

# PROLOGUE

## MY FAIRY TALE ENDING . . .?

**I** RESISTED THIS FOR too long,' I think as I step out of my black cab, bubbling with excitement. After a long call and an intense exchange of messages I'd finally agreed to meet him. He invited me to a rather exclusive bar at the top of the OXO Tower, one of London's most iconic buildings on the River Thames with wrap-around views of the city from its terrace and, apparently, cocktails to die for. I was secretly pleased that the job I'd assisted Natalie, my boss, on today – make-up for a shoot in a trendy loft studio in Shoreditch – had finished early. With an entire afternoon to spare, I'd taken the time to pamper myself and really enjoy getting ready for this night.

Stepping onto the pavement and gliding down the pathway to the riverfront, I feel like a peacock parading its feathers.

As I approach the red-brick old factory building, I catch

my reflection in the gleaming windows. For the first time in a bloody long time, I feel beautiful. I've always thought that my 5' 6" frame, conker-brown hair and brown eyes were the duller of all the potential 'beauty stats'. They're not exactly exotic or outstanding, are they? And they're certainly not hailed as the epitome of perfection in the magazines, but today something feels special. My eyes seem softer and my hair bouncier, as I glimpse myself walking along with my head held high. I don't think, 'slummy mummy' but, instead, 'lovely woman, out on a special date'. Feeling this worthwhile makes me stand a little taller and, oh my God, am I *sashaying* my bum about?

Happily, my make-up looks sultry and glowing. I've gone all out on the contour and highlight, but managed to pull it back before I gave my face actual corners (I still don't regret that luxury make-up binge last month), and I'm in love with my outfit. I'm wearing a knee-skimming black layered lace skirt that I picked up for pennies in a tucked-away vintage shop. In between the light layers of lace and tulle are tiny stars embroidered with gold thread. You can barely see them until the street lights catch them, and then they look like the night sky swirling past. I've tucked a deep V wrap top into the satin waistband and paired it with black-patent heels passed down from my best friend's sister, Piper, before she moved away. If I were deep-down ballsy enough to ask a stranger to take a full-length picture, I'd put it on Instagram with an #OOTD (Outfit Of The Day,

for those not as obsessed with social media as I am) and pretend to be a blogger.

Taking a deep breath and reminding myself of everything I am, I pull open the grand glass door, walk confidently to the lift and push the ‘up’ button.

*It’s going to be perfect.*

*It’s going to be everything I want it to be.*

I say these things over and over in my head. I’m willing the universe to listen and make it so. After four years (and ten months and five days) isn’t it about time?

I step into the lift, and take one last look at myself in the mirror, smile serenely at my reflection – without fretting over my make-up caking or my hair looking like a scarecrow.

This is it . . .

The doors open with a shrill *ping*, and it takes me a second to adjust to what I can see.

Instead of being packed full of people, the glamorous blue-lit bar, leading out on to a stylish restaurant area on the patio, is almost empty.

The sight that meets my eyes takes my breath away.

Tiny white tea lights in mottled silver votives run from the doors of the lift, through the indoor bar and out on to the terrace, making a twinkling path for me to walk down. Next to the doors at the end of the candlelit path is a waiter ready to take me to the one occupied table, where *he* stands smiling at me with one arm outstretched in welcome.

Strings of golden fairy lights hang from every railing

creating a warm glow, and there is champagne already chilling in a bucket beside his chair. Our view is of the Thames and all the boats humming along with their coloured lights twinkling up at us, but I barely notice it.

I'm mesmerised by him.

I'm almost breathless at how beautiful all of this is; how beautiful *he* is. I notice the gentle piano melody tinkling in the background and how the breeze is soft on my skin.

I feel like I'm the main character in a perfect-happy-ending movie. If I died right now, in this very moment, I'd be dying happy.

He pulls out my chair.

'Robin Wilde,' he says softly, flashing me the smile my heart skips a beat for . . .



# Part One

Badass Single Mum?

9 months earlier . . .



