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The Rest of My Life

Written by Sheryl Browne

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The Rest of My Life

Sheryl Browne



Where heroes are like chocolate – irresistible!

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Chapter One

He'd seen her again. He'd slept fitfully, woken with a start, and she was there, yet not quite there: ethereal, indistinct. He could never make out her features, but it was her: Emily, her sadness so intense he could feel it. Adam was glad he hadn't been alone last night.

Shaking off the haunting remnants of his dreams, he hitched his legs over the berth and ran his hands vigorously through his hair. 'Are you sure you don't need me to give you a lift?' he called, looking up as the bathroom door opened and a shapely female leg appeared.

'No need,' the reassuring flesh and blood owner of the leg replied. 'It's only a short walk into town. You stay and catch up on your beauty sleep.'

Adam smiled as she squeezed past him in the small confines of his cabin. 'You're a stunning woman, Lisa, do you know that?' he said, catching hold of her hand to pull her towards him.

'And you're a flatterer.' Lisa laughed, twisting out of his grasp to tug on her jeans and top. 'I have to go. I'll be late for work,' she said, plucking up her bag. 'We'll have another night out again soon, yes?'

Adam's smile widened. 'I prefer the night in bit,' he said, his eyes roving over her. He was glad she'd rung him. He'd really needed the company. Since Emily, he preferred a solo existence – life was less complicated that way, but there were times when he craved a warm body up close, someone to talk to. Not about the dreams. He never talked about those or the remorse that came with them. He couldn't, not to anyone, male or female. But then, thanks to the reputation he'd earned, deservedly, over the two years he'd been moored at Severn Valley Marina, there weren't that many local blokes who cared to pass the time of

day with him anyway, which suited Adam. With Lisa though, at least he *could* talk, act naturally. Lisa was intuitive, understanding – and married, ergo wasn't looking for complications. As friendships went, theirs was a mutually satisfying one. At least Adam hoped it was.

Grazing a hand across his chin, Lisa turned for the door. 'I'll ring you,' she promised.

'Anytime,' Adam assured her, reaching past her to push the boat doors open and check the coast was clear. His own dubious reputation he wasn't much bothered about. Lisa, though, would probably prefer the village drums didn't convey she'd been associating with him. Noting there were no early risers on the other live-aboard boats, in particular the guy moored on the pontoon next door who wasn't keen to have him as a neighbour, he turned back to her, his eyes coming to rest on her soft, infinitely kissable lips.

Far too tempting, he decided, quashing a pang of guilt and leaning in to close his mouth gently over hers. 'Thanks, Lisa,' he murmured huskily. 'I, er ...' He trailed off. *Appreciate it*, he fancied, might sound contemptuous.

'My pleasure.' Lisa snaked a hand around him to clutch a handful of his backside. 'Speak soon,' she said, waggling her eyebrows then nipping deftly up the steps to the deck.

Watching her slip off the boat and head quickly towards the marina exit, Adam smiled to himself and then turned in search of caffeine to kick-start his brain. Lisa was nice, a good friend, his only friend, apart from Nathaniel. He'd hate her to think he might be using her, though he supposed he actually was.

'Yes, Dad, the plumbing's fine now, honestly.' Sienna reassured her father all was well at the cottage she was renting as she headed from the lounge to the kitchen, wondering where on earth Tobias was. A great lolloping black Labrador was hardly difficult to miss, after all. 'No, honestly, it's all in working order, everything flushing and clunking as it should be. Nathaniel, the marina manager, recommended a plumber.'

'You're sure you don't need me to check it over?' her father asked her, hinting at coming visiting with his toolbox.

'Dad, honestly, it's fine. I'm not going to get flooded out or freeze to death, I promise.' Sienna tried to reassure him again, and then mentally tuned out as her overprotective father took up the opportunity to warn her about the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning, again. She'd already told him she'd got an alarm. Granted, when she and her best friend Lauren had moved into the renovated property it had been a typical spring bank holiday, wet and blustery, and the central heating boiler had been suspect, to say the least. However, as it was now mid-June and twenty-four degrees plus outside, she doubted they'd be putting the heating on anytime soon.

'Yes, Dad,' she said dutifully, in all the right places, nodding her head accordingly and trying to concentrate on the conversation. Her attention, however, kept straying to the marina fronting her kitchen window, from where the view had been rather spectacular yesterday.

She and Lauren had caught a glimpse of the well-sculpted torso of the owner of the little white river cruiser moored at the quayside directly opposite – the man they'd christened Lothario, having noted certain nocturnal activities on board. Due to his late comings and goings, Sienna hadn't really spoken to him, other than a passing hello – and then he barely acknowledged her, but she could see what his obvious attraction to women was, on the surface anyway. Tall, toned, tousled dark hair, bronzed skin the colour of caramel mocha latte, the man was definitely eye candy. They'd spotted him again last night. Living up to his reputation, he'd been sneaking a woman onto his boat, amidst much shushing from him and giggling from her. They'd both been tipsy and, judging by the need for secrecy, they were obviously having an affair.

'Yes, Dad, I am eating properly. Stop worrying. I'm a big girl now.' Disappointed that Lothario hadn't made an appearance yet – fancying himself as a super-stud the man was clearly shallow, but he was fascinating in terms of fodder for her flagging screenplay – Sienna turned her attention back to her father. She loved her dad to bits and she understood why he worried about her. It had been so hard for him after her mum died, wondering what he could have done differently. He couldn't have done anything, in reality. Sienna had watched over the years. Even through her confused child's eyes, she'd known. Hyper-mummy was a happy, fun mummy, but in her down times there'd been no way to reach her.

