

Cathy Lake is a women's fiction writer who lives with her family and three dogs in beautiful South Wales. She writes uplifting stories about strong women, family, friendship, love, community and overcoming obstacles.



CATHY LAKE

**ZAFFRE** 

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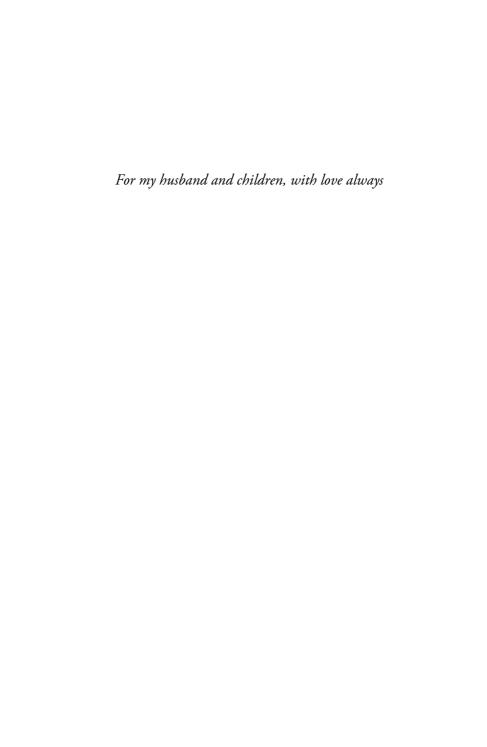
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## Chapter 1



'Look at me, Mum!'

Clare Greene's heart fluttered. She turned, expecting to see her son, but instead her gaze fell on the empty space in the back garden where the swing used to be. The house and garden were full of ghosts and, as she made her way round one final time, she was being assaulted by memories and voices from the past.

Closing her eyes, Clare could picture her son, Kyle, swinging high, remember her anxiety that he'd fall off and hurt himself. But his laughter as he'd soared through the air and the joy on his face as he'd called to her, keen to garner her approval, had made the fear worth it. Her ex-husband, Jason, had taken the swing down years ago, but it had stood there for a decade, from the time Kyle was seven, and he'd had so much fun on it. Kyle was twenty-one now and at university in Bath studying performing arts – a grown man and no longer her little boy.

A cold wind whipped around the garden, tugging at her coat, and she shivered. Time had passed so quickly: she was forty-five and often felt that her life had passed her by, that

she had practically sleepwalked through the days. If only it were possible to have some of that time back to savour the good times . . .

Her heart lurched and she pressed a hand to her chest. Looking down, her eyes found her wedding ring. As difficult as it would be, she really needed to take it off. Jason had removed his when the divorce was finalised, sighing at the white mark that remained on his finger. Just like the emotional scars left by the end of their marriage, it would take some time for physical marks like that to go.

She trudged back up the garden to the semi-detached house, went in through the French doors and closed them behind her, lifting the handle slightly until it clicked, then turned the key. There was a knack to locking these doors. They should have had them fixed years ago, but it was one of a list of jobs that had never been done and now it would be someone else's problem. But the new owners would also have so much to enjoy here. Clare had loved her home and was sad to leave it, but she knew it was time, even though her throat tightened as she realised she would never walk on the lush green lawn again, never sit on the patio as she savoured her morning coffee, never listen to the jazz drifting from next door on sunny afternoons. Her fragrant roses would be tended to by someone else, the shed would house the tools and bikes of others, and the birds that flocked to the feeders would become accustomed to different humans.

Slipping out of her garden shoes and into her plimsolls, she made her way through the open-plan kitchen diner with its large fireplace and driftwood mantelpiece, her soft rubber soles seemed strangely noisy on the wooden boards, the sound

echoing around the empty house, making it feel as though she had company. The furniture had been moved into storage and the clothes and belongings she couldn't bear to part with, such as Kyle's baby photo albums, from a time when people had actually printed photographs, were packed in her treasured Mini Countryman, the remaining finance on it cleared with some of her half of the house sale. The car had seemed to groan under the extra weight but she felt compelled to take them with her.

