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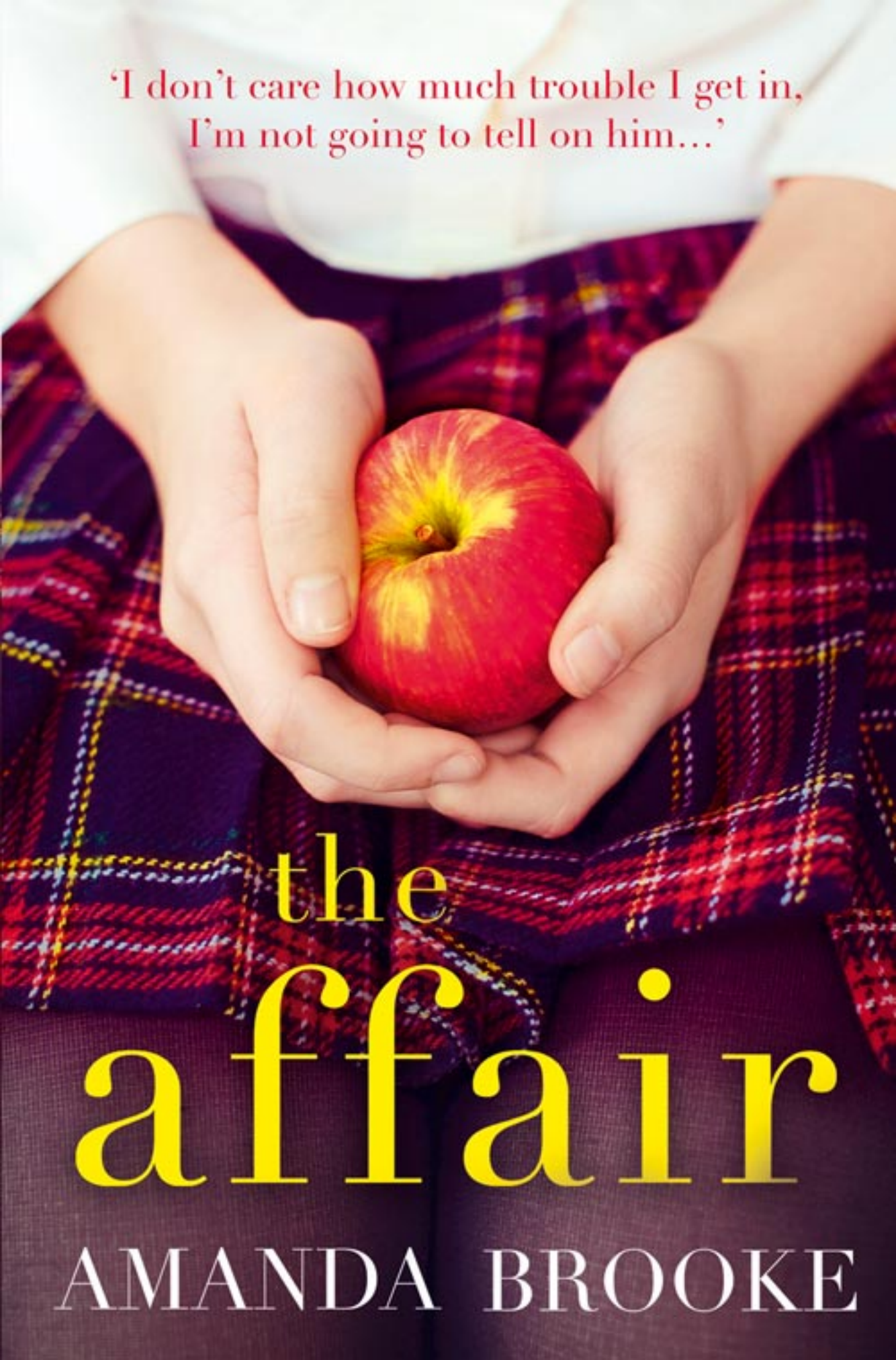
The Affair

Written by Amanda Brooke

Published by Harper

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'I don't care how much trouble I get in,
I'm not going to tell on him…'
the
affair
AMANDA BROOKE

the affair

AMANDA BROOKE

HARPER



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Scarlett

You might as well know from the start, I'm not going to tell on him and I don't care how much trouble I get in. It's not like it could get any worse than it already is. Well, actually, it probably could get a whole lot worse, which is why I'm not doing it.

I can't. Don't ask me why, I just can't.

