

Susan
LEWIS

Home Truths



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‘Don’t go! Please... Oh God, no, please don’t...’

‘I can’t take any more, Angie. I swear... If you’d seen what I just have...’

‘Whatever it is...’

‘Our five-year-old son had a syringe in his hand,’ he raged, almost choking on the words.

‘Oh my God. Oh Steve...’

‘I need to find Liam, and when I do I’m turning him in to the police along with every other one of those lowlife bastards...’

‘No! No!’

He could still hear his wife screaming down the phone, begging him to stop as he tossed his mobile on to the passenger seat and steered the van, almost on two wheels, out of the street.

He’d had enough. He didn’t care about the danger he was putting himself in, or what might happen after, he was too

enraged for that. *You bastard! How dare you... He's a child, for God's sake...* The words circled endlessly through his head.

It took a while to get across town. He barely even saw the traffic, or the red lights that tried to delay him, as though giving him some time to think. He didn't want it. He was past thinking, past caring about anything other than the need to make this stop.

When he reached the hellish streets, the sore at the heart of the sprawling estate, he screeched to a halt on the infamous Colemead Lane and leapt out. He was so pumped with fury that his fists were already clenched, his muscles tensed for attack. His rationale had fled, along with his temper and sense of self-preservation.

He looked around, his eyes fierce. The mostly destitute houses with boarded-up windows and padlocked doors were as silent as graves. The tower blocks at the end with graffitied walls and urine-soaked stairwells rose drearily towards a patched grey sky. Even the pub looked deserted, its sign dangling from one hinge, its barred windows telling their own story.

'I know you're here,' he roared at the top of his lungs. 'Liam Watts! Get out here now!'

His rage echoed around the silence like useless gunshot scattering over a ghost town.

'*Liam Watts!* Show your face.'

Everything remained still.

Seconds ticked by as though the world was holding its breath, waiting to see what would happen next. He sensed he wasn't alone, that he was being watched, that this was a charged hiatus before the storm broke.

He was ready for it. His whole body was primed to take it.

There was a scuffling behind him, sharp yet muffled, and he spun round, heart thudding thickly with fury and fear, eyes blazing.

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‘Go home,’ a wretched young woman hissed from a nearby alley. She was thin, shaking, her eyes seeming to bleed in their sockets. She waved feebly in no particular direction before stumbling into a side alley and disappearing.

He didn’t see them coming at first, he only heard them: faint, deliberate footsteps crunching, almost military in their pace. He peered around, trying to get a sense of where they were. How many they were.

‘*Liam Watts!*’ he roared again.

The sun slipped its cover of cloud, dazzling him, throwing a rich golden glow over the street, as though to paint this purgatory into something glorious.

He listened, hearing his heartbeat, hectic, scared; the sound of a dog barking, a scream cut suddenly short.

Then he saw them emerging from the shadows like ghouls, closing on him from each end of the street, slowly, purposefully, faces wrapped in black balaclavas, baseball bats and iron bars slapping into palms, chains rattling through brutal fingers.

As his survival instinct kicked in he turned to run. He couldn’t take on this many. He’d be a fool to try. ‘Liam,’ he shouted, more panicked than angry now.

He reached the van, tore open the door, but it was too late. A flying brick hit his back, sending him sprawling into the dust.

He tried to scramble up.

A crippling blow to the backs of his knees buckled his legs under him.

‘Liam,’ he cried raggedly as he hit the ground.

A steel toe-capped boot slammed into his head.

He rolled on to his back, dazed, blood in his eyes. He could make out the faces gathered over him in a blur, laughing, as blind to his humanity as to their own.

He crossed his arms over his head to protect it. He tried in the chaos to spot Liam, to beg him to put a stop to this.

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Time, reality, slipped to another dimension as his hearing faded and vicious blows continued pummelling his body. He thought of his other children, Grace and Zac, as more blood swilled around his eyes and his teeth were crunched from their roots.

He thought of his wife, his beautiful wife whom he loved with all his heart.

The thudding of boots and weapons grew worse, more frenzied, unstoppable; pain exploded through his body with a thousand jagged edges as vomit choked from his mouth. Darkness loomed, shrank away then tried to swallow him again. Dimly he heard screaming, a distant siren, and somewhere inside the mayhem he was murmuring his son's name, 'Liam, Liam,' until he could murmur no more.

CHAPTER ONE

‘Come along in, no need to be shy.’ Angie’s smile was encouraging and jolly, and reflected all the natural kindness in her big, soft heart. She was a petite woman in her early forties with a fiery mop of disorderly curls, sky-blue eyes, a naturally pink mouth and freckles all over her creamy round cheeks. It was impossible to look at her without seeing sunshine and colour and all sorts of good things, even on the greyest of days.

Everyone loved Angie, and she loved them right back. Or most of them anyway; there were always exceptions.

Today’s newcomer was Mark Fields, a wiry man in his late twenties with buckets of attitude (she’d been warned) and not much hair. He was apparently showing his timid side now, since his demeanour was quite guarded, and the little flecks of paper blotting up the shaving nicks in his cheeks made him seem vulnerable, or clumsy, probably both. In Angie’s view it was easy to love beautiful people who washed regularly, ate

healthily and lived under proper roofs with smart windows and secure front doors. It took an extra effort to empathize with those on the other side of the divide.

‘Everyone!’ she announced to the room at large. It was a big square kitchen that boasted a series of old-fashioned melamine units, a five-ring gas stove, a tall steamy casement window currently speckled with raindrops and old paint, and a grungy sitting area off to one side with a monster TV and a four-bar gas fire. For all its shabbiness and lack of feminine touch it was actually very cosy, she’d always thought. ‘This is Mark,’ she said, indicating the man she’d brought in with her, ‘he’s going to be taking over Austin’s place here at Hill Lodge. Can we have a lovely welcome for him, please?’

The three men seated at a central Formica table, two in their thirties, the other past sixty, rose to their feet, stainless steel chair legs scraping over the lino floor. Their card game had been abandoned as soon as Angie had entered, for she was always the most welcome of visitors, notwithstanding that she was the only one. The eldest resident, Hamish, was showing the kind of smile that was rare for a man in his position, in that it was almost white with no missing teeth. He reached for Mark’s scarred and bony hand, eager to welcome the stranger and get him off on the right foot. Hamish was the unofficial head of house, partly due to age, but mostly because of his avuncular manner and the fact that his chronic lung condition had earned him permanent residency.

