The Second Husband

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Extract

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Chapter 1

The day I met Davis Calder I was too distracted by Roxy to pay any close attention to him. Actually, distracted is probably the wrong word. Needled, unsettled, anxious – any of those might better describe the feeling a mother gets when she sees her teenage daughter stretched out virtually naked in the middle of communal gardens; gardens that by definition provide a view from every neighbour's window.

It was a Saturday, a rogue summer's day at Easter, and she was sunbathing with Marianne. That was a name I heard a lot these days, Marianne Suter. She was Roxy's new best friend from school, a precocious minx if ever there was one. Her ambition was to become an actress (or 'actor' as she preferred it) and she was already on the books of some casting agent in the West End. She was the kind of girl who would once have been known as a 'wild child' and was, in my view, at least partly responsible for the sudden metamorphosis of my daughter from Pollyanna into Playmate of the Month.

Well, I could only pray that the effects had been limited thus far to outward styling. Today Roxy wore a tiny blue-and-white striped top cropped just below the bra; denim shorts rolled up so high at the leg and slung so low at the hip as to be no bigger than a pair of knickers; oversized sunglasses; charm bracelets on both

wrists; and, finally, one of her brother Matthew's cartoon Elastoplasts stuck horizontally across her right calf (whether this was purely decorative or there was actually a graze beneath, I had no idea). Marianne, meanwhile, modelled a bikini barely a tone or two darker than her own skin and a floppy-brimmed sunhat in a floral print inspired by more innocent times. Between them they had somehow contrived to make their arrangement on two bath towels look like a photo-shoot for a men's magazine. Roxy paints her toenails baby pink! Marianne sucks a lollipop! All the better that sample exam papers lay strewn – unsampled – by their feet.

'Is this it?' Davis Calder asked me. He stood in the living room of the rental flat and scanned from corner to corner as though calculating the precise square footage of the place. About our faces motes of dust still swirled from my final dust and polish this morning. 'I mean, kitchen and sitting room all in one?'

'That's right, it's open plan.'

'Open plan.' He repeated the phrase as though I'd asked him to break a code. His voice was low and grainy, his accent standard educated London, though a little scuffed around the edges, which made it confident and easy. I'd noticed at once that he was attractive, for that would have been impossible to miss. He was in his early forties, at a guess, with a hint of scholarly superiority about the lips. Dark curls silvered thickly over the ears and sprang into his eyes, a statement that he had better things to do than think about what his hair was doing. I wasn't close enough to gauge the exact colour of his eyes, but they were dark and, not watchful exactly, more observing. He was tall and broad-built at the shoulders, his blazer immaculately tailored. Not quite the type to be living alone in a rented flat at this time of his life. (For some reason this made me think of my younger sister Tash, never settled, always moving on.)

'It hasn't been rented before,' he said, suddenly. 'Has it?'

'How can you tell?' I asked him, curious.

'Oh, I've seen quite a few places this week, and this is the first one that doesn't make me want to throw myself under a bus on the way out.' He fixed me with an intense look. Brown, that was the colour of his eyes, not the brown that Roxy and I shared, the type that changed in the light like an autumn leaf, but that rich, nut brown, true and steadfast. 'There's something quite soulless about a rental flat that's just been vacated, isn't there? Like a motel room, when there are still stray hairs from the person before. When you can still feel their body heat.'

Body heat. Now I wanted to repeat *his* words, though I stopped myself just in time. 'You make it sound like a crime scene,' I said, chuckling. 'And it's not that, I assure you.' I realised that he was eyeing not me but the shelving space behind me, and in a peripheral nook somewhere inside I registered disappointment.

'I live next door,' I added, though he hadn't asked. 'With my two children. It used to be all one flat, but we sectioned this bit off and gave it its own front door.'

He just blinked at this, as if to say, We both have our bad-luck stories, let's spare each other the details. For a second I forgot myself and allowed my eyes to transmit the message that I didn't want to be spared the details, I wanted to know, but he was already out of range. It was probably just as well.