She passed the lounge where she had given birth to Kyle three weeks before his due date, taken by surprise as she'd thought the pains were practice contractions. He'd slid out onto the rug, red and furious at his early arrival. Kyle's entry into the world had been dramatic and he hadn't changed a bit; he still enjoyed being the centre of attention. Clare had been just twenty-four then, so young and innocent, convinced that life had plenty to offer and that she was destined for something special, even though she hadn't had a clue what that something would be.

How things changed.

In the hallway, where the October sun streamed through the window above the door, she took slow deep breaths, treasuring the sights, sounds and scents of home, storing them safely in her heart. Who knew when she would have a home of her own again? When her vision blurred, she knew it was time to get moving.

Her mobile buzzed in her pocket, making her jump, and she pulled it out to check the screen, expecting a message from the removal company. When she saw Kyle's name, her heart lifted. Hey Mum,

Hope you're OK. I know today will be difficult, but you can do it! When one house door closes another one opens and all that. Let me know when you're safely at Nanna's.

Love you millions! X

Clare hugged her mobile to her chest for a moment, thanking the universe for the gift of her precious boy. Whatever happened, she had a wonderful son and she would always be grateful for that. After firing off a quick reply, she slid her phone back in her pocket then opened the door and stepped outside, put the key in an envelope and posted it through the letter box, preparing to start the next chapter of her life.



Clare was ten minutes away from the village where she had grown up, but it would probably take her twenty to get there because she was stuck behind a tractor. Her Mini ambled along through the narrow country lanes and her feet ached from braking and pressing the clutch as she had to stop/start the car. Behind her, a row of cars was building and she knew it wouldn't be long before some of the drivers started beeping at her, pressurising her to overtake. But Clare knew better; these lanes could be deadly and visibility was poor. There was always the risk of crashing into some idiot taking the bends at sixty miles per hour.

The whole journey from Reading to Little Bramble in Surrey only took about forty minutes, but she had to admit that she hadn't made it very often, particularly over recent years. There had always been an excuse, whether it was a dinner with Jason's colleagues from the prestigious law firm in Reading where he had been a partner, or an author event at the library where she had worked for twelve years as a library assistant (a job she had adored until they'd had to make some staff redundant six months ago due to cutbacks), or generally just feeling too tired to make the effort. A lump formed in her throat from the guilt. Her mum was seventy-five, fit and healthy, a busy member of her local community, but she wouldn't be around forever and in some ways she'd taken her for granted. They hadn't ever been that close but, even so, she was aware that she could have made more of an effort to visit.

She turned the radio on and listened to the DJ chatting to a celebrity author called Cora Quincy about her latest self-help book. Cora was all of twenty-five but spoke as if she'd lived a long and difficult life. Admittedly, Clare had read about Cora (a fashion model turned actress turned author who'd married someone from a boyband Clare could never remember the name of) online, and knew that she had endured a challenging childhood, but even so, her tone was slightly patronising. Clare had been married for almost as long as the woman had been alive – surely she had more life experience to draw on, more wisdom in the bank? And yet here she was: homeless, jobless, clueless about what came next.

The traffic came to a standstill as the tractor stopped to make way for an approaching car. Clare pulled up the handbrake and turned, gazing at the hedgerow to her left, almost bare of leaves now in October's colder days. Dark twigs poked out of the hedge, threatening to scratch any vehicles that got too close, and others stretched up to the sky like gnarled brown fingers. Beyond the hedges were fields where farmers grew corn and vegetables, where livestock roamed and nurtured their young.