His greeting, along with that of the two younger residents, Lennie and Alexei, both in their late twenties, was everything Angie could have hoped for, and indeed what she’d expected. This little family of misfits was nothing if not generous of spirit (when they weren’t fighting for the remote control or whose turn it was in the bathroom), and she couldn’t have felt prouder of them today if she were their mum. Given her

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age, she accepted that her maternal feelings were slightly off-kilter, but everything about this place was out of whack one way or another, so she wasn't going to waste any time worrying about the tenderness she felt for people who didn't get much of it elsewhere.

Hamish plonked the new housemate down at the table, asking if he played poker, and offering him a pile of the ring pulls they used for currency.

Lennie, said, 'I'll put the kettle on.' Lennie had recently been taken on as an apprentice to a car mechanic and had been so thrilled by this that he'd hardly stopped grinning for a week. He'd tried to give Angie credit for finding him the job, his first in over five years with the best part of them spent on the streets, but she was having none of it. He'd gone through the proper channels at the jobcentre and won it on his own merits. And that, she'd told him, was how he was going to keep it.

Alexei, whose pugnacious face and lispy stammer were touchingly at odds with each other, had recently found employment too. He'd been taken on by John Lewis as a delivery driver, and he was so proud of being selected by such an upmarket store that Angie had to laugh at the little touch of snobbery from someone who'd not so long ago been sleeping in a bus shelter most nights of the week.

Fingers crossed he'd make a success of it, and never forget to take the medication intended to control his psychotic episodes. Thank God for the individuals and companies who gave second chances to those who were trying to turn their lives around. This little family all bore the scars of misfortune, whether drug addiction, alcohol abuse, homelessness, redundancy, marriage break-up, mental burnout, or prison, but they wouldn't have been at Hill Lodge if they hadn't already undergone a period of rehabilitation. Even so, they were at risk of

falling back into old habits, as many did if they felt unable to cope with life or their new responsibilities, or became scared of people too ready to judge them harshly.

The fifth resident of Hill Lodge was young Craig, a slender, almost skeletal lad of twenty-three, with a riot of inky dark curls that tumbled around his beautiful face in a way that, in another existence, might have made him a male model, or even the pop star he longed to be. He was standing in front of the large kitchen fireplace – empty apart from an overflowing waste-paper basket and a well-worn trainer – watching proceedings with curious, hazel eyes. Angie smiled to beckon him forward. His gaze remained on the newcomer, studying him with frank intensity. It was hard for Angie to look at him without feeling an extra wave of affection, or a tug back into her past that was never welcome.

Cups of tea were soon being handed around, no sugar for Angie, two for everyone else, no biscuits – who half-inched the last digestives? Alexei, you toerag – when Craig finally stepped forward and went to stand in front of Mark. His expression was solemn, his stance stiff and awkward as he looked the older man up and down.

Clearly thrown by this scrutiny, Mark glanced at Angie, but before she could make the introduction Craig said, abruptly, ‘*You* are welcome here.’

Mark blinked and the others grinned.

Craig’s eyes remained on Mark as he rose hesitantly to his feet, holding out a hand to shake. ‘Thanks mate,’ he mumbled.

Craig took a step back and watched in alarm as one of Mark’s shaving papers floated like a petal down to the table.

‘Don’t take offence,’ Hamish advised. ‘It’s just his way. Isn’t it, Craig?’

Seeming not to hear, Craig turned around and reached for the guitar propped against the fireplace. After a few introductory

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chords that filled the kitchen with reasonably tuned sound he began to sing, 'Welcome to Wherever You Are'.

'Bon Jovi,' Lennie mouthed to Angie, in case she didn't recognize the number. Craig's renditions didn't always bear close resemblance to the originals; nevertheless, it was astonishing and touching the way he could come up with a song for most occasions.

When he finished, mid-chorus, mid-word even, he put the guitar down, bowed to his applauding audience and took the cuppa Lennie had poured for him. 'I'm getting together with some people later,' he informed everyone. 'We're going to form a band and make some videos.'

Angie glanced at Hamish, whose expression was saying, *I've no idea if it's real or imagined, but I'll plump for the latter.*

Craig said, 'One of them reckons he can get us some gigs at a pub on Moorside.'

It would be good to know that Craig was making friends provided she could be certain they were genuine, and not out to steal his guitar, or rough him up just for the fun of it.

Finishing her tea, Angie picked up her bag and rose to her feet. 'OK, I have to be going, guys, but tell me first, Alexei, are you remembering to take your medication?' He'd told her himself that he'd served four years for grievous bodily harm, and she'd been warned that he'd present a danger to society, and to himself, if he forgot, or decided to stop taking his drugs.

'Definitely,' he assured her, tapping a finger to his forehead in an odd sort of salute.

Hamish nodded confirmation, letting her know that he was keeping a close eye on it.

Hamish was a hero in the way he looked out for the residents as if they really were his family, watching them come and go, succeed and fail, struggle with everything from computers to cravings to job searches and even personal hygiene, always

ready to lend a hand. She knew he was ex-forces and had served in the first Iraq war, but it was a time of his life he never wanted to discuss, although he had once admitted that he'd come back in a terrible state and had been turfed out by his wife. These days he'd probably be diagnosed as suffering with PTSD, she realized, although it still wasn't certain how much help he'd receive. He was as gently spoken and courteous as he was smartly turned out – always in a collar and tie when he left the house, frayed though it might be, shoes shining and trousers neatly pressed. And he was so grateful to have been made a permanent resident that he not only took care of this house and its small garden, but also the one next door that Angie's sister, Emma, managed for their organisation Bridging the Gap.

It was Angie and Emma's job to help the residents progress from all the difficulties they'd fought to overcome on the streets, in prison, in various shelters or rehab centres, back into a society where they could function as worthy and hard-working individuals.

As usual a barrage of questions followed her to the door as she left, mixed in with some teasing, and the merry tune of her mobile ringing. Seeing it was a resident from Hope House, presumably unable to get hold of Emma, she let it go to messages. She needed to get a move on now or a parking warden would start salivating over her little van like he'd just found a tasty sandwich still in its wrapper, and didn't want to be late for her afternoon stint at the food bank.

As she closed the front door behind her, satisfied that all was well inside for now, she started along the front path and with each step she felt herself becoming aware of her thoughts moving ahead of her across the street, and over the rooftops to a terraced house on the avenue behind. It was where she and Steve had lived when they'd first come to Kesterly, almost

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fourteen years ago, in a cramped and draughty second-floor flat that Steve, with his wonderful enthusiasm and decorator's skills, had transformed into a warm and welcoming home.