'Can I open a window?' He strolled across to one of the windows, reached for the brass lock and pulled up the lower sash. I assumed he wanted to check how much traffic noise we got up here – not much, for we were right at the top of the building on the fifth floor – and waited as he closed it again and refastened the lock.

He was the sixth person to come to view the front portion of my flat and consider renting it from me for £250 a week. Perhaps it was my distress at having had to bisect my home in this way – literally walling off three of the nine rooms to create a separate apartment – that had made me a less than exuberant

guide to the previous five. Two couples and a single woman had already been and gone, all professionals in their twenties and thirties, all charmed by the sun-filled living room that used to be my study. And it *was* charming, with its parquet flooring and original sashes, the fat old radiators that took up so much space but felt so nice to pat. The woman, a solicitor, had pulled out chequebook and references there and then, but I had waved her off, waved all of them off, murmuring of last-minute details that had to be attended to before any final decision could be reached. There were no details, of course; I had done everything required of a new landlord. But as long as I could put off that final handshake I could stave off my fear that my sanctuary was to be invaded, that my life would never be the same again.

'Would you like to see the bedroom?' I led Calder through to our old spare (now guests would be on the living-room sofa) and then to the bathroom beyond. 'There's only a shower, I'm afraid.' It was my old cloakroom-cum-utility room and made a decent-sized bathroom for a one-bedroom rental. My nine-year-old son Matthew suffered most from the loss of the space; playing sports most days, he had used it almost as a locker room. Muddy wellies and trainers were accommodated in the kitchen now, or out on the fire escape. Roxy, of course, kept her footwear in her bedroom, the better to conceal illicit new acquisitions. I tried to remember what she'd worn on her feet this morning as she trotted off to meet Marianne at the garden gate. Her flip-flops, possibly, the ones with an oversized pink rubber flower sprouting between big toe and second.

'So what do you think?' I asked him, finally.

He nodded, more to himself than in response to my question. 'It's a nice place, but a little small, to be honest. I've got a lot of books. There's no way I'd get them all in here.'

'Well, have a think about it. Would you like a coffee before you go?'

He looked at his watch. 'Yes, why not.' I wondered where he was going next, where he had come from.

There was no coffee in the small galley kitchen, nor anything to drink it out of, for that matter, agents having advised that tenants liked to bring their own kitchenware, so I led him into the shared hallway, through my new front door and into the rear corner of the mansion block. Our kitchen was east facing, with windows on two sides and a glass door to the fire escape, which meant lots of warm sunlight early in the day. The previous owner had laid an extravagant chequerboard of marble and in weather like this you could almost spirit yourself to Italy, to the terrace of some palazzo in the hills. As I spooned coffee into two mugs I tasted the forbidden tang of a long-buried memory, my honeymoon with Alistair, Roxy's conception . . . though we didn't know that then. A lifetime ago – or at least a whole childhood. She was seventeen now.

'Here we go.' As I set the mug down in front of Calder I saw he was looking out of the window at Roxy and Marianne. Impossible not to, for they were plum in the centre of the lawn, long-wintered limbs gleaming porcelain white in the sun's dazzle. Kid, child, I still applied the words automatically to my daughter, but she was an adult now – or almost one. 'Cusp' was the word they used, wasn't it? She was on the cusp, though when exactly she had moved from childhood to this cusp, I didn't know. When she stopped kissing me goodnight on her way to bed, perhaps? When she stopped telling me who it was who had just been on the phone? Or when she stopped delighting in our physical likenesses – the dark hair that fell straight before curling under at its tips, the straight, serious brows that made us look so thoughtful – and sought instead to look as different from me as possible?

'My daughter,' I said to Calder, lightly. 'And her friend.' At that moment Roxy sprayed her stomach with sun lotion, recoiling from its coolness before rubbing at her skin in lazy circles.

Marianne, flat on her back, used both thumbs to send a text message on her phone and, as Roxy suddenly wiped her hands dry on her thighs and reached into her bag for *her* phone, I realised the two of them were actually texting each other.

'They're revising for exams,' I added.

Davis sipped his coffee, smiling at me with his eyes. 'You know, I've been teaching for twenty-five years, on and off, and I think I can safely say that's not a revision technique I'm familiar with.'