As a child, Clare had thought she'd grow up to be a vet or own her own stables. She'd loved the wildlife around the village, had been a keen horse rider who had spent Saturday mornings at the stables then worked on Sundays at the local farm shop just outside Little Bramble, where she got to feed the chickens and ducks in her breaks, care for the motherless lambs in spring and play with the fluffy collie pups. Yes, she'd had a good childhood, even if she hadn't been as close to her mum as she'd have liked. At university, she'd studied English Literature (after deciding at sixteen that taking A-levels in the sciences was not for her), met Jason, and her ambitions had slipped away like smoke on the breeze. She'd been so infatuated with him, so taken by his apparent maturity and intelligence that she'd have followed him to the end of the earth if he'd asked her, so when he proposed, she'd accepted without hesitation.

The tractor started moving again and Clare released the handbrake and set off again at a snail's pace.

'Oh, absolutely!' Cora's decisive tone burst from the car speakers and broke into Clare's thoughts. 'I'd spent far too long worrying about what everyone expected of me, trying to be that perfect creature that pleased the world, and then one day . . . BOOM! I had an epiphany! I was like, alleluia!

Eureka! And all that jazz.' She giggled, clearly very pleased with herself.

'And so . . . do you have a message for our listeners?' Darryl Donovan, the long-time Radio 2 DJ asked.

'I do, Darryl, I really do. Whoever you are and whatever you've been through, put yourself first. Decide what *YOU* really want and go for it! I realised, and your listeners can too, that I had to live my life for *me* before I could be with anyone. If you don't love yourself, how can you possibly love anyone else?'

Clare rolled her eyes. It was all very well saying that at twenty-five. It was a message Clare had heard many times in the past, but not one she'd ever managed to take on board. She'd been a daughter, a wife, a mum, a library assistant (although that had been something for her because she'd enjoyed it so much) so her roles had been centred around others and she'd been content with that. The idea of shaking off those responsibilities and doing things solely for herself seemed unimaginable.

Now, for the first time in her life, Clare realised that she felt very much alone.

Clare had always been a daddy's girl and tried to make her father proud whenever she could. When he'd died ten years ago, he'd left a gaping hole which she'd struggled to fill. She didn't have a close relationship with her mum. Elaine Hughes had always been busy with her own life – for many years with her job as a drama teacher, then later on with her work as a chief examiner and as chairwoman of the village amateur dramatics society. With Jason bringing

his and Clare's marriage to an end, she was no longer committed to making him happy, but this in itself was another difficult loss to deal with. And then there was Kyle: her darling son, her reason for everything, her joy. But Kyle was grown up and had gone off to university, leaving Clare feeling redundant in that aspect of her life as well, especially after losing her job. Her whole life had changed when she'd least expected it. She'd been prepared for Kyle leaving home, but losing her job and her marriage at the same time was too much.

Would it be possible for Clare to start again and live her life for herself? Could she turn things around and discover what it was that she really wanted?

The left indicator on the tractor started flickering and it pulled into a layby, so Clare put her foot down on the accelerator and drove past it, singing along to the uplifting track from the eighties that the celebrity had chosen as her theme tune.

Perhaps the young woman wasn't so naïve after all.



Sam Wilson unclipped the soft leather lead from his yellow Labrador's collar then watched as she ran ahead, her long tail wagging, nose pressed to the ground. He looked forward to his twice-daily walks with Scout. It was his time out, his time to breathe deeply and enjoy the peace and quiet. He'd have walked anyway, but having Scout for company made the walks around the countryside surrounding Little Bramble

even better. The two-year-old Labrador was good company: she enjoyed being outside as much as Sam did and she didn't feel the need to fill their time together with random chatter or demands. As long as she was fed and walked, could snuggle on the sofa and was praised for good behaviour, Scout was happy, and that made Sam happy too.

Moving to the village over three years ago had been a fresh start for him and for his younger sister, Alyssa. After years of living in London, renting flats and saving hard, Sam had wanted to put down roots and settle somewhere quiet, friendly and beautiful. Little Bramble was perfect, and when a colleague in London told him that a former university friend of hers was looking for a partner to invest in her village veterinary practice, Sam had felt a flicker of hope that he hadn't experienced in a long time. He'd travelled to the village to meet Miranda Fitzalan and had liked her blunt, no-nonsense approach, her devotion to the animals in her care - and the very reasonable asking price for a share of the practice. Miranda's former business partner had decided to retire to Spain and she was looking for someone keen to enjoy being a part of village life. Sam's years of saving and investing his money wisely had finally reaped a reward.

