Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

One Hot Summer

Written by Kat French

Published by AVON

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

AVON

A division of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street,
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2016

1

Copyright © Kat French 2016

Kat French asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-0-00-757762-0

Typeset in Meridien by
Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.



FSC™ is a non-profit international organisation established to promote the responsible management of the world's forests. Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations, and other controlled sources.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

CHAPTER ONE

The *Daily Mirror* headline that morning:

MCBRIDE OR MCMISTRESS?

Spotted! It looks like the sexy on-screen romance between married TV star Brad McBride and his sexy co-star Felicity Shaw has spilled over into reality, if our sensational pictures are anything to go by. Shots of the couple smooching in a booth at The Roof Gardens emerged this morning, along with further images of a distinctly sheepish McBride leaving Shaw's London flat in the early hours of New Year's Day.

'They couldn't keep their hands off each other in the club, they didn't seem to care who saw them,' one reveller, who didn't wish to be named, told the *Mirror*. 'I saw them leave in a cab just after midnight; from the way they were going at it in the club, I bet that cabbie had an eye full!'

Representatives for both McBride and Shaw have so far declined comment.

'Alice, it's not what it looks like. I can explain.'

Alice slowly lifted her eyes from the salacious images splashed across the morning papers to the man standing in front of her with his hands spread wide, his eyes saying the opposite of his mouth. Brad McBride. He'd been a burn-your-fingers hot struggling actor when she'd met and married him more than half a decade ago. All that had changed when he landed a role in a new cop drama that had caused a sensation on both sides of the pond, catapulting him straight from struggling-actor status to celebrity darling, and from Alice's darling into the arms of his leading lady, if the papers were to be believed.

It was pretty tricky not to believe them, truth told. There weren't many conclusions to draw from the photos of Brad and Felicity Shaw besides the glaringly obvious ones. Brad could always have been inspecting Felicity's tonsils with his tongue in a purely platonic way, or maybe she was sitting in his lap with her dress around her thighs because her legs had suddenly stopped working, and there was always the outside chance that he'd been caught leaving her bijou townhouse looking rumpled at dawn because his car had mysteriously broken down right outside on the night of the infamous New Year cab strike that never was. That would be the same night three days ago, the very same one that Brad had called her on to say that he couldn't make it back for the weekend as early as planned because filming had run over schedule. It had surprised her that they'd filmed during New Year week, but Alice hadn't made a fuss. She'd had to get used to her husband being public property since he'd been catapulted into stardom, and as his wife she'd quickly had to get used to being photographed for publicity and showbiz events. She didn't enjoy it but knew Brad

needed her to smile for the cameras, and she'd be forever thankful that it had allowed them to buy Borne Manor, the Shropshire country pad of their dreams. Or Alice's dreams, in any case. Brad had liked the place well enough, but London was calling for him in a way it just wasn't for Alice. It seemed simple enough – they'd keep their London flat as a base and buy the Shropshire house as their long-term family home. Except there was no family as yet, and it seemed from the photographs that Brad had decided that life with Alice wasn't quite bright lights, big city enough for him any longer. Folding her arms wearily, she looked her husband in the eyes.

'Go on then.'

His eyes narrowed. 'Go on then what?'

Pack your case and leave. 'Explain,' she said. 'You said you could explain the pictures.' Alice glanced down at the newspaper on the table. 'I'm listening.'

She wrapped her dressing gown closer around her as she slid into one of the dining chairs, weary already even though it was barely eight a.m. The expensive dove grey cashmere robe had been a Christmas surprise from Brad just a week or two ago. Alice found herself wondering if Felicity Shaw was at that very moment wearing the same thing. Her husband was big on efficiency; she could well imagine him doubling up on identical presents.

Brad paused, tongue tied and uncertain.

