Steve was doing everything he could to try and lift her spirits.

Janice was the one who finally persuaded him that he would have to physically take Emily to see a psychiatrist. He was having trouble getting her out of the house at all. She let her personal hygiene slip and never seemed to do any housework. Steve couldn’t remember the last time she had cooked anything for him. Whenever he tried to encourage her to do anything resembling normality, she would end up sobbing, telling him that he didn’t understand. Which he didn’t! He knew it couldn’t go on and the Doctor, after he finally paid a home visit and saw for himself the condition

she was in, somehow managed to get her to agree to be assessed.

Steve's boss's patience was wearing thin too. Steve was often absent and had used up all his holidays with days off. When he was at work, he was so preoccupied with worry, his usually meticulous standards were showing the strain.

'I can't begin to understand what you are going through Steve' Mr Thompson said when Steve asked him for yet another day off work for the appointment. 'This has got to be the last time.' He said finally.

'Thank you Mr Thompson, I really do appreciate all your help. This consultation will mean Emily can get all the help she desperately needs and then I can get back to being the foreman you deserve.'

Thankfully Mr Thompson just said 'I hope so Steve, I really hope so.'

The night before the appointment, Emily was very agitated and tried most of the night to convince Steve it wasn't really necessary for her to be assessed. She tried to assure him that she was feeling better and could 'snap out of it' herself. Steve however was determined to take her.

'You need to go and we are going.' His voice softened seeing her fear. 'Let's just go and see what help they can give you honey.'

Steve was so tired from lack of sleep, he found himself nodding off in the waiting room the next day. He snapped out of a doze when he heard his wife's name called though, and had to encourage her to make the short walk to the psychiatrist's office. Taking her hand he gently led her to the door. He had thought he would be going in with her and was a little taken aback by the nurse's insistence that he should wait outside.

'Why? She needs me there'

‘She will be absolutely fine, we will call you when the doctor is ready for you.’ The nurse said kindly.

Steve reluctantly sat back down in the waiting room.

He was even more alarmed after falling back to sleep and waking to find himself not in the hospital’s waiting room but in the railway station’s waiting room. He was surprised at his almost uncontrollable urge to continue the dream and find out how serious his wife’s condition was.

His heart skipped a beat and turning he looked into Emily’s sleepy eyes. Her head still on his shoulder jerked as she woke and returned his stare. He didn’t think he could ever love anyone as much as he loved her that moment.

He knew then that the dream was not important. What was important was making the right decision. The right choice, not only for them, but for their unborn child! He knew it would be hard but he also now knew they would be strong enough to make the decision. It would be a joint decision and no matter what the future held for them it would not be as bad as the dreams they had both had in that waiting room.

They were after all just dreams, not as he had first thought visions of the future. He knew before the guard told them this and he felt that the love he and Emily shared would carry them through to the right choice. He knew this with a certainty when he squeezed Emily’s hand and kissed her with an overpowering passion, which she returned tenfold!

‘I love you Steve, so much. It wasn’t real? We will be fine, won’t we?’

‘Yes honey’ Steve replied. ‘Count on it.’

Chapter Thirty Seven

Joanna watched the young couple in the waiting room. Seeing the love they felt for each other radiate from them, she also knew that, however difficult the decision was she had to make, their decision would be much harder.

Her second dream had seen her decide to refuse the opportunity to work for the film company. She had wanted so badly to have the chance of a lifetime but felt the timing was not right and saw the relief on Sam's face the night she had told him.

'Darling, I am so glad. I was very worried you wouldn't be able to say no and I prayed you would. Hopefully you can still get involved through Johnny and we could join the Amateur Dramatics club at St. Andrews if you like. That would mean you would be even more involved in doing something in the acting profession.' Sam chattered on enthusiastically.

Joanna's enthusiasm had taken a bit of a battering and she hoped she could get it back quickly and not dwell on her disappointment too much.

'That might be a good idea.' She said. 'But you don't have to join too. I appreciate the thought but it's never really been your thing has it?'

'I know, but I also know how hard a decision it was for you and I want to show you how much I appreciate your sacrifice. You never know, it could be fun.'

Sam lasted two weeks at it. Joanna loved it from day one and soon got so involved that Sam wondered whether it had been such a good idea after all. The group's regular night was on Fridays in the Church Hall. They were just starting to rehearse a play to put on in the summer and, although all the parts were taken, Joanna became the understudy to the female lead. She also took on the mantle of assistant director in

addition to helping the wardrobe department, being the chief prop finder and a hundred other menial tasks. She absolutely revelled in it.

Sam very quickly felt neglected but thought he only had himself to blame for encouraging her to join in the first place. She was at the Friday night rehearsals. Mondays and Wednesday nights she spent sewing costumes and most weekends she was at the Church hall painting scenery and helping out with whatever else was necessary. She spent quite a few Saturdays and lunchtimes searching the local charity and furniture shops for her props too. Sam foolishly thought when the play was presented and they finished the two weekend runs, things would calm down but no sooner was it all over, than they had one week free and started their next project. This time Joanna got the leading role!

Not only was Sam starting to wish he had never suggested the group to Joanna, he also began to wonder whether it might have been better to take the job. It felt distinctly possible that he might have seen more of her if she had. Jade and James also began to feel jealous of their mother's devotion to the dramatics group.

Jade had shown a bit of interest at the start but after going along to see what occurred a few times, she soon got bored with the long drawn out periods of constant rehearsals and repetitiveness of the pre-production build up.

The group were into their third production after Joanna joined about 18 months previously, when Sam and Joanna had their first major row about the time she was spending away from the family. It was the summer of the twins 14th Birthdays and they had been planning, since Christmas, to take them to Disneyworld in Florida.

It had all been booked to fly out the day before their birthday the 29th June for 10 days. The drama group were performing the musical 'Grease' and the opening night was the 2nd August. This gave Joanne three weeks to polish up her part of 'Rizzo'

and should have been timed perfectly for her to have two weeks before the dress rehearsals to resolve any problems that could come up whilst she was away.

One week before they were due to go Joanna hit them with the bombshell!

‘Sam would it bother you, if I couldn’t go on this holiday?’ she asked him while they were relaxing with a glass of wine in the garden before dinner.

‘What do you mean? Why couldn’t you go? Of course it would bother me’ he replied getting up from the bench and looking down on her. She was twisting her glass round in her hand and couldn’t meet his eyes as she said:

‘It’s just such a crucial time in the rehearsals and I think it could hamper the production.’

Sam was having none of this. He bent down and lifted her face to make her look at him. ‘You can’t hamper the production but you could let me and the kids down. Is that what you mean?’

‘No, of course not. I just felt you could all have a good time whether I was there or not. You know I’m not into fairground rides and the like. You’re the one that loves all that and I could keep an eye on the practice as well.’ Joanna was trying desperately to soften the blow. She and Sam had words a few weeks ago about her lack of interest and time she was spending recently at their practice. She realised he was furious with her for even suggesting she wouldn’t go. She drained her glass and, getting up from the bench and starting to walk back to the house said; ‘Don’t worry about it. I just thought you wouldn’t mind.’ Before she got to the patio doors, Sam caught her up and grabbing her arm furiously swung her round.

‘I don’t believe you. You think more of that drama group than you do of me, the Partnership and even Jade and James. How could you even contemplate not coming with us?’

‘Let go Sam, you’re hurting me.’ Joanna knew she had been wrong to think of not going with them but couldn’t help feeling like she did.

‘What were you going to tell your children then? Or were you planning to leave that to me as well?’

‘I’ve said to forget it. What else to you want me to do?’

‘I want you to start paying more attention to your family or at least give us the same amount of attention that you give to the drama group. Is that really too much to ask?’

‘I do. Don’t forget it was your idea for me to join them. You didn’t want me to take that job either.’

‘Oh yes back to that again.’ Why do you have to always have someone else to blame. The only important person in this family is you and what you want. When was the last time you spent any time with the twins?’

Joanna response was to attack again.

‘You can talk. You spend all your time at the office.’

Sam was furious.

‘I spend so much time at the office covering your absences. If you spent more time there instead of every waking moment at the drama group, we could both spend more time with the children. Be a proper family again.’

‘Okay Sam, enough.’ Joanna went into the house and putting her glass in the sink turned to Sam and said; ‘I’m sorry. I realise I get carried away with the group. I don’t mean too. Please let’s forget it. I’m sure they will manage without me for ten days and we can all enjoy this holiday. You are right, we need to learn to enjoy being a family again.’ Sam really didn’t want to argue anymore but felt the need to really make her realise how much her involvement in the group was affecting their lives.

He went over to the sink and filled the kettle.

‘Okay, but we still need to talk about this. I don’t want our marriage or our business going down the tube because you would rather be prancing about on stage pretending to be someone you’re not.’

‘I will try to cut down the time after we get back and Grease is finished. I promise.’

Joanna went up to him and put her arms around him, laying her head on his chest.

‘And we will have the best holiday. Just you wait and see if we don’t!’

Chapter Thirty Eight

For all Joanna’s determination to enjoy the holiday, she didn’t, not really anyway. She was fascinated by the Epcot Centre and was in her element at the MGM centre, but mostly so she could tell the drama group all about it on her return. She resented them not being with her, well not all of them, one or two in particular. One person really – Tom! She had become very close to him and it really surprised her how much she was missing him. This made her question whether he had become more important to her than her family. She spent virtually all the time whilst holding bags and cameras etc., and when Sam and the twins were on the rides, trying to solve that puzzle.

‘Did she still love Sam?’

‘Was she falling in love with Tom?’

‘When did she become so alienated from Jade and James?’

She still loved them. She was sure of that, but she was shocked to realise that she didn’t know them anymore. She felt like an intruder in their lives. She watched the mutual closeness between them and Sam and shivered. The whole time they were in

the 3D cinema watching some Michael Jackson movie, she spent deep in thought, contemplating her revelations and trying to plan what she was going to do about it.

When they came out of the cinema Jade's excited voice broke into her thoughts.

'Wasn't that wicked?'

'Did you think that little bird thing was going to land on your face?' said James in reply. 'I saw you jump back in your seat.'

'What did you make of it all, darling?' Sam turned to Joanna, who lingered behind them, desperately trying to remember what she had just sat through. 'Are you okay? You look a little pale honey.'

'Yes, I am fine' Joanna hurriedly assured him. 'Just a bit hot, coming out into this blazing sunshine, it was much cooler in there with the air-con.'

'What's next?' Jade rescued the moment. She and James had been chattering away about the film non-stop, their sheer delight radiating from their happy faces.

'I think we need to find a bit of shade and cool down with a drink' Sam replied looking at Joanna. 'Your Mum is wilting a bit and you two must be getting a little peckish by now.'

'Oh no, not yet' Jade and James cried simultaneously.

'Can we grab a drink to have while we queue for the next ride?' James added.

Sam really thought Joanna looked unwell.

'Tell you what, you two can grab a burger and drink to have while you wait to have another go on the 'black hole' ride you wanted to go on again. Your Mum and I can sit down and relax out of the sun at the Café till you come back.'

'Okay.' Again they replied in unison and ran to the queue for their burgers.

'I don't know what's worse about coming here in the summer, the queues or the heat?' Joanna said to Sam as they strolled after the twins.

‘No, neither do I.’ Sam put his arm round her waist and, pulling her to him, kissed her on the cheek. ‘Unless, maybe its coming here at our age and expecting to have as much energy as them, do you think?’ He smiled.

‘Yes – you might be right.’ Joanna tried to hide the coldness she felt at his touch. Once upon a time she loved Sam’s open show of affection for her in public.

The twins duly grabbed their drinks and burgers, when they got to the front of the queue a good ten minutes later, and ran off with them in the direction of the ride. Joanna followed Sam with their tray over to a table in the corner. It was partly in the shade but was occupied by another couple.

‘Do you mind if we join you?’ Sam asked.

‘No, of course not. You need to grab any space you can here the man replied.

They gratefully sat down. Joanna realised how hungry she was and quickly devoured her burger and chips looking round the busy café, taking in the many happy families and the constant coming and goings.

It was a sort of tropical beach bar setting with large haystack type umbrellas set in bright red round tables with quarter circle seats. From the other couple’s conversation it became clear that they too let their children go off to queue for a ride so they could sit down for a while and relax.

Sam chatted away to the couple and found that they were from Brighton, not too far from them. Their two boys were 15 and 13. They too had gone for their second go on the Black Hole. This was the last day of their holiday and they were flying back in the morning so their boys were trying to cram as many goes on the rides as they could. Joanna listened to them chatting, throwing in the odd comment, not wanting to appear rude, but her mind was already drifting back to Tom.

‘Honey, did you hear what Bob and Sue suggested?’ Sam’s voice broke into her thoughts.

‘What, no sorry, I was miles away.’

‘Thought so’ he laughed. ‘They have invited us back to their place for a meal tonight.

What do you think? The twins would enjoy it I dare say.’

‘Yes, sure sounds good to me.’ Joanna pushed her troubled thoughts to the back of her mind. Hopefully, with more people at dinner, Sam wouldn’t notice her pre-occupation so much.

They continued chatting and Bob and Sue’s boys came back followed soon after by Jade and James all flushed with excitement. They didn’t want to sit for long, and after being introduced to each other and told of the plans for that evening, they eagerly hooked up with the boys and were happy to go off with them for a third trip on the rollercoaster in the dark..

Bob went up to get more coffee for the adults and they spent the time the kids were away making final plans to meet up for dinner. They ended up spending the rest of the afternoon together and Joanna found that she enjoyed Bob and Sue’s company so much, she could push her troubled thoughts to the back of her mind for the rest of that day. It proved to be the last time she could!

Bob and Sue’s hotel was lovely. It was within the Disney complex and the twins got on with the boys as much as Sam and Joanna got on with their parents. After their meal the kids went off for a swim in the pool and their parents went into one of the lounges where they were entertained by a ‘play it again Sam’ pianist.

He had a brilliant voice and knew every song that his audience threw at him. The evening passed very quickly and Joanna was sorry to say goodbye to their new friends, who had an early flight the next day. Promising to keep in touch and all

intending too, they reluctantly said their farewells. Joanna could tell Sam was relieved that she had enjoyed herself so much, and he commented on it as they were undressing for bed back at their own hotel.

‘You really seemed to enjoy their company honey. That’s the happiest I’ve seen you all this holiday, apart from maybe at MGM studios.’

‘I know, they are lovely people and I am sorry I’ve been a little bit subdued the rest of the time. I guess I have been worrying too much about the production back home.’ Joanna saw the smile slip from Sam’s face and regretted adding the last part.

