

Chapter One

Martha made sure the bathroom door was firmly shut. Which was stupid. The door was either shut, or it wasn't. Just as there were no degrees of being pregnant. You either were, or you weren't. And that was something she knew all about. The not being pregnant part, that was. She was all too familiar with that state of affairs.

Opening the package which she had bought on the way home, she followed the instructions to the letter. Not that she needed to read the leaflet contained within the small box; she knew what she had to do.

Afterwards, and while counting the seconds away in her head, she flushed the loo, then washed and dried her hands. When she had reached a hundred and twenty, she added on an extra thirty seconds in the hope they would make all the difference.

They didn't.

As before, the appearance of the minus sign told her that once again she and Tom had failed in their attempt to create a baby. This time she had really thought it might happen, that she was pregnant. She had convinced herself that this month she felt different, that her body was already nurturing a tiny speck of

miraculous life. But it was just a cruel false alarm. Or no more than a case of wishful thinking.

Cross with herself for putting too much store in being eight days late, for allowing her hopes to be raised, she stared at her face in the mirror above the basin. Too soon to panic, she told herself; she was only thirty-five, there was plenty of time yet for her to become a mother.

The important thing was to remain relaxed about it.

Anxiety, she reminded herself, would only make things worse. Besides, she wasn't the worrying kind.

She was Martha Adams.

Cool-headed and practical Martha.

Efficient Martha.

Reliable Martha.

As Dad used to say of her, if you needed a steady pair of hands, then Martha was your girl.

Pep talk over, the disappointment in her face now replaced with a determined smile, she put the pregnancy kit back inside the chemist's bag, screwed it up, and put it in the bin under the basin in the marble-topped vanity unit. She then scraped her shoulder-length dark hair back into an obedient ponytail. Mum had described her hair that way when she'd been a child.

'You're lucky to have such obedient hair, Martha,' she would say while brushing it ready for a day at school, 'it's so perfectly thick and straight, it will always do what you want it to do.'

In contrast her sister, Willow, had baby-fine blonde hair that had a careless way about it. As a girl, Willow's plaits had nearly always worn themselves loose by the time the lunchtime bell rang.

Downstairs in the kitchen, Tom was chopping onions with an ostentatious dexterity he had learned while on a cookery course Martha had given him for his fortieth birthday earlier that year. An avid fan of *Masterchef*, he never missed an episode, he loved to cook. He read cookery books the way most people read novels, devouring them page by page, word by word.

‘There’s a bottle of wine open in the fridge,’ he said, tipping the onions into a large ceramic frying pan.

When she’d poured out two glasses of Cloudy Bay, Martha asked him how his day had gone.

‘Oh, you know, same old same old for a Monday,’ he said, deftly crushing a garlic clove beneath the blade of a knife by banging it with his fist. ‘How about you?’

She tried to think back to her day in the office, before she came home with the pregnancy test kit and the day was ruined. Before that small seed of hope that had taken root in the last few days was ripped from her. Before she felt . . . well, never mind all that. ‘A bit like yours,’ she said with a shrug. ‘Same old same old.’

He smiled and added the garlic to the frying pan. ‘Pass me those mushrooms, will you?’

She did as he said, then sipped her wine. Her friends and family said she was lucky to have married a man like Tom, a man who was the perfect embodiment of patience and so handy in the kitchen. They were right; she *was* lucky. A previous boyfriend had dumped her with the damning criticism that she was too organised and sensible. She didn’t think she’d ever felt more insulted, but had then rallied with the acknowledgement that she was who she was, and that was that.

Amazingly Tom loved her for just that reason.

‘If I wanted an impractical and empty-headed girlfriend,

I wouldn't now be sitting here with you,' he'd said when she'd warned him what she was like on their third date. She hadn't seen any point in things progressing between them if he was hoping to discover that hiding beneath the tough exterior there was actually a hopelessly incapable girl longing to have her life organised by a strong man. There really wasn't.

As for how she felt about Tom; she loved him with her head as much as her heart. She loved that he regarded the two of them the way she did, as an equal partnership, a strong team that together could face any challenge thrown at them.

Their life goals were probably the same as most people's – the desire for a fulfilling work life, combined with having children and a nice home. Two of those things they had accomplished with relative ease, it was just the small matter of conception they had yet to achieve.

'What are you making?' she asked.

'Mushroom risotto topped with a sprinkling of toasted walnuts and a drizzle of walnut oil. That okay with you?'

'More than okay.'

'Do you want a salad to go with it? Or what about some kale?'