'Really? It must be a new one . . .' I surprised myself by laughing out loud. Lord, I was almost in a good mood! And there I'd been thinking today was going to be the worst day since – well, hard to say exactly; I usually chalked up the day Alistair left me as the official nadir, but there'd been a few other contenders over the years, it had to be said.

I watched as my guest wrapped both palms around the mug as though warming frostbitten fingers, a curiously vulnerable thing to do, and I felt newly intrigued. However I denied it, I knew he was the one I wanted to be our new tenant.

'Which one is yours?' he asked, gesturing to the girls.

Marianne stretched her arms long behind her head, tautening herself as though in anticipation of Valentino's kiss. I wondered, as I had several times since she'd entered our lives, what her mother must think.

'Not the nymphet,' I said, suddenly emotional. 'The other one.' The reason, I added, silently, my reason for everything.

Calder's eyeballs swivelled a fraction. 'Ah, I see.' Minutes later, he was on his feet. 'Well, thank you for the coffee. I guess I ought to be going.'

When Alistair and I split up, I made it my business to keep in touch with an old college friend of his, Shireen, whom I judged to be too kind-hearted to shun me, as others in his camp instinctively had. We'd meet for coffee, I going out of my way to make

it convenient for her, crossing the city to seek her out at her office or suggesting a café at the end of her street – basically leaving her no choice but to see me. She knew I was there only for her link to Alistair, but she also knew I was the victim in this particular family drama, the one who had the right to act desperately. (It probably didn't hurt that I looked as bedraggled as any newly abandoned woman could be expected to, baby Matthew strapped to my chest in a sling or whimpering in the pushchair next to me.)

Shireen would answer my questions as diplomatically as she could, sometimes even dispensing a few unsolicited crumbs of her own. For instance, it was she who told me that Alistair had an agreement with Victoria that they would not be having children together.

'It was part of the deal.'

'What deal?' I asked, sharply. 'I thought they were in love.'

She eyed me with the blend of pity and fear I was becoming accustomed to as a single mother freshly adrift in the world. 'Just a figure of speech, Kate. It's more that they agree on what they want out of the relationship. She doesn't want children and he agrees with that.'

Victoria was younger than Alistair by over ten years and I could imagine his persuasiveness on the issue. 'This is about us,' he'd say, 'it's about sharing *our* lives. Let's not complicate it with kids, I've been through that and I know exactly what it does to a marriage.' He would shake his head, she would nod hers. She probably had colleagues who had young children, too, pitied them their surrendering of basic freedoms and their deteriorated physical shape. It would not seem too high a price to pay. I wondered if she would be allowed a pet.

'I read it's quite common among the Manhattan rich,' Shireen went on, 'in second and third marriages. They even write it into pre-nups.'

I gazed at her blankly. What did the Manhattan rich have to

do with me, with *my* hell? And who said anything about Alistair and Victoria marrying?

'Anyway,' she said, hastily, 'In a way, that might turn out to be a good thing. For you, I mean. People find it very difficult when a second family comes along. The whole half-sibling thing, you know? It creates a lot of tension.'

'Hmm.' I didn't believe in this deal or agreement for a moment. Victoria would change her mind because she was biologically hardwired to do so. The only question was when. Even so, it wasn't the first thing to spring to mind years later when Alistair phoned me one Saturday morning and asked if we could meet privately – he had some news to discuss. It was two or three weeks ago now, late March, and a weekend for him to take the kids. I usually dropped off Matthew after whatever sports practice he had, but on this occasion Alistair proposed that he come and pick him up from home instead. Victoria would take him for a treat while Alistair and I chatted.

'What's this about?' I asked. It was a long time since those shameful conferences with Shireen, when I would have picked up where we'd left off with barely a reproach, and these days my manner towards my ex-husband was honed, bright and professional, a variation on the one I used with clients. (Remain cheerful, yet impassive, my manager Ethan always advised new volunteers at the Neighbourhood Advice Office, This is not about saving the world; it's about giving the right information at the right time.)