Scout came running back to him, a chunky stick in her mouth. She dropped it at his feet and looked up at him, wagging her tail, her mouth open in what looked like a wide smile.

'You want to play, do you?' He reached out and rubbed her soft head and she barked in reply. 'OK then, girl. Ready?' He picked up the stick then swung his arm back and threw it as far ahead as he could, laughing as Scout scampered after it, knowing that this process would be repeated many times before they reached home again. Repetition and routine were the things that kept his life moving forwards and he didn't think to want for more.



## Chapter 2



Clare pulled up in front of the secluded cottage at the edge of the village and cut the engine. She pushed her shoulders back, trying to ease the knots that had formed during the drive. Actually, who was she trying to kid? The knots had been there for months, possibly years, and most of the time she managed to forget about them, but certain seating positions – like driving – made them more acute.

Home.

The word made her start as if someone else in the car had whispered it.

Her mum's cottage hadn't been home for years, not since she'd left for university aged eighteen. Although she had returned to the village over the years, once she'd met Jason she'd made her home wherever he was. It had been a happy home when she was a child, a busy placed filled with music and laughter, where there always seemed to be people coming and going, where the aromas of coffee and freshly baked bread and scones filled the air and where Clare had felt safe.

But, of course, there was another reason why she'd avoided returning too often, especially for the last ten years. A reason that made her chest tight, her heart ache, a cloud of sadness hover above her . . .

Dad.

She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together hard, waiting for the pain to fade. If she just thought about something else, like the weather or the scuffs on the toes of her plimsolls, then she could forget.

For a while at least.

Clare could be remarkably good at pushing things away, at forgetting – something she suspected she'd inherited from her mother – but it also added to that feeling of sleepwalking through life. For years she'd managed to push away the fact that her marriage was struggling, to forget that, once upon a time, she and Jason had been friends, had been in something that she'd believed to be love, had been lovers. At some point it had lessened, weakened, but Clare had shut her eyes tight and ignored it, because the alternative had been devastating.

The failure of her marriage had left a sour taste in her mouth, left her questioning everything she'd thought she had, thought she'd wanted.

She opened her eyes and took a few slow deep breaths.

Too much to think about.

So she wouldn't.

For now.

She got out of the car, went to the boot and opened it, lifted out her two suitcases. Along with the three boxes on the back seat, the carrier bags for life stuffed behind the seats and the plastic crate on the passenger seat, this was all she had to show for the twenty-six years of their relationship, twenty-two of them married. A mutual friend at university in Reading had

introduced them when Clare was nineteen and Jason twenty-two, both so young, she thought now. Clare was studying English Literature, Jason was three years into a law degree and they'd become inseparable immediately. When Jason graduated, he moved out of student accommodation and rented a flat and Clare had moved in while she finished her final year. They had married soon after her graduation. Of course, there was the furniture in storage and the things Kyle had asked her to keep for him for when he finished his degree and Jason's belongings (his half of everything), but she had brought what she could in her small car. She just hoped she'd chosen wisely because she'd hate to want something – a book, a DVD, a pair of shoes – that was in storage in Reading because there was no turning back now.

Jason was travelling lightly too. She tutted, something she'd found herself doing whenever she thought about how his eyes had lit up when their divorce was finalised. They had lived together, sleeping in separate rooms, until the divorce had been sorted, but once he'd realised it was done, that he was, at last, free to jet off and find himself, he'd not been able to hide his pleasure. That was what he'd called it: finding myself. As if he'd been lost since he was twenty-two and had met Clare, and now he was able to find the person he'd wanted to be all along. According to Jason, Clare had placed pressure on him, albeit unknowingly, to be the husband, father and provider that she wanted him to be and Jason had felt suffocated, trapped, stifled by the roles. Clare had been gobsmacked at first, numb with shock, but as the days had progressed into weeks and then months, as they'd talked over dinners and bottles of wine, as they'd weeded the back-garden side-by-side, the numbness had