# ONE

## JANUARY

**O**PENING MY EYES VERY slowly, I'm greeted by the glare of the mini Christmas tree lights (which I forgot to switch off before I fell asleep) and a hot body pressed up against me, with one arm draped heavily over my chest and the other digging a little painfully into my back.

The first week of January is supposed to feel like a fresh start. This one really doesn't. I've barely slept these last few days, even though I'm exhausted, and when I do close my eyes, I dream of falling into nothing and then wake up with a start.

As my bedroom comes into focus, I roll over and ever so gently stroke her hair. Her lashes are longer than mine but her little nose is the same. I watch her breathe for a few moments and wonder how someone like me managed to

have such a perfect daughter. Six years feels like six months. It's true what they say about them growing up too fast. I'm delving into thoughts of how this tiny person makes my life what it is when I'm jolted back firmly to reality. There's a rustling in my kitchen.

I check my phone: it's 7.45 a.m. I stagger downstairs, leaving a half-asleep Lyla where she is, to find my Auntie Kath in the kitchen surrounded by every single thing that lives in a cupboard or drawer. No longer in their assigned place, all my culinary possessions are strewn across every inch of counter surface available. This is a reasonable-sized kitchen and though the counters are scratched and the breakfast bar is a slightly wobbly stub of counter offcut and the dining table cost £4 in a charity shop, I love it. I love my cool mint tiles that Dad helped me put in last year (Granny, who lived here before me, had this waterproof floral wallpaper that even Dad agreed was hideous) and beach-themed art. In the summer, when the light streams in through the glass doors, this kitchen is the brightest, freshest room in the house. In the winter, when there's less light and we string lights over the cabinet tops and make mulled wine ('Mummy's special Christmas Ribena'), it's a great place to sit at the table and wrap presents or make cards. I love this space even more when everything I own isn't stacked up on the worktops or in piles on the off-white lino (OK, my limited funds haven't stretched yet to anything nicer, and, really who wants to spend money on flooring?).



Instantly I wish I hadn't given Auntie Kath a set of keys. And I really should have wiped down the surfaces before I collapsed into bed.

'My New Year's Resolution is to declutter!' Auntie Kath says, with way too much gusto for the time of day.

It's six days into the new year and Kath is ready to go. I'd love to be that ready for anything.

I've been alone with Lyla now for four years (and two months and twenty-four days). *Fifty-one* months. It's my fifth new year as a single mum, and my fifth new year with my child being my midnight kiss and cuddle. I'm not *alone* alone, obviously. I have Kath and I have my friends. I do normal things like work and go out; I went to a great party at my best friend Lacey and her husband Karl's for New Year's Eve . . . but I've lost my pep a bit. I smiled politely a lot, and tried to have fun, but I left the party as soon as was socially acceptable (twenty past midnight), claiming I had 'a lot on' the next day. I never have a lot on, though. I'm not sure I could handle a lot right now. I just about manage with 'some', unlike Kath, who is a walking whirlwind of positivity and getting things done.

I stare blankly at her, wondering what planet she's from. A pause. Then she continues: 'You *really* shouldn't keep sweet potatoes in a cupboard, love. They keep better in the fridge.'

There's no explanation as to why she's decided to declutter *my* kitchen. I chalk it up to a 'Kathism' and decide to let her be.

‘Right, yeah, thanks, Kath,’ I muster as I go to answer the door. Why is the world starting before 8 a.m. on Lyla’s first day back at school? Didn’t anyone get the memo that it’s Teacher Training Morning, and therefore my last lie-in for months? What is this fresh hell?

Paul from over the road is plodding in with his toolkit and a ‘youallrighthow’sitgoingwhere’sthebrokenswitchthen?’. I realise he’s not fully awake yet either. Kath is, though. She’s all over it. You would be, if you were the kind of woman who’d arranged a handyman to call round at 8 a.m. to fix something that nobody needed fixing. The switch is fine; you just have to push it super-hard in the left-hand corner and it works a dream.