Her dad's mission since had been ensuring Sienna was happy, and she was, largely, though, she wasn't as confident as she pretended to be. Her self-esteem sloshing about somewhere near shoe-level after her last horribly humiliating relationship, what she needed, she'd decided, was space to just be herself, unencumbered emotionally. So here she was, in a picturesque little honey-coloured cottage with its own al fresco dining area, offering breathtaking views over the River Severn.

Her eyes strayed hopefully towards the boat opposite once again. On a needs must basis she'd secured a part-time job in the local pub, where Lothario made an occasional appearance to flirt with women, notably not her, and she had bags of space and time to herself to concentrate on her scriptwriting. She still couldn't believe she'd been shortlisted in the TV Romance Script competition. After struggling with her degree it was a dream come true. The only snag being: she now had re-writes to do and no clue how to do them. The editor she'd hired had suggested she needed to include an actual sex scene, rather than the 'closed bedroom door' scene she had; and to make her ending more upbeat, as in boy-meets-girl, boy-gets-girl, despite all obstacles. But how do you write about sex and romance when your experience of it has been unfulfilling, to say the

least? She couldn't. Unlike Lothario, who obviously had sexual magnetism in abundance, Sienna's characters were about as alluring as copulating camels. If she was going to write about some steely-eyed Adonis bringing his heroine to the roller coaster heights of orgasmic passion; about love conquering all, she needed to believe in the fairy tale. Sienna wasn't sure she did anymore.

I bet Lothario could supply a steamy 'open door' bedroom scene, she thought, her cheeks heating up and her gaze straying to the window, yet again, as her dad got onto the subject of the security of the property.

'Yes, Dad, we do make sure the cottage is well secured at night,' Sienna assured him, dragging her unmanageable strawberry-frizz tresses from her face and glancing around again for her only male admirer, Tobias. 'No, Dad, I haven't "met" anyone yet.' She smiled wryly, wondering at the irony of her thoughts around the 'man' subject and her father's concerns clashing.

'No, not even a prospective someone,' she answered the next question with a roll of her eyes. It wasn't likely she'd be meeting anyone even remotely prospective in the tiny Worcestershire village of Little Crookley anyway. And nor did she want to. Sienna swallowed back a fresh wave of humiliation as she recalled the last awful 'date' with her ex-boyfriend, the dreadful names he'd called her as she'd scrambled from his car.

And still he kept texting her. He'd even rung her, intimating again that it was her who had a problem, which was obviously his way of denying his own. Attempting to consign that cold night to history, Sienna blew out a shuddery sigh and with her phone still clamped to her ear, she headed upstairs to check out the beds. Despite his dodgy hips, Tobias was very likely to have snuck up there and tucked himself under a duvet. Lauren's possibly, which would have Lauren plucking dog hairs from her face for a week.

'Well, don't take any nonsense when you do. Any man who messes you around will have me to answer to. Make sure to tell them that, Sienna,' her dad said as, seeing no suspicious dogshaped lumps under duvets, Sienna started to panic.

'I will,' she dutifully replied. She wouldn't, though, nor had she. A psychiatrist by day and a marathon runner and keen keep fit fanatic in his spare time, Sienna had no doubt her father might be driven to flex his muscles and try to fight her battles for her. She didn't want him to do that. 'Got to go, Dad,' she said over him as he veered the conversation back to his paying her a visit. 'Running late. Speak soon. Love you. Byee!'

Ending the call on a cheery note, lest her father decide to drive from Gloucestershire to Worcestershire to check on her welfare anyway, Sienna dashed to the front door which was slightly ajar, and which opened directly onto the quayside. Oh, no ... 'Tobias!' she yelled, skidding out and shielding her eyes against the morning sun to scan the marina. 'Tobias!'

Coffee made, Adam had barely taken a sip when the boat dipped heavily to one side. *Damn*. He squeezed his eyes closed, guessing it was Nathaniel, who'd obviously seen Lisa slip ashore and was about to give him one of his lectures, attempting to steer him away from his 'self-destructive behaviour' as was Nathaniel's tendency lately. But then Nathaniel – his best friend and who was supposed to have been best man at his wedding – had always tried to look out for him, even in their schooldays, Adam reminded himself and tried not to mind.

Nathaniel didn't disappoint. 'So, it's Lisa who's getting the dubious pleasure now, is it?' he asked, rapping on the doors and clumping down the cabin steps.

Realising there wasn't much point in denying it, Adam smiled sheepishly and wandered back towards the berth to get dressed in something other than his boxers.

'How long has that being going on, then?' Nathaniel followed

him.

'A while,' Adam said evasively, and then, lack of sleep catching up with him, he yawned and parked his coffee on the bedside table.

'You're unbelievable, do you know that?' Nathaniel imparted, obviously not impressed with his behaviour, again.

Glancing back, Adam caught the despairing look. 'What?' he asked. 'Can I help it if she's lonely? If he cared a damn about her, her old man would stop slinking off on his so-called business trips, wouldn't he? Stay at home instead, and give her a—'

'Pack it in, Adam.' Nathaniel's already overripe cheeks flushed furiously.