She could hear Liam, aged five, calling out for his dad to come and read him a story. 'Daddy! Giraffe, monkey, pelly,' and minutes later Steve would be rolling up laughing at his favourite Roald Dahl story. Liam always chose it because of how much it made his daddy laugh, and Angie would stand outside the door listening, loving them with all her heart and wishing Liam was able to read it himself.

'He'll get there,' Steve's mother always assured them, 'he's just a late learner, that's all. You wait, before you know it he'll be streets ahead of everyone else and you won't be able to keep up with him.'

Due to her role as a teaching assistant at the local school, Angie was able to monitor his progress, and it definitely wasn't happening at the same rate as other kids his age. On the other hand he was always so happy and eager to try new things, and even when he was teased or left out of a game he never seemed to get upset. He'd just laugh along with the others, not caring that he was the butt of the joke, and if anyone ever appeared sad he'd quickly invite them home to play trains or do some colouring with him and his dad.

'He's a special boy,' Hari Shalik, Steve's boss, would often say, ruffling Liam's hair and smiling down at the small upturned face in a grandfatherly way.

'Can I come and work for you when I'm grown up?' Liam would sometimes ask.

Hari's chuckle rang with notes of surprise and delight. 'Of course, if it's what you still want when the time comes, but you might have other ideas by then.'

'He's going to fly to the moon, aren't you, Liam?' Steve would prompt.

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Liam's nod was earnest and slow until he broke into a grin and wrapped his arms around his daddy's legs. 'Only if you come with me,' he whispered.

'Well, I wouldn't let you go on your own.'

'Can we take Mummy?'

'I think we should.'

To Hari Liam said, 'Mummy's going to have a baby.'

Hari's golden-brown eyes widened with interest. 'So you'll have a brother or a sister? Will you take them to the moon as well?'

Liam thought about it. 'They might be too small, so they'll have to stay with Granny Watts until we come back.'

'Good idea, and don't forget to let me know when you're going so I can come and give you a good send-off.'

Recalling that conversation now as she drove away from Hill Lodge, Angie was smiling at how precious and pure those memories were, like long hot summer days before autumn came to shadow the sunlight, and rain began falling like tears from gathering clouds.

CHAPTER TWO

Emma was Angie's younger sister by a year and several months. She was also plumper and louder, happily divorced and a hard-working mother of two small boys. She had a similar abundance of fiery red hair to Angie's, and the same arresting blue eyes that changed shade according to her mood.

The two of them had taken over at Bridging the Gap about a year ago after Angie had lost her job as a teaching assistant (cuts to the education budget), and Emma had no longer been required as a receptionist at a local dentist's after it was absorbed into the Kesterly Health Centre. It was pure luck that the husband and wife team who'd been running Bridging the Gap since its inception had decided to retire at that time, and Ivan, the parish manager of St Mary's, the local church, had decided to give the sisters a chance.

'Why not?' he'd agreed, in the slow, doleful tones that had unnerved Angie and Emma at first. 'You've excellent references, the pair of you, and we could do with some younger

and livelier input around here. Yes, you'll suit us very well, and I hope we'll suit you too. Just make sure no dossing in the church, or anywhere else on the site.'

'Don't worry, we promise to go home at night,' Emma had assured him with mock sincerity.

Ivan blinked, taking a moment to understand, but he didn't seem to find it funny. 'I was referring to the men you'll be taking care of,' he explained. 'Or, more accurately, to their associates from the streets. There are shelters for them to go to at night and this church isn't one of them. Nor are the residences we are fortunate to have use of for those who've earned a place to rest on their road to redemption.'

Both of Bridging the Gap's properties belonged to an octogenarian recluse, Carlene Masters, who had apparently handed the rundown Victorian villas to St Mary's to use as the vicar and parish committee saw fit while she went to live in Spain. All she required in return was a small rental income. Angie and Emma had never met her, but they did know that she'd waived the rent for two months during the introduction of universal credit. Since housing allowances were what paid the rent and contributed to BtG's running costs, the change of system could have proved disastrous for the organization and residents alike when payments had dried up for weeks on end.

Now, as Angie went to update the whiteboard that dominated one wall of the shed-like office she and Emma worked from, she spotted a couple of parish outreach workers crossing the small courtyard outside and gave them a wave. From the large plastic sacks the two women were carrying it was clear they were on their way to the storeroom next door, where charity-shop rejects were kept before being sent to those in need overseas. They were the only people Angie and Emma ever saw at this end of the rambling church complex, apart

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from Ivan who occasionally dropped by to make sure everything was running as it should.

Their little enclave was tucked in behind the church hall and sheltered by a magnificent copper beech tree, and contained only their bunker of an office with its en suite loo, tiny kitchenette and semi-efficient heating, and the adjacent storeroom. Their window looked out over the courtyard where a sealed-up wishing-well served as a bird table and a high, thorny hedge separated them from the main road beyond. To get to the church they had to follow a stone pathway through a wilderness of old fruit trees and long-forgotten shrubs to connect up with the car park next to St Mary's offices, where the vicar's wife and parish manager carried out God's admin work.

The rectory was the other side of the centuries-old church, looking out over a sprawl of suburban rooftops that ended way off in the distance where the sea could be glimpsed sparkling away like a feast of temptation on crystal clear days. The old graveyard meandered gently down the south-facing hillside for at least a quarter of a mile to the busy residential street below. This was where Hill Lodge and Hope House were situated, in amongst a number of similar formerly grand villas, most of which had now been converted to flats. Angie and Emma never took the route through the tombstones and neglected shrines; no one did, it was too creepy and far too overgrown. Whoever needed burying these days was ferried to the newer, more desirable cemetery in the nearby semi-rural suburb of Morton Leigh.

'So what's your new bloke like?' Emma asked as Angie added Mark Fields's name to the Hill Lodge section of the whiteboard.

Raising her eyebrows as a fierce gust of wind whistled around their red tiled roof Angie said, 'He seems OK. Early days though. If he doesn't settle in, Hamish will be sure to let us know.'

‘What’s his story?’

Spotting the outreach ladies leaving, heads down as they battled the wind, Angie said, ‘Apparently he broke up with his wife after he was laid off work, and ended up with nowhere to stay when she got the house. Booze played a part in it somewhere, but Shawn, who referred him from the rehab clinic, says he’s been a regular at AA for over six months and is ready to start again.’

‘No history of violence?’

‘Not that I’m aware of.’