Feeding her with good wholesome food was Tom's way of preparing her body for creating and carrying a new human life. He regularly scoured the internet for the latest super-foods that would aid their ability to have a child. Cutting out alcohol should have been on the list of dos and don'ts, but they had both agreed a glass or two on alternate evenings would help them relax. Of course, the moment Martha became pregnant, she wouldn't dream of touching alcohol. Or caffeine. Or soft cheese and whatever else was deemed harmful.

If there was one thing she was good at, it was abiding by

rules. She was a stickler for rules. She was pretty good at making them too.

'Thou shalt not break my ten commandments, so says Martha Miller.'

That was what her sister used to say when they were children and when Martha would invent a game for them to play. It would start simply enough, like pretending they were shipwrecked on a deserted island and had to make a camp before it was dark. It was all imaginary play; the island was the Turkish rug in the hall and the tent was an old sheet pegged over Mum's clothes airer. But at some point, Willow would lose interest because Martha would keep devising things they could or could not do, like why Willow's oversized cuddly polar bear couldn't join them on the island.

'We're not on an island in the Antarctic,' Martha would point out – helpfully in her opinion – 'we're marooned on a tropical island. Polar bears would find it too hot and they don't eat coconuts, do they?'

'They might if they were given the chance,' Willow would say.

They had finished eating supper and were loading the dishwasher when Martha was seized with a depressingly familiar cramping sensation in her stomach. It was confirmation, as if she needed it, of what she already knew. It drew a defeated sigh from her, which she immediately tried to cover up by pretending to cough.

'You all right?' asked Tom.

'A tickle in my throat,' she said.

She rarely lied to Tom, and when she did it was usually a white lie to keep a surprise from him, like the time she had organised a secret weekend away in Venice for their first wedding anniversary. Just as she did with everything, she had planned

it down to the last detail, other than factoring in that Tom had planned a surprise of his own.

‘That puts paid to the dinner reservation I’d made for us,’ he’d said with a laugh when she’d presented him with a card and their flight reservations.

But now she found that trying for a baby – what a ghastly phrase that was! – had turned her into a wife who regularly sneaked around behind her husband’s back.

They were only small indiscretions that she committed, like not telling Tom about the pregnancy test kits she bought, or about the baby clothes she had smuggled into the house and kept hidden in the wardrobe in the guest bedroom.

She couldn’t bring herself to share any of this with Tom for fear of him thinking she was becoming obsessed with having a baby. Because if he suspected that was the case, he might also start to think that was all she cared about, to the exclusion of him.

It happened all the time; couples torn apart through not being able to conceive. She didn’t want that to happen to them. They were stronger than that. *She* was stronger than that. Through sheer force of stubborn tenacity she would make life bend to her will. She was not her father’s daughter for nothing.

But she was getting far too ahead of herself. They had only been trying to get pregnant for ten months. It was no time at all. It was just that she was so used to getting things done, methodically ticking items off her list of things to do. As an inveterate list maker, she liked to start her day with a list of tasks she had to achieve, both at work and at home. It gave her a sense of purpose and achievement. She never actually wrote down the words ‘make a baby’, but it was there in invisible ink right at the top of every list.

Thinking of today's To Do list, she had one other outstanding job to tick off and that was to speak to her sister. She would need Willow's support if there were to be any chance of convincing their mother that it was time now to consider the future and do the sensible thing.

Not that Willow knew the first thing about being sensible, and really Mum wasn't much better either. During the Coronavirus pandemic Martha had nagged her mother constantly to be careful and not risk leaving the house, but Mum had been adamant that she should do her bit to help in her local community. Along with a team of others, she had shopped for the elderly and vulnerable and made sure they were coping with the fear and loneliness of lockdown. Martha had been convinced that her mother would catch the virus, just as Tom's poor mother had.

Having lost Dad only months before anything was known about the Coronavirus, the thought of losing Mum as well would have just been too much to bear. It was the aftermath of that worry that was behind Martha's determination now to make Mum accept that it would be better if she sold Anchor House and moved from West Sussex to be conveniently nearer to her daughters.

Especially if there was a grandchild for her to help out with.

With Willow onside there might be a greater chance of convincing Mum that it would be the sensible thing to do.

Chapter Two

Willow was fast asleep when her mobile rang.

It had been a deliciously deep sleep, the sort that didn't respond well to being disturbed, but in fumbling for her mobile on the bedside table she woke with a jolt, realising two things.

Firstly, she wasn't in bed, she was in the bath.

And secondly, by flinging out her hand for her phone, she had knocked over whatever had been on the wooden stool next to the bath.