'I was going to say, a bit of attention, Nate.' Aware of his friend's propensity to embarrassment on the subject of, and around, women, Adam went on less flippantly. Nathaniel was okay, one of the good guys as far as women were concerned. He'd often said he wished he could be more like Adam, confident in female company. In truth, Adam sometimes wished he could be more like Nathaniel, living in hope that one day he'd meet his soulmate, every day thereafter bathed in a rosy glow of perpetual sunsets. Adam tugged on his cut-offs. She didn't exist. He knew it. He'd been there, done it; nurtured the hope. And then viewed the world from the bottom of a very dark pit he'd had to claw his way out of. Still felt as if he was trying to sometimes, when the dreams came to haunt him.

Picking up his mobile, Adam checked his messages. Despondently noting no new ones, he scrolled to his photos, finding the one he wanted: Lily-Grace, aged three months. How would she look now, he wondered, just turned two years old? She'd be talking, walking ... Why the hell hadn't he found the courage to just go and see her?

'And that's where you come in, is it?' Nathaniel's tone was scathing. 'You can't run away from commitment forever, you

know, Adam.'

Here we go. Adam steeled himself for another one of Nate's save-Adam-from-himself pep-talks. 'I'm not running.' He shrugged a denial, dearly wishing Nathaniel wouldn't insist on dragging him back down bad-memory lane. A familiar feeling of panic knotting his stomach, Adam closed his eyes against the inevitable flashback of Emily's shocked face, Darren's c'est la vie shrug. Two years his senior, Adam had looked up to his brother, wanted to be just like him. That day he'd wanted to kill him. Might have done, if not for his so-called father's intervention. Trailing his fingers over the deep scar he wore on his cheek as a constant reminder, Adam wasted no energy dwelling on that.

As for Emily ... Adam's supposedly hardened heart cracked all over again as he recalled the last time he saw her. She'd looked so fragile, her face so pale against the stark sterile white of the bathroom. She must have felt so lonely. He had loved her, utterly. Why had he back-pedalled then? But Adam knew the answer: because he'd felt trapped, not by the prospect of marriage, but by the prospect of being financially controlled by his old man, working in the business owned by his father, living in a property ditto, being indebted to a man he simply didn't like, becoming him. Instead of finding the courage to talk to her, suggest they ditch the whole white wedding thing and just take off somewhere, he'd pulled away. Driven Emily away. Clamping his eyes closed, Adam swallowed hard. Why hadn't he tried to contact her sooner? When he'd found her ... that had been his defining moment, when he'd decided to relinquish love over sex.

'In any case, her husband's not about to find out,' Adam finally replied, pulling in a calming breath, and seating himself on the bed to pull on his trainers. 'Is he?' he asked, glancing worriedly up.

Nathaniel paused before answering, disconcertingly. 'Not from me, no,' he said finally, saving Adam from imminent minor apoplexy. 'Look, Adam, I don't like what you're doing, but—'

'Odd jobbing, that's what I'm doing, Nate.' Adam went back to flippant, in hopes of cutting the conversation short. 'Can I help it if women are so impressed with my gardening skills they throw in a bonus? Got to go.' He grabbed up a vest from the permanent pile of clothes on the floor, which was crumpled but at least clean, and headed for the door. 'I have three lawns to mow, six Leylandii to prune and the fence up at Hawthorn Farm Stables to mend. The more money I make, the sooner I can get my boat fixed and then sail off into the sunset.' A not-so-perfect sunset maybe, he'd be lonely sometimes, bound to be, but Adam could live without the romance.

'And shag a girl in every port,' Nathaniel muttered behind him.

Adam turned back. 'Hopefully,' he said, eyeing Nathaniel curiously. 'And your problem is?'

Nathaniel did it again, that awkward pause that meant he was going to go all holier-than-thou on him. 'I drink with her husband, Adam,' he said, blowing out a disgruntled breath.

'Whose? Sally's? Rebekah's?' Adam couldn't resist, though he'd never actually met anyone called Sally.

'Lisa's,' Nathaniel clarified tightly. 'I socialise with the man. I like him. He's buying one of my boats. They've just commissioned the fit of the interior, him and Lisa, together. I like her!'

'You do? Well, why didn't you say something? I would have backed off if I'd thought you—'

'Not like that. And you very well know it.' Nathaniel scowled, his fair-skinned cheeks flushing again.

Better not provoke him further, Adam decided, their friendship and the two months' mooring fee he owed him in mind.

'You're a good looking bastard,' Nathaniel went on

grudgingly, 'even if you do insist on dressing like a bloody hobo.' He eyed Adam's thrown-on choice of attire with a shake of his head.

'All the better to show off my finely-honed physique, Nate,' Adam joked, tugging his vest over another noticeable scar on his torso.

Nathaniel ignored him. 'I just don't want you hurting anyone or sailing off into the sunset with regrets. You'll have some someday, you know. There will be a girl sometime whose feelings you wish you'd been more caring of. Why don't you think about staying put, Adam? You're a good boat mechanic, skilled. You don't need to odd job. You could put your skills to use here, rent a property, put down some sort of roots, if only you'd—'

'I don't want to, Nate,' Adam said firmly, probably too firmly. Nathaniel's face fell. 'I prefer to be a free agent, you know I do. And I don't hurt anyone,' he pointed out, less vehemently. Yes, he'd been involved with married women, women whose husbands basically didn't give a damn about them. Lisa's, for instance, who made no effort whatsoever to appreciate her. It didn't make Adam a saint, but making her life a little less lonely didn't make him a complete bastard either, did it?