‘What is there to worry about? You are up to speed and you don’t need to practise anymore, your lines are word perfect. Is that really why you’ve been unable to let yourself go and enjoy this holiday?’ Sam’s question struck a nerve. It did seem crazy but it was the truth. Frantically trying to cover the fact, she replied;

‘No not only that. You know the rides have never been my scene and Disneyworld is full of them. Even the Epcot Centre makes learning fun for the kids by going round the different sections on a ride!’

‘Face it Joanna, you just didn’t want to come did you? That drama group has become your life and the twins and I come a poor second.’ Sam sounded more resigned than angry and Joanna felt a twinge of regret to realise he was speaking the truth.

‘Don’t be silly, darling. You know that’s not true.’ She lied. ‘You and the twins are far more important to me than the group, you must know that.’ She pulled back the covers and climbed into her side of the bed. She tried to snuggle up to Sam but he turned his back and reached over to turn off the light.

‘Go to sleep Joanna.’ She felt the sarcasm cut through the darkness. ‘We have another fun filled day to look forward to tomorrow. You only have three more days

to put up with us enjoying ourselves before you can get back to your precious drama group!

Chapter Thirty Nine

Joanna thought of little else for the rest of the holiday. She felt the resentment from Sam but her mood thankfully didn't seem to affect Jade and James's enjoyment. How they couldn't see the barrier that had formed between their parents was a mystery, best explained perhaps by their youth and sheer pleasure in the wonderful world of Disney!

She and Sam barely spoke to each other, merely made small talk about where they would eat and where they would go next. The twins took control and Sam and Joanna went along with whatever they wanted to do. When they returned to their hotel in the evenings it was to sleep. Joanna tried to talk to Sam but any remarks he made in reply were of the sarcastic variety and she soon gave up trying. She realised that she really had nothing in common with him anymore and was almost constantly thinking of Tom. She planned a whole romantic future with him. That future didn't allow for little details like children, business partnerships and inflicting pain and hurt on other people.

The future she envisaged was of her and Tom playing the leading roles in some big epic - Romeo & Juliet or Anthony & Cleopatra - and some big production executive would just happen to be watching their performance. He would be so enthralled by their portrayal of the lovers that he would have to offer them a contract and whisk them away to Hollywood. They would be rich and famous and live a life of luxury, growing old together and when they retired, to live out their days on some desert island, forever in love.

‘Mum. Are you listening to me?’ James was sitting next to her on the plane going home. ‘When is it your performance of Grease is being shown?’

‘What - oh the first night is the 2nd. Why? Don’t tell me you want to watch it? You’ve never shown any interest before.’

‘Well you’ve never done anything this up to date before.’ He smiled cheekily at her.

‘It might be fun and I’m getting into this whole family thing now. Jade fancies it too. Don’t you, Jade?’ He turned to his sister sitting between him and his Dad. They had the centre four seats across the middle of the airbus. ‘We can make it another family adventure.’

Jade had been chatting to her Dad and the stewardess and Joanna caught the look of annoyance on Sam’s face on hearing Jade’s reply,

‘Too right! There’s a lot to be said for this family thing. Eh, Dad? This has been the best holiday ever. I don’t want to go home.’

‘Well, wait and see. I’m not sure your Mum will want us there necessarily.’ Sam added. Fortunately Joanna was the only one who noticed the annoyance on his face and the infraction in his voice towards her.

‘Yes she will. Don’t you Mum?’ James was on a roll. ‘It will be great fun.’

‘I’d love it if you all came.’ Joanna put emphasis on the ‘all’. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. We really are very good, if I say so myself.’ She turned to take her lunch from the stewardess as Jade and James sniggered and whispered about the lack of modesty in their Mum’s remark.

‘Well you had better be.’ Jade finally said out loud. ‘Cause we are going to be very good critics. I might even write about it for the school magazine and I would have to be unbiased for that.’

Joanna wasn't sure how she felt about them all coming to watch her but the arrival of their lunch ended the conversation. She put it to the back of her already full mind, where it stayed, until the week before the first performance.

She had gotten straight back into her stride and tried to ignore the rift that had formed in her marriage - using it as an excuse to flirt outrageously with Tom. The strain was almost unbearable at work and Sam, understandably, was not happy at having to cope almost single-handedly with the volume of work that had built up during their holiday. Joanna tried to share the work at the office but, given the short time she had to put the finishing touches to her part in the musical, it clearly was not an equal share.

Jade was the one that reminded her to make sure she got tickets for them. She also had to get some for Sam's parents, her Mum and another six or seven for friends. Then she remembered Bob and Sue and the boys were coming up from Brighton also. She went to see Marjorie who was in charge of the ticket sales to get her order in but the opening night was already sold out. The final night would have to do. Jade was disappointed, but Joanna assured her that they had the whole of the middle second row and the final night was more often better than the opening night, due to the cast putting on a more polished performance.

Sam was making it easy for her to feel less guilty for her flirtations with Tom. He even said he was so busy at work that he might not be able to make the performance himself. It was only the nagging of the children and the thought of Bob and Sue's reaction to him not being there that finally persuaded him to attend.

Joanna was more nervous than usual on the opening night. She needn't have been. The show went without a hitch. Tom was superb as Danny and the fact that he and Karen, as Sandy, were both very talented singers ensured the exceptional success of

the performance. She also got complimented on her singing, which she felt held out better than she dared hope, for her solo - 'There are worse things I could do'. It may have had something to do with the almost cult following of everything to do with 'Grease' since the movie had been released.

At the after-performance drink at the local pub, everyone was buzzing. The George had reserved the back room for the cast and guests for every performance night of the show and it was there she crossed the barrier from mere flirtation to full blown affair with Tom.

He had caught her on a high from sheer elation mixed with none too few drinks. She was on her way back from the Ladies, he was on his way to the Gents and they met in the narrow corridor, where they had to squeeze past each other. They both smiled at each other and complimented each other, for the hundredth time, on their respective performances. Then as they touched to pass, the electrical charge Joanna felt took her breath away. He must have felt it too for the next thing she knew she was in his arms and they were kissing with a passion Joanna hadn't felt since she was a teenager. She felt his hand moving up her skirt and the instantaneous moisture between her thighs and totally lost control.

'Tom, please not here.' She found it hard to stop him and somehow managed to drag him into the Ladies where their passion took them to the heights only illicit sex can. Squashed into the cubicle, the awkwardness of the confined space only added to their orgasmic pleasure. They came together in less than three minutes. Joanna sitting on Tom, sitting on the loo!

'Oh baby, you don't know how long I've wanted to do this.' Tom's words brought her back to earth with a bang.

He kissed away the guilt with assurances that 'it was meant to happen, meant to be.'

Joanna couldn't believe she had just committed adultery! The guilt was incredible.

How could she look Sam and the twins in the face, knowing what she had done. She got off Tom's flagging penis and picked her knickers off the floor. Avoiding looking into his eyes she put them on with as much dignity as she was able to in the confines of the cubicle and, straightening the rest of her clothes, turned without a word and left Tom sitting there. She was in a dream, or was it a nightmare?

She didn't remember walking back into the party to collect her coat, nor leaving the pub. She didn't remember driving home, which in her inebriated state, she should never have done. Nor did she realise that it was past midnight and so it came as no surprise to find Sam still working when she arrived home. He looked up from the paperwork as she passed through the lounge, on her way to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee. On getting no response to his remark of how late she was, Sam followed her through into the kitchen where she had flicked the switch on the kettle and was standing by the back door, looking out into the garden. She was oblivious to the noise from the kettle telling her there was no water in it.

'You're supposed to fill it first.' Sam's angry voice finally brought her back to reality. 'What's wrong with you anyway, was the show a disaster or what?'

'No it went really well.' Joanna voice was barely a whisper. 'I guess I am just tired.'

'Don't worry about filling up the kettle. I think I'll go straight up.' She began walking through the hall, towards the stairs.

'Oh right. Leave me to turn off the kettle and the lights. I'm not in the least tired!'

The sarcasm in Sam's voice was very strong. 'I'll finish Smithson's audit before I come and join you and I'll try not to disturb your beauty sleep. You must be exhausted you poor thing.' Sam shouted the final words up the stairs at Joanna.

Choosing to ignore him she climbed the stairs wearily. The last thing she wanted now was a fight. His understandable bad temper was more than she could deal with, although it did help to ease her guilt a little.

Chapter Forty

Joanna did her best to avoid Tom over the next few days, which was quite hard considering they were in the middle of the show's run. She did manage to avoid being alone with him and despite his efforts to waylay her, she remained successful until the penultimate evening's performance. He was waiting for her round the corner from where she parked her car and stood in the middle of the pavement so she could hardly avoid speaking to him. She decided to try the casual approach.

'Hi Tom, the show's really going well isn't it? I think it's got to be the best the group's done so far....'

'Don't – stop it.' Tom interrupted her. 'We need to talk about us, not the show.'

'I can't, I shouldn't have done what I did. Let's just forget it. Please Tom.'

Tom pulled her chin up so he could look her in the eye. 'You know I can't. Don't tell me that was just a quick fumble. We both know we had been leading up to it, especially since you came back from the States. I want more, and I know you do too.'

Tom had moved his hands onto her shoulders and it was hard for her to avoid looking in his eyes. She tried to shrug him off and carry on walking but he wasn't letting go of her, or the chance to finally speak privately to her.

'Please, meet me after the final show, we can talk then.'

'No Tom, I can't. My whole family's coming and it would be too difficult to get away from them.' Joanna said with honesty.

‘Well the day after then.’ Tom added ‘Just to talk.’

Joanna relented to this, more to get away from him now, than with any intention of actually doing so.

‘Okay. I’ll meet you in ‘The George’ about six, after I finish work.’

‘You will, you promise.’

‘Yes I said so didn’t I? Now please let me go, we both need to get ready for tonight’s show.’

‘Just tell me you promise.’ Tom insisted.

‘Okay I promise.’ Joanna said trying to break free and this time he let her go. She hurried away from him.

At every opportunity during that evening’s show, Joanna was met by a look of quizzical delight from Tom and the sight of him crossing his heart and pointing to her.

He also whispered ‘don’t forget, you promised’ in her ear when she left that evening and the final night followed much the same pattern.

After that, the final show and about 10 curtain calls, Joanna gathered her enthusiastic family and friends and invited them all to the pub for a celebratory drink.

Bob and Sue made their apologies. They had a long drive ahead of them and didn’t want to be too late with getting the boys home. Joanna’s In-laws also made their excuses and Sam had to take them home. He said he would come back for the twins who begged to be allowed to go to the after show party, if only for a little while. They were unbelievable proud of their Mum, and wanted the opportunity to meet the rest of the cast. It looked like quite a lot of the audience were going and it would be quite crowded in The George’s back room, so numbers would be restricted.

Reluctantly Joanna opted just to invite her mother and her best friend Dawn, with the twins. She sensed the disappointment in the rest of her guests and felt a little upset that she could not invite them all, but at least the pub was still open and quite a few of the cast lingered in the bar long enough for her to introduce them. She too got caught up in being introduced to other cast member's family and friends and it was quite a while later before she went through to the back room.

She had seen Tom out of the corner of her eye, almost constantly watching her in between being introduced to people, and was surprised to feel the adrenaline pumping through her veins. She had not however seen her husband return. He had kept a low profile and had also spotted Tom's attentions. Joanna jumped when he took hold of her arm in the back room.

'Oh it's you Sam. I didn't see you come back.'

'I've been here a little while. Are you ready to come home yet?'

'No not yet Dad, we've only just come through here.' Jade answered before Joanna could. 'Come and meet Karen, she played Sandy. Wasn't she incredibly good?'

'Okay, honey but not too much longer.' Sam gave Joanna an icy look and followed his daughter's lead to meet Karen. She was holding court in the opposite corner with James all doe-eyed at the front of her admirers. She was a very pretty young woman and, being in her early twenties, was the ideal age to command James's schoolboy's crush. Joanna was more surprised by the obvious attraction Karen seemed to have towards her husband as she witnessed the introduction. What a time for her to get jealous she thought, because that was the feeling coursing through her now. Perhaps it was her indiscretion that had triggered it? With that thought in mind she scanned the crowded room looking for Tom. She found him over by the buffet,

looking directly back at her. He smiled and waved and her friend Dawn witnessed it and immediately demanded an introduction to the 'hunky leading man'.

Joanna knew she had to respond to avoid arousing her friend's suspicions, but made sure her mother accompanied them over, much to Dawn's dismay.

'Tom, I'd like you to meet my best friend Dawn and my mother Pat'. Joanna hoped no-one noticed the tremor in her voice. 'Mum, Dawn, this is Tom.'

'Lovely to meet you.' Her Mum said. 'And what a wonderful voice you have.'

'Bit too good for this neck of the woods.' Dawn added, revelling in his continental double kissed greeting. 'Really professional both in acting and singing' she drooled.

'Don't you think Joanna was great as Rizzo too.' Tom said, giving Joanna the same greeting but lingering just a little bit too long with it.

'Yes.' Both Joanna's Mum and Dawn replied simultaneously, with her Mum adding 'I never knew she had it in her really. She certainly surprised me.'

Joanna felt like she wasn't there. She listened to the conversation but felt apart from it. She must have made the right remarks at the right time because no-one seemed to notice. That is until Sam joined them.

'Hi.' He looked directly at Tom. 'You must be Tom. Joanna's told me so much about you.' Joanna couldn't believe her ears, she had hardly mentioned Tom to Sam.

'All good I hope?' Tom's reply held no emotion. Sam all but ignored it anyway, and turning to Joanna said.

'I think it's time we took the children home don't you?'

'Sure.' Suddenly she wanted to get away quickly. 'I'll go and get them.' She put her drink down and started over to where they were still entranced with Karen. Sam stopped her.

‘No, I’ll get them you need to say your goodbyes. Nice to finally meet you, Tom.’

He shook the raised hand. ‘Dawn you have your car?’

‘Yes thanks Sam.’ Dawn turned to Joanna and said ‘Do you think it will be alright if I stay a little while longer?’

‘Of course you can.’ Tom broke in. ‘You can be my guest. You don’t mind that do you Joanna?’ He smiled wickedly at her.

‘Of course not, why would I.’

