

# After the Rain Comes a Rainbow

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## CHAPTER ONE

Driving down the road I can barely see through the windscreen. Not only because of the rain that has been pelting down for almost half the day as the latest storm sweeps across the city, but because I can't stop the flow of tears from streaming down my face. The wipers swish rhythmically from side to side against the glass in time to the music playing on the stereo. I wipe at the fresh tears with the back of my hand while I try to catch a glimpse of my reflection in the rear view mirror. Oh God! My eyes are red and puffy, my mascara having smudged down my face from earlier attempts at wiping the tears away. Whoever said this was waterproof mascara hadn't given it the cry test. My mobile phone glows green in the gloaming of my BMW interior as it vibrates on the passenger seat beside me. I know who it will be, Greg my husband.

An hour or so ago I had arrived home from an unexpected half day at work covering for Kathy at the jewellery store. I don't normally work Fridays but I said I would cover for Kathy so that she could attend a family emergency, then I had my usual Friday coffee and shopping date with a couple of my closest girlfriends. Sure I may have been home earlier than Greg expected, however what I walked in on was enough for me to hurriedly pack a suitcase and leave.

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I pull into the driveway, pressing the automatic garage door opener before driving slowly into the garage and parking my BMW coupe between the wall and Greg's Audi station wagon. I never give it a second thought as to why Greg's car is parked in the garage and why he is already home before me. I proceed to walk into the house via the kitchen, a couple of shopping bags from the shopping excursion with the girls in tow banging mercilessly against my thighs and no doubt going to leave an unforgiving bruise as the bag containing the kitchen scales slams once more into my leg.

Due to the storm outside it is gloomy and I fumble for the light switch on the wall to my left. In the now bright kitchen I notice a bottle of wine and two half emptied glasses on the kitchen counter. I call out for Greg, but there is no answer. I throw my keys, purse and shopping bags onto the kitchen counter and walk through the kitchen to the lounge, turning on the lights as I go. From off the lounge the large sliding doors to the deck are wide open and I can hear the spa pool jets rumbling away followed by tinkling laughter. I should have guessed what was to come next but instinctively I just had to see it for myself.

Sure enough there was my younger neighbour, Shelley, and Greg, bodies naked and entwined in the spa pool. I can't remember what guttural noise I made but all of a sudden Shelley realised that they were not alone and she quickly jumps away from Greg clambering out of the spa pool and reaching for her hastily abandoned clothes left by the poolside. I note her flabby white backside is a stark contrast to my pert self-tanned one as she attempts to cover herself.

"You bitch!" I vehemently spit out, my heart pounding heavily in my chest. "And you," I turn towards Greg who remains in the pool, both his arms spread wide across the top edge of the deck. "I trusted you. How could you do this to me?" The anger takes over from the initial shock as my voice breaks into a woeful moan.

"Hey babe, it's not what it looks like," Greg replies with a smarmy grin across his face.

I wanted to wipe that grin off his face so badly, preferably with a fast slap from my hand, but I couldn't as I towered over him on the wooden deck poolside. I glance over to lash out at Shelley but she has high-tailed it down the deck steps and through our back garden and the gate we had installed between our two properties, the door banging shut noisily behind her as the metal latch settles back into place.

"You wait Shelley. John will hear about this. You mark my words he will," I yell out into the backyard, the storm drowning me out that I'm not sure she would have heard me.

When I next turn around Greg has stepped out of the spa pool and is wrapping a towel loosely around his hips. He's still got a gorgeous body after all these years, I think to myself as I shoot daggers in his direction.

"Come on babe, what are you so uptight for?"

"Uptight? My God, I've just caught you red-handed with another woman," I seethe.

"Come on you know she means nothing to me."

"But it means everything to me! Just tell me why?"

"I can't help myself."

"Well I'm not going to stand around here and take this anymore. I'm sick and tired of your lying and you cheating on me. I'm out of here. We're done." With that said I turn on my heels and disappear inside the house and begin to climb the stairs to our bedroom.

In my mind I've packed a dozen times before so I know where everything is that I want to take. At least for the first haul. From inside the wardrobe of the spare room I pull out our matching Louis Vuitton suitcases and lugging them both behind me I throw them onto the bed in the master bedroom. I open up the suitcases and begin tossing in an assortment of clothes from my chest of drawers. I head towards the walk-in wardrobe and begin sorting through my extensive designer wardrobe. I quickly fill up both suitcases and go in search of another.

"Come on Jackie, you're not really going to go through with this are you?" Greg says standing in the doorway to the master bedroom his biceps flinching as he gesticulates at the half-filled suitcases.

I push past him, heaving another suitcase from the spare room into the bedroom to fill, this time with my shoes and other essentials I feel compelled to take with me.

"Give me three good reasons why not."

"I'll give you five reasons. One - because you always come back. Two, because you couldn't live on what you earn. Three, you can't live without a man in your life. Four, you couldn't face telling your friends and family. And five, because deep down you still find me irresistible."

"That's where you're wrong. I've had it up to here," I say indicating a point over the top of my head. "And seeing that skank Shelley in my house, my spa pool, with my husband is the last straw. I don't have the energy anymore to deal with you and your promiscuity."

Suddenly Greg's persona changes as it dawns on him that this time I might be telling the truth and prepared to leave for good and how this would exactly implicate him. Greg moves from the door towards the bed attempting to close the lid on the third suitcase to stop me from throwing anything else into it.

"Stop, will you. We should talk about this."

"What is there really to talk about? This is the third time. What do they say - a cheater doesn't change its spots."

"I think that's leopard babe. A leopard doesn't change its spots."

"Grrr. Just let me go Greg. It's over. It's finally over." And that's when the tears start to fall.

"Babe, come on. There's no need to get all upset. I'll try harder this time."

"No, there is no 'this time'. This was your last chance," I blub.

"Whatever," Greg says turning around and exiting the bedroom leaving me alone the only sound being the pitter-patter of rain against the bedroom windows.

I continue to pack heading back into the wardrobe for yet more shoes. On the top shelf of the wardrobe is my stash of jewellery in a cardboard box. I drag the chair from the bedroom into the wardrobe and carefully teeter on tiptoe to reach the box. Tucked underneath the cardboard box is a photo album that hasn't seen the light of day for years. I pull the album down and stow it under my arm before stepping back off the chair onto the plush carpeted wardrobe floor. It's Greg and my wedding album. I place it in one of the first two suitcases with the clothes, not quite ready to part with or abandon it.