It's so unfair.

1

The Accusations

Monday, 22 February 2016

Nina sat alone at the breakfast bar as the sun began its slow ascent over the quiet Cheshire town of Sedgefield. The watery light had an ominous red tinge as it crept into the darkened kitchen of the pretty townhouse she shared with her husband and two teenage children. By rights, she should be unloading stock at the shop by now after an early morning trip to the flower market, but Nina was still in her dressing gown, her blonde hair pulled back in a butterfly clip, her face unwashed and her blue eyes dull and empty.

Nina had inherited a strong work ethic from her father, along with the family floristry business, and it had been going against everything he had taught her when she phoned her assistant Janet to say she wouldn't be in. There were a handful of orders that Janet would do her best to complete from the slim pickings what would be left at the market by the time she got there, but Nina had told her not to worry and to turn down new business if she needed to. In truth, Nina didn't care, and she had no idea when that situation might change. She wondered what her parents

would make of the sorry mess she was in. She was almost glad they weren't around to see it.

Ever since Scarlett had dropped her bombshell on Saturday night, Nina had been in a state of shock, and more than twenty-four hours later, she was still struggling to work out how she was meant to react. It didn't help of course that Scarlett had barricaded herself in her bedroom. Nina had tried to reason with her, she had spoken gently to coax the truth out of her daughter, and when that had failed, she had yelled and made threats, only to be met with equal success.

With nothing except the most meagre of information to go on, Nina had no option but to sift through the minutiae of her life and question everything she had thought to be true. The returning answers were ones she didn't want to hear, but she couldn't ignore them, not any more, not when her fifteen-year-old daughter was pregnant.

And of all the questions she had, there was one that scared Nina most. Who the hell was the baby's father?

2

Before

Tuesday, 1 September 2015

Nina pulled up outside the house and paused for a moment to savour the new life she was slowly adjusting to. Something both marvellous and momentous had happened over the summer holidays: Nina Carrington was no more. The ever so slightly bitter divorcée who had brought up two children singlehandedly, vowing never to be financially or emotionally dependent on any man ever again, was no more. She blamed the Welshman.

She had met Bryn Thomas at a New Year's Eve party thrown by one of Sedgefield's most renowned citizens who happened to be Nina's best friend and confidante. Sarah Tavistock and her husband Miles knew how to throw a good party and Sarah had high hopes every year of finding a suitable candidate for the vacancy in Nina's life.

Yet despite Sarah's valiant efforts, for the previous eight years Nina had been left feeling distinctly underwhelmed. It was going to take someone exceptional to persuade her to forsake the independent life she had become accustomed

to, and, to everyone's surprise, that someone had been the taxi driver who had dropped her off at the party.

Within six months, Nina couldn't imagine life without her Welshman and by August, Nina Carrington had officially moved out, making room for Nina Thomas, the forty-two-year-old, newly married wife of Bryn. Nina's second husband was a year younger than her, and as far removed from her first husband as she could hope. Where Adam Carrington had been a smooth operator, Bryn was quietly charming. He was attentive, he was eager to please, and he was gentle in spite of his muscular frame. Bryn did his best to keep in shape despite a job renowned for late nights fuelled by junk food, but he was by no means vain, which was perfect because Nina hadn't been looking for an Adonis. She had been looking for someone who wasn't expecting to be noticed, and when she had found him, the speed of their relationship had surprised them both, as it had her family and friends.

When Nina Thomas put her key in the front door, she pitied her former self, who would have been about to step quietly into an empty house. It was Liam and Scarlett's first day back at school and Nina would normally be the first one home during term-time. What wasn't normal, or at least not yet, was coming home to the aroma of home baking.

'You've been busy,' she said as she stepped into the large open-plan kitchen.

Bryn picked up a flapjack from the cooling rack and held it temptingly towards her. 'Like to try one?'

Nina walked over and with her hands behind her back, opened her mouth while suppressing a smile. Bryn held the

flapjack at a tantalizing distance so that Nina had to snatch a bite. When she bit down on the delicious mix of sweet, golden oats, toasted hazelnuts and juicy raisins, she groaned. 'You're deadly for my figure.'

'I'd say it's your figure that's deadly,' Bryn said, replacing the flapjack with a kiss.

'You won't be saying that after I've had a year of your home cooking.'

'The recipe is low-fat and I've only used natural sugars. Besides, a little of what you fancy does you good.'