‘Hello, Paul! I do love to see a man with a well-packed toolkit in the morning!’ Chortle, chortle. Someone please make her stop.

Paul heads off to the front room to fix the switch and, assessing that everything is under control, I head back upstairs. I can hear Auntie Kath talking at – not to – Paul.

‘How’s the missus, Paul? And how are those gorgeous kids? Ooh, I took Mollie to the vet last week. Terrible, she’s been. Off her food, off her walks – not like her.’ Paul interjects with a series of *yeahs* and *oh reallys?* as Kath chatters on. ‘Gallstones, they’ve found! Two! Poor thing, no wonder she’s been off her food, I wouldn’t want two little balls inside me either . . .’

## TWO

**A**UNTIE KATH, MY DAD'S younger sister, lives five minutes' walk away from us and is straight out of a children's storybook: the lovely mumsy woman with a soft voice, wise words and a cuddle that could solve most of the world's problems. Charity shop bargain-hunting is one of Auntie Kath's main skills. Knowing everything about everyone is another. If there is news, a scandal or drama to be had within a four-mile radius of Edgeton Vale, Kath Drummond has it. With her thrifty shopping finds, Kath has a unique sense of style. Floaty, coloured skirts (often with her own added embellishments of sequins, lace, braiding or beads), crocheted cardigans and bejewelled sandals are her go-to staples and somehow, they work. Her face looks much younger than her fifty-two years with full lips and kind, sparkling eyes. She's a good-looking lady who

looks after herself with her ‘lotions and potions’, as she calls them. She spends her time attending her Cupcakes and Crochet Club (basically just an excuse for her and her friends to eat cake while they craft), or the Quilt Making Club. She also runs a village Dog Walking Club – which, technically speaking, isn’t a club. She, Moira and Alan from five doors up take the dogs out a few times a week to spy on the neighbours whose houses back on to the field.

Apparently Anthea Lamb’s curtains have been closed a suspicious number of times *during the day*, coinciding with a large workman’s van being parked outside her house. By the time Gary, her husband, gets home, the van is gone and the curtains are open again. Kath, Moira and Alan would never actually face-to-face ask her what’s going on, of course, but they’re very happy to speculate.

In Kath’s working life, she was a hairstylist in Cambridge city centre, but I think she spent more time gossiping in the salon than cutting any hair . . .

I hear her voice again, calling to me this time.

‘Robin,’ she tinkles merrily. ‘I’ve made a lasagne, love, and left some out for you and Lyla. I’ll freeze the rest, shall I?’ She is a good egg. Or at least, she tries to be – as much as, at 8 a.m. on a grey and freezing Wednesday in January, it pains me to admit it.

I start to feel stressed because there are too many people in the house, but then remember how the quiet moments don’t always feel so peaceful.

I've named that feeling The Emptiness. When I feel far away and isolated. I have days where I am consumed by anxiety and loneliness, and just feel so flat. Lyla will be at school and I'll be at home all alone and feeling like I have no place in the world, or like I am a speck of nothingness, desperate for my life not to feel so sad.

I should be glad to have Kath and her so-called help. She means well, I know she does.

After scaring Paul off (though at least he's fixed the switch, I suppose), wreaking havoc in my kitchen and ensuring I never find my cheese grater or corkscrew ever again, she finally leaves when she takes Lyla in to school at 10.30. It's a bit of a drive and it's very sweet of her to offer. I think she's guessed how I'm feeling. As she walks out to the car, she's commenting on the fact that there was no such thing as 'Teacher Training Morning' in her day and that they all just 'got on with it'. I don't bother to argue or explain it; I just zip up Lyla's thick purple coat, cuddle her goodbye and let out a deep sigh of relief when I shut the door.

Peace at last.

But as the hours of the day tick by, I realise I'm looking forward to collecting Lyla and having some life in the house and somebody to talk to. I clean out my make-up kit ready for next week's job on the set of an fruit-infused tea commercial. Apparently the creative team want the models' make-up to incorporate a sense of the fruit infusions, so I spend a

bit of time trawling the internet for ideas and inspiration. It would seem that ‘fruit-infused tea inspired make-up’ hasn’t gone viral with the YouTube beauty vloggers yet. Can’t think why.