morphed into acceptance. At times, that acceptance had been tinged by anger (perfectly natural according to the counsellor Clare had seen for six weeks), and Clare had come to agree with Jason that they were not living their best lives at all. They were simply existing, having lost whatever it was that had brought them together in the first place. Clare had been replaced, not by another woman, but by her husband's realisation that he wanted more from life before it was too late, and she too had come to see that she also wanted something, but she had no idea how on earth she was going to work out what it was.

Time . . . the counsellor said. Time would help her to find her way.

She was still waiting and, while she did, her mum had suggested (to her great surprise) that she could come home and use that time to think.

Tick tock . . .

She wheeled one suitcase to the front door then went back for the other and locked the car. The stone cottage was chocolate-box pretty with small latticed windows set in thick walls and a heavy oak door with an antique brass knocker shaped like a lion's head. Over the years many festive wreaths had been tied to that knocker, often summery ones too when her parents had been entertaining, something they had loved to do. Her mum had enjoyed placing pumpkins of varying sizes outside on the path leading up to the door at Halloween and at Easter, she'd set out baskets of colourful painted eggs along with a few fibreglass rabbits. Props were important to Elaine and Clare was convinced it was the actress in her mother, the love of theatre of all kinds that led her to want to turn the ordinary, everyday setting into the

extraordinary. Elaine was concerned with appearances, but Clare had often wished that her mum would lift up the rug and check what was going on beneath the surface.

Clare had a key to the cottage tucked away in her handbag but she didn't want to just walk in and startle her mum, so she used the doorknocker, hearing it echo through the hallway. A loud bark told her that she'd woken her mum's dog and she smiled, realising that she'd be living with that dog too for a while until she could pull herself together, find a new job and a place to live, which might mean returning to Reading or moving somewhere else. Clare had told her mum that she would be arriving that afternoon but had been unsure of timings because she hadn't wanted to rush leaving her old home, aware that it wouldn't be easy saying goodbye. The removal team had arrived at the crack of dawn to take her bed and sofa from the lounge - the only furniture still remaining at the house, what with the fridge and the cooker being integrated in the fitted kitchen – along with the final few boxes of Jason's things. All of it had gone to the storage facility on an industrial estate in Reading for now and Clare had no idea when she'd be in a position to collect her things, but she hoped it wouldn't be long.

As she waited for her mum to answer the door, she looked up at the darkening sky and smiled, because a plume of grey smoke was curling up from the fat chimney, which meant that the fire was lit and the lounge would be cosy and homely. Clare loved sitting in front of an open fire and the aroma of woodsmoke in the cold air was so familiar, so comforting, that her eyes stung. When the door swung open, she had to blink hard.

'Clare, darling! There you are.'

Her mum stood on the doorstep, her arms folded across her purple cashmere jumper, blue eyes sharp behind the thick black frames of her glasses, her sleek white bob pushed behind her ears. At her mum's side, gazing up at her with his big, brown eyes was Goliath, an enormous fawn Great Dane, the arcs from his swinging tail as powerful as an electric fan.

'Hi, Mum.' Clare felt her bottom lip wobble and she dug her nails into her palms, not wanting to crumble now after being brave for so long, but there was something about coming back here, about seeing her mum, that made her vulnerability rush to the surface. It was as if the little girl she'd once been had woken up and she needed to know that someone cared. 'Hi, Goliath.' She eyed the dog cautiously, hoping that he wouldn't rush at her and plonk those enormous paws on her legs because she already felt unsteady.

'Come here, darling.'

She stepped into her mum's hug, leaning forwards slightly because Elaine was two inches shorter than she was, and breathed in the familiar floral scent. They might not have been as close as some mothers and daughters were, and they might struggle living together again, but right now, Clare was glad to be home.



Sam dropped his keys on the table by the front door then bent over to rub Scout's head.