'And what happens if you have too much of a good thing?' Nina asked.

Bryn patted his stomach. 'If I'm anything to go by, you won't be gaining weight.' There was a note of pride in his voice, but then a thought occurred. 'But that's only because I was turning into a bit of a couch potato before I met you. I'm not suggesting you need to lose weight.'

Nina gave a soft laugh. 'Don't panic, I know what you meant, but I could stand to lose a few pounds. Believe it or not, I was once as slim as Scarlett.'

'And she has you to thank for her looks,' he said, sounding serious all of a sudden. 'You are without doubt the most beautiful woman I've ever met, Nina.'

When she held his gaze, Nina felt such a rush of love that it took her breath away. She knew they were still in the honeymoon period and there would come a time when they would settle into a comfortable life but, right now, she wanted her husband and he knew it. The air fizzed between them.

'The kids will be home soon,' he said.

Letting out a frustrated sigh as she took control of her

desires, Nina said, 'I know. So what else have you been up to? I hope you've had a chance to get your head down.'

'A few hours, once I knew the kids were off OK.'

Bryn worked the late shift for a local cab company and was out from early evening until the small hours. Before taking on the responsibilities of a family, he would have returned home and gone straight to bed, not rising until midday.

'How were they this morning?' Nina asked, having set off for the market shortly after Bryn had come home.

'I wouldn't go as far as to say they were raring to go,' he said, 'but they were both up in time to eat breakfast, even if Scarlett did have to rush to catch the bus. Liam was his usual leisurely self, so if he was running late, I didn't notice.'

Nina scrutinized Bryn's slate-grey eyes. He was painting a picture of average family life that didn't quite fit with her household. For most of their young lives, her children had endured an absent father and an overworked mother who had either dragged them out of bed to stay with a child-minder, or more recently, left them to their own devices in the mornings and hoped for the best.

Liam was the oldest at seventeen and Scarlett two years younger, and despite the challenges of single-parenting, they had all been happy enough with their unremarkable lives. Nina wasn't sure if her children had ever considered the possibility that she might find a new man; Bryn had been her one and only serious relationship since her divorce. Their reaction to his sudden appearance had been muted, and while they hadn't gone as far as refusing to accept Bryn into their lives, neither had they welcomed him. Liam had

continued with his usual routines, which rarely involved leaving his room; for the most part, his acceptance had been less tangible. Scarlett, on the other hand, was more aloof than hostile. Nina had watched anxiously as her daughter attempted to work out how, or even if she should, acknowledge Bryn's intrusion into the family.

Aware that the idyllic family life of her dreams was still a work in progress, Nina asked, 'Did you actually see them?'

'I piled a plate high with toast to tempt them,' he said in a low hush as if he were a naturalist out in the field waiting for a glimpse of some rare species. 'Using a newspaper as a hide, I heard the female approach. The fridge door opened, orange juice was poured and there was the distinctive crunch of toast. When I looked up, the juice had been discarded and the creature was cursing under her breath as she slammed the front door.'

'And the male?'

'He was far more elusive, and I must have become distracted by the sports section, because the next thing I knew, the last of the toast had been reduced to crumbs, and with a gentle click, the front door closed again.'

'Did either of them actually speak to you?' Nina said, her playful tone replaced by one of exasperation. When Bryn winced in response, she added, 'Not even a good morning, please or thank you?'

'It's the first day of term, what did you expect?'

'A bit of gratitude wouldn't have gone amiss, given how you stayed up to make them breakfast.' She looked at the flapjacks, and added, 'And I suppose those are to make their homecoming more welcoming?'

'I enjoy baking. I enjoy having a family to look after.'

Nina slipped her arms around her husband's neck, which was quite a stretch. She was the shortest member of the household and even Scarlett towered over her these days. 'Well, if my self-centred children don't appreciate you, I do. I really did get lucky when I phoned for that taxi.'

'Oh for God's sake, get a room,' someone said from behind them.

Rather than pull away from the embrace as Bryn intended, Nina drew him closer for a kiss, not caring that it would intensify her daughter's mortification. If she couldn't convince her children to accept Bryn, she was going to make it absolutely clear how important he was to her. Marrying Bryn Thomas was not the symptom of a midlife crisis, as Sarah had suggested on more than one occasion. There were simply times when something felt right because it was right.