She had found the sweet little stool in a junk shop and carried it home triumphantly, filled with plans to do it up with some pretty chalk paint and then sell it on eBay. She had thought it might be the start of something new and creative for her to do, a bit like Mum's old gardenalia business. She had imagined gathering enough stock together to open a small shop called Willow's Emporium. Full of enthusiasm for the idea, she had bought the necessary tins of paint, brushes and whatever else was required, but had somehow never got around to painting the stool.

If ever she needed a symbol to capture the complete lack of achievement in her life, that stool was it.

'Willow, are you there?'

At the sound of her sister's voice in her ear, she shook herself fully awake, then she shivered at the coldness of the water. Leaning forward to turn on the hot tap, she said, 'Yes, I'm here.'

'Are you in the bath?' asked Martha above the noise of the gushing water. She said it as though Willow had been caught doing something indecent.

'I am,' she said.

'So what do you think?'

'What do I think about what?'

'What I've just been telling you.'

Oh Lord, thought Willow, she must have been so busy thinking of that wooden stool, she hadn't heard a word of what Martha had said. Attention span of a goldfish, that's what Dad used to say about her. In one ear and out the other.

'Sorry,' she improvised, 'it's a bad line, I didn't hear you.'

There was a frustrated sigh in her ear.

'Try turning the taps off and you might hear a lot better.'

Willow did as her sister said, and Martha went on.

'My idea is for us to go down to Mum's at the weekend and take her out for lunch and then put forward our plan.'

'What plan?'

Another sigh. 'The one about encouraging Mum to sell Anchor House.'

Willow frowned. She had hoped Martha had forgotten about that. Her sister had first mentioned it a few months ago, but Willow hadn't taken it seriously, or given it any more thought. She just couldn't imagine Mum wanting to leave Anchor House and all her friends down there in Tilsham. And apart from anything else, it was home.

Not just any old home, but *their* home. It was where Willow

and Martha had grown up and where Willow's every happy childhood memory revolved around Anchor House and the pretty harbour village that was squeezed in between Bosham and Chichester.

Her memories were full of days spent playing on the beach, of crabbing in the rock pools, of squelching around the mudflats in her wellingtons, of lying in the sand dunes, and of hours spent walking through wheat fields and along narrow flint-walled lanes lined with pretty cottages. If she closed her eyes, she could hear the cry of seagulls and smell the salty sea air.

How could her sister ever think that Mum would leave all that to live near Martha and Tom on the outskirts of Cobham? There was nothing wrong with Surrey, of course there wasn't, but it wasn't Tilsham. It wasn't what Mum was used to and where she was happy.

'So are you free at the weekend to spend the day with Mum?' asked Martha.

'Nothing planned as far as I . . .' Her words trailed off. 'Can you smell burning?' she asked her sister.

'What do you mean can I smell burning? Of course I can't!'

'Burning,' repeated Willow, her nose twitching. 'I can definitely smell—' She broke off again and leant over the side of the bath.

'*Oh!*' she exclaimed, realising now what she had tipped off the stool when she'd reached for her mobile. On top of the towel she'd put ready to use was the tray of aromatherapy candles she'd lit earlier.

'*Oh, oh, oh!*' she said again, 'I seem to be on fire.'

Smoke was indeed coming from a blackened circle and small flickering flames were just taking hold with rivulets of melted wax running everywhere.

‘What?’ demanded Martha in her ear while Willow dithered.
‘What do you mean you’re on fire?’

Tossing her mobile to safety and wincing as it went skittering across the tiled floor, Willow scooped up a handful of water and doused the flickering flames. She then stepped out of the bath, but in her clumsy haste she somehow missed her footing as she reached for another towel and ended up falling sideways and nearly putting a hand down the loo as she tried to keep her balance. All the while she could hear her sister’s voice calling to her from under the radiator asking if she was still there.

A towel now wrapped around her, Willow rescued her mobile.

‘It’s okay, Martha,’ she said, ‘no need to call for any hunky fireman, I’ve put out the fire.’

‘How big a fire?’

‘No more than a flame or two.’

‘But in a bathroom? How is that even possible?’

‘I’ll tell you about it when I see you down at Mum’s. By the way, Saturday or Sunday? Either is good for me.’

‘I’ll check with Mum which day is best for her and get back to you. Just don’t go planning anything else meanwhile.’

The conversation finished, Willow emptied the bath, dried herself and put on her pyjamas. She then folded the ruined towel to take downstairs to put in the bin, grateful that that was all she’d damaged. The thought of having to tell her friends, Lucy and Simon, that she’d burnt down their house made her vow never to light another candle while she was housesitting for them.