I had a sense that Alistair's was not going to be the right information at the right time. He sat at the kitchen table with a take-out coffee he'd brought with him. This was the kind of detail that offended me, seeing in it as I did the implication that my coffee was not good enough for him, not any more. I lingered over the making of my own cup, opening and shutting jars, even stirring longer than necessary before joining him at the table.

'I'll get straight to the point.' His face settled into an

expression somewhere between coy and smug. 'Victoria is pregnant.'

I blinked, and with that downward sweep of the eyelids the wall came tumbling down once again, just as I had always known it would. Despair filled my lungs. It was finally happening. Now my children would have a blood connection with Victoria; now I would be linked for as long as I lived – and long into the future – to the woman who had replaced me. And that was just me; how would this affect Roxy and Matthew? Would Alistair alter towards them once the new baby arrived? Would he have less time for them? Less love?

'But I thought . . .' I tried to compose myself. 'Well, that's wonderful news, congratulations. For some reason I thought she wasn't able to.'

'She didn't *want* to,' he corrected me. 'But these things happen – as you know.'

With enormous effort I blocked memories of my breaking the news to him of my own first pregnancy, our young faces trying the read the thoughts behind one another's. 'When is it due?'

'October. It's still a bit early to tell people, but she hasn't been feeling great and I thought I'd tell the kids this weekend in case they were worried. That's if you think it's a good idea, of course.'

'Sure, that's fine. You will, you know, reassure them that—?'

He broke in. 'Of course I will. Leave it to me.'

Already I wanted exactly that, couldn't wait for him to go. I was glad for once that I'd be without Roxy and Matthew this weekend; I needed to deal with this news – to master it – on my own, before I saw them again.

But Alistair had more up his sleeve. 'The thing is, Kate, I'm afraid this is going to have ramifications for you.'

I looked up. 'Ramifications?' It was such an Alistair word. He'd told me once what it meant, not strictly a consequence, as it tended to be used, but actually a branch, a new branch to a complex situation. (He, naturally, took the role of the core, the

trunk.) 'I'll be meeting with Roger on Tuesday so I'll know more then, but I just wanted to give you a bit of a heads up.' Roger was his financial advisor, one of an array of professionals who'd entered the picture in Victoria's wake.

'Heads up on what, exactly?'

'On the fact that I'll need to reduce my support payments a bit.'

Again I blinked, but this time with the upward sweep my defences were swiftly reassembled. '*What*?'

'Nothing major,' he added quickly, 'but you must see it has to happen. One more mouth to feed, only so much spare cash to go around.'

'Roxy and Matthew are not "mouths",' I said, stonily, 'they're children, people. They can't be uprooted at the drop of a hat.'

He looked surprised. 'Who's saying they'll be uprooted? You won't need to move, the mortgage on this place is tiny.'

Tiny to him, frighteningly large to me. I felt my control waver. 'We only just get by as it is, Alistair, you know how much I earn and what the service charges are like in these buildings . . .' I hated the sound of my voice, weak and plaintive, appealing to him as the powerful authority, the parent figure.

He took a breath. 'Actually, that's partly what I wanted to talk about. I had an idea for you. How about getting a lodger in?'

I looked at him, appalled. 'A lodger? You can't be serious! Do you really want your children exposed to a stranger?'

He laughed. 'Must you be so dramatic, Kate? Think about it, this place is easily big enough to section some of it off with its own front door. The layout is perfect. A bit of refitting to make some kind of second kitchen, a few permissions. I can talk to the management committee if there's any resistance in that department.' He spoke as if this was all off the top of his head, but I knew him well enough to see that he'd clearly given it some thought. (There may even have been a spreadsheet on a computer screen somewhere.) How I hated the idea that my financial

position might have been discussed with Victoria, perhaps even in front of the children. 'There's a rental agent right across the street, so you wouldn't have to have any more contact with whoever it was than you do with the rest of the neighbours.' He was warming to his pitch now. 'And if you do get on, then that's a nice bonus. I'd say it was the ideal solution.'

I snorted. 'I'm sure you would. I'd prefer it if we didn't need a solution. Why don't *you* get a lodger to make up the shortfall?'