By the time Nina was ready to face her daughter, Scarlett had turned her back on them and was inspecting the contents of the fridge. Gone were the days when her daughter looked cute in her new uniform. Her plaid skirt had been rolled up at the waist so that it was a couple of inches higher than the regulatory knee-length, although thankfully still longer than most of the outfits she was inclined to wear these days.

When Scarlett picked up a half-eaten bar of chocolate, Nina said, 'Why don't you try a flapjack?'

'Chocolate's good for you,' Scarlett said, snapping a piece from the bar.

Nina tutted. 'You do know that's just a myth? There's no scientific evidence behind it.'

Scarlett popped the chocolate in her mouth and beamed a smile. 'I'll take my chances.'

‘The flapjacks will keep, I’ll put them in a container,’ Bryn said. ‘They’re only a hundred calories each, and they have slow-releasing energy.’

Under her mother’s withering glare, Scarlett’s conscience was pricked. ‘I suppose I could take some out tonight for my mates.’

‘Out? Tonight?’ Nina repeated. ‘I don’t think so. Summer holidays are over and you have your GCSEs this year. No socializing during the week and only once at the weekend.’

Scarlett’s jaw dropped. ‘You can’t do that!’

‘It’s not open for discussion, Scarlett. That’s how it is. And by the way,’ Nina added, dropping her gaze to Scarlett’s hands, ‘when I told you last night to take off your nail varnish, I meant take it off. You know the school rules, and by my reckoning you’re breaking at least half a dozen.’

‘But, Mum, nobody cares. Everyone wears makeup and nail varnish, and the teachers don’t say a thing. If you’re that bothered, I’ll put nail-varnish remover in my bag and, if any of the teachers freak out, I’ll take it off.’

‘No, do it now.’

Scarlett shoved another piece of chocolate in her mouth before returning the remainder to the fridge. ‘If I do, can I still go out tonight? It’s not as if school’s started properly.’

In the midst of their negotiations, Liam had appeared like a spectre only vaguely aware of the world around him. Without uttering a word, he grabbed something from the fridge and wedged it between two slices of bread before disappearing.

‘I give up, honestly I do.’

Scarlett’s face lit up and she ran over to give her mum a dramatic hug. ‘Thank you, Mum,’ she said, scurrying out

of the kitchen before Nina realized her daughter thought she had been talking to her. Nina was going to have to up her game if she were to avoid being outmanoeuvred by her children in the coming year.

Nina stood on the landing staring at two firmly closed bedroom doors, and as she listened to Bryn preparing dinner downstairs she could feel her frustration get the better of her. She accepted that they were all in a period of adjustment, but was it too much to expect Liam and Scarlett to at least acknowledge the efforts their stepfather was making, even if they chose not to reciprocate? Her marriage could be a great opportunity for them to have a male role model in their lives at long last, if only they would recognize it.

Liam and Scarlett's dad worked on the North Sea oil rigs and lived a single life in Aberdeen as far as Nina was aware. His children rarely had contact with him and it had been a year or two since either of them had made noises about going to stay with him. Nina had been a lone parent in every sense of the word and, despite heroic efforts, there had been limits to the advice and support she could offer her children, not to mention time. Bryn could bridge the gap. He *was* bridging the gap, and while Nina wasn't quite ready to drive the point home forcefully, she wasn't averse to helping things along.

She tapped on Liam's door and, after receiving no reply, pushed against the doorstop her son used to deter unwelcome visitors. The door opened only a fraction, revealing a darkened room thick with stale air. A flicker of blue light suggested Liam was using some form of electronic device to communicate with his virtual world.

'Liam?'

When she received a grunt in response, she asked, 'How was your first day back?'

'Fine.'

'Dinner won't be long. Bryn's trying out a new recipe.'

Nina hadn't posed a question so received no answer or acknowledgement.

'Have you made plans for the weekend?' she continued, and although it was a question this time, an answer wasn't necessary. If Liam had friends outside school, they rarely met, not in the real world at least. 'Sarah's suggested we all go out for Sunday lunch. I'd like us all to go.'

There was a hiss of annoyance, but not an outright refusal.

'OK?' she asked.

'OK, Mum. Is that all?'

'Great, lovely. I'm so looking forward to having quality time with my family,' she muttered under her breath as she closed the door and turned her attention towards Scarlett's room.

Of the two adolescents Nina had to contend with, she held out most hope for Scarlett. At fifteen, she was still young enough to want to please her mum, or at least Nina hoped that was the case. She tapped lightly on the door and walked in.