Emma looked both dubious and cautious. ‘He knows he’ll be out on his ear if he starts drinking again?’ she pressed.

‘He does, but let’s assume that he won’t. Did Douglas get hold of you?’

‘Douglas from Hope House? Yes, he did. Apparently he’s lost weight so his belt’s too big and his trousers are falling down. He wants to know how to make a new hole.’

Angie’s eyes danced with amusement. ‘So what did you tell him?’ she asked, able to gauge from Emma’s expression that some sort of irreverence was afoot.

‘I said that if he took himself to Timpsons in town someone there would be able to help him. He, of course, wanted to do it himself with a hammer and nail, but I reminded him that the last time he’d had those objects in his hands someone had ended up attached to the wall.’

Angie had to laugh. It wasn’t funny really, but the way Emma told it made it sound like a comedy sketch rather than a crime that had ended his victim in hospital and him behind bars. ‘Do you think the belt story was real?’ she probed.

‘No idea, but it might be worth asking Hamish to pop in later to make sure there’s no live art hanging over the fireplace.’

Choking on another laugh, Angie checked her mobile as it rang. Seeing it was Tamsin, a support worker from the main

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homeless shelter in town, she clicked on. 'Hi Tams,' she said, returning to her desk, 'If you've got any referrals I'm afraid we're all booked up at the moment.'

'I wish it were so simple,' Tamsin responded with a sigh. 'I'm hoping you or Emma could collect my kids from school when you go for your own.'

Angie said, 'It's OK, I'll take them back to mine.'

'You're an angel.'

'So they keep telling me. What I say is, you just haven't met my demons yet.' The instant the words were out she wanted to take them back, return them to the dark and awful place they'd come from, but it was too late. They'd already spilled along the connection, doing their damndest, and as she looked at her sister she could imagine only too well what both Emma and Tamsin were thinking. *Oh, but we have, Angie, we know what you did to your own son, but we won't talk about it, and we won't mention what happened to his father either.*

CHAPTER THREE

'I hope you're not peeping,' Steve warned, glancing at Angie who was in next to him in the car, hands over her eyes, as instructed. 'Or you,' he added, checking six--year old Liam in the rear-view mirror.

'Can't see anything,' Liam promised.

Satisfied they weren't cheating, Steve signalled to turn into cul-de-sac of twenty mock-Tudor new builds, each with leaded windows and its own small plot of land, front and back. He drew up outside number fourteen, just behind a skip and a few plaster-caked wheelbarrows – though the work was at an end the clearing up was still under way.

Opposite the smart detached residences with their red brick façades and artfully placed wooden beams was a freshly laid green with a stony brook babbling along on the far side sheltered by a couple of magnificent weeping willows and an ironwork footbridge that linked this street to the next.

'Can we look yet?' Liam urged from the back. His auburn

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curls were still damp from a quick swim in the sea and his round cheeks were flushed with excitement. Liam loved surprises, especially when they were a secret from his mother as well.

Steve grinned as Angie parted her fingers, pretending to take a peek. 'OK, you can look now,' he announced.

As Angie lowered her hands she gazed around the street of brand spanking new houses not quite understanding.

'Oh Dad! There's a bridge,' Liam exclaimed in awe, and as though his father had just given him the best thing ever he leapt out of the back to go and investigate.

As they watched him, Angie said, 'Are we on the Fairweather estate?'

'We are,' Steve confirmed.

'And you,' she continued to guess, 'worked on these houses so you've brought us to see them before their new owners move in?'

'Kind of,' he smiled, and getting out of the compact Peugeot they'd bought for her a couple of years back, he came round to open her door.

'Dad! Dad! Look at me,' Liam cried from the bridge, and making certain Steve was watching he raced across it and back again, looking so pleased with himself that Steve wanted to go and swing him up so high he'd scream with delight. He still wasn't learning as quickly as other children, but it didn't make him stupid, it was simply that his progress was happening at a different speed. In every other way he was an adorable, playful, and happy young boy who wanted no more than to be everyone's friend.

Steve and Angie sometimes wondered if Liam's shortcomings were what made him even more special. Certainly they brought out his father's protective instincts in a way nothing else ever had. However, they were careful not to smother or

overindulge him. They just wanted him to feel like any other child of his age and to know that even when the new baby came, which would be any day now, he would still be their number one.

After almost six years and four heart-breaking miscarriages, Liam was at last going to have a little sister.

'OK, I give up, what are we supposed to be looking at?' Angie demanded as Steve tugged her out of the car.

'It's the bridge,' Liam insisted as he ran back to join them.

'Not quite,' Steve replied, 'although it's a part of it,' and stooping so Liam could jump on his back, he turned towards the double-fronted house in front of them. 'This, my darling,' he said to Angie, feeling so much pride and happiness welling up in him it was hard to keep his voice steady, 'is our new home.'

Angie blinked, looked at it and then at him. 'But we can't afford anything like this,' she protested.

It was true, they couldn't, although Steve certainly earned well. His skills as a painter and decorator and all-round Mr Fix-It were always in high demand, but he was so keen for them all to have everything they wanted – her car, Liam's extra classes, his own sports gear, great holidays – that they'd never managed to save very much. However, now their family was growing they needed somewhere bigger than the small flat they'd been squashed into for the past couple of years. 'We don't have to buy it,' he explained. 'Hari is going to let us rent it from him at a price we can afford.'

Angie's mouth fell open as her eyes lit with disbelief and the first hint of excitement.

Apart from being Steve's boss. Hari Shalik had become like a father figure to them since they'd arrived in Kesterly. In fact, he was the reason they'd moved to this coastal town in the first place. Someone had told him about the high quality of

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Steve's work, so Hari had tried him out on a six-month contract and after three months he'd offered to put Steve in charge of all his development projects if he would agree to move his family to the area. So Steve and Angie had come here with Liam and although Steve effectively remained his own boss, meaning he was free to take on other jobs when Hari had no need of him, most of his work came either from, or through his mentor. Hari was a good man, wise and patient, always fair, and he made it plain that if they ever hit any difficulties they must always come to him. Since Steve's father had died when he was very young, this had meant a lot to him.

'So let me get this straight,' Angie said, 'after building all these beautiful houses...'

'Hari didn't build them,' Steve came in, 'he invested in the project and gave me the job of painting, decorating and finishing off the ones he'd earmarked for himself. There are two on this street – he's already sold the other, no doubt at an enormous profit – and half a dozen semis just over the bridge. He's going to be renting them out too, so I've already put Emma and Ben forward as prospective tenants.'