He didn't answer, just gave me a look that said, Well, I'll save you the humiliation of spelling *that* out, which was, of course, that he didn't need a lodger because he was supporting his family perfectly adequately already, thank you very much. I, meanwhile, earned a pittance as a charity worker and could never provide our children with a lifestyle like this on my own. I needed his contributions not only for luxuries – I needed them to survive.

He drained the last of his coffee and squeezed the paper cup in his fist so that the lid popped off. 'Just think about it, at least. This is a huge flat and you could give up a few rooms without even noticing.'

I scraped back my chair and stood. 'If you don't mind, I'd like some time on my own to think about it. It's all a bit of a shock.'

'Of course, no problem.' He knew better than to offer a gesture, or even a murmur, of sympathy, but rose straight away from his seat, hooking his car keys on his right index finger, just as he always had, twirling the ring up and down the finger with the rhythm of a majorette working her baton. 'Well, great to see you, Kate. I'll drop the kids back tomorrow, usual time.'

Roxy and Marianne reappeared not long after Calder had left. They clattered into the kitchen, sandals slapping on heels, phones beeping (those phones were squeezed to their ears with such frequency I was genuinely worried for the risk of carpal tunnel syndrome). Marianne had pulled on an expensive-looking patterned kaftan, sheer and low cut enough for me to see the edge of

her bikini top, just where the nipples started. Though her complexion was apple fresh, her blue eyes were washed with a kind of weariness that disturbed me. She was far too knowing for a seventeen-year-old, it simply wasn't right. What experiences had she had to earn such adult jadedness? Next to her, Roxy looked as clean and untried as a new cygnet.

'How's studying going?' I asked, continuing my task of folding dry laundry into three piles. Odd what short work I'd made of it for once, what with my mind being so full of the morning's events.

'Yeah, fine,' Roxy said.

'Not fine,' Marianne corrected, amiably. 'I've got so much to do I can't even think about it or my head will explode.'

'Oh dear.'

'Mum?' Roxy turned to me with a faux-exasperated expression we both knew to conceal genuine displeasure. 'There's absolutely *nothing* in the fridge. Isn't it supposed to be your job to make sure students are well nourished?' They preferred to think of themselves as students, I'd noticed, rather than sixth-formers or, God forbid, schoolgirls. Marianne had recently been photographed by a magazine journalist on a trip to Oxford Street and appeared in a feature called 'Style Spy'; she'd given her age as eighteen (she was six months short of that) and her occupation as 'college student'.

The two of them stood peering in at the shelves of the fridge, the door obscuring their bodies so that my view was of the backs of four knees and four long, lean calves. I struggled to dismiss the image of my own body when last viewed naked in a full-length mirror, the way the flesh made garments of the different zones and limbs, like pads someone had inserted when I wasn't looking, everything a little lower than I'd imagined it to be, everything a little thicker. I would be the last person a fashion photographer would approach in the high street.

I adjusted one of Matthew's sweatshirts on the clothes rail,

still damp at the collar and sleeves. 'There's some nice bread, I could make you a sandwich or cheese on toast?'

'No carbs after midday, I'm afraid,' Marianne said, over her shoulder. 'Have you got any avocados? Or yellow peppers, maybe?'

'Sorry, no. I was going to go to the supermarket tonight, Rox, when you're at Dad's. When are you heading over there? Shouldn't you be on your way by now?'

I could see just enough of them to sense the exchange of glances. Then Roxy's voice called out, 'Actually, I'm staying over at Marianne's tonight. Dad said it was OK.'

I knew that Alistair would in fact have approved it only if I had first. This was not an area where we were in disagreement. It would be unlikely to occur to him, however, that Roxy might report my permission by inference if not outright lie, standard practice for a teen shuttling between divorced parents. My first thought was that this might have something to do with Damien, her most recent boyfriend and the one with whose arrival weekend arrangements had begun to get complicated. But they were no longer together, or at least not as far as I could tell. (Such was the breakdown in communications between us, I had never actually discovered who had ended it or why. I couldn't help suspecting Marianne on both counts.)

After a brief pause I went on with the laundry. 'What are you doing? Anything exciting?'