Joanna knew Tom could see the admiration on Dawn’s face and guessed her face reflected the twinge of jealousy she felt. She needed to get out of there and fast. Dragging her Mum round with her she said her goodbyes and caught up with the sulking twins and Sam back at the door, near where her friend stood hanging on Tom’s every word. Sam and the twins said goodbye to Dawn and Tom while she closely followed by her bewildered Mum, almost ran up the corridor and outside the side door into the street.

‘Slow down Joanna, what’s the big rush? Her Mum was breathing heavily when she got to the street. ‘Tom and the twins are still inside.’

‘Sorry Mum’ Joanna lied. ‘I just got a bit over hot and had to get outside for some air. It must have been all the excitement.’

Joanna heard Jade and James before she saw them. They were nagging their Dad for having to leave, but she could tell by their voices they were tired. It was past midnight and it had been a long evening. Joanna got in the back of the car with them and let her Mum have the front seat. No-one spoke much on the way home and Joanna felt the weight of James’s shoulder as he dozed off. He woke briefly when his Nan got out at her house but dropped off again almost immediately, before Sam got back in the car, after seeing her safely to her door. When they got home it was a

job to wake him up. Jade too was very sleepy. Joanna went straight to the bathroom to wash off her stage make-up and, when she went into the bedroom, Sam was fast asleep. He hadn't even complimented her on her role. He had made no comment whatsoever, she realised.

It was the same at breakfast the next morning. Their conversation consisted of little or nothing. So when she reminded him she needed a ride to the office, because her car had been left in the church car park the day before, she wasn't surprised to just get the comment 'well get a move on then – I'm leaving now.' His tone stayed the same for the journey to work, when he bothered to say anything. Joanna, when she realised the extent of work that had built up before and since her holiday, tried to excuse him, until he spoke to her, in front of the receptionist, like she was one of the newest recruits to the trainees in the general office, by saying;

'Do I have to show you the simplest of tasks every single day?'

Come to think of it, he was much more polite to the trainees. He always had so much patience with them. She really lost it then.

'Just what is your problem Sam? She saw the receptionist trying desperately not to listen.

'You are.' Sam retorted. 'You are my problem.' With that remark he left her staring open-mouthed at his retreating back.

'Sorry about that Carol.' Joanna apologised to the receptionist. 'I just don't know what's got into him lately.

'Don't worry about it Mrs. Woods. I do understand the pressure he's been under lately, what with the show and all.' Carol firmly took Sam's side. 'Now that it's over I am sure he will calm down and you'll both get back into a routine.'

Joanna just looked at her. Fortunately, or maybe not, the telephone rang at that moment. It was Tom!

‘I’ll take it in my office thanks.’ Joanna picked up the papers Sam had plonked on Carol’s desk. The ones she had been asking Sam about and hoped Carol hadn’t noticed the redness creeping up her face.

In the relative safety of her private office, she picked up the telephone.

‘Hi, Joanna Woods, can I help you?’ She tried to keep her voice casual, yet professional.

‘Hi Joanna’ Tom’s silky tones set her heart beating faster. ‘I’m ringing to remind you of our date.’ As if she could forget.

‘Yes, I remember Tom’ she tried to keep her voice casual but found she was whispering and that made it come out decidedly husky. ‘I’ll see you at the pub at six, I have to pick up my car anyway.’

‘I don’t care what excuse you use, just as long as you’re there.’

Joanna didn’t get the chance to reply as she heard the click of the receiver being replaced. She waited a few moments to compose herself before getting up and making her way to her husband’s office. Sam was so busy with going through a ledger with one of the trainees, he didn’t hear her come in. Thankful that it helped the situation, Joanna cleared her throat.

‘Sam, sorry to interrupt. I’m just letting you know that I will be a little late home tonight. I have to pick up my car from the church and there is a post production meeting going on, so shall I pick up a piazza for supper?’

Sam didn’t even turn round. He was leaning over the desk with his back to her. Judy, the trainee, at least turned to face her as he said;

‘Sorry, I am busy, just do what you like. You usually do.’

Judy raised her eyebrows sympathetically at Joanna.

‘Right, all okay.’ She stuttered. ‘I’ll let Jade and James know, shall I?’ She felt her eyes filling with tears. He was determined to humiliate her in front of everyone. Turning quickly to hide her distress from Judy, she stumbled from the room. He obviously already suspected an affair so she might as well go ahead and have one!

Chapter Forty One

Within a couple of months Joanna was seeing Tom once or twice a week. She didn’t sleep with him that night. Some maternal instinct prevented her from letting the twins down the first night after the show finished. She told Tom she had to get home, but arranged to meet him the following Tuesday.

Sam was surprised to see her when he got home shortly after eight that evening.

‘Your meeting finished early then?’ He went straight to the drinks cabinet and poured himself a scotch.

‘Yes. I picked up some chicken on the way home and made a casserole. Yours is in the oven. We’ve already eaten.’ Joanna was still mad with him and picking up her book from the side table, pretended to read. Sam was in the mood for a fight.

‘So when does the next production start? Do I get the customary two weeks of your undivided attention?’

‘Stop it Sam. This isn’t doing us any good is it?’

‘What do you expect me to say? We are losing clients at the Practice, you spend more time with your drama group than at the office these days, and the twins are just ships you pass in the night.’ Sam downed his scotch in one and went to pour himself another before continuing. ‘When was the last time we made love? Do you

remember, because I can't? He almost spat the last sentence at her. He was leaning over her, and knocking the book out of her lap, added; 'What do you want from me? A divorce? Is that what you want?'

'No Sam.' Joanna had never seen him so angry. The veins were sticking out in his neck and she realised she was frightened of him. She got up from her chair and, putting her hand on his shoulder, begged; 'Please, calm down, you're scaring me.' 'I'm scaring myself Joanna. I don't know what you want but I'm pretty sure it's not me and I can't go on like this for much longer.'

'Mum, Dad, What's going on?' Joanna and Sam turned simultaneously to see James standing at the lounge door, his sister behind him.

'Nothing love, don't worry. Dad and I just need to talk.'

'Sorry kids.' Sam went over to them, kissing them both on the tops of their heads.

'I've just had one too many of these.' He held up his glass. 'Go back up stairs. We'll sort this out, more quietly, I promise.'

'Go on James, Jade.' Joanna went over and put her arms round Sam's waist, trying to show them everything was okay. 'We didn't mean to worry you. Go on now.'

James and Jade reluctantly did as they were told and Joanna took Sam's hand, led him into the kitchen and told him to sit down. She would get his dinner and make him some coffee.

Whilst Sam was eating his dinner, Joanne told him she would let the group know at the meeting the following Friday that she would take a break from them for at least the next project.

'I'll also try to put in a few more hours at the office and lighten your load.'

Seeing that Joanna was making an effort, Sam suggested that maybe they should get another partner or at least close their books. By the end of the evening they decided

to advertise for another partner which would give them more time together and more family time with the twins. Both of them secretly thought maybe it was too little too late, but were determined to give it a good shot.

Joanna met Tom the following Tuesday and her resolve to try to save her marriage quickly flew out the window. They met in a little Italian restaurant in nearby Sutton, 'Trattoria Toscana'. Joanna had once worked on their books, but when their oldest child had qualified as a doctor, they sold up and went back to Italy. The new proprietors were very pleased to see her and, although they had another firm of Accountants, they remembered all her help when they bought the restaurant and insisted that the meal was on them and to order whatever they liked.

Tom waited patiently with a single red rose and a smile as wide as his face whilst she chatted with them.

'Hello Joanna, you look wonderful.' He kissed her on both cheeks and, before she could draw back, he kissed her lingeringly on her lips.

'Hello Tom.' She was acutely aware of the smell of his aftershave. 'Brut' was her favourite and made her weak at the knees.

'It seems like forever since I last saw you. Not a day has gone by that I haven't thought about you, wanted you.' He was whispering this in her ear but Joanna couldn't have felt more embarrassed if he had shouted it at her.

'Tom, please. Remember where we are.' She said pulling away from him and sitting down at the little table for two they had been allocated in the corner. All the while she was looking round at the changes that had been made, her heart was fluttering and her good intentions of telling Tom it was over were slowly melting to the back of her mind.

The new owners had made it much more of a romantic setting, mostly made up of tables for two. There were a couple that seated four near the till at the entrance, which could be pushed together to accommodate six or eight. The early evening sun shone through the window on them. All the tables had two crossover tablecloths, the top were deep sapphire and the underlying one a deep crimson. There were small vases with flowers, and candles, on each table and the closer you got to the back, the dimmer the light from them became. The paintings that covered the walls were mostly scenic and framed with ornate golden brass. They could have been worth a lot of money. They certainly looked like originals or, at least, very good copies.

Of the four couples that were in the restaurant, Joanna and Tom had the most secluded table and, after Tom poured her a glass of champagne from the bottle he had insisted on paying for himself from the bar, he took her hands in his and told her how he thought he was falling in love with her. Seeing the scared look in her eyes he added ‘or in lust with you at the very least.’ Throughout their meal he kept the compliments going and Joanna felt helpless to resist his charm.

They left almost as soon as they finished their desert and Joanna was glad that she had asked Dawn to cover for her. She had to tell her where she was going and believed that Dawn, who had made it obvious she had a crush on Tom, fell for the story that it was ‘just a meal, as friends.’ She explained that she had told Sam she would be taking a break from the group and wanted to let Tom know it wasn’t what she really wanted to do, so he could in turn explain to the group that she would still be available to help out. The total commitment to the group was taking its toll on her marriage and her working partnership. She felt she owed it to both to take a little breathing space. Dawn understood that she couldn’t tell Sam and ironically asked her to ‘put in a good word for her’ with Tom.

They left her car at the restaurant and drove in Tom's to his flat. No pretences were made or were necessary. They both knew what they were doing. Tom was a very skilful lover and made her feel his only aim was to please her. From the minute they entered his flat until he dropped her back to her car, his attention to her needs never faltered. She felt no guilt this time, just a little sad to realise the feelings she had for Sam seemed to have died. Tom had stolen her desire.

He kissed and caressed every inch of her body. Took the time to ensure her fulfilment before entering her and taking her pleasure to heights she previously thought were impossible to attain. Lying in his bed wrapped in his arms, after he had eventually come, he continued to caress her body and it was all she could do not to fall asleep with the contentment she felt. She basked in the sheer wonder of it all.

She arranged to meet up with him at his flat on the Friday, without giving any thought to where she could tell Sam she was going, and drove home in a dream. Sam was waiting up for her and she was sure he would know. He couldn't fail to notice the glow on her face or the sparkle in her eyes but he did. He greeted her with a smile and put her unusual euphoria down to a long overdue night out with her friend.

'You had a good time then?' He was lounging on the sofa with a glass of wine beside him. 'You obviously needed a nice relaxing evening with Dawn.' You know it must be over a year since you two had a girl's night out.'

'Yes, I suppose it must be.' She replied thinking;

'How can he be so nice to me?'

'How can I feel so unaffected by guilt?'

'He is really trying to make me feel happy, when all I can do is cheat on him.'

'You've had a nice relaxing evening too.' She said, nodding towards the wine glass.

‘It’s obviously what you needed too.’

‘Yes I must admit I was going to do some work and thought maybe I will just chill first. I flicked through the channels and found a film just starting. That was about eight o’clock and I’ve been lounging here ever since. I’m feeling a bit tipsy myself, that’s the last of a second bottle actually.’

‘Well good for you. You deserve it.’ Joanna was surprised to find she really meant it.

‘I’ll go and make us a nice cappuccino. You stay there and finish your wine.’ She floated through to the kitchen.

How easy was that? She thought. This might prove to be good for both of us!

She carried the cappuccinos back through to the lounge and sitting beside Sam placed the cups on the coffee table, next to the empty wine glass.

‘We’ll have to do this more often.’ She said kissing him.

‘Yes, we must.’ he said taking her in his arms and returned her kiss, with a passion he had not felt for her in a long time.

Chapter Forty Two

The affair between Joanna and Tom lasted for six months. It was relatively easy to keep it a secret from Sam. The difficult part was keeping Dawn quiet. She was fuming when she found out.

‘How could you Joanna? How could you do that to Sam?’

They had met in the park for lunch a couple of weeks after it started.

Dawn had been eager to know what Tom had said, when Joanna told him of her interest. She had managed to fob her off, for a time, but had arranged this meeting to finally tell her.

It was a late summer's day. The park was fairly busy with office workers enjoying the sunshine. They couldn't get a bench at their favourite spot, by the lake, so they were sitting on the grass in between two of the benches. Joanna had lost her appetite for the sandwich and got up and walked the few yards to throw the remainder to the ducks.

Dawn remained sitting, a look of utter disgust on her face as she called out to her so-called friend. She didn't feel very friendly towards her now.

'What are you thinking off? Don't you love Sam anymore?

Joanna made her way back. She had noticed the people on the benches looking at her curiously listening for her reply. Dawn was hardly discreet and the distance she had put between them meant Dawn was practically shouting at her. She sat back down beside her friend.

'I really don't know' her voice had become a hoarse whisper. 'I think I do but no-one has ever made me feel like this before. I don't even know if I would do anything differently, if I could turn the clock back.'

Dawn still had a look of disgust on her face mixed with a twinge of disbelief at what Joanna was saying. She remembered how Joanna had been there for her when she found out her ex-husband was cheating on her. She had been almost as devastated as Dawn. They had been friends for a long time and Bob had been like a brother to Joanna. She had dropped him like a ton of bricks and told him in no uncertain terms how despicable he was. Dawn's next words reflected her thinking.

'You've certainly changed your attitude. I can't believe you are now doing what you thought was so – so cruel and wrong. I'm sure you haven't forgotten about me and Bob? Or have you? You have changed so much. I really don't know you anymore.'

Dawn was very close to tears. She got up and started to walk away.

‘Wait Dawn, please. Let me explain.’ Joanna started gathering up the remains of their lunch.

‘Don’t bother!’ Dawn turned back, a look of sheer hatred on her face. And don’t worry, I won’t spill the beans to Sam, but don’t think of using me as an excuse for your sordid affair.’

‘Dawn, I wouldn’t, please. Don’t leave it like this’

Dawn, now also aware of the stares of the growing crowd, used them to punish her friend by shouting angrily at her;

‘Just fucking forget it Jo. Forget we were ever friends.’ Oblivious to the tears streaming down her face she screamed louder at her. ‘I want nothing more to do with you. I fucking hate you – do you hear me?’ Stumbling, Dawn started to run, ignoring Joanna’s feeble attempts to stop her.

Joanna sunk back to her knees and covered her own wet face with her hands. The crowd that had gathered slowly drifted away and left her sobbing and alone.