In the Ensuite bathroom I fling open cupboards and drawers and sweep a concoction of beauty products into the matching Louis Vuitton make-up bag before returning to the bedroom. I then have to make three trips to the car, loading two suitcases into the boot and the third across the backseat. All the while Greg is sitting in the lounge watching sport on the large fifty inch plasma T.V trying to appear oblivious to my actions yet I can sense him watching my every move.

"Greg I'm off now. I guess we'll hear from one another to sort things out," I say standing a safe distance away from where Greg is on the sofa.

He turns his head around from the game, his eyes appear glazed over. Could he actually be upset that I'm leaving? His eyes plead with me not to leave but he doesn't speak the words I want to hear and so I can't stay. He has hurt me too many times and I really don't want to be hurt anymore. And that's when it really dawns on me. I've been waiting for an excuse so that I can leave. There's no more of me to give in this relationship.

“Okay. Call me when you’re ready to come home,” he says flippantly turning his attention back to the large T.V screen.

I reach for my keys and purse from off the kitchen counter where I had abandoned them earlier and stoop to collect the recent shopping before heading out of the house for the last time through the kitchen door to the internal garage. I pause at the doorway for one last glance around at what used to be a happy home. I sigh and walk through the door, a huge weight seeming to lift from my shoulders at each step I take away from the house.

The rain begins to fall harder the droplets of rain bouncing off the concrete as I reverse down the driveway. I glimpse a shadowy figure at the front window, the curtain falling softly back into place and I think back to how long it took us to select the right curtain fabric, wanting it to match ‘just-so’ with the new leather lounge suite we had bought together only late last year. I hit the accelerator, the tyres screeching on the white paint in the middle of the road as I speed off down the street, faster than I should given the weather conditions.

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I don’t even know where I’m going, I think to myself as I drive aimlessly through the streets making a left turn followed by a right with no clear intent of where I am actually headed. A thunder clap startles me, literally making me jump in the leather car seat. I begin to count slowly, one – two - three. Within ten seconds there is another flash of lightning across the sky. The set of traffic lights ahead of me turn orange and I tap the brakes gently bringing the car to a stop behind the barely visible car in front of me as the rain continues to pound upon the bonnet drowning out the DJ on the radio. A red Toyota sedan moves into the intersection and I check the rear view mirror as a set of headlights shine directly into my car almost blinding me. Why do people drive with their headlights on full beam? And that’s when I heard it, a long screeching of brakes on a slippery road surface followed by a loud bang, then the crack of metal twisting and shattering glass.

Instinct kicks in and I turn on my hazard lights, shutting down the motor before grabbing my mobile from off the passenger seat next to me. I exit my car cautiously to see if I can help anyone who may have been hurt. The red Toyota has been shunted from behind by the silver Mazda, pushing it directly into another oncoming silver vehicle, the make of it unknown in the debris. The second silver vehicle has traversed over the kerb hitting one of the large trees in the tree-lined avenue where steam is now rising from the crumpled bonnet. People come rushing out of their homes to help and/or rubberneck, even in the pouring rain.

I approach the driver’s door of the red Toyota. The air bags have been disengaged in the crash and are now lying deflated across the steering wheel. A dazed woman in her mid-thirties sits behind the wheel with no apparent visible injuries. I attempt to open the driver’s door and struggle but it won’t budge due to it being stuck from the impact of the crash, the damage to the vehicle quite extensive. Someone tries the front passenger door which opens and they scramble over the handbrake to release the women’s seatbelt. I continue tugging on the driver’s door and it finally comes free sending me momentarily toppling backwards.

“Don’t move her,” I yell out pushing my way inside the mangled vehicle as T.V medical dramas flash through my mind. I naturally assume neither this guy nor I have had any experience and wouldn’t know what internal injuries this woman could be suffering from. “Has anyone called 911?”

“Yeah, I overheard one of the neighbours saying that they’ve done so. The paramedics and fire engines should be here shortly.”

"Good," I reply smiling at the handsome guy staring at me over the immobile body between us.

"Hey lady, are you with us?" I ask snapping my fingers in front of the woman's face. She mumbles a quiet yes.

"You've been in a car accident. Can you tell me, does it hurt anywhere?"

"Oh God," she begins to cry. "Ouch! That hurts."

"Where does it hurt?" I ask.

"My chest."

"Okay but you can breathe alright?"

"Yeah," she mumbles as she suppresses back the natural instinct of tears.

"What's your name?"

"Jen."

"Hey Jen," I say quietly trying to placate and calm her down. "You're going to be okay. The paramedics are on their way so it won't be too much longer. Just try not to move too much. Okay?"

"Yeah."

I look up into the most beautiful green eyes of the concerned stranger and smile. "How about the other vehicles, are the other drivers okay?"

"I think so. A lot of neighbours have come out to help. I don't think that silver Mazda had its lights on in this weather which is why that other car didn't see it."

"Could be," I reply.

"Are you okay?" the cute guy asks.

"Sure why?"

"You look as if you've been crying."

"Oh," I reply my personal circumstances having quickly been forgotten in the accident fiasco. "I've just left my husband," I continue, not knowing why I was telling this complete stranger my personal problems. I can hear the sirens in the distance, the wailing sound getting louder and louder as they approach the crash scene.

"Okay Jen, not long now. Can you hear the sirens?" I ask trying to keep her alert and reassuring her that help was close at hand.

"Yes. Thanks. What's your name?" she wheezes.

"Jackie."

"Thanks Jackie," Jen replies, an attempt at a smile passing momentarily across her face before she winces with pain.

"Hey if we're all giving names, I'm Richard," the cute guy informs both Jen and I.

"Okay what have we got here?" a booming authoritative voice breaks the silence as I'm pulled backwards out of the wreckage of the vehicle and out of the way.

"Her name is Jen and she has chest pains. She can breathe okay but she said it hurts when she moves," I advise hovering at the driver's door making sure 'my patient' is treated with the utmost care.

The paramedics slowly pull Jen out of the wreck of her Toyota and place her on a wheeled stretcher, leading her off to the waiting ambulance. I rush after them with Jen's purse that Richard handed over to me from off the passenger floor.

"Thanks Jackie," Jen whimpers as I lay her purse across her legs.

"You take care now," I say as the back doors to the ambulance close shut, the sirens starting up as the ambulance begins to pull away. It is only now that Jen is in the safe hands of the paramedics that I realise that I am now soaked to the bone from the unforgiving rain. I look around at the carnage on the road, broken indicator lights and scrap metal from one or another of the vehicles. I fossick around in my pockets for my keys to my car and head back to my BMW coupe.