Scarlett was sitting at her dressing table absorbed in the task of applying dramatic sweeps of eyeliner to accentuate violet eyes that were already guaranteed to draw attention. She had always been a pretty child and undoubtedly she would become a beautiful woman one day, but at that precise moment she was somewhere in between and it didn't rest

easy with Nina. Her daughter had plenty of friends who were boys and one day, perhaps soon, she would break someone's heart and most likely have hers broken in return. The best Nina could hope for was that Scarlett wouldn't follow her example and leave it until middle age to find *the one*.

'Scarlett!' Nina shouted loud enough to be heard above the music being channelled through headphones and assaulting her daughter's eardrums.

Scarlett jumped and the delicate flick of black she had been applying zigzagged towards her temple.

'For f—' Scarlett began, only to check herself. 'Flipping heck, Mum. What did you do that for? You scared the sh—, the life out of me!'

Try as she might, Nina couldn't keep a straight face. 'I think you need to redo your makeup.'

Scarlett turned back to the mirror and examined the damage. 'Oh great, now I'll have to start again. I'm going to be late.'

'Late out, but not late back,' Nina told her. 'Where are you going anyway?'

'Only Eva's.'

'To do homework?' Nina asked hopefully.

'On the first day back? Not even *my* teachers are that mean.'

'How was school?'

Scarlett pulled a face. 'Mrs Russell has left. She got a better job in Chester.'

'Good for her,' Nina said. Scarlett owed much of her academic success to the woman who had been her form tutor for the last four years. Whenever there had been a suggestion that she was becoming distracted or disheartened,

Mrs Russell had managed to get her back on an even keel. 'You're going to miss her, aren't you?'

Scarlett shrugged. She preferred not to admit to liking any of her teachers and Nina had to read between the lines. 'So who's her replacement?'

Wiping her eyelid with a dampened cotton bud, Scarlett appeared disinterested in both the question and her answer. 'Mr Swift.'

'Ooh, isn't he that good-looking English teacher?'

The soiled cotton bud was cast across the dressing table. 'Urgh, if you're into ancient relics.' A smile began to form as she drew her dazzling violet eyes away from her reflection and towards her mum. 'He's about to turn thirty and the whole of our form convinced him he's losing his hair. He's probably gone home to ask his wife if he really does have the massive bald spot we all swore we could see.'

'The poor man.'

'Linus said he's going to bring in one of his granddad's caps as a birthday present.'

'Ah yes, Linus. Will he be at Eva's tonight?'

'Probably,' Scarlett said as she began reapplying her eyeliner.

Scarlett had spent most of the summer helping her best friend Eva convert her parent's garage into a crash pad. She had stayed over so often that Nina had felt obliged to send groceries as a contribution to Eva's parents' burgeoning shopping bill. According to Eva's mum, they had a strict no smoking and no drinking policy in place, and thanks to an internal door that meant an adult could barge in at any moment, Nina was reassured that they weren't up to anything else either.

'I hope you behave yourselves.'

There was a split second where Scarlett might have been about to ask her mother what she meant, but they had already had that conversation and Scarlett was in no hurry for a repeat. 'We will.'

Having remained on the threshold, Nina looked over her shoulder towards Liam's closed door. 'Boys might seem a mystery to you now, but, believe me, it doesn't get any better.'

The comment had been directed to herself as much as it was to her daughter, and Scarlett chose not to respond.

'You do know you can talk to me about anything, don't you?' Nina continued.

Scarlett huffed, suggesting she didn't quite agree.

'What?'

'I would have thought you're too loved up to be bothered about what's going on in my life any more.'

'Just because Bryn is here, it doesn't mean I haven't got time for you, Scarlett,' Nina said carefully. 'I know you're getting to an age where you can make your own decisions, and I trust you to make the right ones, but sometimes it helps to talk them through with someone, and not only me. Maybe Bryn can give you the male perspective where I can't.'

Scarlett put down her eyeliner. 'OK, Mum, is this conversation about me, or could it possibly be about Bryn?' she asked.

Nina felt her heart being pulled in two opposing directions. She and her children had made a formidable partnership over the years and she didn't want that part of her life to change. 'All I ask is for you and Liam to give him a chance. He's not trying to foist himself on you as

your new dad. We both know you'd only resent him if he tried.' Nina left a pause in the hope that Scarlett might tell her she was worrying for nothing, but her silence told her all she needed to know. 'Please, Scarlett.'