'Yes, right.' Nathaniel didn't look any more impressed. 'Whatever.' He sighed. 'Just be careful, that's all.'

'I always am,' Adam assured him. He did actually care about women, but he couldn't allow himself to care too much *for* them, not again.

'Particularly at the farm,' Nathaniel's voice now definitely held a warning. 'Sherry's husband is not the forgiving sort. He has a shotgun and a licence to use it.'

Oh. That gave Adam pause for thought.

'Just don't go making a move on her while you're odd jobbing there,' Nathaniel went on, heading past Adam up to the deck. 'If you've got any sense, you'll-'

'Nathaniel, I have no intention of "making a move" on Sherry.' Adam pulled his door shut and then leapt the handrail to land on the quayside. Given Nathaniel's revelation about the shotgun he decided not to mention the fact that Sherry had already made the move.

'Right.' Nathaniel rolled his eyes and followed him down onto the quay, though rather more carefully. 'They all chase you, I suppose.'

'I'm obviously irresistible.' Adam tried a little levity.

Nathaniel sighed and shook his head. 'Just practise a bit of restraint, that's all I ask. There are only so many married women you can bed without causing serious grief somewhere along the line.' He paused, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow as he sweltered in a long-sleeved shirt and unforgiving temperatures.

'I don't bed married women,' Adam said with a sigh, wishing Nathaniel would drop it. 'Not regularly. I just—'

'Willingly oblige, because it comes with no strings?' Nathaniel finished shrewdly.

Adam shrugged evasively.

'It won't do my business any good, having your body bits splattered all over the marina, you know,' Nathaniel said, walking on.

'No,' Adam conceded. 'Wouldn't do my body bits a lot of good eith—'

'Tobias!' Both men looked up as a girl called loudly from the bank.

Bloody hell. Adam did a double take. It was the girl from the cottage. Innocent-looking and fresh-faced, a radiant smile as she chatted to the punters she served at the pub, seemingly unaware of most of them eyeing her up, Adam had tried hard not to notice her. He couldn't help but notice her now. She was wearing the shortest of shorts and the skimpiest of bra-affair

tops he'd ever seen in his life. It was her hair, though, which she was now wearing loose, that really caught his attention. Red hair flecked gold, tumbling carelessly down her back, it was stunning. She was stunning. Barefoot, with tanned long legs, she was undeniably attractive. Definitely his type, he might once have confided to Nate – as he had when he'd first met Emily. She'd been barefoot too, he recalled the image vividly, fishing from the side of a boat with her father. Pretty hopelessly it turned out. She hadn't had a hook on her line, because she hadn't wanted to hurt the fish. She'd caught him that day, the day he'd learned to smile again after his mother had gone. Emily had been his first love. His last love, too, as far as Adam was concerned.

'Tobias, here boy!' the girl called tearfully again, now peering out over the water.

She was precariously close to the edge of the bank, Adam realised. 'Dog, do you reckon?' he asked Nathaniel.

'Well, she has got one.' Nathaniel furrowed his brow and glanced around. 'It's such an ancient old thing, though, I can't imagine it's gone—'

Nathaniel's speculations were cut short by a suspicious heavy splosh, followed by an ear-piercing scream that had Adam's heart racing. 'Shit,' he muttered, glancing quickly from the water to the girl, who looked about ready to jump in.

'Tobias! Help! He can't swim!' she screamed, now hanging onto one of the boats and dangling a foot towards the water.

Hell, she was going in. 'Stay there!' Adam shouted. 'That water's twenty feet deep!' And ice cold, he thought grimly, setting off at a sprint.

Clambering onto the deck of a moored boat, he dived from the starboard side, giving himself enough clearance not to get crushed between bows and sterns as boats bobbed together on the surface. He was braced when he hit the water, but still the freezing temperature paralysed him. *Move*, he instructed himself, his whole body juddering from the inside out. Surfacing, he trod water, blinked the rank stuff out of his eyes and spat it out of his mouth. Where was the dog? Scanning the water, he saw no sign of anything moving. He turned full circle. *There!* Adam spotted it three boats along, not much more than its head visible and hazardously close to two large vessels. If the dog drifted in between them it would stand no chance. Kicking back hard, Adam swam towards the dog and made a lunge for the animal which was now very close to going under, and frantic, judging by the whites of its eyes. Adam was feeling pretty frantic himself, with trainers like deadweights on his feet.

'Come on. Good boy,' he coaxed, swallowing another lungful of foul tasting water, and then, seizing the dog's collar and somehow managing to keep its snout and himself above water, he waited while Nathaniel used his bodyweight to hold two boats off.

'Now!' Nathaniel shouted, gesturing him forwards.

Adam took a breath and went for it, manoeuvring himself, plus dog, precariously through the gap between the boats and back to the bank.

The dog safe on the quay with one of the boat owners' assistance – no doubt he was an animal lover, because he certainly didn't waste any energy helping Adam – Adam heaved himself out, shook his dripping hands, for what good that could do, and then watched as the girl dropped to her knees. Careless of the shower of freezing cold water it shook all over her, and its manically lapping tongue, she embraced the bedraggled animal heartily, planting a kiss on its sopping wet head, before getting to her feet to take Adam by surprise and squeeze him into an enthusiastic hug. An extremely enthusiastic hug, which was way too close, given what she was barely wearing.