She wasn’t living here entirely for free; she paid her friends a nominal amount of rent on the grounds that she took good care of the house while they were away. They’d decided that

once it was safe enough to travel again they would spend their last year of freedom before starting a family travelling the world. They had jacked in their jobs and simply taken off. They were currently in Kyoto in Japan before going on to Vietnam.

It was the kind of thing Willow would love to do if she had the money. Although knowing her, she'd probably get hopelessly lost.

'Bloody risky if you ask me,' her boyfriend, Rick, had said when she'd explained to him why she was lucky enough to be living so close to Victoria Park in London and in such a great house, considering her lack of funds.

Lucy and Simon could have earned far more money renting out the house through a letting agency, but then they would have had to get rid of their two beloved Siamese cats, Sirius and Cedric.

Every week Willow had to email Lucy with an update on the cats and her biggest fear was that one of them might escape through a door that she had accidentally left open. They were strictly indoor cats, apparently too pampered and valuable to be allowed to roam the neighbourhood.

Thinking about it, confessing to Lucy that she had nearly set the house on fire by falling asleep in the bath would be far easier than admitting she had lost one of the cats.

With her precious charges on her mind, she went to look for Sirius and Cedric. She found them curled up together in the shallow log basket by the radiator in the sitting room. They had proper beds to sleep in but rarely used them, preferring instead the empty log basket with a blanket to lie on.

When Rick came here, she had to keep the cats away from him because he was so allergic to their fur; it made him sneeze and his eyes itch. Which was why he liked her to spend time at his place, or for them go out.

They had met almost four months ago back in December last year – in the way that so many people met these days, by swiping right on Tinder.

He was the one who had swiped right first and after checking out his profile and liking what she saw (he had a nice smile that lit up his eyes), she swiped right to make a match. They then started messaging each other and a couple of weeks later they arranged to meet in a bar. The rest, as they say, is history.

But given how bad at sticking with a relationship she was (she could never get beyond the six-month mark), was Rick destined to be part of Willow's history, and not her future?

It was too soon to tell.

Those of her friends who had met Rick said he was a great catch, and even Martha, who never approved of any of Willow's boyfriends, described him as a keeper. Mum liked him too, and no doubt Dad, if he were still alive, would have given him the thumbs up too.

So why then could Willow not allow herself to believe that maybe she deserved this chance to be happy with Rick?

Chapter Three

It was a beautiful spring morning and with the tide out, wading birds were busy searching the mudflats for cockles to prise apart with their long probing beaks.

Coffee cup in hand, and aching in places a woman of sixty-three years of age had no right to ache, Naomi Miller shielded her eyes from the April sunshine and made herself comfortable on the bench at the end of the garden. The silvered wood of the seat gave her the best view of the shoreline; from here she could observe all the comings and goings of the beach, as well as the birdlife.

She and Colin had bought Anchor House thirty-two years ago, shortly before Willow was born and when Martha was already three years old. Back then she and Colin couldn't believe their luck in being able to afford a spacious five-bedroom Edwardian house like this with a large garden that stretched down to the beach. It had been a dramatic leap up from their terraced house in south London, and they had taken to life here in Tilsham Harbour like . . . well, like ducks to water.

That's what Colin used to say when anybody asked how they were enjoying their new life out of London.

'Oh, we've taken to it like ducks to water,' he'd tell them.

Not that Colin had been here all the time. From Monday to Friday he'd stayed in a small studio flat in London while working in the City, then straight after lunch on Friday he would drive down to Sussex to be with Naomi and the children. A lot of his weekends were spent sailing and he loved being out on the water, nothing gave him more pleasure. It was the sense of freedom he'd enjoyed, that and pitting himself against the elements.

It had been a great disappointment to him that his wife had never shared his love of sailing. Naomi had shown willing from time to time and gone out in the boat with him, but too often he would bellow some order or other which she would misunderstand and do entirely the wrong thing. She much preferred pottering around their little harbour, no more than an inlet really, in a small rowing dinghy. She was not a natural sailor, and to Colin's further disappointment, neither were his daughters.

It used to exasperate him that she didn't know one sailing boat from another. To her they were just boats with sails. Yes, she could tell the difference between the older craft made of wood and the fibreglass ones, but she couldn't put a name to them. And never saw any reason to do so. Perhaps it had just been her being stubborn and bloody-minded, which she knew she was apt to do.

Her interests lay more on terra firma, in particular the garden at Anchor House. Before they bought the house, the garden had been left to its own devices by the previous owners, an elderly couple no longer able to keep on top of it all.