'Hello, girl. Surprised to see me home so early?'

She wagged her tail then licked his hand and he laughed. There was nothing like a doggy welcome.

He walked through to the lounge and stuck his head around the door but the room was empty so he went back out to the hallway then into the open-plan kitchen-diner.

'There you are, Alyssa.'

His sister smiled at him.

'What're you doing home at this time? I thought you'd be at least another hour or two.'

'My last appointment cancelled so Miranda told me to head off early. She must think I look tired or something.' He laughed, but Alyssa shook her head, causing her shiny dark curls to bounce.

'You do look tired, Samuel. Perhaps you need to take a holiday.'

His sister was the only person who sometimes used his full name, to everyone else he was Sam.

'How did the interview go?'

'Really well.' She grinned, and for a moment his breath caught because she looked exactly like their mother. Alyssa was twelve years younger than him and sometimes he forgot that she was an adult, that she was thirty-four years old with a very strong will of her own.

'Really well as in you got it?' He was nervous asking because Alyssa really wanted the job at a tattoo parlour in Woking but he wasn't sure that it was right for her.

'I certainly did!'

'That's wonderful. Congratulations! When do you start?' 'Next Monday.'

'Great!' He tried to inject more enthusiasm into his tone than he felt. Alyssa was a talented artist and he'd always thought she'd end up designing clothes or selling her art at galleries or doing something incredible with her life that their parents would have approved of. After leaving school at sixteen, she'd studied Art and Design at college then decided not to go to university, even though Sam was prepared to support her through a degree. She'd refused, telling him she didn't want to be a financial burden. They'd been living in London at the time and Alyssa had decided to look for a job instead of pursuing her education. Sam had been disappointed but knew that trying to get her to do something she'd set her mind against would end in failure. Alyssa had got a job in a pub and then, through that, some seasonal work at music festivals across the country. At one of the festivals, aged only eighteen, she'd met a man the same age as Sam and moved in with him. The relationship had lasted six years, in spite of Sam's reservations, and only ended when things had taken an unexpected turn. The man Alyssa believed loved her turned his back on her and walked away when she needed him most, right after she was badly injured in a motorcycle crash.

Sam's shoulders tightened as he thought about Jerry and what he'd done to Alyssa. He couldn't help the rage he felt about how he had abandoned Alyssa, even holding up his hands and stating that he couldn't face being tied to someone in Alyssa's condition. If Sam hadn't been so cut up himself about it all, so overwhelmed with guilt and grief for his little sister, he might have gone after Jerry and done something he'd have later regretted. As it was, Alyssa had

needed him too much so he'd swallowed his own feelings and focused instead on doing the best he could for her. She deserved the very best he could give her and that was what he'd always tried to do.

'What do you think?' Alyssa asked, breaking into his thoughts. He tried to let go of the tension that had gripped him as he thought about the past.

'Sorry?'

'I asked what you think about the job?' Her brown eyes sparkled with mischief; she knew he didn't think it was the perfect job for her but that he would keep quiet because it wasn't his decision to make.

'I'm happy for you. Really happy. In fact, we could go out tonight to celebrate if you like? I'll buy you dinner.'

Alyssa's eyes widened slightly.

'Thanks. I appreciate the offer but perhaps we could go out tomorrow instead?'

'Oh . . . OK.' Sam shrugged. He was tired and a bath and an early night was more appealing than eating out, but he'd have made the effort for Alyssa's sake.

'Sam, don't go mad . . . but I have a date.'

'A date?' Sam frowned. 'Since when?'

'Since my interview. The owner of the tattoo parlour introduced me to her younger brother, Sebastian, and he asked me out.'

'You're going out with your new boss's brother?'

'Yes. He lives in Woking and -'

'Alyssa . . .' Sam rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, trying to buy some time so as to work out what he wanted to say. 'Are you sure that's a good idea?'