'Our hero,' Nathaniel said, giving him a look somewhere between 'well done' and 'that was close', as the girl finally pulled wetly away from him. 'He is a hero,' she agreed wholeheartedly. 'He absolutely is. Thank you.' She smiled, blinking innocently at him, leaving Adam feeling definitely off kilter. 'I can't tell you how grateful I am. Tobias is my whole life. I would have just died if—'

'So you let him run loose in a marina and he can't *swim*?' He dragged a hand through his dripping hair, his expression incredulous.

'No, I ... He got out.' Sienna felt her cheeks flush under his gaze. His eyes were brown, dark decadent chocolate-brown, framed by unfairly long eyelashes, little droplets of water dripping from them like tears from a frond. 'I was on the phone and I—'

'And you didn't think to put a life jacket on him?'

Shame made Sienna want to drop her gaze, but somehow she couldn't. 'I, um ... No, I—'

'He could have drowned!' Lothario's eyes were now lasering into hers right down to her toes. 'I could have drowned!' he pointed out, now seeming definitely angry.

Sienna swallowed. 'I'm sorry,' she croaked, her throat feeling parched. He was right. Of course he was, and had every reason to be annoyed. But why did his palpable anger seem to be doing strange things to her pulse rate? Confused by his definite assault on her senses, Sienna inhaled a steadying breath. 'I'm really sorry,' she repeated firmly. 'I didn't think.'

'Obviously not,' he grated, now glaring at her as though she had half a brain. 'Honestly, I do wonder about some people,' he muttered, then sweeping now despairing eyes over her, he shook his head and turned away.

Unbelievable! God, he was rude. But God, he was hot. Holding firmly onto a panting Tobias' collar, Sienna watched him go. The wet, white cotton vest clinging to him, accentuating his torso, did nothing to dampen her curious arousal. But why was she aroused? If he hadn't gone gallantly to the rescue of

Tobias, she'd have been tempted to spit in his contemptuous eyes. *Some people?* What was that supposed to mean? She hadn't asked him to help. Yes, she had. Screaming help at the top of her lungs probably counted as a subtle request.

His wet cut-offs were clinging to his thighs, she noticed. Muscular thighs. Did he work out? Well, obviously he did, regularly, she thought, cynically. Even sloshing water as he walked, he looked steamily sexy. Yes, and obviously also arrogant and ill-mannered. Peeved, Sienna continued to watch, as he climbed onto his boat. The boat he'd snuck the woman onto and had subsequently been rocking and swaying half the night, the same boat woman-in-the-throes-of-ecstasy sounds had emerged from half the night. With an early team meeting to attend, Lauren had been far from amused this morning.

'You'd think they'd give him his own segregated shagging area,' she'd grumbled, bemoaning the bags under her eyes as she'd applied her concealer.

'You all right, Miss Meadows?' Nathaniel's voice pierced through her meanderings.

Shoot! Sienna had almost forgotten he was there. 'Yes. Thanks.' She smiled wanly, attempting to oust an image of what her reluctant hero had been doing exactly to bring a woman to such obvious heights of pleasure. 'Would you tell him ... Pass on my, um, thanks to, um ...' She nodded towards the boat.

'Adam,' Nathaniel supplied. 'I will.' He paused, then added, 'Can I offer you a little word of advice?'

'Hmm?' Sienna tried to focus her mind away from the soggy sex God, realising she must appear as rude as he was.

'He's bad news,' Nathaniel imparted, rather awkwardly. 'Adam. I wasn't sure whether you realised, but he's a bit of a womaniser. I thought I should warn you, just in case ... you know.'

Well, that much Sienna had gathered. And if she'd been imagining there might be anything remotely attractive in *that*

kind of man, she really must have half a brain.

Chapter Two

Adam had agonised over making the call. Receiving the frosty response he'd expected, he was now beginning to wish he hadn't. He could hear a toddler snuffling tearfully in the background. It could only be Lily-Grace.

Waiting for his would-have-been sister-in-law to come back to the phone, he noted Sherry's car pulling up at the farmhouse and hoped she didn't come directly over to him. It had taken him almost two years to make this call. He should have done it somewhere more private. He should have done it sooner.

'Is she okay?' he asked when Nicole came back on.

'Just tetchy,' Nicole assured him. 'She's a bit over-tired, that's all.'

Adam nodded, not sure what to say next. He had a million questions, but no clue how to ask them.

'So, why the call?' Nicole broke the awkward silence.

Adam had no idea what to say there either. That he'd wanted to call before? Every day since the day he'd last seen Lily-Grace, he'd wanted to call, but could never find the courage? Sounded pretty lame, didn't it? In Nicole's eyes, if he'd cared at all, he would have made sure to call more than the one and only time he had. He did care, though, despite his attempts to convince himself he didn't. There wasn't a day that passed when he didn't think about Lily-Grace, wonder whether she was healthy, happy. Not a night when Emily haunting him, more and more lately, didn't remind him he should know how she was.

'You're a bit late if you want to wish her happy birthday, Adam,' Nicole went on, her tone tinged with sarcasm. 'Her birthday was last week, you might recall.'

'I know.' Adam sucked in a breath. Of course he bloody well knew. 'Can I see her?' He blurted out the question he'd steeled himself to ask and braced himself for the answer. He fully expected her to tell him to do what he'd done up until now and stay out of her life.