Much of it had been overgrown and unusable, not to say unsafe with the smashed glass of the greenhouse and tumbling-down sheds. But gradually over time Naomi took it in hand

and turned it into a garden that was her sanctuary as well as somewhere for the children to play, when they weren't on the beach.

Through her love of gardening, Naomi also developed another passion, for collecting old gardening tools and equipment. She used to scour auctions and charity and second-hand shops for bits and pieces – old terracotta pots, galvanised watering cans and laundry tubs, wooden-handled tools, wicker baskets and trugs, stone troughs and urns, and old ornate wirework tables and chairs.

At first, she bought specifically for her own garden, but then, after amassing far more than she needed, or had room for, she decided to make a business out of it and rented a small shop in the village that had become available.

She called it All Things Gardenalia and oh, how she had loved that little shop. With the fashion for recycling and anything remotely vintage, she did surprisingly well and was constantly having to source new stock.

It had been a sad day when she'd taken the reluctant decision to close the shop because of the coronavirus crisis that had so devastated the world. She had sold some of the remaining stock online, but a lot of it still remained in the garage. One day she would get around to having a sort out and sell what she had left.

Colin would be appalled to see the state his once tidy garage was in now. It had always been his domain, where he had religiously put away their cars to spare them from the peril of being exposed to the salty air. Naomi was not so particular about such things and regularly left her car out to fend for itself.

'Standards have been allowed to slip,' she could imagine Colin saying.

More than two years on since his death and she could still hear his voice as clear as if he were right next to her.

She supposed she always would.

They had been out for dinner with friends in Chichester when he died. They'd been celebrating his sixty-sixth birthday, and when it was over, when they were putting on their coats, Colin had looked at her with a strange puzzled look on his face as though he'd suddenly remembered something important to ask her. Then thumping a hand to his chest, he'd closed his eyes with a grimace and gasped.

A big man – a bear of a man was the way he was often described – there had been no way of catching him, and he'd slammed against the table at which they'd just eaten, tipping it over on top of him as he dropped heavily to the floor.

The memory of Colin lying there amongst the debris of their empty wineglasses and coffee cups haunted her for months afterwards. It was such an undignified end to a man's life.

He had been warned by their GP, a personal friend of the family, to cut back on the amount of alcohol he consumed. He'd been told to watch his diet too. But he was old-school and refused to moderate what he ate, no matter how much Naomi nagged him. He was the kind of man who believed the usual rules didn't apply to him; he was untouchable.

'I'm going to die of something,' he would say when she tried to make him see sense, 'and I hope to God it happens before I go gaga!'

The perfect end for him would have been falling asleep in the conservatory after a day of sailing in his beloved boat, the *Marlow*. The name, at Naomi's suggestion, had been a combination of Martha and Willow's names.

The absence of his larger than life presence had taken some getting used to when he'd died, but she had not been what you would call heartbroken. Her life had not ground to a halt as people might have believed it would when they were paying their respects at the funeral. The way they'd offered their sympathy it was as if they thought she couldn't exist without Colin, that he had been everything for her.

The truth was, once the funeral was behind her, she had felt a gradual transformation of her old self into a new and stronger self. Her genuine self, she liked to think.

While it was true Colin had been the one to make all the financial decisions, which was his area of expertise after all, him being an associate director of an international investment company, she was the one who ran the show behind the scenes at home.

Yes, he was the star performer on stage, the one who held court and entertained their friends and his numerous work colleagues and clients, but she was the one backstage directing, producing and changing the scenery. She had accepted a very long time ago that there could only be one star performer in their marriage, and that was Colin. That was how some partnerships had to be.

She had been widowed for just over two years now and there wasn't a day when she wasn't reminded of Colin, but she refused to live in the past. Life changes and acceptance of that fact enabled a person to adapt and change as well. Maybe even for the better.

Her coffee finished, she saw that the curlews in the mudflats had now been joined by a couple of industrious redshanks. Dig, dig, dig, went their beaks.

Redshanks always reminded Naomi of her eldest daughter, Martha. It was the purposefulness of the bird that did it, the way it went about its business with such conviction. That was Martha all over – determined and focused. She set herself a goal and applied herself to it with unwavering intent. She was a doer, just like her father had been. In contrast, Willow was more like a wren – dainty and hopping around without any real direction.

As sisters they really couldn't be more dissimilar. It never ceased to amaze Naomi that two children from the same parents could be so utterly different.

