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Chapter 1

How weird that you could push open your front door and know in an instant that something was wrong.

Tilly stopped in the doorway, her hand fumbling for the light switch. Back from work at six o'clock on a cold Thursday evening in February, there was no reason to believe that anything should be different.

But it was, she could feel it. She could *tell*.

Flick went the light switch, on came the light. So much for spooky sixth sense; the reason opening the door had felt different was because the hall carpet had gone.

The hall *carpet*? Had Gavin spilled something on it? Mystified, her heels clacking on the bare floorboards, Tilly headed for the living room.

What was going on? She gazed around the room, taking everything – or rather the lack of everything – in. OK, they'd either been targeted by extremely picky burglars or . . .

He'd left the letter propped up on the mantelpiece. Gavin was nothing if not predictable. He had probably consulted some etiquette guru: Dear Miss Prim, I'm planning on leaving my

girlfriend without a word of warning – how should I go about explaining to her what I’ve done?

To which Miss Prim would have replied: Dear Gavin, Oh dear, poor you! In a situation such as this, the correct method is to convey the necessary information in a handwritten letter – not in an email and *please* not in a text message! – and leave it in the centre of the mantelpiece where it can’t be missed.

Because, in all honesty, what other reason could there be? Tilly conducted a rapid inventory. Why else would the DVD recorder – hers – still be there, but the TV – his – be missing? Why else would three-quarters of the DVDs be gone (war films, sci-fi and the like), leaving only the slushy make-you-cry films and romantic comedies? Why else would the coffee table given to them by Gavin’s mother have vanished while the—

‘Tilly? Coo-eee! Only me!’

Damn, she hadn’t shut the door properly. And now Babs from across the landing was doing her exaggerated tiptoeing thing as if that made barging into someone else’s flat somehow acceptable.

‘Hello, Babs.’ Tilly turned; maybe Babs had a message for her from Gavin. Or maybe he’d asked her to pop round and check that she was *all right*. ‘Did you want to borrow some tea bags?’

‘No thanks, petal, I’ve tea bags coming out of my ears. I just wanted to see how you’re doing. Oh, you poor thing, and there was me thinking the two of you were so happy together . . . I had no idea!’ Bright green earrings jangled as Babs shook her head, overcome with emotion. ‘Love’s young dream, that’s what Desmond and I used to call you. Bless your heart, and all this time you’ve been bottling it up. I wish you could’ve told me, you know I’m always happy to listen.’

Happy to listen? Babs *lived* to listen to other people’s woes. Gossip was her middle name, her number one hobby. Then again,

you couldn't dislike her; she was a good-hearted, well-meaning soul, in an avid, meddling kind of way.

'I would have told you,' said Tilly. 'If I'd known.'

'Oh my GOOD LORD.' Babs let out a high-pitched shriek of disbelief. 'You mean . . . ?'

'Gavin's done a runner. Well,' Tilly reached for the letter on the mantelpiece, 'either that or he's been kidnapped.'

'Except when I saw him loading his belongings into the rental van this afternoon he didn't have any kidnappers with him.' Her expression sympathetic, Babs said, 'Only his mam and dad.'

The commuter-packed train from Paddington pulled into Roxborough station the following evening. It was Friday, it was seven fifteen and everyone was going home.

Except me, I'm escaping mine.

And there was Erin, waiting on the platform, bundled up against the cold in a bright pink coat and waving madly as she spotted Tilly through the window.

Just the sight of her made Tilly feel better. She couldn't imagine not having Erin as her best friend. Ten years ago when she had been deciding whether to do her degree course at Liverpool or Exeter, she could have chosen Liverpool and it would never have happened. But she'd gone for Exeter instead – something about the seasidey feel to it and possibly the fact that a friend of a friend had happened to mention that there were loads of fit boys at Exeter – and there had been Erin, in the room next to hers in the halls of residence. The two of them had hit it off from day one, the platonic equivalent of love at first sight. It was weird to think that if she'd gone to Liverpool instead – where there would surely have been hordes of equally fit boys – she would have a completely different best

friend, a tall skinny triathlete, say, called Monica. God, imagine *that*.

‘Oof.’ Erin gasped as Tilly’s hug knocked the air from her lungs. ‘What’s this in aid of?’

‘I’m glad you aren’t a triathlete called Monica.’

‘Blimey, you and me both.’ Shuddering at the thought, Erin tucked her arm through Tilly’s. ‘Come on, you. Let’s get home. I’ve made sticky toffee pudding.’

‘You see?’ Tilly beamed. ‘Monica would never say that. She’d say, “Why don’t we go out for a nice ten-mile run, that’ll cheer us up!”’