'Erm, well . . .' He shoved his hands through his dark hair and then scrubbed his palms over his cheeks, unable to meet her eyes head on. If she'd have been looking for classic signs of lying, the red flags were all there. Touching his face and covering his mouth, rapid eye movement, shallow breathing beneath his expensive shirt. It was a poor

show for an actor, really, Alice thought, detaching herself mentally from the situation for self-preservation purposes. She watched him wriggle on the hook, slippery, trying any which way to get himself off it. She wasn't going to help him. She couldn't. All of her efforts were concentrated on holding herself still in the chair rather than flying across the room and tearing his face off.

'Alice, I'm so sorry,' he said, suddenly urgent, crossing the room and pulling out the chair beside hers. He sat facing her, his kneecaps against hers, close enough for Alice to smell the familiar scent of his favourite shower gel. 'It was nothing. She doesn't mean anything to me.'

Alice looked down at his strong, tanned hands as they closed over her clasped ones in her lap. Hands that wore the wedding ring she'd placed there, hands that she'd trusted to hold her heart safely, hands that had held another woman when they should have been holding her. She didn't say anything. It's difficult to speak when your heart suddenly fragments into a million pieces. She could feel it splintering, and it physically hurt all the way from her scalp to her toes.

'It was one night, baby, a stupid, stupid mistake.'

His words washed over her skin, scalding, not in the least bit soothing. Did he imagine that it would be less of a betrayal if he said it had only happened once? Which it hadn't, of course. Lots of little things had happened over the last few months that hadn't quite added up, a dinner receipt here, an inconsistency in Brad's recollections there, and each time Alice had allowed herself to sweep it under the carpet, or had at least looked for innocent explanations instead of jumping to the worst-case scenario. This though . . . these pictures . . . there wasn't a best-case scenario to find here, only the ugly truth of deception and infidelity. Those warning

signs did nothing to deaden the blow of evidence; hard facts turned out to be a lot harder to swallow than suspicion. Dread prickled cold and clammy beneath her skin and her morning coffee rose bitter in her throat. She knew that what she said next mattered. Go, or don't go.

'Tell me what I can do, Alice. I need to make this right again.' Brad squeezed her hands. 'You name it and I'll do it.'

Was it really her responsibility to tell him how to right his wrongs? And why did he assume there was something he could do to balance the scorecard again? Even so, finding the strength required to say the things she needed to say next was the most difficult thing she'd ever done.

'There's only one thing you can do now, Brad. Pack a case. Leave.'

'No! I won't.' Urgent desperation thickened his voice. 'Alice, please, we can work through this. I love you, and I know you love me.' He gripped her hands tighter still. 'Our marriage is worth that, surely?'

Oh, he had no idea how badly he'd just screwed up. She nodded, digesting his words slowly, fury heating her blood.

'You didn't think it valuable enough to stop you screwing Felicity Shaw, yet I'm supposed to think it's worth fighting for. Is that what you're saying?'

She lifted her eyes to his and watched him scrabble for the right words when there weren't any.

'That isn't what I meant,' he said quietly. His phone buzzed in the pocket of his jeans. They both glanced down, knowing in her eyes, guilt in his.

'You better get that,' Alice said, keeping her voice even as she stood, scraping her chair back on the flagstones. 'I'll go and find you a suitcase.'

Three months later . . .

Throwing Brad out had hurt like hell. Gwyneth Paltrow had been way off the mark when she'd used the term conscious uncoupling for separation. Alice felt more like she'd had her heart amputated without anaesthetic, or all the life sucked from her body by an industrial-strength Dyson. It came as a surprise most mornings when she looked in the mirror and found herself still standing up.

'I cancelled your newspaper delivery yesterday,' Niamh said, handing Alice a mug of coffee before taking a seat alongside her on the garden bench out the back of Borne Manor. The sun hadn't long risen, and there was that chilly hint of new-day promise in the pale blue sky.