Whereas Martha was dark-haired and tall with an oval face and hazel eyes, and a nose that she claimed was too long, Willow was smaller with a more petite build and her heart-shaped face was framed by blonde hair. Her eyes were blue, like Naomi's, and set wide apart. As a child she had always been picked to be an angel in the school nativity play, a role Martha had never been interested in playing. She always wanted to be the innkeeper announcing in a commanding voice that there was no room at the inn.

'Ahoy there!'

Leaning forwards, Naomi turned her head to the left from where the voice emanated. She knew without actually seeing him that it was Ellis Ashton, the new tenant of Waterside Cottage, her nearest neighbour.

Ellis had moved in at the end of February, just over two months ago. He was sixty-four years of age, widowed with a grown-up stepson living in Los Angeles and had recently retired as a client director for an asset management firm. His work had taken him to Frankfurt, Brussels, New York and latterly London, where he'd been temporarily renting a house in

Richmond. He'd then moved here to be nearer his mother, who was being looked after in a local care home.

'Ahoj to you too,' she said with a smile.

'Permission to come aboard?'

'Permission granted.'

Lifting the latch on the wooden gate, he pushed it open.

Now directly in front of her, Naomi could see that his denim-blue eyes matched the colour of his shirt and the sky above him. Bending at the waist, and in a very courtly manner, he kissed her cheek. Then with a smile – a smile that had not changed from the one she remembered a long time ago – he produced a bunch of pink and cream tulips from behind his back.

'I'm afraid I'm guilty of stealing them from my landlord's garden,' he said, 'but I wanted to give you something for making last night so special.'

'Thank you,' she said, blushing like a teenage girl at the memory of him cooking dinner for her and what happened afterwards. And which was the reason for her aching in so many places this morning.

Goodness, what would Colin have thought!

More to the point, what would Martha and Willow think?

Chapter Four

Tom Adams was on his way to work. It was now two days since Martha had secretly tested herself to see if she was pregnant.

He knew that his wife kept things from him, but then he kept things from her. Every couple kept shtum about something, he believed. Those who said otherwise were not being honest with themselves. To his way of thinking, it just wasn't feasible, or sensible, to pour out every worrying thought one ever had.

It was because he loved Martha as profoundly as he did that he didn't want to burden her with half of what went on inside his head. She had enough to cope with as it was with her longing to have a baby. They were only ten months into the process and already it was beginning to take its toll on her.

On him too.

They had always operated as a team, taking pride in the strength of their partnership. Whatever they took on, they gave it their combined two hundred per cent attention. There were no short measures with them. All or nothing. And that was what increasingly was worrying him.

He wanted a child as much as Martha did, he really did, but he didn't want to lose who they were in the process of creating

a baby. He'd read up online how easily it could happen, and it frightened him.

'We won't become one of those awful couples that destroy their relationship by being obsessed with wanting a baby,' Martha had said before they found that things didn't fall into place as easily as they had assumed they would. She wasn't used to failing and he knew that was how she now viewed their inability to conceive at the click of their fingers.

How long before blame was apportioned?

And why did it worry him so much that he might be the one who was at fault?

Having a family had always been a part of the deal for them. When they were getting to know one another, they'd each raised the subject of children quite early on. Better to flush out the dealbreakers sooner rather than later, had been their mutual take on dotting the 'i's and crossing the 't's before committing to a serious relationship. He could remember how relieved they had both been when they'd tackled the subject and each heard the answer they'd wanted to hear.

They had married four years ago and had agreed to establish themselves as a couple before taking the step of becoming parents. They had everything planned, everything neatly figured out.

But then with all that had happened in the last few years Tom had suddenly not been so sure it was a good idea to bring a child into a world that could so easily be tipped on its axis. Previous generations had worried about war or a nuclear bomb destroying mankind, now it seemed that it could be something far more insidious.

His mother had caught the virus in the early stages of the

pandemic, before anyone really knew just how bad it was going to be. She had spent five awful weeks in hospital on a ventilator before she died. During that time neither Tom nor his sister, Lynn, had been able to see her in hospital. Their father hadn't been able to either. She had died alone, with only the kindness of an exhausted nursing team to watch over her.

Fifteen years older than Mum, Dad had always joked that he'd be the first one to check out. He'd been heartbroken at her death and he still hadn't recovered from losing her. In poor health anyway, and at Lynn's insistence, he had moved to live nearer her.

Tom felt guilty that his sister had so readily taken on the responsibility of keeping an eye on their father, but geography had rather dictated things. The family home had been in Harrogate, where Tom had grown up, and with his sister and husband living nearby in Northallerton, it had just seemed more sensible for Dad to remain in Yorkshire, rather than up sticks to move down south.