Admin done and dusted – and by done and dusted I mean I’ve ignored the pressing email from the accountant and spent forty-five minutes adding things to my ASOS if-I-ever-win-the-lottery-and-can-afford-to-treat-myself list – it’s time to collect Lyla from school.

3.14 P.M., AND I’M AT the school gates a minute early. I enrolled Lyla here at the beginning of the school year. Dad and Auntie Kath released the last of our inheritance from my wonderful Granny so I could pay for this lovely school and I’m still getting used to it all. It’s nothing like the down-at-heel and rowdy primary and comp where Lacey and I went to school. Lyla was struggling in her oversubscribed local primary. As always, I blame this on her broken home and emotionally damaged mother. Hesgrove Pre-Prep School is a bit like a giant stately home, with ivy creeping up the exterior and huge stone-framed windows, except everywhere you look there is something wholesome or comforting: a row of low pegs for the juniors to hang PE kits on; artwork on the walls from their trips to the nature area; notices for jamborees or cake sales and that faint smell of new books and poster paints that instantly brings back your own childhood, when you didn’t need to worry about broken hearts or council tax bills.

I know this is only the first day back after Christmas, but – *deep breath, Robin, and start as you mean to go on* – perhaps from today onward I will *always* be one of those mothers who is here before the bell rings! I look around hopefully, expecting some kind of mutual congratulations from the other smug mothers whose names I’ve yet to learn. Those who made it here early too. But no one seems to engage. These women are pros, and are unlikely to congratulate themselves (not publicly, at least) on winning first place at the PTA Bake Off, let alone making it to the school gates on time. They stand here waiting in their Hunter flat boots and skinny jeans, which somehow disguise any hint of a mum tum or muffin top. Please God let them have muffin tops! I glance around at their almost identical navy-and-white striped Bretons under padded Joules gilets with grey cashmere scarves, and swear never to succumb to the ‘mumiform’. My ripped jeans (*avec* muffin top), loose slogan sweater and leather (OK, pleather) jacket may not scream elegance, but at least, I tell myself, I’m not hiding my pyjamas under my trench coat today. I do wish that, given the January weather, I’d perhaps considered the grey scarf bit, though.

I’ve noticed a thing about the PSMs (Posh School Mums). They all have their car keys in hand. I mean, they have handbags – very nice soft, slouchy ones with room for a bento box and sensory play pack – but their flashy car keys are always on show. I suspect it’s some kind of status symbol

or initiation into their secret Mumarati Club. I look down and I'm clenching my own Nissan Micra keys in my pink, cold, unmanicured fingers. To be fair, my nails are usually in pretty good nick – it's important for my job that I make a good impression on that score – but lately things have slipped a bit. Still, keys are in hand, though; a girl's got to try.

I spend most of my life desperately hoping that Lyla is emotionally and mentally nourished. I'm constantly worried that the split from Simon has in some way irreversibly damaged her. What if one day she finds herself in counselling, talking about how unavailable her dating-website-addicted mother was or how much she wished we'd been outdoors more, holding hands and making daisy chains, like characters from an Enid Blyton book? OK, note to self: remove all traces of Enid Blyton from house and replace with more suitable titles like Jacqueline Wilson's *The Illustrated Mum*.

3.15 p.m., and the foyer doors open. There she is, my little brunette beauty! The children don't pour out and run eagerly into our arms like at our old school. There are strict security measures. Each child must be signed out and ticked off a clipboard by Mrs Barnstorm, the Head of Pastoral Care. I could do with some bloody pastoral care.

'Hello, Lyla's Mum!' Mrs Barnstorm is thin and pointy, like a ferret. She greets us with a clenched-teeth, plastic smile. I don't have a name any more. None of us do. We



birthed children, so exist only to be ‘Tabitha’s Mum’, ‘Natasha’s Mum’ or ‘Ava’s Mum’.