"Hey Jackie?"

I look up to see Richard waving out to me. He jogs towards me and I quickly wipe away at the mascara that had smudged my face earlier.

"Is this you?" Richard says pointing to my BMW coupe, the hazards still flashing on and off.

"Yeah, this is all me."

"Should you be driving in your state?" Richard asks kindly. "Why don't you come in and dry off and I'll make you a hot cup of home-made espresso coffee, or tea, if that's your thing?"

I hesitate for a mere second before nodding and agreeing with Richard. I move my BMW from where it has been parked at the intersection into Richard's driveway directly opposite and walk tentatively up the front steps to the house where Richard is standing in the doorway, his green eyes seeming to glow even in the gloom of the dark sky.

## CHAPTER TWO

"Tea or coffee?" Richard asks as he leads me through a spacious hallway towards the kitchen at the back of the house.

"Coffee thanks."

"Do you want to dry off and change into something else? I can't believe how soaked we both got helping that woman."

"Good idea. I've got plenty of changes of clothes in the back of my car," I laugh reminding Richard of my situation having left Greg barely two hours ago. "I'll pop out to my car and get something."

I return with a pair of jeans, t-shirt and dry sneakers. I had also managed to find my make-up bag so I could touch up my tear-streaked face. Richard points towards the bathroom down the hall from the kitchen, a clean dry towel already laid out on the bathroom vanity for me. After changing out of my wet clothes and blotting my hair dry I run my fingers through my hair and shake my head, the dark curls spring up to brush lightly across my shoulders. I give my face a quick going over, touching up my foundation and reapplying my 'waterproof' mascara before opening the bathroom door and making my way to the kitchen and Richard.

"Better?" he asks.

"Much. That coffee smells good."

"Yeah I make a pretty good brew. Milk? Sugar?"

"Milk and one, thanks," I say taking a seat on one of the black leather barstools. Absorbing my surroundings for the first time I notice the lack of a woman's touch in the kitchen, with no silly frilly knick knacks adorning the kitchen window ledge. Richard slides a coffee mug across the kitchen counter towards me and I can't help myself looking to his left hand for any sign of a wedding band. Richard catches me, smiles and quickly stuffs his hand in his jeans pocket while holding his coffee mug with his right hand. Embarrassed at being caught I can feel myself blush.

"I'm a widow. Have been for just shy of five years now," Richard explains.

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Suicide."

"Oh God, that's awful. What happened?"

Richard is silent as he stands pondering whether or not to answer my direct question. "Do you mind if we don't talk about it."

"Sure, I mean that was really presumptuous of me that you would want to tell a complete stranger something so personal," I reply fully understanding and also embarrassed at the same time for my thoughtlessness.

"I mean shouldn't I be asking you why you are leaving your husband, and driving in such awful weather conditions. Where were you headed anyway? Do you need to let anyone know that you are going to be late?"

"The sad thing is no," I swallow a lump of self pity with a sip of coffee. "I hope Jen will be okay," I add hoping to change the subject of conversation away from my personal problems.

"You were pretty good out there, did you know that. Do you have experience in first-aid?"

"No. I guess I'm guilty of watching too many T.V hospital dramas. I recall 'they'." I hold my two hands parallel to my head and pretend to make quote marks in the air. "Say you can do more damage by moving someone than by leaving them as they are until the paramedics show up."

"Well it was quick thinking. I guess it is a man's first instinct to pull and drag someone out and away from an accident like that."

"Mmm, probably. So what do you do Richard?"

"I'm an architect. I work from home," Richard replies explaining why he was home early on a Friday afternoon as he takes another long sip of coffee the slurping sounds filling the kitchen.

"Nice," I reply clasping the coffee mug tightly with both hands to warm them up.

"And what about you Jackie, what do you do when you're not saving s lives?"

"I'm a jewellery designer, well an apprentice actually. I know, I know it is a little late in life to be an apprentice but I've always had a passion for jewellery and Greg, my husband, is an investment banker so we didn't need my income to supplement the mortgage payments," I nervously over explain.

"Nice. I bet you have some amazing pieces," Richard says looking to my hands for evidence of my handiwork.

"I designed this one," I say extending my middle finger on my right hand for Richard to examine. It is a replica, with my little twist, of a design I had seen in a magazine.

"I like it. Do you sell many of your own designs?" Richard lets go of my hand and I return to clasping the steaming coffee mug.

"Not yet, just to friends at this stage," I think whimsically to the bracelet I had designed for Shelley the neighbour who was only hours ago in the arms of my husband. I feel my body tense.

Richard senses my awkwardness and changes the topic to the weather and the amazing and dramatic storm sweeping across the city. We pass the time over another cup of coffee happy and content as we chat about this and that and nothing in particular. My stomach emits a loud grumble and I catch the time out of the corner of my eye on the kitchen oven clock.

"How rude of me, I should have offered you something to eat," Richard says turning back to me from the clock which reads half past six.

"That's okay. I should be going."

"And where are you going to go?" Richard poses the question that has been circling around and around in my head for the past hour.

"You know I don't know. Maybe I will book into a hotel for the night and think things through before making any further rash decisions."

"This may sound a little weird and all, but you are more than happy to bunk down here for the night. I mean I have a spare room that is always set up. No strings attached. I get the feeling we can trust one another and I won't wake up with an ice-pick through my chest if I let you stay," Richard laughs at his own joke.

"I don't know. It does seem a little weird." I hesitate for barely five seconds. "You know what? I think I will take you up on that offer. That's very kind of you Richard," I say smiling up into his dark green captivating eyes.

"Good. Now that that is sorted, why don't you drive your car into the garage seeing as you have it laden down with all your clothes and things? The neighbourhood may be nice but it isn't that safe around here."

"Oh okay, I'll just grab a few more things out of the car before I do that."

"And then we will decide on something for dinner. I was going to make homemade pasta if that is okay with you Jackie."

"Sounds yum. Do you want to show me where the spare room is?"

"Right this way." Richard leads the way back through the hallway towards the front door and begins to climb the stairs to the right that I hadn't even noticed when I first walked in. I follow a few steps behind him, my wet abandoned clothes clasped in my hands. "Bathroom to your left, spare room, your room, right next door, and I'm down the end of the hallway."

"Thanks Richard."

"I'll let you settle in and I'll see you in the kitchen when you're ready. I'll make a start on the pasta."