She spilled her heart out to Tom that evening. He understood of course. He consoled her and put her fears to rest.

‘Dawn is probably just jealous, especially as she fancied me and for all we know she fancies Sam too!

‘Maybe, you could be right I suppose.’

‘Of course I’m right. She has no man and you have two who care for you and now, after being so cruel and hurtful to you, she’s has lost her best friend too.’

Joanna believed him because she wanted too, needed too.

Tom held her, soothed her, made love to her and sent her home a lot happier than when she arrived.

Not that happy though. Sam who thought she had been out with Dawn that evening, noticed immediately she was not as chirpy as normal when she came home. Joanna had thought about little else on her way home and the mood that Tom had managed to get her into had long gone. She was again lifeless and this obviously reflected in her eyes and gave Sam cause for concern. She dodged Sam's questions and somehow managed to convince him that she had fallen out with Dawn over paying for the meal.

Dawn was on a much tighter budget than them, being on her own, and Sam bought the story about her becoming upset when Joanna paid the bill, when it should have been Dawn's turn. Sam then consoled her too. Told her it would blow over soon enough.

'You've been friends far too long to let a little thing like that split you up.'

Chapter Forty Two

Joanna tried several times to ring Dawn but she wouldn't take her calls. When she rang at her office, she was told she wasn't there or in a meeting. When she rang her at home, she put the phone down as soon as she heard her voice. She even sent her flowers with a card saying 'I'm sorry, please talk to me, Love Always Jo.'

They were returned with a card saying 'Fuck Off! Whore'.

Fortunately, Sam wasn't home when they were delivered otherwise she would have had a job explaining that! There was nothing more she could do but accept the friendship was at an end.

Before too long Tom convinced her that the only problem about losing her friend was losing her alibi! She didn't notice Tom cooling down their relationship until some months later when, unbeknown to her, Sam decided to telephone Dawn himself.

He came into her office as she was packing up to leave for the day. She looked up from closing her briefcase when he opened the door.

'Hi honey. You packing up to go yet?' she noticed the deep furrow in his brow.

'What's up, problem with Packers?' That was the client he had been working on for the last two weeks. Sam just looked at her, trying to use his words carefully.

'Who is it you're going out with tonight?'

Dawn had been caught off guard when he called and had spoken to him.

She had told him, after he had rambled on about the pettiness of the reason for falling out with Joanna, that it wasn't what he thought and she suggested he ask his wife the real reason. She added that he was a fool to believe that their friendship could have ended over something so trivial, but would not tell him what the real reason was.

Joanna needed time to think. She couldn't remember what she had previously said to Sam. He had gotten into the habit of not really asking her anymore. He was happy to let her go out at least once a week. Previously, when she was involved with the drama group, she had been out more than in. Finally she answered his question with a question.

'Why is there a problem you need my help with? I can cancel if you want me too.'

'No, no problem.' Sam said, much more casually than he felt. 'I just wondered.'

'I am just going to the pictures, with Karen from the Drama Group.' Joanna tried to disguise the panic she was feeling, but it became harder when Sam said;

'What are you going to see?'

‘Not really sure. I said I would meet her at The George and we would look at the local Guardian and see what we fancied.’

‘Okay then, have a good time.’ Sam, not knowing what else to say, added; ‘See you at home later’ and walked out of her office.

‘Right, okay.’ Joanna found herself speaking to the closed door with a puzzled expression on her face. By the time she got to Tom’s flat that evening she had forgotten all about it.

They shared a takeaway from the local Indian. They never seemed to go out anymore. After eating, they went to bed and, as usual, the sex was amazing. She always forgot all her troubles when Tom made love to her. She was still on a high when she got home.

‘What did you go and see then?’ Sam startled her. He was waiting in the hall when she opened the door.

‘Oh Sam you gave me a fright.’ What...

‘What was the picture?’ Sam’s eyes were flashing with anger.

Joanna stuttered. ‘I...We.... We didn’t go. There was nothing we fancied we just stayed at the pub and had a drink.’ She couldn’t think of a single picture that was showing. ‘Why, what’s wrong?’

‘Where have you really been?’ He had hold of her arm tightly.

‘Sam, let go your hurting me.’ Joanna was scared. ‘What do you mean, I’ve been at The George with Karen, I told you.’

‘Liar!’ He spat in her face. Joanna was really frightened now. She had never seen Sam like this. ‘You’re a lying bitch.’

'I'm not. What's wrong with you?' She struggled free from his grasp, stumbling down the hall. He grabbed her arm again and spun her round to face him by the kitchen door, pushing her tightly against the wall.

'Tell me the truth. Are you having an affair?'

'No of course I'm not.' Her voice trembled and she started to cry. 'Whatever's given you that idea?'

'I spoke to Dawn today.' Joanna flinched at his words. 'She told me to ask you the real reason you fell out. So come on tell me.'

Joanna's world was crumbling around her. She struggled to get free from him all the while stuttering her innocence and knowing he was not even listening to her.

'Please let me go Sam. You're really scaring me.' She begged.

Joanna was desperately playing for time. How much did he know? What had Dawn told him?

'I'll let you go when you tell me the truth. The truth about where you've been tonight. The truth about Dawn and where you've really been going on your girl's nights out.'

'I can't - I didn't. -I'm sorry.'

Joanna realised she was blubbering and not making any sense.

She couldn't bring herself to admit to it. She had to find a way to get out of this situation. She needed time to think.

Sam let her go and she slid down the wall. She watched him go to the cupboard and get a glass. She could do with a drink but she didn't think for a minute he was getting one for her. He disappeared into the front room to get the scotch and she sat in a heap against the wall in the hall sobbing her heart out. He stepped over her five minutes later and went up the stairs. Still she sat. She could hear him above her

banging about in the wardrobes, opening and closing drawers. She found out he was packing, when he came down stairs, dragging two suitcases behind him. He was leaving her!

She could see the tears in his eyes as he opened the front door. She got back up on her feet and walking towards him put her hand on his shoulder.

‘Sam don’t leave, we can sort this out. Please honey.’

He turned violently shaking her off.

‘I’m going nowhere – you are. Get out now and don’t bother coming back. Go to lover boy.’

He grabbed hold of her and pushed her out the door, slamming it shut behind her.

She fell in a heap on the porch. It happened so quickly. She was sitting there in a daze, wondering what had happened. A hundred questions running through her mind.

‘Where were the kids? Why didn’t they help her, stop their Dad being so cruel to her? What am I going to do now? Where can I go? What can I do? How could he do this to me?’

She was still sitting in a heap rubbing her grazed knee when the front door opened again. She looked up, thinking he had changed his mind, only to see her handbag come flying at her and the keys to her car following on.

She got to her feet and walked to the gate, determined not to look back.

‘Right then he’s asked for it. She would sort out her things and speak to the twins tomorrow. For now, she would go where she was welcomed and loved. All Sam had done was make it easier for her to leave him. It was bound to happen sooner or later. Now, she could be with Tom.’

She drove back to Tom’s flat, busily making plans in her head for the future.

'No more cloak and dagger meetings with Tom. Everything out in the open at last, no more lies. Tom would be delighted and she could worry about James and Jade later, when they had made their plans for the future. He could sell his flat and they could get a joint mortgage and buy a place between them, with three bedrooms so the twins could have their own rooms.'

She almost had it all worked out in her head when she knocked on the door of Tom's flat and nearly missed the shocked look on his face when he opened the door.

'Joanna, what are you doing back? Did you forget something?'

'No, I've left him.' She lied.

'What do you mean left him? You can't.'

Tom was leaning against the door, holding it, not allowing her through.

'Of course I can. He knows all about us and now we can be together properly. Come on, let me in.'

Joanna reached towards him and tried to sidestep into the apartment but Tom wouldn't let her.'

'What's wrong Tom? Isn't this what you want, what we both want?'

'Who is it darling?' A woman's voice came from over his shoulder.

'I'm sorry Joanna, I truly am. I have to go now, I can't help you. Go back to Sam.'

Joanna just stood there, with her mouth open, while Tom closed the door. She heard him reply to the woman saying;

'It's no-one. A woman from the drama group!'

She couldn't believe what was happening to her.

She stood rooted to the spot, hearing their voices reduce to a whisper. She realised they were not whispering, just moving away from the door and through to the

bedroom. She leant against the wall and silent tears slid down her face. Her body trembling softly with emotion at the realisation that he didn't love her at all.

She didn't know quite how long she sat there, thinking how foolish she had been.

'He has been using me.' - *'He has someone else.'*

Chapter Forty Three

The next few weeks passed in a blur. She had tried going back home that night but, although her key turned in the lock, the dead bolts were on. She had had to go to her mother's house. She told her that Sam and her had an argument, but of course didn't give her the details. The next day, when she called him in the morning, he told her she could come round for her clothes.

Any hopes she had of a reconciliation with Sam were quashed as soon as she opened the door. In front of her in the hall were three suitcases, packed and ready to go. She went through to where she could see Sam in the kitchen sitting at the breakfast bar and even though she pleaded with him for another chance and told him she didn't want Tom, he told her he didn't want her. He said in no uncertain terms that their marriage was over. He did ask where she was staying, but any hope she had of a crack in his resolve was quickly filled when he added that he needed to inform the twins where to go to see their mother. His eyes bore into hers with a cold hatred and he informed her that he would be contacting a solicitor, not only to start divorce proceedings, but also to sever their business partnership. He would be advertising for a new partner and she would be given a fair price for her share. In the meantime he didn't want her in the office, and if she cared to make a list of any c.d.'s tapes or

personal trinkets she wanted from the house, he would pack them up and get the twins to bring them round to her – he didn't want her back in the house.

Joanna knew she was beaten when he told her the twins had been given brief details of the reason for their mother leaving and that they had chosen to stay with him.

She got no sympathy from him while she struggled with the cases to her car, and meekly handed over the keys to the house when he asked for them. She still hoped after a week or two he might reconsider, but knew deep down that he wouldn't. She knew she was the guilty party and the only realistic hope she could have would be that the twins would come round to choosing to be with her, even if they couldn't forgive her. That hope also diminished over the next few months. They came to see her of course, and asked countless questions, but they wouldn't forgive her and they chose to remain with their father. Her mother also, while allowing her to stay with her, took Sam's side and constantly reminded her about what she had thrown away, for 'a little bit of excitement on the side'.

Her share of the partnership was sold fairly quickly as it was a thriving little business and fetched a pretty good price. Joanna used the money for a deposit on a small flat and got herself a job with a firm of Chartered Accountants nearby in Croydon. She put up with a fair bit of 'I told you so' from Dawn to ensure she had one good friend, and settled down to her new life. She changed drastically. Her whole outlook on life reduced to just one degree above existence. She suffered badly from depression and rarely went out. Her normally immaculate grooming became mere adequacy and she plunged even deeper into the abyss when she heard from Jade that Sam was seeing a 'nice woman' occasionally.

On awakening and finding herself in the waiting room on the railway sidings Joanna's thoughts were firmly focused on trying to decide which was the worst outcome - Sam dying in an accident, or losing him to another person and not having the twins with her. These thoughts filled her head as she watched the young couple across from her.

Surely she should be able to decide whether or not to take the job without worrying about losing Sam whichever way she went?

She turned and looked at the other man in the room.

Seeing the anxious look on his face she wondered what his choice was and would he be strong enough to make it?

Neil returned Joanna's gaze and smiled. It was the last thing he felt like doing and surprised himself.

'How can I possibly have anything to smile about.'

Chapter Forty Four

Neil's second 'vision' saw him break Claire's heart. He had almost jilted her at the altar but somehow managed to pluck up the courage and do the right thing and tell her, albeit only two days before the wedding. 'What do you mean, call the wedding off?' Claire's eyes were brimming with tears. 'I don't understand. I...'

'Maybe just postpone it?' Neil interrupted her. He didn't understand himself. 'Put it off for six months or so. I just know I can't go through with it, not right now.'

'We can't just cancel everything, two days before. It's just not practical.'

They were sitting in Neil's bedroom, on the bed, and Neil had his arm round her shoulder. Claire shrugged it off and stood up. Neil felt a wet tear drop on his hand as

he reached up to try and get her to sit back down. Claire twisted away and walked over to the window. Looking out she was amazed at how everything outside looked so normal. How could that be when her world was ending?

The children from next door were playing ball in the small cul-de-sac where Neil lived with his parents.

Claire turned slowly and asked Neil the question he could at least answer honestly.

‘Do you still love me?’

‘Yes, I do. I love you very much.’ Neil went over to her and took her in his arms.

Claire raised her head from his shoulder.

‘Then why? Why do you want to call the wedding off? It just doesn’t make sense.’

Neil wanted to change his mind. He didn’t want to tell her the truth about Sheena, but he needed to tell her something. Give her a good reason. A reason that she could accept and, at the same time, a reason that wouldn’t split them up, because he still felt he needed to keep his options open. He couldn’t afford to be weak now, but all the reasons he had thought of to give her seemed totally inadequate now that he was actually telling her.

‘I don’t really understand myself Claire, truly I don’t’ he eventually found his voice.

‘I feel as if I am on a roller-coaster ride that is heading over the edge of a cliff and I have to get off. I owe it to you not to ask you to make this commitment until I am one hundred per cent sure it’s what I want.’

Claire disentangled herself from his arms and took a step back before speaking.

‘Have you met some-one else, is that it?’ She took in the shocked look on Neil’s face when she asked the question and Neil’s used every ounce of composure he possessed to answer;

‘No! Don’t even think that. There is no-one else I swear.’ He said desperately to convince her. ‘I love you and only you.’

Claire went back to his outstretched arms and Neil breathed a sigh of relief hoping the worst was over.

‘Then it’s probably just pre-wedding nerves. I’ve had a few of them myself this week. It will be all right, you’ll see.’ Claire stood on tiptoe and kissed his forehead.

‘Let’s just see how you feel tomorrow.’ She wiped her last tears from her eyes and sat back down on Neil’s bed reaching for the final check list that they had been going through before Neil’s bombshell. Neil frantically fought back the panic.

‘Claire, please try to understand. I can’t go through with it, I just can’t.’ He rushed past her, out the door, down the stairs and into the street. By the time Claire realised what he had done and rushed to the window, she was in time to see him disappear round the corner of the cul-de-sac.

His mother called up the stairs to her. ‘Claire, what’s going on? Where’s Neil gone in such a hurry. He’s left the front door wide open.’