‘Hi!’ I reply to Mrs Barnstorm with an overenthusiastic wave – not because she scares me. Oh shit, she’s coming over. OK, fine, she scares me.

‘Bit of an issue today, Mum!’, she says condescendingly. ‘Lyla was short of some of her PE kit and so was forced to go out in her ballet socks instead of her gym socks.’

An expectant pause, and a few heads turn our way.

‘Oh. Right. Err . . . I thought they were in there. I did put them in there.’ Did I? I don’t bloody know. They’re both pairs of white socks.

‘You didn’t.’ She returns to her forced smile. ‘It’s important the children have the correct uniform on for their own safety. Gym socks next week please, Mum!’ She ticks Lyla off the clipboard and I’m left with a beetroot-red complexion. Undermined in front of the PSMs. Again. I bet they have drawers full of the correct pairs of socks, all in neat little rows, just waiting to be gently tossed into PE kits and placed lovingly by the door the night before, ready for their easy, breezy school run. I bet *they* don’t have to ask eighteen times, ‘Have you eaten your cereal? Can you eat up, *please*? Have you finished your breakfast yet, lovely?’

Screw it, I’ve got this. The day isn’t over yet.

A slight setback in motherhood, but hey! It’s character-building.

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ONCE WE'RE LOADED INTO the car – you'd be surprised how long it takes to get into a car when you have a six-year-old: there's the argument about which side they're sitting on, do your seat belt up, do it up *now*, do the blimmin' seat belt up! Can she have *Frozen* on? Can I bring myself to sit through another rendition of 'Let It Go'?

I decide that today, I can't face going straight home.

The house is a mess, despite Kath's best efforts, and all day I haven't dared look at the new 'organisation system' in the kitchen. So, to kill time, we head off to visit Lacey for a chat and some reprieve from the humdrum twosome routine of 'fun' games and crafts, fish fingers, bedtime schedule and trash TV. At least Lacey won't know the difference between PE and ballet socks either.

Lacey is my oldest, dearest friend. We met when she joined my lower school in lovely Miss Ledge's class and I was made her Playground Buddy – an esteemed job where you had to take care of someone and make sure they had a friend for the entire break, a role I still haven't let go of, apparently. She's the kind of friend I feel so comfortable with that we're almost sisters. Except that she has an actual sister, who I adore as well.

Piper is six years younger than us and what my mother would somewhat insensitively call 'an oopsie baby'. Piper wasn't a planned addition to the Dovington family, but Tina and Michael always told us they were thrilled with their happy surprise and to give their beautiful doe-eyed daughter a sister.

Lacey is stunning. A petite 5' 5" with once-bum-length but now a sensible medium-length curly blonde hair, blue eyes and a size eight waist, she's like a character from a Californian romcom. She's married to Karl Hunter – handsome (obviously), 6' 2", thick dark hair – who works in the City doing goodness knows what in finance, and last year they had the most beautiful wedding in a barn conversion on the outskirts of Cambridge. Think exposed brick and ash beams; white fairy lights at every turn; candle-filled mason jars; hessian and lace adorning every chair; a sweetie bar with sugary poems about love; the works. They are the most Pinterest-perfect couple I know. They take selfies at sunset with golden light and soft-pink skies; they have a wall painted in chalkboard paint for guests to write messages on in their home, and they regularly nip off for romantic city breaks in Europe without arguing over who should have booked the airport parking. They live in Hopell Village, ten minutes' drive from my house, which suits me perfectly. With Karl working long hours, Lacey has lots of time for tea and chats. Come the evenings, though, she's happiest spending time with her husband, catching up on their favourite programmes or planning their next mini-adventure, and I'm on my own again. I don't blame her; Karl's great, and I'm glad she has found her soulmate and lives so blissfully. She's a good one. One of the best, actually.