"Sure."

I can hear Richard's retreating footsteps on the carpeted stairway as he makes his way back down the stairs. Turning around I sit on the edge of the bed and extract my mobile from my purse. Damn it! I had forgotten to take my charger when I left the house. Minutes later I rejoin Richard in the kitchen where he is cutting the last of the fresh pasta into spaghetti strips and leaving them to dry on a wooden rack which is perched on the kitchen counter.

"What type of mobile phone do you have Richard? I've forgotten my charger for my Nokia in my haste to leave. I wonder if we're compatible."

"I've got a Nokia too. Let's have a look shall we," Richard says wiping his hands free of flour on a towel before reaching for his mobile plugged into the wall where it had been recharging. He reaches out for my phone, our hands brushing lightly against one another, as he attempts to insert the charger 'male bit' into the 'female bit' on my phone. "Perfect match, look at that. That should only take a couple of hours to charge."

I snigger like a nervous school girl, fortunately not snorting like I usually do. "Can I help with anything?"

"Well I was going to wait until you came down to see if you want a drink. Red wine?"

"You must be able to read my mind Richard. Just what the doctor ordered, especially now that I'm not driving."

"Good. I've taken the liberty of opening a bottle already. Glasses are in that cupboard behind you," he says pointing over my shoulder.

"These okay?" I ask holding two tulip-shaped fine crystal glasses for inspection.

"Yeah sure," Richard hesitates, and shrugs his shoulders.

"Are you sure?" I ask picking up on Richard's hesitancy.

"I just haven't used those particular ones since my wife died."

"Oh I'm sorry," I apologise.

"That's okay. There's no point holding onto things that have happened in the past. Right?"

"Right," I reply as I reach across for the opened bottle of red wine.

"Pinot Noir, my favourite," I say turning the bottle around to inspect the label.

"I was always a Shiraz man myself when Lou, my wife, was alive. I guess your taste buds change and evolve over time as you grow up."

"I guess they do. God, I used to drink whatever was going," I smile thinking back to an incident years ago when my best-friend Sam's husband, Mason, asked me what I would like to drink and Sam had replied that I drink anything, like I was some drunkard.

"Hmm," Richard replies turning his attention back to the pasta, touching it to see if it was dry enough before dropping it slowly into the large pot of boiling water on the gas stove hob. I lean back on the barstool and watch Richard as he fusses about the kitchen and I feel an inner peace wash over me. Inhaling the rich aromas of the mature Pinot Noir first before taking a mouthful from the exquisite glasses I don't even realise that I have let out a contented sigh.

"Everything okay Jackie?"

"Everything is fine thanks Richard."

Barely fifteen minutes later and the kitchen is filled with the delicious aromas of tomatoes and herbs as Richard puts the finishing touches to the homemade pasta sauce, the fragrant scent of basil permeating the kitchen.

"Mmm that smells fantastic. Do you cook like this often?"

"Yeah most nights. I've become a real dab hand in the kitchen since Lou ...," Richard trails off for a mere second. "Well to be fair I was pretty good beforehand too she just insisted on cooking and keeping the household chores to the old fashioned sexist roles."

"Greg and I have a housekeeper. We both loved to cook, in fact it became our form of entertainment hosting lavish parties for our friends and his clients there for a while."

Richard smiles at me over his glass of wine, the lines around his eyes crinkling warmly. He drains the pasta of water and spoons a serving of steaming fresh pasta onto the waiting plates that he had produced magically from underneath the kitchen counter, topping off the pasta with his delicious tomato and herb sauce.

"Thanks Richard. This looks great."

"Well I hope you like it," he says. "Shall we move to the lounge and watch some T.V? Only if you want to of course."

"Sure, that sounds fine," I say jumping down from the barstool and following Richard through the

house. "Did you design any of this yourself?" I pose the question, the house reflecting a unique and individual style.

"Yes, well parts of it. Lou and I ... Let's say it has been more of a renovation make-over," Richard replies whimsically.

We watch T.V for a couple of hours in between bursts of conversation as we reveal various things about one another but wary also not to reveal too much. The emotion of the day, and alcohol, begins to take a toll on me and I apologise suggesting that I would like to retire for the evening. Richard insists I leave the dishes for him and to take myself upstairs to bed. I take my now fully charged mobile with me and begin to climb the stairs checking my phone for messages as I take each step slowly. Greg has left a couple of texts including a voicemail which I listen to but don't bother replying to. Exhausted at the day's events it is mere minutes after my head hits the pillow that I find myself sound asleep.

### CHAPTER THREE

The birds chirp noisily outside my bedroom window as I rouse out of a blissful night's sleep. I check my mobile for the time and I'm surprised to see that I have slept well past my usual wake-up time, even for a Saturday. I hastily throw on my clothes from last night and open the bedroom door, checking to hear if Richard has already risen or not. I can hear either the radio or T.V on downstairs and I saunter down the carpeted stairs heading for the noise coming from the kitchen.

"Morning Jackie. How are you feeling today?" Richards asks standing in the kitchen in a pair of dark jeans and green t-shirt that match his eyes with a slogan from Hawaii blazoned across the shoulders.

"Great thanks Richard. God, this feels kind of awkward. I haven't 'slept over' at a man's house since before my College days and before Greg and I moved in together," I chuckle.

"Coffee?" Richards asks.

"Yes thanks," I reply hopping up onto the barstool on the other side of the kitchen counter.

"Bacon and eggs?"

"Yes please Richard. Don't spoil me too much or I could get used to this," I exclaim, taking the freshly poured cup of coffee from Richard, our fingers brushing against one another sending pleasant shivers down my spine. I look up into Richard's green eyes and he swiftly turns away.

"How do you like your egg? Poached, scrambled, fried, boiled?"

"However you like them. I don't mind."

"Scrambled it is then," Richard confirms ducking behind the fridge door and re-emerging with half a dozen eggs in his large hands, the bacon already sizzling away in a frying pan.

"Can I help with anything? I feel so useless just sitting here."

"No, you just stay right where you are and enjoy your coffee. I've missed cooking for someone,"

Richard lets slip.

I smile and take a sip of coffee, burying my nose in the cup and inhaling the delicious strong espresso aroma. While Richard begins cracking eggs into a bowl for mixing I pull open the newspaper and start to read the headlines. Inside on page four, is an article about the car crash, a small picture of Richard and I huddled around Jen before the paramedics took her away to the hospital.

"Look! We're in the paper," I say turning the newspaper around so that Richard could read it.