He met her gaze and she glared at him, her nostrils flaring slightly, her lips set in a determined line. He knew at that moment that he had no hope of convincing her otherwise. The dynamic of their relationship was such that if Sam thought something wasn't a good idea, Alyssa would do it anyway and be damned with the consequences.

She sighed dramatically and Sam braced himself, prepared for her to tell him why he was wrong, but she merely shook her head, making him feel like a child being reprimanded.

'And before you ask, yes, he is a tattoo artist too and yes, he has lots of tattoos and piercings, some that I suspect I couldn't see because he was fully clothed.'

'But what if it doesn't work out? It could make things awkward between you and your new boss and -'

'Sam, you really have to stop being so negative about everything and so bloody overprotective! Go get a life of your own! Every time I meet someone I like I either have to keep it from you completely or downplay it so you don't get all stressed out.'

He opened his mouth to reply but couldn't find the words. Instead of standing there like a goldfish, he nodded, then left the kitchen, not wanting to make things worse or make Alyssa think he was even more pathetic than she already did. He was only trying to look out for her, but she clearly did not want him worrying as much as he did.

As for getting a life of his own – how exactly was he supposed to do that?



'There you are, Clare,' her mum said as she handed her a mug of tea. 'Are you sure you won't take a slice of lemon drizzle?'

'I'm sure, thanks. Tea is lovely for now.'

Clare sat back on the fat purple sofa and cradled the mug between her palms, savouring the heat. The lounge was just as she remembered it being when she was growing up: cosy, homely and scented with woodsmoke and vanilla and lavender candles, her mum's favourites. The open fireplace was the focal point of the dual aspect room, with a solid wooden mantelpiece and the gold-framed mirror above it. Amber and red flames flickered in the grate, casting dancing shadows across the room, and Goliath lay on the hearthrug, his chin resting on his large paws, his eyebrows raising in turn as he peered at Clare and Elaine. It was almost as if he could read their thoughts and feelings and wanted to watch over them; Clare found his presence comforting.

On the mantelpiece were family photographs of Clare, her parents, and her paternal grandparents, Alice and Terry, who had passed away over twenty years ago. Clare had never known her maternal grandparents and although her mum had briefly mentioned them being disinterested in their daughter, she had never elaborated on the subject, always found ways to avoid doing so. Even from a young age, Clare had sensed that it was a topic that upset her mother, so best avoided.

Elaine sat on the sofa opposite Clare, an emerald velvet affair with plump duck down cushions and a faded patchwork throw over the back.

'Goliath is keeping an eye on you,' she said, smiling at the dog.

'I know. I hope he doesn't mind me being here.'

'Oh, he'll love having more company. He gets a bit fed up with it being just the two of us, I think. He's a sociable dog, considering his age.'

'How old is he now?' Clare asked, then took a sip of her tea. It was hot and strong with just a splash of semi-skimmed milk, exactly how Clare liked it.

'About eight and a half, a good age for a Great Dane. I'll never know his exact age as I didn't get him as a puppy but I can't imagine not having him around. He's filled the space left by your father . . . well, not entirely, but he's helped.'

'Really?' Clare had heard her mum say this before but much as she liked animals, she found it strange to think that a dog could come anywhere close to replacing a human being. Her mum had adopted Goliath from an animal charity eight years ago. His first owner had abandoned him after he started growing bigger than expected and had an appetite to match, but when Elaine had seen him, she'd fallen for him instantly. During his first year at the cottage he had eaten everything Elaine fed him and more, including a piano chair, a bookshelf, a variety of valuable first edition hardback books, a table leg and two picture frames. Whenever Clare's mum had told her about the latest item to meet its demise, Clare had wondered how her usually no-nonsense mum didn't feel tempted to take the dog right back to the shelter. After each incident, Clare had tried to offer some cheery comment about Goliath growing out of it, and he had grown out of his puppy antics – all except one.