‘He’s called off the wedding, that’s what he’s done.’ She said coming down the stairs ‘and he’s left me here to explain. Well he can explain everything himself when he comes back.’ She left Neil’s mother with a look of bewilderment and walked out through the open door, slamming it shut behind her.

The enormity of what he had done didn’t hit Neil until a few days later. Claire wouldn’t talk to him and it was left to her parents and his to inform everyone that the wedding was off. The cost to him monetarily was over £5,000. Both sets of parents had contributed to the costs by paying for the church, flowers and wedding cars. The bulk of his money went on Claire’s dress, the hire of the morning suits, the reception and the honeymoon. They had hired the Church Hall for their Reception

which meant he had a garage full of booze and he told Claire, through her parents, to take her best friend Susie to Cyprus with her for a holiday. Her reply was to ‘stuff the holiday where the sun didn’t shine’, but she obviously changed her mind and decided to go after all. He tried to speak to her again when she returned but she refused to come to the telephone, and when he went round to her house, her parents told him, quite nicely under the circumstances, to leave it for a few weeks. This gave him the courage to ask them to let her know that he still loved her and wanted to arrange another date for the wedding but he heard Claire, who must have been listening from the upstairs hall, shout down the stairs.

‘I wouldn’t marry you now if you were the only bastard left in the world.’

‘Please Claire just talk to me for a few minutes, let me explain’ he tried to reply but her mother closed the door on him.

Chapter Forty Five

It was over a month later before Neil tried to contact Claire again. He was feeling exceedingly sorry for himself, wishing he had gone ahead with the wedding because Sheena was acting exactly like she had warned she would by keeping their relationship on a strictly casual basis.

They had sex where and when she wanted, which turned out to be twice in that month, and she flirted outrageously at the office with every available and unavailable male under forty.

The first occasion he sought out her sympathy was when they lay in her bed after an amazing sex marathon. Looking for any sort of commitment from her he stroked her left thigh which she had curled up over his legs and said casually.

‘How can we make love like that and not want to be together always?’

Sheena with a chilling abruptness removed her thigh from his legs and her body from the bed and walked over to the window of her apartment, pulling on a silk dressing gown on the way. She stood looking at the view of the Thames for a few minutes before turning back and replied with a coldness that chilled him to the bone.

‘That’s the reason why we can enjoy such abandonment because there is no commitment. And it’s not making love darling, it’s just sex, raw passion.’

Neil looked at her intently. He studied her beautiful face for any sort of sign that she was teasing him, but could see none. She may have looked physically perfect and was to his eyes the essence of beauty, but he could now see the emotional imperfections shining through the thin façade of her body. She was like a statue in more ways than one. He shivered involuntarily and couldn’t keep the sarcasm from his voice, saying:

‘Well I felt like I was making love even if you didn’t so I guess that makes me the weaker sex then’

‘That’s right darling, I always knew us females were stronger, definitely on an emotional level anyway.’ She moved back to the bed and climbed on top of him.

‘Now you can demonstrate how much physically stronger the male species are.’

Neil’s body betrayed him. Although he thought his mood change had cooled his passion, the touch of her body on his and her mouth on his was all it took to make his manhood rise to the occasion, with reluctant ease.

She virtually ignored him for the rest of the week at the office and he was glad of it at the time. He needed to think, to review his feelings for Claire and work out what he could do to get his life back on track. He decided to stop seeing Sheena and concentrate on trying to win back a place in Claire’s feelings, and fully intended to

do just that when Sheena popped her head round his office door at the end of the week.

‘Hi sexy’ she said nonchalantly ‘fancy a quiet night in at my place tonight?’

The rest of her luscious body followed the head round the door and she slithered seductively round to his side of the desk. Neil’s determination started to crack almost immediately but he managed to mutter something about being busy. Sheena plonked her bottom on his lap and wrapping her arms around his neck, deliberately allowed her split skirt to ride up her legs and her blouse to gape showing Neil an inviting glimpse of her hardening nipple.

‘What’s the matter darling? You’re not still sulky about last week are you?’

The last of Neil’s resolve melted away and all good intentions went with it.

‘No, but you really know how to play me, don’t you, you hussy? You string me along with your tantalising wares and leave me helpless to your charms.’ His hand crept up the split in her skirt and playfully stroked the thin material covering her mound of Venus. She squirmed with delight and Neil was lost once again.

They went back to her apartment after work finished for the day and what followed was similar to the previous times. This time however, when it was over, Sheena actually asked him to leave her apartment as she had to go out.

‘Where are you going, it’s 10 o’clock now? Neil had thought he was there for the night. ‘Come back to bed, please.’ He hated himself for asking her the minute the words were said. Sheena had showered and started to get dressed.

‘It’s really nothing to do with you where I’m going, is it?’ she had her leg on the side of the bed and was putting on black hold-ups. ‘But if you must know I am going to that new club in Leicester Square with a friend. We’ve got tickets for the opening night, should be great fun.’ She smiled at him and changed legs on the bed. She was

totally oblivious to the hurt she was inflicting on him – or was she? Neil felt used, which was pretty ironic considering she had made it perfectly clear how she was going to play it from the start. He tried to make light of it.

‘So now you’ve used me you are tossing me aside for someone else – a female someone or a male?’

She laughed cruelly at him. ‘It’s a female darling but who knows who we might meet there, the place should be buzzing with talent. Come on shake a leg, I need to get my skates on. I don’t want to be late.’ Now fully dressed, she went over to the dressing table and started applying her fresh make-up. Neil slowly got out of the bed, wishing he had been strong enough to have spurned her invitation tonight.

‘Would you like to go with me next weekend?’ she called after him. He had picked up his clothes and was on his way to the bathroom.

‘No thanks.’ He couldn’t manage to keep the tremble from his voice. ‘I’ve got better things to do.’

‘Suit yourself I was..’ The rest of her sarcastic reply was cut off by the slamming of the bathroom door behind him.

Neil had a much greater determination now and vowed never to see Sheena again. He tried to wash all traces of her from his body in the shower, rubbing his skin until it burned with the friction. When he came out of the bathroom, fully dressed, Sheena was waiting impatiently by the front door of her apartment.

‘You took your time.’ She said, adding hopefully ‘I don’t suppose you would drop me off on the way, darling?’

‘Fuck off, bitch.’ Neil barged past her and stormed out the door.

‘And fuck you too darling!’ He heard her add something about him being childish as he turned the corner and made his way to the lift, out of her apartment block and hopefully out of her life for good.

He called Claire the next morning and to his surprise and delight she picked up the phone.

‘Claire honey, please don’t hang up. I need to talk to you.’

‘Hello Neil.’ Although her voice sounded strained she stayed on the line. ‘Yes I think we do need to talk. Where and when?’

‘Tonight, at the pub?’ He said hopefully. ‘The Cambridge Arms or I can pick you up if you like.’

‘No the Cambridge will do fine. I’ll see you there at eight.’

He heard the click of the receiver being replaced in the middle of agreeing but it didn’t extinguish his delight. She had agreed to see him and hopefully he would get the chance to make amends.

Chapter Forty Six

Neil arrived at the Cambridge at 7.30 and the time passed very slowly. Every time the door opened he got up from his seat in the corner, eagerly anticipating her arrival. The pub was quite small but still had two bars, public and saloon. Neil was waiting in the saloon bar where they had often gone on a Sunday for lunch.

It was a lively bar on a Saturday night and people were turning up to get the best seats for the disco that usually started around 8.30. The D.J. was setting up his equipment at the back of the bar and Neil was sitting opposite on the corner table next to the small stage. He hoped it wouldn’t be too noisy for them to talk and had sat

where he was because he had a good view of the door and was as far away from the speakers that would shortly dispense the loud music as he could be.

On more than one occasion he had been asked if the other seats on his table were taken because he was sitting in one seat of a table for four. Eventually he had to give up two of them and decided that he would suggest to Claire they went somewhere else when she arrived. He kept looking at his watch, nursing a solitary pint – he had to stay sober. The watch moved very slowly, eight o'clock came and went, 5 past, 10 past.

The D.J. had put on some background music to show he was ready to go and went up to the bar to get another drink. Quarter past, twenty past... Neil was starting to get edgy.

Where was she? Was she coming? Maybe she had decided to leave him sweating or maybe she planned to jilt him?

That was probably exactly what he deserved. When it got to half past, he was convinced that she had done just that and he decided to go to the telephone box up the road to call her.

He almost caused a fight for his place between two girls and two guys, who had been hovering, watching him nursing the dregs of his pint, when he got up. The girls won and Neil was struck by the irony of his thoughts as he made his way to the door;

'The girls always seem to win!'

He opened the door and literally bumped into Claire. He began to stutter an apology before realising it was in fact Claire. She looked so well, she had picked up quite a tan and had her hair cut and coloured. Neil's heart missed a beat, she looked amazing. He had forgotten just how pretty she was, but whether it was the tan and

hair, or the time that had lapsed that had caused the transformation from pretty to beautiful he wasn't sure.

'Claire, hi, you look wonderful.' He bent instinctively to kiss her, forgetting how late she was and not caring anymore why. She turned her face and his kiss landed somewhere between her cheek and ear.

'Hello Neil, sorry I'm late.' She looked down at her feet. 'I changed my mind so many times about whether I could face you or not. That's why I am so late.'

'It doesn't matter, you're here now, that's the important thing.' He took her hand and led her away from the pub. 'It's really crowded in there, the disco's just starting up.

Let's go to the Burger bar and grab a coffee, we can talk there.' The door to the pub opened at that point and disco music came blaring out confirming Neil's point.

He felt Claire's hand start to move from his grasp and he pulled it to him, kissing it gently, but although she relented and left it in his grasp, he noticed it was limp and she returned no acknowledgement to his kiss.

'Okay, fine.' She met his eyes but Neil couldn't read them.

The burger bar was surprisingly quiet for a Saturday night. It must have been the lull between the family time and the rush for food by the revellers after a few pints. They sat opposite each other and Neil ordered the coffee. The only other occupants, another couple, sat four tables away on the other side. It was probably only a few minutes before Claire said anything to him but it seemed to Neil like hours. He babbled on with small talk and interspersed it with compliments on how well Claire looked, how much he liked her hair and it wasn't until he mentioned the tan for the second time that she said quietly that he could have had one too if they had both gone to Cyprus like they should have. Neil visibly winced at the comment, but was even more shocked by the venom in her voice when she added.

‘Was she worth it then? Was she worth all the pain and hurt you caused me, my parents and your family?’

Neil saw the glister of tears in her eyes and knew there was no point in denying his guilt. ‘I’m so sorry, honey.’ He reached to take her hand across the table but she pulled away and sat back against the rigid plastic chair. ‘I can’t explain and I know there is no excuse, and no, she wasn’t worth it.’

Claire was in turmoil. She tried to stand up and walk away but her legs wouldn’t hold her. She had thought maybe there wasn’t someone else but he had admitted it and now she didn’t know what to do. She had planned this evening perfectly in her mind but all her plans had been made on the assumption that Neil had really just got the wedding jitters. Now though, knowing he had been seeing another woman, was just too much to take. She began to sob, quietly at first but quickly built up until great racking spasms tore through her body. Neil couldn’t bear it and tried his best to comfort her. The other couple and the counter staff were all watching the scene intently but neither Claire nor Neil noticed until the manager came over and kindly asked if everything was okay.

‘Yes, thank you, sorry’

Neil spoke the words in a dream and bent to help Claire to her feet. He fumbled in his pocket and left some money on the table and led Claire from the burger bar. He somehow managed to get the information from her that she had taken a mini-cab to the pub and led her to his car, when she sobbed to him to take her home. They stumbled to the car and, finding some tissues in her pocket, Neil tried to dry her eyes and clean the streaks of supposedly waterproof mascara from her face. They sat in the car for a long time. Neil held her and let her cry.

He constantly apologised and tried to let her know how much he loved her and how stupid and low he felt at treating her so badly.

‘My behaviour towards you was despicable and I can only hope and pray you can forgive me Clair.

‘I don’t know Neil’ her voice was barely audible.

‘I was so very wrong, honey and, if you can find it in your heart to forgive me, I promise to spend the rest of his life making it up to you’

Eventually Claire’s sobs subsided and she somehow found the words to let Neil know what he wanted to hear so badly.

‘I still love you Neil. I wish I didn’t but I do.’

Neil didn’t get the chance to let that sink in before Claire deflated his spirits by adding; ‘I can’t trust you though and I’m not sure if I ever will!’

Then, before Neil could get carried away with re-planning their wedding, she left him in no doubt whatsoever.

‘I don’t want to marry you anymore, not now, and maybe not ever.

Neil still could not help feeling that he could and would change her mind and was prepared to wait, taking one day at a time, however long it took, and he told Claire this on the journey back to her house.

On arriving home Claire remained in the seat and began to ask Neil questions.

She wanted her name, dates and times. Neil tried to duck out of giving detailed answers, implying that the whys’ and wherefores’ were not important, only to be told by Claire that they were very important to her. He told her how they had met at the office and he had become infatuated with her, which seemed to only add fuel to the fire of Claire’s desire to go into every little detail. Then when he held back on details

and times of meetings, Claire became even more agitated as if she knew he was holding back.

Her questions started innocently enough, and the answers were easy:

‘Is she prettier than me?’

‘No.’

‘Where did you take her?’

‘Mostly to her flat.’

Then, quickly, her questions bit to the bone, and Neil struggled to answer:

‘How many times did you have sex, before you called off the wedding?’

‘Not many, I don’t honestly remember’

‘How many times since you called off the wedding?’

‘None.’ (On seeing Claire’s look of disbelief, he then answered truthfully). Twice.’

‘Is she better in bed than me?’

‘Claire, please. Must you ask me that?’

‘I guess that means she is then?’

‘No. She was different I suppose, more experienced, maybe.’

Neil noticed the tears starting to form again in her eyes and begged her not to continue with the questions.

Claire however insisted that she needed to know everything if there was to be any chance of their relationship working. She needed complete honesty to be able to try to trust him in the future and, for her own understanding, needed to know if there was any way in which she could have prevented it. This would help her to decide whether she could in fact cope with any sort of future with him. Neil couldn’t imagine how punishing herself, with details of him having sex with Sheena, could

possibly do anything other than hurt her more deeply. He desperately wanted to console her and take all the hurt away but the questions continued:

‘Is she slimmer than me?’

‘A little, maybe.’

‘Bigger Boobs?’

‘No, I don’t think so’

‘Did you tell her you loved her, after?’

‘No, never.’

