THE SECOND CHANCE HOLIDAY CLUB

Kate Galley



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Head of Zeus
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

For three incredible Septuagenarians

Sue
Valerie
Andrea

Chapter One

Fledgling

I'm kneeling on the floor in my husband's study. My ancient knees are arguing with each other in the deep pile carpet while my fingers tap their way along the underside of his desk, as if I'm playing a soundless piano.

I knew the day would end like this, in here, although I'm not sure what I'm going to find. Certainly a lot of paperwork, which I'd expect from Tony, but perhaps, if I'm lucky, some cash, or a secret savings book, some long-forgotten Premium Bonds. Or maybe a stack of those men's magazines; I shudder at the thought, but really, my husband wasn't that kind of man. I can hear my sister's voice immediately, *Tony was a man, it's all men*, in that self-satisfied way she has, the voice of unfounded authority, despite her having only sixty-eight years to my own seventy-six. Our mother had cut her parenting teeth on me. She had eight years to get used to motherhood, duty, care, but the true flood of maternal love didn't seem to materialise

until Carol popped into the world. But then, she'd been a beautiful baby; easy to love, to spoil.

Bingo! My fingers find a lump of Blu-Tack with a key stuck in its grip. I pull hard and the whole lot comes away, a sliver of lacquer with it. The key is almost identical to the one for my jewellery box, which I do keep locked even though Tony says it's pointless. It's not heavy – someone could just walk off with the whole thing if they felt so inclined, he said. Even so, every night before I go to bed, I remove my gold locket and lay it carefully inside the velvet-lined box, lock it up and pop the key into my bedside drawer, because you can never be too careful. Tony said it would be better if I slept with it around my neck, because a burglar would be hard pushed to walk off with me. He could be a little cruel like that sometimes.

Of course, Tony's desk is a different matter altogether. There are three drawers, but it's only the bottom one that's locked. I think, perhaps, I always knew this, but hadn't had the inclination to understand what that might mean; until now, that is.

The key slips easily into the lock and with one quick turn, I have it open. I rock back onto my heels to relieve the pressure on my knees, but this just causes more pain in my hip; I'm not made for crawling around on the floor any more. Ignoring the discomfort, I take a glance inside. My first thought is that it's almost empty, and with it comes a sense of disappointment. In reality, there are only a few things: a couple of folded newspapers, an Airfix model of a Spitfire with pots of paints and glue, and a lilac-coloured envelope; the name on the front isn't my husband's. Suddenly, though, the significance of so few items elevates them to a greater importance.

My eyes return to the envelope and the colour of it. Tony wasn't a man who was into pastel tones; he was a lover of stags' heads and horse brasses, paperweights and paintings of battle scenes and brooding skies. He certainly wasn't interested in pretty things. Just the thought of him using lilac stationery is ludicrous. It wasn't even well hidden. Yes, it was locked, but I could have asked him what was in it any time I liked, of course I could. But instead, he chose to hide the key and I chose not to be interested. It occurs to me that these are exactly the sort of things I was expecting to find and my throat tightens. All of a sudden, I'm undecided – maybe today isn't the day to be looking, after all.

I close the drawer with a bang that disturbs the air around me, and the scent of the lilies, orchids and roses that have been arriving all week invade from the hallway and living room. Carol sent most of them. She said it added a certain drama to the occasion, but despite me suggesting I had quite enough of that going on, the flowers kept arriving.

I stand now against protesting hips and pause to allow the pins and needles to stop and for a moment of dizziness to pass. My head is still a little fuzzy from the sherry I had at the wake and I wait with one hand on the wall, taking in the deep lines and liver spots, how dry my skin is. I make my way slowly to the kitchen, my hand brushing the wallpaper as I go, the flock soft under my fingertips, the sturdy wall only a whisker away in case of a fall. I contemplate another drink – I quite like the haze – but that really won't do. Instead I fill the kettle, then pour some away, take two cups from the cupboard and put one back; *silly old Evelyn Pringle*.

Taking my tea into the living room, I sit on the settee, change my mind and settle in the armchair – Tony's

armchair. I'd like to feel the weight of a cat on my lap, or perhaps it could be curled up on the rug in front of the gas fire. I had wanted a real fire in a stove with a proper crackle and an occasional roar, but Tony wouldn't have it. He wouldn't have a cat, either – he was allergic to their fur; although I glimpsed him once, through the kitchen window, stroking next door's tabby as it rolled around in a patch of sun on our driveway. I'd watched him when he came back in for signs of a rash or a sneezing fit, but there had been none. Perhaps his allergy came and went as often as he did himself.

