

The Dream House

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Extract

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Chapter 1

London, November 2002

'Come on, come on, please answer,' Kate mouthed into the receiver. Her eyes focused on the photo of her husband, Simon, with Daisy and little Sam on the wall of her grey, windowless office as she listened to the distant ringing. Finally she dropped the phone back onto its cradle. Where could Tasha be? Surely Sam wasn't worse or the nanny would have rung her.

Kate reached down, riffled in her bag for her mobile and hit Tasha's mobile number. Straight to voicemail. Damn.

'Tasha – it's me, Kate. Hope you're OK. I need to know how Sam is. Can you ring me at the office when you've got a moment?'

She shoved the phone into the pocket of her jacket, trying to ignore her butterflies of panic. Sam probably just had a bad tummy bug but it had been so horrible seeing him hot and limp this morning, and he'd even thrown up the water Kate had given him. Of course, Tasha was more than competent, but . . . I should have stayed at home with him, she told herself fiercely, rung in sick myself.

No, you shouldn't, said an irritating voice in her head. *Tasha*

can manage perfectly well by herself. What would have happened if you hadn't been at the television studios this morning holding Susie Zee's hand? Susie would probably have refused to appear on the chat show at all and there would have been an awful stink then, I can tell you.

Kate had to agree that the uncomfortable voice of reason had a point. Susie, a sweet but very needy person, was a singer-songwriter and Kate's employers, Jansen & Hicks, had just published her no-holds-barred autobiography. As publicist for the book, Kate had been shepherding Susie around London media-land for the last week, attempting to protect her from the fallout of her confessed affairs with various famous figures in the music business. Even now Kate had taken a huge risk by leaving Susie in the care of the London sales representative for a book-signing and, crossing her fingers that all would be well, hailing a cab back to Jansen & Hicks's offices on Warren Street. Her plan now was to deal with the worst of the urgent tasks waiting for her and to sneak off home early.

Kate glanced at her watch – twelve fifteen already – and surveyed the horror of her desk. She'd only been out of the office for a morning, and look at it! Towers of new books, tottering piles of papers and magazines, even a heap of plastic toy trolls with Day-Glo hair to promote a children's fantasy title. Why do people just dump things on me any old how? she thought, grumpily, brushing a strand of dark hair off her face and stabbing at the 'on' button of her computer. She wished, not for the last time, that she had an assistant but, alas, she was not high enough up the ladder for that.

The telephone rang now and she snatched it up, hoping it was Tasha.

'Kate? Adam here. Sorry to bother you with another problem, but . . .'

Kate's heart dived. Adam Jacobs was a first-time novelist in need of large dollops of TLC. Normally she would be happy to provide reassurance, but today she just wanted to get him off the line. As she listened to his latest complaint – his local bookshop not stocking his novel – she jammed the receiver between jaw and shoulder and started sorting through the mess. She balanced books in piles by the desk, swept the trolls into a box, stashed papers and circulars into various trays.

'Adam, don't worry, really, I'm sure there's a simple explanation. Whoops!' A pile of books fell crashing to the floor. 'Look, I'll e-mail the sales rep straight away. Yes, yes, yes, I know. Must go, I'm afraid. Bye, now.'

She threw down the receiver, shuffled the fallen books into a pile then started plucking the Post-it notes off her computer screen.

The phone rang again. 'Kate, it's Patrick. Where the *hell* were you?'

Oh my God. How could she have forgotten? She was supposed to have been at that meeting with him and his best-selling crime author! Patrick, the publishing director, was pitching for a new contract and the author had badly wanted reassurance about the publicity side of things.

'I'm so sorry,' she gulped, 'it just slipped my mind. I've been out of the office . . . I know, it's too late, isn't it. I'm sorry. It's Susie . . . No, I know, Patrick – yes, I know it's my fault. Yes. Sorry.'

He slammed down the receiver and she buried her face in her hands, his angry voice still ringing in her ears. If they didn't win a new deal with the author, he had hissed, it was all down to *her*.

Well, it is your fault really, said the headmistress's voice of conscience once more. *You shouldn't try to fit quarts into pint pots.*

But I've got too much to do and no one to help me. How can I be everywhere at once? Kate countered.

You could organize yourself a bit better. Say 'no' more often.