'Did I ask you to?' Alice said, frowning. She couldn't recall doing it, but that didn't mean much lately. She talked to Niamh most mornings and could barely remember what they'd said within half an hour of her leaving. And it wasn't just Niamh. It was everyone and everything since Brad had left. Her brain was soup. And not a silky smooth consommé, either. It was more like yesterday's leftover dinner liquidised

into a thick unappetising gloop, trying hard to work and failing.

Niamh shook her head. 'Nope, but I did it anyway. You need more pictures of Brad the Cad and Felicity-no-knickers like you need a hole in the head.'

'But . . .' Although Alice knew that Niamh was right, anxiously scouring the papers and magazines for images of him had become part of her post-Brad daily routine. He'd taken out a costly subscription to all of the nationals when they'd moved to Borne; Brad had taken pleasure and pain from searching for mentions and reviews of his performances.

This was just another form of that, really. Alice didn't enjoy it. In fact she had to brace herself for it and her shoulders didn't drop from around her ears until she'd closed the last page of the last newspaper, but in another way she kind of relied on it, in the same strange way you can come to rely on visiting a sick relative in hospital because the alternative of losing them altogether is even worse. By cancelling the papers, Niamh had kicked the power cable out of the life support machine of her marriage. She'd argue, but Alice knew that any doctor in the land would have pronounced it dead anyway.

'But what?' Niamh said, leaning down to find a stick to throw for Pluto, her rescue dog turned loyal companion. 'You'd rather torture yourself slowly than go cold turkey? If I had a bullshit buzzer I'd press it right now, Alice.'

They both watched an ecstatic Pluto hurtle down the frosty lawn and career off towards the woods in search of the stick. He'd be gone a while. He was the dearest of dogs, but he was blind in one eye and his good one wasn't brilliant.

'I bet Davina had a field day, didn't she?' Alice muttered, picturing the owner of the local shop-come-post-office. Dark

haired and sly eyed, Davina was the village ear to the ground and man-eater. There was always talk of scalps on her bedpost amongst wronged wives after a few gins in the local. She wasn't exactly what you might call a girls' girl; she'd happily gossip with mums at the school gate in the morning and try to bed their husbands in the afternoon. She'd had plenty of cracks at Brad since they'd moved into Borne Manor a little over eighteen months ago, a fact which he'd always reported back with glee to Alice. She hadn't been concerned, back then. The fact that he told her all about it meant he wasn't interested, right? Looking back, Alice wasn't so sure. Maybe if Davina had caught Brad at a weaker moment he might have accepted more than a book of stamps and a punnet of strawberries.

Niamh laughed beside her. 'Oh, she tried to fish. All doe eyed, twisting her hair around her fingers as she asked after you and Brad. Proper concerned she was.'

Alice sipped her coffee and watched Pluto mooch about at the edge of the woods. The gardens and land that came with Borne Manor had been one of its big attractions; Alice had imagined kids building forts and camping in the woods, and Brad had pictured rolling garden parties and summer balls attended by the rich and famous. He was a man who'd let his fledgling fame go straight to his head – in his mind's eye he was already one good dinner jacket away from David Frost. Pushing all thoughts of her errant husband to the back of her mind, Alice dwelled instead on the worrying red letter that had arrived a few days ago in the mail.

'I might lose this place, Niamh,' she said, facing facts as she cupped her hands around her mug for warmth against the March morning. 'The bank letters are coming thick and fast, and Brad isn't happy to keep paying the mortgage

indefinitely. I can't possibly pay it. I don't even have a sodding job.'

'So divorce him and use the settlement. Ask the bank to wait.'

'You know that won't happen soon enough. Even if I saw a solicitor today it'd drag on for months.' She didn't mention that she wasn't ready to start divorce proceedings. Divorces needed strength, and she couldn't see herself feeling very Fatima Whitbread for a while yet.

'Is there any chance that Brad might try to take the house?'