As soon as I woke this morning, I imagined myself going through Tony's things. I thought about it at the hairdresser's, while the girl tried to curl my straight white hair, and when I made up my face and wrestled myself into my black wool dress, and again when Carol arrived with her husband to take control of the day. I was still thinking about it when Tony's coffin disappeared behind the curtain. While I should have been focused on the enormity of never seeing him again, never sharing another meal, a conversation, a bed with the man I'd been married to for fifty-eight years, I'd actually been imagining myself coming home, kicking off my shoes and walking straight into his study to rifle through his possessions. With good reason, it would seem.

The crematorium had been stuffed to the rafters. All of Tony's golf chaps had been there, the Rotary Club lot and the self-named *Book Busters*; ridiculous title. Tony had led the campaign to save the local library from closing a few years ago; an odd undertaking for a man who barely picked up a novel. He liked a cause, though. Well, he liked a cause outside of this house. All those people and their husbands

and wives was too much for me. I kept to the shadows, my heart keeping up a relentless thrumming, my breath hot and fast in my throat. I'd let Carol meet and greet, make sure there were enough sandwiches at the wake. It was impossible to miss the tributes murmured from group to group, though. Tony was well liked, he was a super golfer, the best person to find for a pint on the nineteenth hole, had done so much for the community, a wonderful problem-solver. I should have felt so proud but, to be honest, I'd lost touch with who they were talking about.

I sip my tea still thinking about sherry and what would it matter if I did have another drink, who would know? I can imagine my sister, though, thinking of me as a lonely widow, a bit drunk most of the time. She once said that Tony was my anchor, my rock, that I'd be lost without him. We were watching a documentary at the time about birds nesting high up in cliffs and the fledgling had just hurled itself from the top. I was the chick and Tony was the nest, according to Carol, who'd had a fair amount of gin. I told her the fledgling looked liberated, but then it hit the rocks below before being snatched up in the jaws of a predator. *Stay in the nest, Evelyn*, she'd said, but where she thought I might contemplate going was anyone's guess.

Abandoning my teacup to the side table, I make my way to Tony's drinks cabinet, the idea of more dry sherry already warm on my tongue, when the shrill ring of the telephone stops me. I consider ignoring it, but then lift the handset from the hook anyway, regretting it the moment my sister's voice comes at me from down the line.

'Evelyn, I'm just phoning to check you haven't hit the sherry again. It was a big day today and you did so well.'

Carol starts the sentence like a competent human being, but by the time she reaches the last three words, her voice descends to a pitch usually kept aside for children and small furry animals.

'I'm just having a cup of tea, actually,' I say, moving back towards my cup and away from temptation.

'I really wish you'd let me stay tonight, so you're not on your own. I could be in the car and with you in half an hour.'

In just thirty minutes, Carol could be here, in this house. We could go through the contents of the drawer together, ruminate about what it means, consider next steps. But it wouldn't be like that. Carol would take the matter entirely out of my hands and besides, I haven't examined the contents of the drawer properly yet, haven't found all there is in there waiting for me. And it's not just about what's in the drawer – there's the ring to consider, too.

'I'm fine,' I tell her. 'I'm going to have a nice bath and an early night.'

I'm actually going to finish that bottle of sherry and watch some rubbish on the television. I usually like a bit of notice when Carol's coming, to dot about a few thank-you cards from her grandchildren, bring out that ghastly vase my niece bought me for my birthday.

'You know, you could come and stay with me and John. I could look after you, we could talk. Maybe being in the house without Tony is too much for you. He was a big part of your life, you know.'

I stifle a sigh.

'Yes, he was a big part of my life, he was…' I find myself trailing off before I can finish.

'Oh, Eve, it breaks my heart to think of you being alone. Is there anything I can say to persuade you to come?'

'Carol, I've spent most of my married life alone. You know how often Tony was away – I think I can cope.'

I wonder for a moment what would happen if I accepted the invitation, though. Carol doesn't really want me to stay. It's her birthday in a couple of days and she's probably got her daughters and grandchildren visiting – I'd be in their way. I can picture my sister trying to enjoy her special day with her perfect family: cake, presents, balloons – they always go over the top – and then offering lonely, childless old me, sad and pathetic looks. It's tempting to call her bluff, though, just to hear her try to squirm out of it, but I let her off the hook; I really haven't got the energy for games.

'I'm honestly OK. I've got to get used to being on my own. Thanks, though; it means a lot,' I say, although really it means next to nothing.

'Well, make sure you eat one of the meals I left in your freezer. You need to keep your strength up, take your mind off the pain.'

Am I in pain? I'd certainly been in shock when I first heard Tony had died, but that's to be expected when the police turn up on your doorstep and tell you your husband's been found dead in his car on the hard shoulder of the M3. A heart attack; nice and quick, they'd said, he wouldn't have suffered. In fact, he was halfway through cleaning his reading glasses, his outdated 2013 road atlas open in his lap, a neat diamond ring in the top pocket of his best suit. He was supposed to be at an antiques fair in Sevenoaks, Kent.