Kate sighed. Yeah, and then they'll say I can't cope. 'These working mothers, their brains go, you know.' She'd heard Patrick say something along these lines only last week, the bastard. His assistant had left two months after returning from maternity leave because she 'clearly couldn't take the pace any more'. He meant being in the office until seven every night *and* taking work home, Kate presumed.

At moments like that she wished she had a Harry Potter wand. Then she'd magically marry Patrick to a high-flying career girl followed swiftly by a high-flying mortgage and the arrival of triplets who only needed three hours' sleep a night – different lots of three hours. That would fix *him*.

'Hi, Kate. It looks like you're off again,' declared Annabelle, her boss Karina's secretary, materializing at her office door in a cloud of Anna Sui perfume. 'Karina's just rung. She's stuck on the train back from Leeds, so you'll have to go to the James Clyde lunch instead of her.'

Fussy, elderly James Clyde. The last person Kate could handle today.

'Oh that's great – just what I need,' Kate groaned, running both hands back through her dark bob. She simply could not face the celebration lunch for his eighteenth political thriller, due to be held today in the company's private dining suite upstairs. There must be someone else who could go instead . . .

Annabelle understood immediately what was in Kate's mind, for she said hastily, 'There's only me and you left – and I'm busy. *Someone's* like gotta answer the phones round here.'

Something snapped inside Kate. She rose out of her chair and leaned across the desk. Two spots of red suffused her normally pale Celtic complexion and her green eyes blazed with dislike. At five feet five, she just had the edge on little mini-skirted Annabelle. 'Well, you'll just have to answer mine for a change,

then,' she snarled. 'And make sure you bring me up any urgent messages. Some of us have real work to do.'

The main course had been cleared away and dessert served: a pretty strawberry mousse patterned with blackcurrant coulis and spun sugar. The select gathering in the small but elegant dining room of Jansen & Hicks included the company chairman, Robert Goss, James Clyde, a portly balding man in his mid-sixties, Clyde's longsuffering editor, Felicity, two sales managers and Kate. So far, Kate had been invited to express her opinions on the following subjects: last Saturday's Chelsea game, about which she knew nothing and cared less; the new décor in the reception area downstairs; Jeffrey Archer's latest venture . . . She surreptitiously looked at her watch – one thirty – and felt for the mobile in her jacket pocket. Could she get away with excusing herself to go and try Tasha again?

But James Clyde chose that moment to ask Kate archly, 'And what *other* exciting projects are you working on at the moment, my dear?'

Kate thought quickly. 'I'm really pleased with the way our book *The Lost Generation* is going,' she told him. 'It's about the highlife of the nineteen twenties. There have been some great reviews already. The launch-party is at the Oxo Tower. And then there'll be the TV series—'

But Clyde's concentration had snapped back to its usual focus – himself.

'That's just what I wanted to talk to you about, Robert,' he addressed the chairman in his reedy voice, jabbing his spoon in the air for emphasis. 'I don't seem to be getting the review coverage I used to. How about leaning on that fellow at the *Sunday Times* book pages a bit, eh?' he chuntered.

Kate remembered last week's conversation with the journalist

in question, who was, incidentally, not a 'fellow' at all. 'James Clyde? God, is he still alive?' she'd said.

At this, Robert Goss calmly did what he always did in awkward circumstances. He delegated.

'Well, Katherine? It's true we're not getting notices for James's books. What are you doing about it?'

Kate's hand froze on her water glass. She replayed in her mind another conversation a couple of weeks ago in which she had actually pleaded with the editor of *Motoring Monthly* to photograph the portly Clyde in his silver Lamborghini holding his book aloft. It was the only piece of publicity anyone had managed to get for him.

As her mind spun, searching for the right way to wriggle out of this one, the cavalry arrived in the unlikely form of Annabelle, who sashayed into the room without even a tap on the door.

'Messages for Kate,' she breathed, batting her long eyelashes and brushing against the chairman, she handed Kate a sheaf of yellow Post-it notes before dematerializing again.

The male contingent took a moment to recover from this visitation and Felicity tactfully moved the conversation away from reviews.