Tom had upped sticks himself when he'd graduated from Leeds University and left Yorkshire for a job in London as a graduate trainee accountant. He'd ended up specialising in forensic accountancy, which, with his nerdy propensity for detail, was a perfect fit for him.

Just over three years ago, he and Martha moved out of London and he took the plunge to start his own business. He rented office premises near Guildford where he and a small team could operate. Their client base had since grown at a very pleasing rate, even with the challenges of coping with a pandemic, and they'd just successfully been hired by a prestigious law firm to provide evidence in court against an insurance company accused of defrauding customers.

Martha had encouraged him every step of the way when he'd said he wanted to abandon his relatively secure and well-paid job in London and go it alone. He'd always be grateful for that, that she was happy for him to take the risk. A risk that so far was paying off handsomely.

In return for that support and encouragement he would love nothing more than to make her dream of having a baby come true. But how far would he go?

What if further down the line desperation kicked in and Martha proposed IVF?

The thought of that filled him with dread. Not just the outlandish cost, but the misery it could bring – hopes raised, only to be crushed with each failed attempt.

He hoped to God he could spare Martha that pain.

When he'd found the latest pregnancy test kit Martha had kept from him, not a word had he said to her about it. It wasn't the first time it had happened. She clearly wanted to keep him on a need to know basis, wanting to test herself in secret and then delightedly give him the good news if it was positive.

If he were honest, he wanted to be there with her when she did the test, to share the moment of discovery.

He hadn't been deliberately snooping through the bin when he'd found the kit, but he'd had his suspicions roused earlier in the evening when she'd disappeared straight upstairs to the bathroom the moment she'd arrived home from work. He had caught the unmistakable rustling sound of a bag. He knew her routine as well as his own, so any variation from the norm was like a klaxon going off.

So yes, he had looked in the bathroom bin when he was

cleaning his teeth while getting ready for bed. But only because he wanted to confirm what he thought he already knew.

At around three in the morning, he had woken to find Martha crying. She had claimed it was because she was suffering with the pain of her period, and maybe she was, but he suspected the tears were for another reason. He'd offered to fill a hot water bottle for her and while he was downstairs waiting for the kettle to boil, he had studied the calendar on the wall.

Now as he drove through the early morning traffic, Tom felt a wave of guilty shame, remembering the reason why he had looked at the calendar.

He had been counting up the days until Martha would be ovulating next.

Counting the days when he would be off duty.

Counting the days until it would start all over again and once more the pressure would be on.

Chapter Five

The 7.57 a.m. train from Cobham & Stoke D'Abernon station to London Waterloo was crowded and running thirteen minutes late. It was not an uncommon occurrence, but all the same, it annoyed Martha; she hated to arrive anywhere late.

The large man sitting next to her was taking up so much room he was spilling over into her seat. The intrusion into her personal space made her almost nostalgic for the socially-distanced days of the coronavirus. With no room to use her laptop, she took out her mobile to check her emails. Scrolling through them, she flagged up the ones she would deal with later and deleted anything of no interest. She was ruthless when it came to decluttering her devices. She was the Marie Kondo of screen technology!

Actually, she was quite a fan of the KonMari concept and when it first became popular, she had put it to good use at home with Tom. They were both naturally tidy people, another reason why they were so compatible, and had once spent a wet Bank Holiday weekend together systematically emptying all their cupboards, even the attic. They'd jettisoned anything they agreed was superfluous to their lives. Clothes they hadn't worn in ages, books they would never reread, cheap badminton rackets they would never use again, boxes of, well, just stuff that wasn't

relevant to who they were now as people; it was all put into bin bags and either taken to the tip or put ready for their local charity shop. Neither she nor Tom had a sentimental nature, so the task wasn't difficult for them. By the time they'd finished, she had been filled with an extraordinary sense of empowered wellbeing. She'd felt thoroughly cleansed and more in control.

When the train finally pulled into Waterloo and she was hurrying along the crowded platform towards the underground, and remembering how upset she'd been the other night in bed – how pathetically useless she'd felt – she wondered if she needed to repeat the KonMari process. Would it make her feel more in control again? Because as things were, her inability to get pregnant made her feel powerless. She hated the growing sensation that she was up against some unknown force that was preventing her from having the child she so badly wanted.

She bought her usual latte from the coffee shop in the foyer of the building where Brand New Designs had their offices, and took the lift up to the tenth floor.

Settled at her desk, her computer switched on, she was ready for the day. Here at least she could throw her energy into thinking of something other than not being pregnant.