By the time I saw the ring, it was in a sealed plastic bag

along with his own wedding band. They clinked together like something to celebrate, teasing me. The policewoman handed it over and smiled sympathetically, said what a lovely surprise it would have been and what a shame he'd never got to give it to me himself. I'd agreed, a smile fixed to my face, and then spent the whole of the bus journey home trying to pull it from my ring finger where it was wedged, having never made it much past the end of my fingernail.

'I'll speak to you tomorrow, then. Perhaps I'll pop over in the afternoon,' she says, but I don't answer, hoping my silence is enough on the matter. 'Sleep well, Eve.' And then she's gone.

For a moment I want to phone her back, tell her I do need her, that maybe it would be best if she did come and stay. I could pretend to play the part of the grieving widow, and it wouldn't even have to be a part – I could try to do it for real. There would be no ring, no letter, just the memory of a dear dead husband and Carol's sympathy. I could forget about the drawer, ask my sister to tip the contents into bin liners and leave them for the dustmen. They're due in the morning – it could all be gone, nothing to sort through, nothing to find. But there is something hiding in the third drawer down – a siren call I know I'll be unable to resist much longer. Tony has been dead for ten days and I've been restraining myself all that time. 'Your husband is resting with us,' the funeral director had advised me. It was hard to think of him there, cold, still; neither word I'd usually associate with my husband. It was as if he hadn't really gone. But he has now, and he's safely in the ground so he won't be popping up behind me while I'm rummaging.

With a large glass of sherry in my hand, I walk back towards Tony's study, but deviate at the last minute into the dining room. I feel a burning need to see something. Opening the door of the teak sideboard, I pull the wedding album out from underneath Aunt Sylvia's best linen tablecloth. The lace one has disappeared – to Carol's, probably.

I can't remember the last time I looked at our wedding photographs. So many of the assembled guests have long since died, so the moment to reminisce has ceased and instead has become an awakening to my own mortality. I quickly flip over the paper leaf and straight to me and Tony on the steps of St Mary's Church. My wedding dress had been my mother's and probably the only thing I'd managed to procure before Carol. A fact that had kept a small smug smile on my face until Carol had said she wouldn't be seen dead in that hideous old thing, anyway. Looking at it now, I have to wonder if she'd had a point. It had to have a panel added to allow a little more give in the stomach area, and my mother, the seamstress and myself had all played a game where we'd agreed it was just because I was a bit fat. How could it possibly have been fifty-eight years ago? I pick up my drink and swallow half in one go.

I'd always told myself that Tony was a strong man, but if I'm honest, he looks terrified in this photo. Flicking through the album to check his expression in each one, I can see his fear give way to something a little more relaxed, something closer to resignation. I've never looked so closely before. Usually I'm focused on myself: was the set of my hair old-fashioned, even for 1964; should I have worn more make-up for the camera; was it obvious I was pregnant? The trouble

with photographs is they tell stories that are probably best left in the past.

I close the book with a thump and put it back in the box, back in the sideboard. A sob begins in the base of my throat, but I swallow it down until it sits as an angry lump in my stomach. After turning out the light behind me, I refill my glass and take it into the study.

I lift the items from the drawer and lay them on top, but it's the envelope I'm most interested in. My hand closes around it and I pull it gingerly towards me as if it's either precious or flammable, perhaps both. On it is the name Margaret, written in my husband's clumsy hand. That's it, nothing else, no address and no surname.

'Margaret,' I say out loud, rolling the name around my tongue, checking it for familiarity. 'Margaret Pringle,' I try again, with less conviction, but then the other woman never got to be Mrs Pringle. I imagine myself saying: *Have him, he's yours – he snores and leaves the toilet seat up. He's eighty, you know*. But that's the sort of thing Carol would say, not me. Besides, Tony is dead – there won't be another Mrs Pringle now.

My eyes are drawn to the ring still in the plastic bag on the desk where I left it when I got home from the police station. A circle of gold, set with numerous diamonds nestled into the band itself, somewhere between an engagement and a wedding ring. I'm sure there's a name for that style of ring, but I can't seem to grasp the word.

I pick up the envelope again and slide Tony's letter opener through the top, pull the paper out, smooth it with my hand, then take a breath.

My dearest darling Maggie,

I have something I want to tell you, something I need to tell you, but it's going to be as hard for you to hear it as it is for me to write it.

I stop reading, quickly folding the paper shut against my chest. A chill shoots through me like a frozen fist and for a mad moment I wonder if it's Tony's, but I don't believe in ghosts. With the letter still clutched in my hand, I leave the room and hover for a moment outside in the hallway, listening for… what? There's nobody here. Then walking back into the study, I close the door behind me anyway, just to be sure.

Lowering myself into his chair, I unfold the letter and begin to read.