‘Do you, love her?’

‘No, I told you it just an infatuation.’

‘Why did you call the wedding off then?’

‘I don’t know. I panicked, I guess. I couldn’t go through with it, knowing I was cheating on you.’

‘So what’s changed?’

‘I have. I love you so much Claire, I don’t think I realised how much. Please believe me. I’ll never see her again. You have my word on that.’

‘What about your job then, you have to see her at work?’

‘I’ll leave. I’ll hand in my notice first thing Monday morning. I’ll avoid her until I leave.’

‘You have to give a month’s notice, don’t you?’

‘Yes, but I swear, I won’t have anything to do with her.’

Both Neil and Claire knew this would be virtually impossible and Claire made it clear to him that she wouldn’t see him until he had left the Company before continuing once more with the questions:

‘How can I be sure that you won’t see her again?’

‘I won’t. I promise.’

‘What if she begs you?’

‘I won’t.’

‘You found her impossible to resist before, how can you be so sure?’

‘I can, it’s over. It’s you I want to be with. You I love. I don’t ever want anything more to do with her. She’s a cold calculating bitch. I just wish I had never laid eyes on her.’

‘So did she dump you then? Is that why you want me back?’

‘No Claire it’s not like that, I swear.’

‘How do I know you won’t get back with me and then carry on having wild passionate sex with her, while I’m sitting dutifully at home, waiting for you?’

‘I won’t, I promise, I never want to see her again. I love you so much, please.’

Neil felt he couldn’t take much more and cringed at the next question.

‘Was it because she sucked your dick, when I wouldn’t?’

‘No! God stop this, please. You’re torturing yourself, more than me.’

‘Did she – did she suck it?’

‘No.’ He lied.

‘Liar’ she spat the words at him. ‘She did, didn’t she? You promised me to tell the truth.’

Neil whispered the word - ‘Yes’.

‘I knew it.’ She triumphed. ‘So when you need your dick sucked will you go running back to her, or find someone else to do it to you?’

‘Claire, really that is not important to me. You are the only thing I want. The only person I want to make love too and I don’t need to ever have my dick sucked, ever again. Please stop this now.’

Claire was silent for a while collecting her thoughts. She had to ask one more question:

‘I know you are right, I need to stop but, I need to know one last thing. Did she come? Did she have an orgasm? Cause you know I never have, don’t you?’

‘Yes you have.’ Neil thought she had anyway. Now, thinking about it, he realised she hadn’t. He felt the difference, when Sheena came.

‘Fuck! Claire had been faking it’

‘Answer the question Neil.’ No, don’t bother and yes, I was faking it.’

Claire knew she had to stop torturing herself, but she wanted to torture Neil.

She needed him to hurt, like she’d been hurt. The problem was she still loved him so much and knew that she had to do it now, while she had the upper hand. She had to make him grovel.

‘Right, enough for now.’ She said at last.

They must have been sitting in the car outside her house for nearly two hours, and she had seen her mother peer through the net curtains with increasing regularity and knew she was worried about her. She made a move to get out of the car, telling Neil to call her in a few days, after she had time to think. She hadn’t gone through any of the practical problems that he had caused in calling off the wedding. She still had to sort out some of the wedding presents and of course the flat. Neil was living there at the moment but it was in both their names.

‘We need to talk about the flat. I don’t want to live there if you’ve slept with her there.’ She flung the final comment at him as she opened the door to get out but didn’t get the satisfaction she craved in seeing how hurt he had been by the words. She only felt sorry for him. Neil struggled to speak evenly himself as he felt the sting of tears welling up in his eyes.

‘I am sorry and I do love you, more than you’ll ever know. I’ll make it up to you, however long it takes and whatever it takes. I promise.’

‘Goodnight Neil.’ Claire turned and ran up the front path and into her mother’s waiting arms. She had opened the door when she had seen Claire open the gate and stared intently towards Neil who had got out of the car.

‘Take care of her Julie. I’m so sorry for the hurt I caused, believe me, I’m going to make it up to her, to both of you.’ Neil called to her. ‘I love you Claire, goodnight.’ His words hung in the air as he stood and watched Claire’s Mum shut the door before getting back in his car and reluctantly driving back to his flat.

Chapter Forty Seven

Neil kept to his promise and first thing Monday morning handed in his notice. His boss was surprised when he got the letter from personnel, and called Neil into his office the same afternoon. Neil knocked on Tom McCluskey’s door.

‘Come in.’ Tom’s booming voice could be heard clearly through the door and Neil opened it slowly and stepped into the office.

It wasn’t a very large office but impressive, none the less. A large, curved oak desk dominated the room and Tom McClusky dominated the desk with his equally impressive bulk.

‘Ah Neil, sit down.’ Tom’s greeting was warm and friendly. ‘What’s this about you leaving? I thought you were happy here.’

‘I have been Sir.’ Neil was still a little in awe of the huge yet handsome man, who had stood up to greet him, and shook his hand before sitting back down. He had been responsible for Sheena’s red hair and sparkling green eyes, although his hair was

more of a ginger, grey now. His large round face somehow defied its bulk and the neat grey moustache and horn-rimmed glasses gave him the look of a jolly old leprechaun. The resemblance was clear to see still and, in spite of his bulk, he looked casually smart in his designer blazer over a polo neck sweater. He leaned forward on his desk and proceeded to ask Neil why he was leaving. Neil thought he had made it pretty clear in his letter, which he could see now on Tom's desk, why he felt he had to leave. He had worded the letter to explain that it was personal problems, not the job, that had warranted his decision. He was more than a little caught off guard when Tom asked him if the personal problems had anything to do with his daughter.

'What? No Sir how could they?' he muttered.

'Call me Tom, please Neil.' Tom continued 'I know I am blinkered when it comes to my daughter but I do know about your little fling, and about the wedding being called off. I did hope you might be the man to tame her.'

Neil was shocked and a little knocked off kilter, which was evident by his reply.

'Sir, Tom, I don't know what to say. Please just accept my resignation. There's nothing I can do about Sheena anyway.'

'I'm truly sorry Neil. We don't want to lose you and if there is anything I can do to persuade you to stay, please just tell me and I'll do what I can.'

'Thank you Sir, I mean Tom. I really appreciate it but I think it is best that I leave. Sorry.' Neil really was touched by his boss's obvious disappointment. 'It's not your fault or Sheena's either for that matter. It's just the right thing to do.'

Tom stood up and reached across his desk to shake Neil's hand. 'I truly wish there was some way I could convince you to stay.'

'Thank you I appreciate that.'

‘If you need any time off, just ask, interview, whatever, and I will ensure your references will be first class. I’ll see to it myself personally.’ The big man’s genuine feelings were evident and Neil wished it could have been different. He left the office deliberating the exchange of words and didn’t see Sheena standing at the secretary’s desk. She caught up with him by the lifts.

‘You’re really leaving then? Daddy couldn’t persuade you to stay?’ Neil jumped at her hand touching his shoulder.

‘Yes, and you and I are history.’

He turned causing his shoulder to part company with her hand.

‘Darling, you don’t mean that really.’ Sheena used her rejected hand to squeeze his manhood gently.

‘Get off me.’ Neil was furious and couldn’t risk giving her the chance to arouse him further. ‘I damn well do mean it Darling! So just stay away from me for the next few weeks until I’m out of here, do you understand?’ He shouted so loud that Tom’s secretary peered round the corner, a look of amazement on her face.

He brushed past her and took the stairs down. Sheena’s parting shot echoing behind him.

‘Don’t worry Darling, I will, there’s plenty more men here and they’re more than happy to take your place.’

Neil went out of the building, straight to the local recruitment agency to register for employment. He left with two interviews for later that week. He immediately went back to his office to telephone Claire.

Her mother’s guarded tone was evident when she answered the telephone.

‘She’s at work Neil, she asked me to tell you to ring this evening.’

‘Oh right’ Neil was surprised. Claire hadn’t told him she had a job. ‘Can you give me her work number please Julie?’

‘No. Not really. I didn’t even want to pass on the message for you to call this evening.’ Julie’s blunt reply showed her obvious contempt for him.

‘Why can’t you just let her get on with her life, haven’t you done enough damage?’

‘I’m sorry. I’ll call back this evening then shall I?’

‘I hope you don’t.’ The line clicked and went dead. She had hung up.

Neil did his best to try to work for the rest of the day. He owed that much to Tom.

Claire was a little more pleasant than her Mum went he called back that evening, especially when he told her he had given in his notice. However she was adamant that she wouldn’t meet up with him until he had left.

‘Have you seen her?’

‘Yes.’ Neil couldn’t lie. ‘And I told her to keep well away from me. I promise you, I want nothing more to do with her.’

‘I hope you mean that Neil. Call me and let me know how your interviews go.’

‘Okay. Won’t you just meet me at the weekend for a drink?’ Neil pleaded with her.

‘No. Not yet.’ Claire’s voice trembled but she stuck to her guns. ‘I’ll talk to you at the weekend.’

‘I love you Claire.’ Neil wasn’t sure whether she heard his last words, she had hung up.

Chapter Forty Eight

Neil didn’t find it easy to get another job, which surprised him. He had been cocooned at McCluskeys for a long time and had forgotten how hard it was in the

minefield of job-hunting. He had been there for a long time and hadn't realised how many applicants there were now for every vacancy. Over the next month he got short listed twice and failed to get either job. Fortunately Tom was keen for him to stay and extended his notice period, which didn't please Claire. They spoke most evenings and Neil did his best to assure Claire that he was staying only for the money, but she constantly doubted his motives. In the end he had to leave two months later, without another position. Not only because of Claire's fears but because Sheena constantly harassed him too. He didn't know how long he could cope paying the mortgage, without any money coming in, but Sheena was starting to wear him down with her provocative behaviour.

She came into his office the last week all smiles and oozing sex appeal and he had found it very hard to resist her. She had heard through the office grapevine that although he was now talking to Claire, they weren't seeing each other and she planned to take full advantage of his lack of a sex life.

'Hello Darling, you're still here then?' She crept up on him and, before he had a chance to protest, sat on his desk in her normal attire of low cut top and split skirt directly in his eye-line, as he swivelled his chair round to face her.

'Go away Sheena.' His feeble attempt at a protest had made her bolder and she tossed her hair back and laughed.

'You know you don't mean that darling.' She leant forward and tried to kiss him.

Neil, in trying to avoid the contact by getting out of his seat ended up stumbling into her legs. He put his hands out to avoid falling over and she moved simultaneously and he found himself in her arms. For a moment he couldn't move and he was dizzy from the closeness and the smell of her, but he quickly came to his senses when she

did kiss him and managed to struggle free from her clutches. He knew he still wanted her and if he didn't get away from her, and quick, he would be lost again.

'Get away from me. Get out of my office now!' Neil had to shout to try to get back in control. He was standing tight against the wall of his office and the palms of his hands flat against the wall were clammy with sweat. 'Go on, go.' He remained rigid praying she had enough room to pass him without touching him.

'Okay darling, but you know where to find me, when you want me and you know you do want me.' Sheena trailed her hand round his face, blowing him a kiss on leaving the office. 'Ciao, for now, darling.'

Neil remained against the wall for a full five minutes before crossing the room and picking up the phone. He dialled Tom McCluskey's extension and keeping his tone even, advised him that he had been offered a position and would be leaving next Friday. He could feel his heart pounding heavily in his chest while he listened to Tom wishing him success in his non-existent new job, and his still clammy hands gripped the receiver and desk respectively. He replaced the receiver and slumped forward on his desk his head in his hands. It was all he could do to stop himself trembling. He didn't realise how much he still wanted her. She did obviously, and she also knew exactly how to play him.

Every day for his last week, she came to his office. Neil didn't know how he managed to constantly turn her down. Now it was his last day and he was clearing his desk before going for the traditional drink at the pub. Even Tom would be going to the pub, which was a first and of course Sheena would be there too.

'Are you ready mate' Keith popped his head round the door, breaking into Neil's thoughts.

‘Yes, I guess so.’ Neil took a last look round before following his friend out of the office for the last time. He was going to miss him and this place. He had been happy most of the time there and wished things could have been different. Wished Sheena had never come to work there. If she hadn’t, he would have been happily married to Claire now and still working at McCluskys too.

Jack’s Bar was heaving when they walked through the door. Most of the staff were at the back of the bar, where Tom had arranged for a buffet to be laid out. Neil did his best to cheer up and chat to all the friends he had made at the office over the years. Keith and Beth were the only ones who Neil had told that he didn’t have another job to go to, but by the comments or lack of questions it was evident that most of them knew.

Tom himself had merely wished him luck and told him to keep in touch, saying, that if he wanted to, he could always come back if things didn’t work out at the new firm. He didn’t arrive until nearly two hours after Keith and Neil, and only stayed a short time, but Neil appreciated the fact that he had showed up. Sheena was significant by her absence.

It was nearly closing time and Neil was very drunk when she walked in. All the rest of his colleagues had left, only Keith remained propping up the bar with him. They were discussing who would be taking who home when he heard her voice.

‘Come on boys, I’ve got the car outside, I’ll take you both home.’

Neil turned and said in a drunken stupor; ‘What, you’ll take us both home? Show us a good time too I’d bet.’

Keith, probably the more sober of the two, sensed an unpleasant confrontation. ‘Steady on there mate, no need for that kind of talk.’

Sheena just laughed. 'Don't worry Keith, I can handle him and myself too. No offence taken. Let's get going, while he can still walk.'

'I'm going nowhere with you, Da-ar-a-ling.' Neil slurred. 'So just piss off and leave us alone.'

Neil staggered in the direction of the toilets and Keith followed, leaving Sheena calling out after them. 'I'll wait here Keith, you'll have to help me get him in the car.'

Sheena waited for a good ten minutes before they staggered back out. Keith was doing his best to keep Neil on his feet and the unpleasant smell of sick arrived just ahead of them. It definitely was not part of Sheena's plan to find him quite so drunk, but she couldn't withdraw the offer to take them home.

'Come on then, the sooner I get you two home the better' she said raising Neil's floppy arm which she put round her shoulders and helped Keith get him out of the bar.

'You don't have to do this Sheena, I can get him on the train.' Keith saying this was praying she wouldn't let him, he couldn't imagine how he would have coped if she left them to this course of action.

'You know that would be impossible Keith, and no taxi would take him in this state. Let's just get him in the car, it's just round the corner.'