"That will have to pass as my fifteen minutes claim to fame," Richard remarks returning his attention back to the bacon and eggs on the stove hob.

"Sounds like Jen is going to be okay," I state having completed reading the article. "Oh look at this, here's a survey especially carried out for Greg. Infidelity."

"What does it say?" Richard asks as he places the dish of eggs into the microwave oven and pushes a series of buttons sending the microwave whirring into action. Richard bends down to read the survey article, our heads almost touching as he reads it upside down. "Interesting," he comments.

"It's right on the button if you ask me. He's such a cliché," I seethe.

"Don't let him upset you. Do you want to sit here or at the dining table?"

"Here's fine," I reply beginning to refold the newspaper to clear a space for us both to eat our breakfast. The microwave emits a long beep and Richard takes a wooden spoon to the eggs giving them a quick stir so they don't stick to the dish. I find myself thinking how I can't help but feel an instant attraction to Richard, his strong muscled back facing me as he continues to prepare breakfast and I hope that he is unaware that I am checking him out.

"Stop it," Richard says and I'm unsure if that was intended towards me or the scrambled eggs as the microwave beeps for a second time.

Caught out I can feel my cheeks heat up and I know that they have no doubt turned a deep shade of pink, if not crimson. I try to cover it with a cough but that only causes Richard to turn around quickly and enquire if I am alright concerned that I may have caught a cold in the rain yesterday. I smile warmly at him, happy to have met this kind stranger. Richard hands me a plate of bacon and scrambled eggs and again our hands touch. I wonder if that was deliberate.

"This is scrumptious," I inform Richard who smiles warmly at me nodding in agreement while his mouth is full of food.

"Thanks," he says having finally swallowed.

"I hope I'm not in your way this morning?"

"Not at all. I've missed this," he says indicating our surroundings of breakfast, coffee and the newspaper. "Since Lou ..." Richard drifts off. "Sorry I shouldn't keep harping on about Lou. But it's just unusual to have someone other than her in the kitchen."

"There's no need to apologise."

After finishing breakfast we clear away the dishes, loading the dishwasher with our greasy plates and cutlery before partaking in a second cup of freshly made coffee before continuing to leisurely read the newspaper together. I feel anxious as I ponder my current housing situation staring off into space. Richards notices and again extends the offer to stay longer here with him. I'm torn, it doesn't seem right to move in, yet I have felt so comfortable while I have been here. Richard states that it would be better than staying in a motel or hotel on my own. I thank him for the offer but explain that I'd like to think about it.

"I guess I owe it to Greg to call him."

"All in your own time," Richard replies. "In fact I should leave you to it. I need to pop down to the shops. That way you can have some privacy and use the landline instead of your mobile."

"Thanks Richard, that's very thoughtful of you."

"Okay well I'll just throw some shoes on and then I'll be off. I'll be back later this morning, that should give you plenty of time, and if you're still here I can whip us up something for lunch."

"Thanks," I reply.

Minutes later Richard is backing out of his driveway in his black SUV leaving me all alone in his home. The house is eerily silent as I creep upstairs to the spare room where my purse and mobile are lying on the bed where I had left them. I decide I should phone Greg on my mobile realising that he wouldn't be able to trace the call if I did. I push the button to automatically dial Greg's mobile on my phone and hold it up to my ear. The phone connects with a loud click followed by the normal dulcet ringtones as I wait for Greg to pick up.

"Where the hell are you?" Greg's agitated voice booms down the receiver and I pull the phone away from my ear so as not to be deafened. "I've been worried all night about you? Why didn't you phone me or at least text me back? What do you think you're playing at anyway," the anger clearly audible in his tone as my heart beat begins to quicken. "Hello? Jacks are you there?"

"Yes I'm still here Greg," I reply meekly feeling myself slip into the subservient role again that has dominated Greg and my relationship since the start of his promiscuous days.

"Well. Where are you? Where did you spend the night?"

"At a hotel," I lie not wanting to reveal the truth.

"When are you coming home?"

"I-I-I'm not," I stammer.

"Of course you are Jacks. You always come home. Look I'm sorry for my outburst just now. I have been really worried, honest I have."

"Hmm."

"What is that supposed to mean? Look I don't know what came over me yesterday with Shelley. You know as well as I do that she has been giving me the eye the last few times we have got together and particularly at the barbeque a month ago, even in front of John," Greg continues not giving me a chance to reply. "Jacks come on, come home, we can put this behind us. I'll take you out for dinner tonight, how does that sound?"

"I can't be bought with dinner Greg. You have hurt me, more than you will ever obviously realise. I don't want to live like this anymore."

There's a long pause from the other end of the phone as our relationship situation finally seems to dawn on Greg. I can hear him breathing while I wait patiently for him to reply and I pick at some lint from off my t-shirt and flick it onto the floor.

"Do you really mean it Jacks, that you're not coming home. Don't do this. Look I'm sorry, really I am," Greg pleads. "I don't know why I do the things I do. I know they hurt you but ... but." Greg begins to stammer. The sound of sobbing fills my ears.

"Are you crying Greg?" I ask, slightly concerned.

"What do you care," he snaps reverting back to his angry man persona.

"I don't know where you get off saying that to me. I'm not coming home Greg and you will be hearing from my lawyers, whoever they are going to be," I mumble. "Oh, and you can tell Shelley from me that John will be hearing about this. She's not going to ruin a marriage and get away scot-free."

"Come on Jacks, no need to drag John into this too and hurt him."

"So what, I should be the only one who gets hurt here?" I fume.

"Come home and we can sort this out."

"No. Have you not been listening to me! I'm not coming home."

"Alright, alright. Just tell me where you are then."

"No, I don't want to. You will only make things worse. I'm sorry Greg but I just can't do this anymore. Goodbye."

"Don't you hang up on me? Jacks? Jacks?"

I push the red button to disconnect the call, the tears already beginning to well up in the corners of my eyes. Even before I can place the phone down it emits one of my favourite 80s tunes, a classic from the Norwegian band A-ha, ironically named Call Me. The backlight on the phone shows that it is Greg calling me again. I stare at the phone as it rings six times before clicking through to my voicemail, and only then do I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Anybody home?" a woman's voice calls out from downstairs.

"Y-Y-Yes," I stutter barely audible even to myself. I head out of the spare room to the top of the stairs.

"Oh! Who are you?" a woman in her mid-thirties stops halfway on the stairs. She looks me up and down disapprovingly as she eyes my state of dress which is a stark contrast to her own immaculately casual but smart weekend attire.