Angie was still staring at him in amazement.

Knowing she absorbing the idea of having her beloved sister nearby, Steve marked himself up another point and said with a grin, 'I've got the keys.'

'But...' Words were still clearly failing her, until she broke into helpless laughter. 'Why on earth would Hari give us something like this?' she cried.

'He told me it's his way of saying thanks for all the deadlines I've helped him keep, and holes I've dug him out of.'

'But an entire house...'

'We're renting it,' he reminded her, 'and he's promised it'll always be at a price we can afford.'

'Does Roland know about it?' she asked, referring to Hari's

son who was a few years older than Steve, and openly resentful of Steve's closeness to his father.

'I've no idea,' Steve replied. 'Now, come on, let's go inside and take a look.'

It was a dream home for them, with more space than they were able to imagine filling, and it exuded such a welcoming air that it seemed to embrace them the minute they walked in. To the right of the hall with its wide wooden staircase and built-in cupboards was a huge family-cum-play-room that went all the way from the front to the back of the house, where floor-to-ceiling French doors – still criss-crossed with manufacturers' tape – opened on to a newly laid patio.

'I thought I could put my piano here,' Steve indicated a dusty space just inside the doors, 'that way you can hear me playing when you're outside drinking wine in the garden.' The piano had been in storage since his mother's death three years ago because they'd had nowhere to put it, and he missed it more than he'd expected to.

'You can have the piano wherever you like,' Angie told him, looking misty-eyed, 'just as long as you promise to sing Nat King Cole songs whenever I ask.'

'It's a deal,' he laughed, pressing a kiss to her forehead. 'Now what's going on with you up there?' he asked Liam, who was still riding on his father's back. 'You've gone very quiet.'

In a worried voice Liam said, 'Will I be moving in too?'

Swinging him round into his arms, Steve said, 'We'd never go anywhere without you, my boy. This is going to be your home from now on, and because you're the oldest you get to choose your room first.'

Lighting up at that, Liam said, 'Can I have this one?'

'For playing and entertaining,' Steve promised, 'but you need a bedroom, so why don't you run upstairs and decide which one you want?'

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As Liam zoomed off Steve put an arm round Angie and led her across the hall to the sitting room that felt as though it was waiting for them. He explained how he envisaged fitting in two large sofas and an armchair, a good-sized TV and an eight-seater dining table and chairs at the far end for when they had guests. Next came the kitchen, not huge, but at least four times the size of the one they had now, with pale oak veneer cabinets, a double sink, and mock-granite worktops. There was space for a small table and chairs, also for one of the big American-style fridge-freezers they'd always promised themselves they'd get one day. There was even a separate alcove for the washing machine and tumble dryer.

'Obviously everything's brand new,' Steve announced like a salesman, 'from the heating, to the electrics, to the plumbing, all the kitchen units... We've even got a dishwasher.'

As he laughed, Angie slid her arms around him. 'You might have to pinch me,' she said, 'because I'm still trying to take it in.'

Holding her face between his hands, he said, 'Just tell me you think we can be happy here.'

'Of course we can,' she murmured. 'I can be happy anywhere as long as I'm with you.'

Although it was the answer he'd expected, it still made his heart soar to the stars. He loved his wife a thousand times more than he'd ever be able to put into words. 'I'm getting carried away with everything,' he said, 'but you know all the decisions will be yours. All I want is a small space for the piano.'

'And a barbecue built into the terrace,' she teased, 'and swings, slides, sandpits for the children, and a shed somewhere to keep your surfing gear.'

Smiling at the way she read him so easily, he kissed her tenderly, hoping to feel the baby fluttering against him, but

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she – Grace they were going to call her – was so close to arriving now that there wasn't much room for her to move.

'Found it!' Liam yelled from the top of the stairs. 'Can I have a bed like an aeroplane? Preston Andrews has got one and it's really cool.'

'Do you feel up to climbing the stairs?' Steve asked.

Angie shook her head. 'Not right at this moment, but tell me what's up there.'

'Not three, but four bedrooms,' he declared as if even he was still trying to believe it, 'the master has room for an en suite if we want one, but there's a really big bathroom with a walk-in shower that I know you're going to love. I did it myself, using the tiles you picked out when I told you Hari was trying to make up his mind which way to go.'

Eyebrows raised, she said, 'So how long have you known he was going to let us rent this place?'

'Only a couple of days. When I worked on it I had no idea.'

Turning at the sound of Liam thundering down the stairs, Steve shouted, 'We're through here.'

Finding them, Liam cried, 'I can't wait to bring all my friends here. They're going to love it.'

'And they'll all be very welcome,' Steve assured him, knowing how much it meant to his son to have friends, even those who didn't always treat him well.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was early on Sunday morning. Angie was in the bathroom staring, through specks of water on the mirror's surface, at her tired blue eyes as they assessed her reflection. It was as though it belonged to someone else, someone who looked vaguely like her; a kind of clone living another life over there in an alternative world.

Angie through the looking glass.

Maybe, in that elusive back-to-front place, things were actually as they should be, continuing unassumingly, happily, along the path she'd been on since she and Steve had moved to Kesterly fourteen years ago. OK, she'd understood that the odd curve ball could be lobbed in from out of the blue now and again, meaning tears had to be dried and hurdles overcome. Sometimes, Liam was picked on at school, and three miscarriages had followed Grace's birth, making a total of seven altogether. In spite of the challenges they'd loved being parents right from the start; holding Liam in their arms knowing he

belonged to them, that he was them, had made them feel as though they'd found the right way in the world. They were meant to create a family full of love and laughter, understanding and adventure, and for the most part that was how it had been. Now their youngest, Zac, was soon to be seven, making six years between each of the children, though somehow it had never seemed to matter – until one day they'd realized that it did.

The first time Liam had been brought home by the police he was only eleven – *eleven*. His PE teacher had found a stash of drugs in his school bag and instead of contacting them he'd reported it. It was all a big mistake, of course, Liam didn't even know what drugs were, much less how to get hold of them – or so they'd believed at the time. It was only later that they'd discovered how wrong they were, how life had already started slow-rolling the worst curve ball of all.