Roxy emerged from behind the fridge door, shrugging. 'Just hanging out.' This, I knew, could mean anything from watching a DVD to dabbling in witchcraft. Most likely, post-Damien, it would entail a trip to some horrible pub in Camden; Marianne's boyfriend was a DJ and horrible pubs his natural habitat.

'Your dad will miss seeing you.'

Another shrug. 'He'll have Matt. Anyway, he said he'd pick me up in the morning and take me back to have lunch with them.'

'You're *so* lucky your dad is in London,' Marianne said, sighing. 'I have to schlep all the way to Norfolk to see mine.' She spoke as though it were an accepted fact that everyone's parents lived apart. How sad, I thought. If only ours was the family that proved her wrong.

'What happened with the viewings?' Roxy said, suddenly, leaving her friend at the fridge and approaching me with a friendlier air. She was willing to charm now that she didn't have the battle for Saturday-night leave she'd been expecting. She was so beautiful when she was happy, the good-natured smile of her infancy rising to the surface. It may have been a coincidence, but she had come to position herself directly next to the Metropolitan Police printout that was pinned to the kitchen corkboard. This was a schools' website document entitled 'What can I do at age . . .?'. The girls had one in their common room at school and Roxy had downloaded a copy for home. The top page read:

What can I do at age seventeen?

- You can hold a licence to drive cars and motorcycles
- You can go to war
- You can engage in street trading
- You can purchase an air rifle
- You can leave home without your parents' consent

The list for sixteen had been considerably longer and included such terrifying entries as 'You can leave school' and 'You can have heterosexual and homosexual sex', and I'd been relieved when it had been replaced with the seventeens. I tried not to anticipate the one for eighteen; by then, I imagined, she could do anything she liked and putting up notices to remind me of her rights would no longer be necessary.

'Earth to Mum? *Mum*? How did it go? Anyone good?'

'Possibly,' I said, focusing. 'I liked one guy, a teacher . . .' I realised I could picture Calder's face much more clearly than any of the others'. 'But he said it was too small. There was a trainee solicitor who seemed quite nice, as well. I may go for her. I'll talk to the agent on Monday.'

'You don't have to *like* them,' Roxy said. 'They're just tenants. We won't actually see them, will we?' I wondered if she were deliberately parroting Alistair's opinion to annoy me, and then I saw that she echoed it merely because it was the conclusion of any sensible person. In any case, giving up a portion of our home was not the wrench for her that it was for me. Once it had been established that her own quarters would not be touched by the upheaval, she'd been perfectly at ease with the prospect of change. And that was how it should be, I'd reminded myself repeatedly over the last few weeks. I didn't want her or Matthew to share my pain. It was my job to mop it up before it reached them.

'I could probably make us something with this,' Marianne said, finally emerging from the fridge with a carton of eggs and a potato. 'Tortilla or something basic.'

'You cook?' I asked, trying not to sound as amazed as I was. Somehow I had put her in the contingent of Roxy's schoolmates who had staff at home and a credit card for restaurants when they were not.

She pulled a face. 'Doesn't everyone?'

'Roxy hardly knows how to boil an . . .' I trailed off as I caught my daughter's glare. I wasn't allowed to do this, to point out her shortcomings in front of friends, or any third party for that matter, and even when we were alone criticism was seldom taken in the constructive spirit that it was given. Cooking in particular had an emotional history for us, for there'd been a few months in her life, after her father had left, when she *had* cooked, when she would not have eaten if she hadn't, when she had looked after me. Since then, I'd been just as keen as she was

to re-establish who was the mother and who the mothered.

Marianne began cracking eggs into a bowl, placing the shell halves inside one another and expertly stopping any strings of egg white with her middle finger. The glamorous attire, the sunglasses pushed into her hair to free her face of the long strands honeyed with highlights, made her look like a TV chef preparing to talk to camera. 'My mother says that gaps in a child's knowledge are a reflection of their parents' failings, not their own,' she said, tone matter of fact.

Roxy giggled delightedly and watched for my reaction, eager to see if I'd take up the challenge.

'No offence, Mrs Easton,' Marianne added, getting to work with the whisk.

'None taken,' I said, weakly.