Scarlett bit her lip. This was another conversation they'd had many times before, right up to the eve of her wedding, in fact. Both Liam and Scarlett had needed some convincing that Bryn wasn't a con artist preying on a lonely woman who just so happened to have a house and a business. It didn't help that Bryn had made the mistake of mentioning to Sarah that he had been made bankrupt in a previous life, and so Sarah had sided with the children. Nina had told them to trust her judgement, and although that argument hadn't been completely won, she clung to the hope that one day Scarlett and Liam would come to love Bryn as much as she did.

'I'll try,' Scarlett promised.

Leaving a pause that was thick with disappointment, Nina asked, 'What time are you planning on coming home?'

'Eleven.'

'Ten.'

'Ten-thirty?'

'If you're expecting me to pick you up, it has to be ten o'clock, Scarlett. Some of us have to get up at five.'

'I could walk. It's not far.'

'Not at that time of night.'

'I'll get a taxi.'

'Bryn will be out then, I could ask him to pick you up?'

The refusal was already forming on Scarlett's lips, but with her promise to her mum still fresh in both their minds, she managed another shrug. 'I suppose.'

‘Great, so that’s settled. And like I said earlier, don’t think this is a regular occurrence. As of next week, studying begins in earnest. You’ve worked really hard to get this far, don’t fall at the last hurdle, Scarlett.’

‘Mum, it’s the first day, at least give me a chance to mess up before you go into nag mode,’ Scarlett replied before returning to the task of putting on her makeup.

Rather than leave, Nina crept deeper into the room until she was standing behind her daughter. She waited for Scarlett to stop what she was doing and look at her mum through the reflection in the mirror. Nina kissed the top of her head. ‘Sorry. I should have more faith in you,’ she said.

‘No arguments from me,’ Scarlett said with a smile and the kind of assured tone that Nina was convinced would see her daughter achieve the A-star grades her teachers were predicting.

Sunday, 6 September 2015

There was a varied selection of restaurants in and around Sedgefield, and if it were up to Nina, she would have been happy enough with the local pub for Sunday lunch, but Sarah had other ideas. The two friends had known each other from childhood, back when Nina had helped out at her dad’s shop and Sarah had faced a similar plight in the shop next door. Unfortunately for Sarah, her father had been a butcher; she would often sneak off to help Nina with her flower arranging, if only to avoid the smell of blood and guts.

Despite the similarity in their backgrounds, Sarah’s life had taken turns that neither of them could have imagined. Sarah would say she had more of an incentive to turn from

the paths their parents had led them towards, but it also helped that she had a driving ambition. She had gradually taken over the management of the butcher's and introduced new product lines until the business was as well known for its delicatessen as it was for fresh meat. When she had married Miles, he had encouraged her to diversify into property management and goodness knew what else. Nina often wondered what she might have made of herself if she had hated flowers as much as Sarah hated raw meat. Would she have gone on to explore new and exciting opportunities instead of being satisfied with business as usual?

As things stood, Nina lived an average life with average expectations, while Sarah had become accustomed to a certain level of service. Pub grub would not do and a table had been booked at the Stone Bridge, a restaurant that overlooked the Bridgewater Canal and was on track for its first Michelin star.

'Are we happy with the table?' Miles asked, pulling out a chair for his wife.

Nina had already taken her seat and felt Bryn's hand on the back of her chair in a clumsy attempt to follow Miles' example. 'It's a lovely view,' she said.

'Hmm,' Miles said, glancing out of the window only briefly. They were on the upper floor of the restaurant, which had a grand view of the dense Cheshire countryside that had yet to be touched by autumn's scorching fingers. Sarah's husband was more interested in checking the distance between their table and those on either side, which were both occupied. Even if he had wanted to move, which he was obviously considering, the restaurant was almost full and their options would be limited. 'I suppose it will do.'

‘I hope you’re all hungry,’ Sarah said, ‘and I don’t want to hear anyone suggesting we skip starters.’ She was directing the comment towards Scarlett and added, ‘You can always give dessert a miss if you want to watch your figure.’

Scarlett blushed fiercely but said nothing.

‘She doesn’t need to watch her figure. She’s perfect as she is,’ Bryn said.

His tone had been light but there was no mistaking the defensiveness in his remark and it made Nina smile. He was protecting her family, but judging from Sarah’s expression she wasn’t reading it that way.

‘You think so?’ she said, raising an eyebrow.