'Why?' Nicole eventually asked.

'Because I want to,' Adam said simply. Sharing the fact that he felt Emily also wanted him to, he fancied, would probably make him sound certifiable.

'Yes, but why now, Adam?' Nicole forced her point home.

'To see how she's doing,' Adam gave her the only answer he could. 'How she is.'

'But why, Adam?' Nicole repeated. 'Don't tell me your guilt gene has kicked in and you've finally realised you give a damn.'

Adam swallowed. 'The guilt is always there, Nicole,' he said quietly. 'I know it might not seem like it, but I do actually give a damn. I always have.'

'Right.' Adam heard the cynicism still in her voice. 'Enough to want to be a part of her life?' she asked the crucial question, the answer to which they both knew would impact on all their lives.

'Yes,' Adam answered immediately, 'providing it's okay with you and it doesn't upset her.'

Nicole paused again, and then, 'Without a paternity test?' she asked, cutting to the chase.

Adam sighed inwardly. Barbed that comment might be, but the fact was it was the truth. As far as Nicole was concerned, he really hadn't given a damn when Emily had gone through the pregnancy on her own; the birth; or when Lily-Grace was tiny, vulnerable, parentless. Too wrapped up in his own grief he hadn't visited since, hadn't even enquired how she was, his overriding concern being *whose* she was.

'She's okay, Adam,' Nicole said, a determined edge now to her voice. 'She's doing fine without your input. She's a healthy, happy little girl. I'm not sure it's a good idea, particularly if you're imagining she might be better off with you suddenly. The psychological consequences would be—'

'I'm not imagining she would be better off with me, Nicole. I don't doubt she's happy with you,' Adam interrupted, before she said an out-an-out no. Without the paternity test, he had no rights. He knew it. Nicole had taken responsibility for Lily-Grace when he'd been so messed up he'd been incapable of doing anything but drinking himself into oblivion, when his brother refused to even acknowledge the child existed.

'But even you seeing her would be disruptive, Adam,' Nicole said, after another heavy pause. 'Surely you must realise that? As far as Lily is aware I'm Mummy and Phil's Daddy. It might confuse her.'

'I know,' Adam said quickly. 'That's why I'm asking, Nicole, not insisting. I'd like to see her. I'm happy for it to be on your terms. I know you've been there for her, all that she needed you to be. I would never do anything to upset her world, I promise. If she does seem upset, in any way, I'll back off. I give you my word.'

Adam held his breath as Nicole went quiet again. 'All right,' she eventually relented. 'A short visit, though, initially, Adam. We'll see how things pan out.'

He blew out a sigh of relief. 'Thanks.'

'I'll let you know when and where, but Adam ...' Nicole hesitated again, obviously about to add a caveat, '... if you're planning to see her regularly you're going to have to prove yourself, you know that, right?'

As in make sure he could be relied on not to make a complete mess of this, as he had everything else. Adam got the message. 'I know,' he said, wondering if he could ever live up to that task. 'I'll wait to hear from you. Thanks again, Nicole. It means a lot to me.'

'Don't thank me yet,' Nicole warned him. 'Let's get the first meeting over with. We'll take it from there.'

Pocketing his mobile, Adam went back to work on the fence Sherry had hired him to erect. It was almost finished. After that, he had another few jobs lined up around the town, and then ... He'd cross that bridge when he got to it. He'd see Lily-Grace. Long-term plans though, he wouldn't make, not yet. It might not work out. Nicole might decide he wasn't fit to be any kind of a father figure to her. Momentarily poleaxed by that thought, Adam mulled it over in his head. Could he be? Did he really want to be, given he didn't actually know he was the father? He honestly didn't know. What he did know was there seemed to be an empty space inside him where that child should be. He needed to do this. It made no sense; in fact, the more he thought about it, the more absurd it seemed, but he also felt Emily needed him to. He'd tried to tell himself it was his conscience conjuring her up, but he could *feel* her, her loneliness, her longing, growing stronger each and every time he saw her.

Nicole was right, though. He did need to be reliable if he intended to barge into Lily-Grace's life. If he wanted to be involved in her future, he'd need to contribute financially, too. Despite Nathaniel glibly saying he had skills and should use them, it wasn't going to be that easy. His reputation as a womaniser meant that he wasn't exactly loved by the blokes in the area. He got the cold shoulder most places he went, particularly in the pub, either that or killer looks. He couldn't blame some of the husbands, he supposed, albeit they probably cared more about their own reputation than their wives. That was okay. Adam could live with it, though he wasn't quite sure why a gang of Neanderthal thugs had jumped on the bandwagon, tossing snide remarks after him, slashing his car tyres once, he suspected, which was worrying. Also worrying, now he'd decided to try to do something about his finances, or lack thereof, was that his card had been marked by at least two local car workshops. Mechanics being the only thing he was any good at, it didn't leave him many options employment wise. Short of a paper-round, Adam couldn't see how he was going to get a regular job.

But then – he reached for the final plinth to finish the section of fence he was working on – wasn't he getting a little ahead of himself here? Nicole might even change her mind and not get back to him. In which case, his boat needed to be ready to go. He needed to be ready to do what he'd done since his world fell apart – move on. There was nothing else to keep him in the area, no commitments, and that was the way Adam preferred it. Other than Lily-Grace, he couldn't envisage surrounding himself with family, only to lose them all over again. It was almost inconceivable now that he'd actually been making wedding plans once. He'd wanted to marry Emily, she must have known that. It wasn't commitment to her that had been the problem. Emily had his heart, all of it, he couldn't have been more committed than that. But then, maybe he hadn't had hers.