Kate sat and looked over Annabelle's childish handwriting, her relief at the interruption quickly evaporating. The top one ran: *Susie, Borders bookshop. Upset. Pl. ring.* Oh well, that was predictable. The next message went, *Yr husband rang. Crisis mtg work. Won't get back for dinner party sorry.* Oh no, something else she'd forgotten! She'd invited Liz and Sarah round with their husbands. Oh hell, not with Sam sick. She'd just have to cancel yet again! The third was a message from Tasha – at last. *At doctor's. But Sam much better.* Thank heavens for that, Kate thought, feeling the tension finally leave her body. But then she stared at the last note and felt her stomach go into freefall.

Urgent. Daisy's school rang. Daisy has rash – meningitis??? Go to Chelsea & Westminster Hospital.

Later, Kate wouldn't be able to remember exactly what happened next, though Felicity told her she'd committed the cardinal sin of interrupting one of Robert Goss's shaggy dog jokes. She just remembered arriving down in the lobby, her heart thumping, her body shaking, gazing round wildly. She shoved at the revolving doors – why were they so slow? – and found herself on the pavement. Tube or taxi? Like a madwoman she waved frantically at every passing black cab until finally an empty one stopped. She snatched open the door and threw herself onto the back seat, then explained the crisis to the driver, who nodded sympathetically and swung the cab immediately across three lanes to make it through the right-turn filter light just in time. Kate clutched the strap for dear life as the driver dodged his way south-west through the traffic. There arose in her mind a picture of little Daisy, six years old, blonde and blue-eyed, with that funny lopsided grin that lit up her face. The idea of her ill in a hospital bed with tubes sticking out in all directions was too much after the tension of the day.

After a moment, she searched with her free hand for her handbag to find a tissue to blow her nose. It was then she realized she'd left the bag in her desk drawer. This was just the final straw. How was she going to pay for the cab? She reached in her jacket pocket, pulled out her phone and brought up Simon's office number.

'Why are we putting ourselves through all this?' Kate said wretchedly to Simon later – ten fifteen that evening, in fact. Her husband had walked in through the door of their terraced house in Fulham, exhausted and starving, twenty minutes ago and was now sitting opposite Kate at the kitchen/breakfast-room

table shovelling down the Chicken Basque she'd cobbled together last night for tonight's cancelled dinner party. 'Life is like one long obstacle race at the moment.'

Simon put down his fork and looked at Kate from under his blond cowlick. He rubbed his eyes, then reached across to squeeze her hand.

'Poor you,' he said. 'What an awful day. At least the children are all right. They look so peaceful asleep now, don't they? Sam seems to have every soft toy he possesses tucked into bed with him.'

'Let's hope he's not sick in the night, then. Half of them you can't put through the washing machine.' Kate got up to fetch dessert from the fridge – a large bowl of trifle that they'd plainly be eating for the rest of the week. She sat down and spooned out a large helping for him and picked out half a dozen bits of fruit from the jelly for herself. Cream always brought her out in spots, never mind what it did to her hips – she had never lost that last extra half-stone after Sam's birth, and she knew she looked enough of a mess as it was. She pulled her fingers back through lank, tangled hair. Her blouse and skirt were crumpled and she picked at the pink Calpol stains on the skirt, souvenirs of the last seven hours with two sick children.

'When I finally got to the hospital, you can imagine what a state I was in,' she said. As they'd waited in traffic, she had confessed to the cab driver that she had no means of paying him. Amazingly, he had not thrown her out onto the street there and then. 'My kid was ill once like that,' he had said grimly. 'Scared the life out of us, I can tell you. Come on, let's beat this traffic.' And with the determination of a tank driver going into battle, he'd manoeuvred his way through the jams, zipped up and down tiny side streets until they turned neatly into a miraculous space just outside the hospital. 'Here you are, love. Hope she's all

right, your little girl. Nah, don't worry about the money. I was on me way home anyway. Just you run along now.' And jabbering her thanks, Kate had torn into the Accident and Emergency reception and through to the bright, toy-strewn children's section.

'I just blubbered something at the receptionist and she had to make me calm down and explain. And then they took me through to a side room and there was Daisy, sitting with her teacher, and oh, Simon, she gave me this huge Daisy smile. I just hugged her and hugged her. The doctor said it was only a rash, but she was being sick with the bug so it was confusing. You can't imagine the relief . . .'