In the weeks and months that followed, the problems increased in ways they'd never have imagined possible for their sweet-natured little boy who'd always been desperate to be noticed, to feel he belonged, to impress those he considered friends. They seemed to lose all connection with him as he was sucked deeper and deeper into the worst kind of crowd. He all but stopped going to school, and began spending his days hanging around street corners and municipal parks with kids from the notorious Temple Fields estate, thinking he was as cool and smart as them when he was anything but. They used him, abused him, had fun at his expense and he never saw them as anything but heroes. When he was expelled from school he wore his disgrace like a badge of honour and reviled his parents for trying to punish him. He began disappearing for days on end, and after the first few occasions the police simply told them that he'd come back when he was ready. His known involvement with the Satan Squad, as the biggest gang

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on the estate had ingloriously named itself, made him of far less interest to the overstretched authorities than any normal child of his age would be.

No one had ever told his parents about the county line gangs that infiltrated small communities, priming local gangs to prey on vulnerable children and turning them into couriers or addicts, or both. They'd had no idea until it was already too late just how cruelly Liam was being exploited, manipulated and brainwashed by forces so evil that neither Angie nor Steve knew how to combat them. Even the police seemed to struggle. By the time he was fourteen they'd lost all contact with the sweet, innocent boy he'd been. He behaved as though he despised them.

Steve became gaunt with worry, so stressed and fearful that it began affecting his health. Each time the police knocked at the door they expected the worst, that Liam had been stabbed, or he'd overdosed, he was in prison or he'd killed someone. Usually the police came because he was thought to be a witness to a crime, but they never found him at home.

It was the day Steve spotted five-yearold Zac with an old syringe, making to jab it into his arm, that he'd finally lost it.

Angie hadn't been at home; if she had maybe she could have stopped him. As it was she'd been at the end of the phone when he'd said, 'I've had enough, Ange. He's no longer a son of mine.'

'Don't say that, Steve. Just tell me what's happened. Where is he?'

'I don't know, but I'm going to find him and when I do...'

'Steve,' she cried in a panic. "Don't go! *Please*... Oh God, no, please don't...'

'I can't take any more, Angie. I swear... If you'd seen what I just have...'

'Whatever it is...'

‘Our five-year-old son had a syringe in his hand.’

She’d all but choked on the horror. ‘Oh my God. Oh Steve...’

‘I’ve got to go,’ he told her. ‘I need to find Liam, and when I do I’m turning him in to the police along with every other one of those lowlife bastards...’

‘No! No!’ but the line had already gone dead.

She’d arrived home fifteen minutes later to find the house with its front door wide open, and no sign of Steve or his van. She tried telling herself that he wouldn’t actually go to that terrible estate, that he’d turn off and stop somewhere to calm down. But he wasn’t answering his phone and a sickening, terrifying intuition was taking hold of her.

It was around five in the evening when a female detective came to tell her what had happened on the estate. Angie would never forget the earth-shattering moment that her world had spun out of control. They’d beaten Steve to death. With iron bars, clubs, chains and heavy boots they’d laid into him with so much savagery that they hadn’t been able to stop, this was how a lawyer later described it in court.

Five of the attackers, all members of the notorious Ozwell gang, were arrested and charged the same day; Liam had also been taken in, but Angie received a call twenty-four hours later to tell her he’d been released on police bail.

‘Where is he now?’ she asked the officer who’d rung to let her know, her throat raw and tight with grief, her head gripped in a throbbing vice. Grace sat with her, holding her hand, dabbing away their tears, while Emma took charge of Zac and her own two boys. Angie felt almost as horrified by the thought of Liam coming home as she did by the fact that Steve never would.

It turned out no one knew where Liam had gone. He didn’t show up that day, or the next. Apparently he’d been present during the attack on his father. He’d told the police that he’d

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tried to stop it, and realizing he wasn't the entire full shilling, as one insensitive officer had described him, they'd held back on charges for the time being.

He came home eventually, three days after his release, so foul-smelling and spaced out that he could barely speak. Angie didn't even let him in the door.

'Get out!' she'd yelled into his stupefied face. 'Get out of this house and don't ever come back. You're dead to me, do you hear that? *Dead, dead, dead.*'

What she hadn't spared a thought for that day, or many days after, was what it must have been like for Liam to watch his father die in such a horrific attack. How had he felt when he'd realized he had no power to stop it, for she didn't want to believe he'd been a part of it. No! No matter what else he was capable of, he surely to God didn't have it in him to murder the father he'd once loved so much. Afterwards, he just hadn't been able to cope with what had happened, and then his mother had lost her mind and told him he was dead to her.

During the months following Steve's funeral, Angie had thought so much about Hari, their dear friend and landlord who she knew would have done anything to help her had he not lost his battle with leukaemia the year before. Having no other stabilizing or fatherly influence to guide her she'd acted alone, doing everything she could to find Liam, even venturing into the dreaded zone of Temple Fields when everyone had warned her to stay away. The streets, tower blocks, shops, pubs, were not so very different to any other housing estate on that side of town, at least on the outside. On the inside... things were different. Every other window was boarded up, burned out cars lurked like decaying teeth between shinier new ones, the stench of urine, cooking and vomit soured stairwells, and a chilling sense of menace filled the air. The families and

fellow gang members of those in custody for Steve's murder were all in this area, and she was sure she could feel them watching her. No one wanted to talk to her; a pub landlord told her to go home if she knew what was good for her, and aware of the hostility and resentment her intrusion had triggered, she remembered her other children and took his advice.

The police hadn't been interested when she'd tried to report Liam missing. Given his age and who he'd hung out with they didn't even bother filing a report. As far as they were concerned the London gang that controlled him had reeled him in and no doubt set him loose on some other undeserving community a long way from here. Though Angie knew how likely that was, she'd still tried the homeless shelters, rehab centres, helplines, missing person charities, Salvation Army and even the government's prisoners location services in her efforts to find him. If she'd had the money she'd have hired a private detective, but with Steve's income gone and her own barely covering the rent that she now paid to Roland Shalik, Hari's son, she'd already had to apply for benefits to help keep her reduced family going. Then, due to cutbacks in the local education budget, she'd lost her job as a teaching assistant. It had been the last straw. Grace had come home that day to find her mother scratching herself frenziedly, tearing her clothes, sobbing and begging God to tell her what to do.

Summoned by Grace, Emma had rushed straight over, rung the doctor, and eventually, between them they'd managed to calm Angie down. The sedative knocked her out until the following morning, and when she'd woken she'd been too groggy to remember much of what had happened. It had come back to her during the day and realizing how much she'd frightened her daughter, and her sister, she'd vowed to herself and to them that it would never happen again. She needed to get herself back in control, and to find another job before

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someone turned up from social services to take her children into care.

Two weeks later, after a soul-crushing interview at the jobcentre, Emma had called, all excitement, to tell her about the opening at Bridging the Gap.