History. Don't dwell on it. Preferring not to disassemble it all over again, try to work out when it was exactly that she'd decided to sleep with his brother, Adam poured his energies into his physical endeavours instead.

Turning for his drill, he noted Sherry walking across from the house. 'Hi, Adam,' she called, pausing behind him. 'I thought you could use a drink.'

Dragging an arm over his forehead, Adam straightened up and turned to face her. 'I'd love one.' He smiled.

'In the kitchen,' she said, nodding towards the house. 'A beer, so cold the glass is perspiring. I thought you might like to cool down while you drink it.'

'Sounds like a plan.' Adam's smile broadened. The heat was relentless, unusually for mid-June. He squinted up at the cloudless blue sky. It didn't look as if there was going to be a break in the weather anytime soon either.

'Fabulous, isn't it?' Sherry followed his gaze.

'Definitely.' Adam grabbed his vest from the post where he'd hitched it and used it to wipe the sweat from his torso, before tugging it back on. 'Though not so great when you're working in it.'

Sherry trailed her eyes over him. Adam could read the look. 'You could take a shower,' she offered.

'Erm.' Adam glanced sideways to where her husband was leading a horse to the stable blocks. 'Probably not a good idea.'

'I wasn't proposing to join you, Adam.' Sherry gave him an enigmatic smile and turned back towards the house.

Adam watched her as she led the way, her hips swinging in that provocative way women's hips did as she went, but her demeanour all business. Pity. She was an attractive woman. She had nice eyes: cornflower blue, he'd describe them. Adam recalled how she'd reeled him in with those eyes, locking them unflinchingly on his and asking him outright whether he thought she was attractive. What was he going to say? No? When she'd leaned in to brush his lips with hers, trailed a fingernail suggestively from his chest to his abdomen, was he supposed to pretend he wasn't interested? Uh-uh. He'd defy Nathaniel not to have done what he'd done and taken up the invitation, particularly as it was obvious her husband was giving yet another new stable girl so-called riding lessons.

She had nice lips, too. He returned Sherry's smile as she turned to beckon him in through the back door. Soft, full lips. He'd like to taste them right now, but Adam wasn't about to try. It didn't look as if she'd been so thrilled by the action the first time she wanted a replay. Plus, there was the matter of the shotgun; possibly a bloody big shotgun, of which he'd prefer to steer clear. Accepting the beer Sherry offered him from the fridge, Adam concentrated on satiating his thirst.

'Good?' Sherry asked, once he'd glugged half in one mouthful.

'Very,' he assured her, wiping his forearm across his mouth.

'Come and sit down,' she said, helping herself to a beer. 'Take the weight off your feet for five minutes.'

Adam nodded and followed her to the table.

'I have a proposition for you, Adam,' Sherry said, removing the cotton shirt she wore loosely over her strappy top, as he sat.

'Oh?' Adam eyed her over his beer and his eyes lingered. He couldn't help it. Her breasts were fabulous. She had a fantastic figure. He had no idea what the husband was thinking, playing around. Clearly, he wasn't. Sometime, probably soon, the guy was going to lose her. With no children to consider – her husband apparently didn't want kids – Adam figured it was only the business keeping them together.

'How's the boat coming along?' Sherry asked, flicking back her auburn hair as she seated herself opposite him.

She had nice hair, too. Coloured possibly, not natural like the girl's on the quayside this morning, but still sexy. He'd felt bad about losing his temper with the girl the way he had. Even if he had almost come to a watery demise, along with her dog, he'd been well out of order. He wasn't even sure why he'd been so angry, other than there was something about her that had reminded him of Emily, evoking feelings he'd worked hard to forget. He was going to have to swallow his pride and apologise, he supposed.

'Good,' he answered Sherry, pulling his thoughts away from a girl whose name he didn't even know, and who would probably tell him where to stuff his apology. 'Still a fair amount of work to do, interior mostly, electrics and upholstery.'

Sherry arched a curious eyebrow. 'Leather upholstery, I assume?'

'If funds allow.' Adam tried not to read any innuendo into the statement. 'It's probably the most serviceable.'

'You can't beat the smell of leather.' Sherry sighed, taking a sip of her beer.

'No.' Adam watched mesmerised as she wiped the froth from her lips with the pink tip of her tongue, and then, mindful of the husband out in the yard, he glanced down and busied himself with his own beer. 'The hull's sound now, though,' he went on. 'The engine needs an overhaul and I've yet to finish paying for it, but a few more decent jobs and I should be almost there.'

'You're good with your hands, aren't you?' Sherry commented.

Adam glanced sharply back up. 'Some people say so, yes.' He nodded, now definitely confused as to where this was leading.

'So why do odd jobs, then, Adam? Didn't you ever think of maybe setting up a business?'