Erin’s flat, as quirky and higgledy-piggledy as the properties that lined Roxborough’s High Street, was a one-bedroomed affair situated on the first floor above the shop she’d been running as a dress exchange for the last seven years. Working in a shop hadn’t been her dream career when she’d graduated from Exeter with a first-class degree in French, but Erin’s plans to work in Paris as a translator had been dashed the month after her twenty-first birthday when her mother had suffered a stroke. Overnight, Maggie Morrison had been transformed from a bright, bubbly antiques dealer into a fragile, forgetful shadow of her former self. Devastated, Erin had given up the dream job in Paris and moved back to Roxborough to nurse her mother. A complete ignoramus where antiques were concerned, she converted the shop into an upmarket dress exchange and did her best to combine caring for Maggie with keeping the business afloat.

Three years after the first stroke, a second one took Maggie’s life. Grief mingled with relief which in turn engendered more guilt-fuelled grief, but this was when the inhabitants of Roxborough had come into their own. Having always intended to move back to Paris once the unthinkable had happened, Erin

realised she no longer wanted to. Roxborough, an ancient market town in the centre of the Cotswolds, was a wonderful place to live. The people were caring and supportive, there was real community spirit and the business was doing well. This was where she was happy and loved, so why move away?

And now, almost four years on, Erin had even more reason to be happy with her decision to stay. But she wouldn't tell Tilly yet, not while she was still reeling from Gavin's disappearing act. That would definitely be insensitive.

Although it had to be said, Tilly didn't seem to be reeling too badly. It had come as a shock, of course it had, but discovering that her live-in boyfriend had moved out appeared to have left her surprised rather than distraught.

'I phoned him this afternoon,' Tilly said now, between spoonfuls of sticky toffee pudding. 'Honestly, you wouldn't believe it. He couldn't face telling me in person in case I cried, so doing a bunk was the only thing he could think of. He's moved back in with his parents and he's sorry, but he just didn't feel we were going anywhere. So he left!' She shook her head in disbelief. 'Which leaves me stuck with a flat there's no way I can afford on one salary, and I can't even advertise for a flatmate because there's only one bedroom. I mean, talk about selfish!'

'Would you have cried? If he'd told you face to face?'

'What? God, I don't know. Maybe.'

'*Maybe?* If you're madly in love with someone and they dump you, you're supposed to cry.' Erin licked her spoon and pointed it at Tilly. 'You're supposed to cry buckets.'

Tilly looked defensive. 'Not necessarily. I could be heartbroken on the inside.'

'Buckets,' repeated Erin. 'Which makes me think you're not actually that heartbroken at all. In fact, you might actually be quite

relieved Gavin's gone. Because secretly, deep down, you *wanted* him to finish with you because you couldn't bring yourself to do the deed yourself.'

Tilly flushed and said nothing.

'Ha! See? I'm right, aren't I?' Erin let out a crow of delight. 'It's Mickey Nolan all over again. You really liked him to begin with, then it all got a bit boring and you didn't know how to chuck him without hurting his feelings. So you did that whole distancing yourself thing until he realised the relationship had run out of steam. And Darren Shaw,' she suddenly remembered. 'You did the same with him. You feel guilty about finishing with boyfriends so you force them to finish with you. I can't believe I never spotted it before.'

It was a light bulb moment. 'You could be right,' Tilly admitted.

'I *am* right!'

'Did I ever tell you about Jamie Dalston?'

'No. Why, did you do it to him too?'

'No, we went out for a couple of weeks when I was fifteen. Then I realised he was a bit weird so I dumped him.' Tilly paused, gazing into the fire as she dredged up long-forgotten memories. 'That was when it started getting awkward, because Jamie didn't want to be dumped. He used to phone the house all the time, and walk up and down our road. If I went out, he'd follow me. Then, when it was my birthday he sent me some quite expensive jewellery. My mum took it round to his mum's and the police got involved. I don't know exactly what happened but I think he'd stolen the money to buy the jewellery. Anyway, his family moved away a couple of weeks later and I never saw him again, but it frightened the living daylights out of me. And reading in the papers about ex-boyfriends turning into stalkers always creeps me out. I suppose that's why I'd rather let the other person

do the dumping. That way, they're less likely to stalk you afterwards.'

'So you are actually quite glad Gavin's gone,' said Erin.

'Well, it wasn't working out. He was so set in his ways. I did feel kind of trapped,' Tilly confessed. 'But his mother kept telling me what a catch he was and I didn't have the heart to say, "Yes, but couldn't he be a bit less boring?"'

'But you moved into the flat with him,' Erin pointed out. 'Was he boring from the word go?'

'That's just it! I don't know! I think he probably was, but he hid it well. He definitely didn't tell me he belonged to a model aeroplane club until after I'd moved in,' said Tilly. 'And he completely forgot to mention the bell-ringing. Oh God, I'm so ashamed. How could I have gone out with someone for six months and not known they were a secret bell-ringer?'

'Come on.' Erin's tone was consoling as she put the empty pudding bowls on the coffee table and stood up. 'It's stopped raining. Let's go to the pub.'