'Thanks Sheena' Keith was sobering up rapidly which was more than could be said for his friend. All the way to the car he struggled trying to resist their help and his mostly incoherent protests fell on deaf ears. Keith tried to persuade Sheena that he would be okay on the train but she would have none of it.

'How could I cope on my own getting him out the other end, you have to come with me.'

They had bundled Neil into the back seat of the car.

‘You had better get in the back with him and make sure he doesn’t spew up on my leather upholstery on the way.’

Sheena got into the driver’s seat and checking Keith was following her instructions in her rear view mirror, she pushed the electronic button to lower the window on Neil’s side to ensure any further spasms could be directed out. Nothing much was said until they got close to where Neil lived and Sheena asked Keith for directions to Neil’s flat. This was a surprise to Keith, although he said nothing to that effect. He had assumed Sheena would know where he lived. He fumbled in Neil’s pockets for his keys. His friend was out for the count and he found himself thinking, what a waste it was and how he wished Sheena fancied him. He felt he was still capable of showing her a good time, he certainly wouldn’t pass out on such a siren as Sheena. He was brought back to reality by her swearing as she stumbled up the stairs.

‘Shit.’ She had caught her shin on the step. ‘Can’t you take a bit more of the weight Keith?’

‘Sorry’ he stuttered as if she could read his mind.’ Nearly there now.’ He had the key ready but struggled to get it in the lock.

‘Here, give it to me, you can hold him up against the wall.’ Sheena struggled to disguise the disgust she was feeling. All prior thoughts of seducing Neil had long gone and she could see the way Keith was looking at her and it made her skin crawl.

‘What if he made a pass at her?’

She found it easy to resist men she fancied, but it scared the hell out of her to think she might have to fight off a drunken idiot, like she imagined Keith was. Fortunately he spared her the experience by suggesting that he would stay the night with Neil.

‘You get off home love. I’ll stay and make sure he is all right.’

She had managed to open the door and help Keith get him on the sofa and couldn't get out quick enough.

'Right. Okay, bye then.' Her relief was immense!

She clattered her way down the stairs and out to the car in record time and with a last look up to Neil's flat, she roared off into the night.

The following morning, Neil woke with a blinding headache. His throat was raw and he had to push Keith off him to get to the kitchen for some water. He couldn't remember getting home the previous night. The pounding in his head didn't help his powers of recollection much either. He drank a pint of water straight down and refilled the glass before fumbling with the packet of painkillers he hoped would stop the relentless throbbing. He was sitting at the table trying to recollect events when Keith came into the kitchen.

'Morning mate, how's it hanging?' Keith didn't seem to be suffering any ill effects.

'What are you so cheerful about and don't shout.' Neil hands went to cover his ears.

'Oh, are we a bit fragile then? You shouldn't drink so much if you can't handle it.

I'll put the kettle on shall I?' He picked up the kettle and filled it from the tap. Then,

flicking the switch on, he went over to the fridge. 'Fancy a fry up? I'm starving.

Have you got any eggs and bacon in?' He peered inside seeing only standard

'bachelor fridge contents.'

Neil just groaned.

'Two eggs and a bit of hard cheese, is that it?' Keith complained. 'Have you got any bread?'

'If there is any, it will be in the breadbin.' Neil pointed it out to him. 'Help yourself, I don't want anything.'

Keith busied himself finding a frying pan under the sink. He proceeded to make himself an omelette and, examining the bread for mould which was thankfully absent, popped it into the toaster. He also found a tin of beans in the cupboard.

‘You didn’t want anything last night either. Missed your chance there, mate.’ Keith turned smiling to Neil. ‘But you’re not interested in Sheena anymore, are you?’

‘What do you mean? Neil vaguely recalled Sheena coming in late but couldn’t remember much else. ‘And how did we get home anyway?’

‘She brought us here, in her Merc. Lovely ride it was, and if you hadn’t been in such a state, you could have had an even better one.’

‘That’s over now. You know that, Claire’s the only woman for me.’

‘If you say so mate. I certainly wouldn’t say no.’

‘Yeah well you wouldn’t get the chance would you?’ Neil was determined to wipe the smile of his friend’s face. He regretted it almost instantly. It wasn’t his fault his life was such a mess. The comment went over Keith’s head, fortunately.

‘I should be so lucky eh mate’ was his reply.

‘So she just brought us home and left?’

‘That’s about it. We were both the worse for wear.’

Neil was thankful that he was in such a state. Otherwise he would have found Sheena hard to resist. Especially for one last time. Now that episode in his life was finally over and he could concentrate on Claire and their future.

Chapter Forty Nine

Neil was out of work for nearly three months. In the end he took a job at half his previous salary, just so he could pay the mortgage on the flat. Even though he had

assured Claire that Sheena had never been to the flat, she was determined to sell it and buy a new one. It would have to wait for a while though as there was a bit of a slump in the housing market. Which meant, with all the costs of buying and selling they would end up worse off if they sold now. Anyway the new start with Claire wasn't exactly flying along. They were only meeting up once or twice a week at the most, and she would still not go back to the flat. So they hadn't even slept together, much less made love.

He was getting very frustrated and was glad that Sheena hadn't attempted to contact him. He knew he would have found it difficult to resist her and he was determined to win Claire's trust back.

He spent most nights stuck in front of the telly, and had become an expert on the soaps, especially Coronation Street and Brookside. He couldn't afford to go out very much and saved what meagre funds he had left on taking Claire out. Even that didn't stretch much further than a pint or two and the pictures. He thought that, combined with the fact that she wouldn't go to the flat, was why Claire didn't want to see him so often. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Over the next couple of months Claire became more and more distant. Instead of them seeing more of each other, Neil noticed that for the last fortnight she had made some excuse not to meet him in the week, and had only seen him on Fridays.

This coming Friday he had decided to find out what was going on in her head and he was going over what he would say to her on the Wednesday night. He was in his kitchen making some tea when the doorbell rang. He opened the door to find Claire there, looking somewhat distressed, which quickly banished his initial hopeful thoughts of it being a step forward, her coming to the flat.

'Claire, what's wrong, what are you doing here?'

‘I need to talk to you. Can I come in?’

Neil hadn’t realised he was blocking the way.

‘Of course you can.’ He stepped back and tried to kiss her as she passed, but she skilfully managed to avoid his lips and went straight through to the sitting room.

‘I’m sorry Neil, but you know it isn’t working.’ She blurted it out before he had the chance to ask again what brought her there. She was standing in the middle of the room twisting her hands together and avoiding his eyes. Neil’s heart sank.

‘What do you mean? What’s brought this on?’ Neil was panicking now. ‘Come on sit down.’ He took her hands and tried to lead her to the couch but she wouldn’t budge. He could see the tears in her eyes and he knew what she was going to say, but he didn’t want to hear it. ‘What have I done wrong, tell me please.’

‘You haven’t done anything wrong Neil, not now anyway. I’m sorry I just don’t love you anymore.’ Her words were barely a whisper but they sounded like they came from a loudspeaker to Neil.

‘You don’t mean that Claire. Please tell me you don’t mean that.’ He tried again to take her in his arms.

‘I do Neil.’ She turned to walk out the door.

‘I’m truly sorry, I thought it could work, I really tried to make it work but it’s too late.’

Neil held the door. He had to stop her leaving.

‘Please Claire, don’t go. I’ll do anything. Anything you want me to do please just give me another chance.’

‘I can’t Neil. Don’t make this any harder then it is....’

‘Is there someone else?’ He interrupted her. ‘That’s it isn’t it?’ He had her pinned against the door. His hands either side of her face.

‘No, not really I.....’

‘Not really! That means there is someone else. Tell me who, damn it!’ He banged his hands against the door.

‘Stop Neil, let me go, you’re frightening me.’ Claire pushed him off and Neil, suddenly realising what he was doing, moved back holding his face in his hands.

‘I’m sorry honey, I just can’t handle this. I love you so much. Please don’t leave me.’ Claire softened, seeing the tears in his eyes. She didn’t want to hurt him but she knew there was no point in pretending anymore.

‘You must have noticed Neil. There’s no spark and it’s not fair to either of us to pretend anymore.’ Claire started to walk down the hallway, leaving Neil standing in the doorway. ‘Please just let it go.’

‘But I still love you Claire’ he begged following her. ‘Don’t you care for me at all?’ Claire reached out and took his hands.

‘I’ll always care for you Neil, but not enough to go on with this relationship. I’m sorry, it’s just not enough.’ She turned and opened the door adding. ‘Try to understand why I can’t. I’ve tried, but it’s for the best. I’ll call you. Good-bye Neil.’ She walked down the stairs looking back when she got to the landing to see Neil leaning against the door frame, watching her go, tears now streaming down his face. He mouthed the words; ‘I love you’ through his sobs and Claire had to close her eyes, unable to bear to see his pain. When she opened them, he had closed his and stood there letting the tears fall. Hearing her say ‘I’m sorry’ he opened them, but she was gone.

Neil couldn’t remember how long he stood there or how long it was before he sunk to his knees. He went through all the memories of their lives over and over. He knew he was to blame, but by the time he went indoors and got in bed he had managed to

absolve himself, and he went to sleep thinking of Sheena and how she would help him get over the pain. He would show Claire he could manage fine without her, wouldn't he?

Chapter Fifty

Claire rang him on the Friday, to see how he was coping. Even though he was hurting like he never imagined possible, he managed to convince her, if not himself, that he was fine. He had really known himself that it wasn't working but didn't want to be the one to end it for the second time, he told her. He knew she didn't believe him but saying it made him feel better and Claire was happy to let him ease his hurt pride. She didn't tell him she had met someone else, he found that out later, but that was only a push that she had needed to enable her to tell Neil what she had known almost since they had got back together. She wasn't dating Brian at the time, he was just a friend, but now she was free to take it further. Neil didn't tell Claire that he had been unable to go to work or that he had tried to call Sheena. They kept the conversation light and brief, but Claire was definitely the one who gained the most satisfaction from it.

Neil somehow managed to get through the next few months without cracking up. Sheena spoke briefly to him the second time he called but made it plain that she didn't want to meet up with him and Neil definitely wasn't going to beg. He was, however, drinking more and because of this it was proving quite a struggle to pay the mortgage. His bank manager wouldn't extend his overdraft without assurances that his earnings would be increasing to the level he was at before he left McCluskeys. Finally that morning, he had received a letter from the mortgage company to say that

they were unhappy that he was still a full month's payment behind with his mortgage and he should contact them to talk about it. He decided to telephone McCluskys to find out if he could get his job back.

Tom McCluskey greeted his call warmly and advised him that, although he would be happy to welcome him back, his position had been taken and his replacement was very capable. There was a more junior position available if he was interested in giving it a try, but he was over-qualified and may find it difficult adjusting to the 'lower rank', and of course the salary was considerably lower too.

Neil asked; 'How much lower?'

'About two thirds of your previous salary, I'm afraid.' Tom reluctantly replied.

'Oh, I see. Right do you mind if I take a few days to consider it?'

He didn't want to let Tom know he was desperate.

'Of course, but let me know early next week if you want it.' Tom added. 'We are finishing interviewing this week and I don't want to keep the others waiting too long.'

'Okay, fine, I will and thank you.'

'No worries son.' Tom felt sorry for Neil and decided he might as well let him know about Sheena. 'By the way, did you hear Sheena is engaged? Some poor chap finally got her to agree to tie the knot. It was the guy who took on your old job as it goes, so I couldn't exactly fire my future son-in-law.'

Neil was amazed. So much for her not wanting to settle down!

'Give her my love and tell her I sent my congratulations.' Neil hoped he hid the resentment he felt. 'And I will call you next week, either way.'

He went out after work and got totally smashed that night and the next. In fact he went on a total bender all over the weekend and missed work on the Monday and

Tuesday, he had made himself so ill. He managed to get in on the Wednesday and made up some excuse about having a tummy bug, not knowing that the creep in his office, who was jealous of his expertise, had seen him totally rat-arsed on the Sunday.

The creep, John Murray, thought Neil was a jumped up know it all, and wasted no time in letting the boss know what state he had been in at the weekend and how he believed his tummy bug was self-inflicted, if he had one at all. Then he made sure that Neil knew he had told him.

‘You were well smashed at the weekend old boy. Sorry but I was telling someone in the canteen and the boss overheard. Sorry for letting the cat out of the bag.

Yeah right, I’ll bet you are!’

John couldn’t even feign innocence the size of the grin on his face as he added ‘I hope it was worth it and it doesn’t cost you your job.’

‘Like you care.’ Neil threw the remark at him and immediately picked up the phone and rang Tom McClusky.

‘Hi Tom, I’m just phoning to say I will take the junior position.’

‘I’m sorry Neil, the letter’s went out last post yesterday offering one of the applicants the job. I did ask you to call me early this week. I’ll keep you in mind if anything else comes up. I’m sorry.’

Neil felt his words echo in his head. ‘Well, their loss.’

He tried to convince himself by going straight to the pub to drown his sorrows after work again. He didn’t remember getting home that night, which was becoming a normal occurrence in his life. The next morning he overslept and decided not to bother going in which was his biggest mistake. They telephoned him at midday.

'I'm sorry. We're going to have to let you go Neil.' The bosses' voice cut through his hangover. 'Call into personnel on Friday and pick up your money, there will be a week's severance pay for you.'

Neil resisted the urge to tell him to 'fuck off and keep his severance pay'. Instead he replaced the receiver, before he made it any worse.

He made a half-hearted attempt to find work the next day, before picking up his cheque, to the delight of John Murray.

He just happened to be in personnel to witness his demise. Neil didn't resist the urge to bombard him with a volley of abuse for his contribution to his sacking, but didn't derive as much pleasure from it as he hoped to. Slamming the office door behind him, he went straight to the pub.

Four months later, the flat was repossessed and he was in the spare room at Keith's house.

Keith's wife, Jane, wasn't happy about the situation but Keith managed to convince her it was the Christian thing to do.

'I couldn't leave him to sleep on the streets sweetheart' he cajoled.

'Well don't think he's staying here for a minute longer than necessary.' Neil heard her disagreeable reply. 'He's not far short of an alcoholic!'

'Shush!' He heard his friend answer. 'He'll hear you.'

'I don't care if he does. He'll know he's only here under sufferance then and he might shift himself to find somewhere permanent quickly.'

Neil was tempted to walk out then and tell her *'to poke her room where the sun don't shine'*, but knew he couldn't afford to. *'Right 'Plain Jane' she was, the ugly old bag'* Neil thought to himself. *'I'm sure even Keith could do better than her'* he surmised.