Nina held her friend’s gaze long enough to let her know she should keep her thoughts to herself. The only reason she had gone along with Sarah’s suggestion that they all have lunch was because she saw it as a way to cement her new husband’s place amongst her friends and family. It was not another opportunity for Sarah to sit in judgement of Bryn, and she had told her as much.

‘Of course it’s perfect,’ Sarah continued, with a small nod of apology to Nina. ‘You’re turning into quite a stunner, Scarlett. Your mum’s going to have to keep her eye on you.’

Scarlett slunk lower in her chair, threatening to disappear and never return.

‘How’s business, Miles?’ Nina asked, to divert attention. After all these years she still wasn’t sure what exactly Miles did, other than he was something big in engineering and the demand for his skills took him all over the world.

‘Busy as always,’ he said, ‘and it doesn’t help that my darling wife has a habit of jumping from one new project

to another while expecting me to sort out the paperwork for what is meant to be *her* company.'

'But you're far better at it than I am,' Sarah said with a playful smile. 'And there's so much to do.'

'Which means I should be back at home sorting things out, but you insisted, and what Sarah wants, Sarah gets.'

'Well, we're glad you could make it,' Nina answered, 'aren't we, Bryn?'

'Most definitely. I know how work can take over your life.'

Miles gave a disinterested nod and it was Sarah who asked, 'Have you never thought of starting up a business again?'

Bryn seemed to consider the possibility for a moment, only to shake his head. 'Printing was all I knew, but the industry changed so fast. I wouldn't know where to begin these days, and I wouldn't want to try. Taxi-driving suits me fine: not as much stress and more time to spend with Nina and the kids.'

'Have you been working this weekend?' Sarah asked.

'Yeah, and I'll probably go out for a few hours tonight, although it's hardly worth the effort on Sundays.'

Scarlett stopped gazing out of the window and turned an arched eyebrow towards Bryn. 'Could you pick me up later?'

'Pick you up from where?' Nina demanded.

'Eva's,' Scarlett said, as if it were obvious.

'You were there last night and it's school tomorrow.'

'Oh, let the girl live a little,' Miles said. 'Is there a boy on the scene by any chance?'

Nina was about to come to her daughter's rescue again,

but this was a question she had asked often enough and it was refreshing to hear it from someone else.

'No.'

'How about you, Liam?' Sarah asked.

All eyes turned to Nina's eldest, who had kept his head down and his eyes fixed on his smartphone throughout the entire conversation. Nina had warned Sarah not to make any remarks if he insisted on using it during their meal; it had been part of the deal to get Liam there in the first place.

'Yes, Liam, are you seeing any boys?' Miles said. He was the only one to laugh at his joke.

Nina was about to say that it didn't matter which of the sexes her son preferred provided he was happy; but saying such a thing would only expose the fact that this was a possibility she had considered. She really didn't care if he was interested in girls or boys, just as long as he was interested in someone with a pulse. She had shared her concerns with Sarah and suspected her friend had continued to speculate on Liam's sexuality with Miles.

Liam lifted his gaze and fixed it on Miles. Her son didn't speak often but when he did, he used his words to full effect. 'Sorry, Miles, you're not my type.'

From the corner of her eye, Nina knew Bryn was trying not to laugh, which made it doubly hard to suppress her own smile. She would have liked nothing better than to high-five her son.

After placing their orders, it was Sarah who kept the conversation flowing. And while she was busy telling Bryn how her company supplied the hummus he had ordered for starters, Nina let her mind wander. She looked at her

children in turn and wondered how the next critical years in their lives would play out. She was hoping that her marriage would add some stability to their lives; although they weren't quite there yet, Scarlett appeared more comfortable in Bryn's company of late, possibly because she had worked out that she had a chauffeur at her beck and call. Except she didn't look comfortable now, Nina realized when she saw a deep blush rising in her daughter's cheeks.

'What's wrong, Scarlett?' Nina asked quietly.

'Nothing.'

Scarlett pressed her chin to her chest. Her sleek blonde hair fell over her shoulders and partially obscured her face while she played with her hands.

Liam was first to locate the source of her embarrassment. 'It's Mr Swift,' he said, tipping his head to the far side of the restaurant.

Scarlett's form tutor was even more handsome than Nina remembered and, in contradiction to his students' teasing, his thick dark hair showed no signs of thinning. On the few occasions she had spoken to him at parents' evening, she had been almost tongue-tied, but it was Mr Swift who looked lost for words at present. He was with a small group consisting of two women and a young child, and was as yet unaware of the attention he had drawn from their table, being fully preoccupied with the two helium balloons that had been tied to the back of his chair. A large silver number three and a matching zero.