"I'm Jackie. Sorry, who are you?" I return the question as bluntly as I take a step at a time down the staircase, the third to top stair squeaking under my body weight as it did last night.

"I'm Richard's neighbour," the woman replies not giving me her name.

"Oh. Well I'm a friend," I half lie. "Of Richards," I say smiling and extending my hand out to shake formally.

"Humph." The woman turns her back on me and heads towards the kitchen. I instinctively follow her curious as to why and how this woman has let herself into Richard's home.

"Sorry I didn't catch your name."

"I didn't give it. When is Richard due home?"

"He should be home later this morning."

"And he left you, a stranger, here on your own, in his house!" the woman almost shrieks.

"Yes, well I suppose it does sound unusual, sure. You see there was this car accident yesterday outside, if you're a neighbour you may have seen it. Well both Richard and I were assisting this lady, Jen, and Richard could see that I was upset over something, because you see just before the accident I had left my husband and somehow after we had seen Jen off in the ambulance with the paramedics Richard asked me in for a coffee and then I stayed the night."

The woman's eyebrows rise in abject horror and I realise that my story must sound worse than it really was. Just then we both hear Richard coming through the backdoor laden down with recycled grocery bags.

"Oh Tara, I forgot all about you," Richard says as he places the grocery bags on the kitchen counter and begins to unpack them. "So you two have met then?"

"Kind of," I reply. Tara replies to the positive, smiling condescendingly towards me. I roll my eyes, a bad habit of mine, at Tara's blatant lie but realise she is probably miffed that Richard had forgotten about their weekend rendezvous.

"You know we catch up for a coffee every Saturday morning," Tara berates Richard. He turns towards the fridge so that Tara can't see him and gestures at me with his hand, his thumb moving animatedly up and down from the fingers intimating that Tara talks a lot. I stifle a giggle.

"Sorry Tara, I got side-tracked - after last night," Richard emphasises the last few words. "I should have called or texted that I have plans today."

"Yes well maybe you should have. It would have saved me the embarrassment of barging in like this. I'll see myself out." And with that Tara briskly walks through the house towards the front door where she sees herself out.

"Wow, what was that all about?" I ask of Richard.

"Tara. Let's just say she'd jump at the chance to change the status of neighbour to girlfriend. She insists, because we're both single, that we 'catch up' and have coffee every Saturday morning. Personally I think her life is so lacking of stimulation that it is the only thing that keeps her going."

"Hmm, she did come across a bit strong. Probably didn't help when I told her that I had stayed the night."

"Really!? No that wouldn't have helped one bit," Richard chuckles putting the last of the groceries away in the pantry and folding the bag up to reuse again. "So did you speak to your husband?"

"Yes," I say my eyes and voice downcast.

"And?" Richard probes looking me directly in the eye for my answer, his beautiful green eyes warm and friendly.

"I've told Greg that I'm not going back if that is what you want to know."

"Good. He sounds like a right wanker. I can't imagine why anyone would want to cheat on you Jackie. Now, what about my offer of a place to stay? I could use someone to keep Tara off my back, literally."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want the company. Besides it is not like you can run home to the safety of your folks when they are away holidaying around the world."

"No, you're right - again. And I never thought for one minute that I would be the type to fall back on my parents at this stage of my life. Thanks Richard, this means a lot to me. Can I show my appreciation by taking you out for dinner tonight? I'm assuming that you do not have any plans for tonight of course."

"That would be nice. And no, I don't have any plans for tonight. Right then, let's get the rest of your things out of your car and moved in and settled upstairs," Richard says clapping his hands together, his cheeky smile touching my heart and sending a tingly feeling coursing through my body.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Greg continued to phone and text throughout the remainder of Saturday and all day Sunday trying to convince me to come home and insisting that I tell him where I was staying. I had ignored many of the texts, especially when Richard and I went out for dinner on Saturday evening letting Greg's calls divert to my voicemail. Richard had decided on a local restaurant, the Fork 'n Cork, around the corner from home and Richard's company over dinner, and indeed the weekend, had been refreshing and relaxing, something I had noted had been missing in my own relationship with Greg for a long time.

However going into work on Monday I feel a little apprehensive about whether or not to divulge my home situation to my boss, Mike Browne, who has never had a nice word to say about Greg. Richard had wisely suggested that I should be honest and upfront with Mike and I had to agree with him. Having sat in my BMW in the parking lot and pondered for twenty minutes or so I finally dig up the courage to leave having given myself another little pep talk. I stroll into the already opened jewellery store at the mall and place my purse inside my locker in the backroom, hanging my coat on the hook inside the locker door. Mike was busy at his desk, peering through his jewellers' loupe at an intricate piece of fine gold chain as he attempts to mend it. He drops the loupe into his hand and places it on the desk, waving out and acknowledging me as I pass him on my way to the front of the store. I ask if he would like a coffee and he nods, a man of few words. Kathy, the head sales assistant is attending to her morning chores and wiping down the many glass cabinets. She too accepts my offer for coffee and I amble out of the store careful to dodge

the early morning mall walkers who have come indoors due to the persistent rain.

The young female barista smiles at me as I wait patiently in the already formed queue of early morning mall workers in need of their first coffee fixes for the day. On my turn to order, I hand over the café's loyalty card and place Mike, Kathy and my respective coffee orders with the cashier. Ten minutes later laden with cardboard cup carrier I walk back into the jewellery store to find Kathy talking to Greg.

"Oh here she is now," Kathy says as Greg turns around to face me. I freeze mid-step just inside the store. "Why don't I take Mike's and my coffee from you and you can talk to Greg. It must be important if he has come in." Quick as a flash Kathy takes the coffees from out of my shaking hand, extracting my usual medium-sized cappuccino from out of the cardboard tray and leaving it on the counter for me before dashing out the back and deliberately out of earshot.

"I thought you may have called in sick today," Greg asserts. "And since you won't return my calls or tell me where you have been staying I thought I would come down to you at work," he says taking in his surroundings for the first time, his eyes flicking from counter to counter.

"You can't just come in here like this Greg," I say firmly.

"Why not, you're my wife, aren't you?"

"Technically, yes. But what more do I have to say to you to make you understand that I am not coming home. We are officially separated," my voice rises in pitch causing Kathy and Mike to look up from behind the glass wall separating the store to the back workroom.