He ended up being there a month, before, with Keith helping financially with the deposit, he found a bed-sit cum studio flat. He worked out he must have owed Keith over £2,000 by that time. He had borrowed almost constantly from him to keep the wolves from the door. He had been advised by the social to declare himself bankrupt to stop the credit card companies and the bank from issuing court proceedings, and he was so depressed with his life he had to be able to have a drink now and then. That's where most of what he owed Keith had gone. He allowed his mind to wander.

I don't go to the pub much now.

Mostly because its cheaper from the off-licence.

That's why I drink indoors.

But I'm not an alcoholic.

Yeah, I liked a drink, but I'm not a drunk.

It isn't my fault I can't get a job. I am trying.

Every other week Neil signed on and looked at the job vacancies. The one or two places where he got an interview said he was over-qualified!

He felt he had nothing else to do but drink. He thought he could stop anytime he wanted and would. Just as soon as he got a job!

Then he got a start at the Wimpy Bar. It wasn't much of a job but it was better than nothing. He didn't drink for two days.

Not one drop.

Now his mind tried to focus on anything but the real reason he got the sack from there too.

That stupid assistant manager didn't like me, that's why I was fired on the third day. It had nothing to do with me having a sly mouthful out the back. I was careful no-one was watching me, and you're not supposed to be able to smell vodka anyway, so it couldn't have been that reason. Could it?

I don't even like the taste of beer anymore I drink cider most of the time now. That is more of a fruit drink and I only have vodka occasionally, when I am a bit bloated with the cider.

Keith shouldn't be worrying about me so much. I am okay.

I haven't lost that much weight either, just because Keith needs to shed a few pounds.

I am lean and fighting fit, so I am.

Come to think of it I haven't seen Keith for a few days. I wonder where he is.

When I first moved into this bed-sit he called round most days.

It was probably 'Plain Jane' keeping him away. Hope he comes tonight, he can buy me a couple of bottles till I get my dole money.'

Keith was getting very concerned about Neil. He was beginning to think Jane was right. If he wasn't an alcoholic yet, he was certainly well on the way. He found it hard to believe it was less than two years ago he had been so jealous of Neil.

Then he had been about to get married to the lovely Claire and he had that siren Sheena on the side, whenever he fancied it. Now look at him!

Penniless, on the dole, Sheena and Claire both married, happily it seemed too.

Now Claire was expecting. Neil didn't even know she was married. He had told Neil about Sheena, because he knew he had been told she was engaged, but he hadn't told him about Claire. He often saw her and when she asked after Neil, which she always did, he said he was doing okay. When he heard about her getting married, Neil had

just had his flat repossessed and he thought the news would be too much of a downer for him. Now, less than three months later, she told him yesterday she was expecting. He would have to tell him before someone else did but he didn't know how too. That's why he hadn't called in to see him yesterday. It was now three days since he had last seen him.

Maybe it will bring him to his senses he thought when he knocked on the bed-sit door. There was no reply. Keith sighed and reached above the door frame and, finding the spare key, let himself in.

The stench was overpowering when he pushed open the door.

The small living/bedroom was dirty and cluttered with dozens of empty cider bottles strewn across the table and the floor. There were quite a few bluebottles feeding off a half eaten burger in a plastic container, and empty crisp packets which seemed to be his main source of food these days. He let out a gasp of horror when he saw his friend splayed across the bed in the alcove. At first he thought he was dead, until he heard a simultaneous cough and fart emitting from the body. He walked closer, holding his nose with one hand whilst trying to wave away the flies and the smell with the other.

Apart from the unwashed smell of body odour, it seemed Neil had wet himself and the bed judging by the strong smell of urine. There were also globules of sick on his pillow which fortunately hadn't been sufficient to cause him to suffocate on the fumes, otherwise his first thought on seeing him might have been right.

His anger at the state of his friend overtook his concern and he shook him violently.

'Wake up you stupid bastard.' He yelled. 'How can you live like this, an animal would be ashamed to lie in this shit. Come on Wake up!'

Neil stirred and opened the eye that wasn't hidden in the pillow. 'Wass'up Bud, where's the fire.'

'Come on, get up out of that cesspit and clean yourself up, I'll make some coffee.'

Keith went to the kitchen area and put the kettle on. Neil only had a few cups and they were all in dirty water in the sink. He washed two up but only found enough coffee in the bottom of the jar to make one cup of coffee. Meanwhile Neil had followed him into the kitchen and Keith turned to face him, unable to keep the look of disgust off his face. He tore into him the venom dripping from his words.

'You disgusting piece of shit, haven't you got any shame? You're covered in sick and piss, and you've probably shit yourself as well. If you don't sort yourself out and quick this will be the last time I'll be round to see you. Now get in that bathroom and clean yourself up. You've been in those fucking clothes since I was last here three days ago.'

'Easy mate, keep your hair on.' Neil shuffled in the direction of the bathroom and watching him, Keith realised how much he had aged. It was hard to believe that shambles used to be the same man he envied a short time ago. There was little left of his good looks in the drunk he had become. On hearing the shower going Keith was relieved Neil was taking some notice of him.

He made the coffee as strong as the dregs allowed and set about trying to clean up the mess.

When Neil was finished his shower, Keith made sure he helped him tidy up the studio flat, even though he had to agree to go and get him a couple of bottles of cider when it was done. It took a good hour to make the place look moderately clean and tidy. The neglect it had suffered was only too evident in the stains in the carpet and sofa, which could not be removed by even the most ardent scrubbing. They were left

with two black bags full of rubbish and another with the soiled bedding and clothes, which would have to go to the launderette. Keith felt no guilt in refusing to stick to his agreement to buy the cider, insisting he only had enough money on him to buy coffee.

‘You’re a goddamn liar.’ Neil’s whinging voice proclaimed when Keith advised him of this. ‘You promised, just to make me clean up.’

‘Maybe. But would you have done it if I hadn’t promised? He replied. ‘And anyway you’re lucky I still care enough about you to help you clean up. I never made this mess.’

‘Oh please mate, just one bottle will do.’ Neil pleaded, trying in vain to look like a little boy lost.

‘No sorry, it won’t do you any harm to abstain for a few days anyway, prove to me you can. Then I won’t feel like I’m wasting my time.’ Keith bent to pick up the laundry bag. ‘Grab those two bags of rubbish and you can take them out to the rubbish bin on our way to the launderette. You’ll need to wash and dry, the sheets at least, so you have a clean set for your bed tonight, the spares are dirty too.’

Thankfully Neil seemed to accept what Keith was asking him to do and meekly bent to pick up the bags and follow him out the door.

It became obvious why when they reached the launderette!

Reaching for the bag of laundry Neil casually said; ‘Leave that with me and get off home mate. Jane will be wondering where you are.’

‘You must be joking! Do I look stupid? As soon as I walk out that door you’d be off to the off-licence, to spend the dosh on booze.’

‘I wouldn’t mate, honest.’ Neil tried to convince him but Keith was having none of it.

‘Put it in the machine. I’ll put the money in.’

The only other occupants of the launderette were a harassed looking Mum and two young boys. She listened with a wry smile before turning her attention to her squabbling offspring, who were in danger of catching their fingers in the dryer they were playing around with.

‘Johnny, Paul, stop that at once and get back over here before I brain the pair of you’ she shouted. This was greeted by each of the boys blaming the other, whilst denying their own guilt and she turned back to see Neil dutifully filling up the machine and Keith extracting the required change from his pocket. He then went over to the powder machine and, feeding the pay-slot, came back with a tub which he emptied into the dispenser on the machine.

‘I’ll pop down the 7-11 and get you some coffee and a few other bits and pieces. You can stay here, or come along if you like, but there’ll be no alcohol on the list either way.’

‘I might as well stay here then.’ Neil slumped on the bench with a petulant look on his face more befitting the two boys, and Keith left him to it.

He was gone about twenty minutes.

On his way back, he could hear the commotion coming from the launderette half way up the road. He quickening his step and arrived at the door to hear the woman screaming at Neil.

‘I’ll call the police on you. Don’t you dare touch my boys! Paul, Johnny, come over here now.’

‘Her boys’, who he could see were laughing at Neil, were watching Neil attempt to break into the powder machine.

‘What’s going on, Neil, stop that you idiot. You’d be lucky to get enough out of there for a bottle of Coke.’

‘He pushed my Johnny out of the way.’ The woman turned on him. ‘You better sort him out and get him out of here or I’ll call the police!’ She shepherded the boys up to the other end of the launderette where her clothes were in the dryer.

Neil turned to Keith and, despite himself, he couldn’t help feeling sorry for him.

Seeing the tears in his eyes and the state of his door key, which he had been using to try and break into the machine, his heart went out to him.

‘Come on let’s get you home and sort you out a strong cup of coffee and something to eat.’ Putting his arm round his shoulder, Keith marshalled him to the door.

When he apologised to the woman and her sons, he felt she was happy to see the back of them, but her sons would have preferred their source of their entertainment to have stayed a little longer.

Back at the Studio flat, Keith unpacked the provisions and made his friend a sandwich and a cup of coffee before returning to the launderette to put the washing in the dryer. He wasn’t gone for long but, by the time he got back, Neil was curled up on the sofa fast asleep. He made the bed and left, taking the bent key with him, to get a duplicate cut.

Chapter Fifty One

Over the course of the next few days, Keith made several attempts to help his friend, to no avail. He even went with him to his Doctor, to try to get him professional help and between them they managed to get him into a drying out clinic. Unfortunately they only worked when the patient voluntarily admitted themselves and, the day before he was due to take up residence, he found out about Claire’s marriage and the birth of her daughter. Needless to say that resulted in him getting absolutely legless

and disappearing off the face of the earth. He showed up four days later with no idea where he had been. The effect Neil's drunkenness was having on Keith's own marriage escalated to the extent that Jane gave him no alternative but to choose between them and in truth Keith knew that he himself had had enough. He did however arrange another appointment for Neil to go to the clinic but, when he cocked that up in similar circumstances to the first time, he felt he was left with no alternative but to virtually give up on him. He still popped in to see him about once every few weeks at first, but the frequency of this declined and the last time he stopped off on his way home from work the previous week, there was no sign of him at the flat.

Today Keith cut home through the park.

He was deep in thought about the audit at work and at first didn't hear the beggar call out to him.

'Tight wad!

Selfish Bastard!'

He heard that and, as he turned, the seeds of recognition broke into his thoughts, but he wasn't sure.

He looked more closely at the man sprawled across the grass, next to the bench and he was still unsure. It took a further remark from him to confirm his fears.

It was Neil!

'Changed yer mind have yer!' Neil dribbled the words, struggling to sit up. He obviously was too far gone to recognise it was Keith he was talking to.

'Neil, what the hell are you doing, begging in the park?' Keith couldn't believe the state of him. He saw the quizzical look in his eyes, which appeared to have sunk deep into his dirty, unshaven face, and shivered involuntarily. Taking in the empty cans of

strong lager strewn around him, the filthy clothes and disgusting smell emanating from him, Keith slumped on the end of the bench. At the same time, recognition dawned on Neil.

‘Hey! Keithy boy. Where you been hiding?’ Neil slurred through his black neglected teeth, giving him a grimace of Death, personified. Seeing the look on Keith’s face sparked the addition. ‘Don’t look at me like that. Like, I’m a piece of shit on your shoe. You arrogant bastard!’

‘I’m sorry mate. It’s such a shock seeing you like this. When the hell are you going to sort yourself out? Don’t you realise how bad you look? I hardly recognised you.’

‘Oh Fuck off! What’s it to you anyway?’

‘Come on mate, let me take you home and clean you up.’

Keith wasn’t sure if he could stomach the smell but, he obviously, still had some compassion. ‘Please, for God’s sake mate.’ He got up from the bench and leaned towards Neil, trying not to breathe through his nose, he reached to grab his arm.

Neil pushed him off, somehow managing to get to his feet before falling over again and mumbling: ‘Fuck off and do your Samaritan bit elsewhere. Call yourself a mate?’ Saliva dribbled from his distorted mouth and settled in the tangled mess of beard as he slavered on; ‘Put yer hand in yer pocket if you’re a mate and then piss off and leave me alone’, the last words barely audible.

Keith, sensing he was wasting his time, decided to leave him and go to the telephone box at the entrance to the park and ring someone. He wasn’t sure who, the Salvation Army or the emergency services? There must be someone who would take care of him, wasn’t there? Neil continued to shout abuse at him, giving up trying to get to his feet, he passed out.

Through the haze in his mind Keith heard someone calling him to wake up.

‘Come on it’s time to go. The train is ready to take you home. Wake up.....’

Chapter Fifty Two

Neil saw Joanna looking at him through blurry eyes, not realising at first where he was and then, focusing on the guard who had been shaking his shoulder, his anxiety returned giving him a haunted demeanour. Slowly he got to his feet.

Steve with Emily, Joanna and Neil followed the guard out of the waiting room and back onto the train.

Every one of them felt it had been a lifetime ago since they had left the train, but the guard assured them that, in real time, it had been less than an hour. Each of them lost in their own thoughts, reliving their dreams, or more accurately, their nightmares, for that’s what they were.

When they were asked about their delay, they knew to say it was simply a mechanical breakdown. To divulge to anyone the details of the strange guard and surreal occurrences they had been part of would have been unbelievable.

They also knew, without question, that the visions they had each dreamt were not premonitions of the future. They had been shown the worst possible outcome of their lives to give them the mental strength and resolve to help in the decisions they each had to make.

It did not even make the decisions any easier, in fact it made them harder, so their thoughts were burning with the futility of the interruption. The need to know why they had been chosen, why they could not have been given the best possible outcome

and who was this man, the guard, who had disappeared as miraculously as he had appeared on the train?

The guard watched, unbeknown to them and he knew their perception of him had been greatly influenced by the severity of their dilemma. He couldn't help that. It was the way it had to be!

Emily and Steve had seen in him the compassion he felt for their fate. They also knew that they had both seen the same visions. They would go on to discuss in great depth the choice they had to make over the weekend. They sat close together and held hands and prayed for the strength they would need.

Joanna had been somewhat confused in her perception of the aura the guard projected and quietly cursed him for any outcome that could result in her losing Sam, fatally or otherwise.

Neil's fear had been induced by the guard's feelings being portrayed to him, for he knew his decision was the least traumatic of the passengers on the train and he cursed himself for the weakness of his mind.

The guard continued to watch them until the end of the journey.

They did not speak to each other until they left the train at their destination and then simply said goodbye.

They had more important things to think about.....