Exactly why their predecessors had decided to recommend her and Emma as their replacements to run the organization's two transition houses, Angie had no idea. What she did know was that it had been a lifesaver for her in so many ways, not least of all because it allowed her to focus on those in a far more vulnerable state than she was, and to take heart from their courage. It was as though helping them back to a better world was helping her too, and though she'd never admitted this to anyone, Craig at Hill Lodge had soon come to represent Liam. They even looked vaguely alike for her, with the same ragged mop of curly hair and lazy gait. Craig was older, but his learning difficulties made him seem younger, and Angie had it fixed in her head that as long as she took care of this boy, someone else somewhere would take care of Liam.

Liam was turning nineteen today and she still had no idea where he was.

He could be dead.

This was her biggest fear, the one that kept her awake at nights. that tore at her conscience so savagely that she wanted to scream as though noise could somehow drown the pain and madness of it all. Even after everything that had happened, the mother in her continued to see past all the horror and heartache to the small boy who'd never even thought about harming anyone. He hadn't had it in him before the gangs had got hold of him, and she'd asked herself many times why they'd picked on him, what – or who – had really been behind the grooming and corruption of her and Steve's innocent boy.

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Steve. Oh God, Steve.

She missed him more than she could ever have imagined possible, and it wasn't getting any easier. If anything it was becoming worse.

'Mum?'

Angie was still at the bathroom mirror rigidly trapped in the worst time of her life, but as her eyes moved to the other face reflected behind hers, a smaller, younger, image of her own, and yet like her father too, she felt her limbs start to relax.

'Grace,' she said, and bringing up a smile she was aware of her anxiety retreating into a small, contained ball, as love for her thirteen-year-old daughter eclipsed it. 'What are you doing up so early?'

Grace's normally bright eyes were circled with shadows of worry, and grief – Angie must never forget that the children were suffering too. Two years had passed, and she wasn't sure any of them were close to getting over what had happened to Steve. Grace and Zac had loved their father every bit as much as she had, and the last thing they needed was to feel afraid that she couldn't cope. It was how she often felt, but she must never let it be true.

Except it was already true.

'I could ask you the same question,' Grace responded. 'It's Sunday. I thought we were having a lie-in.'

Relieved that Grace hadn't come into the bathroom to find her mother filling the luxury shampoo bottle with the same colour washing-up liquid, a regular occurrence, Angie said, 'And so we are. Come on, let's go and snuggle up under the blankets.'

It was still only seven o'clock; the heating was due to kick in at eight – always later at weekends, even if they had to get

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up early for one reason or another. Every little saving helped, or it was supposed to anyway. She wasn't sure that the smart meter she'd had installed was really onside, for it wasn't making anything less expensive, it just kept going round and round like a horror ride at the fairground, showing her how much it was all costing.

She wouldn't have minded a cup of tea, something warm to help soothe her gently into the day, but it took electricity to heat the kettle and they were going to need what was left on her key card for showers in a while. She just hoped the remaining credit would be enough to cover all bases, since the post office was closed on Sundays and so were the nearest PayPoints.

She should have sorted it out yesterday while everything was open, and she would have had she not needed to put petrol in Steve's van, now hers – five pounds' worth instead of ten, so there was enough left over to give Grace some spending money for bus fare and a coffee in town with her friends. The other twenty in her purse had gone to Lidl, so at least there was food in the cupboard – for now.

It was the roll-out of universal credit fourteen months ago that had tipped her from the precarious edge of just about managing into the terrifying downward spiral she was now caught in. Nine entire weeks had passed without any benefits at all, so she'd simply been unable to pay her bills. True, she'd still had her widow's pension – something they hadn't taken into the universal system for some reason – but thirty-four pounds a week was an impossible sum for a single person to live on, never mind a family. The only way she'd managed to survive was by running up her credit cards, going overdrawn at the bank and selling her car. Her rent, council tax and utility bills had gone into arrears and that was how they remained, with the outstanding amounts getting bigger all the time. She

could no longer bear to open the envelopes when they dropped ominously through the letterbox like voices with only doom to deliver.

She was receiving her benefits again now, but she was two hundred crucial pounds a month worse off than before, over three hundred if she counted the loss of her widow's pension. That was only paid for the first year following a death so it had run out eleven months ago, and she supposed she had to feel thankful that Steve had been forty-five by the time he died, any younger and she'd have got nothing.

Her head began hurting as she ran through everything she had to pay out this coming week. By the time she'd topped up her electricity key, retrieved Grace's boots from the repairer's, put a fiver aside for Zac's upcoming birthday party, paid a token amount towards the water bill and covered their school lunches, there might be enough left over to pay a little bit more than the interest on her credit card.

There would be nothing at all for the rent, or the council tax.

The breath was so tight in her chest that it felt like a solid mass of fear. She didn't want to admit it, even to herself, but things were moving out of her reach so fast that she was terrified of where they were heading.

A cuddle with Grace might help to relieve some tension and even somehow set her up for the day.

Feeling her teenager's slender body folding into hers, those smooth, gangly limbs and the sleepy morning smell of her opened Angie's heart to how blessed she was to have her. She was a beautiful girl, full of life and fun, but thoughtful and patient with an understanding of situations and people that sometimes made her seem twice her age. She worked hard at school, was a favourite amongst the teachers and other students, and possessed not a mean bone in her body. She was, in fact, just like her father, always seeing the positive side of

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a situation; the first to help in a time of need, and able to summon a sense of humour when the rest of the world was losing theirs.

Angie guessed Grace didn't find it so funny losing her beloved Lush cruelty-free cosmetics, Boux Avenue undies and weekly pop magazines – or the subs she had to pay to belong to the Fairweather Players. Her great passion was acting, and she was good at it. She'd been cast in many parts for the local am dram society since the age of eight and always received great reviews. She sang too, and danced, but for the time being she'd had to give up those lessons along with her Players membership – although her best friend Lois had bought her three months' worth of dance classes for Christmas. What a blessing that had been, and how guilty it had made Angie feel knowing she was unable to do it herself.

'It's all right, Mum,' Grace had whispered when she'd realized this. 'I know things are difficult now, but it'll all come good in the end. Promise.'

How like her father she'd sounded, and for one heady moment Angie had felt as though Steve was trying to communicate through their daughter. Whether he was or wasn't hardly mattered now, for the debts were still piling up and only two weeks after Christmas she'd been forced to sell Steve's beloved piano. She'd cried as hard that day as she had on the day they'd cremated him, for it had felt as though a special and intrinsic part of their marriage had been carried out of the door by strangers, who'd given her fifty quid less than she'd asked for it.