"Okay if that is how you are going to play it, then fine. But Jacks, just remember, you can't survive without me and I'm going to make it as difficult as I can so that you don't get one red cent more than what you are entitled to. You left me, and don't you forget that."

"Is there a problem Jackie?" Mike stands menacingly in the doorway.

"No, Greg was just leaving," I state and with that Greg storms out of the store without so much as a goodbye, the customer buzzer beeping on his way through the doorway.

"Are you okay Jackie? Come and sit down," she says taking me by my shoulders and guiding me to a seat out the back. "Here, take a sip of coffee," Kathy insists passing me my still hot coffee.

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly, bringing the cappuccino to my lips and taking a small sip. I look up at Kathy and Mike who tower above me, genuine concern for me in both of their faces like the adopted parents that had become.

"I was going to tell you when I came back with coffees that I have finally left Greg," I confess.

"Finally," Mike exhales. "I don't know what took you so long Jackie but I'm glad you've finally made that decision for yourself, and not the other way around."

"I was surprised to see him here this morning. I admit I almost didn't recognise him," Kathy says before probing further her curiosity getting the better of her. "What brought this on, I thought things were going okay(ish)?"

"So did I," I mumble. "You know how I covered for you on Friday, well after lunch with my friends ..."

"Yes."

"Well I got home and ..."

"Oh my God, you caught him at it, in your own house!" Kathy jumps to the right conclusion.

"Yes. So I packed up some of my clothes into a few suitcases and left."

"Oh my God I can't believe he would do that to you."

"Neither could I."

The store buzzer alerts the three of us that someone has walked into the jewellery store. Mike goes out to attend to them while I continue my story with Kathy.

"So where have you been staying? Sorry, I couldn't help but overhear Greg asking."

"Well if you remember Friday night there was that awful storm. Anyway I was driving in the rain, with nowhere in particular in mind to go and while I was stopped at this intersection there was a huge crash right there in front of me. So there I was helping one of the accident victims before the paramedics got there and, I know this is going to sound weird, but one of the neighbours and I got to talking and after we had seen Jen, the accident victim off into the ambulance, he asked me in for a coffee. While we had attended to Jen Richard had noticed that I had been crying and he wouldn't let me drive off. I think he originally thought I was in shock with the accident or something but he wouldn't take no for an answer. So anyway I accepted his offer for coffee and one thing led to another and I stayed the night and now I've moved in with Richard. That's the name of my good Samaritan," I finish revealing my story taking a deep breath in.

"Wow. No wonder Greg was pissed."

"Kathy, can you help me find Mrs Johnstone's watch that she left with us last week for a new battery to be installed," Mike calls out. "Sorry," Mike says directing the last bit at me.

"That's okay," I say. "I should get myself sorted and back to work."

"Take your time," Mike insists following Kathy out to the front of the jewellery store.

Half an hour later Kathy finds me texting, a wry smile creeps across my face. "That can't be Greg you're texting," Kathy smirks. "So what's this Richard like? Is it love?"

I look up at Kathy a somewhat puzzled expression on my face. "Whatever gave you that idea? No, Richard is just my 'knight in shining armour' as they say."

"Hmm, it does seem a bit odd that's all, moving in with a complete stranger you had only just met."

"I guess it would seem like that from an outsider. Righty-o I guess I had better start making myself useful for the day." I take aim and throw my empty coffee cup into the oblong metal rubbish bin. "Missed, damn it," I say picking up the paper cup and dropping it carefully into the bin.

I walk toward my desk on the opposite side of Mike and sit down on the stool, adjusting the spot lamp behind me so as not to cause a shadow. Kathy returns to her position out the front while Mike joins me out the back, plonking himself down on the padded stool opposite, the gas

whooshing out in complaint as the stool takes his full weight.

"Jackie if you want to you can take the day off or are you okay?"

"I'm okay, thanks."

"Well don't say I didn't offer," Mike shrugs. "We have plenty of jobs from Friday that we need to get on top of. Do you think you can cope with these?" Mike says handing over half a dozen small envelopes containing jewellery to be fixed. I quickly scan the instructions on the front of each of the envelopes and nod in agreement before settling down to the first task.

My first day separated from Greg is like any other after the initial morning incident. Now I can't wait to pack up and leave and get home to Richard. We had made dinner plans for the week, except for Thursday, which was Richard's poker night with his mates and I planned to make myself scarce. Both Kathy and Mike were very understanding and empathetic, continually asking throughout the day if I was okay, which as nice as it was, started to get on my nerves.

~

I knock on the backdoor. Tap-tap-tap. "Come in Jackie, its unlocked," Richard calls out from within the depths of the house. Twisting the outside handle the door opens inwards and I step inside the kitchen, to the smell of roast chicken. My mouth begins to salivate and I can't resist checking the bird cooking in the oven as I steal my way across the kitchen, bending down to peer through the hot glass oven door.

"Does it look okay?" Richard says startling me as I straighten up.

"Definitely and it smells even better," I say. "Can I help with anything, the veggies perhaps?"

"No, I'm all under control. One of the many perks of working from home. So, how was your day?" Richard asks as he stands behind me offering to take my coat.

"Oh thanks," I say as I shimmy my arms out of the coat. "Yeah my day was okay. As you know Greg turned up at work first thing, had his little rant and then left. So both Kathy and Mike found out even before I could say anything."

"Ah well at least it's all out in the open."

"They were really good about it. Mike in his gruff and fatherly way was quite concerned for me, offering me the day off if I needed it."

"That was nice. Why don't you get changed and I'll open a bottle of wine to have with dinner," Richard says thoughtfully.

"Careful or I could get used to all this pampering," I tease before heading out of the kitchen, my coat draped over my arm towards the staircase and my room. I can smell them even before I can see them. Lilies! How sweet. Richard has bought me flowers and put them in my room. I stoop down to bury my nose in the sweet florally scent which permeates my entire bedroom. I throw off my heels and change into comfortable jeans and a t-shirt, checking my reflection in the mirror. I run my hands through my hair, the curls bouncing back to brush, as they should, across my shoulders. Inhaling the fresh smell of lilies once more I then descend the stairs rejoining Richard in the kitchen.

Richard places the last of the vegetables into the roasting pan and returns it to the oven. He hangs up the oven mitt and dusts off his hands against his denim jeans. "Right then, where is that wine? I hope you don't mind Pinot Gris?"

"No, not at all. I should have stopped on my way home and picked us up a bottle or two. I'll do that tomorrow. I can't have you out of pocket," I say smiling sweetly at Richard.