Lacey inherited her paternal grandmother's florist's, Dovington's, and runs it with the help of a manager, Terri. Lacey's life skills are organisation and efficiency. There's

nothing she can't handle. I sometimes think that if we gave Lacey all of the world's problems she'd have them solved before most of us had made our to-do list. I don't think she really needs Terri, but she's been there since the days of Granny Dovington and loves the place. Lacey is happy to have the help. She calls her life 'fluid'. If she fancies sitting and chatting to me for three hours while happy, easy-going Terri flits about creating displays and serving customers, she can. If she fancies devoting all of her time to arranging and hosting Floral Wreath or Flower Crown workshops, she does. Since Karl is the main breadwinner and the shop pretty much runs itself (thank you, Terri), Lacey is the first to say she has a good life. Ultimately she wants to be fully settled with a household of children, golden Labradors and Joules jersey dresses, but right now – though she's working on it – she and Karl are a family of two.

Sometimes Piper, Lacey's little sister, swings by to 'help out' too. She's recently graduated, is living with Tina and Michael again and, I suspect, bored. She studied in London at Central Saint Martins and came out with a first in Culture, Curation and Criticism and I think she thought she'd walk straight into the job of her dreams. Like so many graduates, she's found it's not that simple, and so right now she's 'looking'. She'll pull something out of the bag; she always does. Probably a very fashionable bag, though. She's easily the most stylish young woman I know, and I don't think I've ever seen her in her 'comfies' or with a slightly grubby

canvas tote slung over her shoulder with a load of old receipts, tissues, lip balm and coins at the bottom. She exists on a higher level than that. Like her sister, she's gorgeous, but she has an air of mischief that somehow only adds to her appeal. Piper is a total babe. She's one of those people you want to hate, but as soon as you meet her you're bowled over by her warmth, charm and wit. You can't help but love her, a problem many men have fallen victim to. Piper loves the chase, but she's nowhere near her sister in terms of settling down and having a family. It'll be a lucky man that manages to tame her.

'Guess where we're going, Lylielooobblue?' I ask in my falsest, cheeriest voice as we turn onto the main road. Fake it till you make it, eh? I don't want her to detect how unenthusiastic I feel for life right now.

'Wacky Warehouse?' replies her hopeful little voice as I see her dark, almost navy, blue eyes light up and her head bob up at me in the rear-view mirror.

'No . . .' Thank God. There's nowhere I'd like to be less in the world than at an overstimulating, slightly sticky, giant corrugated iron building on an industrial estate with a million screaming children in ball pits inside. My actual worst nightmare.

'Auntie Kath's?'

'Not quite!' I think Kath said something about a meeting with Moira and Alan about The Extension. Gordon four doors down is building *without planning permission*. Moira

is absolutely scandalised and Alan is writing a strongly worded letter to the council. Kath just enjoys a good nosy, so she's tagging along on their 'research trip'. The research trip will no doubt be a walk across the estate with Mollie, her golden cavalier, and a good look into Gordon's garden.

'Your special hairstyle salon so I can play on your phone!' Oh my God, why does she remember that? One time, *one time*, I had nobody to look after her and no choice but to take her to the wax salon with me for my appointment. I sat her in the corner and let her play a vibrant ADHD-inducing game just to take her focus away from me having the hair ripped out of my nether regions. I explained it to her as Mummy having a special hairstyle in her grown-up place (not that anyone but me has shown my 'grown-up place' any attention in a long while), and there were no further questions. And here we are, seven months on and she's decided to dig it up and discuss it. I really hope this hasn't been a topic at story time with Mrs Barnstorm.

Not wanting to give her any more opportunities to delve into her memory banks, I decide it's safest to just tell her.

'We're going to Dovington's to see Lacey! Won't that be lovely? I'm sure she'll find something so fun for you to do, and I can have a little chat with her. What do you think to that?'

'Rubbish.'

Oh good.

I'm glad she feels such gratitude for the delightful outings she goes on. Like a top CIA agent, I won't negotiate with

her or bend to her will. I will show her I am a strong force to be reckoned with.

‘What if I buy you some Smarties on the way there?’

‘OK.’