'Putting down roots? No, not really.' Preferring not to talk about his past, the shared business with his brother, the boatyard they were due to take over from the father he no longer saw and had flatly refused any further financial help from, even when he'd been at his lowest ebb, he ran a finger contemplatively over the rim of his glass. Boats had always been part of his life. As a kid he couldn't keep away from them. He recalled how, attracted by the still of the water, the boats under renovation in the dry dock, he'd spend hours sitting on the lock gates at Diglis in Worcester, a vantage point to the River Severn. He used to think about his mother a lot then: why she'd left him behind, where she'd gone, why she hadn't been in touch. He knew why, though, in his heart. He'd watched his father's bullying day after day.

With no wish to be stuck behind a desk when he'd left school, he'd initially relished every minute working at the boatyard. He'd enjoyed working with his brother, too, though they'd always been competitive; trying to outrun each other on the track at school, on the rugby field. Darren had also taken huge pleasure in proving who was better at martial arts, to Adam's physical discomfort. He hadn't realised how competitive his older brother was though, until he'd moved in on ... *History*, he reminded himself. *Forget it*.

'Maybe, one day,' he said, coming back to the present. 'For now I prefer to travel light, though, so ...'

Sherry nodded thoughtfully. 'About that proposition,' she

said.

Adam eyed her quizzically, wondering if she might be about to offer him something more permanent. He wouldn't say no to short-term employment, particularly now.

'I'm afraid I'm running out of jobs around the farm, Adam.'

'Ah.' Adam nodded. He guessed she might be. Once the fence was finished, he'd fixed pretty much everything that needed fixing.

'I wondered whether you fancied continuing to see me anyway, though,' Sherry went on, outwardly confident, but her eyes were clouded with uncertainty, Adam noted. 'You know, continue seeing each other, I mean. Not as a couple, obviously, as, um ...' she trailed off, clearly flustered.

Adam looked her over curiously. 'Friends?'

Sherry nodded, her eyes flicking down and back.

'With benefits?' Adam added cautiously.

'Yes,' Sherry said, looking relieved. 'I know time is money, so I'd make sure you weren't out of pocket, and we wouldn't have to meet here. I have the holiday cottage, we could, you know ...'

Adam searched her face, bemused. Did she have any idea how many men would think they'd won the lottery if offered a proposition like that?

'Well, what do you say?' Sherry wet her lips with her tongue and swallowed nervously.

Adam smiled. Their previous liaison hadn't been a complete disaster then. 'Did you honestly think I'd say no?'

'I hoped not.' Sherry laughed and exhaled a long breath, her shoulders visibly relaxing. 'I'd better let you get on.' She nodded towards the yard and got to her feet. 'We'll liaise on the phone as to timings, yes?'

'Anytime,' Adam assured her. 'I'll, er, go and finish that fence then.'

Standing, he debated, and then walked around the table and took a step towards her. 'You don't need to make sure I'm not

out of pocket, incidentally,' he said softly. 'Trust me, Sherry, seeing you is plenty incentive enough. You're a very desirable woman.'

'Pity my husband doesn't think so. I can't remember the last time we ...' Sherry trailed off again, humiliation hot on the heels of the uncertainty he'd seen in her eyes.

The man really was a prat. Adam despaired inwardly. 'He must be blind.' He smiled and reached to brush a stray tendril of hair behind her ear.

'You're a hopeless flatterer, Adam Hamilton-Shaw, but lovely with it.' Sherry sighed and turned her face to his touch, her eyes now closed, her lips slightly parted.

Irresistible. Adam trailed his thumb downwards, tracing their outline. Risky though it was with the husband outside, he was sorely tempted. One kiss couldn't hurt, could it? Leaning in to find her mouth with his, he probed softly with his tongue, hopefully leaving her with no doubt that he really didn't need any inducement. Seeing her vulnerability, he wanted to kiss away her insecurities.

He wanted her. Breathing heavily, he eased back and steered her away from the window. He couldn't go too far, not here, it would be completely insane, but ... Adam scanned her face and then, finding what he needed there, he pushed his tongue back into her mouth, kissing her hungrily, before grazing his lips across her chin to kiss his way down the length of her neck. Tentatively, his pulse racing – his antennae on red alert for sounds from outside – he trailed his mouth along her shoulder, peeling one flimsy strap of her top down as he went.

'Extremely desirable,' he whispered, pulling her towards him. His hips hard against hers, he held her gaze, one hand pressed to the small of her back, the other peeling her remaining cami-top strap back.

'And you're doing terrible things to me,' he grated, pressing his mouth back to hers. Time of the essence, he didn't linger, kissing his way once again downwards, he paused at the soft hollow at the base of her neck, between her breasts, easing the top down as he did. 'You should never doubt yourself, Sherry,' he murmured, venturing to take one inviting breast into his mouth, sucking gently, circling with his tongue, until a low moan escaped her.

Now feeling distinctly frustrated and most definitely turned on, Adam found his way back to her ear. 'When and where?' he whispered throatily.

'I'll call you, as soon as—' Sherry stopped, her eyes pinging wide. 'Hell! It's James.' She paled as the male voice right outside the window forced them apart like a thunderclap.

'Crap.' Adam gulped, stepping back, then forwards again to help her with her straps. 'You're an attractive woman, Sherry.' He caressed her lips briefly again with his. 'Definitely desirable, trust me. I'd pay you. I mean ...'

'Go,' Sherry said, laughing, urging him onwards. 'Use the front door. I'll ring you.'

'Do.' Adam winked over his shoulder, quashing a fleeting feeling of guilt as he left. Why he should feel guilty when the husband ... husbands ... were usually cheating without compunction, he wasn't sure, but he always did.