'Over my dead body,' Alice shot back, even though she had no clue how she'd stop him if he actually tried. This was her house. It might have both their names on the deeds, but she knew every brick and slate, she loved every nook and cranny. She knew its history and its stories, because she loved the place enough to find out. From the moment she'd set eyes on Borne Manor, she'd wrapped her heart around its mellow stone walls and vowed to love it for ever. Much like her wedding vows, really. The difference was that Brad had let her down. Borne Manor hadn't, and she wanted to repay it in kind.

Quite how she was going to do that though was anyone's guess.

'How long do you have?'

Alice shrugged unhappily. 'Two months, maybe?'

Niamh sucked in a sharp breath of cold air. 'We better think of something fast then.'

We. Not you, we. Not for the first time in the last few months, Alice found herself grateful for Niamh's friendship. They'd been neighbours ever since Alice and Brad moved to Borne, but it was only since Brad's departure that their friendship had blossomed beyond the occasional coffee in the village

or chat at the gate. She'd knocked on the door of Borne Manor and asked if Pluto could possibly go for a run in the gardens as it was safer for him than being on the common, and she'd been around most mornings since at sun up for an early morning coffee on the back bench and an hour setting the world to rights. Alice suspected that word had reached Niamh's ears of her troubles and she'd reached out to help; she was that special kind of person. In actual fact they weren't neighbours, exactly; as owner of the row of four tied cottages next to the manor, Alice was officially Niamh's landlady. Not that she went along the row and collected rent; specified arrangements with most of the cottage owners had been included as part of the sale particulars.

Number one housed Stewie Heaven, ex seventies porn star, a perma-tanned man who seemed to have a wig to suit every occasion. Alice had only seen him on hops and catches as he wintered in Benidorm, but from what Niamh said he'd arrived home a week or so ago and was as verbose as ever about his exploits. He paid rent to Borne Manor at the princely sum of one pound a month, a nefarious peppercorn arrangement with the previous owner for services rendered. No one knew the precise nature of the services, and no one had the stomach to ask.

Hazel lived at number two, a woman as round as she was tall and who told everyone who cared to listen that she was a practising witch. She lived with her sofa-surfing son Ewan, a perpetual student, and Rambo, her talking mynah bird, who could often be found perched on her open windowsill shouting obscenities at passersby. Hazel paid double Stewie's rent at two pounds a month, secured on the basis that she'd cleared the manor of an unwanted poltergeist some twenty years previously.

Which left just Niamh, who'd returned to Borne to nurse her ailing mother after a stroke last summer and stayed on after she died a couple of months later. It was written into the sale of Borne Manor that Niamh's mother and any of her surviving children should be allowed to live rent free in number three until such a time as they no longer wanted or needed to. There was no explanation offered, and Alice saw no reason to question it. Brad had wanted to when news reached him of Niamh's mother's death, but Alice had uncharacteristically put her foot down and refused to allow it. She was glad every day now that she'd made a stand; Niamh had turned out to be the perfect friend in her time of need.

The end cottage, number four, presently stood empty after the passing of Borne's most senior resident, Albert Rollinson, who Hazel assured them now haunted the row of cottages in spirit form, stealing their morning papers to check the runners and riders at Aintree. Fond of a bet and a pint, if Albert was there at all he was the most benign of ghosts. He'd make Casper look angry. Freed of its peppercorn rent arrangement with the death of Albert, the estate agent had secured a buyer for the tiny two up two down and agreed a sale a couple of months back, but as of yet no one had moved in.

'Pluto!' Niamh called, putting her cup down on the cobbles and standing up. 'Here, boy! I better shoot. I've got a sitting this morning, some farmer from three villages over who wants a painting of himself naked for his wife's birthday. Where would a man get the idea that any woman wants that?'

Alice laughed despite her gloom. 'Maybe you could offer him a strategic bunch of bananas or grapes to drape himself with. Tell him it's arty.'

Niamh huffed as she leaned down to clip Pluto's lead on.