'You and the children matter way more than a dumb old piano,' she'd heard Steve telling her, and of course he was right, but it hadn't made her feel any better. If only he were here now to tell her how to handle Roland Shalik, who'd taken over his father's businesses when Hari died, and had,

if the rumours were true, incorporated them into various far shadier dealings of his own. He liked to portray himself as a tough guy, someone of influence, not to be messed with, and on the whole he succeeded, though Steve had never really been taken in by his bluster. In fact Steve had mostly kept out of his way and for the most part they'd seen or heard little of him, probably because they'd never been short of money to pay the rent then, nor had they complained when Roland had increased it. He'd only done it once, and not by a huge amount, but since Steve had gone and Angie had fallen into arrears things had changed. Roland had none of his father's softly spoken, courteous manner, nor, it turned out, did he feel any sense of loyalty or duty of care to the many tenants around Kesterly who'd been fortunate enough to have Hari for a landlord.

'Mum, you're squeezing too tight,' Grace murmured in protest.

Realizing she was, Angie slackened her hold and stroked her daughter's tangled red hair, careful not to catch any knots. She felt a glow of love, remembering how proud Steve had been of his precious girl.

Hearing a thud in the next room, followed by the hurried patter of feet and needless cry of 'I'm awake,' she felt rather than heard Grace laugh, and broke into a smile of her own. She wasn't going to think any more this morning about what had gone before, or how desperately she still missed Steve, or how much she hated herself for throwing Liam out. She was going to give all her time and attention to the two children who'd never caused her a moment's concern, apart from how to keep a roof over their heads, food in their mouths, clothes on their backs, vital gadgets in their pockets and ears... She could go on, and on, but her boisterous, fearless, head-first-into-the-bed six-year-old, had just landed, and simply had to be tucked in tightly with them, or tickled.

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It turned into a tickle, which she ran away from when they decided she was next. She loved them so much she could eat them, but they always won at tickling so she needed a refuge. Too bad the bolt inside the bathroom door was hanging off, she'd have got away if she'd remembered to fix it, but she wasn't sure how to – and no sooner had she shut herself in than they were there with her, putting their arms around her, telling her not to be scared.

'Scared!' she cried. 'Who's scared?' and putting on her most ferocious monster growl she ran after them.

Who needed heating when there were two children to play with?

OK, they did when the excitement was over and they finally settled down to breakfast, but a few minutes later the radiators clicked and rumbled into action and by the time the Lidl cornflakes had been devoured and Grace had finished her porridge the water was hot enough for showers. It might be Sunday, but they had a busy day ahead, and any minute now Angie would remember what they were supposed to be doing. For the moment her mind was filling up with figures that she couldn't make add up anywhere near close to where they needed to be.

Don't stress. Just don't. It'll be all right. You'll find a way out of this.

Her own breakfast was the mouthful of porridge Grace left. Never mind that she was hungry enough to down half an elephant, a cup of instant coffee should deal with the pangs, and to save on hot water she'd treat herself to a damned good wash instead of a shower. They'd be OK at the end of the month when her salary was due to be paid into the one bank account she had that wasn't overdrawn. Well, not OK, exactly, but better than today, for her quick calculations were already warning her that by the end of tomorrow she'd have no more

than sixteen pounds fifty in her account at Santander. The account at HSBC was already overdrawn by six hundred pounds with monstrous interest accruing by the day, so she couldn't go there for anything at all.

What utter fools she and Steve had been not to take out life insurance. They'd meant to, had even sent for some forms, but they'd never quite got round to filling them in. Angie had found them days after the funeral, exactly where she'd put them when they'd arrived, in a tray on Steve's desk with a prepaid and ready-addressed envelope attached. She'd stared at them, dumb with misery, rigid with the worst kind of understanding. She was holding a lifeline with nothing and no one attached to the other end, a limp rope in the water, an illusion of safety that would disappear in the cold light of day. She could do nothing to save herself or her family; these papers meant they were going to drown.

She'd told herself right away that she wouldn't let it happen. As though using up fierce and determined last gasps of air, she'd silently promised herself that Grace and Zac would never, for a single moment, feel any less special than they had while their father was alive. She'd quickly let it be known amongst her friends and neighbours that she could fill in people's shifts if they needed cover, whether cleaning, waitressing, delivering, babysitting: whatever was in her gift she would give it to make sure her children didn't go without.

She'd been in no doubt then that she could make everything work, and right up until she'd been made to wait for universal credit, she'd somehow managed to keep their heads above water. Now, in spite of still taking on all the extra jobs she could, it was impossible to make ends meet.

Grace, because she was Grace, had lately begun challenging her mother and brother to find the best bargains online or in charity shops, and they'd had some stunning

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successes: a pair of brand-new Nikes at Oxfam for Zac, price tag still taped to the bottom and half a size too big so he could grow into them, how perfect was that? A last-season white Zara blazer for Grace that would have cost fifty quid in the shop, and was just two pounds at Blue Cross (only a button missing, which was easily fixed). They'd even found a padded winter coat for Angie and wrapped it up for her birthday – what a memorable moment it had been when she'd opened it – it fitted, and they'd told her it had only cost a tenner (five quid contributed by Auntie Em). They'd jumped up and down with triumph, thinking themselves the smartest (in every sense) people alive, and how stupid was everyone else to pay full price?

It had also been Grace's idea to try and sell their old toys and clothes on eBay or Depop, while Angie began visiting a pawnshop in the old town, a place she hadn't even known existed while Steve was alive. By now she'd forfeited the white-gold watch he'd given her for her thirtieth; an emerald-studded bracelet he'd once accepted from an old lady in lieu of payment for decorating her kitchen; a pair of binoculars that had belonged to his father; his paintbrushes, best toolkit and protective gear; the rocking horse he'd carved for Liam; his surfboards; just about everything she could raise a few pounds for, right down to the electric heaters for when it was especially cold. Each time she went she felt as though she was giving away more pieces of her heart. All she had left to pawn now was her wedding ring, and the nine-carat gold locket Steve's mother had worn on her wedding day, and Angie had so proudly worn on hers.

She wasn't going to think any more about all that now, though. Instead, she was going to try to make herself believe that all would come good, maybe even by this time tomorrow. God only knew how, unless she caved in and took out one

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of those lethal payday loans... The fact that she was actually considering it made her feel sick inside, but what choice did she have when Roland Shalik had already begun the eviction process?