'Yes, Clare. Goliath keeps me company, warms my feet and is there to greet me every morning. A dog is a faithful companion. You should get one.' 'Perhaps.' Clare shrugged. It wasn't that she didn't like Goliath, or other dogs, because she really did, but she couldn't imagine the extra responsibility on top of everything else. Of course, Kyle had begged for a dog growing up but she'd found ways to avoid getting one, knowing Jason would have been indifferent to a dog and she'd have been the one cleaning up the poo, feeding and walking it and she'd had enough to do without being responsible for another living creature. Now that she was single and her son was grown, she *could* get a dog but then she would be tied to it and to its care. She wasn't sure how to help herself at the moment, let alone a dog.

'Maybe when I'm settled.' She raised her mug and finished her tea, hoping for a change of subject. When her mum had rescued Goliath, Clare had been surprised because they'd never had a dog when she was growing up. Her parents had both worked and said it wouldn't be fair to leave a dog at home alone all day, and Clare had been able to enjoy caring for the animals at the farm and the horses at the stables, so she'd never felt that she was missing out.

'Don't wait too long, Clare. Getting out for daily walks wouldn't be a bad thing for you, you know.'

And there it was!

Clare had known it would come. Elaine Hughes spared no one's feelings, especially not her daughter's. Clare knew that she'd gained a few pounds since Jason had told her he wanted to separate. She had comforted herself with wine and chocolate, as well as those big blocks of crumbly, golden mature Cheddar, but then why shouldn't she? After years of trying to keep an eye on her weight, of Zumba, boxercise and more, she'd thought, What the hell? She'd done all

those things to stay in shape, to age gracefully, to be the best version of herself she could be - and it hadn't made a jot of a difference to her husband. He had barely noticed her towards the end of their time together. She'd told herself that all the exercise and healthy eating was for herself, and to a large extent it was, but she had also wanted to feel appreciated, to feel loved, to feel that even though she was past forty, she still had it. Whatever it was. So when she'd realised that all the effort she'd made hadn't stopped her husband from walking away from her, she'd stopped and found comfort in tasty food and nice wines, especially the wines that Jason had stocked his wine fridge with over the years. When he'd commented on it, she'd shrugged and told him he couldn't take them away with him, so she might as well enjoy them. Besides which, after years of supporting his penchant for purchasing wines with eyewatering price tags, she'd found great enjoyment in downing them as she slouched on the sofa in her pjs or in the bath with a paperback.

And yes, seeing her mum had been nice initially; she'd felt a surge of emotion as they'd hugged, but now she was back to reality with a bump. Clare's dad had somehow tempered the harsh edge that Elaine could show, had made her laugh and take herself and the world around her less seriously. Since he'd gone, she had been tougher, harder, colder. It was as if losing him had extinguished the tiny spark of warmth that she was able to demonstrate.

Clare had come back to stay with her mum because she felt her choices were limited. With no job and nothing appealing on offer in Reading, along with a sense of inadequacy about what she was skilled to do other than cook, clean, garden and sort books, she had floundered in uncertainty. She had a degree but she hadn't done anything with it. She'd loved working at the library surrounded by books, recommending them to customers who were as excited as she was about new titles and favourite authors, and had been able to work the ancient computer system there, but her IT skills weren't up to date and the idea of going for an interview was terrifying. She had money from the house sale, as well as some savings, but they wouldn't last indefinitely, especially if she ended up paying some extortionate rent, and she couldn't exactly land on Kyle's doorstep at his student digs and ask for shelter. All of her friends in Reading were either married or cohabiting and who wanted a newly divorced friend on their sofa or in their spare room? Besides which, Clare hated the thought of being a burden. But she needed some time, some breathing space, a chance to lick her wounds and heal. When her mum suggested that she return to Little Bramble, it had seemed like the only option. Yes, she knew it could end in disaster, that living with Elaine could be challenging, but she'd had to do it.

She stared into her empty mug as if she could find a smidgen of hope there at the bottom, but all she saw was a few leaves from the loose-leaf tea her mum used that had escaped the strainer.

How on earth Clare was going to get through the next few weeks, she had no idea, but she was here now, and she had to make the best of it.

What else could she do?