'I remember him, he was one of Charlotte's teachers,' Sarah said. 'Why didn't we have teachers like that in our day, Nina?'

'Maybe we should go and say hello,' she suggested.

Scarlett snapped her head towards her mum. 'Don't you dare!'

'She's only teasing,' Bryn said. 'Even your mum wouldn't embarrass you that much.'

'I think the embarrassment is all his,' Miles said. 'I spent my thirtieth in New York having a whale of a time.'

'Would that be the business trip you were forced to take while I was at home caring for our baby girl?'

'Ah, yes,' Miles said and cleared his throat. 'When I said a whale of a time, what I meant was because I was working so hard, dearest.'

Nina bit her tongue. Unlike her oldest friend, who would jump at the opportunity to scrutinize the cracks in someone else's relationship, Nina preferred to focus on the positives. Sarah's marriage might have its faults, but it had been strong enough to endure an affair, and if Miles had strayed since, he was a brave man indeed. By contrast, Nina's first marriage had disintegrated at the first hint of a problem, and Nina would be eternally grateful to Sarah, who had stopped her falling apart by convincing her she could go it alone.

'Thirty is *so* old,' Scarlett was saying.

Sarah choked on the sip of wine she had been taking. 'God knows what she makes of you then, Miles.'

'Fifty is the new forty.'

'And twenty years more than thirty,' remarked Scarlett.

When the starters arrived, the English teacher and his family were all but forgotten as the grown-ups focused their attention back on their own table.

'So what are you up to, Liam?' Sarah asked.

'Not much.'

'Have you picked a university yet? I'm sure it was around

this time that Charlotte dragged us all around the country for countless open days. Typical of Charlotte, she opted for the first one we'd seen.'

'She's at Liverpool, isn't she?' Bryn asked.

'Yes. I can't believe it's her final year so soon, and now the little madam has her mind set on a career in advertising. If I'd known she wouldn't be coming home to work for me, I might have thought twice about paying for all that extra tuition that got her into uni in the first place.'

'It's a different generation,' Nina offered.

'Maybe, maybe not,' Sarah told them. 'By hook or by crook, I'll rope Charlotte in eventually. I know I take advantage of Miles, but we can't go on as we are. It's only going to get busier in the next year.'

'I can't imagine convincing any of mine to become florists,' Nina said, confirmed by the expressions on her children's faces. 'And I wouldn't want them to. I'd like them to go off and explore the world. Liam came up with a long-list of possible unis over the summer, but I suppose we do need to whittle it down. Isn't January the deadline for getting applications into UCAS?'

'It doesn't matter any more,' Liam said. 'I've changed my mind.'

'Pardon? What do you mean, you've changed your mind?'

'Not everyone has to go to uni.'

'I know,' Nina said slowly to keep her temper in check, 'but up until now, it was what you wanted. And if you don't go, can you please tell me what you do have planned?'

'My company has a very good apprenticeship programme,' Miles offered. 'Or failing that, there could be opportunities with Sarah's new housing development. It's still going

through planning, but once we get the green light, I'm sure we could persuade one of the contractors to take you on. What kind of career were you thinking about?'

Nina was struggling to keep up with the pace of the conversation. 'Hold on, can we rewind for a minute. We haven't ruled out university yet.'

Rather than answer, Liam returned his attention to his phone. The argument was closed, for now at least, and perhaps that was for the best. She didn't want Miles mapping out her son's life for him, she had managed well enough on her own so far.

'I'll be out this evening and, by the sounds of it, so will Scarlett,' Bryn said. 'Maybe you two could have a chat about it later?'

'Good idea,' Nina said, admonishing herself for forgetting she was in a partnership now. The conversation she needed to have with Liam might be better alone, but it felt good knowing she had backup.

While everyone had been concentrating on Liam, Scarlett became disengaged from the conversation. She had finished her starter and was looking absent-mindedly around the restaurant. Taking her lip gloss from her purse, her mouth open in a pout, she stroked the wand across her lips in soft, sensual strokes.

'A word of advice, my lovely,' Sarah said, her note of caution laced with a hint of envy. 'Don't do that in public unless you want to attract the attention of every hot-blooded male in the room.'

Bryn and Miles remembered themselves and looked away from the fifteen-year-old schoolgirl.