He pours a generous slosh of opaque wine into a glass and offers it to me. Our eyes meet as I begin to thank him but he turns away abruptly as if shy.

"Another forty minutes or so until dinner, shall we adjourn to the lounge and watch the news?"

Without waiting for a reply Richard leads the way towards the lounge at the front of the house. I follow with my wine in hand and tuck one leg underneath me as I sit down on the sofa, turning my attention to the large plasma T.V screen. Richard sits front and centre, something he is obviously well accustomed to, an array of remotes within easy reach from him. He searches the numerous channels for the local news and turns the volume up. I steal a glance over my glass at Richard who catches me and smiles. I can feel myself blush as I nervously take a large gulp of wine, which causes me to choke.

"Are you alright Jackie?" concern clearly in Richard's tone.

"Yeah," I wheeze, it went down the wrong way." I try to laugh it off but I can tell my face, and even my ears, have gone from a slight tinge of pink to a brilliant shade of crimson as I continue to cough the water from my lungs.

After another lovely dinner Richard and I clear away the dishes together chatting away about the current events of the latest earthquake around the world and the devastation it has caused. I excuse myself and retire to my room to phone my parents who are presently on an overseas holiday. I check my watch, allowing for the time difference in Singapore, where they currently are, and push in the multiple numbers on my phone.

"Hi Mom," I reply as my mother answers.

"Oh hi Jacks. I was just thinking about you, it's lovely to hear from you. How are you? How's Greg?" my mother asks innocently.

"Tonight, I'm not sure. I've left him Mom," I say before bursting into tears, the realisation of leaving Greg finally hitting home.

"Oh Jacks I'm so sorry, are you sure? Obviously you're not alright or you wouldn't be crying. What can your father and I do for you? Do you want us to fly back?"

"Yes Mom I'm sure, and no there is no need to come home. I caught him red-handed at it this time, and with my neighbour, Shelley, who I thought was my friend," I confess, the tears subsiding as the anger kicks in.

"That's no good. I thought this time he would have behaved and the two of you would have been okay together. I do hope you will be okay. If your father and I can do anything you just say the word. Do you need money?"

"No Mom, I'm fine, really I am. In fact, I feel fine for the first time in years."

"Where is Greg staying?" Mom asks.

"He's at the house. I've moved out," I explain.

"You shouldn't have done that. You should have made him leave, after what he has put you through. That should have been the least he could have done."

"I know but my words just fall on deaf ears. He only hears what he wants to. And I just couldn't take it anymore."

"Then it was a wise and courageous move on your part to leave. Where are you staying, with your girlfriend Sam?"

"No. I've moved in with ... another friend," I lie more to protect myself from Mom's prying questions.

"How can I get hold of you if I need to?"

"Just call my mobile, or you can reach me at work. We can email too," I reply.

"Do you want to talk to your father?"

"No," I stifle a snuffle. "Can you tell Dad for me? I know how much this will make him angry and I'm not ready to face that just yet."

"You know you're father won't be angry with you Jacks. It's that silly husband of yours that has ruined everything. But of course I will break the news to your father."

"Thanks Mom. I'll call again soon."

I hang up the phone clutching it unwittingly to my chest as I consider my dire situation. I text my best-friend Sam knowing that she won't be able to reply until she has finished putting her daughter to bed, but glad to be able to tell her my news and get it off my chest. I retire early for the night, the raw emotions of the day wearing me out.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Sam manages to get hold of me at work on Tuesday morning, insisting I come and stay with her and her husband Mason. I put her off insisting that I am content where I am but that if she was up to it I would be over on Thursday night for dinner when we could dissect my affairs over a bottle or two of wine. This would give me the opportunity to offload with Sam my Greg woes and allow Richard to keep to his scheduled poker game with his mates. Sam agrees, telling me she can't wait to hug me for having finally taken the plunge to leave Greg, something Sam, and more particularly her husband, had been wanting me to do for the past year.

I return home from work on Wednesday to find Richard cornered by Tara at the letterbox at the end of the driveway. He catches my eye over the top of the oblivious Tara and I take the hint asking Richard to help me carry a heavy parcel from my car into the house. He takes the bait and hurriedly excuses himself from the clutches of Tara, following me to my car parked in the garage next to his newly cleaned SUV.

"Thanks. She wasn't taking no for an answer today. And she was definitely prying to find out more about you," Richard confesses.

"Oh great. So what did you say?"

"Nothing much. I like to keep her guessing. I implied you could be my girlfriend. Sorry. I just couldn't think of anything else to make her shut up!" he says sheepishly dodging my teasing slap to his bulging bicep.

"Well that will give me the opportunity to use you as an excuse when I need it too then."

"Fine by me."

I follow Richard inside the house and I notice that he has already started to prepare for dinner, the kitchen counter cluttered with an assortment of bowls and spices.

"What are we having tonight then?" I ask nodding towards the large strip of beef sitting on top of the plastic chopping board.

"I thought we could have a barbeque, maybe the last one before autumn really takes hold. Is that okay with you?"

"Like I've said before, I could get very used to this. I'll just go and get changed," I say placing my grocery bags on top of the kitchen counter. "I stopped off and bought some wine and I have some money for rent. I know we haven't talked about this but I won't accept no for an answer," I call out as I make my way to the staircase.

"Okay, whatever you say."

I return to the kitchen poised in the doorway. "Please don't say 'whatever' like that. It was one of Greg's catch phrases and it makes my skin crawl." \*

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Jackie Fletcher's life resembles a roller coaster - with euphoric highs and gut wrenching lows. On returning home from work earlier than normal Jackie catches her husband, Greg, cheating on her with the neighbour. Her first reaction is to flee the scene, however an unprecedented storm is battering the West Coast of the US and Jackie is embroiled in a car accident. At the accident she meets Jen, who later becomes her new BFF and Richard, her knight in shining armour, or is he?

As Jackie's life morphs into something resembling a daytime TV soap drama she regains her self-confidence. Even her oldest friend Sam notices that the new self-assured Jackie is back now that Greg is out of the picture. And, like bees around a honey pot, Jackie's new found confidence is an attractive trait and Jackie finds others demanding to be with her.

Life isn't all rosy and like a scene from a movie, it feels like d&#xe9;j&#xe0; vu when Jackie is involved in another car accident and Jackie is admitted to hospital where she finds out that she is pregnant. The issue of who the father is weighs heavily on Jackie's mind and she fears her new boyfriend Carl is slipping from her grasp.

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