But it was not to be. At eleven forty-five she was asked to join the team in the main meeting room to discuss pitching for a new client who was in need of rebranding. Nobody knew who the client might be, not until Jason Dawson, the company CEO, clicked the top of his pen – always three times – and began.

'Topolino,' he said, 'originally a predominantly online company specialising in high-end baby and maternity products, but also sold through a number of exclusive outlets such as Harrods and Harvey Nichols. They became more widely known

after Meghan and Harry's first child, Archie, was photographed wearing one of their blue-and-white-striped knitted jackets with the distinctive mouse logo on the collar. Topolino meaning "little mouse" in Italian, in case you didn't know.'

On the screen behind Jason, a photograph of baby Archie in said jacket appeared.

Murmurs of acknowledgement went around the table.

'As a result of the patronage, sales for their baby clothes, maternity clothes and accessories skyrocketed,' continued Jason, 'and they've since opened a number of stores in London, Bath and Cambridge. But here's the kicker, they recently made the mistake of—'

Staring up at the photograph of the adorable little Archie, Martha knew exactly what the kicker was and couldn't stop herself from blurting out, 'They've been accused of unethical manufacturing practices.'

Jason turned to stare at her and clicked his pen the statuary three times. 'Go on,' he said, his laser-beam attention on her.

Martha knew that Jason liked to have spontaneous input, but she was irritated with herself for displaying that she knew anything about babies when she didn't have one herself. Not a word had she said to any of her colleagues about wanting a child. Had she done so she was sure she wouldn't have had the promotion she'd recently been given. The others round the table were either never going to have families, or had their children years ago and were well past the baby and toddler stage.

'It was alleged they had used child labour in Bangladesh for a new line in maternity wear they were selling,' Martha said. 'As soon as the allegations came to light, they stopped using the factory

and switched all production to the UK and to an existing factory in the Midlands where they had better controls in place.'

'Exactly so,' said Jason with a smile.

'Presumably by using the factory in Bangladesh production was cheaper for them?' said Steve, their creative director.

'And they've paid the price since,' said Jason. 'So now they feel the need for a rebrand.'

'Have they actually experienced a loss in popularity and sales?' asked James, their design consultant. 'Because often what shoppers say they'll do while professing outrage is not what they actually do in practice.'

'A valid point,' said Jason with three clicks of his pen, 'and while the drop in sales is minimal, image, or the perception of it, is all. Which means our job is to convince the client that we can put some shine back on what they fear is a tarnished crown.'

For the next forty-five minutes they tossed ideas back and forth until Jason called an end to the meeting.

You were very well informed about Topolino,' he said when he followed Martha out of the room. 'Been researching baby stuff, have you?'

'I was buying a present for a friend's newborn,' she lied, her game face on. If this was Jason's not-so-subtle way of asking her if she was pregnant, or planning to be, a question by law he was not allowed to ask, he was crossing a line. But men like Jason were adept at crossing lines and could somehow always get away with it. Clever, dynamic and strikingly good-looking, and with an uncanny knack for seemingly knowing what she was thinking, he might have been a temptation for Martha in another life. But not now. Now she could see through the smoke-screen of his super-strength charm.

‘I hope you found something nice,’ he said with a slow smile, before sauntering off to his office.

I did, she thought, picturing the beautiful little jacket she’d bought, and which was hidden in the spare room at home. She’d bought it before the recent allegations had been made about Topolino and she very much hoped it had been produced as ethically as the company now claimed all their clothing lines were.

Lunch was a hurried cup of miso soup heated in the office microwave, and then it was another meeting with an existing client, an online betting website that needed to be seen as advocating responsible gambling while at the same time inviting their core audience – people who couldn’t afford to lose money – to gamble even more.

It was not the most creative or inspiring of days, she thought that evening when she was on the crowded train home. When you had a business to run, you couldn’t pick and choose your clients, Jason frequently said. Martha wasn’t so sure about that. In this day and age, shouldn’t they be more ethically minded, a bit more discerning? Jason had a thing about ‘keeping it real’ but at the same time he would play the game by whatever new rules he’d been handed.

Her father would have agreed one hundred per cent with Jason. Business was business. You did your best for the client, and for those who worked for you, and you didn’t judge. It was a dog-eat-dog world out there and not for the fainthearted.

Martha had idolised her father from an early age and had wanted to be just like him, full of drive and energy. He’d made everything fun, and possible. ‘There’s no such thing as can’t,’ he had drilled into her. ‘Everything in life is up for grabs. You just have to believe it’s yours for the taking.’