'I know, I know. I'm really sorry you couldn't find me. I don't know why Zara didn't just buzz me on Gillingham's mobile. She knew I was out with him, silly girl.' By the time Simon had got Kate's frenzied call for help the crisis was over. He had accidentally left his own mobile on his desk.

'Poor Tash will have two sick kids to look after tomorrow. It's not really fair on her. Simon, the ends are just not meeting at the moment, are they?' Kate covered her face with her hands.

Simon pushed back his chair and came round the table. 'Poor darling.' She felt his warm breath in her hair as he kissed her. Then he released her abruptly and turned away, his hands diving into his trouser pockets to rattle his loose change.

'Is something the matter?' she asked. Fidgeting was always a sign of anxiety with Simon.

'Perhaps this isn't the best time to tell you, Kate, but it's the reason why I was so late. Staff meeting. Riot Act read. There are no bonuses this year and some people are being let go. No, not me, I don't think - *this time*,' he responded to Kate's sharp intake of breath. He pressed his lips together in what passed as a reassuring smile.

They were silent for a moment, both remembering the past. Simon and Kate's thirtieth year had been a testing time. Daisy was on the way and Simon ended up being without a proper job for nearly a year, which had put a lot of pressure on the marriage, more pressure than Kate liked to think about. It was worst after Daisy's birth. Kate developed severe post-natal depression, from which she took many months to recover because, the doctor said, of her psychological history. When Kate was seventeen, her elder sister, Nicola, had been killed in a car accident. Now, the trauma of a difficult birth and the shock of finding herself responsible for a small baby had ripped open emotional wounds that had never properly healed.

Then, just when it seemed things couldn't get any worse, Simon's father, newly retired from his country GP's surgery, had dropped down dead of a coronary on Boxing Day. Simon's mother had been distraught. Simon was their only child and he and Kate found themselves going back and forth from Suffolk for months to be with her.

Things had gradually improved. Simon finally got permanent work, if not with the prospects of his previous job, Kate's treatment started to take effect and the corner was turned.

Kate had been nervous when she'd found herself pregnant again eighteen months later, but her doctor was encouraging and, in the end, her baby blues with Sam were more manageable. She still had patches of depression and went to counselling occasionally. One of the things the doctor had warned her against was too much stress, but 'too much stress' exactly described her current lifestyle. Simon not getting the hoped-for bonus was yet another blow.

'I suppose we should have seen that one coming,' she said.

'Yup. Last month's figures.'

'So we're stuck here.' Kate's voice was wobbly. She looked

round the small room, festooned with the children's paintings. Despite the bright lighting she imagined for a moment that the walls were moving in on her.

'Well, we won't be able to get somewhere bigger in this area, will we?' said Simon, his voice sharp with disappointment.

A lot had hung on the hope of a bonus. Three bedrooms weren't enough now, with Tasha living in. And the single reception room – the knocked-through living room – seemed so small, especially with two children and increasing numbers of large plastic toys.

Kate stared out of the window at the scrubby bit of garden, the bare terracotta pots huddled together in the November chill. She didn't exactly dislike their house, which was in one of the residential roads leading off the Fulham Palace Road, but somehow it had never entirely felt like home. At first it had seemed huge after the tiny flat in Shepherd's Bush she had rented with her friend Claire, but now it had magically shrunk with three adults and two children jostling for space.

Simon had always said they would look for somewhere as soon as capital was available. It never was.

Sometimes Kate felt frustrated at her husband's carefulness with money, but in her heart of hearts she was relieved that he was sensible. Some of his other City friends had got into serious trouble by taking out huge mortgages, then being made redundant and unable to keep up the payments.

Simon started to go through that morning's post in his methodical way. The first envelope contained a bank statement. He cast his eyes over the figures, folded it back into the envelope and tucked it into a letter rack on the dresser. The second envelope contained an estate agent's brochure. He laid it on the table between them and they pored over the prices of local four-bedroomed homes as they had many times during recent

months. The difference now, of course, was that they were having to lower their expectations even further.

'We just can't do it, can we?' Kate slumped in her seat.

'Not if we stay round here, darling, no. It's a bit better south of the river, look.' Simon pointed out a couple of properties in Wandsworth. 'Lower council tax, too. Still tiny gardens, though.'

'They're both right on the main road,' said Kate, 'and my journey to work would be even longer.' With one change on the tube from Putney Bridge it took her nearly an hour each way now; Simon, with his direct route, only a little less. 'I can't ask Tasha to work a longer day, and I hardly see Sam and Daisy as it is.'

'Well, we'll only get something significantly bigger if we move even further out. Into Surrey, for instance, near your parents.' Kate looked at him and shook her head firmly. They visited her mother and father, Major and Mrs Carter, once a month for Sunday lunch, and it was always a stiff, claustrophobic affair.

'OK, somewhere else, then. Look, we've had this discussion before and it seems to go round and round.'

'I suppose I could change jobs. Or give up work altogether. But I can't imagine not working. And we've always needed the money, though most of my salary goes on Tasha.'

'You could get something part-time, maybe,' he suggested. 'Did you ask at work?'

'Yes, but Karina hasn't got back to me. I think by her face the answer's no. She wouldn't be allowed any more staff to make up. Anyway, Simon, then Tasha would have to go, and that would be a shame. The children love her.'

As they sat thinking, Kate picked up a pencil and started doodling on a piece of scrap paper. She drew a box house, like children draw, with curtains at the windows, smoke coming from the chimneys, jolly flowers in the garden. She added a little

stick woman with a smiley face and two little stick children dancing on the grass with a tiny stick dog

She was suddenly aware of Simon studying her. He cleared his throat.

'You know,' he said, 'I've been thinking a lot about that idea I mentioned a couple of weeks ago. I know it's crazy, but wouldn't it be great to move right out - to the country ...'

Kate said nothing. She drew the figure of a daddy with a briefcase marching up to the garden gate, a big smile on his face.

'Yes, like that.' Simon laughed. 'Cept you've got the hair wrong. Look, you dope, you can't draw faces, can you? Here, gimme.' Giggling, they both snatched at the pencil, which rolled onto the floor and away under the dresser.

They both gazed at Kate's picture. Kate spoke first.

'Suffolk, I suppose you mean.'

'Well, yes, in that Mother's there and we both know the area.' Simon's parents had moved nearer the Suffolk coast from Bury St Edmunds after Dennis Hutchinson's retirement. 'It's a beautiful part of the world and it would be great for the kids to have a country childhood.'

'It's so far away from London and everyone we know, though. What about our work?'

'Well, I could keep going at Pennifold's. It's an hour and a half from Diss to the City on the train. Not much more than now really. If it got bad, well, I could look around locally, I suppose, though the money wouldn't be great.'

'What would I do there?'

'You'd find something - freelance publicity, or you could train as a teacher. You're good at lots of things. And our friends could all come and stay. We'd be able to get this great big house.'

'Like this one, you mean?' Kate yawned as she waved the picture.

'Yes, but with straighter walls. Now, I'll make us some tea and then we'd better get to bed.'

While Simon stacked the plates in the sink and made the tea Kate sat deep in thought. It had been such a horrible day, even with the relief that her two children were asleep happy and nearly healthy upstairs. But she dreaded work tomorrow. It was the tiredness, she supposed, and the pressure everyone was under all the time. Never seeing the kids, that had to be the worst thing.

'You'd have more energy and time for the family. Think about it,' Simon broke in as he put the milk back in the fridge. 'I get worried about you sometimes, darling. You don't want another patch of the blues.' He put two mugs of tea on the table and ruffled her hair. Then, tidy as ever, he bent to fish out the pencil from under the dresser.

'I'm not saying no to the whole idea of moving out,' said Kate carefully. 'It's just there is so much to weigh up.'

'We need to draw up a chart of pros and cons,' Simon said crisply, reaching for the estate agent's envelope.

'Not tonight we don't,' Kate said in a weary voice, taking the pencil and envelope out of his hand. 'You're not in the office now, and anyway, you're getting way ahead of me.'

'Well, at least we can look at some house prices when we're down at Mother's at the weekend,' Simon said. 'Do some sums.'

'If the children are well enough to go,' Kate said. 'Hope so.'

Then she scribbled something under her picture, laughed at her efforts, and went to pin it up on the noticeboard. She had written *The Dream House*.